

Van Didden, Gerard W (mainly from The Age website, The Echo and CALM News 1997)



Migrated from Netherlands in 1954 at age 12. Graduated from Dwellingup Cadet School 1960. Joined Forest Department as a Forest Guard in 1961 at Mundaring. Based in Dwellingup in c1964-67. Was at the Dwellingup fire, see below. Worked at Grimwade in 1960s. Technical Assistant at Manjimup in 1967. Involved with fire control in various positions, throughout his career. In the team that developed the "red book" fire behaviour tables. Part of the team that developed aerial surveillance. Helped develop incendiary machines. Was an incendiary machine operator in late 1960s-70s. In early 1980s a consultant to Bushfires Council of Northern Territory. Retired 1997. Has farmlet at Sawyers Valley. Qualified as a private pilot.

Poignant stories from the front line of an inferno

The Age Saturday February 5, 2011 by ROBERT DREWE

Tempered by Fire, a book of personal stories from the firefighters and survivors of the 1961 West Australian bushfires centred on the old jarrah-forest town of Dwellingup, is as fascinating as it's relevant. (Here I'm happy to point out two coincidences: not only was I at school with the book's editor, Roger Underwood, an experienced forester, but my first out-of-town assignment in my first week as a cadet reporter on the West Australian was to cover the Dwellingup fire. I use the word "cover" advisedly. I was the sidekick to a senior reporter, Jim Dollimore, who drove us to the bushfires in the company Land-Rover, did 90 per cent of the reporting, and slept on the last available couch in the foyer of the amazingly spared Dwellingup Hotel. While remaining so unflappable and courteous that he was destined to leave newspapers and become Ambassador to Syria.) What's so compelling about *Tempered by Fire* is that it's like a series of poignant conversations with previously reticent acquaintances you've always suspected had important stories to tell, but had kept them close to their chests until now. The summer of 1961 was exceptionally hot and dry, and a series of fierce electrical storms ran north-to-south down the state's forests. The fires began as lightning bolts from the blue, striking long-dry bush that carried heavy fuels. More than 400,000 hectares of forest and farmland were burnt. Whole towns were burnt to the ground. As well as the victims' misfortune, it's interesting, for once, to hear from the firefighters. Some of them are vivid writers. **Gerard van Didden** was an 18-year-old forestry cadet straight out of school when he was assigned to save a row of houses. "I put on my heavy overcoat and took my leather motorcycle gloves. The wind was raging and intense showers of sparks were flowing through the air. Spot fires were starting on the walls and in the gutters. As I worked, moving from house to house and back it suddenly struck me that I was completely on my own. When the main front hit, the wave was very intense. Inside a washhouse I found a foil-lined tea chest and crouched down and pulled this over me." What I remember is losing all sense of time. Things were going on, but had no reality. My main feeling was being overcome by loneliness. It has done me good to tell my story." *Tempered by Fire* is published by the Bushfire Front, PO Box 1014, Subiaco, WA 6904.

February 8, 2014

ECHO

Golden anniversary



SAWYERS Valley couple Gerard and Maree van Didden celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary on February 1 with a sumptuous evening meal under the stars with family and friends.

Maree's cousin Frank Quick sang the same song he had sung on their wedding day, *Walk Hand in Hand*, a perfect rendition to a romantic evening.

The couple met at a local dance at the Mundaring Weir Hall and became engaged when they were 21.

On a very hot summers Day in February 1964, Gerard and Maree were married at the Forrest Park Methodist church in Mount Lawley and later honeymooned on Rottnest Island.

Over the next 10 years Gerard and Maree lived in forestry settlements in Manjimup, Dwellingup and Wanneroo before building their home in Sawyers Valley where they continue to live today.

The pair have two children, Tara and Craig and four grandchildren Jasmin, Damon, Chloe and Reagan.

Gerard was born in Sandpoort, Holland to Hank and Jacoba, on in 1942.

The family immigrated to Australia when Gerard was aged 12, with his parents and two younger brothers Bill and John.

The family joined their uncle on his Swayers Valley poultry farm.

They settled on the property, which was later divided between the three brothers.

Maree was born to Gordon and Rhoda Hunter in Mount Lawley in 1942.

She grew up on the pumping stations along the Golden pipeline with her older sister Dellas.



Maree's father was a stoker on the number 6 pumping station in Ghooli, then the number 2 O'Connor pumping station in 1947, the family moved to Mundaring Weir in 1959. Gordon became the parks and gardens manager there.

Gerard worked for the Forestry Department as a cadet from the age of 16 and was a forest guard when they mar-

ried. He remained with the department working primarily in fire protection for thirty eight years.

At age 15, Maree started an apprenticeship as a hairdresser working in Perth, and later completed her qualification in Midland where she worked until she married.

Photos courtesy of the family.