

A Tragic Hero

By Bill Baillie

Often a new Accession to the Society's collections has an intriguing story behind it. One such recent case was a medal-and-ribbon of P.O.S.A., the Patriotic Order Sons of America (see photo at right; credit to Macey Wommer). It was awarded *In Memoriam* to Karl K. Klees, a young Columbia County farmer, in recognition of his heroic action in trying to save a friend from drowning.

During the Depression on May 28, 1935, 20-year-old Klees and a friend, Charles E. Derr, age 28, were swimming in Catawissa Creek near a dam (there was then more than one dam along the creek). While much of the creek is wadable, in places there are deep pools. Derr swam to a rock that rose vertically from such a pool, just below the dam, and stood on the rock. Water around it was seven to nine-and-a-half feet deep and there were strong irregular currents. Less than a minute after reaching the rock, Derr slipped from it and struggled in the rough water, with his head appearing twice.

His friend Karl, seeing Derr struggling, swam about 35 feet to the spot and tried to find Derr; he dove and did not reappear. Both men drowned.

Each of these young men were from farm families in Locust Township. Derr's home was near Slabtown, while Klees lived along Old Reading Road in the far southeastern corner of the township, just below Ringtown Mountain. Both are buried at Numidia. The photo on the next page, from FindAGrave, shows Karl not long before his death.

Charles E. Derr left a wife, Thelma Berninger of Cleveland Township; they had been married for four years. She never remarried and lived until 1986.

The P.O.S.A. ribbon/medal in recognition of Karl's heroic act came from a then-popular fraternal organization. The Patriotic Order Sons of America was founded in Philadelphia in 1847. It peaked around 1900 when there were more than 800 local units, called *camps*, in Pennsylvania, and other units in more than twenty states. Today the organization has fourteen camps in Pennsylvania, with headquarters at Valley Forge. The ribbon is imprinted WASHINGTON CAMP at Newlin, a small community just east of Numidia. The enameled roundel shows George Washington kneeling in prayer at Valley Forge.

The P.O.S.A. ribbon/medal was donated to the Society by Rev. Dr. Thomas Tomlinson of Gulfport, Florida, formerly a resident of Jamison City in Columbia County. He provided some of the information in this article and wrote that he found the item in an antique shop "somewhere in Pennsylvania."

Karl Klees also won a second medal for his selfless act in trying to save his friend. He was awarded posthumously the Carnegie Hero Fund medal, one of nine given to Pennsylvanians by the Fund in 1935. Andrew Carnegie established the Hero Fund in 1904 to recognize persons who perform extraordinary acts of heroism in civilian life in the United States and Canada. The Hero Fund Commission in Pittsburgh has granted over 10,000 medals to date. Some awardees receive scholarships or other forms of financial assistance in addition to the medal. About a quarter of the medals have been awarded posthumously, including the one to our Columbia County hero, Karl Klees.

