

(Taken from Vol. 77, No 4. on July 10, 1953-The Willows Journal)

13 of Dead Were from New Tribes Missionary Camp

By CHARLES J. GLEESON

Fifteen men died in a forest fire last night because someone either got careless or tuned arsonist. The victims, 14 of them members of the New Tribes Mission's boot camp at Fouts Springs, were killed along the Alder Springs road just below Powder Point about 28 miles northwest of Willows. They died as a result of a sudden shift of wind, just as crew of about 100 fire fighters though they had the blaze under control.

List of Victims

The men were: Robert Powers, 27, married two children; Ray Sherman, 20, married, no children; Stan Whitehouse, 30, married, four children; Stan Bote, 26, single; Darrel Noah, 35, married, four children; Bob Meiden, 32 married, two children; Paul Gilford, 32, single; Benny Dinnel, 23, single; Harold Griffiths, 37, married, seven children; Dave Johnson, 25, married, two children; Howard Rowe, 25, married, two children; Sergio Calles, 40, married, no children; Cecil Hitchcock, 21, single; Dan Short, 21, single; Ellen Boddy, age and marriage status not given. All except Powers live at the New Tribes Mission's boot camp at Fouts Springs. Both Powers and Bote were federal forest service employees. Powers, transferred here about three months ago and had been living at Alder Springs.

Here's the story

The blaze broke out alongside the road about 2:30 o'clock yesterday afternoon. By 7 o'clock about 100 men were on the scene, including a large detachment from the mission camp, which customarily helps fight fires. It was believed at that hour the blaze, raging in scrub timber and brush, would soon be under control. It had been corralled on three sides and firefighters gathered on the point to watch the final effort hemming in the other side. The wind was then blowing at about 15 miles an hour, and from southeast. A short time before 10 o'clock it died down, and control seemed only a few minutes away. Meantime, sparks had set 3 sport fires about a quarter mile down the canyon from the point. A crew of 24 was sent to check it, headed by Powers. That was about 9:30 o'clock. By 10 o'clock these men had the sport fire checked, and so they sat down to eat. The 25 men said grace, then started in on their milk and sandwiches. By around 10 o'clock, too, the wind sprang up again, and this time in the opposite direction—from the north. In a few minutes it had reached a 15-mile an hour velocity. The fire jumped the lines and began billowing down the canyon.

Were in Gully

The new Tribes Mission group and Powers were in a small gully which apparently hid from them a view of the oncoming flames. As for the men at Powder House, a quarter mile away, they were so taken by the unexpected change, they paid no attention to the New Tribes Missions crew, thinking they had heard the roaring flames and had escaped. It was about 10:15 o'clock when Charles Lafferty, fire control forester from Stonyford, got worried and rushed to where the group was still eating. "Get out as fast as you can." he yelled. Several members of the group said they thought he told them to go east along

the ridge contour. Lafferty said however, he had split the group sending some directly to the top of the ridge and the others down the canyon. "I figured," he said, "they could get into some clearing and out run the flames." About 10:30, nine of the men climbed to the newly-built bulldozer road atop the ridge. They were exhausted, but unharmed although one man was later placed under a doctor's care. But there was no sign of the other 15.

Search at Dawn

Through the night men waited along the fire lines hoping to hear they had somehow reached safety. At dawn, however, hope was abandoned, and the search for the men was started by Supervisor Leon Thomas. At 4:15 o'clock, the first body was found. It was in the bottom of the canyon, about a mile from the point. The other 14 bodies were found about 5:20 o'clock sprawled in an area about 100 yards in diameter, three quarters of the way up the ridge and about three-fourths of a mile from the point. Several of them were lying on one another. A few had tried to dig foxholes, but the hardpan stopped them after they had gone about eight inches. One might have made it, but the tinned rations he carried in the front of his clothing kept most of the body above ground. Most of the bodies were badly burned, especially about the face but friends were able to identify most of them. Safety was far away for them in the direction they fled. Had they stayed at the same altitude, they would have had to go several miles down canyon before they would have been out of the reach of the flames. Their only hope would have been with the nine who escaped. There was but one way out, through the thick brush to the top of the hill, about 200 yards from where they had sat down for a leisurely dinner.