

Our Experience with the Forest Fires

by Mr. Swaine

For days the air had been laden with smoke, flying embers, ashes, singed twigs and moss - some pieces as large as a hand or foot falling promiscuously about. Needles from the fir and pine trees rained profusely through the air, falling like showers upon roofs and the ground. The sound was identical with that of rain. It was evident that fires were raging in almost every direction and that day by day, they were drawing nearer to us. Our constant prayer was for rain.

It has been said the Divine Providence requires His children to prove every word they utter, and in the thirteen years of my residence in the Coeur d'Alene's, it has been a constant boast with me that the wind never blows here; and the frequent, abundant, delightful showers keep everything fresh, lovely and beautiful. But alas! The wind CAN blow in Idaho and weeks can pass without rain as had been proven in the weeks of drought.

In the distance, the reflection of the ruddy glow in the sky and the great crimson sun, seeming to stand out like a gigantic, blood-red orange; a perfect sphere at which one could gaze with ease through the smoke, had been a most beautiful and awe-inspiring sight. The mighty roar of the burning forest resembled the sound of a storm at sea, as expressed by those familiar with that sound. The splendor of the scene was transformed into terror on Saturday, August 20, 1910, when the fires were so near that we were forced to realize that our little village was in imminent danger and that a strong wind might at any moment, prove our destroyer. Before three o'clock p.m., it became so dark from smoke, we were obliged to turn on the lights. Bats flew about thinking the night had arrived, and indeed it was enough to make anyone batty. The air became hot and oppressive and the reflection of fires all around us made danger feel uncomfortably near. The falling fragments were now veritable brands, many of the great twigs bearing live fire; and all agreed that our worst fears were about to be realized. Groups of men began congregating at street corners discussing the scene and a sort of reverential silence seemed to have settled upon the place. About five o'clock the business houses and streets were given a thorough soaking by means of the fire hose, as had been done each day for weeks. Every dwelling received a similar application with a garden hose and from that moment, it was a constant conflict with a furious enemy for two nights and two days. With the evening came the wind from the south carrying the Red Terror toward us. Telephones became active, people began discussing the situation seriously, and altogether, a spirit of intense alarm supplanted that of awe. Among those mighty mountains which seemed one mass of flames were many precious lives, we knew, fire fighters and prospectors, and we wondered how they could possibly escape.

Night came on with its added darkness. The screeching, fiendish roar of the fire increased. The flames were headed right for us. Wallace, the metropolis of the Cocur d'Alene's, just seven miles west was suffering a worse fate. That town was already on fire, and believing the outlet eastward most accessible, hospital inmates and women and children were hurried by special trains, through Mullan toward Missoula. Many of our frightened inhabitants, mostly women and children, took advantage of these trains and left our stricken town. It was noticeable that the few men who chose to go, were the foreign element employed in the mines, who had nothing to lose but could carry in a suitcase their savings which would eventually drift back to the fatherland regardless of conditions .

Our brave, courageous citizens turned out enmasse and successfully backfired the path of the flames and by three o'clock a.m., Sunday morning, danger from that direction seemed over, but half of Wallace had been wiped out, the wind had changed and their fire was traveling this way. As yet, the river was between it and us. Telephone poles had burned as well as part of the railroad track, cutting off all communication aside from what could be ascertained by messengers on horseback.

About five o'clock a.m., the wind subsided and danger seeming over for the moment, the worn citizens started home for a few hours' rest when their attention was arrested by an appalling sight. Thirteen burned, blackened, almost charred men, holding their painful hands in the air, scarcely knowing how or where they were going, yet aiming for one goal, the physician's office, came hastening into town. They were fire-fighters who had been sent out days before, to arrest, if possible, the progress of the fires. All but two succeeded in reaching town, but the agonies of these poor men can only be realized by those who witnessed their writhings and expressions. Two physicians, assisted by willing volunteers, hastily did all that was possible to relieve their suffering. A temporary hospital was prepared in a vacant store building and the wants of the sufferers satisfied as far as circumstances permitted.

By eight o'clock a.m., the wind resumed its zeal from the west. The fire jumped the river and was covering the ranges west of us and traveling northward. The heat, smoke and humidity were almost unbearable. Conveyances of every description were pressed into service and women and children hurried across the burned district to special trains west of Wallace waiting to carry refugees to safety. The day was like a horrible night, but through the trying hours was that dread of another even more terrible night to come. All too soon it came and those of us who witnessed it, have termed it the "Night of Terror".

The wind came up with a fury. It seemed to blow in whirls carrying sparks in every direction, but the general trend was northeast. As if by magic, new fires would spring up, here, there and everywhere. In every direction, a mountain of flame faced us. One side of a gulch would be aflame and in an instant the fire would be borne across to the other side, and by leaps and bounds from tree to tree, the terrible destruction continued.

Those familiar with the location of our little village, can, in a measure, picture the scene. Others never can. The mountains so high and steep with the narrow gulches between, resembled curtains of fire suspended from the clouds. Absolute property loss seemed positive but we believed our lives could be saved.

Every emergency reaches a crisis; and when the extremity arrives, the last resort is adopted. Consequently, when fires had completely surrounded us, and were crowding within a few feet of our doors, and sparks raining like water, it was unanimously agreed that the town must surely go unless the entire west, north and east could be protected by backfires. The tops of the mountains in these directions were already a mighty billow of flame showering their sparks and brands upon the town below.

Those familiar with forest fires, know how much faster fires travel up than down a mountain side. Hence a fire started almost against the houses would travel with a fury up the hillside meeting the surging flames in the timber thus clearing the space passed over and leaving a burned district upon which burning fragments might fall without danger. If backfires take the desired course, all is well; but should they be reversed or misdirected by the wind as is often the case, they are only an added menace. It took courage to start more fires with surrounding country already a sea of fire and the wind a veritable fury but it was our only chance; so a line of men were stationed just a few feet apart, forming a letter s, from the Morning to the Hunter mills, just a few feet in the rear of the buildings. At the signal each started a blaze. These fires united in less time than it takes to relate it, and traveled up the mountains, leaping, foaming, rippling over the brush and grass, then bursting into crimson towers as they passed over stately pines and firs. It was a most beautiful sight yet a most terrible one. The mountains south were still on fire. There was now no outlet. Fancy a deep bowl which is completely lined with seething flames, yourself a spectator in the center, and you can in some degree conceive the scene. The screeching, furious howl of the fire, the heat and grandeur withal, was suggestive of the infernal regions, something unreal, unnatural; as our dear, calm Scotch friend who was so unfortunate as to be our guest at that time, expressed is "uncanny". Much of the smoke was carried onward by the high wind. Midnight was as light as day. The mountains never appeared so high as with their blanket of fire and never impressed us as such barriers.

At last the morning dawned. The wind subsided, and with the dawn, our prayers of gratitude went forth. The terror had passed. Not a precious life had been sacrificed and not a home consumed. It seemed too good to be true. We could scarcely believe it ourselves. We found people asking us and ourselves asking each other how the town had escaped when the fire had passed right over our heads. The reply is as follows: The water supply was unlimited and was most economically and advantageously used;

the constant drenching prior to the arrival of the fire and during its presence made things less tangible, but last and best of all was the united, well-managed, thoroughly systematized course pursued by the volunteer fire department and willing citizens, headed and superintended throughout by William Coumerilh, whose council was sought in every instance and whose advice was at no moment disregarded. He seemed to be everywhere at all times with encouragement and assistance for the tireless workers who toiled with him three days and two nights without a moments sleep or rest.

An admirable feature of the entire ordeal, was the calm, stolid reserve which seemed implanted within each soul. With absolute ruin, destruction and poverty, possibly death staring people in their faces, there was no indication of hysteria or a panic at any time.

You will wonder what we were doing all this time. Our guest, Mrs. Swaine, the children and I spent our time serving meals to the firefighters who could not leave their posts except in small relays. However, there came an hour when we bade farewell to the little home, the heat and smoke forcing our departure, and sought a place of safety each with a blanket for protection, quite reconciled to the loss of everything if only our lives might be spared. We took refuge in the schoolhouse - a brick structure situated on a roomy cleared space near the river. This we thought would be the last place to burn although there was danger of suffocation. We remained only about three hours when we returned duly and truly thankful for the tableful of dirty dishes which greeted us, and truly thankful for a sink in which to wash them. We all felt very benevolent after the ordeal and allowed the vagrant livestock, driven as we had been from their homes, to graze unmolested upon our lawns. And we realized as never before, how affliction reduces us to a common level. We had all been one united in a single cause, that of saving our all, be it a pocket knife, a home or a fortune. And I echo Mrs. Swaine's remark: "It was a terrible ordeal, but I wouldn't have missed it for anything."