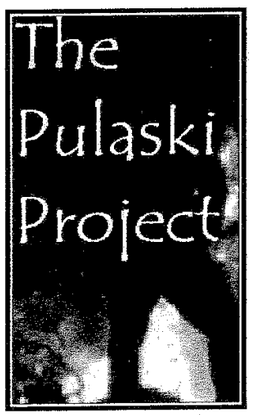
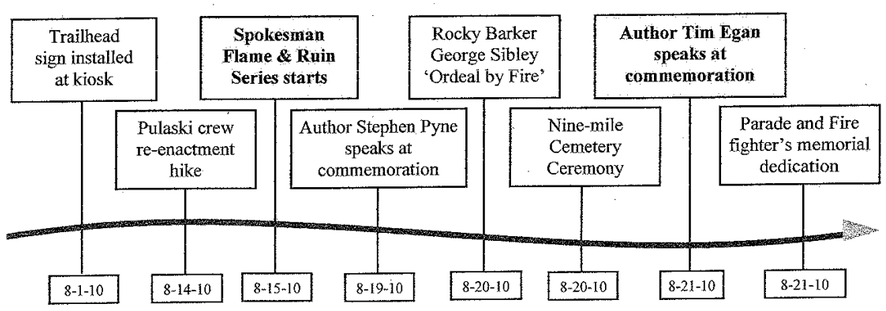
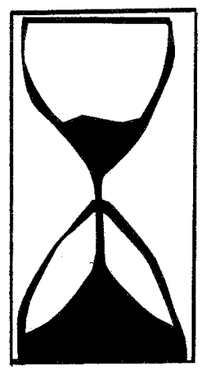


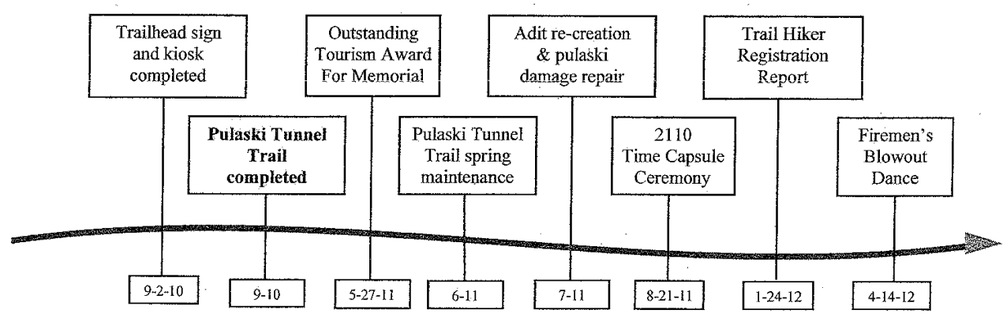
Pulaski Project Accomplishments & Activities Timeline

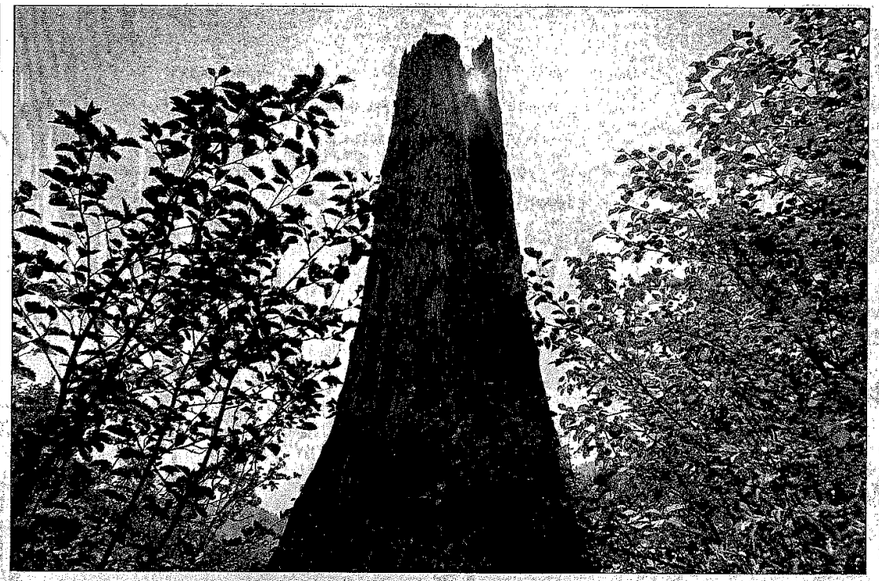
August 2010 - April 2012





and News & Media Coverage of the Great Fire of 1910





JEROME A. POLLOS/Press

Sun shines through a 50-foot-tall dead cedar stump at the "Cedar Graveyard" on Moon Pass Road. This marshy area is one of the few locations that still show the remnants of the 1910 Fires.

'Ghost Cedars' stand vigil

Great cedar snags are reminder of fires' intensity

By DAVID COLE
Staff writer

Haunting remnants of the 1910 Fires stand along the narrow and dusty Moon Pass Road, which winds between tiny Avery and Wallace.

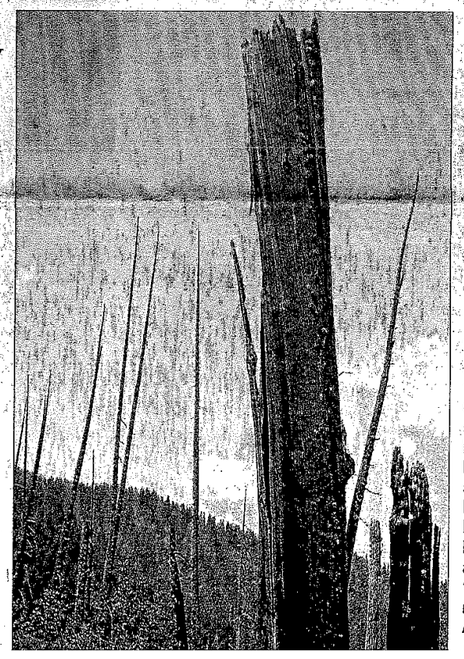
A traveler can witness for themselves the force with which those catastrophic wildfires raged.

Numerous large dead cedar snags — known locally as the Ghost Cedars — stand in a wetlands area along the North Fork of the St. Joe River.

It's a graveyard for the cedar trees, which were 300 to 500 years old when they burned in August 1910.

Those fires affected many in North Idaho, Eastern Washington and western Montana.

At least 85 people died in the fires that swept through the mountains of those states. Most of the dead were U.S. Forest Service firefighters. The final toll could have been as high as 130 dead.



The stand of "Ghosts Cedars" snags litter the landscape along Moon Pass Road about 10 miles north of Avery.

JEROME A

Trial by fire

Wallace, Pulaski both victims of 'Big Blowup,' but survive

By DAVID COLE
Staff writer

WALLACE — While many of the roughly 4,000 residents of this city on Aug. 20, 1910, were fleeing east and west as the waves of a firestorm burned down the steep hillsides, "Big Ed" Pulaski did everything he could to get back here.

Because of the smoke, city street lights were turned on before 3 p.m. Fire was visible on the ridges surrounding the city. Many people were burying possessions they wouldn't be able to take with them as they hurriedly left for safety.

It had been an extremely hot and dry year. It had warmed up early in February and March, with almost no rain. April was hot, too, with temperatures in the 80s, said John Amonson, former director of the Wallace District Mining Museum.

By that summer, heat lightning began to strike mountainsides, starting numerous wildfires, Amonson said. There was no rain in July.

Jim McReynolds, the current museum director, said nearly a third of Wallace would burn

FIRE
from A1

before it was all over. Twenty years earlier in Wallace, in July 1890, most of the structures in downtown Wallace were burned after a fire started in a hotel.

Many of the buildings in town were wood structures then, and after the 1890 fire most were replaced with masonry construction.

In 1910, "Everything east of Seventh Street, with the exception of Providence Hospital was burned," McReynolds said.

The Wallace Times building, located on the 700 block of Bank Street, was the first to light, he said. Burning tree branches and other debris fell from the sky, starting the fire.

Everything that burned, did so in a two-hour period on the night of the 20th, he said.

About 100 buildings, including homes and commercial structures, would be destroyed. The damage total was said to be $1 million at the time.

One man died trying to save a pet bird. Another man died in the Coeur d'Alene Hotel, McReynolds said.

While Wallace was partially spared, the town of Grand Forks, south of Mullan, was completely burned. Mullan was barely saved by residents who started backburns.

Seven miles away from Wallace, by trail, up on the Big Creek Divide, Pulaski was losing his voice hollering to round up his crew amidst the fire noise and gale-force winds, said James See, president of the Pulaski Project, which works to preserve the Pulaski Tunnel Trail. The trailhead is about a mile south of Wallace, and leads to one of the most historic sites of the 1910 Fires.

Pulaski planned to round up his crews on the divide and head back to Wallace, See said. Pulaski knew they couldn't hold back the fires headed for them from the south.

He and 45 men headed past Lake Elsie and on toward the West Fork of Placer Creek. On the way down one of the men died, possibly killed by one of the trees that fell in the winds and fire or lagged behind and was caught by flames, See said.

His men were panic stricken.

"Trees were exploding like Roman candles," See said. "They were in hell."

Once to the West Fork of Placer Creek, the men would head toward Placer Creek and follow the trail there to Wallace, along what is Moon Pass Road today.

On the way down the West Fork, with a bear following them down the trail, they could see fire headed up toward them. They were boxed in.

"The citizens of Wallace might have set a backfire," See said. "The crew was freaking out. The sound of the fire is roaring and smoke is choking" them.

With Wallace blocked by a monster wall of flames, they decided to seek safety in the War Eagle adit, a mining term meaning portal. They quickly found they wouldn't be able to reach the War Eagle because of the flames — it was just too far down the ravine.

They settled for Nicholson adit, which was about four miles from Lake Elsie.

Nicholson adit was an exploratory hole in the mountain. Miners had likely been looking for galena ore.

See said the hole goes about 200 feet into the mountain.

"You can stand up and walk, and it's about two people wide," See said.

Fortunately for the crew, Edward C. Pulaski was a miner, blacksmith, and forest ranger.

"He knew the whole area, and knew it well," Amonson said.

Jason Kirchner, a spokesman for the Idaho Panhandle National Forests, said, "The man knew the woods. He knew exactly what he was looking for and what was back there."

Still it was difficult to see through the dark smoke, and the flames sounded like jet engines screaming around them. The heat was like a giant furnace.

After not being able to reach War Eagle, they headed back up toward Nicholson. They would make it just in time.

See said it was probably late afternoon or evening when the men reached Nicholson, which is about 15 feet from the stream.

With the men in the adit, along with two horses, Pulaski tried to keep the flames and smoke out with blankets and water from inside. Fire reached the tunnel just as they made it inside.

Heat, smoke, and gas from the fire was too much for many of the men, who fell unconscious. He'd ordered the men to lie face down.

When someone decid-

JEROME A. POLLOS/Press

The opening of the Nicholson adit is now the end of a historical site outside Wallace which visitors hike a two-mile trail to get to. It was this mine opening where Ed Pulaski hid during the 1910 Fires.

"He literally saves their lives by threatening to kill them."

JIM McREYNOLDS, Wallace District Mining Museum director

ed to run from the cave, Pulaski pulled out his pistol and threatened to shoot anyone who tried to leave.

"He literally saves their lives by threatening to kill them," said McReynolds. "It's such a great human interest story."

See said the first men emerged from the cave in the early morning hours of Aug. 21. The rocks and ground outside the cave were too hot, so the men went into the now warm creek. The trees looked like they had been mowed down.

Five men who reached the cave had died overnight. Of the 45 men he started with, 39 survived the ordeal. Both horses died. The men were burned and injured, their clothes and shoes were burned and torn, and they were covered in mud and ashes.

Some could no longer walk, and had to crawl part of the three miles to Wallace on their hands and knees.

The fire had ravaged Pulaski's eyes, lungs and throat. They would cause him problems for years afterward.

The Forest Service was very lightly manned at that time, said Amonson.

"They were literally taking people off the street who were willing to fight the fire," Amonson said.

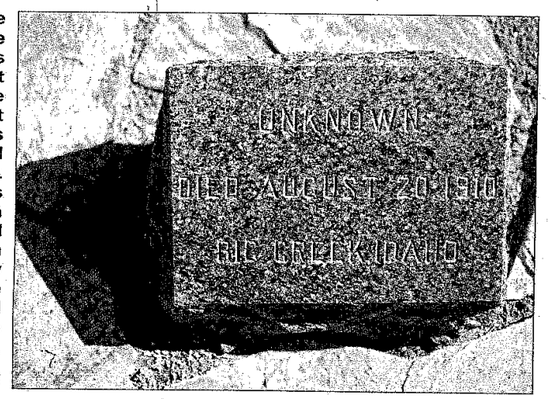
Pulaski himself had just begun working for the Forest Service in 1908, as a forest ranger on the Coeur d'Alene National Forest. He retired from the Forest Service in 1930. He died in 1931, and is buried in Coeur d'Alene at Forest Cemetery.

While serving as a district ranger, Pulaski developed a combination ax and grubbing hoe tool. This has since been accepted as the standard firefighting tool of the Forest Service. In his honor, the tool carries his name, Pulaski. The original Pulaski Tool is at the Wallace District Mining Museum.

Following the 1910 Fires, forestry officials established a policy of 100 percent suppression toward wildfire. The irony is that policy has created a threat of more catastrophic fires because of the build-up of fuels.

More scientific research into wildfires also was driven by the fires.

The Forest Service itself says the catastrophe in its early, fledgling years was its "trial by fire."



None of the headstones that encircle the 1910 Forest Firefighters Memorial in St. Maries have birth dates listed on them and a few of those buried were unknown.

JEROME A. POLLOS/Press

CEDARS

from A1

Woodlawn Cemetery in St. Maries is the final resting place of nearly 60 firefighters, and many of them died Aug. 20 at Big Creek and Setser Creek.

Several communities and miles of railroad infrastructure were destroyed. Most of the destruction occurred in a firestorm on Aug. 20 and 21, often referred to as the "Big Blowup," which burned nearly three million acres of forest. Nationally, an estimated five million acres of national forest burned during the 1910 fire season. State, private, reservation, and other lands also burned.

A third of the booming city of Wallace was burned, and the towns of Mullan and Avery were barely spared. Avery had 250 people living there in 1910.

Today, the Ghost Cedars are grayish, some 6 to 7 feet in diameter at the base. Some rise, branchless, from massive bases to long fine spikes at the peak. Those broken near the base are blackened inside where the heart rot of the trees were scorched.

The river rushes and gurgles through the bottom wetlands where the cedars stand. Dense sedges and shrubs grow in muck near the stream. Moose bed down where they can find dry patches of ground.

There are several hundred of the Ghost Cedars stretching for about a mile along the river.

They aren't the only cedar snags still standing as remnants from those fires, but "this is the area where they're most visible and easy to find," said Jason Kirchner, a spokesman for the Idaho Panhandle National Forests.

If they weren't cedar they likely wouldn't be standing today.

Still, despite the strength of the wood, "There are less and less (standing) every year," he said.

It took thousands of years to grow the cedar forest, he said. A raised water table, gophers that like to eat young trees, and frost keep cedars from repopulating the valley bottom. The U.S. Forest Service tried to plant cedars, but they didn't survive, Kirchner said.

About eight species of trees grow on the hillsides above the valley bottom. The hillsides look much the same as they did in 1910, he said.

"That valley was a hub of activity, between logging, railroads, and mining," said Kirchner. "There were a lot more people in the woods back then, compared with today."

The Forest Service says that historically, in an average summer, the river bottom wetlands are too moist to carry a forest fire — even if the surrounding hillsides are dry enough to burn.

But in 1910, the old cedars in this bottom did burn. The severity of the drought and the heat conditions that year made it possible.

A fire of the magnitude of the Big Blowup burns everything in its path with great intensity, the Forest Service says. There was nothing fire-resistant that summer.

Living cedar stands might one day take root again in this valley bottom, Kirchner said.

"But not in our lifetime," he said.

THURSDAY, AUGUST 12, 2010

SHOSHONE NEWS-PRESS

Pulaski's 1910 hike will be re-enacted

On Aug. 20, 1910, U.S. Forest Ranger Edward Pulaski gathered 45 firefighters on a ridge above Lake Elsie near Kellogg. He intended to lead them to safety from the great fire down the west fork of Placer Creek to Wallace. Upon meeting fire coming up from Wallace, he directed the men to reverse direction and hasten to the Nicholson mine in an attempt to save their lives from certain death. Pulaski saved all but six of his crew.

The route Pulaski and his crew followed is registered as the Escapeway on the National Register of Historic Places.

This Saturday, on Aug. 14, 2010, a new crew of 45 hikers will re-enact this 100-year-old historic flight to safety as part of the commemoration program of the 1910 Fire Committee.

The re-enactors will gather at Wallace Jr./Sr. High School for transportation to Lake Elsie. At the lake, they will follow Forest Service Trail 106 one mile to the ridge where Pulaski assembled his desperate crew. The hikers will then follow the St. Joe Divide Trail 16 two miles to the convergence with the West Fork of Placer Creek Trail. They will follow heritage trail 38, down one mile to the Pulaski Tunnel loop. The loop is the destination point of the Pulaski Tunnel Trail, which continues thence down to Moon Pass Road and Wallace.

After lunch at the loop, above and across the creek from the Pulaski Tunnel, the crew will hike another two miles down the Pulaski Tunnel Trail to the trailhead, which is located one mile south of Wallace. From the trailhead the group of distressed and blackened re-enactors will march toward Wallace into the Wallace Hospital site at First and Cedar, and thereafter continue on to the Wallace Depot. The march into town will be between 3 and 4 p.m.

The public is invited to witness and encourage the march into town along their route, at the hospital site and at a reception at the Wallace Northern Pacific Depot.

The re-enactors were selected based on an application form offered at the 1910 Fire Committee Web site at www.firecoop.org. A waiting list of additional re-enactors will fill vacancies, if any, of the original group selected. Applications are now closed.

The seven mile re-enactment hike is one event in a series commemorating the 1910 fire. Other upcoming events include a speech at the Wallace Elks by Stephen Pyne, author of "Year of the Fires" on Thursday, Aug. 19; a speech by Rocky Barker, author of "Scorched Earth" and a film by George Sibley "Ordeal by Fire" on Friday, Aug. 20; and a parade and dedication of the 1910 Fire Fighters Memorial and a speech by Tim Egan, author of "The Big Burn" on Saturday, Aug. 21.

The Wallace Melodrama, Mine Tour, the Wallace District Mining Museum and Huckleberry Festival all have events planned for the commemoration. Further information may be found at www.firecoop.org.

Events to remember 1910 fire

On Friday, Aug. 20, and Saturday, Aug. 21, the USDA Forest Service Idaho Panhandle National Forests will hold commemorative events remembering the 100th anniversary of the Great Fires of 1910, and the sacrifices of the firefighters and communities affected by the fires. Events in St. Maries and Wallace will remember the weekend of the "Big Blowup" in 1910 when southwest winds whipped up numerous fires burning in Idaho and Montana creating a fire storm of more than 3 million acres in just two days. The fires killed 85 firefighters and burned numerous small towns including a third of Wallace. This historic event contains many tales of heroism, tragedy, loss and redemption. The Idaho Panhandle National Forests invites the public to attend the commemorative events.

On Friday, Aug. 20, the Forest Service and the community of St. Maries will rededicate the grave site of 54 firefighters who lost their lives in the Big Blowup. The ceremony will take place at Woodlawn Cemetery and will include a procession led by bagpipes and an honor guard, local boy scouts, wildland firefighters, the Ninemile Pack String with remarks from state and local elected officials, U.S. Forest Service Fire and Aviation Management Director Tom Harbour and author and historian Dr. Stephen Pyne. The rededication ceremony will begin at 3:30 p.m. Guests to the event are encouraged to arrive early. The U.S. Forest Service and the St. Maries community will also sponsor a No Host Community Dinner served at the Nazarene Church, Friday at 6:30 p.m. The keynote speaker is Bob Mutch, a national and international leader in fire management. His talk will be followed by a performance by the Fiddling Foresters.

On Saturday, Aug. 21, the Forest Service and the community of Wallace will hold a commemorative ceremony dedicating a new monument to the firefighters who lost their lives in the Great Fires of 1910. This larger event will include a memorial procession of fire trucks, firefighters and an honor guard through the community of Wallace ending at the Wallace Visitor's Center. Following the procession a dedication ceremony will take place at the visitor's center including remarks from local, state and federal elected officials, U.S. Forest Service Fire and Aviation Director Tom Harbour, and author of The Big Burn Timothy Egan. The procession will begin on the east side of Wallace near Exit 62 of Interstate 90 at 11 a.m. The dedication ceremony will begin at the visitor's center at 12:30 p.m. followed by a water drop from an air tanker on the hillsides above Wallace at approximately 2 p.m.

The procession and memorial dedication in Wallace on Aug. 21 caps a series of community and Forest Service supported commemorative events taking place in the Silver Valley. Visitors to the area in the week before the memorial dedication can enjoy a wide variety of commemorative events including evening talks by Dr. Stephen Pyne and Timothy Egan. Additional opportunities include hikes along the Pulaski Trail and the premiere of a new documentary film by George Sibley titled "Ordeal by Fire." For tickets, pricing, and reservation information please visit the Shoshone County Fire Prevention Cooperative website at http://firecoop.org, or call (208) 784-0821.

Forest Service commemorative events on Aug. 20 and 21 in St. Maries and Wallace are free to the public. For more information about the Great Fires of 1910 including photos, historic accounts of the fires, and schedules for commemorative events, please visit http://www.fs.fed.us/r1/1910-centennial/

SATURDAY, AUGUST 14, 2010

SHOSHONE NEWS-PRESS

New 1910 Fire exhibit unveiled

By RONALD BOND
Staff writer

A new exhibit commemorating the 1910 Fire was unveiled Friday at the Route of the Hiawatha, the latest such exhibit set up on the trail and an important one with the 100th anniversary of the blaze coming next weekend.

Close to 40 people were on hand for the ceremony, in which members of Superior Ranger District, local historical societies and firefighters uncovered and offered brief explanations of six interpretive panels about the fire, communities, and people.

"This display that you see before us today talks about the personal stories of individual people and communities that experienced the 1910 fire," said Sharon Sweeney, District Ranger of the Superior Ranger District. "It's an important, significant, historical event that occurred, and it's 100 years ago that this all happened."

Each panel in the display, which is set up in kind of a half-circle, explains a different aspect of the fire. One focuses on the fire itself and how it spread. Another focuses on firefighters and their fight for survival, while others focus on heroes and heroines, including one about Pinkie Adair, who cooked for dozens of firefighters.

The Wallace Historic Preservation Society has contributed many pictures to the commemoration of the fire, including several that are on display in this latest exhibit.

see EXHIBIT, A3

— Photo by RONALD BOND

Sue McLees of the Mineral County Historical Society unveils one of six new interpretive panels set up at the trailhead of the Route of the Hiawatha on Friday. The exhibit is one of many set up to commemorate the 1910 fire.

EXHIBIT
from A1

"We received a 200-photo collection from a member of the family that helped build this Route of the Hiawatha," she said. "Our goal is to share them with the public."

She said the display will give visitors to the trail an opportunity to understand why some of the terrain contains "dead snags in the forest" and the importance of the tunnel just a ways down from the East Portal trail head.

"Many people were saved by being in the train inside the tunnel," she explained.

It will also be a way to teach visitors who may not know about the fire the importance and impact of it in history — including the towns, terrain and people that were lost and the heroes who saved so many lives.

"It was a large, traumatic event in this piece of the world," Sweeney said.


THE GREAT FIRE
OF 1910
Special coverage in
The Spokesman-Review
Sunday August 15 and
every day through August 22

180

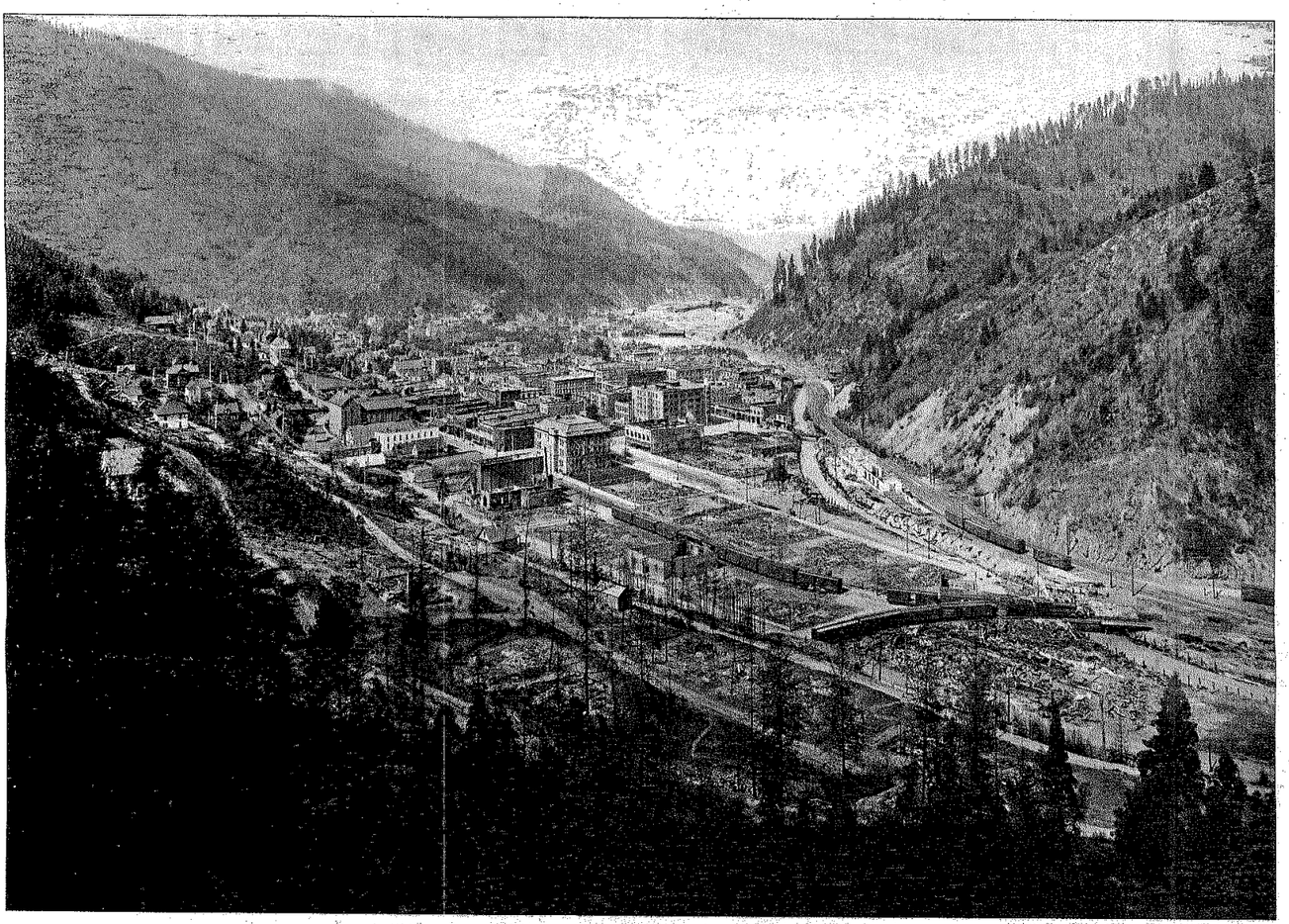
THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

SUNDAY, AUGUST 15, 2010 | BRIGHT AND SUNNY ▲ 89 ▼ 59 | WWW.SPOKESMAN.COM

FLAME AND RUIN
THE FIRES OF 1910

A region consumed

Suffocating smoke. Obliterating flames. Delirium-inducing heat. A century later, the roar of the blaze – deadly to dozens as fire engulfed 3 million acres – still echoes in the stories of that hell on Earth.



University of Idaho Barnard Stockbridge Collection

DEVASTATION | More than 50 homes and the east end of Wallace were reduced to rubble by fire on Aug. 20 and 21, 1910.

By Jim Kershner
jimk@spokesman.com, (509) 459-5493

Today, we can imagine the smoke – thick and suffocating.

We can fathom the flames – causing mountains and towns to glow red at midnight.

We can even imagine the heat, enough to peel paint off boxcars.

Yet there's one thing the survivors said was impossible for anyone to imagine: The roar.

A forest the size of Connecticut was exploding in a fearsome whoosh – generating, with fire and oxygen, its own tornadoes and cyclones. One survivor called it "the sound of a thousand trains rushing over a thousand steel trestles." Another said it could be

See FIRES, A8

About this report

A century ago, what's still known as the largest forest fire in U.S. history burned 3 million acres in the Inland Northwest, leveling entire towns, killing at least 85 people and spawning stories both harrowing and heroic.

Over the next week in print and at **spokesman.com**, The Spokesman-Review will examine the fires and their legacy.

Insurance, trains, divine deal help save scorched Wallace

By Becky Kramer
beckyk@spokesman.com, (208) 765-7122

For three days in August 1910, the mining town of Wallace was at the epicenter of national news.

Over their morning coffee, New Yorkers read newspaper accounts of the fire that threatened to destroy the city of 3,000. Even British papers carried stories of the fires in the American West.

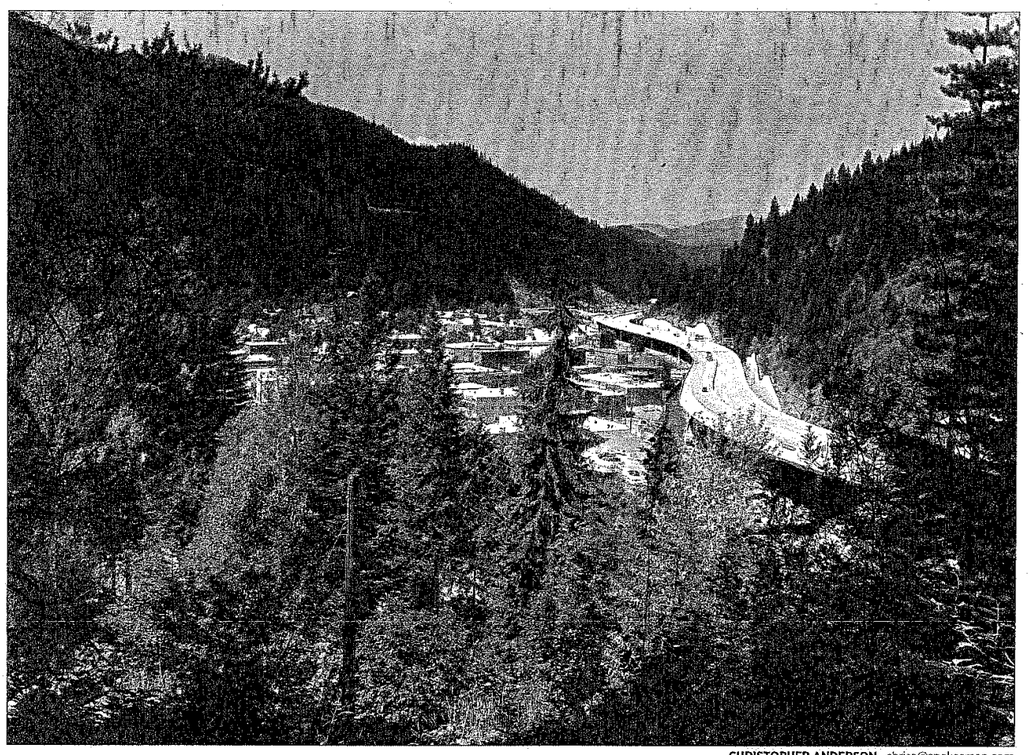
"Forest Flames Wreak Havoc; $1,000,000 is loss at Wallace ... 25 dead," shrieked headlines in the Seattle Post-Intelligencer.

"Wallace is scorched by forest fire ... Hundreds flee for lives," The Spokesman-Review reported.

In extra editions, stories of firefighters' bravery vied for space with accounts of people defending their homes with wet gunnysacks. A man who knocked over a pregnant woman trying to get a spot on one of Wallace's evacuation trains was beaten by the crowd at the depot.

See WALLACE, A7

FLAME AND RUIN
THE FIRES OF 1910



CHRISTOPHER ANDERSON chrisa@spokesman.com

WALLACE TODAY | The forest has long since recovered from the fire of 1910. This view from the town water tower looks downhill toward the west and shows the path of the fire that destroyed more than one-third of the town.

Fire commemorations

Idaho and Montana communities are planning events for the 1910 fire anniversary. For a longer list, visit www.fs.fed.us/r1/1910-centennial/events-links.html.

Coeur d'Alene Public Library

What: "Ordeal by Fire," documentary film by George Sibley, 2 p.m. and 7 p.m. today. Stephen Pyne, author of "Year of the Fires," speaks at 7 p.m. Wednesday.
Cost: Free
Where: 702 Front Ave., Coeur d'Alene
More information: (208) 769-2315

The Historical Museum at Fort Missoula

What: "When the Mountains Roared," an interactive exhibit on the fire
When: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Saturday; noon to 5 p.m. Sunday. Exhibit runs through Jan. 1, 2012
Where: Bldg. 322, Fort Missoula, Missoula
Cost: $3/adults, $2/seniors, $1/students, $10/family
More information: (406) 728-3476, www.fortmissoulamuseum.org

Wallace Mining Museum

What: "Ed Pulaski and the 1910 Fire"
When: Through Oct. 31, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily
Where: 509 Bank St., Wallace
Cost: $3/adults, $1/children 6 and older, free/children 5 and younger
More information: (208) 556-1592, www.wallaceminingmuseum.org

FLAME AND RUIN

THE FIRLS OF 1910

WALLACE

Continued from A1

By 1910, the telegraph and telephone had given newspapers the ability to report on distant events.

"You could take a localized event and give it national attention," said Jim McReynolds, executive director of the Wallace District Mining Museum. "We all love a good disaster. ... They make great stories, and we live vicariously through them."

The story of 7-year-old Willie Graftenberger, who got separated from his parents during the fire, was part of the news. He rode a train into Spokane, where he asked for a hotel room. The boy told the hotel clerk that Wallace had become "too hot" for him.

Wallace had been hot all summer. Residents' eyes smarted from the smoke generated by fires burning in the surrounding mountains. In the swanky Samuel's Hotel, patrons left sooty footprints on the lobby's tile floors.

On Aug. 13, firebrands rained down on the city, igniting an awning. Two days later, the 25th Infantry was sent from Spokane to help defend Wallace.

Local residents thought the fire would follow the prevailing wind patterns from the south, flaming over the mountains and bursting out of the Placer Creek canyon toward town. People planned accordingly.

One merchant loaded up valuables from his home near the creek and took them to his cigar company for safekeeping. Another family paid to have their grand piano hauled to an abandoned mine shaft.

The Placer Creek fires were burning so hot that soldiers couldn't get close enough to fight them. As the soldiers retreated, the flames advanced. By the afternoon of Aug. 20, a premature darkness settled over Wallace.

"A heavy pall of smoke hung over the city," one resident told The Spokesman-Review. "There was not a trace of the sun. At 2:30 in the afternoon the electric lights were turned on."

Insurance companies did a brisk business, writing fire policies into the afternoon. By 4 p.m. the winds died down and an eerie calm settled on the city. An hour later, the winds picked up again. Soon, they were gusting at 60 mph.

By 6 p.m., Mayor Walter Hanson ordered every able-bodied man to report for firefighting, threatening to jail those who refused. Hanson hoped to save the town by setting backfires.

At 9 p.m., an ember landed in a trash pile near the Wallace Times, igniting solvent-soaked rags and newsprint. The newspaper building went up in flames, which spread to the law office next door.

At the telephone office, seven women worked the lines, taking frantic calls as one building after another caught fire. The streets seethed with people trying to get out of town.

Trains lined up to evacuate women and children to Kellogg, Wardner and Spokane. In one crowded boxcar, a mother clutched her toddler, ill with scarlet fever. At the mayor's orders, the soldiers threw men off the trains.

Wallace's beleaguered, one-wagon fire department chose a string of brick buildings on Seventh Street to serve as a fire break. The new Shoshone County Courthouse was part of the defense.

When the Sunset Brewery succumbed to flames, 2,000 barrels of beer burst. Firefighters waded through foam to their knees on the adjacent street. It was a sad sight for the thirsty men. Mayor Hanson ordered the remaining bars to stay open all night to serve beer and whisky to the dehydrated firefighters. The town's water supply was no longer drinkable.

At midnight, Hanson declared martial law. Soldiers patrolled the streets to prevent looting.

By then, the fire had isolated Providence Hospital on the north side of town. The Northern Pacific Railroad, which had a line up Burke Canyon, was the sole hope for the patients, Catholic sisters and other hospital staff.

The conductor, George "Kid" Brown, had only an engine, coal tender and caboose to work with. Patients, including some on stretchers, and the hospital's staff crowded into the caboose. With tracks to the west blocked by burning boxcars, Brown headed east – the same direction the fire was moving.

Sister Joseph Antioch, a 21-year-old novitiate, missed the train when she went to find three patients in the hospital's basement. A doctor and nurse also stayed behind to wet down the hospital's roof.

Sister Anthony, the hospital's supervisor, was visiting Missoula during the fire. Apprised of the situation by phone, she sank to her knees in prayer, promising to erect a statue of Christ if the hospital, its patients and staff were spared.

The hospital's deliverance is one of McReynolds' favorite stories.

"The Mother Superior in Missoula makes a deal with God," he said. "By the time she finishes the prayers, the wind shifts. Whatever your beliefs are, that's a miraculous story."

The hospital evacuees on the train were safe, too. With coal supplies running low, Conductor Brown considered stopping to refuel, but the fire was too close. He gunned the train over the "S" bridge, a wooden trestle between Mullan and Lookout Pass that was catching fire as the train passed over it, and coasted downhill. At St. Regis, the patients caught a passenger train to Missoula.

The next morning, Wallace residents took stock. The east end of their town was leveled. Businesses razed by the fire included the cigar company where the merchant had stashed his valuables. Fifty homes were gone, but the Seventh Street fire line had helped save other residences.

Two lives were lost. James Boyd died of smoke inhalation when he returned to his house to retrieve a pet parrot. An unidentified man died in a boardinghouse.

Spokane nurses traveled to Wallace to help care for injured firefighters and refugees streaming out of the mountains. The city of Boise wired $2,000 to Mayor Hanson to help provide food and shelter.

Wallace's remaining hotels soon were full, and "every eating place is rushed to death," The Spokesman-Review reported.

Two days after the fire, the mines were back in operation. Insurance adjusters were expected in town the next day.

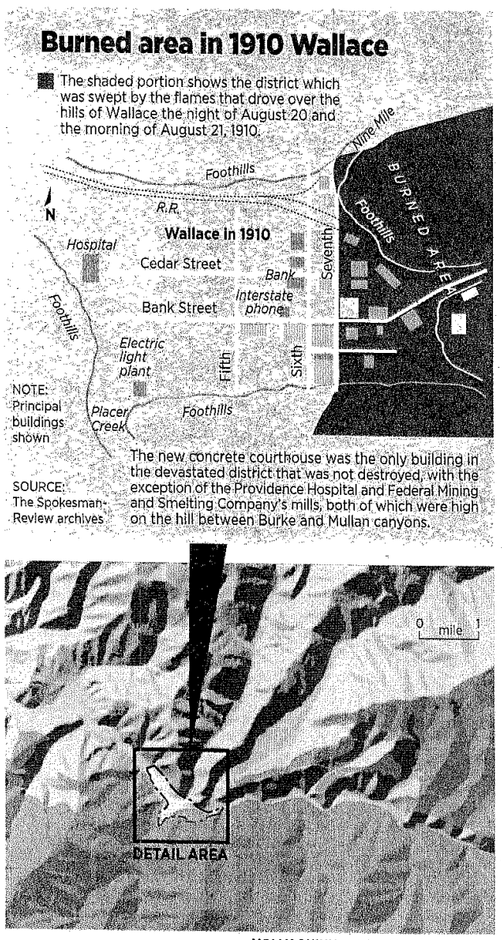
The liberal writing of insurance policies through the afternoon of Aug. 20 helped Wallace rise up from the ashes. About $1 million worth of damage was reported, but most of the buildings were insured. By 1912, photos showed new construction replacing empty lots.

Sister Anthony, meanwhile, kept her side of the pact with God.

A life-size statue of Jesus of the Sacred Heart was erected on the grounds of Providence Hospital.

Sources for this story include: "Northwest Disaster," by Ruby El Hult; "The Big Blowup," by Betty Goodwin Spencer; "Year of the Fires," by Stephen Pyne; and "The Big Burn," by Timothy Egan.

For a virtual exhibit on the 1910 Fire, visit http://wallaceminingmuseum.org/



MOLLY QUINN mollyq@spokesman.com

"There was not a trace of the sun.
At 2:30 in the afternoon the electric lights were turned on."

Wallace resident
As told to The Spokesman-Review

to 5 p.m. daily
Where: 509 Bank St., Wallace
Cost: $3/adults, $1/children 6 and older, free/children 5 and younger
More information: (208) 556-1592, www.wallaceminingmuseum.org

Old Jail Museum

What: "Flames and Courage, Sagas of the 1910 Fires."
When: Through Labor Day, noon to 4 p.m. daily
Where: 109 S. Madison St., Thompson Falls, Mont.
Cost: Free
More information: (406) 827-4002

Other Sanders County, Mont., events

- "A Step Back in Time to 1910" – An evening of period music, readings and a tribute to the late Lily Cunningham, a fire survivor. 7 p.m. Friday, Thompson Falls Library.
- Trout Creek Commemoration – A full day of activities Aug. 20 at Trout Creek Park, including an ATV ride through burned areas; memorial dedication to four firefighters who died at Swamp Creek; a fire camp re-enactment; a talk by author Stephen Pyne; and a barbecue dinner from 6 to 8 p.m. ($10).

St. Maries Fire Commemoration

When: Friday
What: 3:30 p.m. U.S. Forest Service Honor Guard and service honoring fallen firefighters at Woodlawn Cemetery; 6:30 p.m. community dinner at the Nazarene Church auditorium
More information: (208) 245-2531

Wallace Fire Commemoration and Huckleberry Festival

When: Thursday through Sunday
What: Festival of vendors, live music and events. Highlights: author Stephen Pyne speaks at the Wallace Elks Club, 7 p.m. Thursday ($5); Dedication of firefighters' grave at Nine Mile Cemetery, noon Friday; "Ordeal by Fire" film, 7 p.m. Friday at the Wallace Elks; parade, 11 a.m. Saturday, downtown Wallace; Fire Memorial dedication at Wallace Visitors Center, 12:30 p.m. Saturday; Author Timothy Egan speaks at 7 p.m. Saturday at the Wallace Elks ($5).
More information: (208) 753-7151; www.firecoop.org.

Avery Fire Commemoration

When: Saturday and Sunday
What: Saturday events: breakfast at the Avery Community Center, 7-10 a.m., $7; dedication of a white pine tree in Avery Park, 10:30 a.m.; historic skills demonstration, 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.; historic lectures about Forest Service rangers and Buffalo Soldiers, including 1-2 p.m. talk by Norgy Asleson and Sandra Cromwell, authors of "Up the Swiftwater": 1910 photos on display at the Asleson Museum; spaghetti dinner at Community Center, 5-7 p.m., $7.
Sunday events: 9 a.m. church service; 10 a.m. "Ordeal by Fire."
More information: (208) 245-4517

FIRES

Continued from A1

compared only to the "roar of Niagara Falls."

The noise was a deafening combination of 60 mph gales, colossal fire-driven updrafts, and the clamor of hundreds of trees cracking, snapping and slamming against earth. One witness said it sounded like being in the midst of "heavy cannonading."

Some came to call it the Big Blowup. Others called it the Big Burn. By any name, it was easily the biggest forest fire in the Inland Northwest's history – actually the biggest forest fire in U.S. history

A century ago this week, 3 million acres of North Idaho, Montana and Washington forest were turned to charcoal in two wind-whipped days. The towns of Taft, Haugan and DeBorgia in Montana, and Grand Forks and Falcon in Idaho, were destroyed. One-third of Wallace was obliterated. At least 85 people died.

One hundred years after the fact, the fire still burns in the nation's imagination. The event has recently spawned a mini literary genre, with two excellent books published in the past decade alone, Stephen Pyne's "Year of the Fires" in 2001 and Timothy Egan's best-selling "The Big Burn" in 2009 (see Q-and-A, page A12). Before that, the story was told in Betty Goodwin Spencer's "The Big Blowup" in 1956, Ruby El Hult's "Northwest Disaster: Avalanche and Fire" in 1960 and Sandra A. Crowell and David O. Asleson's "Up the Swiftwater" in 1980.

(Much of the information in this story is derived from those books, along with newspaper archives and U.S. Forest Service records.)

In this centennial year, the Forest Service in particular has lavished new attention on what Pyne calls the agency's "Ur-Fire."

No witnesses survive today, but we have good reason to keep the story alive. For one thing, the 1910 trauma continues to shape the way America fights wildfires, according to Pyne. Also, the fire guaranteed the continued existence of the public lands and national forests we enjoy today, according to Egan.

And there's a third, more compelling reason: The Big Burn was, quite simply, a monumental human drama.

Elbert Dow would no doubt agree. This was a man who had survived the Great San Francisco Earthquake four years before. Yet when he stumbled out of the St. Joe country, burned and dazed, here's what he said: For sheer "horror and suffering," the Big Burn was worse.

Months in the making

1910 began with a disastrously snowy winter and then turned into an ominously dry spring and summer.

The first wildfires in the Northern Rockies flared up in the unheard-of month of April. The drought persisted into summer, and by late June and early July crews already were patrolling the forest "reserves," as the national forests were then called, putting out dozens of spot fires. By late July and early August thousands of fires were smoldering deep in the mountains of Idaho, Montana and Washington.

The smokiest areas of all were in the vast St. Joe River drainage and the more thickly settled Coeur d'Alene River drainage of North Idaho.

The fires had three main sources. Lightning strikes (including hundreds on July 26 alone); people, mainly farmers, prospectors and loggers who were clearing land and burning slash; and railroads, including one of the most audacious and expensive rail lines ever built, the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific line (called the Milwaukee Road) completed a year earlier over the Bitterroots.

"Locomotives threw sparks like a Roman candle chugging down the tracks," wrote Pyne.

The forest rangers at Wallace acquired a small fleet of velocipedes, or "speeders," which were like bicycles that could be used on railway tracks. The rangers scooted along behind the trains and put out the fires alongside the tracks.

By mid-August, thousands of firefighters – including thousands of Army troops – were out in the mountains. Most were already exhausted from cutting fire lines (essentially, trenches) for miles through wilderness. The rangers were only too aware that hundreds of small fires were still alive, creeping along through brush and smoldering in the duff. The rangers' biggest fear was that a big wind would whip all of these fires into flame simultaneously.

On Aug. 20, 1910, that's exactly what happened.

Fire crews deep in the forests noticed with apprehension that the wind was freshening from the southwest. By mid-day it was a full-blown gale on the mountain ridges – the dreaded "Palouser," named for the Palouse country to the southwest.

The crews knew the winds boded ill, but it wasn't until that afternoon that they looked up to see a truly horrifying sight: Huge black clouds, like giant inky thunderheads, blotting out the sun. These were clouds of smoke, ash and cinders, carried high aloft by giant, roaring updrafts. It meant that those hundreds of small fires across the Clearwater, St. Joe, Coeur d'Alene and Bitterroot regions had flared, marched and, in many cases, joined up together and created a massive chain reaction of fuel, flame and oxygen. It was a true firestorm, massive enough to create its own roaring vortexes. Witnesses estimated clouds of smoke and ash 2,000 feet in the air.

Down on the ground, these winds and updrafts created crown fires that moved faster than a man could run – faster than a locomotive could steam, said some witnesses. Entire mountainsides of trees were blown down like matchsticks.

The scale was immense. Telegraph operators sent out desperate messages describing the approach of a solid line of flame 30 miles wide, and that was no exaggeration. Today, you can drive Interstate 90 east from Wallace to just short of St. Regis, Idaho – about 45 miles – and be within the old burn zone every mile of the way. And this was by no means the only burn zone in the Northern Rockies – just the biggest.

The remainder of Aug. 20 was consumed in a thousand different varieties of panic. Many fire crews realized instantly there was no stopping the fire. Their only job now was to find some way to hunker down while the maelstrom blasted through. If the heat didn't kill you, the falling timber would.

There were dozens, if not hundreds, of desperate flights to safety. Several have gone down in Big Burn lore because they were either more heroic – or tragic – than most.

Ed Pulaski and the mine shaft

Ranger Ed Pulaski was already a well-known figure patrolling the forests around Wallace. On Aug. 20, when the Palouser blew in, Pulaski was riding out to check on a large fire crew on the West Fork of Placer

See FIRES, A10

FIRES

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Creek. When he found them, scattered and terrified, it was obvious they had only one choice.

"Boys, it's no use," Pulaski told the crew. "... We got to try to make Wallace, that's our only chance."

Pulaski led them down the creek, but the fire was already catching up with them. The smoke was thick, trees were crashing everywhere, and flames cut them off from the creek. Darkness set in, but the world still glowed orange.

One man lagged and died, possibly hit by a falling tree. At one point, the band of 45 men was joined by a dark companion – a bear, also fleeing the fire.

Finally, in desperation, Pulaski led the men into the Nicholson Tunnel, an old mine shaft. Tunnels and mine shafts were dangerous refuges, since a fire, voracious for oxygen, could suck all of the oxygen out in minutes.

But it was better than staying outside and roasting.

Pulaski herded them in. The fire swept over, setting the timber-framed opening on fire. Men tried to hold wet blankets over the opening, but their hands started to blister.

Oxygen grew short and men collapsed in the trickle of water on the tunnel floor. One said he was "nearly crazy with the heat." A few screamed that they could take it no more. One man tried to run out.

Pulaski pulled his pistol and said he would shoot any man who left.

Every man, including Pulaski, passed out. Pulaski's hair, skin and eyes were burned.

At predawn, it looked like a death camp. One survivor raced down to Wallace, and reported everyone dead, including Pulaski. It may have looked that way, but slowly, men groggily stumbled out of the tunnel. One said, "The boss is dead." Pulaski raised his head and replied, "Like hell he is."

Five men died in the tunnel, probably from suffocation, smoke inhalation and heat. But the others managed to join Pulaski in a painful march back to Wallace. They staggered into Wallace the next morning, limping and half-blind.

The Bullion Mine tragedy

A crew of 60 firefighters was working a fire near the Bullion Mine, along the Idaho-Montana line, when the firestorm exploded.

The crew boss ordered all 60 into the Bullion Mine tunnel and then into a relatively safe side shaft. In the darkness, desperation and confusion, eight men became separated from the group and continued down the main shaft.

As the fire roared outside, the men in the side shaft held up blankets across the opening to keep out the smoke. They lighted little stumps of candles and wrote postcards to their loved ones.

"Mother dearest, this is my last," wrote one British firefighter. "We are trying to hold out the smoke, but chances are slim for all of us."

He survived, but the eight separated men did not. They were overcome by heat and smoke. The next day, their compatriots dejectedly buried all eight outside the mine opening.

The tragedies near Big Creek

Nowhere were crews so suddenly and completely overwhelmed as in the Big Creek and Trout Creek drainages, in the St. Joe country.

When the inferno appeared, a crew on Big Creek retreated frantically to a homesteader's two-acre clearing. Men dived into

See FIRES, A11

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Continued from A10

the shallow creek. Then the trees started crashing into the water, killing two and smashing the legs of one man, pinning him down as flames licked at him.

Seven others panicked and raced toward the settler's tiny root cellar. They fought desperately to burrow into the tiny space, but it proved to be no refuge. Flaming logs rolled down the hillside on top of the opening. Their screams, as they burned, were heard by the men who stayed in the creek. All seven died, along with the man trapped by the log.

Just over a ridge, another large crew beat a frantic retreat. A group of 40, led by Lee Hollingshead, a 22-year-old forest service employee, ran through fire to reach one of the few safe places – a spot already burned over.

However, a group of 19 had split off and taken another route. When they arrived at a tiny cabin they all jammed into it in their desperation for any kind of shelter. When the roof ignited and caved in, they fled blindly out the front door – none of them made it more than a few paces before collapsing from the heat.

The next day, Hollingshead arrived and found the charred corpses of 18 men and two black bears at the cabin. The 19th man had twisted his ankle at the doorway, collapsed and crawled to a creek. By keeping his nose close to the ground, he found fresher, cooler air and eventually crawled 16 miles down the creek to safety.

Joe Halm and his resurrection

Ranger Joe Halm, 25, was a former star athlete at Washington State College (now University), and the leader of a fire crew of 70, which had just mopped up a fire near the headwaters of the St. Joe River.

On Aug. 20, when the winds hit and the flaming embers began to drop all around their camp, his terrified crew wanted to run. Some did, but he drew his gun and told the rest that they would stay put and ride it out. He led them to a sandbar where Bean Creek meets the St. Joe River. They draped wet blankets over their heads and stretched out in the creek.

A few days later, the Spokane Daily Chronicle ran a front page story headlined: "Athlete A Fire Victim – Joe Halm, Formerly Football and Baseball Man, With His Party, Lost in the Fire Saturday Night at Big Fork."

Nobody knew the truth yet – Halm and his entire crew were still alive. That first terrible night, one man had been knocked underwater by a falling tree but was rescued. When the firestorm passed, they spent a wet night on the sandbar, warmed by the burning snags. Every man was accounted for.

Then they began to pick their way downriver, over a charred landscaped.

"The virgin trees, as far as the eye could see, were broken or down – devoid of a single sprig of green," Halm later reported.

They emerged about a week later. The Chronicle ran another, happier, front page headline: "Joe Halm Is Safe."

From earthquake to firestorm

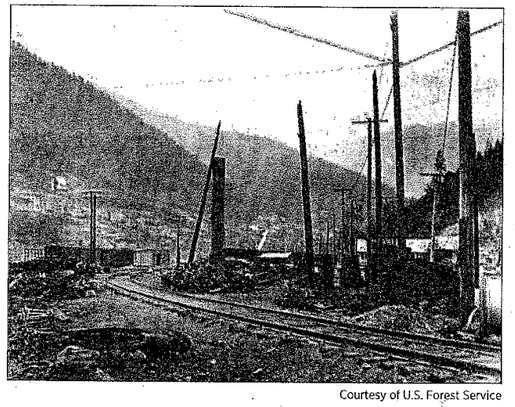
The Big Burn was especially hard on fire crews, but the fire also caught and sometimes killed trappers, prospectors, hunters, railroad workers, settlers, loggers

See **FIRES, A12**

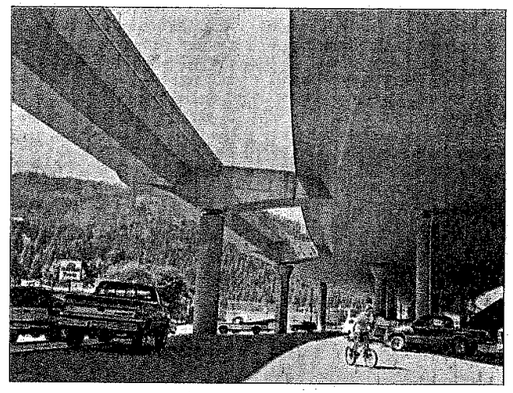
The fires of 1910 forever altered terrain and towns of the Inland Northwest

Then & Now

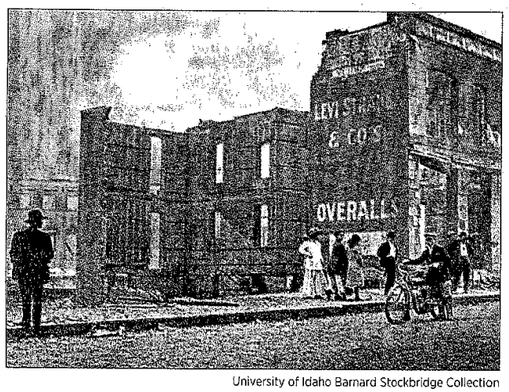
Present-day photography by Christopher Anderson
(509) 459-5598, chrisa@spokesman.com



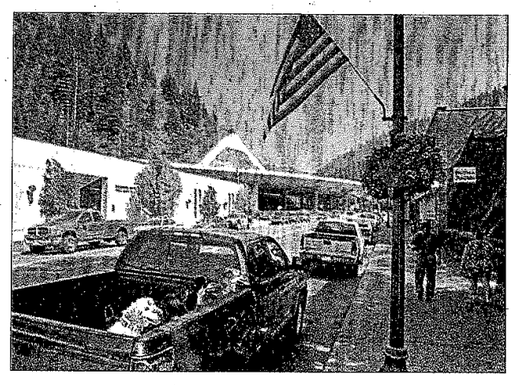
Courtesy of U.S. Forest Service



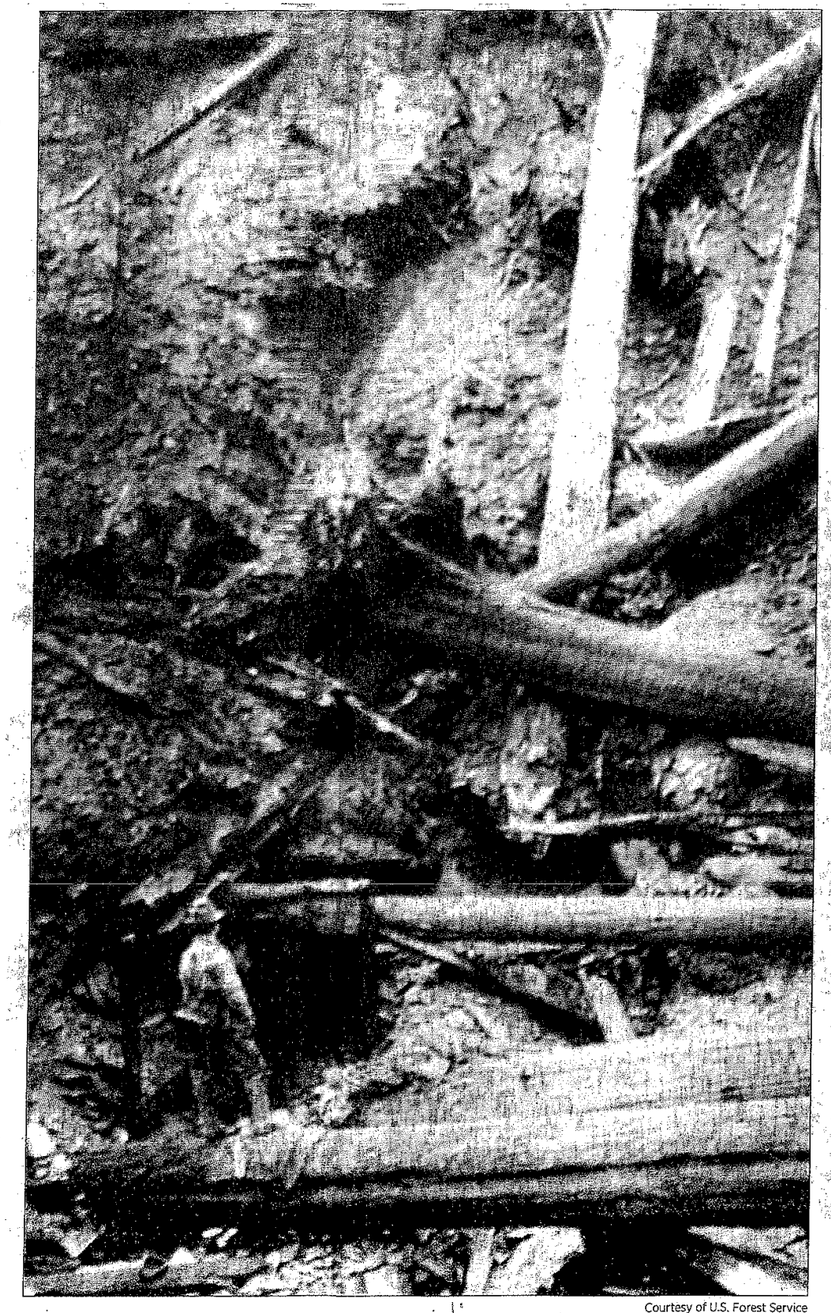
TOTAL LOSS | This area of Wallace burned to the ground in 1910. The train track on the left was eventually replaced by an elevated portion of Interstate 90, which runs through the town.



University of Idaho Barnard Stockbridge Collection



BANK STREET | On what is now the east end of Bank Street, residents of Wallace mill about the devastation brought by fire in 1910.



Courtesy of U.S. Forest Service

PULASKI TUNNEL | William Morris stands in front of the Nicholson adit, the tunnel where Ed Pulaski sheltered his crew during a blowover in the 1910 fire. Today, underbrush frames the entrance to the famous tunnel outside Wallace . The framing timbers built to replicate the scene after the fire are newly installed along with interpretive signs and a two-mile trail leading from Wallace to the site.

FIRES

Continued from A11

and miners.

The story of Elbert Dow, the man who had survived the Great San Francisco Earthquake, is particularly harrowing, as told in the Aug. 25, 1910, edition of The Spokesman-Review.

He was working as a commissary man (cook, perhaps) for a contractor along the Milwaukee Road line. He fled into a railroad tunnel above Avery when the inferno engulfed him. He and about 60 other refugees spent Saturday and Sunday night in two different railroad tunnels.

Their predicament was especially terrifying because the tunnels contained two abandoned railcars, one holding black powder, the other gasoline, lubricating oil and dynamite. The flames were licking over a neighboring bridge toward the tunnel and its lethal cargo. Dow and his companions, in desperation, took some of the dynamite and blew up the bridge, halting the advance of the flames.

Dow, "out of his head from hunger and exposure to heat," eventually stumbled down the tracks to Avery, where he was treated for numerous burns and blisters.

Meanwhile, the cities and towns in the path of the Big Burn endured a different kind of trauma, a mass panic fed by hundreds of people jammed together by heat and flames. The story of Wallace, the "metropolis" of the area (at least, that's what the newspapers called this town of 3,000) is told in an accompanying story (see Page One). The demise of the railroad-camp towns of Taft and Grand Forks will be the dealt with in an upcoming story.

Yet for sheer drama, it's hard to top the stories of Mullan and Avery, both with happy endings.

Backfire saved Mullan

When the firestorm swooped around Mullan on Aug. 20, the afternoon became so black that people reported bats flying through the murk. When townspeople heard that nearby Wallace was evacuating, many Mullan residents jumped on the evacuation trains as well. Yet enough people stayed to man a backfire, which created enough room to stop the flames racing in from the south.

On Aug. 21, however, fire surrounded Mullan from the north, east and west. Another evacuation commenced. But a number of volunteers stayed, convinced they could save the town. That night, they lined up with torches on the edges of town and lit an even more massive backfire.

Witnesses said the little town looked like it was in the bottom of "a deep bowl, completely lined with seething flames." The town glowed red at midnight, but the backfires worked. An all-night bucket brigade hauled water from the river to douse every ember and spark. When morning came, Mullan was saved, without a single loss of life.

Avery's last stand

Avery, the Milwaukee Road railyard town on the St. Joe River, was in an even more precarious situation. Fire raged upstream and downstream; on the north bank of the river and on the south bank; up the Milwaukee Road tracks and down the tracks. Refugees from the entire drainage were huddled in town.

On Aug. 21, the rangers ordered all women and children evacuated by train. It was an orderly evacuation because it was supervised by the 53 enlisted men of the all-black 25th Infantry, Company G (also known as Buffalo Soldiers) and their one white officer, who had been sent in from Fort George Wright in Spokane. They kept the able-bodied men from elbowing their way onto the train and made sure the windows were securely shut against the heat. It was the last train to escape west.

Only the men and troops remained in Avery. Martial law had been declared, but there was little the troops could do against flames advancing on several fronts. That night, indecision reigned. At one point, everyone walked to the river in hopes of finding safety in the water. Once they got into the river, they were forced to confront an awful question. Which was worse? Being trapped by falling trees and drowning? Or being roasted by fire? They got out of the river and walked back to town.

They decided to try one last desperate escape on a train. Everyone piled onto flatcars, and a locomotive began steaming west – the only option since most of the bridges and trestles were down in the Taft Tunnel direction. The flames burned the varnish off the cars. The tracks were hopelessly blocked by fallen trees, rockslides and flame.

The flames, said the lieutenant, "seemed to be over a mile and a half high."

So they had to chug back to Avery for one last stand. On the morning of Aug. 22, out of options, the Buffalo Soldiers and residents decided to set a backfire and pray that it would be sucked toward the main fire and exhaust the fuel near the town.

The moment the backfire hit the onrushing main fire, the wind miraculously died down. Avery was saved.

"If I hadn't gone through it, I wouldn't believe human endurance could be so great," said one Avery fire crew member. "But we got our reward when we knew that we had won the battle, overwhelmingly against us."

The Spokane Daily Chronicle ran a photo of some of the Buffalo Soldiers with the headline, "Troops Are Good Fighters."

'The completeness of the destruction is indescribable'

The winds finally calmed. In the high country, a trace of snow fell. The Big Burn was over; refugees trickled back into Wallace, Mullan and Avery. The railroad immediately started rebuilding its trestles and bridges – trains would be rolling again in a month.

But the forest and the land could not be repaired so easily.

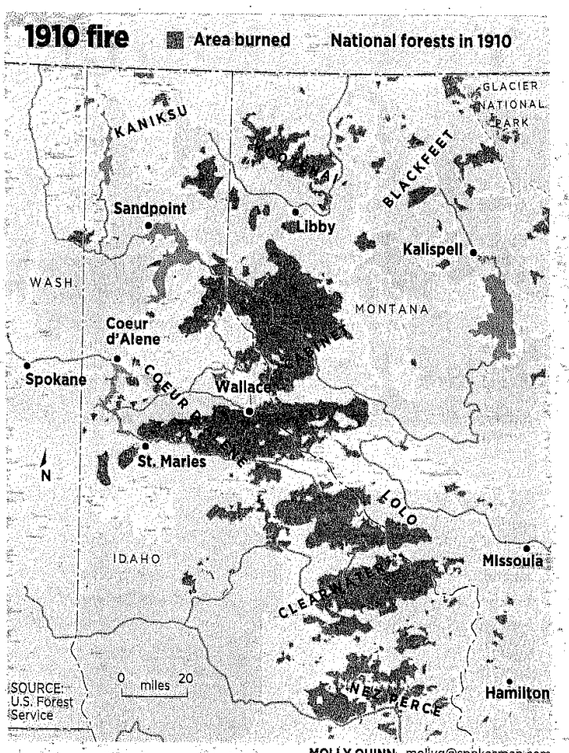
"Not a living thing can be seen for a distance of 20 miles; not a green spot greets the eye where a week before stood one of the finest bodies of white pine timber in the world," wrote a correspondent for The Spokesman-Review, filing from Wardner, Idaho. "... The completeness of the destruction is indescribable. ... Even the fishes in the streams were killed and are seen floating on the water by thousands."

One Avery survivor had what seemed to be the last word.

"Forest fires around Avery will not cause trouble, for there are no forests to burn," he said. "The country is wiped clean."

But not entirely. One homesteader, gazing forlornly over the black landscape, suddenly noticed a solitary tuft of green: A lone, living pine on a hilltop.

From such survivors, the forest would eventually return.



MOLLY QUINN mollyq@spokesman.com

Coming up

- **Monday:** A look at the Route of the Hiawatha, which strikes into the heart of the Big Burn.
- **Tuesday:** The search for the Pulaski Tunnel.
- **Wednesday:** The men who fought the fires.
- **Thursday:** First-person historical narratives.
- **Friday:** Two wild and raucous towns, wiped off the map by the fires.
- **Saturday:** A Great Burn Wilderness waits for approval.
- **Sunday:** The legacy of the fire.

Q-AND-A

Timothy Egan, 'Big Burn' author

By Jim Kershner
jimk@spokesman.com, (509) 459-5493

Timothy Egan, Spokane-bred winner of a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Award, tackled the subject of the 1910 fires in his most recent best-seller, "The Big Burn: Teddy Roosevelt & The Fire That Saved America" (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt).


Egan

It's a dramatic narrative of the fire, yet it's also an insightful look at how the fires have shaped the West and, in some ways, the entire nation.

We caught up with Egan by phone from his Seattle home, where he writes the Outposts column for the New York Times. Here's an edited version of our conversation:

Q. How big an event was this considered at the time?

A. It dominated the news. It was Hurricane Katrina and the Gulf oil spill. Something like a seventh of all of the military was sent here. It got Page One coverage in New York, again and again.

Q. Was it the biggest fire in U.S. history?

A. There have been fires, such as the Peshtigo fire (in Wisconsin and Michigan in 1871), that have killed more people, been more lethal, but no one can pinpoint a wildfire in recorded American history that burnt this much, this quickly.

You have to get your hands around this: 3 million acres in a weekend. I say that it was like all of the state of Connecticut, burning in 36 hours. That's amazing. Look at the Yellowstone fires (of 1988). They were big, but they weren't nearly the size of this, or the ferocity.

Q. How did the 1910 fires shape the Inland Northwest today?

A. One is the actual physical change to the land. You've got third-growth timber, you've got scars there where it still hasn't grown back.

The larger significance is that we had never in the United States tried to fight a fire on that scale.... From Eastern Washington to Glacier Park, the lasting legacy is not so much in the physical land, but in how you treat the land.

After these fires, they vowed to put out *every* fire. They had the 10 o'clock rule. If a fire started on your watch, they tried to put it out by 10 o'clock the next day. ... That's impossible. Fire is part of nature. It goes through and cleans out dead timber, etc. It is a regenerative force of nature.

And so actively trying to put out every fire left a lot of standing dead timber. So some of the big fires we had in the latter 20th century, including the Yellowstone fires of 1988 and some of the Idaho fires of the late 1990s, and fires still to come, are the result of having timber that probably should have burned every now and then during the seasonal fires. So I think that's one legacy that's still with us.

Q. What did the fires mean to the Forest Service and its continued existence?

A. At the time, the Forest Service was this fledgling agency. They were five years old – and they were about to kill it. Teddy Roosevelt had just left office and Congress was systematically defunding it. Your average forest ranger had 300,000 acres to cover. Just imagine the size of that. So it was entirely roadless and largely without trails, and this fledgling agency was suddenly put to the task of fighting the biggest wildfire in American history.

And even though they themselves said they had failed – the fire clearly got the upper hand, it killed nearly 100 people, leveled five towns and burned 3 million acres – even though all this happened, it changed the public opinion of the Forest Service.

And so American sentiment, especially in the West, shifted from being largely skeptical – who are these green-shirted rangers, what's their purpose, why are they being sent out here from Washington, D.C., we don't need these people – to one of heroic stature. They were almost mythologized. These young men put themselves at risk to save this land.

So it changed public sentiment, and I argue that it saved the Forest Service. To this day, I think that agency owes its existence to this fire

Courtesy of U.S. Forest Service

ECOVERY | Men work among fallen trees as they clear a trail and harvest timber near Avery in 1910.

Q. Do you think we take for granted all of our public land (in national forests)?

A. Yeah, I think we do. I think you have to travel, to get out of the West, to see how amazing it is to have public land as your neighbor. Most countries don't have this. They have private land, or leased land, or public land with tons of restrictions on it. We have, as part of our existence, public lands that everyone owns. We're so used to it, you have to go somewhere where they don't have any, to see what an extraordinary thing it is.

Q. Did you discover that the story of the 1910 fire still resonates with people?

A. That's been one of the great surprises to me as an author. ... This is a book about a still really obscure fire, in what many people think of as an obscure part of the United States, from 100 years ago. And it was on the bestseller list and sold more than 100,000 copies in hardback. So, to me, that's really reassuring that Americans care about their history enough that they would want to hear it.

The paperback edition of "The Big Burn: Teddy Roosevelt & The Fire That Saved America" comes out Sept. 7.

A DROUGHT, THEN THE FIRES BEGIN

SPRING 1910

APRIL: The first wildfires flare in the Northern Rockies, far earlier than normal.

MAY AND JUNE: Drought builds.

LATE JUNE AND JULY: Dozens of small fires blaze and are fought with varying degrees of success.

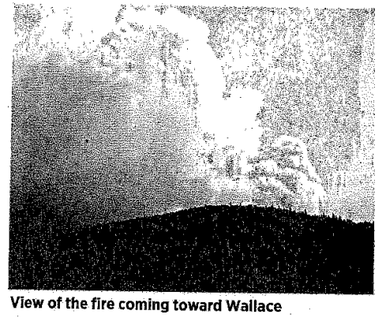
JULY 26: Huge thunderstorms kindle hundreds of small lightning fires.

AUG. 7: President William Howard Taft orders troops into the forests to help fight the fires.

AUG. 15: 5,000 men are fighting fire on the Forest Service payroll.

AUG. 20

MORNING: Wind freshens to a gale.



View of the fire coming toward Wallace

MIDDAY: The wind, called a "Palouser" by old-timers, blasts up against a broad swath of the Northern Rockies. The gale hits 60 mph on ridges in the Clearwater, Bitterroot, St. Joe and Coeur d'Alene drainages. Hundreds of smoldering fires are whipped into flame.

1910 · April · May · June · July · August · 20

SOURCES: "Year of the Fires" by Stephen Pyne, "The Big Burn" by Timothy Egan, "The Big Blowup" by Betty Goodwin Spencer, "Northwest Disaster: Avalanc

FLAME AND RUIN
THE FIRES OF 1910

AFTERNOON: Firefighters report "huge, black storm clouds" heading their way. These are in fact clouds of smoke and ash.

A full-fledged firestorm has begun. Fire crews throughout the backcountry are trapped; dozens die.

Trains packed with evacuees race to safety; some take shelter in tunnels on the Milwaukee Road.

One of many buildings consumed by the fire in Wallace

EVENING: Wallace is in the grip of panic. Hundreds of townspeople begin to flee by train.

An ember lands on a bucket of solvent in Wallace, igniting a fire that consumes one-third of the town.

Fire surrounds the Montana towns of Taft, Haugan and DeBorgia and the Idaho town of Grand Forks. They burn to the ground.

NIGHT: A backcountry firefighter reports a flaming "star" has fallen from the sky and ignited a mountainside. It is in fact a burning airborne ember, one of thousands sent aloft by the firestorm.

AUG. 21

PRE-DAWN: Ranger Ed Pulaski leads a crew of 45 into an old mine shaft outside of Wallace.

To the east near the Bitterroot Crest, eight firefighters die after taking refuge in the Bullion Mine.

MORNING: Pulaski and 40 survivors stumble into Wallace.

Avery, Idaho, ordered evacuated.

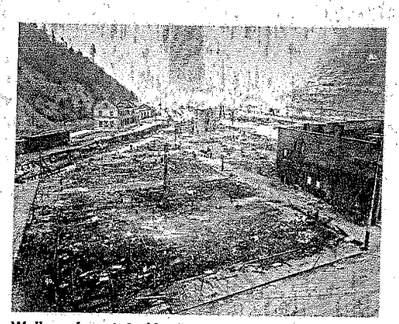
Burned timber surrounding Placer Creek

NIGHT: Fires surround Mullan, but residents set a backfire and save it.

AUG. 22

MORNING: Troops and residents are trapped in Avery, but a backfire saves the town.

MIDDAY: Winds abate. The worst is over.



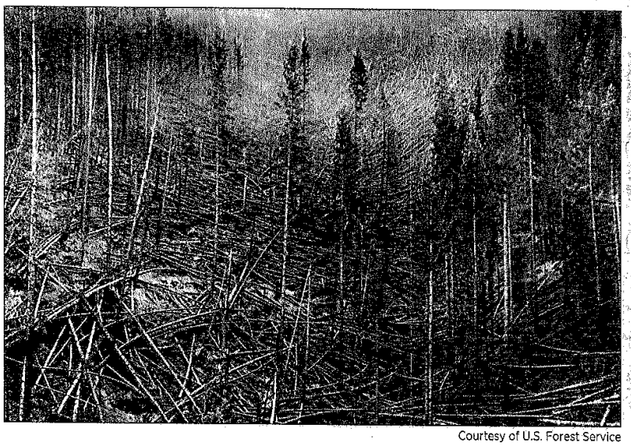
Wallace devastated by fire

THROUGH AUG. 25: Soot and smoke from the Big Burn darken the sky over the Dakotas, the Great Lakes, New England, and finally, over Greenland.

SEPT. 4: Rain finally falls on the gray ash of the Northern Rockies.

21 · 22 · 23 · 24 · 25 · 26 · 27 · 28 · 29 · 30 · 31 · Sept. · 3 · 4

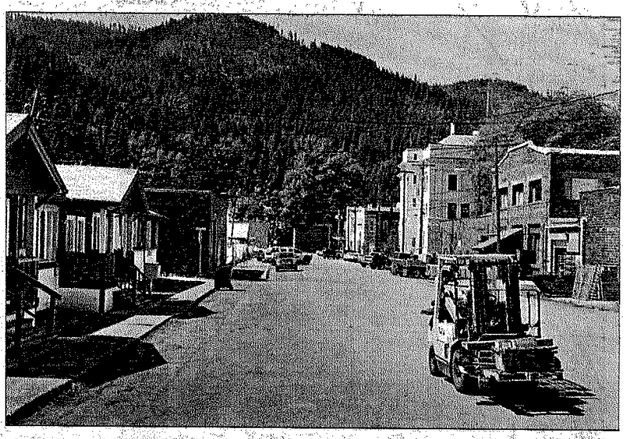
Fire" by Ruby El Hult and "Up the Swiftwater" by Sandra A. Crowell and David O. Asleson. Photos courtesy of Special Collections & Archives, University of Idaho Library, Moscow



Courtesy of U.S. Forest Service

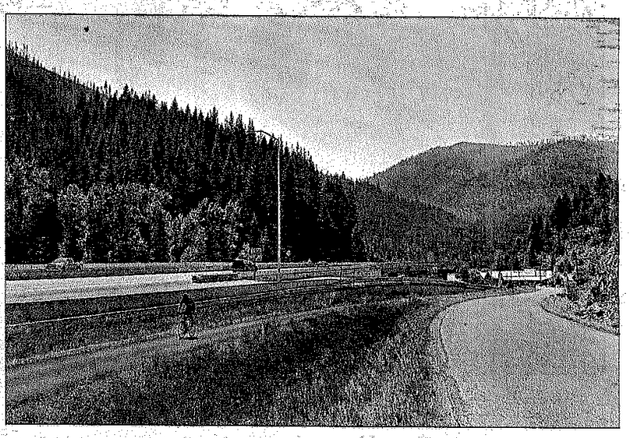
MOUNTAINSIDE | What didn't burn in 1910 was blown down by gale-force winds. At right, bicyclists move through the treetops as they cross a trestle on the Route of the Hiawatha along the border between Idaho and Montana.

University of Idaho Barnard Stockbridge Collection



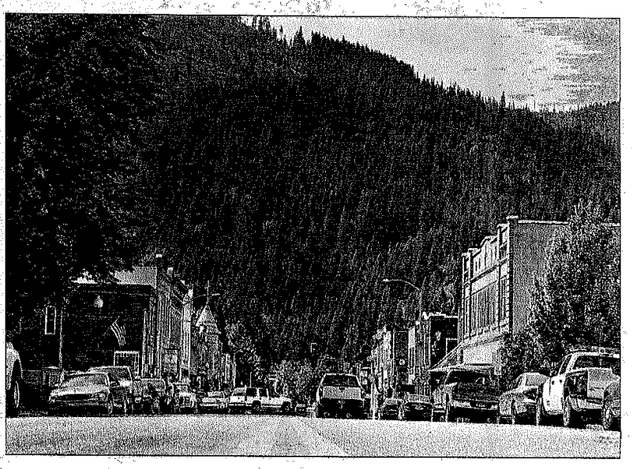
EAST WALLACE | Residents of Wallace search the rubble of the east end of town after the Big Burn destroyed many of the homes and businesses. In the same view at right, a forklift runs down Hotel Street.

University of Idaho Barnard Stockbridge Collection

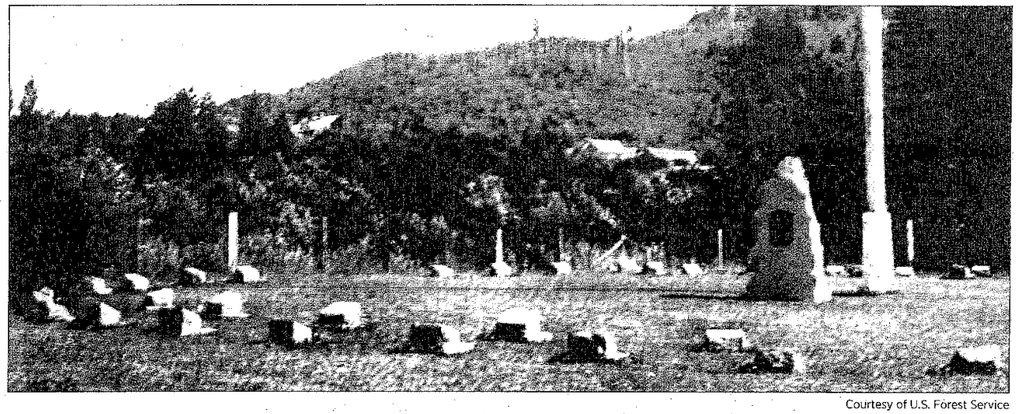


FUTURE FREEWAY | Where the great fire once swept through Wallace, reducing much of the town to rubble, now stands a ramp for Interstate 90 and a recreational trail.

Courtesy of U.S. Forest Service



MAIN STREET | Devastation reaches into the distance in this view looking west down the main street of Wallace in 1910. The same view at right shows how the forest has recovered, surrounding the Silver Valley town with a blanket of green.



Courtesy of U.S. Forest Service

FALLEN FIREFIGHTERS | The graves of dozens of forest firefighters killed in the 1910 blaze form a circle at a cemetery in St. Maries. The circle today surrounds a monument and flag honoring the dead.