

Sugarloaf Obelisk

“When she saw the cairn for the first time, she clasped her hands and softly wept.”

by Henry Bothwell

Just north of the Upper Peninsula port city of Marquette, Michigan, high on top of Sugarloaf Mountain guarding Lake Superior's Partridge Bay, stands a lonely stone monument and a virtually forgotten story. The small copper plaque that used to mark it was stolen years ago and even today's colorful travel brochures make no mention of it.

Yet for six decades it has honored a boy who at age 15 blazed a trail for the youth of Marquette and America, helping to set in motion the wheels of the first Boy Scout troop in the United States – a boy who in 1917 found himself a soldier at the age of 22, sent to a country that most never saw, to fight for a people they never knew and die in a war they never wanted. The monument was a tribute from his young scouting friends and dedicated to the only member of their tightly knit group who failed to return. The name on the inscription reads simply – BART.

The events really began with Perry Hatch, a Marquette banker, who, with forty boys between the ages of six and eighteen, formed what was probably the very first Boy Scout troop anywhere in North America. Organized through the First Methodist Church in Marquette and called the Junior Epworth League, ten of this original group of youthful pioneers, among them one Bart King, loaded with backpacks and food, boarded Captain Kimball's sleek 20-foot wooden launch Cayuse and set a course for the place where the gently meandering, amber water of the Sand River entered Lake Superior. This was their first of many formal camping expeditions. It was June 1909, a full eight months before the first “officially recognized” troop of American scouts.

“I was with boys who were familiar with me,” Perry Hatch recalled of those first years, “and I took them out in the woods in 1909 and '10, before organization and legal form over there in the east was ever heard of here. But just as soon as it was heard of, we organized Troop One in Marquette.” By then it was June 15, 1914.

They hiked, explored, read compasses and maps, cut trails and camped for days at a time decades before scouting was fashionable. These were the boys who formed the historic core of what became Marquette's Troop One.

But soon the boys would be men and in the process would learn what men had to do in the world. The hardest lesson was to be learned by Bart King.

Born in 1894, Alanson Bartlett King was the only boy in a family with three sisters, Doris, Miriam and Helen. He was strikingly handsome with a daredevil's nerve, a combination not altogether unattractive to the girls he knew, and he displayed a powerful vocabulary that made him a tough high school debater who seldom lost.

His real ability of expression, however, lay in his talent as an artist who drew colorful futuristic designs as well as capturing the familiar faces of those he most admired in warmly penciled illustrations. So many of them were sketched on the inside covers and in the margins and pages of his schoolbooks that his sisters quipped, "Bart's favorite volumes must be those with nothing but blank pages."

Only twenty years old and already armed with a Life Certificate in Education from Northern State Normal School (now Northern Michigan University), he took a job teaching in Thompson, Michigan, a rough U.P. logging town routinely avoided by most college graduates (and a substantial number of others as well). He swept the floor, split wood and stoked the fire in his one-room school and taught his students the same respect for work, knowledge and each other that he had learned as a member and assistant scoutmaster of Troop One. The kids adored him.

But in 1917, three years after beginning his career, the changing winds of a world embroiled in conflict blew across the Atlantic and deep into the heart of a peaceful America. President Wilson, tired and drawn from years of trying to spare American families the tragedy of combat, issued a solemn plea on behalf of civilized nations everywhere and demanded a declaration of war. Congress agreed; the world held its breath; and all of the original members of Boy Scout Troop One enlisted. So, of course, did Bart King.

Winter's icy grip had weakened by the 20th of April as he boarded the train for Houghton, Michigan, to be sworn in as a private in the 107th Engineers of the 32nd Division. The tracks carried them along that very edge of Lake Superior and through the heavily forested areas of Marquette County where he had camped hundreds of times before. As he gazed out the gritty window, he recalled hiking towards Big Bay, a rugged lumbering town 25 miles north of Marquette, chased by thirsty swarms of mosquitoes in the days before bug repellent, and how Perry Hatch had in desperation shouted, "Just dig a hole and burrow in like a bear in a stump."

Bart remembered, too, the ex-drill sergeant recently returned from the fighting in Cuba during the war with Spain who'd been recruited to teach discipline to the scout troop. He'd regularly mark time around the high school athletic field in formation with each kid shouldering a broomstick in place of a rifle. Bart could almost hear his raspy, bellicose voice as it boomed out, "I'll teach you how to stand up straight and stay alive." He'd never thought much about that before, but he wondered now if somehow that old war vet had known all along what was coming.

As they rolled on, he thought of his father painting, not railroad freight cars as he had when he worked for the Duluth South Shore and Atlantic Line, but rather his oils of Lake Superior's

frothy waves that seemed to attack the shore like regimented army legions. He created canvases of the lake's changing moods at such a phenomenal rate that he couldn't give them away fast enough. Bar was sure that some day they would be in demand. He was right.

After completing basic training in Waco, Texas, where he earned the highest marksmanship rating in the entire division (something he must have wondered about as a member of an engineering unit), he was promoted to master sergeant. It was the only promotion he ever accepted, despite twice being offered the rank of second lieutenant which he promptly twice refused, wishing instead to remain with the friends of his company.

In Texas he met Olga Huddleston, the commanding general's daughter, fell in love and decided to be married upon his return from Europe. The next day Bart left for France, it was the last time Olga ever saw him.

By the summer of 1918, the Germans' vicious land and aerial bombardments had crushed the Italians, destroyed the Russians and pushed the French and British armies to within 50 miles of Paris. Marshall Foch, recently installed Allied Commander assigned the near impossible task of halting the German war machine, promised General John Pershing of the American Expeditionary Forces (A.E.F.) that only under the most disastrous situation would he call up any of the newly arrived U.S. divisions.

But in July, the Germans unleashed a furious assault in such enormous numbers near Chateau-Thierry that Foch was compelled to order several American divisions to the front. One was Bart's. His assignment was to reconnoiter the enemy's position and report the information to his captain. (A swell job for an engineer.) It was also the first time in his life he'd been shot at. His commanding officer later wrote, "Bart showed his mettle and won for himself the respect and confidence of those under his command."

With the biggest Allied offensive of the war about to begin near Soissons, he volunteered to direct a convoy of eleven trucks loaded with supplies through a five-mile corridor of firmly entrenched enemy guns. Almost immediately they found themselves savagely pounded by heavy artillery that hit two of the rigs. As machine guns smoked and shells rained everywhere, they frantically lashed the badly scorched vehicles together. With several men horribly wounded, two already dead and every truck riddled with bullet and shrapnel holes, they finally rumbled onto Allied soil. Some time later three soldiers in the unit were awarded the Distinguished Service Cross and Bart King nominated for France's croix de guerre (The War Cross). He was never aware of the recommendation and didn't live to see it presented.

In September, with the tide of battle turned and Allied forces pushing inexorably eastward, Bart's unit was moved to the Argonne region where they built the bridges to carry the French, British and American armies to Germany itself. Week after week the engineering units from several divisions labored first in rain then snow, with insufficient food and virtually no sleep. Bart and the others continued to work despite deplorable conditions, constant enemy attacks and terrible illness – Bart's illness.

Then late in the grey, damp afternoon of October 7, 1918, just thirty-five days before the end of the war, Bart King died of pneumonia. He was just 24. He was quietly buried in a small cemetery at the edge of the Argonne Forest near the town of Fridos on the river Aire.

Three years later they brought him home.

July 31, 1921, was hot in Marquette. One of the boys in the scout drum and bugle corps carried an American flag cloaked in black as they led the solemn procession from the first Methodist Church west on Ridge Street, marching to the slow cadence of muffled drums. The green and red silk ribbon and finely sculpted Florentine brass medal of the *croix de guerre* was now neatly pinned to the flag that draped the casket, drawn on the shiny black artillery caisson. Following faithfully behind were the armed military color guard and the two young soldiers who had accompanied Bart on the last leg of the long journey home from France. Both wore sharply pressed olive-green army uniform with snow white gloves and had the evening before stood all night in the Kings' Hewitt Avenue home, silhouetted only by flickering candles that bathed the living room walls in pale yellows and softest reds.

Captain Andrew Sweet led the honorary contingent of Marquette Legionaires from the Richard Jopling Post. Each man wore his Medal of Victory. Now that the war had ended they all had one.

As the cortege passed through the wrought iron gates of Park Cemetery and stopped beneath the rustling branches of an old white birch, Sergeant Clarence McKereghan, a wartime friend from the regiment, ordered his honor guard to take aim and fire three volleys. Quietly standing at attention as Henry Robinson, the lone scout bugler, played taps, the boys of Scout Troop One saluted.

"While standing on the beach at Little Presque Isle, we could think of only one place to build the monument for Bart," Perry Hatch wrote of their decision. "It was the place he liked the best – Sugarloaf."

It was later that summer of 1921, three years after the war had ended, that Perry and the scouts of Troop Number One met at the mountain's base in an obscure fjordlike cove to scour the stone-covered beach and gather more than 1,400 perfect baseball-sized pieces of black and white and red-fleeced granite for the obelisk to Bart King. Some stuffed rocks into backpacks, while others shoved stones into their loose fitting Boy Scout shirts before starting the steep climb up the 477-foot northeast face of Sugarloaf. For weeks, from the warmth of August through November's snow, they hauled over 100 bags of sand, 3,000 pounds of cement and lumber and tons of rock. Each day the boys made ten or twelve trips to the summit where they usually collapsed from exhaustion, resuscitated only by the mountain-top view of green-capped islands and the deep blue rippling face of Lake Superior far below.

To supply water for the mortar, a six-foot wide and twenty-foot long tarpaulin was held by the boys during cloudbursts, trapping the rain and filling a giant wooden pickle barrel at one end of their canvas sluice. With the guidance of Harmidas Dupras, a Marquette stone mason, the rocks were pushed into the soft freshly-mixed cement in even rows until eventually it stood twelve feet high with a four-sided point visible even from the King family's Marquette residence three miles away.

Some years later in a letter to Perry Hatch, Bart's younger sister Miriam wrote, "This monument was a great comfort to my mother. From her second floor bedroom window she searched the horizon daily for a glimpse of it, and when she saw the cairn for the first time, she clasped her hands and softly wept."

The lumber that had served as the frame was then piled up by the scouts and burned, leaving only a solitary stone tower, and a story.

The monument at the top of Sugarloaf is dedicated to a young man who lived and died during a turbulent time that has passed into history, a boy whose life and death gave credence to the parable that, "Old men start wars and young men fight them." It's been struck by lightning and buffeted by Lake Superior's winter gales that long ago scattered the twelve crimson roses placed there by the scouts. Even some of its precious stones have been chiseled away by vandals.

Yet for those who make the climb and stand atop that peak, there is a story there; a wonderful tale of honor and courage and friendship. It is whispered by the gusty winds of years gone past that echo softly with the distant voices and tramping feet of the boys from Boy Scout Troop One.