

Press-Times, Wallace, Idaho, August 21, 1912

ANNIVERSARY OF THE GREAT FIRE TWO YEARS AGO

It was two years ago yesterday, August 20, that the great forest fire swept over this district. More than sixty lives were lost in Wallace and the immediate vicinity, scores of men were badly burned, a large section of the city was destroyed, and the amount of standing timber destroyed was beyond calculation. No one who was in Wallace that fatal August evening can ever forget the awful spectacle. The wind from the west and southwest rapidly increased in briskness indicating the approach of the fire, the first real apprehension for their own safety took possession of the people of Wallace. It was evident that the city was in great danger, and steps were taken at once to remove women and children to a place of safety. Five trains were made up by the two railroad companies, and before they got started the flames were leaping over the hill south of the city and brands and ashes were dropping everywhere. About this time fire broke out near the Times office on Bank street, between Seventh and Eighth streets, and although the firemen were waiting for just such an emergency and were out in record time, they were powerless to even check it in the face of the awful wind. So when the trains pulled out with the refugees they saw the city in flames and all of them fully expected to find their homes in ashes when they returned.

It was a night of terror for those who remained, but the real tragedy of the conflagration did not appear until the next day. Men who for weeks had been fighting the fire under the direction of the forestry service were caught in the dreadful holocaust and the fact that any of them were left to tell the story was little short of the miraculous. All during the day they were brought in from all directions, some dead, some suffering such intense agony that they piteously prayed for death, and all blackened, burned and bruised, their clothing in shreds and having the appearance of men who had literally passed through the "jaws of death."

As usual when the lives of men are placed in jeopardy in the presence of some overwhelming disaster, when death seems the certain fate of all, the men with the cool head and the iron nerve came to the rescue. Many acts of courage and heroism were reported, but the one which attracted the most attention was that of E. C. Palaski, the forest ranger of this city. The story is familiar to most of the people of this district, but by a coincidence it appears in the last issue of the Youths' Companion which arrived on the anniversary of the great fire. The scene of the story is a few miles from this city, up the west fork of Placer creek, and the account here reproduced from the Youths' Companion is in general terms true and correct;

Professor Welling, tanned and toughened by his summer's work in the Coeur d'Alene national forest reservation, held his eastern visitors spell-bound with stories of the fight he had helped to make against the fearful forest fires. He had gone out with two others, under government commission, to study the forest and coming back in August, they had met the fires and spent almost a month in fighting their way out of them.

"There are real men among those forest rangers," he went on. "In fact, there is no place for anything that is not genuine up there. The most thrilling story of heroism that I have heard in a long time is the story of Ranger Pulaski. It did not happen in the part of the reservation where I was, but I can vouch for its truth, for I have talked with some of the men who were with him.

"Pulaski had forty men under him, and they had been fighting a big fire for hours. Suddenly the wind rose until it blew a gale. The fire got beyond them, and it became a question of saving the lives of the men. There were many miles from a railroad or a clearing.

"Pulaski remembered that about a mile from where they were working was an abandoned mine tunnel that ran back about forty feet into the hillside. He ordered the men to snatch their blankets from the camp and run for this shaft. Once there, they packed themselves like sardines into the hole. Pulaski placed himself in the opening and stretched a blanket across it.

"In a few minutes the fire overtook them. The blanket at the opening caught fire, and Pulaski herked it away. Again and again this was done, and when the supply of blankets ran low, he held the burning fragments across the mouth of the tunnel with his bare hands.

"The suffering of the men from the heat and smoke was pitiful. They were fairly maddened by it, and some of them made a wild attempt to push their way out of the shaft. For a while Pulaski held them back by sheer physical strength, for he was an unusually strong man. But he knew that he must soon be overpowered, and that the men, in their frenzy, would rush out to certain death. He drew his revolver, and told them that he would kill the first man who attempted to break away. The men knew that he meant it, too, and that knowledge brought them back to reason.

"It was n't more than twenty minutes when the ~~fire~~ ^{the} fire had passed the tunnel. When it was safe to crawl out, they found that five of the men were dead from suffocation, but the other thirty-five were all right. Pulaski himself was blinded and seriously burned, but his sight was partly restored. He lost five men, to be sure, but with less courage and presence of mind he would have lost them all. I take off my hat to such a man. He is a real hero."