

CYCLONES

Tommy Whight, student, teacher, and then Headmaster at Townsville Grammar School from 1939-46 in presenting his Speech Night Report of 1942 said of the move to the Rosslea Campus: "...one of the most difficult years in the life of the School. I do not say the most difficult year, for the years 1903 and 1904, after the School had been blown down by *Cyclone Leonta*, must, at the very least, share the honour.

With the recent presence of cyclones in our area and the concomitant heavy rain, it is perhaps opportune to write about the effect cyclones have had on our School in its one hundred and twenty-one year history.

Cyclone Sigma, 26 January 1896, was the first cyclone to hit the School. While no meteorological data is available it must have been a nasty cyclone as Townsville was flooded to a five kilometre radius and seventeen people were drowned. Fortunately, the only damage caused to the School was the blowing down of the weather vane on the main building [now School House]. The School authorities at the time were pleased to note that the buildings had stood up to a heavy storm. Unfortunately, it did in some ways lead to a misguided confidence because when **Cyclone Leonta** struck on Monday, 9 March 1903, the School was almost totally destroyed.

The School day had started normally on that day but by 11:30am classes had to be suspended because of the noise generated by the advancing storm. The girls were taken to the Headmaster's house while the boys sheltered in the main building. When the full fury of the cyclone hit Townsville at 1:20pm every building in the school with the exception of the Headmaster's house was destroyed. It is said that the gymnasium vanished without trace while the laundry and kitchen were totally destroyed. The girls remained safe because the Headmaster's house stood up to the cyclone but the boys had to seek safety as best as they could. Queens Park was not an option because of flying debris and corrugated iron so the boys, guided by staff members N.W. Jolly, J.G. Leadbeater and A.H. Shuttlewood, sought refuge in the creek that runs through the middle of the School. Fortunately this turned out to be a safe place for the duration of the cyclone. That evening the boys were hosted in the homes of a neighbour, Mrs da Costa and the Chairman of Trustees at the time, Mr A.W. MacNaughton. Miraculously, apart from some minor scratches, there were no serious injuries.

As a testimony to the wonderful dedication and drive of the then Headmaster, Mr F.T. Miller, and his staff the School reopened on the following Monday. As there was little left standing on the main campus the School moved to the old Town Hall in Flinders Street East where it was to remain until mid-winter. For the second half of the year classes were undertaken in the old Museum on Stanton Hill. Boarders were housed in the Headmaster's House until such time that the chemistry building was re-built and when completed this classroom was used as a dormitory for the remainder of the year. Meals were cooked and served in the Headmaster's House. In their spare time boarders worked on clearing the debris and re-planting the school grounds. Helped by a substantial loan from the Queensland Government and financial support from the Old Boys' Association the main building was re-built and on 8 February, 1904, eleven months after Leonta the School re-opened.

Leonta's greatest effect on Grammar was in the economic and physical progress of the School. The debt incurred by Leonta took close to fifty years to repay and its immediate consequence was that it held back the building of much needed facilities. A stroll around the present Senior Campus will show that facilities, sporting and academic, only started to develop during Maurie Blank's tenure [1948-65]. The economic problems caused by Leonta also had a decided effect on the planning of many Boards of Trustees. Continually aware of the financial problems experienced by the School during the first half of the twentieth century, Boards trod carefully before committing the School to heavy debt repayments.

Cyclone Agnes, 6 March 1956, was the next cyclone to directly hit. The Day students were sent home at noon just before the full fury of the storm hit at 1:00pm. All the domestic staff sheltered in the Headmaster's House while the boarders were placed into classrooms in the 1941 building [now the Maurie Blank Building]. Unfortunately the roof of that building was blown off as was the roof of the kitchen while the verandah of the Dining Room collapsed. The boarders were then herded into School House which fortunately suffered no damage. No students were injured during the cyclone although it took at least three weeks to get the School in reasonable working order again. [As an interesting side note, *Cyclone Agnes* was the first cyclone in Australia to be tracked by radar developed at the Townsville Meteorological Office].

It can be argued that after Leonta, **Cyclone Althea**, 24 December 1971, was the most devastating cyclone to hit Townsville. During the cyclone three people were killed, ninety per cent of the homes on Magnetic Island were either destroyed or damaged and ten per cent of homes in Townsville were damaged. Surprisingly, however, the School suffered very little damage with the exception of the Maurie Blank Building which was again unroofed. The damage bill came to \$40,000 and this amount was covered by insurance. A working group led by Mr Phil Brazier, Chairman of Trustees and the Deputy Headmaster, Burke von Wald, worked during the January period to get the School back into working order. They were aided by many staff and students: the effort was so successful that there was very little loss of school time once the school year got under way.

Cyclone Tessi, 2 April 2000, was the last cyclone to hit the School. A category one storm it caused very little damage to Townsville or the School. In some respects, it was more of a nuisance storm as power was lost for some time and the catering staff had to look after well over one hundred and fifty boarders. It is a credit to their ability that they were able to cope with the help of two gas barbeque stoves. The boarders were also helpful to the ground staff, clearing up a mass of broken tree branches and other debris left by the cyclone. Two days after the cyclone the School Rugby Union team was able to host a fixture against a touring Canadian school team.

The School is perhaps fortunate not to have experienced greater damage from cyclones during its history: after all we do live in an area prone to damaging storms. The one factor that does stand out, however, in all the storms that have hit the School is the magnificent spirit in the face of adversity displayed by the School community ranging from Trustees to staff, students and past students.

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