

In the Wake of the 75th Anniversary Memorial

By John N. Maclean

As Gov. Gregory Gianforte and I waited at the top of Capitol steps in Helena to give our talks on the 75th anniversary of the Mann Gulch Fire, about 80 people were seated in the audience facing us on a broad landing below. Surely the seats were for anyone, there being so many, but then an organizer said, no, they were only for relatives of the 13 men who had died in Mann Gulch.

“How did they get them all here?” the governor remarked with awe.

The story of how so many people with intimate ties to the fallen were located, contacted, and invited to come to the memorial began two years earlier with a chance trip to a cemetery in North Carolina by Mike Bina (MSO '68), president of the National Smokejumper Association (NSA). In reading my father Norman Maclean's account of Mann Gulch, *Young Men and Fire*, Bina had noted that one of the men, Silas Raymond Thompson, was from Charlotte, North Carolina, where Bina happened to live. He decided to visit Thompson's gravesite, only a few miles from his home, to pay his respects. Bina, who tells the story in *Smokejumper Magazine* (August '24), discovered that Thompson's gravesite carried no mention of his service as a smokejumper or death in Mann Gulch.

Bina determined to change that. He launched an effort to hold a memorial observance and place a brass memorial medallion not only at Thompson's gravesite, but at all 13 gravesites of the men of Mann Gulch, at the time of the 75th anniversary. The NSA board approved the project, and a committee was formed to contact family members, no small task so long after the event. The bulk of the work fell to Sarah Doebling (MSO '91), a NSA board member, and Jodi Stone (MSO '02), who worked closely with Chiara Cipriano, public affairs officer for the Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest, and others.

They pulled together materials from the past, used Ancestry.com, and at one point engaged with a professional genealogist. They also received help from Wayne Williams (MSO '77), who had been a principal organizer of activities for the 50th anniversary. Students from Helena High School had researched the biographies of the men for a documentary, and Williams passed on what they had learned. “We got a lot of information from that; they did an excellent job,” Doebling said.

The men of Mann Gulch had been young – the average age was 22 – and only two were married, Stanley Reba and William Hellman, so finding relatives wasn't easy. In one case, a search for people with the same last name in the man's hometown proved fruitless, but a further search of middle names turned up a female relative, who had kept her surname when she married and took on a new last name. “It took tons of emails, phone calls, and wait, wait, wait,” Stone said. “And it was sad. A lot of them had been in World War II, they were warriors, and they came home to die in a dumb grass fire.” The greatest help often came from the families

themselves, Doebling said. One family member would become inspired and alert a network. “The train gets rolling and it just keeps going.”

The years of work paid off. About 650 people attended gravesite memorials close to the anniversary date of August 5 at cemeteries in seven states from coast to coast. Medallions were placed at all but one gravesite, Reba’s in Long Island National Cemetery in New York, which does not allow such markers.

The story does not end there. Bina and Doebling hiked into Mann Gulch with family members on August 5 and listened as they shared details about the impact of Mann Gulch on their and other family member’s lives. “I thought how valuable these stories are, but then realized that these wonderful details quickly were lost, escaping into silence,” Bina said. To keep connections alive, the NSA plans to establish a group email to share stories, photos and contacts.

In *Young Men and Fire*, my father wrote, “They were young and did not leave much behind them and need someone to remember them.” I’ve often thought of that line as I’ve watched the book act as a touchstone for the fire’s legacy and the Mann Gulch community. It’s the reason I wrote my own fire book, *Fire on the Mountain*, about the South Canyon Fire of 1994, which was an eerie echo of Mann Gulch in geography, fire behavior and number of firefighters killed, fourteen including three smokejumpers, the first to die by fire since Mann Gulch.

In researching the book, I became friends with Lois Jansson, Ranger John Robert Jansson’s widow, who left me her papers, which I added to my father’s papers at the University of Chicago’s Joseph Regenstein Library. I met others from the fire, too: Homer “Skip” Stratton (MSO ’47), who headed up the recovery detail, and Earl Cooley, the spotter on the DC-3 that took the men to Mann Gulch. I spent much time with Bob Sallee, the last survivor of the fire, and talked him into going into Mann Gulch after the South Canyon Fire, where I recorded his account of his experience there and remarks about connections between the two fires. In preparation for my talk at the 75th memorial, I dug out the audio and photo record of that trip and, learning that friends at the Missoula Fire Sciences Laboratory were preparing a Mann Gulch documentary, I gave them the materials. During the memorial event, I learned that they had been incorporated into the documentary.

Young Men and Fire occupied the last years of my father’s life. I would call him up and ask how it was going, and he’d reply, “It’s a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night,” like the Lord in the exodus of Moses and the Jews to the Promised Land. Like Moses, he died before he reached the Promised Land, leaving the final stages of the journey to others. After his death in 1992, my sister Jean, my father’s research partner Laird Robinson (MSO ’62), myself and others worked to bring the text to publication, checking facts and editing for clarity. We knew it was a powerful work, but had no idea it would have such a lasting effect. All those who fought the fire or were on the recovery detail are gone now, but the memory of Mann Gulch did not die with them.

Instead, it has become a self-sustaining reaction offering a sense of community to families, instruction to firefighters, and honored remembrance to the fallen.