

THE GREAT FIRES OF 1910

by

William W. Morris

Never within the memory of all the old timers did the Coeur d'Alene experience such a dry spell as occurred during the summer of the year 1910. Even as early as April the south slopes were quickly relieved of their snow burdens, and became quite dry. A fire was reported to the office on one of these slopes the latter part of that month. A few scattering showers in May and June about completed the sum total of the rainfall for the summer.

Returning from another hard trip up the Coeur d'Alene River by pole boat in early July, I was taking a somewhat needed rest in the office, by writing up reports, etc. when Professor Kirkwood from the University of Montana made us a visit. As he wanted to make a study of the flora found upon our forest, I was very much pleased when the supervisor asked me to accompany him on his trip, and show him some of our more accessible timbered areas. July 13, 1910 saw us climbing the top of Striped Peak, about five miles from the city of Wallace, and reached by what is known as the West Fork trail. It was a beautiful day, but quite hot and dry with a stiff south west wind. We arrived at the top of Striped Peak, which has an elevation of over six thousand three hundred feet, about lunch time. We had hardly sat down on the top of the peak to eat our lunch when I noticed smoke in the southwest. I took a compass shot in the direction of this smoke and then sat down to finish our lunch. As we were eating smoke suddenly appeared in the southeast, and fanned by the gale that was blowing quickly developed into what looked to be a stiff fire. Looking carefully in the direction of the other fire we also detected smoke, a thin narrow band of it, in the southwest but nearer than the first one we had seen. This was too much. It was necessary to report these fires at once and postpone, for a time at least, our trip. Hastily taking a compass shot on the three fires and estimating their distance as near as possible, I plotted them approximately without the aid of a protractor, on my map, and we started on the return trip to Wallace.

At that time no telephones connected this peak with the office, as is now the case with all of the mountain peaks that command a good view of the country. Before descending we took a look at the fire in the woutheast. It was coming our way rapidly, and although possibly twenty miles away, it seemed as if it might be at our mountain peak in a short time. Little did I think as we left that high point that day, a point commanding a view of timbered slopes and canyons, bare peaks and green ridges, stretching away as far as the eye could reach, that it would be my last view of this beautiful panorama of green clad hills. The next time I was to behold it again it was with a feeling of great sorrow, sorrow for a fallen race whose scattered and broken remains lay spread out before me. The greenness had vanished. The canyons and hillsides were covered with a twisted mass of broken blackened trees, in some places five trees deep. It reminded me of jackstraws more than anything else. Great pines almost two hundred feet long were there, broken, twisted and fallen, the product of hundreds of years of slow but sure accumulation of food from the earth and air. What a sad sight it all was for one who had viewed the same country from this spot only a few months before.

We reached the forest office in Wallace in the afternoon. The stenographer said that the supervisor had already gone out on a fire. The fires we had seen had all been reported, and action taken. From then on until about eleven o'clock that night, the telephone was going continually, either the same or other fires being reported from various sources. Thus the fires had caught us all at once, and from then on until the middle of September it was one continual fight, though at that time we did not know it was to be. The next day I was sent out to one of the fires that we had sighted the day before from Striped Peak. This fire was on the North Fork of the Coeur d'Alene river about thirty two miles from Wallace by rail. Professor Kirkwood was to accompany me. I was to stay until the fire was under control, then go on up the river with Professor Kirkwood. It was thought it would probably take a day or two to control this fire. It took just fifty five days and nights. The one daily combination freight and passenger train took us up the river quite near the scene of the fire where the Graham Creek Ranger Station was, and is still located. A small stream emptied into the river at this point, and it was up this stream the fire was burning. With the ranger from the station we started for the scene immediately. A road led for about two miles up the canyon along this little stream. Three settlers had taken up claims in this canyon some time before. The fire originated probably from burning brush from the furthest claim, about two to three miles up the stream. It had started the day before we arrived, and conditions were just right to give the fire a great start up the mountainside. At the first cabin about one mile up, some young ladies from Spokane had been visiting. Their suitcases full of clothing were still in the stream where they had thrown them the day before, in their hurry to leave the place. As it happened it was not until about fifteen days later that anybody on this little road would have been in any great peril. The fire was burning quite near the second cabin, and that afternoon we confined our efforts to stopping it at that point, which we did temporarily. Only a few men were working, and we all had to turn to with axes and mattocks. Professor Kirkwood proved himself to be an expert with the mattock, as well as in the classification of plants. A camp down the river had promised to send up a big gang of men, but they did not arrive until the following day. When they finally came I divided them up into two groups, one going up to the head of the fire, another group working to head it off in some valuable timber on the slope just over the ridge from the second cabin. These fire lines eventually met. Most of the men were foreigners and not highly satisfactory. We had a crew of about sixty all told. In making a fire line axes and crosscut saws are first employed to clear away all windfall and dead stubs, and these are followed up by men with mattocks who clear a trail exposing the mineral soil, about three feet wide. Patrol men are sent back on this trail as it is increased in length, to keep sparks and fire brands from blowing over it, or to put out fires caused by these being blown over the line, before they have developed into a large fire. Usually these fire lines are constructed a little to the lee side of a ridge, as it offers a favorable place to fight a fire, and it will run down hill on the lee side much slower than it comes up on the other.

Everything was going along favorably except the weather. It seemed as if it could not rain. Several times clouds appeared that under ordinary circumstances would have poured rain copiously, but not so this year. After getting a fire line around the fire on the east slope of the canyon, we tackled the west slope, where a fire had been burning lightly in some small timber. That day the wind came up strongly, and scattered fire

everywhere. However we were enabled by working several nights to get a fire line up to the top of the divide, on the west side of the creek, so it was kept for the time being from going down towards the mouth. Many of the men had left or were unsatisfactory, so I went about the last part of July to Wallace to get hold of some more men. I returned with twenty nine. Conditions were then bad in Wallace. The air was filled with smoke and fires were raging everywhere in the mountains. Our supervisor was almost exhausted with the strenuous work, both night and day. I met a man on the train when going to Wallace, an old timer, with whom I conversed relative to the fires. He said "We will be all right as long as we don't get one of those 'Palousers' lasting about three days, which would scatter our fires everywhere now that it is so dry." Now a "Palouser" this time referred to a gale of wind from the Palouse country which strikes the whole region occasionally. The Palouse country is famous for its wheat, and the wind picks up the fine red soil and carries it for miles, filling one's throat and nose and covering everything with a fine powder. Fortunately these are rare and the country is usually calm, with very few violent storms. But this year one of these was to come along with many other things. The wind is one of the new chief factors in fire fighting. When the wind blows hard and other conditions are right, the fire leaps up into the crowns of the trees, and travels along at a great pace, by brands blowing ahead of it and starting new fires. When it is quiet one may work quite close to a fire, but let the wind blow, and it is necessary to keep a respectful distance. It is also well to get on a fire early in the morning for this is usually the coolest and quietest time of the day, and the dew has a tendency to check the fire.

At this time we had only one small fire that was not under control. This was burning in a small area of rather poor timber on the east side of Graham Creek but nearer its mouth than we had been before. But this fire was to be our downfall, for it was in an old slashing, and a wind came up strongly the day we attacked it, and soon it was leaping and rushing over our fire line in all directions, but mainly towards the mouth of the stream. We could do nothing with it. Bringing down the men we put forth all our endeavors keeping it on the east side of the stream. Here for the first time we had a chance to use water, its natural enemy. But it was no use. Looking up on the west slope we suddenly saw smoke, and in a short time this side was a roaring furnace, travelling rapidly down towards the mouth of the creek, and threatening to shut off our escape in this direction. Men worked like heroes that day. I remember one man a "lumberjack" who had come to the camp drunk. I had hesitated to employ him, but being short of men at the time took him. I will always remember how that man dashed into the fire with buckets of water or shovels of earth, as cool as a cucumber, doing everything that human power could do and much more than most human power. The men called him Patsy, and I will always be grateful to Patsy for his strenuous endeavors against such great odds, as well as to many other faithful ones. It was necessary for us to get out of the canyon now in a hurry, and running through some fire that was already before us we reached the railroad. At the mouth of the stream just before coming to the railroad track was a small schoolhouse (Graham Creek School near the Prichard Ranger Station). The fire was there as quick as we were. As we lay down on the track exhausted I remember hearing the school bell give a final clang as it fell to the ground, its supports being eaten away by the tongues of fire. As the fire came down the west side of the stream toward the mouth of the river the timber was uprooted at just about the time the flame struck it. The falling trees caused a continual roar,

and in some places were thrown in rough whirls, resembling the work of a tornado. Arriving at the mouth of the stream, the fire jumped the railroad tracks and river, and started burning in a flat on the opposite side about an eighth of a mile from the mouth of the stream where we had heretofore confined it. On this flat was a cabin belonging to a logging camp, and in this cabin were several boxes of giant powder. This we buried in the river, so that no sparks could get at it.

Taking a much needed rest that night, we began early the next morning to fight the fire on the flat. Had it gotten away from here the whole upper river would have been threatened. The fire jumped the main Coeur d'Alene river and threatened the Grizzlies. Fortunately we were able to get a fire line around it the first day. Once it jumped the fire line, and for a moment the upper river seemed doomed, but by quick work this danger was avoided. The next few days our efforts were confined to stopping the fire on the west side on the river slope. After building several miles of fire line, only to have the fire jump over it in spite of all efforts, we finally succeeded in running a fire line to the summit of the slope, taking advantage of a rock slide part of the way. Here we stopped it completely on the western front. The watershed in which we had been fighting the fire was now almost burned over. So far however we had confined this fire within it, with the exception of some small areas on the main river. It was away up at the head of this watershed on the east side that the danger now threatened, for the fire had jumped over our lines, and was threatening the large watershed of beautiful timber to the east. We established a camp on this high ridge, separating the two watersheds, and cut a fire line along it. This camp was not in a very desirable place as far as water and provisions were concerned, for everything had to be packed in with horses, and for a time it was necessary to carry the water on our backs with five gallon water bags that we had for that purpose. A logging camp was situated in the watershed below us, and possibly three miles away to the east, nearer the main Coeur d'Alene river. From here our supplies were packed by pack horses coming to camp every two or three days. It was necessary for us first to build a "shotgun" trail as they call a very rough trail in that country, and this was so steep in some parts it was hard for a pack horse to get over it, even with a moderate load.

About this time a man appeared for work who said he had been a cook. We had been bothered a great deal heretofore by not being able to get a man who knew the art of cooking for a crew of men in the "open." Formerly we had done a good deal of the cooking at the ranger station, and at one of the cabins in the watershed below. I determined therefore to give this man a try, and he proved to be a wonder, and soon had order out of former chaos. He had a place for everything, and built a fireplace with stone he found on the mountain top. He had the men line up for their meals, and dished it out to them in a lordly manner as they passed in review. He could turn out some dishes that would make some of our fine hotel chefs take notice, and with very little in the line of provisions or dishes to do it with and under the most trying circumstances.

We were situated on a bare ridge, with a lodgepole thicket a little way below us. The men built Indian "tepees" with this young lodgepole, and we looked for all the world like an Indian village stuck away up there on the top of a high ridge.

There were a great many bears on this ridge, attracted there probably by the huckleberries that grew in great profusion, and which sometime stayed our thirst, when water was not obtainable. One of the boys in his spare moments made a bear trap of logs. This was made in the nature of a figure four, the bear having to crawl under a heavy log to get the bait. On eating this bait, stick holding the heavy log would release, and allow it to fall on the unfortunate bear. But we were destined not to have any bear meat, much as we wanted fresh meat, for although Mr. Bruin got into the trap one time, he managed to pull himself out.

One time we had been out of bread for some days, and the packer had promised to relieve the situation on his next trip. Bread of some kind is essential to the happiness of camp life. We all were looking forward to the packer's coming. He finally arrived one day, and after unloading the faithful horses, a few of us who happened to be in camp exclaimed, "But where is the bread?" The packer said he had brought about three dozen loaves, but that the pack horse carrying it had slipped off the trail on a steep rocky hillside, had rolled over a couple of times, and the bread had scattered in all directions. He had succeeded in getting the horses on the trail again, but he had not been able to pick up the bread, as some of the horses had continued on ahead, and he was afraid of losing them. Accordingly I threw my packsack over my shoulders and went down the trail in search of a few loaves. I found the point at which the horse had slipped off the rocky slope, and soon began to pick up scattered loaves. It reminded me of picking up manna in the wilderness, or stories I had read of bread-fruit trees. The loaves were scattered over a distance of more than an eighth of a mile, as the hill was very steep. I had picked up possibly twenty loaves, and was about to leave when I decided I would climb a tree and take a careful look around. Something caught my eye a way down the hill. I went down to it, and there was one of the boxes that had been packed on the pack horse. All around this box were scattered loaves of bread, and I believe I must have picked up a dozen more at this place. This was quite a find, and I returned to camp with a bulging pack sack and rather proud of my ability to secure bread in the wilderness.

Thus passed the first stage of operations at this camp, days of most strenuous toil on the part of everyone, but days which I can now look back to with somewhat of a feeling of pleasure, for the fire at that time was under control, and the life in the camp went along smoothly. But this was the calm before the storm. It had been a fight against nature from the beginning, and so far it looked as if we were getting the best of it. But soon nature was to show us what she was capable of doing when in her rougher moods.

It was near the twentieth of August and our fires had been surrounded by well made fire lines and things looked fairly favorable. But it was extremely dry, so much so that the soil was like powder, and a spark dropped at any point would quickly start a conflagration.

On the afternoon of the nineteenth of August I walked down to the ranger station, to talk over the situation with Ranger Schneider. Our fires were smouldering, but I felt they were under control. The following morning the ranger and I started for the fire camp. The wind was fresh in the early morning and strengthening every minute. When we reached the camp it was blowing a gale. Our "Palouser" had arrived. With great rapidity the smouldering fires below began to gather headway, and in a few minutes

had gone over our ridge below the camp with a mighty roar, and down into the watershed we had been working all the summer to protect. But it was necessary for us to get busy now to protect our camp and ourselves. We cleared a place on the ridge where we placed all the provisions. We made a fire line below in the lodgepole thicket, but while doing this the fire jumped up into the crowns of the trees, and the head axeman was almost suffocated. We had to abandon this fire line and confine our attention to work on the ridge above our camp, where the fire was threatening to come over.

It was getting late and I was strongly hoping the wind would die down with the coming of night as it so often does. But there was no let up this time. It was blowing about sixty miles an hour now from the southwest. Our work on the ridge above us was in vain, for with a rush the fire was upon us at this point, then over. No human means could stop it now. Over the ridge it went into our precious timber below. The work of the summer was undone, at least I thought so then. We were too in a somewhat serious predicament. Fire had gone over our ridge below us in the morning, and above us in the evening. Trees were falling and burning on these areas continually. Our food supply was covered with sand and dirt. The men were called in. We sat down and ate what we could.

Never had any of us seen such a wild sight. In the direction of the city of Wallace great masses of smoke were blowing wildly up the valley of the South Fork. Southward toward the St. Joe River stood a great white cloud pillar, apparently still, looking like a great thunder cap, or the steam cloud that attends the eruption of a volcano. Many of the men thought it was a cloud and predicted rain at last. Westward the sun was setting in a flying black mass, looking like a great red ball of fire. Our high ridge gave us a wonderful view. The weird scene greatly impressed them, and one could not help having the feeling of fear and awe which the scene produced, as if a great tragedy was about to happen. Many fire fighters from other parts spoke of this later. They said the very air was afire. And tragedy was taking place in all these regions.

At Wallace at this time women and children and the sick from the hospitals were crowding the cars to escape the wall of flame that rolled down the mountainside that same afternoon and burned almost a third of the town. Where the great white pillar of smoke hung townships of timber were being consumed, great trees were being uprooted and snapped in pieces by the thousands with a mighty roar that could be heard for miles, and many a brave fire fighter met his doom on that fateful day and the day following. In all, about eighty men perished in this great fire at our camp.

The wind continued to blow all night. Most of the men, dead tired, turned into their lodgepole shacks. The situation however looked too serious to make me think of sleep. At nine o'clock it was apparent that something must be done. The men were awakened, and each one told to take his blankets and other belongings, and start off down the ridge. Two of us buried all the tools we could find. Our provisions had already been put together in an open space.

It was rather dangerous work going through the fire in the dark on the ridge below, where trees were still burning and falling, from the fire that had passed over in the morning. The trail was completely obliterated by fallen trees, and in the darkness was hard to follow. We made it all

right and after walking several miles, lay down on the ground and slept until morning. I was awakened by one of the night patrol men coming in. "Say," he said, "you ought to see our old camp, there is nothing left of her." I went back and took a look. The lodgepole shacks, provisions and all tools that had been left were completely gone, and the ridge was swept bare. A few tools had been left near the provisions, in the cleared open space, yet only the iron parts were left showing with what heat this fire had rushed over our camp.

We were indeed fortunate to have escaped so well. It was necessary that something be done at once. The men had had very little supper, no breakfast, and no dinner was in sight. They were worn out from overwork, and lack of water both for drinking and washing purposes. Sending some men down to the logging camp for provisions, I went to the ranger station to see what I could get and report the situation to the Wallace office, and try and get some more men to tackle the fire again. Supervisor Weigle answered my telephone call. He said "The situation is serious. A great deal of Wallace has been burned, and our ranger here (Pulaski) has lost six men in a tunnel. I can't send any more men. You will have to do the best you can without them." I got several loaves of bread at the ranger station, and hastened back to camp. It was a dark day and the sun was hidden, as it was for many days following.

When I arrived at camp, I found most of the men leaving. I was unable to make them stay by either persuasion or force. However some of the faithful few stuck, among whom was my cook fortunately. We made arrangements with the foreman of the logging camp to get a line around the lower part of the fire, which was now burning in the watershed where the logging was being done, and we attacked the fire at the top and finally connected up with their fire lines. A patrol was established on these new lines, which formed a circle four or five miles long, and on completion of their trip around the circle the patrol man would report at the camp. The wind continued to blow for four days, gradually slacking on the last day and getting colder, so that the fire went down greatly. It was traveling down hill, and protected from the wind, as well as being on the more moist eastern slope, so we soon had it under control again.

The last few days on the fire in camp on the high ridge I look back to with somewhat of a feeling of pleasure. The weather had changed. It was getting colder and a feeling of approaching autumn was in the air. Everybody seemed to feel that their hard work was nearly over, and their spirits rose accordingly. Around the campfire at night I had a chance to size up my crew. A number of men who had been with me all through the fire were there. One was a young Englishman who had fought in the Boer war. He could tell many exciting stories of his experiences, and also was quite a poet and singer. Often he held the attention of the whole camp as he recited bits of poetry of his own composition, or sang some old English airs. There were also two Montenegrins who were the best workers I had, and they had been with me from the first. They were very faithful and never seemed to get tired. One time one of these men was carrying water for the camp in two five gallon water bags. He had a hard climb up a steep trail, but there was not water enough for all the men to wash. "That all right, I get some more" he said, and though it was late and he had been working hard since early morning, back he went for more water. We also had two southern boys with us from South Carolina. They were a different type from most of the others, but good workers. They were out for a trip to get adventure and experience in the West, and I believe they went home satisfied.

Another young fellow who had been one of the foremen throughout the fire was with (Guard Burk, later a ranger). He was the wag of the camp, and always making the men laugh with his jokes. I remember he said in regard to our first cook, "He was so greasy that every morning he had to roll in the ashes of the fire to keep from sliding down the hill."

On the night of September fourth raindrops on our faces awakened us. First only a few fell, and then, increasing, it soon began to come down quite heavily. We lay there and enjoyed it. We were glad to get wet, for we knew our long fight was over. The next day the rain continued, so we broke up our camp, and I bid an affectionate farewell to the faithful crew, the men going on their various ways, most of them never to see each other again. I returned to Wallace, where the people were just recovering from the effects of the fire, which had burned a large part of the town. The hills surrounding the city, which formerly had been so green and beautiful, were now bare and black.

One of the first things that we found it necessary to do after the fire was to clear out our old trails. Most of these were absolutely impassable, and not an easy matter. Gangs of men were out on this work all the fall. Great tree trunks were piled across the trails in twisted and broken tangles, often five trees high, and it was necessary to cut through all this with axe and saw. This work took much time and money.