

Details Given on Death of Former Local Teacher

(Editor's Note: Sometime late in November we published a short article on the fatal death of Bessie Lamkin Smith at Bethel, Alaska. And there has been several inquiries as to how it really happens. We received a clipping the other day so we are printing this as Bessie Smith is very well known in the valley and formerly was a teacher at Central Point Schools.)

Ann Joyce, manager of the Bethel Roadhouse, and Bessie Lamkin Smith, teacher, both well known in Fairbanks, were burned to death Wednesday morning, Nov. 7, in the most tragic fire that ever struck Bethel.

A third life was also lost, that of a native boy from Kwethluk, whose name could not be learned. The fire laid to the ground the famous roadhouse owned and operated by Northern Consolidated Airlines and the N. C. Company theater.

The fire started about 5:45 a.m., apparently from an oil stove explosion in the kitchen. Mrs. Joyce was accustomed to lighting the kitchen stove about that time of the morning. She was never seen during the fire nor had her body been recovered at the time the NCA plane left for Anchorage and Fairbanks late in the day.

Mrs. Smith died in the window of her second floor room at the roadhouse, too weak to break the window, but screaming for help. A ladder was raised to her window, but the rotten rungs in it broke under Swanson, plunging him to the ground and breaking his hip. Before another ladder or rescuer could reach the window it was too late.

Charles Wilcombe, steward on the NCA plane that reached Bethel two or three hours after the fire had started gave a graphic description of the holocaust. By stroke of fate, crew members and passengers on this plane, counted their own lives saved by the fact that weather conditions held them overnight at McGrath. Normally they would have arrived at Bethel on Tuesday night and have spent the night at the roadhouse.

The fire was discovered by "Pinky," an old-timer living in a cabin nearby. He was just starting

breakfast when he heard something "boom," and then saw two little waitresses who lived in the back of the roadhouse with their faces in the window. They broke the glass, one jumped out and he helped the other to the ground.

Keith Swanson, NCA station manager who had an apartment in the roadhouse and his wife lost everything they had. Swanson grabbed all the company papers he could before the fire got too bad. He then heard a howl from the side of the building on the second floor where the NCA mechanic, Gene Chavis, was sleeping.

Chavis had been awakened by screams from Mrs. Smith's room. He jumped out of bed and opened the door but smoke and flames drove him back. He quickly got into some clothes, broke the window glass with his shoes, saw the ground was too far for him to jump and tied sheets together for a rope. Swanson brought a ladder, assisted by Father Donahue, two rungs were gone but Chavis made it down.

They then moved the ladder around to Mrs. Smith's window. They saw her trying to break the glass. Keith got another ladder and had just got to the window with it when the ladder collapsed and his hip was broken in the fall. So Bessie Smith perished and Keith was removed to the hospital.

The native boy was trapped on the third floor no possible way of escape. None of the bodies had been recovered at the time the plane departed. It delayed its return flight for three hours so as to re-

move all the injured and homeless who wished.

Swanson was left at the Bethel hospital. Gene Chavis was flown to Anchorage. He had a lung full of smoke and an injured leg. Stan Zapull, accountant for N. C. company had a room across the hall from Chavis and he, too heard Mrs. Smith screaming. He started to go into the hall but was forced back by smoke and flames and had to go out the window. He came back on the plane. He lost all his possessions as did Chavis.

Ann Joyce, former Ladd AFB

hostess, went to Bethel over a year ago to take over the management of the hotel. Born in Australia, she lived many years in Hawaii. She first came to Alaska several years ago and returned to make it her permanent home after subsequent trips to Australia and Hawaii. She leaves a son, Horace, a U S quarantine inspection officer in Hilo, Hawaii; a daughter, Mrs. Paul Christensen in Kukukihale, Hawaii, and another daughter living in the States. Mrs. Smith was former U.S. Commissioner at Flat. She resigned her position there, took a

brush up course at the University of Alaska and then accepted a position in the Bethel school. She leaves a son, Charles, whose whereabouts authorities were endeavoring today to locate.

Both women had scores of friends in the Fairbanks area and both were extremely popular in Bethel. Said Wilcombe this morning, "There isn't a smile in Bethel. The roadhouse was the center of social life. There were lots of people coming and going. It was the place to eat. The ticket office was there. Everyone fought valiantly to check the flames,

there was plenty of water but the fire hose was rotten I never saw anything like it. The Bethel people act as if they were all related to Mrs. Joyce and Mrs. Smith. All the flight crews were fond of them, and they spoiled the boys."

First reports of the fire reaching Fairbanks Wednesday came to Leo Vincent over KZAW.

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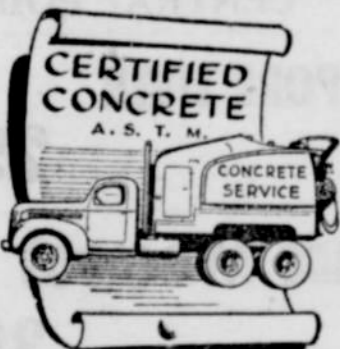
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