THE GREAT IDAHO FIRE OF 1910

by

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The fires of northern Idaho and western Montana, which on Saturday and Sunday, August 20 and 20, 1910, burned together into one huge conflagration, burning over an area of more than a million acres, destroying approximately two billion feet of timber, 81 human lives, 30 horses, and thousands of fish, birds and wild animals, may well be classed as one of the world's greatest fires.

Northern Idaho had experienced one of the driest seasons known to the pioneers of that region; with the exception of a few lifht showers no rain had fallen since early in April and, instead of being calm as usual, high winds prevailed throughout the early summer, thus drying out the forests more than usual.

Forest fires began burning on the lower slopes early in May, which was two months in advance of the usual dry season, and their number rapidly increased through May and June, but the forest rangers with a small amount of help succeeded in extinguishing all of the fires up to the latter part of July. During July, however, the fires became so numerous that it was difficult to man them and watch them after they were placed under control. On the evening of July 26, a severe electric storm, unaccompanied by rain, passed over the Coeur d'Alene National Forest. The rangers and all others on the forest having anything to do with fires were immediately busy looking for lightning fires, and during the next three days after the storm fifty-two lightning fires were discovered and extinguished and many others found that could not be reached in time to keep them from spreading. By August 1 we had men working on twenty-two large fires on the Coeur d'Alene National Forest along, and by August 14 we had slightly over 1800 men fighting these fires, including two companies of Federal troops stationed near Wallace, with only a very small supply of equipment and pack horses at hand.

To feed and provide bedding for 1800 men, scattered for a distance of more than 100 miles along the slopes of rugged mountains, where there were no roads, few telephone lines and but few trails, and many of the crews being located from 25 to 60 miles from the nearest supply station, was more of a job than the uninitiated may think. There was very little sleeping done by the forest officers on the Coeur d'Alene National Forest during the terrible month of August, 1910. Pack horses were gathered in from all over the adjacent region. Supplies were concentrated in warehouses that were kept open all night so that pack trains would not need wait. On account of the absence of telephones, runners were provided for all the big fires to keep the supervisor's office in touch with the character of the fires and needs of the crews. The railroads of the region gave us all the assistance they could, frequently stopping between stations to let runners and men off at advantageous places.

The strenuous fire situation on the Coeur d'Alene forest called for superhuman efforts, but by August 18 we had control lines around practically all of the big fires and conditions looked as though we would be able to hold them. And with the usual weather conditions we would have held them, but August 19 was a bad day with the fires breaking over the lines in many places. Such conditions at the present time would tell us that we had a very low humidity, but in 1910 we were not so familiar with the relation existing between low humidity and fires. The Weather Bureau records, however, show an exceptionally low humidity for August 19, 20 and 21, 1910, which explains the cause of the unusual fires at that time.

August 20 started out bad in the morning with a very heavy wind blowing toward the Northeast. This dry wind increased in velocity during the day, carrying burning bark for long distances, starting many new fires all over the forest. On the morning of August 20 the nearest fire was five miles in a straight line from the town of Wallace, yet the high wind carried burning tamarack bark over this distance and set awnings on fire in Wallace in humerous places. During the late afternoon of August 20 the dry wind reached the velocity of a hurricane, spreading

all of the fires over the lines that had been placed around them, and starting new fires all over the adjacent country. The men had to abandon their camps and fire lines and try to protect their lives.

Although the wind was stimulated by the fires, it was not of local origin but crossed the wheat fields of Southern Washington and was heavily laden with fine particles of soil, so much so that it was easily visible and produced mud wherever it struck a wet surface. Its velocity increased during that late afternoon to the extent that it blew down or broke off thousands of acres of timber. This occurred immediately preceding the fire. There were thousands of acres where practically every tree was down, and blown down so suddenly that the trees practically all lay in the same direction, or parallel to each other. Many large trees were picked up roots and all and landed from 50 to 100 feet from where they originally stood.

The rangers in charge of the various crews were real woodsmen who knew their business and were well acquainted with the country. Had it not been so the loss of life would have been far greater than it was.

Ranger Pulaski, one of the best all-around woodsmen that I have ever met, had a crew of nearly 100 men stationed about 8 miles south of Wallace. On account of the fires spreading so rapidly, Pulaski, 40 of his men and two horses were separated from the remainder of the crew. Pulaski realized that they had to get out of that place quickly or be burned to death. Conditions looked favorable in the direction of Wallace, so they started for the town. They would have been able to have kept ahead of the fire following them, but they ran into a new fire that had started during the day.

This new fire cut off their avenue of escape toward Wallace. Pulaski being thoroughly acquainted with the country knew of a tunnel about 100 feet long on the "War Eagle" prospect, about three miles south of Wallace, which appeared to be the only way to safety. They thought if they could reach this tunnel they would be safe. They started for the tunnel and although they had to pass through the fire in

numerous places, made possible by protecting their faces with wet coats and blankets, they finally reached the tunnel and the fire got there about the same time; in fact, one of the crew who had lagged behind was caught by the fire before he reached the tunnel and was burned to death. The tunnel had sufficient space for 40 men and two horses, but the terrific fire on the outside caused the cold air in the tunnel to rush out and the smoke and heated air to take its place, which suffocated five of the men.

After the men went into the tunnel, Pulaski tried to protect them from the smoke and heat by hanging wet blankets at the mouth of the tunnel but the terrific heat on the outside soon burned the blankets and the timbers caught fire. The smoke rushing in nearly suffocated the men. Pulaski commanded the men to lie down in the tunnel with faces to the ground as there was less smoke on the floor of the tunnel than anywhere else. One man attempted to rush out of the tunnel which would have meant almost instant death. At the point of a revolver Pulaski commanded him to lie down, which he did. After the wet blankets at the mouth of the tunnel were burned Ranger Pulaski used his hat to get water from a small stream on the bottom of the tunnel which he threw on the burning timbers, which retarded the fire sufficiently to prevent the ground falling in to close up the mouth of the tunnel. He continued to do this until he fell over exhausted, nearly suffocated, and badly burned. One man who had kept his face on the ground all the time regained consciousness and crawled out of the tunnel over what he thought to be the dead bodies of the other men, who were either dead or unconscious. The worst of the fire was over. He staggered into Wallace and reported the location of the men and stated that he was the only one of the 40 who had survived.

He reached Wallace about 3 a.m. Wallace was then on fire. I immediately organized a rescue party who went out to the tunnel, the fire by this time having burned over the whole valley and died down, so that it was not difficult to reach the tunnel. Just as soon as the rescue party arrived they got the men out of the tunnel, many of them by this time having regained consciousness. After getting out into

the air they all regained consciousness except five, who were dead. Those who were not dead were taken in to the Wallace hospital where most of them recovered in a short time, while others remained in the hospital for several weeks. The two horses that had been taken into the tunnel were so badly burned that they were shot by the rescue party.

The remainder of Pulaski's men went up on a steep mountain peak above the heavy timber and were safe, where they watched below them one of the most spectacular displays of fire that ever took place.

Ranger Bell had a crew of 50 men on Big Creek, about 17 miles south of Wallace. When Bell learned that he and his men were entirely surrounded by the flaming forest he gethered his men in to the Beauchamp homestead, which consisted of a cabin and about one-half acre of cleared land in the midst of the heavy timber. While he knew t is was a poor place, it was the best that could be had. Before the fire reached the little cabin a large white pine tree blew down, killing three of his men. The wall of roaring flames closed in on the little homestead, burning the cabin and burning to death the homesteader and seven of Bell's crew. The remainder of the crew got into the creek and lay with their faces buried in the water, while the hair burned off of the back of their heads and burned to a crisp the skin on their heads and necks. As their clothing caught on fire they wriggled into the shallow water and extinguished the fire. At the same time that they were being sizzled by the fire they were being mentally and physically tortured by large numbers of burning trees falling criss-cross over the stream where they were lying, only the low banks preventing them from being crushed to death.

Although the trails were all closed by thousands of fa len trees, one of Bell's men who was least injured worked his way over hot ashes and fallen timber for 17 miles into Wallace and reported conditions. We immediately secured two doctors and a crew of men who shouldered packs of medical supplies, blankets and provisions and made their way to the burned men. A day and night crew were immediately set to work cutting out the trail leading from Wallace to Big creek, which was completed in four days, when the injured men were brought to the hospital on horses.

Ranger Hollingshead had a crew of 60 men on Big creek, about 22 miles southwest of Wallace. On the afternoon of August 20, new fires were starting all around him and he gathered his men together and told them that it was time they were getting into a safer place and that it would be safer for them to travel through the recently burned over area south to the St. Joe river than it would be to go north into the green timber, on account of the possibility of fire spreading over the unburned region north of them. Forty-one of his men accepted his advice and followed him through the burned area and while there was still great danger from the fires and falling snags, with the exception of having badly burned feet and being nearly dead from exhaustion they arrived safely at the St. Joe river the next morning. The 19 men who refused to follow the ranger's instructions went north to what was locally known as the Dittman cabin, where there was a small cleared area around the cabin in the midst of heavy timber. Here they decided to make their stand as there was a wall of flames in every direction. They carried tubs and pails of water into the cabin with which they hoped to keep the cabin from burning. When the fire neared the cabin the heat became so intense the men were compel ed to go into the cabin, which soon caught on fire and the small amount of water which they had stored was of little value. The men remained in the cabin until the burning roof fell in, when they rushed out hoping to find some means of escape, but 18 out of the 19 perished within 100 feet of the cabin, where their bodies were so severely burned that they could not be recognized. When the bodies were found a few days later the 18 dead men, five horses and two black bears were all close together.

One man happened to find a weaker place in the wall of flames than the other 18 and made a miraculous escape. He stated that he stumbled and fell right in the flames but somehow rolled out. After getting through the fire he rolled on the ground to extinguish his burning clothing. His appearance after spending six weeks in the St. Joe hospital indicated that practically all of the skin had been burned off of his hands and face. Without anything to eat he wandered through the burned area in a southerly direction for three days, coming out near St. Joe more nearly dead then alive.

Ranger Debitt had a crew of 100 men working on Setzer creek, north of the St. Joe river. He warned them of the great danger they were in and instructed them to go out to the St. Joe river. All of the men but 28 went out and were safe. The 28 men who remained were all burned into an unrecognizable mass and were later temporarily buried where they fell.

Ranger Rock had a crew of 125 men between Wallace and the St. Joe river. When they found they were surrounded by fire they located in what they thought was a suitable place and backfired and burned over a large area around them. When the main fire approached, the fire again passed over the area that had been backfired, but the first fire had taken much of the fuel, therefore the second fire was not sufficiently severe to do great harm. The crew were all saved but one man, who shot himself presumably on account of an insane fear of burning to death.

Rangers Danielson and Myers had a crew about 10 miles east of Wallace near the Idaho-Montana line, who also thought they would protect themselves from the flames by backfiring. But when the main fire approached it came with such force that it swept right over the recently burned area and soon reached the men. They had blankets and quilts with them which they threw over their heads and which more or less protected them from the flames for the instant, but the quilt soon caught fire and burned. One of the men had two woolen blankets which he separated and used to cover the whole crew, which consisted of 18 men. These woolen blankets served as sufficient protection to save their lives, with the exception of one who had evidently inhaled the flames and who fell dead on the spot where they had made their desperate stand. These men were so badly injured that they were carried out to the Northern Pacific railroad on stretchers. A special train awaited them and carried them to where a large trestle had burned out. They were carried around the trestle to another special train which brought them to the hospital at Wallace. Although they were all very badly burned their chief distress was in their lungs. They all finally recovered.

A large crew of men fighting that section of the fire near the Bullion mine on the Idaho-Montana line between Wallace and Saltese sought shelter from the roaring furnace in one of the tunnels of this abandoned mine. Those of the men who went in the tunnel sufficiently far to get beyond a ventilating shaft had little difficulty in surviving the fire, but the remainder of the cre, consisting of eight men, who failed to pass the ventilating shaft were all suffocated.

The large crews of men under Deputy Supervisor Haines and Ranger Allen, Derrick, Kottkey, Fearn and Halm protected themselves through this terrible night by getting into the river or by backfiring.

Even though August 20 gave signs early in the morning it was going to be a very bad fire day, the fire which for several days had been held in check about five miles south of Wallace did not break over the lines to any extent until about 4 p.m. The O.W.R.& N. railway officials, at the request of the citizens of Wallace and on account of information given by the Forest Service relative to the hazardous situation of Wallace, because of the raging fires near-by, kept a train in readiness all afternoon so that at a signal to be given, of which the people were all familiar, the women and children could be removed from the city on short notice.

To become more familiar with the action of the fire on account of frequent requests from the citizens and railroad officials, I went up Placer creek about 4 p.m. When I got about five miles up the canyon I noticed the fire had taken on new life and was burning at a terrific rate. (Great columns of black pine smoke above the tops of the trees would explode into flame and send a swirling, swishing column of fire hundreds of feet into the air.) A new fire was now raging on the hill close to Wallace, which indicated that the town was in great danger. I started down the canyon to notify the town that it was time for the women and children to go. About three miles out of town I met a man who was driving up the canyon to get is family, who lived on a little homestead about a mile farther up the stream. His progress was stopped by trees that had recently been blown across the road. He was ill and scarcely able to walk, therefore he implored me

to help him save his family. On account of the fallen timber I had left my horse on the Wallace side, so I ran back to the homestead, hoping to bring his family down to him. But when I reached the place several of my men had sought shelter there from the fire and, although the barn had already been burned, they were pouring water on the house. I knew from this and with the cleared space about the house that his family was safe, so I immediately returned without them. Before I reached the man who was waiting for his family, however, the fire had swooped down the mountain with a roar that could be heard for miles. Great tongues of flames crossing the road cut me off from the man with the rig and my horse. Being well acquainted with the region, I knew of a small tunnel on a prospect about a half mile up the canyon from where the fire had crossed the road. I ran back as quickly as possible and entered the tunnel, the fire reaching the tunnel less than a minute after I entered. The heavy debris of brush and logs just outside of the tunnel set the tunnel timbers on fire and as they burned out the ground fell in, which, together with the strangling smoke, led me to believe I would be safer outside. There being a little water on the bottom of the tunnel I soaked my clothing thoroughly, held my wet hat over my face and rushed out between the burning timbers.

I quickly scratched a hole in a pile of sand just outside of the tunnel, in which I lay my face down, which gave my face protection, but my neck and back and part of my head were badly burned. By midnight the fire had burned down sufficiently to permit travel toward Wallace. I found the bridges all burned out and many places so hot that it was difficult to pass through. When I reached the city reservoir I found that a large pile of debris adjacent to the water main had set the outside of the wood stave pipe on fire. Believing that there was grave danger of the fire weakening the pipe sufficiently to cause a break, I carried water with my hat until the fire on the pipe was extinguished. My horse had torn loose but he had fallen in the fire a short distance from where I had left him and was dead. I reached Wallace at 2 a.m. and found the town on fire. Fully a third of the town had burned with a loss of more than a million dollars. When the hills adjacent to Wallace became a seething furnace and the town caught on fire, the women and children were loaded on the special train held in waiting, and taken out of town for the

night, and brought back the next day. Another special train of box cars carried the patients from the Sister's hospital. As they were taken out hurriedly many of them were taken without sufficient clothing to protect them, some being carried on stretchers. The two companies of federal troops who had been sent to Wallace to Help fight fire rendered splendid service in helping to get the women and children on the train and in policing the town.

The results of August 20 and 21 were disheartening, but the fire was still burning in many places. New crews had to be immediately recruited, not only to fight fire but for rescue.work. This was the hardest task of all. The men were afraid to go into the woods. On August 21 a fire was reported in the little north fork of the Coeur d'Alene river which contained a billion feet of white pine. A crew had to be sent there at once. By hard work it was secured and they had good luck in extinguishing the fire. Crews had to be organized to cut out the fallen timber from the trails, bury the dead, and bring out the injured. Runners had to be sent long distances to look up crews from which no report had been received.

One of these crews was led b Ranger Halm 75 miles up the St. Joe from Avery. The stations of Superior and Iron Mountain, Mont., on the Northern Pacific railway, were the nearest points to where this crew was working and these places were about 60 miles by trail. Three crews had been sent in from Superior and Iron Mountain Sunday, Monday and Tuesday, but they all returned without finding them, saying they could not get through the fire. We had learned that their entire pack train and one man had burned to death.

Deputy Supervisor Rosco Haines, who had originally taken the men to the head of the St Joe river, was the only man who thought he knew how to get through the fires that were still burning and find Halm's crew. So Haines, with two other men, started on Wednesday morning, August 24, for the head of the St. Joe. They traveled on horseback to the divide at the Cedar creek crossing, where they left their horses and started down the river on foot, frequently shooting as a signal to anyone needing help. The third day out, Friday afternoon, Haines shot a grouse, and Frank Mills, one of the crew, heard the shot, and the crew was found. On account of the thousands of fallen trees they were cutting their

way out and had already come 20 miles. The crew had survived a terrible fire by getting on an island in the St. Joe river. Haines cut across country through fallen timber and burning snags, and after a long, strenuous trip reached a telephone that same night and phoned me at Wallace of the safety of Halm's crew--a more pleasing message has never been received.!

The severity of the fire can be well known on account of the fact that in many places much of the green timber was actually consumed. This was especially true of the cedar. Also, a few days after the fire occurred, thousands of dead trout were found along Big creek and other streams where the fire was especially severe, this being caused, without doubt, chiefly by the large quantities of ashes getting into the streams, by the falling of burning logs, and the very heavy winds at the time of the fire.

By August 25 we had more than 100 men in the hospitals of Wallace and St. Joe. Many of them were in on account of smoke injury to their lungs, and only remained a few days, while others who were badly burned were in the hospital for as long as six weeks.

Up to 1910 the government had made no provision for the expenses of emergencies of this kind, therefore there was no way to pay with government funds the hospital bills which amounted to more than $5,000. The Red Cross was good enough to furnish $1,000 and the remainder was paid in full by donations from the forest officers throughout the service. The following winter congress passed an act appropriating a small amount which was used in making small payments to those of the fire-fighters who were most severely injured and to the dependents of those who were burned to death.

The dead bodies were sewed up in heavy canvas and buried where they fell, as soon as possible, and later they were removed to St. Maries, Ida., and the plot of ground containing their graves permanently marked.

The difficulties to be overcome in paying off the men, many of whom were working under assumed names, identifying the dead men and finding out the names and location of their relatives and dependents, represented by practically all of the states and many foreign countries, culling out the false representations, and answering letters of inquiry from thousands of persons who had at some time lost track of an acquaintance or relative. produced a volume of work which took several years to clean up.