

BASS RIVER GAZETTE

A newsletter from the Bass River Community Library History Committee and the Great John Mathis Foundation

SPECIAL FOREST FIRE FIGHTER'S MEMORIAL REDEDICATION EDITION

• Issue No. 20: Special October, 2006 Edition • donations appreciated •

BASS RIVER STATE FOREST FIRE FIGHTERS' MEMORIAL TO BE REDEDICATED

by Peter H. Stemmer

This is a Special Edition of The *Bass River Gazette* to commemorate the October 29, 2006 rededication of the Forest Fighters' Memorial in Bass River State Forest. This issue is unique in that (1) It deals with a specific event which serves to memorialize the memories and deeds of brave men who sacrificed their lives in the fighting of two horrendous forest fires that threatened the homes and towns scattered in and around the edge of the New Jersey Pine Barrens; and (2) It is comprised of newspaper accounts and photos from the times that the events occurred. It is felt that this approach gives the reader the sense of being there at the time of the events, and it better conveys the sadness, tragedy, and horror felt at the time. We will leave the reader to digest the events unhindered by the hindsight which often influences historical interpretation.

The Jersey iron stone memorial on the west side of East Greenbush Road, not far from its termination at Stage Road, is the last remaining fully intact evidence of the existence of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) Camp which existed in Bass River State Forest in the mid 1930's and early 1940's [See *Bass River Gazette* Issue #16 for the late Almira Cramer Steele's *Another Thing I Remember* column entitled "The Bass River CCC Camp."] The CCC camp was responsible for the development of much of the State Park as it exists today, including the road network and the construction of the dam that created Lake Absegami.

Scattered and isolated remnants of some building foundations and shallow cellar holes to the west of the Memorial are all that are left of this once bustling camp facility. Trail signs identify these remains. Fittingly, the Memorial has been maintained so that memories can be preserved concerning the brave men that deserve our honor.



DEDICATION MESSAGE

Cynthia L. Coritz
Superintendent
Bass River State Forest

Thank you to the Bass River Township Library History Committee for developing a *Bass River Gazette* to commemorate this rededication of the Firefighter Memorial and in helping tell this chapter in Bass River State Forest's history. This is the 70th Anniversary of the 1936 Chatsworth Fire that claimed three Civilian Conservation Corps boys lives and the lives of a volunteer firefighter and a NJ Forest Fire Service Warden.

Before I began working at Bass River State Forest I had walked through the remains of the CCC Camp and read the plaques on this unique memorial. I had no idea that the men that were killed were so young or how they died protecting Bass River State Forest and surrounding communities. I had no idea that the CCC boys had donated labor and money to build the memorial and place a bronze plaque with the names of the men killed. These young men sacrificed their lives protecting the forest and local communities and we will forever be in their debt. This is why this memorial is so important. As the last intact "structure" at CCC Camp S-55 it stands as a reminder of the bravery, dedication and harsh conditions of this time period in Bass River State Forest's history. I invite everyone to visit the memorial, sit on the bench and ponder what might have happened if not for the sacrifice made by these men.



The Forest Fire Fighters' Memorial at the upper end of East Greenbush Road testifies to the bravery of local New Jersey Forest Fire Fighters who gave their lives for the protection of the forest and homes and towns surrounding the forest.

The Memorial was originally built by the CCC Camp to honor its fallen members, Stanley Carr, John LaSalle, and Edward Sullivan who lost their lives fighting the May 1936 forest fire that destroyed 133 square miles of Pinelands and threatened many surrounding towns including Tuckerton, New Gretna, and West Creek. Plans for its construction began shortly after the last of the tragic funeral services. Sandstone was collected from the surrounding forest and fashioned into a memorial. Funds for the bronze tablet memorializing the three CCC men who lost their lives in the fire were donated by the CCC Camp Officers and members. In August, 1936 the flag pole was set at the Memorial, and the bronze tablet was put on display in the Recreation Hall awaiting the completion of the Memorial. The poem inscribed on the tablet was written by F. William Bates, the advisor to the *Bass River Log*, the local camp monthly newspaper. I have been unable to document the original dedication of the CCC Memorial, but it is likely that it was held in the Spring of 1937.

For about 40 years the CCC Memorial remained unchanged, a modern day Stonehenge in the Pines, acting as a reminder of the ever present dangers of forest fires in the New Jersey Pinebarrens. On May 25, 1976 the Memorial was rededicated with the addition of a bronze plaque honoring the two New Jersey State Forest Fire Fighters - Ira Morey and

(Continued on page 2)



State Forest Fighter vehicles line up on the beach at Lake Absegami as part of the 1977 Rededication of the CCC-Forest Fire Fighter Memorial. (Photo courtesy of Bass River State Forest Archives)

1936 FIRE NEWS ARTICLE

SHIFT OF WIND TRAPS VICTIMS

Last of Missing Fire-Fighters Found as 133-Square-Mile Blaze Is Finally Stopped

TWO OCEAN VICTIMS IDENTIFIED

TUCKERTON- Five dead and eight injured was the final toll today as a dangerous fire which had swept 133 square miles of Ocean and Burlington county woodland was brought under control.

A final check of the 750 men who had fought the fire for 48 hours showed all accounted for. A number of CCC workers at first reported missing were found on the fire lines.



Ben Broome

Two fire wardens, Benjamin Broome and Henry Updike, both of New Gretna, were the last of the missing men to be found safe. They were located as searching parties began a hunt thru the still-smoldering woodlands for possible further victims.



Henry Updike

Only one danger spot remained, near Manahawkin, and men were rushed there by truck to meet the threat.

The victims had been trapped yesterday as shifting winds turned backfires into new menaces and created death traps in the heart of Ocean County's pine lands.

Ten or 12 small fires were still blazing in the area west of Tuckerton. The wind was driving the flames obliquely toward Barnegat bay but since the fires were scattered there was little danger of further damage. Lookouts at Barnegat and Lakehurst reported the wind had a velocity of eight miles an hour.

The bodies of the CCC youths were found last night near Stafford Forge, half way between Tuckerton and Barnegat and a fifth member of the fire fighting crew died of burns on route to Camp Dix Wrightstown. He was Ira Morey, West Creek, a state fire fighter and brother of Warden Alfred Morey, who expressed the opinion "many of my boys" had died. Capt.

MEMORIAL TO BE REDEDICATED

(Continued from page 1)

Kingsley White - who also lost their lives in the May, 1936 fire. Representatives from the surrounding municipalities, counties, and Federal government participated in the ceremony.

An exhibit panel was added, sometime after 1976, next to the Memorial to explain the Memorial and the historical significance of the CCC ruins adjacent to it.

The final addition to the Memorial occurred in November, 1982 when a bronze plaque was added in memory of the four Eagleswood firemen - Fire Chief Harold "Skip" Cranmer, Assistant Chief Marcus Cullen, and firemen John Baker and Herbert Blackwell - who lost their lives fighting the July, 1977 fire. A ceremony with local community and fire company representatives was held.

The exhibit panel will be renewed for the October 28, 2006 Rededication Ceremonies by the New Jersey State Forest Fire Service, and a sign identifying the Memorial to passing motorists and hikers will be installed.

It is fitting that we, again, in 2006, remember those who sacrificed their lives for the protection of the forest, the surrounding Pineland's communities, our homes, and our families. Seventy years has passed since that terrible 1936 fire and 24 years since the 1977 fire. The Memorial stands as a physical tribute to the memory of those brave fire fighters, but it is our actions which show what is in our hearts. Let us never forget.

Roe Nelson, commandant of the Bass River CCC camp, where hundreds of CCC workers were drafted to fight the flames, said no more were dead.

Elwood P. Jones, Tuckerton funeral director, reported this afternoon that the dead are John T. LaSalle, 20, of 13 Oak Street, New Brunswick; Edward F. Sullivan, 20, of 81 Guilden Street, New Brunswick; Stanley Carr, 22, of Waretown; Kingsley White, 38, of Whitesville; and Ira Morey of West Creek.

Two Wardens Missing

Division Fire Warden John Thornburn set up field headquarters in the National hotel at Manahawkin.

Thornburn was maintaining communication by radio with Col. Leonidas Coyle, state fire warden, who was using a plane to direct the fire fighters. Telephone wires were also laid to the various danger points to aid in the battle today and speed the search for the missing.

Winds Heighten Menace

The fire started near Chatsworth Sunday and burned southeasterly toward the ocean over a triangle with 16 mile sides and an 11 mile base. The corners of the triangle were Chatsworth and New Gretna in Burlington county and Manahawkin in Ocean county, none of which was reached by the flames.

It did not become serious however, until yesterday afternoon when shifting winds confused the fire fighters. Backfire suddenly became uncontrollable while the head of the flames they were supposed to meet veered off.

It was in such a situation that four of the five known victims met death last night. When their bodies were found their faces were futilely covered with their arms.

All of the dead and missing were recruited from New Jersey towns. Carr was the driver of a truck which carried many fire fighters in the point where the bodies were found.

The bodies were discovered by Kenneth Barber, 17, of West Creek, who led Division Fire Warden Thornburn to the spot.

Youth Describes Flight

William Whittick, 17, Camden, one of the group which escaped from the same location, described the scene as the men were trapped.

(Continued on page 3)

Gazette Information

It has been a year since the last Gazette was published. We lost a good friend and our favorite columnist, Almira Cramer Steele, who went to meet her Lord on July 11, 2006. Computer problems, some of our contributors being out of town for extended periods of time, and various life distractions hindered our efforts this year. Hopefully, we will do better in 2007, when we hope to publish a Memorial Edition to honor the Memory of our sister, Almira, plus June and December editions.



In Memoriam
Almira Cramer Steele
1922 - 2006

A yearly subscription (2 issues) of the Gazette is available for anyone who sends 2 business size, 4" x 9 1/2", stamped, self addressed envelopes to Gazette Subscriptions c/o Bass River Township Community Library, P.O. Box 256, New Gretna, NJ 08224. There is no charge for the subscription; however, donations are appreciated. The subscription will start with the next issue unless otherwise specified and will expire after the 2 envelopes are used. It may then be renewed by sending 2 or more additional envelopes.

SHIFT OF WIND TRAPS VICTIMS

(Continued from page 2)

"There was a sudden shift in the wind," he said. "We were all told by our boss to get out of there. The fire was right in back of us. A whole bunch of us jumped into the truck and pulled a fellow on with us just as we went away. There were other fellows back in the woods. We didn't see them any more."

Another eyewitness said he saw five or six youths run out on a small road shouting that others had been caught in the whirling flames.

Thornburg said the four were trapped on a back road three miles north of Stafford Forge. They were in an army truck and the road was so bad they could not turn around to flee, he said. Abandoning their truck, they tried to escape thru the woods but were caught by the flames.



John T. LaSala, fire victim,
(1916 - 1936)

Casualty List

Those taken to hospitals at Camp Dix and Lakewood included:

William H. Morey, 40, West Creek, brother of the dead man and Warden Morey.
Louis Hedervary, 29, New Gretna.
Melvin McQueen, 34, Lakewood.
Richard Allen, 19, Bordentown.
Christopher Lupton, 19, Atlantic City.
Irving Senkel, 19, New Brunswick.
Samuel Bieslin
Philip J. Matthews

All but Morey and McQueen were from the Bass River CCC camp.

Confusing reports as to the number of dead and missing circulated throughout the area, but the most persistent of the unconfirmed rumors was that 17 were missing.

Fire Trucks Flock to Scene

Scores of fire trucks poured into the area from Ocean Gate, Toms River, Beachwood, West Creek, Barnegat, Tuckerton, Manahawkin, New Gretna, and as far as Atlantic City, 20 miles from the center of the blaze. Hundreds of volunteers were enrolled and at one time the Atlantic City- New York highway was closed at Mayetta to permit the fire fighters to start a backfire. The road was opened an hour later.

Many of the men were treated for minor burns by Dr. J. Lewis Lane. Tuckerton. Morey, one of the victims, was so badly burned he was beyond medical aid when found.

Leaders of the fire brigades were hopeful the missing had scattered and would eventually report. weary wardens said the search for the missing men would take most of the day and might be delayed until the flames had been finally checked.

The fire smoldered over a wide area during the night and appeared to freshen in the morning, but at many points it was headed for areas already burned over.

The main fire worked toward New Gretna last night before it was brought under control in that section. It was difficult to keep track of the blaze however, since backfires and recurring blazes sent clouds of smoke curling toward the main fire.

Save 43 Homes

Fire fighters won a battle to prevent the flames from spreading into the town of Tuckerton, 16 miles from where the fire started. They backfired along Green street, north of the town, completing a blockade before the fickle wind . . . [four words unintelligible].

Twelve fire companies reported they had saved 43 homes last night. Two unoccupied dwellings were destroyed, one at Warren Grove, where a sawmill also burned, and one at Mayetta, the only place where the fire succeeded in

jumping the Atlantic City- New York highway. Several small hunting lodges in the pines were also leveled.

Firemen wet down more than 30 houses at Mayetta before finally stopping the fire.

A dozen small towns skirt the highway, but none was in danger today. The fire either had passed them, or was under control. New Gretna would be seriously threatened only if the wind shifted to the north. Its prevailing direction yesterday was northwest.

A large part of the area swept included The Plains, known for its scrub pines. Altho good timber grows a half mile beyond its limits on The Plains nothing will grow more than head high. Scientists believe that a succession of forest fires which have swept the area have reduced the fertility of the soil.

State Fire Warden Leonidas Coyle who mobilized the State forces at Chatsworth Sunday, directed the operations, yesterday from an airplane. Comdr. Charles E. Rosendahl, commandant of the naval air station at Lakehurst, said this morning the Navy's blimps could be used in the search for the men reported missing but no request had been received for such assistance. He said the blimps were aloft on training flights and could be directed to the scene as soon as the request is received.

The force which battled the fires totaled 750 men, including 25 wardens, 300 assistants, 200 CCC workers and 200 soldiers from the 18th U.S. infantry at Camp Dix.

[Asbury Park Press, Tuesday, May 26, 1936]

The Benjamin Broome and Henry Updike photos are from the Bass River History Committee Archives. The John LaSala photo is from Vito LaSala, John's nephew who tells us that John's surname was misspelled in the CCC records.

EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT

The following is an excerpt from a January 31, 1990 letter written by Richard Allen, a burn victim survivor of the 1936 fire, to the New Jersey State Department of Environmental Protection. It provides a rare eye witness account of the horrors experienced by those fighting the raging fire.

Our company of CCC boys were helping State Forest and civilian fire fighters fight the vast number and areas of forest fires in that east central New Jersey area. Lowell Thomas was flying over the area every evening and reporting it on the radio news.

On the night of May 25 a truck load of us was sent up a back road near Stafford Forge to set off a back fire. However, the wind changed and the main fire came down on us like a hundred express trains. Our truck got stuck in the sand and the fire hit us.

Have you ever been Par-Boiled? We were! The fire grabbed us, burned us and shook us like we were rag dolls! It was like we were in a semi-coma and couldn't think. The main fire swept on but everything was burning and the truck on fire. Finally primitive reasoning returned and we climbed out of the truck, our skin hanging from us like disembodied robes.

Six men were left behind that didn't survive: three CCC men and three civilian fire fighters.

We walked till we came to a highway when autos stopped and took us to Lakewood Hospital. The next day an Army ambulance took us to Camp Dix for medical treatment and recovery.

Yours sincerely,
Richard Allen

BASS RIVER LOG ARTICLES

The men of the Bass River State Forest CCC Camp published their own monthly newspaper. It was first called *Bass River Mosquito Bits* when it started in June, 1934. The name was likely a reference to one of the many country living conditions first experienced by city boys who found themselves suddenly in the country. A contest was held in November, 1934 to chose a new name for the publication which became the *Bass River Log*. The following articles appeared in the *Bass River Log* shortly after the tragic 1936 fire.



HONOR THE BRAVE

As the records of May 25, 1936 are written in the Camp Log, so must they endure: "On this date, the sad and untimely deaths of Stanley Carr, John LaSalle and Edward Sullivan are reported."

Our humble efforts to bespeak the bravery of these lads are but futile. God alone in His infinite goodness shall be the Judge of their devotions to the traditions of the CCC and their service to mankind.

But let it be written that these brave lads were men among men, they stuck to their posts in the face of danger and paid for their devotion with the highest price of man - - their lives.

Company 225 reveres their memories, and, as we go down the sands of time, we shall recall with sad, but loving recollection, the names of "smokey" Carr, Eddie Sullivan and Jack LaSalle.

Rest thou valiant soldiers brave,
Rest thou in thy hallowed grave,
You uphold the C.C.C.;
God keep you in Eternity.

[*Bass River Log*, June, 1936]

MEMORIAL SERVICES FOR THE DEAD

In loving memory to their departed comrades, Stanley Carr, Edward Sullivan and John LaSalle, the men of Company 225 and their officers, assembled in the recreation hall on Wednesday evening, May 26, to hold memorial services.

Capt. Rittenhouse, the Camp Chaplain, came from Camp Dix especially to conduct the services.

There wasn't a dry eye in the assembly as Capt. Rittenhouse reverently intoned the ritual for the dead. At the conclusion of an inspiring sermon, Capt. Rittenhouse read the tribute to the boys which had been written by Mr. Bates.

[*Bass River Log*, June, 1936]

DETAILS ATTEND FUNERAL

Details of fifty men each were sent by Capt. Nelson to pay their last sad, farewells to the boys who fell in action. On Thursday, May 29, the detail under 2nd Lt. Frank A. Puglia, went to New Brunswick to say goodbye to Ed Sullivan, on the following day Capt. Nelson led another detail to Waretown to honor "Smokey" Carr, and on Saturday the boys returned to New Brunswick to be with Jack LaSalle as he was laid to rest.

[*Bass River Log*, June, 1936]

FOREST FIRE SHOWS HEROISM OF MEMBERS OF COMPANY 225

The Names of Carr, Sullivan And LaSalle Are Indelibly Written Upon The Memory Of The Company

The serenity of the camp of Company 225 was broken Sunday afternoon . . . when the bell tolled at 5-30 O'clock to assemble the men then on the camp reservation. A telephone call had been received by Capt. Rowe H. Nelson, Commanding officer, asking for aid in fighting a forest fire which had originated in Chatsworth. Every man in the camp responded to the call for volunteers and within ten minutes after the call had been received, two truck loads of enrollees were speeding toward the worst forest conflagration which South Jersey has ever known.

100,000 acres of roaring hell were ravaging the territory on a 12 mile front, thru Chatsworth, Manahawkin, Tuckerton and adjacent towns. The flames were leaping thru the sky and devouring, with the avarice of a hungry wolf, everything which came within its path. Smoke, too, which was impassible, belched forth in huge volumes, as the hungry flames spread north, south, east and west.

And into this inferno rode the brave lads of Company 225 who had volunteered to do battle with this raging hell, displaying rare heroism and courage which befitted the established traditions of the CCC. Every man stuck to his post with the same tenacity of the flames - it was human ingenuity and brawn pitted against the worst enemy of man, and, as always, the human side rose to heights and emerged with victory.

But victory was not won so easily, three of the company's bravest men made the supreme sacrifice and gave up their lives - - STANLEY CARR, JOHN LaSALLE and EDWARD SULLIVAN were the heroic boys who gave their all, and, as we go to press, six other men, Irving Finkel, Philip Mathews, Christopher Lupton, Richard Allen, Stanley Biesolin and Louis Hedervary, lie in the Base Hospital at Camp Dix suffering from first and second degree burns. These boys too, rank with the brave.

Throughout the terrible ordeal, every officer was on duty. Captain Rowe H. our Commanding Officer, was at the front lines continuously, refusing sleep and standing by at the peril of his own life. At the camp, in continuous active service, was 2nd Lt. Frank A. Puglia, directing the details as they were sent out to the fire lines and managing a thousand and one other things. So too, did 1st Lieut. Julius Stark, our camp surgeon, fight off fatigue and administer to the injured both at the fire and at the camp.

But we must not lose sight of the rangers. They too displayed a degree of heroism that could not be surpassed. Under the direction of their Project Superintendent, Warren I. Risley, rangers Bush, Cubberly, Sommes, Smith, Cheston and Koster kept with the men and fought off sleep until the dying embers of the fire had burnt into ashes.

It seems a remarkable co-incidence, that almost to the hour, and exactly one year from the date of a previous forest fire in 1936, the bell in the camp tolled out the call for assemblage and fire-fighting volunteers. And it is still further remarkable, that these forest fires in the past five years have deviated little in the date of starting. They have started with regularity between May 20 and 24.

The splendid record of the CCC must be written in the records of the brave, not only the deeds of Company 225, but the courage and unselfish devotion of the boys from all the camps who responded with their officers when aid was asked. Chatsworth, Port Republic, New Lisbon and Manahawkin deserve the highest praise for the indomitable fight they put up along side of Company 225.

[*Bass River Log*, June 1936]

THE CCC OFFICERS AND MEN WHO FOUGHT THE MAY, 1936 FIRE

Below is a photo of the officers and men at the Bass River CCC Camp, Company 225, Camp S-55, taken in March of 1936. It is likely that many of the men who fought the May, 1936 fire are in the photo. Unfortunately, we do not have names to correspond to the faces. Part of the camp, located to the west of the present day Forest Fire Fighters' Memorial, is seen in the background. (Photo courtesy of Bass River State Forest Archives)

BASS RIVER CCC CAMP, COMPANY 225, CAMP S 55 - March, 1936



Below are two pages from the **November, 1936 Thanksgiving Menu** from **CCC Company 225, Camp S55** which likely contains the names of most of the CCC officers and men who fought the May, 1936 forest fire. Most are probably in the photo above. (Menu courtesy of Bass River State Forest Archives)

ROSTER OF C. C. C. COMPANY No. 225 NEW GRETNA, N. J.

CAPT. ROWE H. NELSON, <i>Commanding</i>		
LT. H. P. WRIGHT <i>Supply Officer</i>	MR. W. H. VAN SLYKE <i>Educational Adviser</i>	LT. S. E. DiFIGLIA <i>Medical Officer</i>
MR. J. W. JOHNSON <i>Project Superintendent</i>		
FOREMEN		
H. A. Somes	A. A. Cubberly	G. R. Moorhead
C. A. Smith	Thomas Wood	H. B. Chalfant, Jr.
C. R. Bush	A. H. Koster	N. P. Taylor
Walter B. Sagirs <i>First Sergeant</i>		
Norris Maxwell <i>Supply Sergeant</i>	Chas. E. Warner <i>Mess Sergeant</i>	Fred Ridgeway <i>Canteen Steward</i>
Sigmund Strenkowski <i>Company Clerk</i>	Francis S. Sears <i>Forestry Clerk</i>	
FIRST-AID		
Norman Adams	TRUCK DRIVERS	
Richard Allen	Daniel Walker	
George Fauser <i>Camp Utilities</i>		
SECOND COOKS		
FIRST COOKS	Albert Oharah	
Mathew Hemphill	Grover Johnson	
Vernon Black	Ernest H. Cotterell	
Russell Murphy	LEADERS	
Ralph Loveland		
ASSISTANT LEADERS		
John H. Carr	Rupert Fenimore	
Howard C. Parker	Ralph Pharo	
David Streater	John Kirsch	
	Mearl Seyler	
	George Thompson	

MEMBERS

James Alfano	Morris Hodson	Ernest Paccillo
Roscius Arnwine	John Huff	John Pagden
Irwin Bankard	Andre Jasper	Anthony Palmieri
William Barton	Clinton Johnson	Austin Patten
Seanley Biesslin	Paul Johnson	John E. Petzak
William Bock	John Kalicki	John J. Petzak
Edward Borkowski	George Kepics	Joseph Ptumari
Michael Boubles	John Keating	Robert Provaznik
Gordon Britton	Bernard King	Thomas Rannucci
Samuel Bruno	Howard King	John Reali
Joseph Calderone	John Koieski	George Reeves
Harry Caterson	Chester Konopacki	Harry Ridgway
Joseph Chamberlain	John Kriesick	Clarence Robinson
Gerald Clark	Edmond Krzyzanoski	George Rothman
Raymond Clayton	John Kserka	William Rowlett
Ward Cramer	William Kuhn	Martin Salender
Francis Cranmer	William Kulp	James Sanders
Charles Davison	Howard Kylar	Edward Servon
John Dewald	Vincent Langone	William Sauer
Joseph DiGiorgio	Caspar La Presti	Harry Shemley
Joseph Diil	Chester Lepkowski	Peter Simonelli
Nick DiPietro	John Yowinuka	John Spence
August Eigenmann	Chester Lucas	Ernest Spencer
Edward Downs	Edward Lucas	Raymond Sprague
Alton Eubanks	Dominic Lucca	Russel Staufenberger
Robert Hahl	Joseph Luisi	Alex Sadnickovich
Edward Ferral	John Markle	Willard Stilson
Harry Ford	William Marter	Chester Szkodny
William Gadinger	Carl Maruca	James Tate
Phillip Gelfert	Robert Mason	George Warner
Michael Giambatista	Philip Mathews	Thomas Watson
Charles Gifford	Andrew Mellish	Millard Wheeler
Arthur Goldenbaum	Charles Miller	William Whittick
Frank Gombocz	Paul Munkacy	Joseph Wieliczny
Leon Grabowski	William Murawski	Ralph Willetts
Valentino Graziano	Louis Murrel	Harry Williams
Calvin Griswald	John McCullough	John Wills
Frank Hackler	John McGovern	Russell Wirth
Elwood Haines	Kenneth McLane-Herborn	Forrest Wood
George Harvath	Jay Norton	Otto Wortleman
George Heblow	Frank Ogorowski	Harold Wright
Louis Hedervary	John Osborn	Alex Zdan

1936 FIRE NEWS ARTICLE

Five Killed, Many Injured in Greatest Forest Fires in the History of Two Counties - More Than 20,000 Acres Involved in Four-Day Conflagration in the Area from Chatsworth to Tuckerton and Manahawki - 2,000 Men Fought Fire - Men Were Trapped While Fighting

In one of the worst forest fires in the history of Burlington and Ocean counties, the past four days, burning over more than 20,000 acres, five men lost their lives and many others were injured. The area involved includes the section from Chatsworth to Tuckerton. There also were fires east of Brown's Mills.

Colonel Leonidas J. Coyle, state fire warden, reported last night that the fire was under control and practically extinguished, when a change of wind turned the flames back over the area already burned over. The dead are: Edward F. Sullivan, 19, of New Brunswick. Kingsley White, 38, of Whitesville. Stanley Carr, 23, of Farmingdale. John LaSalle, 20, of New Brunswick. State Forest Ranger Ira Morey, 35, of West Creek. Sullivan, Carr and LaSalle were members of the CCC camp at Bass River. White was a member of the Whitesville fire department. Morey, a brother of Alfred Morey, fire warden, of West Creek, died of burns in hospital. With the other four and the ten injured, he was a member of a crew being rushed to safety in a truck after more than 100 men had been trapped by their own backfires in the Stafford's Forge section.

Drove Others to Safety



Everett Allen, Bass River State Forest Ranger (Photo courtesy of Jean Allen Lainhart)

Carr was the driver of one truck carrying 50 of the men out of the woods while **Everett Allen, a ranger, Bass River**, drove the others to safety. It was not until nearly an hour after Allen reached West Creek with his load that it was discovered the other truck was missing. Meanwhile, Ira Morey, terribly burned, managed to get out of the woods and give first news of the tragedy. Morey was taken to Camp Dix hospital, where he died, and rescue crews were sent after the other men. Carr's body was found in the truck.

The bodies of the other three were found 200 to 300 yards from the machine, which is believed to have been wrecked when it struck a tree as Carr lost control in the dense smoke. All of the dead were so horribly burned identification was nearly impossible. They were taken to a Tuckerton morgue, where they lay for more than 12 hours. Lieut. Julius Stark, CCC officer, identified Carr by a mole on his shoulder, and LaSalle through a dental filling. White was identified by inspecting the teeth. Sullivan's father, Amos, identified his son by a ring and locker keys. Sullivan had been a member of the CCC camp but eight days.

A number of men had been reported missing from time to time Monday night. One, Dandall Leek, 24, of West Creek, has been accounted for. Leek was reported missing when his car was left all night on the highway. However, he turned up yesterday, explaining he had left his original group of volunteers and gone out with a second party. He was unharmed.

Ten men are in hospitals. In Camp Dix Hospital are Stanley T. Biesel and Philip J. Matthews, of the New Gretna CCC camp. Biesel is a son of Carl Biesel, Mullica township clerk. The other eight injured were taken to the Paul Kimball Hospital, Lakewood. They are: Irving Tinkel, New Brunswick; Christopher Lipton, 528 North Delaware avenue, Atlantic City; Richard Allen, Bordentown; Lewis Hedervary, New Gretna; Melvin MacQueen, Lakewood; William Morey, West Creek; **Robert Adams, of New Gretna**, and Emil Wauchlin, of Tuckahoe.

At the hospital it was said each of them was suffering burns and effects of smoke. Morey, another brother of the fire warden, and Hedervary are in critical condition. Scores were burned less seriously and were treated by roving doctors and ambulance crews who have been running up and

down the fire lines continuously. Ambulances from Camp Dix and nearby Ocean county communities were rushed to West Creek and an emergency (sic) hospital was established by the Toms River First Aid squad.

Although several fires seemed to be burning fiercely, Division Fire Warden John A. Thornberg said that the "situation is in hand" last night. He explained that some of the fires which looked dangerous were backfires. Thornberg had 1500 volunteers under him. In addition, there were 500 CCC campers, under Capt. Rowe A. Nelson, fighting the flames, and 200 regular army men of the Eighteenth Infantry, Camp Dix. The latter were the men of Companies D, H and M, under Captains Wilson and W.D. Long. Peter Crozier, division fire warden, who was replaced by Thornberg after collapsing Monday at Stafford's Forge, suffered another relapse yesterday at his home in Mount Holly.

He was removed to Burlington county Hospital, where his condition was described as "good." Three men listed as missing early yesterday, were found later in other sections of the burning area. They are Benjamin Broome, fire warden; Henry Updyke, a volunteer, of New Gretna, and William P. Marter, a volunteer, of Tuckerton.

Col. Leonidas J. Coyle, state fire warden, returned to Trenton last night, after a plane trip over Burlington and Ocean counties. He announced all of the fires were "officially out." Coyle said several hundred men had been posted for all-night duty, but he believed all danger has passed. He described the blaze as "the worst fire in our experience."

Recapitulation of the four-day damage revealed: The fires burned over more than 20,000 acres of forests and bog lands in Ocean and Burlington counties. At least nine towns were saved from destruction by the combined forces of more than 2,000 CCC workers, volunteers and soldiers. Twenty-three fire departments aided fire wardens and others in drenching homes and preventing the fires from entering towns. More than a score of homes, camps, gunning clubs and a sawmill were destroyed. Forest rangers were able to count 15 fires—four main ones—and 11 smaller ones—at noon yesterday.

The most destructive forest fires in several years have been raging in parts of the pines districts of Burlington, Ocean and Atlantic counties during the past few days. Several times the firefighters succeeded in extinguishing the flames, in one section only to have them break out in another. The most menacing fire swept over thousands of acres in the neighborhood of Chatsworth on Saturday and Sunday. It had burned over an area of twelve square miles on Saturday before it was brought under control near Todd's cranberry bog . . . On Sunday the flames broke out again in that section and once more bore down on Chatsworth. A force of 400 CCC workers was hurried to the scene from the Lebanon forest, Pack and Bass River camps, while fire companies from Barnegat, Tuckerton and Manahawkin were hurriedly summoned.

. . . On Saturday, Sunday and Monday, State Fire Warden Leonidas Coyle flew over the burning area in his plane, sending messages by radio to his forces on the ground beneath him, equipped with receiving sets . . . The advance of the fire was believed to have been stopped early on Monday just west of a road bisecting the Tuckerton-Philadelphia and Manahawkin-Philadelphia roads, near Warrens Grove.

Before noon, however, the advancing flames, borne by the stiff breezes, managed to jump the back-fired area near the road, and then began their rapid eastward advance . . . Fire apparatus at Atlantic City stood by ready to come to the assistance of Tuckerton should the blaze resume its aggressiveness and renew the advance on the town of 500 buildings. Special measures were taken to protect the Tuckerton wireless station..

New Jersey Mirror, May 27, 1936

Some information was edited out due to space restraints



Col. Leonidas J. Coyle (Lakewood Daily Times Photo)

STRONG WINDS BLAMED IN FIRE DEATH

by William Aaronson, Staff writer

EAGLESWOOD TWP. - Authorities believe that strong winds that changed direction twice in less than one-half hour contributed to the death of four local firemen who perished during a raging fire late Friday afternoon.

According to N.J. State Police Detective John Dennis, the truck that carried Eagleswood Fire Chief Harold (Skip) E. Cranmer, Assistant Chief Marcus P. Cullen, Fireman John Baker and Fireman Herbert Blackwell to their death arrived at the scene of the fire at 4 p.m.

Detective Dennis told The Beacon that Eagleswood unit number 731, the call number of a specially equipped 10-wheel tank truck, signed on at 3:21 p.m. with the message they were standing by at the firehouse. At 3:37 the unit reported it was approaching Oswego Road. This was the last clear radio transmission from the unit, and according to Dennis, sometime shortly after 3:37 this unit entered the woods area where it would soon be engulfed in flames.

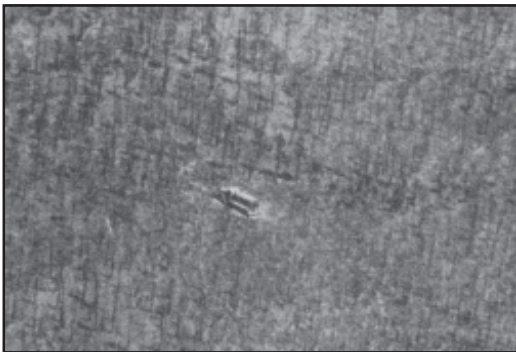
Exactly nine minutes after 731's last transmission, Dennis said the on-scene commander Alfred Smith ordered all units out of the area. This word came over the air for the first time at 3:46. At 4:04 Smith repeated his order to pull out, and again at 4:06 a third order came from Smith. This one repeated that a back fire was being started along Cole [sic] Road. At 4:12 another call came from Smith to pull out of the woods and meet at Dans Bridge Road, reported Dennis, who recorded the transmissions from tapes of the Ocean County Sheriff's Department.

Shortly afterwards, at approximately 4:30 the fire tower reported the wind shifted from the northwest to the southwest, said Dennis. "It was about this time they started to get into trouble," said Dennis.

Twenty minutes later, at 4:50 the tower recorded another wind shift - this time to the northeast.

Between the 4:30 and 4:50 wind shifts Dennis said a faint transmission was received from what he believes was Eagleswood 731. Dennis said they could hear a microphone open and a similar background noise that had been accompanying 731's radio earlier in the afternoon.

At 4:54 Eagleswood's second unit on the scene, #733 tried to make radio contact with 731 but got no response. Again at 4:55, 733 tried to reach 731 and the same faint response and background noise that was heard earlier was again recorded by the recording equipment.



Aerial photo of the burned out truck in which shows the devastation caused by the raging fire. (Unknown newspaper photo.)

First sight of the tragedy came at 6:16 when State Central Forest Fire District Warden David B. Harrison spotted from the air the charred truck and four firemen. Two of the bodies were discovered 35 feet from the vehicle and the other two were approximately 600 feet from the unit. Dennis said it

was almost 7:30 before rescue crews bulldozed their way to the site, one and one-quarter miles from Allen Road. The bodies were removed to the Southern Ocean County Hospital where the victims were pronounced dead on arrival.

Dennis said the ill-fated truck was found in gear and up against a small tree. He noted that the tree was certainly no where near big enough to stop a unit as large as Eagleswood 731. Dennis also reported that the

antenna was broken off the truck at the base of the unit, and the truck was without gas or water in its tanks; both latter conditions he attributes to the intense heat of the fire that went through the area.

Based on these findings, authorities are speculating that the men were heading toward the advancing fire when their truck stalled due to a lack of oxygen caused by the advancing fire. The same lack of oxygen and heavy smoke is being blamed for snuffing out the lives of the four firemen as they tried to escape the blaze on foot.

Dennis reported his investigation revealed the men were fighting the fire properly, considering the path of the fire and the direction of the truck. He said the unit was heading north in the direction of Cole [sic] Road when it stopped. He speculates that the sudden change in wind conditions and the rapidly moving fire (it was estimated to be traveling at 12 knots) combined to cause the tragic death of the four firemen.

The blaze broke out at 3 p.m. on the north side of Allen Road. According to an eyewitness at the fire scene, the fire was discovered by campers in the Pilgrim Lake Campground located on Allen Road, Bass River Township. Campground owner Scott Hazzard phoned the report to the local fire tower, which according to Hazzard had already seen the smoke.

"We then went up Allen Road but by the time we got there the fire had already taken off and was out of sight," said James Flaherty who was working with Hazzard at the time.

Flaherty's report of how fast the fire was moving and exactly where it started conflicts with Dennis's report that records the fire starting 800 feet from Allen Road. Dennis said it was hard to tell exactly where it began because of another fire in the area that occurred two days earlier.

Seventeen state fire fighting units were rushed to scene and volunteer units from Ocean, Atlantic and Burlington counties were called to assist.

Hundreds of campers from the state forest and those in several privately operated sites were evacuated safely within less than a half hour, according to officials.

Many who had to leave trailers and personal possessions behind, were taken to the New Gretna elementary School on N. Maple Avenue, where they were fed and cared for by volunteers.

The fatalities were the first among area firefighters since 1936 when five men lost their lives in a fire that began on May 23 in Chatsworth and, in a four-day rampage, burned 133 square miles of South Jersey pinelands.

Volunteer firefighters who died in that blaze were Ira Morey, 28 of Stafford Forge and Kingsley White, 38, of Whiteville and three CCC men: Stanley Carr, 28, of Waretown, John LaSalle, 19, of New Brunswick, New York [sic- should be N.J.] and Edward Sullivan of New Brunswick, N.J.

Those men were sent into an area near Stafford Forge in Eagleswood Township to set up a backfire to check oncoming flames threatening local communities.

The volunteers had been dispatched to the area by district fire warden Alfred Morey, grandfather to Assistant Chief Cullen who died in Friday's holocaust.

Ira Morey, who died, and William Morey of West Creek, who was severely burned, were Cullen's great uncles.

Ironically, Eagleswood volunteers were set to celebrate their 50th Anniversary with a parade and housing of a new fire truck last Saturday, the day most residents learned of the tragic loss. In memorial services for those who lost their lives in the 1936 fire, former mayor Kenneth L. Barber made a brief, but eloquent speech which will undoubtedly be echoed in today's ceremonies:

"They gave their lives to protect life and property . . . They saved my town . . . I'll remember them forever . . ."

[The Beacon, July 28, 1977]

They Die Who Serve



Fire Chief
Harold "Skip" Cranmer

Like all members of the Eagleswood Fire Company, the four men were looking forward to the 50th anniversary celebration in the firehouse.

In a festive atmosphere, the men worked with their friends, putting up the bunting, flags and decorations. Good humor was in the air, and laughter would greet the occasional complaint about it being "an awful hot day to work like this."

Then the call for help came. The woods in New Gretna were ablaze. The flames were getting out of hand. Lives, as well as homes, were being threatened.

Now the laughter stopped. There was no more joking. The sound of hammers striking nails which held the decorations ceased. Instead, men went into action. The motor in the fire engine hummed as they climbed aboard.

Rushing to aid a neighboring community were these dedicated men, serving without pay; men whose only reward was in some inner glow over being of help to friends and neighbors.

The men who rode that Eagleswood engine were no longer the lighthearted and laughing men who had been decorating the firehouse. Now they were grim faced, well knowing they were going on a dangerous task. Yet, with this knowledge there was never a thought of turning back, or of their own personal safety. This was a task for which they had been trained; a duty and risk which they willingly accepted.

Four of these brave men, Fire Chief Harold "Skip" Cranmer, Assistant Chief Marcus Cullen, and firemen John Baker and Herbert Blackwell, never came back. They died at their posts as swirling flames turned their once proud machine into a torch, and the searing flames from the woods took their lives.

Although death is inevitable, it is never without heartbreak. In this case the heartbreak is more poignant because all four men were in the prime of their lives; three were heads of households which depended upon them for livelihood. All were well respected in their community, and had a large number of friends.

The trauma attendant upon the deaths of four brave firemen engenders greater personal feeling because of the small community in which they worked, lived and enjoyed life. It is highlighted by the fact the Volunteer Department was small in numbers, and each member had personal contact with others.

One member of the department, with tears in his eyes, upon hearing of the deaths said, "To us this is like losing a brother or a son. We were that close."



Asst. Chief Marcus Cullen



Fireman Herbert Blackwell



Fireman John Baker

[Text from the July 28, 1977 Tuckerton Beacon Editorial. Photos from an accompanying news article.]

Two Memorials in honor of the four Eagleswood fire fighters who lost their lives in the May, 1977 fire may be found in Bass River State Forest - a bronze plaque at the Fire Fighter's Memorial on East Greenbush Road (left) and a granite monument placed by the Eagleswood Fire Department outside the Bass River State Park Office on Stage Road.

