

The late summer of 1910 approached with ominous, sinister and threatening portents. Dire catastrophe seemed to permeate the very atmosphere. Throughout the first weeks of August the sun arose a coppery red ball and passed overhead red and threatening as if announcing an impending disaster. This fiery red sun continued day after day. The air felt close, oppressive and explosive. Drift smoke clouded the sky day after day. District Forester W. B. Greeley, en route to Missoula over the Great Northern, wired from the train to be met at the depot. His first question was, "Where are the fires?" He was very much surprised when told that there were no fires of serious proportions on the Kaniksu and that most of the smoke in the air was reported to be drift smoke from Canada. Shortly thereafter fires began springing up seemingly from no cause. The town of Newport and locality had been cleaned of men and fire fighting tools. About August 18 or 19 so many fires appeared along and within sight of the railroad that trainmen in alarm reported the condition to the depot agent at Newport. The agent, sensing that a conflagration was inevitable, called a hasty meeting of townspeople at his office. Mr. Millar was absent in the field. I attended the meeting. The critical situation was discussed and the nucleus of an organization started. Later during the same day the mayor called a hasty meeting to further discuss best means to protect the town and adjacent property. It now seemed inevitable that the numerous fires burning within and outside of the forest boundary could no longer be controlled, especially in the event of a high wind. Groups of citizens were organized, and arrangements made, with what little there was to work with, to keep the fire as far from the town as possible. Every available tool was placed in service, even garden hoes, rakes and pitchforks. August 20 arrived more ominous and threatening than the days preceding. Reports of so many fires came in that it was impossible, with means at hand, to even begin to cope with the situation. The wind began to increase in velocity from the west. Small fires were fanned into large ones. The air was rapidly becoming filled with smoke more dense than previously. From the window of the office we could see for several miles along the timbered bench lands northeasterly from the river. These yellow pine slopes were occupied by several ranchers. We could see fires break out from these ranch locations and sweep up the slope beyond. It was clearly evident from location of these new fires that the ranchers were starting what they thought to be back fires as a protection to their own property. There is not anything more dangerous than a back fire started by hands of the inexperienced. These fires spread with great rapidity. Finally the expected hurricane broke in all its fury. Local fires burned together and swept through the forest as one vast conflagration. The flames swept across the Pend Oreille River as if it had not been there. The mid-afternoon became dark. The roar of the flames and crash of falling timber could plainly be heard in town. Newport was entirely spared. The flames cut a straight swath to the northward.

The hurricane passed, leaving death and destruction in its wake. Telephone lines were down, and only fragmentary reports were received. No deaths were reported among the forest personnel or firefighters on the Kaniksu. On the following morning I saddled and rode north through the smouldering burn to the summit of the Priest River divide. Only blackened waste could be seen. I returned and started down the river on the west side. The burned area was a tangled mass. The road was completely blocked. I was forced to turn back. All that remained was to salvage what material that could be salvaged from the disaster, and reorganize for a new start. (CLARENCE B. SWIM, Assistant Forest Supervisor, Gallatin National Forest -- Retired 1939)