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Contents

Fall	Brave Men in Their Motor Machines — <i>And the 1918 Forest Fire</i> By Arnold Luukkonen Page 3
1972	
Volume 9	James C. Burbank, <i>The Man Who Used Coach and Boat to Link the Northwest to St. Paul</i> By Robert Orr Baker Page 9
Number 2	Anna Ramsey's Letters — <i>A Compilation of Excerpts Reveal Her Warmth, Humor Page 17</i>

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ON THE COVER: This lithograph which originally appeared in Harper's Weekly December 7, 1878, shows the hazards, such as forest fires along the banks, which faced James C. Burbank's steamboats as they traveled the Red River.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: The photograph on page 3 is from the private collection of Winfield R. Stephens, Sr., Anoka, founder of the Motor Corps of the Minnesota Home Guard during World War I. All other pictures in this issue are from the audio-visual department of the Minnesota Historical Society.



Colonel Winfield R. Stephens, right, with Motor Corps' vehicles.

Brave Men in Their Motor Machines *--And the 1918 Forest Fire*

BY ARNOLD L. LUUKKONEN

In October of 1918, while the United States was deeply involved in the First World War, a disaster engulfed a major portion of northern Minnesota.

For a few days the events that covered the front pages of local newspapers were displaced by news of a great forest fire that had destroyed a number of northern Minnesota communities and left thousands homeless. What follows is a brief description of this disaster and the story of a unique band of volunteer soldiers, the Motor Reserve Corps of the Minnesota Home Guard, who brought a measure of relief to the victims of the holocaust.

During the fall of 1918, many Minnesota communities, like others throughout the country, were deeply involved in the war effort. Northern Minnesota communities such as Cloquet, Duluth, Hinckley, and

Moose Lake experienced a minor economic boom due to the demand for war materiel, particularly wood products. Since many men had been drafted into the armed forces, those remaining could and did command good wages for their services.

THE SHORTAGE of manpower, coupled with the mobilization into federal service of the Minnesota National Guard, left the state with no real means of insuring law and order, should a large-scale disaster occur. The need to replace the federalized state troops led to the creation in April, 1917 of the Minnesota Home Guard by the State's Public Safety Commission. These troops, modeled after the National Guard itself, were under the command of the governor of the state, and were to serve for the duration of the war. Membership in the Minnesota Home Guard was open to able-bodied men over 26. These men, who were liable for service without pay for up to five days at a time, were organized into some twenty-three battalions with an aggregate strength of over eight thousand men. Four hundred men from St. Paul were divided among 12 companies enrolled in the Minnesota Home Guard in response to the governor's call for enlistments.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Arnold L. Luukkonen is an assistant professor of history at Bemidji State College, Bemidji, Minnesota. He has researched and written widely about both the Cloquet fire, described in this article, and the great Hinckley forest fire of 1894.

The Minnesota Home Guard was quite unlike any other state force. It included a unit of uniformed volunteers, the "Minnesota Motor Reserve," who offered their private automobiles as a means of transporting the Home Guard to any point within the state. The Motor Corps, as it was called, was organized by Colonel Winfield R. Stephens, a Minneapolis automobile dealer, in the fall of 1917. The second battalion was Ramsey County's unit, made up of three companies from St. Paul and one from South St. Paul.

The new organization, which at the time of the fire possessed more than 2,000 automobiles, gave the Home Guard a mobility that few other military forces had at that time. As we shall see, it was this element of mobility that was to prove so valuable.

The exact causes of the forest fire of 1918 remain a mystery. Official investigations after the event pointed to careless burning along the railroad right-of-ways. Yet, other equally dangerous practices undoubtedly contributed to the great conflagration. Northern Minnesota's earliest settlers cleared their lands through the use of fire and this practice continued to be followed up to 1918.

In addition, lumbermen were required to burn their slashings (piles of tree limbs and debris left in the forest after logging). Frequently, the combination of clearing operations, burning slashings, and a dry autumn caused several small fires to merge into one large forest fire.

COUPLED WITH the careless burning habits was a lack of funds and manpower on the part of the state forest service to adequately patrol the forests, particularly during the dangerous seasons of the year. After the outbreak of the 1918 fire, the Minnesota Home Guard was used to augment the tiny force of rangers in the northern woods.

Finally, there was the problem of a low water table caused by extensive ditching of lowlands and peat bogs. The tinder-dry bogs were frequently ignited by lightning or by clearing fires that got out of control and the peat would smoulder for weeks on end until fanned into flames by high winds.

In the first few decades of this century, in the vain hope of selling land that was never meant for the plow, northern Minnesota counties such as Aitkin, Carlton, and

St. Louis dug mile after mile of drainage ditches. No Eden was ever created from this "improved" land — only a blackened Hell. In spite of repeated fires since 1918, the ditches still remain, a monument to the stupidity of men who would unthinkingly change their environment.

STORIES THAT the 1918 fire was set deliberately have no basis in fact; yet, they form part of the folklore surrounding the event. One particularly interesting story concerns a German plot to destroy the mills at Cloquet because they furnished a large number of the boxes and crates used to ship war materiel to the American Expeditionary Force in Europe.

This story, as far as I can determine, was more the product of the hysteria surrounding the fire than of any secret orders from the Kaiser. In any event, units of the Home Guard and Motor Corps spent some time after the fire scouring the woods for possible incendiaries.

Forebodings of disaster are revealed by the contents of the local newspapers on the eve of the fire. Among lengthy reports on the war were notices not to burn, as well as reports of small fires spotted in the woods. The autumn of 1918 had been extremely dry. One newspaper reported it was feared that electric service in Cloquet and surrounding towns would have to be curtailed for a portion of each week since the water level was very low in every reservoir in the St. Louis River system. Aside from these few alarming notices, not much attention was paid to conditions in the woods until after disaster struck.

THE FIRST indications that something was wrong came over the railroad telegraph. A number of stations northwest of Cloquet along the Great Northern and Northern Pacific railroad lines reported fires burning in their vicinity and asked that trains be dispatched to evacuate people in the area. At dawn on Saturday, October 12, 1918, the air was filled with woodsmoke and a strong wind was blowing out of the northwest. By afternoon, gale-force winds reached speeds of 60 to 70 miles per hour. Witnesses told of seeing an ominous red glow in the north and of hearing the roar of flames.

Apparently the high winds had fanned a number of small fires into a general conflagration and then the sudden change in temperature accompanying the flames created a draft. The flames, helped along by

their own draft, swept over the countryside, incinerating everything in the way. The fire storm thus generated covered an area about 85 miles in length and from 20 to 50 miles in width.

Of all the twenty-two communities caught in the path of the forest fire, Cloquet was the largest. The majority of its population seemed reluctant to believe the city was in any danger; however, a few cautious individuals heeded the first rumor and saw to their possessions. Some buried their valuables in their "Victory Gardens," but most people just could not believe that danger was near. Despite the growing stream of reports pouring into the town, the mills continued to operate as usual. Shifts changed according to schedule, and the time keepers reported that every man was at his post.

THE CLOQUET Fire Department had been called to the county seat at Carlton that morning to help fight a fire near there. When word was received that Cloquet was in danger from a forest fire sweeping down the St. Louis River Valley, the firefighters were withdrawn in haste.

The fire that threatened the city first became visible when piles of lumber in the Northern Lumber Company's woodyard burst into flame. Company personnel tried to extinguish the blaze, but their efforts proved fruitless. By the time the city fire department arrived at the northwest edge of town, the situation was beyond control. Gale-force winds broke up the solid streams of water the men poured on the lumber and turned the spray back into their faces.

Within two hours the fire began to spread beyond the lines of firefighters and the order was given to evacuate. Burning brands hurtling through the air had ignited the roofs of houses in spite of the owners' efforts to extinguish them. About 7 o'clock in the evening, the mill whistles began to sound in unison. This was the signal for evacuation. Efforts were made to alert the occupants of every house and to be sure no invalids were left behind.

All afternoon Cloquet's railroad station had been the scene of turmoil as telegraphers sent out emergency calls. As a result, twelve trains were dispatched to carry refugees out of the city to the safety of the nearby communities of Carlton, Duluth, and Superior. Messages about the disaster were also flashed to the state capital. Governor



Devastation in Moose Lake. This was the hotel.

J. A. A. Burnquist and Adjutant General William Rhinow were anxious to know the extent of the fire, but one by one the telephone and telegraph circuits in the fire zone went dead. Only Duluth and Two Harbors continued to report.

The tragedy in Cloquet was repeated in many other communities. From as far west as Grand Rapids the Governor received reports of fires raging out of control. General Rhinow called for Home Guards from Aitkin and Brainerd to proceed east by train to the threatened communities of McGregor and Lawler.

Meanwhile, Home Guardsmen and members of the Motor Corps from St. Paul and Minneapolis, Hinckley, Sandstone, Pine City, North Branch, and Duluth were notified of the disaster and ordered to relieve the firefighters at Moose Lake and Carlton. But the situation at Moose Lake was hopeless. The fire storm swept over the town, burning many people as they tried to flee, including the Home Guardsmen themselves.

In the countryside the situation was worse. Home Guards and Motor Corpsmen from Duluth under the direction of Sergeant Frank N. Phelps, Company A, Minnesota Home Guard, made speedy trips into the countryside around the city to rescue fire victims, and a number of cars were damaged



in the attempt to rescue weekend vacationers.

MANY RURAL RESIDENTS perished long before help could arrive. People took shelter where they could. A few wise persons made for lakes or rivers and stood for hours in the freezing waters while the flames swept by. Some who were less fortunate tried to seek shelter in open fields, wells, or root cellars. The wells and cellars became death traps for many. As the wall of flame swept over these places of refuge, the hot suffocating gases turned the sanctuaries into tombs. In some places the fire actually burned off the top soil to a depth of one to two feet, thus rendering many acres of land sterile.

Rescue workers moving through the fire districts afterwards found evidence of many freakish occurrences as well as heroism. Near Pike Lake, George Beers, an employee of DuPont de Nemours and Co., worked to save a magazine filled with 60,000 pounds of blasting powder destined for use in the iron mines of northern Minnesota. He saved the explosives in the very teeth of the fire storm, but his house was destroyed and his family forced to flee for their lives.

Some buildings directly in the path of the fire escaped, whereas other farm houses were destroyed but the crops and livestock were untouched. Much livestock, however, was injured or killed by the fire, and one of the biggest problems facing most farmers after the disaster was how to find sufficient forage for their animals.

Immediately after the forest fire, opportunists tried to victimize the unfortunate farmers by offering to buy up livestock at

Rescued, a family is driven toward food and shelter by a Motor Corps member.

ridiculously low prices. It was in the midst of the disaster that the Governor and the Adjutant General decided to take direct action.

General Rhinow set off at once by automobile to view the burned-over district with two members of his staff. Meanwhile, units of the National Guard, Home Guard, and Motor Corps were alerted. The Motor Corps began its disaster relief work by carrying supplies of food, clothing, and medicine to waiting trains in St. Paul and Minneapolis. After delivering supplies to the railroad station in St. Paul, Motor Corps men were told to prepare to carry troops to Moose Lake the following day.

Governor Burnquist also set out by special train to view the disaster. General Rhinow and his staff drove through the burned-over district by way of Aitkin, McGregor, Automba, Kettle River, and Moose Lake.

THE GREATEST LOSS of human life was sustained in the Moose Lake-Kettle River area. At one point on the road from Kettle River to Moose Lake, a number of automobiles loaded with fire refugees missed a sharp curve and plunged over an embankment.

What was left of Moose Lake became the temporary headquarters of relief operations for the surrounding countryside. Immediately after arriving in Moose Lake, the Adjutant General sent off the order to activate the National Guard, the Home Guard, and the Motor Reserve Corps. Units from Hinckley and Pine City and companies H and I of the fourth regiment, Minnesota

National Guard, from St. Paul and Minneapolis immediately set out for Moose Lake on Sunday evening and arrived Monday morning. On Tuesday these groups were reinforced by companies G and K and the first and second divisions of the Motor Corps. The high school building at Moose Lake was turned into an emergency hospital as search parties made up of National Guardsmen, Home Guards, and civilian volunteers under the leadership of Major H. L. Brady turned to the grisly task of recovering the dead and injured. Of the total number of casualties, some 71 died in Moose Lake alone. They were interred in a mass grave shortly after the arrival of the rescue teams.

THE MOTOR CORPS proved to be particularly useful after the disaster by providing speedy transportation for the rescuers and the injured and by bringing into the district more than a thousand Home Guards and volunteer firefighters to contain the remaining blazes. Rescuers moved quickly through the countryside in luxurious touring cars. Drivers were repeatedly forced to use all of their skill to keep their machines moving. Where bridges had burned, the cars forded streams. In some cases, the drivers

raced through areas where walls of flame obscured the roadside.

The fire-devastated area was immediately placed under martial law, and sentries were ordered to keep out sightseers and looters. The Motor Corps moved patrols of National Guardsmen and Home Guards through the region and distributed supplies from central supply points such as Moose Lake and Carlton. Within a few hours after the disaster, Home Guards and Motor Corpsmen also were distributing posters containing military, sanitary and medical advice.

Before the fire, the newspapers had been carrying warnings about the threatened epidemic of Spanish Influenza. Now, after the disaster, with refugees crowded together in poorly heated facilities, the disease began to spread, thus compounding the task of the relief workers. Under the direction of Captain A. L. Reed, Home Guardsmen and members of the Motor Corps distributed influenza masks and helped medical personnel in treating victims of the fire and of the spreading influenza. Field hospitals for

Refugees were supplied with food and clothing which Motor Corps members had helped bring into the area.



the fire victims were set up in Aitkin, Cloquet, and Moose Lake.

SUPPLYING THE NEEDS of the troops and the fire victims was the most pressing problem confronting the Motor Corps after the initial rescue work. Major William C. Garis and Captain J. W. Edwards of General Rhinow's staff directed the mobilization of supplies for the relief trains and the Motor Reserve was largely responsible for hauling the supplies to the St. Paul railroad station. After the first relief train left the station at 9 a.m. on Sunday, the Motor Corps was ordered to transport units of the fourth regiment, Minnesota National Guard, to Moose Lake.

Later in the week, the Motor Corps transported Companies A and B, the machine gun company and the sanitary corps, together with the commander of the fourth regiment, Colonel Le Roy D. Godfrey, to the fire district to relieve the volunteers on station there. By rotating the men on duty in the disaster area, fresh troops were continually available for rescue and supply work, and the process of rotation was aided considerably by the Motor Corps.

In all, contingents from the fourth, fifth and sixth regiments, Minnesota National Guard; the first, second, third, fifth and seventh battalions of the Motor Reserve Corps, and eight battalions of the Home Guard were called to service during the disaster.

THE FIRE LOSSES included some 1,500 square miles of burned timberland. An estimated 432 lives were lost; but since many families buried their own dead, an accurate count is impossible. Some 4,295 domestic animals were lost and 2,100 were injured. At the final count, 4,089 homes and 4,295 barns were destroyed, and 11,382 people were forced to flee for safety to neighboring communities.

The problem of providing adequate housing was partially solved when thousands of prefabricated homes were pieced together in Duluth by an army of carpenters and distributed throughout the disaster area.

The loss to insurance companies in the 1918 fire was estimated to be the heaviest

since the San Francisco earthquake of 1906, and of the \$75,000,000 in property lost in northern Minnesota, only an estimated \$25,000,000 was covered by insurance.

Fortunately, the loss of human life was relatively small when compared with the area covered by the fire. Without the speedy relief provided by the Motor Corps, it is doubtful if many people would have been able to survive both the fire and the aftermath of disease and hunger.

While it has been fashionable in the past to fault voluntary military forces, such as the Motor Corps, for certain shortcomings, these are in most cases due to the improper use of the men. Throughout the history of the United States, volunteer forces in one form or another have been expected to serve as a ready reserve for regular forces. In some instances, volunteers have mistakenly been sent directly into battle or into other emergencies, usually with disastrous results. Fortunately, the Motor Corps was not so misused.

In the area of disaster relief, the Motor Corps of the Minnesota Home Guard performed splendidly. The effectiveness of the Home Guard and other units was vastly increased through the mobility provided by the Motor Reserve. The spirit that motivated these volunteers is something rarely seen in comparable units today, such as volunteer fire companies. Most of the Motor Reserve Corps men who served during the disaster received precious little in the way of remuneration or in honors, except for the gratitude of the refugees.

MANY MEN RUINED their machines during rescue operations and at least two Motor Corpsmen were killed in accidents as they moved through the devastated area. In retrospect, these men appear to have been motivated by the same spirit as the old volunteer militia companies of the last century. They performed almost super-human labor in bringing aid to the distressed.

In General Rhinow's own words, "Had it not been for the Motor Reserve, Minnesota Home Guard, the splendid work done by the other organizations would have been seriously hampered, if not completely nullified."



THE GIBBS HOUSE

Headquarters of the Ramsey County Historical Society, 2097 Larpenteur Avenue West, St. Paul, Minnesota.

THE Ramsey County Historical Society was founded in 1949. During the following years the Society, believing that a sense of history is of great importance in giving a new, mobile generation a knowledge of its roots in the past, acquired the 100-year-old farm home which had belonged to Heman R. Gibbs. The Society restored the Gibbs House and in 1954 opened it to the public as a museum which would depict the way of life of an early Minnesota settler.

In 1958, the Society erected a barn behind the farm house which is maintained as an agricultural museum to display the tools and other implements used by the men who broke up the prairie soil and farmed with horse and oxen. In 1966, the Society moved to its museum property a one-room rural schoolhouse, dating from the 1870's. The white frame school came from near Milan, Minnesota. Now restored to the period of the late 1890's, the school actually is used for classes and meetings. In the basement beneath the school building, the Society has its office, library and collections. In 1968, the Society acquired from the University of Minnesota the use of the white barn adjoining the Society's property. Here is housed a collection of carriages and sleighs which once belonged to James J. Hill.

Today, in addition to maintaining the Gibbs property, the Ramsey County Historical Society is active in the preservation of historic sites in Ramsey county, conducts tours, prepares pamphlets and other publications, organizes demonstrations of pioneer crafts and maintains a Speakers' Bureau for schools and organizations. It is the Society's hope that through its work the rich heritage of the sturdy men and women who were the pioneers of Ramsey County will be preserved for future generations.