

## 1910 Fire Season

No one can claim to be a real oldtimer in the Forest Service unless he went through the 1910 fire season. We have had bad fires since, but nothing has approached the terrific burning conditions of the two days of August 21 and 22, 1910. After a long drought period beginning in March, conditions became more and more critical. Springs dried up, and the fuels in the forest were ready to ignite almost spontaneously. Dry lightning storms scattered numerous fires through the undeveloped wilderness country of North Idaho and western Montana. The inadequate forces of the Forest Service battled the flames stubbornly through July, getting some of the fires and being driven back on others.

Finally the climax came. With the humidity down to almost nothing, the southwest fire wind from the Snake River desert whipped into a gale that lasted two days. Hundreds of fires that had been burning for days picked up and joined in the advance of the terrific sweep of fire which roared out of the wilderness forests of the Clearwater, St. Joe and Coeur d'Alene country in Idaho, across the Bitterroot Mountains into Montana to a distance of 40 or 50 miles. The sky turned first a ghastly, ominous yellow, then darkness shut down in the middle of the afternoon. When all was over a large part of the town of Wallace had burned. Saltese, Haugan, Deborgia and numerous ranches and ranger stations were left in ashes. Eighty-seven men lost their lives in the flames. Game animals were killed by the thousands and the stream bottoms were white with the bellies of dead trout. Billions of feet of fine timber had burned, and millions of acres left a blackened waste. Missoula was filled with refugees from the Coeur d'Alene branch who escaped on the last train out.

I was supervisor of the Lolo Forest at the time. In the night of August 21 the telephone bell at my bedside awakened me. It was Ranger Kottke at Wallace. "Mr. Koch," he said, "the fires have all gone wild. The flames are just breaking into Wallace. I don't know where my family is, and my men and pack strings are all out in the path of the fire, and I am afraid many of them can't escape alive." A little later Ranger Haun called from Saltese. He said the hills were all afire around town and he had 200 firefighters there trying to save the town. Just then communication ceased. The Coeur d'Alene lines were down. In the morning I went out with a special Northern Pacific train down the Coeur d'Alene branch to see what could be done. About three in the afternoon we pulled into Deborgia. The head of the big fire had just reached the town, and some of the buildings were afire. It was black dark and everybody was carrying lanterns.

We loaded the residents of the town on the train and started back down. Between Henderson and St. Regis the whole canyon was afire on both sides and the train had to run through it. The heat was so great that we couldn't stand in the open door of a box car, but fortunately we made it through to St. Regis. About midnight weather conditions changed. The wind continued to blow, but the humidity picked up, and the fires made little progress the next day. The night of August 22 came a general rain.

It is possible that such burning conditions might again occur, but with the present organization of the Forest Service it is not likely that sufficient fires will ever again be uncontrolled at one time to build up such a widespread conflagration.