

## Incident Summary Page for the 100 Fires Project

<b>Incident Name:</b> Shawme Fire	<b>Incident Date &amp; Time:</b> 04/27/1938 @ 14:30
<b>Incident Location:</b> Shawme State Forest and Camp Edwards, near Sandwich Massachusetts	<b>Incident Size:</b> 5000+ acres
<b>Types of resources involved:</b> Local fire departments, volunteers, Works Progress Administration labors, power company workers, and military personnel	<b># of Fatalities/injuries:</b> 3 fatalities / 2 burn injuries
<b>Reason this fire was selected for the 100 Fires list:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ 3 or more firefighter fatalities by entrapment</li> </ul> This fire is <u>not</u> documented in the NWC Historical Wildland Firefighter Fatalities publication (NFES 1849/PMS 822)	
<b>Conditions leading up to the event:</b>	
<p>The spring of 1938 had been very dry. There was no deciduous crown cover yet and the direct sun combined with strong southwest winds made local conditions conducive to rapid fire spread. At the time of the accident there were four other fires burning within 15 miles, straining both area resources and supervision.</p> <p>A small group of Works Progress Administration (WPA) workers were clearing brush along the southwest border of Camp Edwards, which was a U.S. Army National Guard installation (now known as Joint Base Cape Cod). They started a fire while clearing brush; there was debate whether the fire was accidental or intentional. These WPA workers claimed they had permission to burn granted by Lincoln Crowell, the local Fire Warden, who died in a car/train accident earlier in the month. Crowell's successor Abraham Esty denied any such permission being given.</p> <p>This first start was extinguished by Camp Edwards personnel by 12:00 hours.</p>	
<b>Brief description of the event:</b>	
<p>At approximately 12:30 the fire rekindled, pushed by 40 mph southwest winds. Without a deciduous canopy, the sun dried surface duff allowed the flames to easily ladder into the 10 to 30 foot tall Pitch pines (<i>Pinus rigida</i>) and Black oak (<i>Quercus velutina</i>). The fire rapidly burned onto the Shawme State Forest (now Shawme-Crowell State Forest). It was decided a stand would be made near the intersection of State Route 130 (paved) on the eastern flank, and US Route 6 (gravel) on the northern flank.</p> <p>The Bourne City Deputy Fire Chief Clarence Gibbs approached the fire on Route 6 with a 400-gallon pumper truck. With him were Albert Johnson, Henry Jarvis, and Ervin Draber. When Gibbs arrived at Route 130 and Jefferson Road, he was instructed by the Town of Sandwich Fire Chief, Tom Kelleher, to back his pumper north, up a narrow road, off Jefferson Road, and start backfiring. He was assigned two extra men, Gordon King, and Thomas Adams. Neither were volunteer firemen, just volunteers.</p> <p>Their backfire was along a road that ran primarily north/northeast, pushing the backfire along the road rather than toward the advancing front. There was also a power line in the same vicinity, running south of Route 6. While moving along their road, Gibbs' backfire group met up with Deputy State Fire Warden Sam King and Edward Watson. These two men were leading a crew, likely from the power company, working to secure the wooden power poles.</p> <p>With the fire closing rapidly amidst shifting and gusty winds, Gibbs knew they were exposed. About 14:30 a sudden violent gust caused the backfire to flare up and jump the road, cutting off the five men from the pumper. Gibbs made the call to get out and start back toward Jefferson Road. To his dismay, he looked back, and four of his personnel had failed to follow him out of the area. Gibbs turned and ran back yelling for the four to follow him, but they froze. Seeing it was too late to escape, Gibbs ordered them all to lie down on a sandy patch of the road. Adams rose up to a face full of flames, King got up and ran towards the fire, perhaps looking to get into the black. Jarvis huddled at the base of a power pole covered with a heavy jacket.</p> <p>After the fire front passed, Gibbs walked out with Draber and Adams, all three men were burned. Jarvis walked out separately on his own power with a burned shoulder and both hands severely burned, but saved by the jacket. After the main fire had passed, Kelleher took his group back into the burn looking for King. They found him after spotting his wristwatch; all his clothes were burned off, except his boots.</p> <p>Thomas Adams was the first to perish on the morning of April 28; Gordon King lived until April 30; Ervin Draber was relieved of his suffering in late May.</p>	

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### Fire behavior factors that were present during the event:

Low humidity and dry fuel conditions prior to springtime green-up.  
40 mph southwest winds with shifting gusts to 45 mph.

### Operational lessons available for learning from this incident:

Insure that backfires are initiated from anchor points with access to safety zones.  
Have an emergency escape plan and make it known to all.  
Maintain control of your crew at all times; crews should move with experienced personnel in the front to lead the crew to safety, and also at the back to account for personnel and provide clear direction anytime the crew changes locations.

### Notable impact or historical significance for the wildland fire service from this incident:

The Shawme Fire was not historically significant, nor did it have a notable impact on the wildland fire service. However, it is one of the many multi-fatality fires during this Historical Era that have been forgotten to history. If this fire had occurred today, it would have been considered a major tragedy prompting an extensive investigation process and most likely a number of directed safety action items.

Notable local facts related to the incident:

- Groups of high school boys were organized to help fight the fire once the winds died.
- There was another individual fatality on a different fire in the area during this same time period.
- Gordon King's father was Sam King, the Deputy State Fire Warden who was working on the fire and he was good friends with the Town of Sandwich Fire Chief, Tom Kelleher who was also working on the fire.
- The State of Massachusetts decided to provide an annuity to the families of the deceased, a very unusual benefit in that time.
- Four years later, on a snowy January day, Gordon King's son, Robert, age 8, got off the school bus with his older sister. She made it up their long driveway in the deep snow, but Robert never did. Despite a desperate search effort, he was not found until the next morning a quarter of a mile away, near where they found his father and where the monument stands today.

### Links to more information on this incident:

Newspaper articles:

North Adams Transcript ~ April 28, 1938 (Page 1)  
Springfield Daily Republican ~ April 28, 1938 (Page 1)  
Springfield Morning Union ~ April 28, 1938 (Page 22)  
Boston Globe ~ April 29, 1938 (Page 1)

Research assistance was provided by:

- Josh Nigro, Massachusetts District 1 Forest Fire Warden
- John Walker, Town of Sandwich Library Archivist to retrieve an article titled Fire in the Woods ~ by R.A. Lovell Jr.

Video (4 part series about a 15,000 acre brush fire in the same area a few years later):

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CQgFzdfpHjs>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=ZyoRA5tWKMc>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LdlSbTBpLe4>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=u2RvBisWovg>

**This summary page was proudly provided by:**

Richard Blair, former Squad Leader Arrowhead Hotshot Crew

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**Incident Summary Page for the 100 Fires Project**



**Shawme Fire Memorial along State Route 130 near Sandwich, Massachusetts**

## Incident Summary Page for the 100 Fires Project



**Shawme Fire Vicinity Map**

**Landmarks from the summary narrative are shown along with an approximate location of the entrapment  
No records of the actual fire perimeter were found**