



MONO COUNTY

SHERIFF

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To: All Media Partners

From: Jennifer M. Hansen, Public Information Officer

Date: February 11, 2015

RE: The 25th Anniversary of the Convict Lake tragedy

**Remembering the Convict Lake Tragedy on this 25th Anniversary
By, Jennifer M. Hansen, Public Information Officer**

Mono County has so much history that truly makes our corner of the Eastern Sierra what it is. We have great history and we have tragic history.

On Monday, February 19, 1990, at approximately 10:40am, several teenagers and their counselors from the juvenile detention camp of Camp O'Neal set out for a special camp sponsored President's Day holiday outing. The destination: beautiful Convict Lake. It was a nice Eastern Sierra day; the perfect day for an outing out in the fresh mountain air. During the outing, several of the teenagers decided to do some exploring and made their way out onto the ice of Convict Lake. The teenagers walked out approximately a ¼ of the length of the mile long lake when disaster struck. The ice was not thick enough to maintain the weight of the teenagers. It began to crack and the teenagers fell through the thin ice into the freezing water. As the teenagers fell through, chaos erupted on shore. Counselors ran out onto the ice in efforts to rescue the teenagers. Other members of Camp O'Neal ran to the store to call 911 and over to the Forest Rangers station to get help. The counselors that went to help the teenagers also fell through the ice in their rescue efforts. The situation officially went from bad to worse.

Over 50 first responders from the US Forest Service, the Mono County Sheriff's Office, the Long Valley Fire Department, Mono County Paramedics, the June Lake Search and Rescue Team, and the Washoe County Hasty Team from Reno responded to Convict Lake. As first responders carefully made their way onto the ice to rescue those in the water, three responders also fell through the ice. It was now not only a rescue effort for several teenagers and their counselors, but also for three first responders, of which one would ultimately be rescued. It took five days to complete the search before seven bodies were ultimately recovered from the lake: three teenagers, two counselors and two first responders lost their lives. The first responders were Clay Cutter of the US Forest Service and Vidar Anderson of the Long Valley Fire Department.

On May 15th, 1990, the Mono County Board of Supervisors awarded Clay Cutter, Vidar Anderson and two other surviving first responders with the Medal of Valor to recognize and pay tribute to these brave men for their sacrifice and courage. In December of 1990, Clay Cutter also received the Carnegie Hero Fund – Hero Award for risking his life to save or attempt to save the lives of others.

“It's been 25 years and everyone remembers the event differently. I was 8-years old and remember wondering what happened to my favorite bus driver. You see, Vidar Anderson had a way with us kids. Sure, we weren't walking 18 miles, uphill in the snow, to school. No, we were plowing through the snow roads of Hwy 395 between Crowley and Mammoth in our big yellow school bus as Vidar sang 'Catalina Matalina' to us kids. We would eventually stop screaming at each other and sing along with him until the bus pulled safely in front of the school. For days we wondered where 'Catalina Matalina' went. I remember going home and telling my dad I didn't like riding the bus anymore. He asked me why

thinking there was some little girl reasoning, not expecting me to bring up Vidar. See, my dad was one of the investigators working the case, and now had a new element by trying to explain to his 8-year old daughter that the bus ride to school would be forever changed because her favorite bus driver wasn't coming back as he had died trying to save the lives of some other kids who needed his help. As an 8-year old, it was hard to understand the significance of the lives lost that day, and, where there is no more 'Catalina Matalina,' there are forever heroes in the hearts of us now grown kids."

So, as you read this very small tribute to the 25th Anniversary of the Convict Lake tragedy and remember where you were that day; or are remembering how you felt the first time you heard of this incident; or if this is the first time you are becoming aware that something of this magnitude happened in our small corner of California, the Mono County Sheriff's Office asks that you keep in your thoughts ALL of our Mono County first responders and their families. This incident is an example of what each of them would do to help the life and safety of another, even if that means putting their own life on the line.

Written and reported by: Jennifer M. Hansen, Public Information Officer

The law requires that arrest information be made available to the public. This publication may contain suspect information about individuals booked by the Mono County Sheriff's Department recently. Names of juveniles (under 18 years of age) are not public. Suspect information and ongoing investigation details are also withheld. Since most cases have yet to be adjudicated, all charges should be considered allegations. For questions/concerns regarding any information contained in this publication, contact Undersheriff Robert Weber at (760) 932-7549.