

-INITIAL REPORT- File No. 2-D-06-2  
October 22, 1938

OF: Privates Eilliam M. King and Frank H Bender

CASE: Accidental deaths. Suspicious Fire.

VICTIMS: Basil Bogush, John Boring, Andrew Stephanic, Howard May, Gilbert Mahoney, Stephen Jacofsky, Ross Hollobaugh.

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 CJ McRae, to proceed to Sinnamahoning, Cameron County, Penna., and vicinity, for the purpose of conduction an investigation relative to the circumstances surrounding a forest fire which broke out on October 19, 1938, and in which 50 members of Camp #1xx, C.C.C., Cameron, Penna. were trapped, resulting in the deaths of seven members by fire, I proceeded as ordered via troop car xxx-2-127, in company with Pvt. Frank Bender, leaving station at 1:00 PM this date, and arriving at Emporium at 1:45 where Mr. Ed. Tompkins, District Attorney of Cameron County, was contacted and arrangements were made for a complete investigation.
2. "Lick Island", Grove township, Cameron County, Penna.,
3. The scene of the fatalities is a densely wooded section of approximately 800 acres in area, approximately three miles north of the town of Sinnamahoning, in what is locally known as the "Lick 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 a mile from the Sinnamahoning 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 frontage of approximately five miles.
4. Weather conditions: Clear. warm and dry, with light wind in the afternoon.
5. The first fire started in a wooded area just back of the town of Driftwood, about 5 miles west of Sinnamahoning. 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 hopurs, from 9:30 AM until 1:00 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 18 years, Johnstown Pa., Ross Hollobaugh, 18 years, Rimerburg Pa., Basil Bogush, 18 years, Conemaugh, Pa., John Boring, 18 years, Johnstown Pa., Andrew Stephanic, 17 years, Twin Rocks, Pa., Howard May, 18 years, Erie Pa., Gilbert Mahoney, 38 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 AM Wednesday, October 19, 1938. Fatal fire broke out at approximately 1:00 PM, October 19, 1938, as determined by statement of nearby residents.

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

9. Probable motive: Undetermined.

10 In consultation with District Attorney Thomkins, it was

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

Accordingly, with this in mind, investigating officers and the District Attorney proceeded to a point just back of Driftwood Pa., 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 litter 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 started could not be located by the investigators.

Another theory, the "sundial theory" was checked. A practice of incendiaries 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 lense, 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 ever 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 the 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 the record stated that the fires were deliberately set.

This, of course, leads to another phase of the investigation: There are several reasons why persons living in the region and native to it would fire the woods. The first reason expressed by numerous people, was that some disgruntled job-seeker, attempting to get work with the C.C.C. or with the Forestry department, failed to do so and harbors a resentment for that reason. Another theory is that some law violator, resentful over arrest and conviction, fires out 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 work in the woods has aroused considerable resentment. Many of the natives are outspoken in their condemnation of the manner in which the forest fires are fought by the C.C.C. All of them believe that the boys that went into the woods to fight fires were too young, were not properly equipped and were poorly led by their superiors. Persons apparently familiar with fighting forest fires, and who were near the scene of the fires, stated that the boys were actually driven into the woods, exhausted and tired from fire-fighting, and died in the conflagration because they were too exhausted to escape from the flames. This investigation will be continued.

Respectfully Submitted,  
William M King  
Received Oct 25, 1938

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-SUPPLEMENTAL REPORT- File NO 2-D-06-2  
OF: Privates Eilliam M. King and Frank H Bender  
CASE: Accidental deaths. Suspicious Fire.  
VICTIMS: Basil Bogush, John Boring, Andrew Stephanic, Howard May, Gilbert Mahoney,  
Stephen Jacofsky, Ross Hollobaugh.  
ACCUSED:  
SUSPECTS:  
PLACE: Grove Township, Cameron County, Pennsylvania.  
DATE: October 19, 1938

This last of 3 pages is hard to read, but seems to say the investigators were unable to determine the exact spot where the firefighters died, but did find a canvass canteen cover and effects of some of the young men approximately a mile from the road.

Seems also to say the fire was a "low fire" that "burned only the leaves" and "the large trees being untouched by the fire."

Seems to have a timeline from some local witnesses (Mr Miller and his son who lived about a mile away and traveled the road) who report when they first saw fire and what they heard and when.

Respectfully Submitted,  
William M King  
Received Oct 25, 1938