



The Pepper Hill Fire & Memorial Springs

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The planners thought the memorial would get more attention there than up First Fork were the tragedy actually occurred. The enrollees from the Hunts Run Camp built the memorial with stone from the surrounding area. One year after the event, Memorial Springs was dedicated. Hundreds of people attended the service.

Today, many people stop for water and to look over the Memorial. It is a fitting tribute to the memory of those who died so long ago in hills of Cameron County. In October, members of the Cameron County Historical Society place a wreath and flowers at the Memorial to continue the tradition of remembering these boys- a tradition once carried out by former members of the CCC who are no longer with us. Memorial Springs is located about 3 miles south of Emporium on the scenic Bucktail Trail (Rt. 120).

The Cameron County Historical Society would like to hear from any family members who may have photos of these boys
info@thelittlemuseum.org or 814-486-0213



At noon the fire gong once again sounded through-out the camp. We jumped out of bed, back into denims and rushed to the mess-hall for dinner, before going to the "fire-front." Following a hurried lunch, I placed a fire tank on my back, and with eighteen other fellows was off on the greatest adventure of my life. Little did we dream of the tragedy that lurked on Pepper Hill Mountain.

Arriving at the "front" we began cleaning a path at the foot of the mountain. After progressing about fifty feet and starting a back fire, we were ordered to go to the head of the fire and work downhill. About three-fourths of the way to the top, nine of us fellows (the others had gone ahead) stopped to take a rest; one of the lads biting into a sandwich he had hidden in his shirt. Looking back he screamed, dropped his sandwich and then fainted.

Waves upon waves of red and yellow flames, only a hundred feet away, were eating their way to the top of Pepper Hill --- ready in a few seconds to devour us. Instantly the picture of the back fire we had ignited at the foot of the hill flashed through my mind; it has jumped the path and, driven by a fresh wind, had taken to the trees and madly charged toward us.

To run ahead of the flames was futile; they would easily catch us. On the three remaining sides the red headless monster leaped and laughed as they threw heavenward showers of sparks and clouds of smoke and came fatally closer.

SMOKE! SPARKS! FLAMES! FLESH! I dropped my tank shut my eyes, mumbled a short prayer and ran directly into the face of the back fire. In semi-daze I dragged my weary feet and burned body until completely fatigued; scorched and parched with thirst, I fell exhausted at the foot of a tree.

A long time later, it seemed like eternity, I regained consciousness, hearing one of my buddies screaming at the top of his voice, as though his lungs were about to burst, lying only five feet away from me. He was terribly burned; I could scarcely recognize him. A hundred feet away another of the crew was lying on the ground, his face buried in the earth.

The fire was dying. With my two companions we began trudging back to the road. After several short steps, one, whose clothing was entirely burned off him, dropped naked and exhausted. Could we carry him? Help him? We tried, but his listless body weighted tons. After a few attempts we had no alternative but to attempt to get through ourselves.

Reaching the road, I frantically quenched my thirst with water from the kegs carried on the truck. With a passing motorist we rode to the Bucktail Veterans Camp and then, minutes later, was raced in an ambulance to the Renovo Hospital. After three weeks in Renovo, I was moved to the Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, D. C. where I was a patient for two months. Receiving my discharge, I went back to the Hunts Run Camp and was on quarters for the following month. A few weeks later, still bearing scars on both hands and legs, I was transferred to Camp S-125, Elimsport, PA, to attend the Central Shop School, where I am at present.

Of that fire crew of nine men, six perished in the flames, one lived one day, another two weeks--- only I was fortunate enough to survive the disaster. Never does a day pass that I fail to thank Providence for my extremely good fortune --- to have seen death face to face and lived.“

Other survivors had their stories to tell. Enrollees Sofchak and Kiliany were credited with saving the lives of a number of men by calling them into a safe area. They were decorated for their quick thinking. Three of those men were Carl Yereb, Chester Penko and William Koerber. Enrollee Penko described the ordeal as follows: "we were trapped before we got to the top. Three of us tried to make a break for it. We ran upward and to the right of the thing. We got about 50 feet from the edge of the fire. The flames were about 25 feet tall.”

Koerber was with Penko and Yereb and he said, "We dropped our spray cans and ran. When we got a ways from the fire, we climbed a tree.”

Yereb testified: "We climbed up a tree to see if there was any chance of escape, but there was a danger of the flames reaching the tree."

At that point, the three heard Kiliany and Sofchak calling to them. They climbed down the tree and were guided to safety by Kiliany's voice.

The three of them and others waited out the fire on the top of a large rock. After about a half an hour the fire passed and they made their way down the hill though the burned area. Gaydos, one of the survivors relates: "We then went over the burned area and down the hill. We went down about 700 feet and found two of the fellows who were burned to death. Boring was on his knees with his hand on his head. The other fellow was also on his knees with a hand and his head resting on a rock. We heard Bogush and went over to him. I heard Bogush holler, 'Jesus, save me.' But we could do nothing for him. He did not recognize us at all.

In all, the fire claimed eight lives: Gilbert Mahoney 38, Ridgeway was the first to perish. Mahoney was a heavy man who was not able to stay ahead of the fire; Basil Bogush, 19, Conemaugh; John Boring, 19, Johnstown; Howard May, 18, Erie; Andrew Stefphanic, 18, Twin Rocks all died in the fire. Ross Hollobaugh, 18, Rimersburg died the next day in Renovo; Stephen Jacofsky, 17 Johnstown died the next day at St. Marys Hospital;; George Vogel, hometown unknown died November 2, in Renovo.

The outpouring of grief from the people of Cameron County was immense. More than 600 people attended a Memorial Mass the following week at St. Marks. Crowds of people met the trains that took the bodies of the boys to their homes. The County Coroner convened an inquisition and District Attorney Edwin Tompkins I made a sweeping investigation of the tragedy. There was also a Board of Inquiry convened by the U.S. Army. All three investigations pointed fingers to the staff of the Hunts Run CCC Camp. Today, the mistakes made in this event are still taught by the Pennsylvania Forestry Department during their fire fighting training.

Word of the tragedy went through the CCC world. Pennies poured in from over 8000 enrollees for a monument to be built in memory of the boys. The site for the monument that we know as Memorial Springs was selected because The Springs was already a popular tourist stop.

The Pepper Hill Fire of 1938

At 11:10 AM on the morning of October 19, 1938, the Hunts Run CCC Camp S-132 received a phone call from District Forester Charles Baer requesting that someone be dispatched to check a reported fire in the vicinity of Sinnamahoning. Truck driver George Poloski was immediately sent to investigate. What was about to unfold was a tragedy of errors that would cost the lives of seven boys and their adult supervisor.

At 12:00 noon, Poloski phoned from the Veterans Camp CCC S-86 in Sinnamahoning and reported that there were several forest fires burning in the area. The summer and fall of 1938 were unusually hot and dry. Precipitation for the months of August, September, and October were nearly four inches below normal. For the fifth day in a row temperatures were in the 80's (so much for global warming!). The forests were tinderboxes waiting to flare and many areas in the County had been burning for days.

Poloski returned to the Hunts Run camp to grab lunch and pick up a crew of firefighters. Two crews of enrollees were dispatched toward the fire scene. Crew #1 under foreman Adolph Kammrath, consisted of 25 enrollees. Crew #2 under Gilbert Mahoney, consisted of 22. Both crews had been on the Jerry Run fire the day before and had not returned until 5:30 that morning. They were very tired and worn out. Several of them asked to stay behind because they were so tired, but they were ordered to go. Other than fighting the fire the night before, these two crews had not been properly trained to fight fires. There was indication after the fact that one of the supervisors was also not knowledgeable of fire behavior or proper firefighting tactics. Most of them were only 17 and 18.

How the story unfolds is best told by one of the survivors Pete Damico. Here is his story from the files of the Historical Society.

"It was the morning of October 19th, 1938. The torrid sun relentlessly beat down its wave of heat and light, literally scorching the forests about Sinnamahoning, as if intentionally igniting the spark of destruction that was to follow. We had returned a few hours earlier from fighting a small forest fire and were getting a brief rest.