

A job for a King

By Roger Underwood

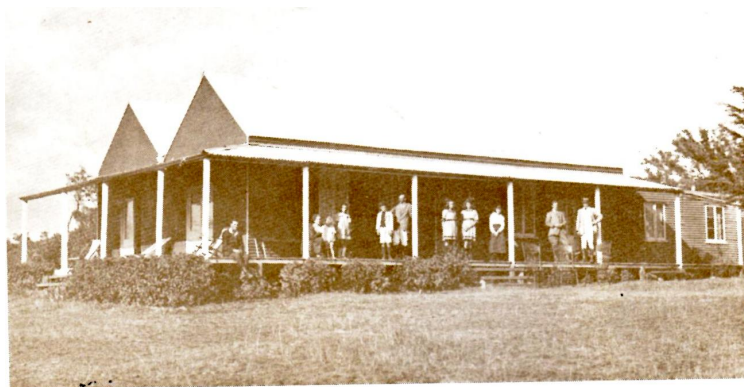
The recent death of York identity Walter King brought to my mind a fascinating story told to me by Walter many years ago. I knew Walter for my entire life, his parents and mine being close friends. And whilst I have no way of double-checking the adventure he related, I knew Walter always to be a true and honourable gentleman, given to amusing understatement.

The story is fascinating because it brings together an unlikely combination of two disparate elements: French history and Western Australian bushfires. It came about this way.

In 1937 when Walter was six-years old, he went with his parents for a summer holiday at the guest house at Nornalup run by the famous Bellanger (pronounced Bell-onjay) family. The head of the family and master of the pioneering Nornalup property, was the famous Pierre Alphonse Bellanger. In 1937 he was aged 62, but was frail, in poor health and spent most of his days confined to a rocking chair with a blanket over his knees.

M. Bellanger was born and raised in France, the son of a noble family, a Barrister and highly educated, with degrees in Arts and Law. Having been admitted to the Bar while still a young man, he was part of the legal team defending Alfred Dreyfus in the infamous “Dreyfus Affair” that rocked France in the years before and after 1900. Captain Dreyfus had been framed by antisemitic elements in the French Army, falsely accused of being a spy for Germany, convicted of treason and incarcerated for life at the notorious Devil’s Island. After a second trial, in which M. Bellanger helped to defend him, Dreyfus was exonerated, returned to the Army and served with distinction in the first World War. It was a case which could have made young Bellanger, leading to him becoming a famous French barrister.

Bellanger, however, suffered from poor health, not helped by the French climate. He decided to move to Western Australia, settling first at Toodyay (in 1899) and then taking up virgin land at the mouth of the Frankland River at Nornalup (in 1908), where he was the first pioneer. As well as farming and fishing, M. and Madame Bellanger established a guest house and entertained visitors with tours of the local beauty spots, fishing trips and glorious French cooking.



The Bellanger homestead/guesthouse at Nornalup¹

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Both photographs in this story, and the excerpt from Marie Bellanger’s recollections of the bushfire are taken from the lovely little memoir *Champagne and Tingle Trees* by Bernard Bellanger. Apollo Press, 1980.

The summer of 1937, when Walter King and his parents were holidaying at Bellanger's at Nornalup, was one of WA's worst bushfire seasons. Specifically, it was the year of the great fire which started somewhere near Donnybrook and then burnt, taking all before it, for hundreds of kilometres until it ran into the sea between Walpole and Denmark. Farms, forests and settlements were devastated. At Nornalup the magnificent bridge over the Frankland River (constructed of yellow tingle timber) was burnt and many boats moored in the river caught fire and burnt to the waterline. Even to this day, the tops of dead karri trees still can be seen in the Walpole-Nornalup national park, reminders of that terrible fire.

When the fire bore down on the Bellanger farm and homestead, it was all hands to the pump, including the King family and other paying guests. Luckily, the farm had some cultivated areas (M. Bellanger was especially proud of his asparagus crop, which was non-flammable at that time) and green kikuyu grass paddocks that had been well-grazed down by cows, and these helped to minimise the on-rush of the fire. But there were also serried ranks of dead karri trees, ring-barked during the initial clearing of the forest. The crowns of these caught alight, and sent streams of embers and spot fires, threatening the homestead/guest house itself.



M. Pierre Bellanger standing proudly in his asparagus paddock, dead ring-barked karri trees beyond

"Everyone, even my mother, was at work beating out the grass fire and extinguishing spot fires" Walter related. "This included me. I was given a special assignment, which was to look after the old man".

M. Bellanger had insisted on being out on the veranda to observe the firefight, although he was confined to his rocking chair, still with a blanket over his knees. "The burning embers were alighting on M. Bellanger, and setting fire to his hair and his blanket and clothes" Walter told me. "I had been armed with a bucket of water and a mop, and I would dip the mop in the bucket and then dab it on the smouldering spot fires to extinguish them. All the while, the old man gave a running commentary in voluble French".

There is a vivid account of the fire written by M. Bellanger's grand-daughter Marie, who was also there at the time. She wrote, of the fight to save the house:

...the smoke soon became stifling. We couldn't see each-other. We were in a very dangerous situation, no escape and no communication ...Our home, like many others, is a wooden one ... sparks and burning debris were falling on us all the time and the heat was unbearable

But as so often happens in bushfires, there was a change in the wind at the last minute and the fire veered off to the north-east. The house was saved. But Marie goes on to say:

... dawn revealed a sad spectacle. The property was a blackened ruin ... there were fallen trees and huge branches everywhere. Not a fence was left standing, all outbuildings and tents gone.

The 1937 bushfire has gone down in the folklore of WA bushfire and south coast history. But how much worse it would have been had the historic Bellanger homestead been lost, let alone the life of the famous Pierre Alphonse Bellanger, who survived thanks to the (until now unremarked) efforts of the six-year old Walter King. His death in an Australian bushfire would have made international headlines.

It is an episode well-deserving of a footnote in history.

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