

**OFFICIAL REPORT OF 1910 FIRES**  
**6/24/1911**

COPY

Wallace, Idaho, June 24, 1911

Coeur d' Alene – Fire

District Forester.

Missoula, Montana

Dear Sir:

The following is a report relative to the men who lost their lives fighting fires on the Coeur d'Alene National Forest on August 20 and 21, 1910:

The season of 1910 was the driest season in northern Idaho known to the oldest settlers. With the exception of a few light showers there was no rainfall in this region from April 1 to October 1, 1910. The Forest fires on the Coeur d'Alene National Forest began in April, and during the months of May and June they were numerous but owing to the fact that humus covering the ground had not yet thoroughly dried out we were able to extinguish all of the fires that occurred during these months. The continued dry weather however by the 15<sup>th</sup> of July made the conditions so very bad that even though a fire was apparently extinguished a crew had to be kept constantly on the fire line owing to the fact that the fire would smoulder underneath the ground and could not be fully extinguished. By this time new fires were starting at various points throughout the Forest practically every day, caused chiefly by sparks from railroad engines, settlers burning brush and careless campers.

On July 23 a severe electric storm, with practically no rain, passed over this region, setting numerous fires throughout the entire district. On the morning of July 24, by special orders the rangers throughout the Forest were looking for electric fires and were successful on July 24, 25 and 26 in extinguishing nine fires set by lightning. Five others however started by the same cause in extremely inaccessible places far away from trails and roads attained such proportions before getting crews of sufficient size to them that it was impossible to put them immediately under control. Many of these fires were in such inaccessible places that provisions had to be packed to the men on men's backs until a trail could be cut within reach of the fire. This condition always weakened the fire fighting force at the start when the heavy crew was most needed and would be most beneficial. From this time on practically every day brought news of new fires, starting largely from brands blowing from the other fires. On August 13, even though the nearest fire in a straight line was six miles from Wallace, numerous pieces of burning bark as large as a man's hand fell in the streets of Wallace, setting awning on fire in three different cases. This condition of course maintained throughout the timbered areas within reach of all fires. By this time we had, besides two troops of soldiers, about eighteen hundred men fighting forest fires

on the Coeur d'Alene National Forest, and we felt that everything was in good condition owing to the fact that we had fire lines practically around all of the fires and there is not any question whatever that had there been normal conditions we would have been successful in stopping all of these fires without any great loss of timber. On August 20 however a heavy wind arose about noon, blowing toward the northeast, which brushed up all of the fires to such an extent that it was impossible to hold them within the confines of the fire trenches dug around the fires. These fires not only swept over the fire lines, but the stiff breeze that was blowing became intensified by the heat of the many fires until throughout this fire region the wind attained hurricane proportions, scattering the fire to such an extent that new fires started in thousands of places, often following the tops of the trees for miles before it would meet some open country to stop it. The enclosed photographs show the intensity of the wind at this time and the character of the destruction now to be found on many thousand of acres. These were the conditions that led to the loss of life of the fire fighters.

All the fire firefighters were in the charge of men who knew every trail, stream and open place in the region, but owing to the fact that the severe windstorm started up thousands of new fires within a short time it made little difference which direction the men were taken, as new fires were springing up all around them which made their escape impossible. Although the fire fighters were distributed over the entire region from the head of the St. Joe river to the head of the Coeur d'Alene river, a distance of practically on hundred miles, the loss of life occurred wholly within the region between Wallace and the St. Joe river, where the storm conditions seemed to be much worse than anywhere else.

The man who had charge of the several unfortunate crews were E. C. Pulaski, Forest Ranger: John W. Bell, Forest Ranger: William H. Rock, Assistant Forest Ranger: R. M. Debitt, Assistant Forest Ranger: L. A. Hollingshead, Forest Guard: James Danilson, Forest Guard, and S. M. Taylor.

Mr. Pulaski, who is about forty years of age, is a man of most excellent judgment, conservative, thoroughly acquainted with the region, having prospected throughout the burned area during the last twenty-five years, and is considered by the old timers in the region as on of the best and safest men that could have been placed in charge of a crew of men in the hills. Mr. Pulaski was in charge of about one hundred fifty men distributed over a distance of several miles along the divide between Big Creek of the Coeur d'Alene river and Big Creek of the St. Joe river. When the danger conditions became imminent he rounded up about forty of his men who were in the danger zone and cut off from safety on the west side of the fire where the other men were located and started with them down the mountain toward Wallace, a distance of ten miles. When he got about half way however he found that he was cut off by new fires. At the sight of this his men became panic stricken, but he assured them that he would still get them to a place of safety. Being thoroughly familiar with the region he knew of two prospect tunnels near by, the shorter being about fifty feet in length and the longer about one hundred feet in length. Not being certain as to whether or not he could reach the largest and safest, by putting a wet gunny sack over his head he penetrated the dense smoke to where he could see the largest tunnel, and finding it was safe he rushed back to his men and hurried them to the tunnel, getting them there just in time to get them inside before the fire reached them. The portion of his crew with him consisted of forty-two men and two horses. He got all of his men and horses inside of the

tunnel, with the exception of one man who had fallen a few hundred feet behind and was caught by the fire before he could reach the tunnel. The intense heat caused by the forest fire outside of the tunnel caused the cold air of the tunnel to rush out and the smoke and hot air to rush in. The timbers supporting the tunnel caught fire and Pulaski stood as near to the mouth of the tunnel as he could, and from a little stream that flowed from the bottom of the tunnel dipped water with his hat to dash upon the burning timbers, until he was badly burned and fell unconscious. Prior to becoming unconscious himself he had commanded all his men to lie on their faces for protection. All of the men were evidently unconscious for portion of the time. One of the men however having sustained less injury than the others, recovered to the extent that he was able to crawl out of the tunnel, and the fires by this time had subsided sufficiently for him to drag himself into Wallace and notify the Forest Office. This was about three o'clock in the morning. A crew was immediately sent to the tunnel and all of the men and the horses were removed. Although nearly all of the forty-two men were still helpless condition after being taken to the hospital in Wallace, they rapidly recovered their strength, with the exception of five who had smothered before they were reached. The two horses although still living, were in such bad condition that they were immediately shot. The man who failed to get into the tunnel was burned beyond recognition. Had not Pulaski know the location of this tunnel everyone of the forty-two men in his crew would have perished.

Mr. John W. Bell is a man of about thirty-five years, thoroughly acquainted with mountain conditions, having spent a large part of his life in this western country. He is conservative and thoughtful and an all around man of the mountains. He had his crew, consisting of about fifty men, working in conjunction with Pulaski's crew at the head of the middle fork of Big Creek. When the terrific windstorm arose and fires were started in many new places he sought safety on a small clearing on the homestead claim of Joseph Beauchamp. Under ordinary conditions this place, consisting of a clearing of about two acres, would have been sufficient to offer protection. A small stream flowed through the opening and some of the men protected themselves by lying down in the stream, while seven sought shelter in a small cave that had been dug for the purpose of storing the belongings of Mr. Beauchamp. The terrific storm that preceded the fire by about a minute, which was of course intensified by the fire, overturned and broke off practically every tree of a dense forest in this region. The seven men who sought shelter in the cave were burned beyond recognition and three others who were in the stream were killed by a falling tree. This constituted the number of dead of this crew, but the remainder who sought shelter in the creek had their hair burned off the back part of their heads and the skin all burned from their necks, besides being nearly suffocated from the smoke. One of those injured men made his way into Wallace, a distance of twelve miles, by nine o'clock on Sunday morning, the day after they were injured. Judging from the distress of the men in Pulaski's crew I had already put a crew of seventeen men to work cutting out a trail leading to this point, and upon learning the condition of the men I immediately sent out two doctors on foot, with a crew of men with medicines, blankets and provisions, to help the injured men. It required a crew of seventeen men working all day Sunday, Sunday night, Monday and Monday night to open the trail to the injured men twelve miles from Wallace. This enabled me to get pack horses into the injured men and they were brought to Wallace. With the exception of the two men who had friends at this place the dead men were buried near the spot where they died, a few days later. Reverent Carter, a Congregational minister at Wallace, volunteered to go along with the burial crew to give

Christian burial to the dead. All of this crew, with the exception of the ten men who were killed, speedily recovered from their injuries at the hospital in Wallace.

Mr. William H. Rock is a man about twenty-five years of age, having served for two years in the region in which he was fighting fire; therefore he was thoroughly acquainted with the details of the region where his men were working. He had a crew of approximately seventy men about six miles northeast of Avery, Idaho. When the terrific windstorm arose and the fires started up in many places he found he was cut off from getting his men out to Avery. Therefore he led them to an area that had burned over the day before. This proved to be a place of absolute safety and all the men came out uninjured. As evening drew on the fires were burning up so terrifically that huge columns of smoke which contained large quantities of combustible material would frequently burst into flames that would shoot into the sky for thousands of feet. This, some of the men told later, frightened Oscar Weigert to the extent of his wanting to kill himself. He however left the crew without anymore knowing it at the time, and even though tow shots were heard no one knew that he had taken his life until the following morning. Mr. Rock had his crew in perfect safety, and the unfortunate happening to Mr. Weigert was a matter entirely beyond the control of Mr. Rock who was in charge.

Mr. Debit is about thirty-five years of age. He was in charge of the district during the last four years, having headquarters within six miles of where the men perished; therefore was thoroughly acquainted with all the conditions which might have led to the protection of the men. Owing to the fact that he had general charge of the district he was away from the men when they perished, but a few hours preceding this, seeing that danger was imminent, he sent Charles Sullivan, who was then serving as Deputy Sheriff at Avery, into where about seventy men were working on Setser Creek, telling them to come out to Avery immediately as there was danger of being hemmed in by the fire. All of these men came out with the exception of twenty-eight who thought there was no danger and refused to come. All of these twenty-eight were burned beyond recognition a few hours afterward. These men were all wrapped in blankets and sewed in heavy canvas and buried where they were burned.

Mr. Hollingshead is about twenty-two years of age. Although a young man, he as always exercised good judgment. He is conservative and had served as Forest Guard in the immediate region in which he had charge of men for two years; therefore was thoroughly familiar with the country. He had charge of a crew on the west fork of Big Creek fighting a fire that was coming northeast from Trout Creek. He had a crew of about sixty men. When the terrific winds scattered the fires all over the region and they discovered that they were surrounded by fire all of his men, with the exception of nineteen, worked through the fire line to a place of safety on an area that had previously burned over. Nineteen of these men, being thoroughly panic stricken, rushed down the hill ahead of the fire to a little cabin where five pack horses were stationed. They found that the fire was all around them. They went into the cabin and remained there until the roof began falling in. They rushed out this and tried to break through the fire line, but the fire was so terrific that eighteen out of the nineteen perished in the flames within a few feet of the cabin. The nineteenth man accidentally worked his way through the fire line and came out to the St. Joe two days later with all of the skin off of his face and hands and his clothing practically burned from his body. After six weeks in the hospital this man fully recovered. Mr. Hollingshead the next day went into the place where those men perished and found eighteen

men, five horses and a large black bear that had perished in the flames all at the same place. The men were wrapped in blankets and canvas and buried where they perished. They were all burned beyond recognition.

James Danilson is a young man about twenty-two years old. Although young he was thoroughly acquainted with woods work and had been over the region many times where his crew was located; therefore was thoroughly familiar with the location. He had eighteen men in his crew. When he found he was surrounded by fire he took his men to an open park near the timber line which contained a light covering of bear grass. They burned off a large area in this park, thinking that by so doing they would absolute protection, and the general appearances would indicate that they did have protection of the very best kind. When the terrific fires however approached this area, instead of stopping when the burned area was reached, as would be expected, they continued to burn over the same area the second time. The men in Danilson's charge had their blankets with them over their heads until the flames had practically consumed them. One of the men, however, by accident inhaled the flames and perished on the spot. The other men were very badly burned about the face and hands. The fire reached these men about nine o'clock Saturday evening. Early Sunday morning Mr. Danilson, although badly injured, worked his way into Mullan, a distance of five miles, and delivered the news. Pack horses were immediately sent to the place and the men, although badly injured were brought to Mullan and given medical attention at Dr. Keys' office before they were brought to Wallace at 2 P.M. by special train which I received through the kindness of the Northern Pacific Railway Company. These men were all placed in the Wallace Hospital, where they remained from one to six weeks, all recovered with the exception of three men who have still hands.

S. M. Taylor is a man of about forty years of age and a conservative, intelligent fellow, thoroughly able to handle men and a prospector in this region for many years. He had charge of the Bullion fire along the Montana-Idaho line east of Wallace. When Mr. Taylor discovered that he was surrounded by fires he took his crew, consisting of about sixty men, to the tunnel of the Bullion Mine, which seemed to Mr. Taylor to offer absolute protection. One of the men, Mr. Ryson, who was with the crew, knew the tunnel thoroughly owing to the fact that he made it. Most of the crew who went into the tunnel passed an overhead air shaft. Eight of the men however did not do this and the smoke rushed in to where these eight men were located and suffocated them. The remaining crew came out a few hours afterward without any injury; neither had they experienced any inconvenience during the time they were in the tunnel. Mr. Taylor immediately notified me of the conditions and although this was within about four miles of the Northern Pacific Railway, several large trestles along the mountain had burned out; therefore I could not depend wholly upon the railroad to bring these dead men to Wallace, so I sent a crew a men the next day to bury the dead bodies. About ten days later, when the railroad was sufficiently repaired on both sides of the mountain to make it more convenient for handling the bodies, I sent a crew of men to the place with pack horses to disinter the bodies and bring them to the railroad, where through the kindness of the Northern Pacific Railway Company a special car brought them across the mountain to Dorsey. At this point a trestle was still not replaced and the dead bodies were transferred to another special train sent out from Wallace. The bodies were delivered at the morgue at Wallace and prepared for burial and a few days later they were given Christian burial in the Wallace cemetery.

The following is a list of the men who perished in the fires, the list being followed by specific statements concerning each man.

**[Editor's Note: This information has been provided in the Lists of Crews, their pay, and specific details within Stories of Firefighting Crews.]**

Many of the men who perished in the fires on the Coeur d' Alene National Forest in August, 1910, are still unidentified, and the chances are that we never will be able to identify them. The fact that we are unable to identify them may seem strange to anyone not familiar with the conditions. OF the men used in fighting forest fires were men who were floating around through the country apparently having no home. Many of the men passed under assumed names, and through the great stress for time the precaution was not taken when they were hired to have them give a statement concerning their relatives or home address, if they had any. The only thing we have to go by is the name of the man as taken from him or placed upon our time books. We received many of the men that we employed from the employment agencies of Spokane and Butte, and these employment agencies have nothing to show further than the name of the man. We have written hundreds of letters and followed up every trace that might lead to the identification of the men, but we feel certain that there are a number of men who perished that will never be identified.

The following information is everything we have regarding them at the present time:

**[Editor's Note: This information has been provided in the Lists of Crews, their pay, and specific details within Stories of Firefighting Crews.]**

The men referred to in this report, although directly supervised by the man in charge of the crew, were all indirectly under my supervision, and up to August 20 and 21, when the great conflagration took place, I was in direct communication with these men either by telephone or messenger every day.

Our object in view in employing these men was to put out the numerous forest fires in the region. Their duties were clear off a fire line about eight feet wide by an advance crew cutting the brush, followed by a crew with mattocks and shovels who would dig off the surface so that the mineral soil would be exposed. This line was always made sufficiently far in advance of the main fire to enable the men in charge to back fire from this fire line so that a space would be burned sufficiently wide between the fire line constructed and the main fire to stop the progress of the advancing fire when it reached this burned space. This system is usually very effective and would have been in this case had it not been for the abnormal conditions.

A camp is always established within a reasonable distance of the fire, so that the men from different parts of the fire line can reach the camp at meal time and in the evening. If conditions are such that it is too far from the camp to where the men are working, provisions are cooked and

packed in pails to where the men are working. If water is too far distant canvas bags in connection with pack horses are used to carry water to the men.

There are no claims against the Government at the present time for the death of any of the men who perished on August 20 and 21, 1910, with the exception of the amounts due the men for labor at the time of their death, and in very few cases has this been requested, but we have done everything in our power to learn the location of the friends of these men so that the amount due them might be turned over to the proper parties.

I am herewith enclosing a map of the Coeur d' Alene National Forest showing the location where the men perished, and a few photographs to illustrate the severity of the wind and fire.

Very truly yours,  
*/s/ W. G. Wiegler*  
Forest Supervisor.