

OF Privates William M. King and Frank H. Bender.

CASE -- Accidental deaths. Suspicious Fire.
VICTIMS -- Basil Bogush, John Doring, Andrew Stepnamic, Howard May,
Gilbert Mohney, Stephen Jaconski, Ross Hollibaugh.

ACCUSED --
SUSPECTS --
PLACE -- Grove Township, Cameron County, Pennsylvania.
DATE -- October 19, 1938.

1. Having been ordered by the Commanding Officer, Troop "D", Squadron No. 2, Pennsylvania Motor Police, Captain C.J. McRae, to proceed to Sinnemahoning, Cameron County, Penna., and vicinity, for the purpose of conducting an investigation relative to the circumstances surrounding a forest fire which broke out on October 19, 1938, and in which fifty members of Camp #182, C.C.C. Cameron, Penna., were trapped, resulting in the deaths of seven of the members by fire, I proceeded as ordered, via troop car #1-127, in company with Pvt. Frank Bender, leaving station at 1:00 P.M. this date, and arriving at Emporium at 1:45 where Mr. Ed. Thompkins, District Attorney of Cameron County, was contacted and arrangements made for a complete investigation.

2. ~~Grove~~^{Grove} township, Cameron County, Penna., Nlick Island, is a densely wooded section, of approximately 800 acres in area, approximately three miles north of the town of Sinnemahoning, in what is known locally as the Nlick Island District. Most of the acreage is in dense second-growth timber. The spot where the seven members of the camp met death is about one mile from the Sinnemahoning creek road up a mountainside approximately 70 degrees in elevation from the horizontal. As to the locale of the fire, it measured in area a fronsage of approximately five miles.

4. Weather conditions: Clear, warm and dry, with light rains in the late afternoon.

5. The first fire started in a wooded area just back of the town of Driftwood, about five miles west of Sinnemahoning. Shortly after the outbreak of the first fire, another one started on the opposite side of the mountain from the first. In all, about four fires started at widely different points, all in a period of a few hours, from 9:00 A.M. until 12:00 Noon, October 19, 1938. The fire which trapped the C.C.C. men was on the opposite side of the mountain from the point where the first fire started.

6. Stephen Jaconski, aged 19 years, Johnstown, Penna., Ross Hollibaugh, 18 years, Rimersburg, Pa., Basil Bogush, 18 years, Conemaugh, Pa., John Doring, 18 years, Johnstown, Penna., Andrew Stepnamic, 17 years, Twin Rocks, Penna., Howard May, 18 years, Erie, Penna., Gilbert Mohney, 33 years, Ridgeway, Penna., an employee of the Pennsylvania Department of Forests and Waters. No further description of victims available at the present time.

7. Fire broke out at 9:30 A.M. Wednesday, October 19, 1938. Fatal fire broke out at approximately 1:00 P.M. October 19, 1938, as determined by statements of nearby residents.

8. Discovered at outbreak by unknown person who turned in an alarm.

9. Probable Motive: Undetermined.

10. In a consultation with District Attorney Thompkins, it was

decided that the only way to approach an investigation of such obvious magnitude was to start from the beginning and sift all reports, rumours, hearsay, etc.,

Accordingly, with this in mind, investigating officers and the District Attorney proceeded to a point just back of Driftwood, Pa., where the first fire started and search the burned area thoroughly in an effort to find some shred of evidence that would justify the theory that the fire had been of incendiary origin. The fire was apparently of the low, or leaf fire type, and the trees in the densely wooded area were merely scorched around their bottoms. At no place within the burned area was a burned tree found, the leaves and underbrush alone being consumed. The exact spot where the fire actually started could not be located by the investigators. Another theory, the "sun-dial theory" was checked. A practice of incendiarists in firing a woods has been the use of a lens, perhaps from a small flashlight, in such a way that the direct rays of the sun, in passing through the lens, concentrate and ignite the dry leaves. The lens may be fashioned in a tree or on a branch, and when the sun reaches a certain point in the sky, the rays pass through the set lens and the woods are ignited. However, no lens or any evidence of the use of one was found. As it was out of the question for the investigators to remain in this area after dark, due to the fact that a stranger in these woods is likely to become lost after dark, it was necessary for the investigators to leave the area before nightfall. No conclusions were arrived at by the search of this area of the woods, but it was thought that if the fire was of incendiary origin, as they appear to be, it might be possible to find some trace. The area searched by the investigators was the area in which the first of the series of fires occurred, and was approximately 100 acres in extent. This fire, according to reports of native residents, began in such a locality that the idea of the fire starting from some natural cause would be idiotic, as the area is completely isolated from inhabited areas and the only persons in the woods at this time of year, prior to the hunting season, are those persons who would have no reason to be there.

After leaving the woods, investigating officers interviewed many of the residents of the locality. Their names cannot be used, and, in fact, were seldom secured by the investigators, due to a deep-rooted fear of law on the part of these people. These persons interviewed, with one accord, stated to the investigators that the fire was deliberately set. This, of course, leads into another phase of the investigation. There are several reasons why persons living in the region and native to them would fire the woods. The first reason expressed by numerous people, was that some disgruntled job-seeker, with attempting to get work with the C.O.C. or with the Forestry department, failed to do so and harbors a resentment for that reason. Another theory is that some game law violator, resentful over arrest and conviction, fires the woods from revenge. Politics plays a large part in this matter, due to the fact that the natives resent the appointment of outsiders to jobs involving the work in the woods has aroused considerable resentment. Many of the natives are outspoken in condemnation of the manner in which the forest fires are fought by the C.O.C. All of them believe that the boys sent into the woods to fight fire were too young, were not properly equipped and were poorly led by their superiors. Person apparently familiar with fighting forest fires, and who were near the scene of the fires, state that the boys were actually driven into the woods, exhausted and tired from fire-fighting, and escape from the flames. This investigation will be continued.

OCT 25 1938

Respectfully Submitted,

William M. King

Pvt. Troop W.D. Sg, P.M.P.

OF
CASE
VICTIMS
ACCUSED
SUSPECTS
PLACE
DATE

- Privates William M. King and Frank H. Bender.
- Basil Brown, Fire, Accidental deaths.
- Basil Brown, John Doring, Andrew Stephens, Raymond Ray, Gilbert Romney, Stephen Jacobelli, Ross McElbourne.
-
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- Grove Township, Cameron County, Pennsylvania.
- October 19, 1928.

Grove

Having been ordered by the Commanding Officer, Troop 105, Cameron Co., Pa., Pennsylvania Motor Police, Captain C.J. Kefau, to continue the investigation in the above case, I proceeded as ordered, wearing civilian clothes, via troop car D-12-117, in company with Pvt. Frank H. Bensen, leaving station at 4:00 P.M. this date.

Investigating officer proceeded to departing, Pa., where District Attorney Township was contacted and the investigation continued. Investigator proceeded to the area in which the seven members of the C.C.C. were buried to death, and again, following the practice started on October 17, 1919, posted the area for any sign or sign of any kind that might indicate the manner in which the men met death. The route taken the east side of which the fire in which the men died was blazing. It almost immediately and some time was consumed in receiving the report where the men died. No details were given in receiving the report indicate the exact spot where the men died, but it was stated, a grave eighteen feet and a half or about seven feet deep, the remains apparently in this place the road, the fire was apparently burned only six inches and was a low fire, the legs of the men being untouched by the flames. The soil which was 18" on the mountain by the men had been covered by the C.C.C. men, and no evidence remained as to the spot where the men died.

Numerous local residents were interviewed as to any other persons surrounding the fire. Mr. Arthur Miller, a resident of the region for a long time, informed the investigator that he was driving in the road near where the fire started at approximately 11:00 A.M. October 19, 1928. He claimed that he saw no signs of fire at that time, but on returning to the spot at 1:00 he found the road along the road burned. He judged that the fire must have started at about 12:30 P.M. He pointed on the exact spot along the highway where the blaze started, and accompanied the investigator to the top of the mountain. His son was later interviewed and he stated that he had seen nothing on the porch of his house, which is about 1/2 mile away from the scene of the tragedy, and at about 7:30 P.M. he heard the men yelling on the mountain. He could not hear the words they were saying. At about 4:00 P.M. he drove his car down the road and picked up two men of the C.C.C. who were apparently injured; one of them, according to him, being Charles Williams. He drove the men to camp No. 30 about 7 miles from camp where they were met by the same ambulance which was being dispatched to the camp and turned the injured boys over to the doctor, who immediately rushed them to the hospital at Harris. Both Mr. Miller and his son promised full co-operation with the officers in pursuing the investigation. There seems to be a great deal of feeling against the C.C.C. of which an idea is commonly held, and the people are in arms of the burning of the seven youths. These people are experienced camp fire fighters, and claim especially that there was absolutely no excuse for the death of these boys. The exhibits as noted above are being held by District Attorney for future use. This investigation to be continued.

RECEIVED
OCT 25 1938

HEADQUARTERS TROOP

Respectfully submitted,
William M. King
Pvt., Troop 105