

Coffee Mill Fire – Fresno Bee Report

Transcribed Newspaper Article Covering the 1931 Coffee Mill Fire
Entrapment

August 20, 1931

THREE MARIPOSA FIREFIGHTERS BURNED TO DEATH

Tragedy Victims Were Fighting Brush Blaze on Edge of Stanislaus Forest

Companions Too Late to Aid Trapped Men

Stubborn Fire Continues to Rage Unchecked Towards Timber Land

(By Bee Bureau)

MARIPOSA (Mariposa Co.),

Aug. 20.—Caught in a sudden swirl of flame in a clump of blazing manzanita, two Mariposa men and one youth were suffocated and burned to death yesterday afternoon, eighteen miles north of here and eight miles east of Coulterville.

The dead are Arlan Love, 30, Mount Bullion; Frank Smith, 26, Mormon Bar; and James Whalley, 16, Bootjack.

The fire victims were members of a group of about fifty Mariposa County men who were battling the stubborn blaze that has been raging inside and outside the Stanislaus National Forest in Mariposa County for the last two days.

Trio Working Alone

Love, Smith and young Whalley were working alone about fifty yards from their fellow Mariposans, from whom they were screened by the brush and a heavy pall of smoke and flame. Without warning the larger group of men heard screams of terror and started an immediate search for their companions.

The charred bodies were found by Rowell Dexter, 16, and Don Abbott, 16, both of Mariposa. It was evident that the trio had been suffocated by a sudden shift in the flames and smoke and were prostrated in the path of the raging brush fire which passed over their bodies, burning off their clothing.

The firefighters, reconstructing the story of the tragedy according to the postures of the victims, concluded that Love fell from suffocation, striking his head against a rock. His two companions were fatally delayed in their flight from the flames when they attempted to take the unconscious man with them and were trapped by the enveloping flames.

The scene of the tragedy is in the most rugged part of the Mariposa Mountains, four miles from the nearest trail, and considerable difficulty was experienced bringing the bodies out. Stretchers were rushed from Mariposa, under the direction of Coroner W. F. Farnsworth and the bodies were brought here today on horseback.

Coroner Farnsworth held an inquest at the scene of the tragedy last night and concluded that the two men and the boy were suffocated and burned to death.

...

The brush and grass fire, which has already burned over about 6,000 acres of brush, grass and commercial timber, was thought under control early yesterday afternoon, only to flare up anew under the lash of the afternoon wind forcing the weary firefighters to rush back into the lines in an effort to prevent its spread farther into valuable timber of the Stanislaus National Forest. It is reported blazing out of control today in the direction of the big timber, with the Stanislaus Forest Service men and the Mariposans battling desperately to check its advance. It is expected that the fire breaks in the forest will prove effective today in preventing considerable destruction in the timber land.

Supervisor J. B. Hall of the Stanislaus National Forest, has estimated the damage so far to be about \$16,000.