

Reflections on a Hike to Mann Gulch with the 13 Families

Mike Bina, NSA President

On August 6, 2025, the day after the Helena Memorial tribute, I woke up before the alarm went off excited to go to Mann Gulch with the 13 families. To go had been on my bucket list for years, especially after reading Norman Maclean's book. Like many others, I wanted to witness the landscape, slopes, and the exact site to help put this tragedy in a geographic perspective. To be invited to accompany the families came as a surprise. I wasn't planning on going with the families as I thought this was something intimately personal for them. I didn't feel like I had a place or business to be there on the solemn occasion. I



Frances Bobbie, Sarah Doehring, Mary Newcom, Mike Bina, and Johan Peers

planned to go to Mann Gulch the following year before I got too old. I knew my clock was ticking— fast! The Helena Committee chairperson invited me to go with the families. I could tell this was an invite that wasn't negotiable, and RSVP needed to be a definite "yes." I changed my flight reservations to stay another day. Not only was I going to Mann Gulch, but the added layer of going with the families added to the meaningful excitement.

Before meeting the families at the marina at 7:00 a.m., Helena-Lewis and Clark Forest organized a short coordinating meeting of approximately 25 people at an

assembly area just off the interstate near the marina. The coordinator went over safety protocols and event procedures. This was clearly a very well-planned activity. No detail involving the many moving parts was left unattended. I was particularly reassured that the group included local EMS volunteers and four smokejumpers who were EMS-trained.

We arrived at the Missouri River marina. The 13 family members were already there. They numbered approximately 80. Positive excitement was in the air as people introduced themselves and mingled as they had the day before at the Helena memorial. The families, forest service staff, and volunteers boarded the boat. I sat beside **Lawrence Smith**, a retired Forest Service employee and a Sherman family relative. The Harrison family and Diettert families were seated next to us. I was in awe of being with the families and on the Missouri River heading to Mann Gulch. As the boat docked at Mann Gulch, I felt familiar with the area, having read everything possible in print and on the web and seeing multiple photos from different vantage points. It is not until you are there with boots on the ground that the pieces fit together.

Before boarding the boat, **Chiara Cipriano**, the Helena Committee chair, handed me two hiking poles. In disbelief, I asked her why I would need them. I stressed that I never used any “hiking poles” when I worked for the Forest Service, going up and down many steep slopes carrying heavy gear and tools. I guess my brain forgot to process those 56 years that had passed--- adding 56 years to my youth, putting me in another

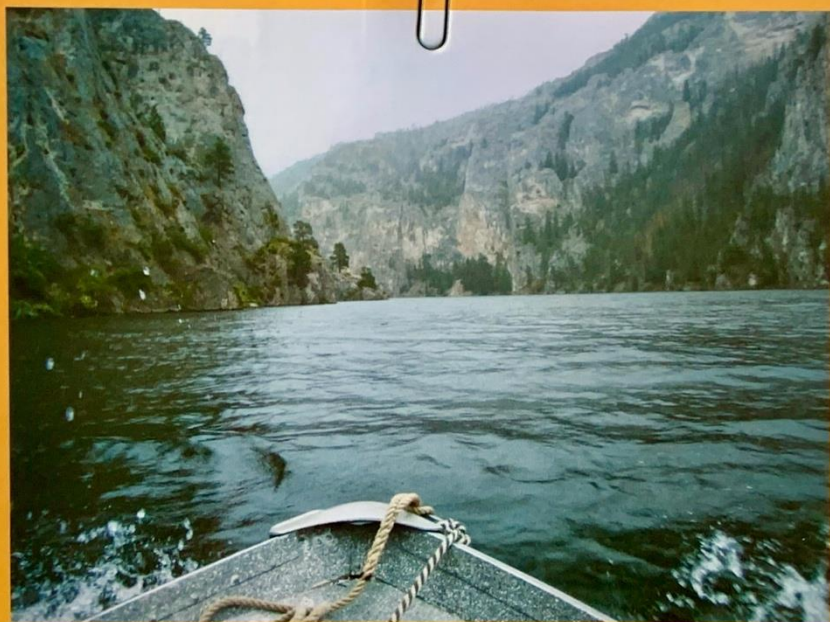


Back: Mike Bina, Josh Diettert, Noel Broenneke, Scott Diettert, (unknown); Front: Lauren Diettert, (unknown), Bruce Diettert.

age group-- super senior. After a few minutes on the trail, I realized how wrong I was and how grateful I ultimately became for the gift. The weather cooperated as it was sunny with highs of only 80 degrees. To think that the temperatures in

Helena on August 5, 1949, were well over a hundred as the crew sprinted on the extreme slope, evading the fire.

As we walked into the gulch, I listened to the families. I tagged along with the Diettert family, going up and returning to the river with the Silas Raymond Thompson family. It struck me that Eldon and Raymond were the topics central to the conversations. Seventy-five years had passed, yet Eldon and Raymond were very much present in the conversation. To meet the brothers of Henry Thol and James Harrison was an honor. Both were in their mid-80s and in excellent shape hiking Mann Gulch. I could see the family resemblance. These brothers, during their generation, lived the Mann Gulch reality in real-time. What struck me even more were the nieces and nephews, and particularly the grand nieces and nephews who continue to carry what happened at Mann Gulch with them today and most likely will in the future. It gave me a distinct sense that they will keep the story alive and that the devastating outcome will remain fresh in the minds of future generations. The Mann Gulch tragedy is very much alive and on the family's minds.



The view from our small boat as we head towards Mann Gulch via the Missouri River.

Coming down the slopes was more challenging than going up. On the boat, I felt gratitude and respect for the families and groups. In particular, the Helena-Lewis and Clark Forest employees. They committed their time and effort to comprehensively ensure that on the 75th anniversary, the 13 fatalities and three survivors were remembered and honored. The other groups that impressed me were, of course, the

smokejumpers who attended the many memorials along with Hotshots and other wildland firefighters. Many traveled great distances. Being with the families, I am particularly grateful to **Sarah Doehring** and **Jodi Stone**, who

accepted the assignment to find the families and encourage them to attend the Helena memorial tributes and the 13 individual memorials around the country. To have so many families involved is to their credit.

Once we reboarded the boat at Mann Gulch, we took a short ride to Merriweather campground. Awaiting us was an excellent buffet of comfort foods! Evidently, I had burned off enough calories to fill two empty legs, so I loaded my plate to overflowing more than once to refuel. It was a good tired, like we have all experienced, with the fire lined and mopped up—time to go home. Take a long shower. Get a good night's sleep, but before dozing off, replay the trip with the families to Mann Gulch. It will forever be one of my favorite memories to replay in my mind. I am grateful that I was able to tag along, didn't need the EMS, had the hiking poles, and was able to experience one of the best days of my life, honoring the memory of the 13 who perished at Mann Gulch and the three survivors whose lives were profoundly impacted. Norman Maclean wrote that these men who tragically died at Mann Gulch need someone to remember them. *Indeed, their families, smokejumpers, and so many others answered the call.*