

SIXTY DIE IN ALABAMA FIRE Turpentine Camp in Isolated Place Destroyed by Flames

Sole Survivor Tells the Story—Believes Fire was Started by Discharged Negroes— Posse Out After Them

MOBILE, Ala. March 15, 1901—News has just reached here of the most horrible catastrophe in the history of Alabama. A big turpentine camp, situated across the bay in Baldwin County was burned at an early hour this morning, and sixty persons, mostly colored, are supposed to have perished in the fire.

So far as is known, only one man survived, and he is so frightfully burned that it is only with great difficulty that he could tell of his fearful experience after reaching here.

The survivor is Frank C. Pressler, a white cutter, who was employed in the Camp. After lying nearly all day in the swamp near where the isolated camp was situated, he aroused himself this afternoon sufficiently to row naked across to Mobile and tell his story. The exertion of pulling the boat and the pain caused to his badly burned hands were so great that he had to be attended by a physician before he could talk. After being revived by stimulants Pressler recounted his experience.

* I am so dazed by what I went through last night," he said, " that I hardly know how it all happened. Our camp, you know, is miles from any settlement and bound on one side by a swamp and on the other by an immense forest." Our shack, or quarters, was one long frame building, and in it slept the whole force, sixty-one men, if I remember correctly. Partitions divided the colored and white men. The house was made of dry pine lumber and burned like tinder when the flames reached it. In a shed near us were 600 barrels of raw turpentine.

" The first I knew of the fire I was awakened by the intense heat and the crackling of timbers around me. At first, I thought the judgment day had come and the world was being destroyed by fire.

" The whole earth seemed ablaze. Fortunately for me, I was sleeping near the door, and instinctively rushed out into the open when I discovered what was happening. I did not take time to make a close inspection of the room.

" It was full of a dense, thick smoke such as pine timber gives out, but I believe none of my companions escaped. I am sure if I had not been right at the open door the smoke would have stifled me to death.

" I screamed with all my might as I ran from the burning house, but if any replies came I never heard them. The cracking of the burning houses and trees, though, could have drowned the strongest voice.

" My first thought was self-preservation, and I made a desperate dash through the flood of fire as soon as I crasped the terrible situation. I was undressed; the charred timbers on the ground burned my feet terribly, and the smoke almost choked me, but I kept running toward the swamp, knowing I could escape if I reached it.

" More than once I fell, but managed finally to reach the swamp, where I lay down In a pool of water to cool my burns. Then I fainted."

"I don't know how long I lay there, but sometime this evening I woke up. I knew I must reach Mobile or die from my hurts, exposed as I was; so I made my way to a little landing where the camp had several canoes and rowed over here. How I acquired strength to do it or how I endured the pain caused by my burns I don't know.

" There was no use to try to make for a house to get assistance, as there are no dwellings within miles of our camp, and our own medicine chest was burned along with the balance of the things. I did not go back to the camp, but I am sure our men must have been burned. Unless they escaped before I did, they could not possibly have lived."

Pressler is of the opinion that the fire was started by three negroes who were discharged from the camp yesterday morning. They were pretty badly handled before being allowed to leave, and he thinks they set fire to the woods for revenge.

The negroes are not known here, but Pressler furnished a good description of them, and a posse has gone to Baldwin County to look for them. If apprehended they are sure to meet the fate they bestowed upon their victims.

The owner of the camp is James Halloway from somewhere in Wisconsin. He is not known here. He was out at the camp yesterday, but Pressler does not know his whereabouts. Forty-five of the men who are thought to have perished are colored.