

## Incident Summary Page for the 100 Fires Project

<b>Incident Name:</b> Coffee Mill Fire	<b>Incident Date &amp; Time:</b> 08/19/1931 @ late afternoon
<b>Incident Location:</b> Stanislaus National Forest, California	<b>Incident Size:</b> 16,000+ acres
<b>Types of resources involved:</b> California Division of Forestry temporary hire firefighters	<b># of Fatalities/injuries:</b> 3 fatalities
<b>Reasons this fire was selected for the 100 Fires list:</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Fire is historically significant</li> <li>➤ 3 or more firefighter fatalities</li> </ul>	
<b>Conditions leading up to the event:</b>	
<p>This fire pre-dates the employment of standing fire crews; temporary laborers paid by the hour as emergency firefighters were the majority of the firefighting force on wildland fires.</p> <p>The tragedy occurred in the canyon of Coffee Mill Creek a tributary of the north fork of the Merced River about 18 miles from Mariposa and 10 miles east of Coulterville. A location known for a heavy transitional fuel load where the low country brush begins to give way to a mixed conifer fuel type and strong late afternoon upcanyon winds.</p>	
<b>Brief description of the event:</b>	
<p>While the crew was securing the fires edge and looking for possible danger points they noticed a smoldering tree downhill from their location. Three firefighters started down the hill accompanied part of the way by a Native American boy. Their precise actions past this point unknown.</p> <p>The fire was later seen sweeping along the bottom of the canyon at a rapid rate. The speed at which the fire was traveling made their position dangerous and it is believed they try to run for safety when one of them became injured. The Native American boy, who had remained further up the slope, heard their screams and ran back to the crew for help.</p> <p>Their bodies were found side by side on the lower slope. The handles of their rakes had burned and it was evident two of the rake handles had been leaned against a rock while two of the men sought to render aid to the third. One firefighter was found lying on his rake which gave rise to the belief that he had fallen on the tool and been injured. It is believed the men died within a few minutes of trying to assist the injured individual. Their bodies were found close to a large clump of charred scrub oak and brush. They were burned almost beyond recognition.</p> <p>A crew of 25 required most of the night to move the bodies two miles to where they could be placed on horses and then transported to automobiles and taken to Merced.</p>	
<b>Fire behavior factors that were present during the event:</b>	
<p>The fire made a rapid late afternoon uphill run in the fuel and weather conditions typical on the west slopes of the Sierra Nevada Mountains during August.</p>	
<b>Operational lessons available for learning from this incident:</b>	
<p>Leaving a secured fire edge and its black safety zone in the late afternoon is always a cause to assess your overall tactics and ensure LCES is provided for and updated as you move to reengage the fire.</p> <p>When attacking any fire below your position, care should be taken to never move straight down the slope directly at the fire. Move away from the fires projected upslope path and work your way into the spot on its downslope side with lookouts in place.</p>	
<b>Notable impact or historical significance for the wildland fire service from this incident:</b>	
<p>Arnold Love, Frank Smith, and James Whalley were the three firefighters who perished while working to suppress the Coffee Mill Fire on the Stanislaus National Forest in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Though incorrect or misspelled names of the deceased have been commonly associated with this incident, these men are recognized as the first firefighters lost in the line of duty by the California Division of Forestry (later the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection from 1983-2006, and now known as CalFire since 2007).</p>	

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While researching this fire we were unable to find any investigations or reports completed by either CalFire or the Stanislaus National Forest. The only written records we could find were from the Stockton Daily Evening Record newspaper archived online and the information presented in this summary is entirely from these articles dated August 20, 1931.

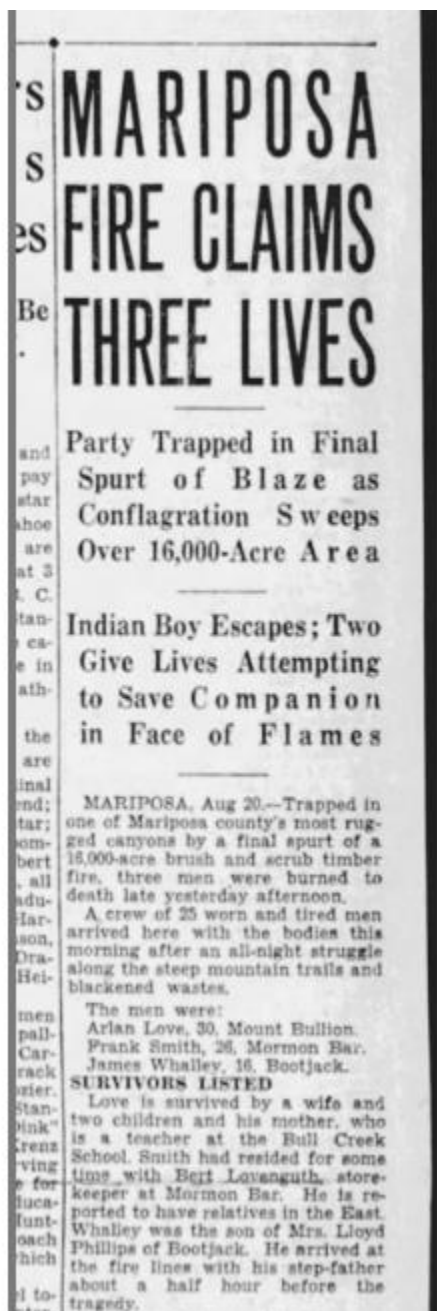
### Links to more information on this incident:

<https://lessons.wildfire.gov/incident/coffee-mill-fire-entrapment-1931>  
<https://wlfalwaysremember.net/1931/09/01/arlin-love-frank-lovinguth-bill-wally/>

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Headline in Stockton Daily Evening Record from August 20, 1931