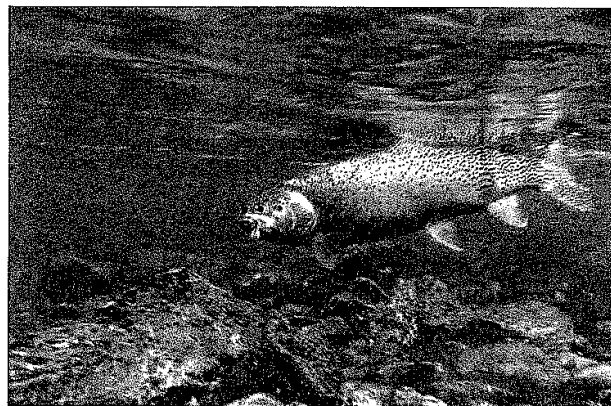


OUTDOORS

SPOKESMAN.COM/OUTDOORS KEEP UP ON HUNTING AND FISHING NEWS ONLINE

FLAME AND RUIN THE FIRES OF 1910



The St. Joe River is famous for its clean water and bounty of native westslope cutthroat trout, such as this one being reeled in by a fly fisher in the river's roadless section.

Up from the ashes

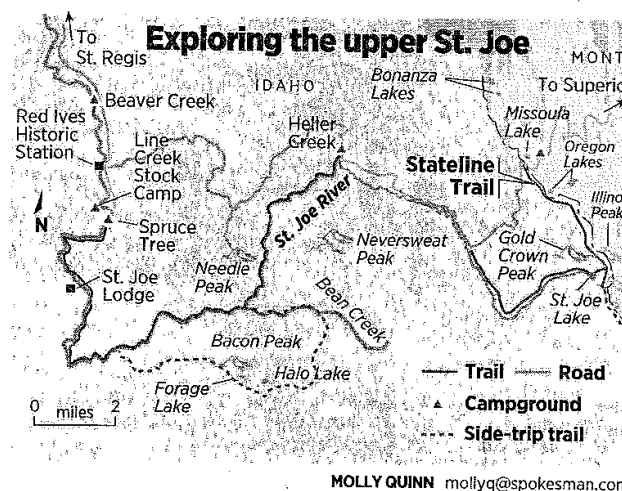
Trails and fish flourished in aftermath of 1910 fires

By Rich Landers
richl@spokesman.com, (509) 459-5508

It's no coincidence that today's choice hiking trails traverse mountains charred by the 1910 fires.

For better or worse, the explosion of flame across the region's landscape 100 years ago this week sparked a new emphasis on forest fire suppression and prevention.

"When you look at the maps and where the lookouts and the first ranger stations were sited, you can see that our trail network was heavily, heavily influenced by connecting those dots," said Doug Gober, Clearwater



MOLLY QUINN mollyq@spokesman.com

National Forest North Fork District ranger in Orofino, Idaho.

"Out trail system would probably be a fraction of what it is had our fire management not been influenced by the 1910 fires -

and the other big fires that came after that."

A hiker with a yen to walk back into the history of the 1910 fires has thousands of miles of options that lead through the formerly scorched earth.

A few stand out, such as:

- **Siamese Lakes** - Straight Creek loop - a rugged 25-mile route

from Clearwater Crossing southwest of the Fish Creek exit off Interstate 90 west of Alberton, Mont., and up through ancient cedars and hemlocks that survived the

See **HIKES, C9**

ALSO TODAY: MORE ABOUT THE AFTERMATH OF THE 1910 FIRES

- Ten Great Burn hikes to try.
- How the major fires contributed to the region's great trout fishing. /Page C9

MORE PHOTOS ON THE WEB

See more images of Rich Landers' hiking-fishing trek downstream from the headwaters of the St. Joe River at www.spokesman.com/outdoors



HIKES

Continued from C10

Great Blowup. The route tops out at cirque lakes at the Bitterroot Divide and heads down through a drainage that was devoured and dramatically transformed by the holocaust.

► **Stateline Trail** – follows the Bitterroot Divide on the Montana-Idaho border roughly 70 miles on maintained and unmaintained routes used by Native Americans and trappers because it was relatively open compared with the steep, dark canyons below.

The 1910 fires stormed over the divide, as one can see in choice segments of Trail 738, such as the 8-mile route from Hoodoo Pass (south from Superior, Mont., on the Trout Creek Road) to Goose Lake.

► **St. Joe River Trails** – including routes that can be linked into a rugged 38-mile trip through 1910 fires history.

The river is a case study in the remarkable evolution of forest, wildlife and native fisheries restoring themselves from the ashes into one of Idaho's premier fishing drainages.

An eye-opening trek traverses the roadless region of the upper St. Joe River, which I re-explored recently with David Moershel of Spokane.

From I-90 at Superior, drive south on Cedar Creek Road (Forest Road 320) about 28 miles to Cascade Pass on the Montana-Idaho border.

This rough, narrow road can be an adventure in itself.

"I've towed vehicles from every corner on this road in my 21 years here," said Carl Metcalf of Carl's Towing during our \$300 chauffeured detour back to Superior after we'd suffered two flat tires simultaneously.

Later, finally arriving at Cascade Pass, we started hiking at 6,500 feet, heading southeast on Stateline Trail 738 on the Bitterroot Divide between Montana and Idaho.

Indeed, several other states are involved in this alpine trek as it drifts above timberline, passing Oregon Lakes (California Creek isn't far away) and leading 6 miles to Illinois Peak, elevation 7,690 feet, the highest named peak on the Idaho Panhandle.

Blooming pink mountain heather was breathtaking against the succession of rounded peaks and valleys fading away in the distance in every direction.

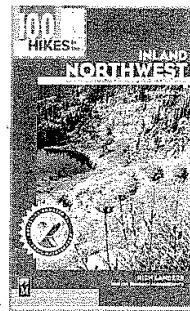
Other flowers brightened the highline route through meadows and crags, including columbines, penstemons, yellow pasqueflowers, bluebells, gentian, phlox and beargrass.

From Illinois Peak, one can head directly down to primitive campsites at St. Joe Lake, the official source of the St. Joe River, nearly 135 river miles from the river's terminus at Lake Coeur d'Alene.

But a short detour leads to the more specific source of the river: a small, shallow spring-fed tarn on a grassy bench above the lake.

Here an angler can anoint himself in the St. Joe's holy waters with one foot among the purple shooting stars on each side of the clear stream as it tumbles down to the lake.

Hatchery trout stocked by aircraft in St. Joe Lake will satisfy the itch in a casting arm, but the best is yet to come.



Hiker's guide

Detailed information for hiking these Great Burn routes, including the Stateline Trail, are included in "100 Hikes in the Inland Northwest," By Rich Landers (\$16.95, Mountaineers-Books)

remote camp graced with a single vault toilet, hikers can launch into the longest roadless section of the Joe.

From here it's nearly 18 miles to the lower trailhead at Spruce Tree Campground, where we had our pickup shuttled.

The mileage is considerably longer if you chose to mingle with the mosquitoes, biting flies and no-see-ums to pursue the St. Joe's famous native westslope cutthroat trout.

We bushwhacked down from the trail, over fresh elk tracks and ample piles of black bear scat, to fish prime waters. Then we'd return to our packs and inevitably find equal or better runs just a short way downstream.

We'd make camp and tote our wading boots back up or downstream to cover even more water during prime evening hours.

Headlamps were made for eating dinner after sundown on a trout stream.

Every run was different, but we always caught fish. Cutthroats evolved in these clear, nutrient-poor mountain waters by eating virtually every bug that comes by. With certain exceptions, they are usually more than willing during summer to rise to a fly pattern drifted drag-free above the olive green water where their camouflage avoids detection.

The middle portion of the St. Joe roadless area is lightly used, with virtually no campsites in the stretch from above Aqua Creek down to Bean Creek, where a crew of 25 firefighters retreated and hunkered in the water to survive a 1910 fires blowup.

The camping is pleasant at Bean Creek now, and even better if you have time to fish.

As if to endorse the clean water and wildness of this stretch, a hen harlequin duck flushed as Moershel approached a pool.

The river begins at 6,400 feet, flowing from the lake and plunging down Rambikur Falls.

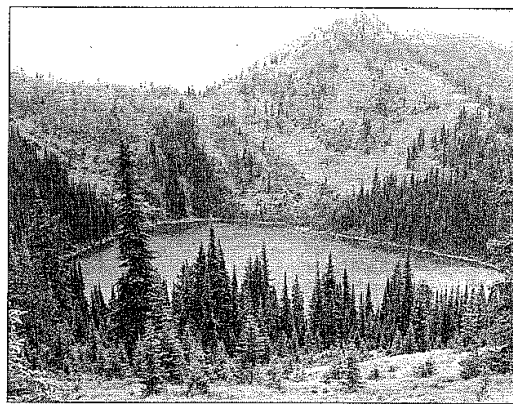
In August, a hiker following the river on Trail 49 usually can hop rocks to ford the St. Joe in the next 5.5 miles to the Medicine Creek trailhead.

The trail had been brushed and maintained in mid-July for the first time in several years, making it a breeze to get farther downstream to the promise of serious fishing.

From Medicine Creek to Heller Creek Campground the river is roughly paralleled for 5 miles by Forest Road 320, which descends from Cascade Pass and eventually leads all to the way on a notoriously rough route to Red Ives and the paved-road portion of the St. Joe.

The river is small above Heller by August, but it has fishable stretches few people bushwhack down to explore.

From Heller Campground, a



RICH LANDERS richl@spokesman.com

St. Joe Lake at the headwaters of the St. Joe River is nestled against the Bitterroot Divide on the Montana-Idaho border below the Stateline Trail.

Hareluquins winter in the saltwater of the Washington coast before migrating inland to nest in a few selected pristine mountain streams.

I was downstream tying a Renegade pattern onto my tippet and quickly realized the hen hadn't seen me. I lifted my hand so she could fly under the tip of my 9-foot rod, the white patches on the side of her head giving away her identity.

Just downstream, fresh wolf tracks were sharply outlined in the shoreline mud.

We began seeing a few hikers in the lower half of the roadless area, some lured by the high-mountain fishing at Forage and Halo lakes on the trail looping Bean and Bacon creeks.

The human activity and horse traffic picked up near St. Joe Lodge, which is 5 miles upstream from Spruce Tree Campground.

But no tents were pitched at the first campsite a hiker would encounter coming the other direction 3 miles upstream from Spruce Tree. We saw only a couple of anglers.

Moershel and I had experienced a dramatic transition in four days as we ended our journey at the campground, elevation 3,800 feet, where families were splashing in the river to cool off.

We'd hiked from where the huckleberries were still green to where they were ripe for eating.

We'd descended from the pristine alpine ridges that had little fuel to offer to the 1910 fires down to the lodgepole pines that reforested large areas of the great burn.

Lodgepoles have a lifecycle of roughly 100 years, and perhaps that's why they're beginning to succumb lower in the drainage to pine beetles in a landscape that's trending from green to red.

And, in another temporary respite in the grand scope of the St. Joe, Moershel and I had fully satiated our desire to catch and release cutthroat trout.

We scoped out the few anglers we saw fishing the popular waters along the river's paved-road section as we drove out. Neither of us had to fight back a single twinge of inclination to stop and make a cast.

We had arrived.

Wildfires can be a boon to fisheries

By Rich Landers

richl@spokesman.com, (509) 459-5508

Fishermen need not fear the impact of fire on their sport.

But they need to keep their guard up when humans want to fiddle in their favorite mountain streams.

The St. Joe River, Kelly Creek, Fish Creek and other waters in Idaho and Montana are famous for their thriving native populations of bull trout and westslope cutthroats because of – and despite – major forest fires.

Idaho Fish and Game Department research confirms that native fishes, especially those that can migrate, are well-adapted to big 100-year or even the 500-year fire events.

While hot fires can bare the ground, change soil composition and temporarily foul stream sections with sediment, "they also tend to add a lot of large woody debris to stream channels," said Chip Corsi, Idaho Fish and Game Department regional manager in Coeur d'Alene.

The logs create scour areas that expose the clean and larger gravels important for spawning, incubation, and fry rearing as well as for insect production, he said.

"Large wood also provides lots of cover and channel complexity that fish such as bull and cutthroat trout have an affinity for," he said. "A lot of deadfall can provide a fair bit of shade to protect stream temperatures."

"And fire often delivers nutrient pulses that can stimulate primary productivity, making more bugs and other fish food."

Intense fires, such as those in 1910, can kill fish in some areas by raising water temperatures.

But if the fish have a history of migrating, and the drainage is not otherwise impaired, fish will return to spawn in following years, he said, citing the most recent fisheries studies following the intense 1990s fires near Boise.

Native fisheries – more specifically "healthy" native fisheries – are adapted and resilient to natural events such as intense forest fires, Corsi said.

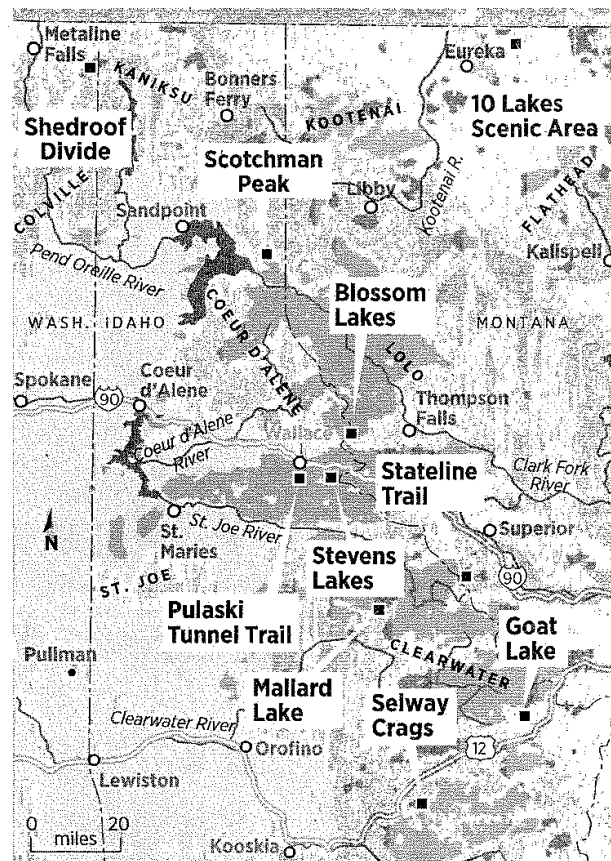
"Had the migratory component of those fish populations been impaired for other reasons – migration barriers, over-fishing, de-watering, pollution, and so on – the likelihood of recolonization, and hence resiliency, goes way down," he said.

OUTDOORS

10 Great Burn hikes

Research by Rich Landers
richl@spokesman.com

- Hike
- Area burned
- National forest



10 Lakes Scenic Area

ATTRACTION: Short, easy hikes to multi-day trips in lake-studded proposed wilderness area.

TRY THIS: 9-mile round-trip route from Little Therriault Lake to Wolverine Lakes, leads to alpine area at 7,300 feet and brings you back down gently.

INFO: Kootenai National Forest, Murphy Lake Ranger Station, (406) 882-4451.

Shedroof Divide

ATTRACTION: Earn stunning views along the backbone of the Salmo-Priest Wilderness and Idaho Selkirks from a trail that runs 20 miles along the high, narrow divide west of Upper Priest River.

TRY THIS: Drive east from Sullivan Lake 12 miles on Forest Road 22 to south trailhead just over Pass Creek Pass. Hike north as far as you desire, turn around and return. Pack all the water you'll need.

INFO: Colville National Forest, Sullivan Lake District, (509) 446-7500.

Scotchman Peak

ATTRACTION: Highest point in the proposed Scotchman Peaks Wilderness overlooking Lake Pend Oreille; good chance of seeing mountain goats.

TRY THIS: Not for sissies, the 8-mile round trip starting near Clark Fork climbs 3,700 feet on switchbacks to the summit.

INFO: Kaniksu National Forest, Sandpoint District, (208) 263-5111.

Blossom Lakes

ATTRACTION: From a trailhead off the Highway 9 pavement at Thompson Pass, gentle trails lead to secluded mountain lakes with overnight options.

TRY THIS: Start with the gentle 6-mile round trip to lower Blossom and extend to tiny Pear Lake if you have the energy. Want more? The 4-mile round-trip to Revett Lake starts from the same trailhead.

INFO: Lolo National Forest, Plains-Thompson Falls District, (406) 826-3821.

Pulaski Tunnel Trail

ATTRACTION: Just a mile south of Wallace, a dozen interpretive signs tell story of heroism and survival en route to the mine where Ed Pulaski saved his crew from a 1910 fires blow-up.

TRY THIS: From the trailhead on the road to Moon Pass, the well-designed trail, 4-miles round-trip, gains nearly 1,000 feet of elevation.

INFO: Historic Wallace Chamber of Commerce, (208) 753-7151

Mallard-Larkins

ATTRACTION: Fishing lakes, high mountain peaks, mountain goats and other critters in a gem of proposed wilderness between the St. Joe and Clearwater rivers.

TRY THIS: The 7-mile trail into Mallard Lake has no demanding ups or downs. Camp there for side trips to nearby Fawn Lake and up to Mallard Peak lookout cabin.

INFO: St. Joe National Forest, Avery office, (208) 245-4517.

Stevens Lakes

ATTRACTION: Easy access off I-90 at Mullan followed by a steady climb to a pair of timberline lakes under Stevens Peak, the area's highest at 6,838 feet.

TRY THIS: It's uphill but less than 2 miles to the lower lake, so don't stop there. Go the entire 2.5 miles to the upper lake (5 miles round trip). Then consider a scramble up to Stevens Peak for views.

INFO: Coeur d'Alene National Forest, Silver Valley Office, (208) 783-2363.

Stateline Trail

ATTRACTION: 70-mile high route with constant views from the Bitterroot Divide between Montana and Idaho, accessing dozens of mountain lakes.

TRY THIS: Drive from I-90 at Superior, Mont, about 30 miles up Cedar Creek Road to Stateline Trail 738 and hike the 6 unforgettable miles to St. Joe Lake, source of the St. Joe River. Scramble up 7,690-foot Illinois Peak, highest named peak in the Idaho Panhandle.

INFO: Lolo National Forest, Superior District, (406) 822-4233.

Goat Lake

ATTRACTION: Moderate hike to good fishing and prime base camp for exploring the high point in the heart of the proposed Great Burn Wilderness.

TRY THIS: Pry yourself away from world-class fishing in Kelly Creek and backpack the moderate 7 miles round trip from Blacklead Mountain to Goat Lake, a base for hikes to Williams Lakes and 7,930-foot Rhodes Peak.

INFO: Clearwater National Forest, Powell District, (208) 942-3113.

Selway Crag

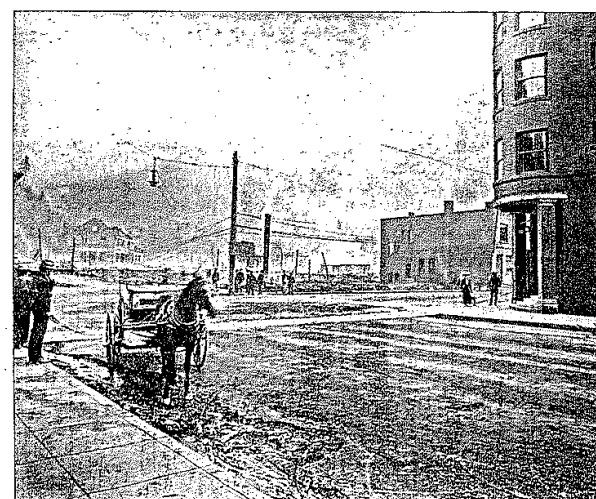
ATTRACTION: One of the most rugged and scenic portions of the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, spiced with alpine lakes.

TRY THIS: A challenging 13-mile round trip backpacking to Cove Lakes, where a rocky-ridge scrambler's dreams will be realized.

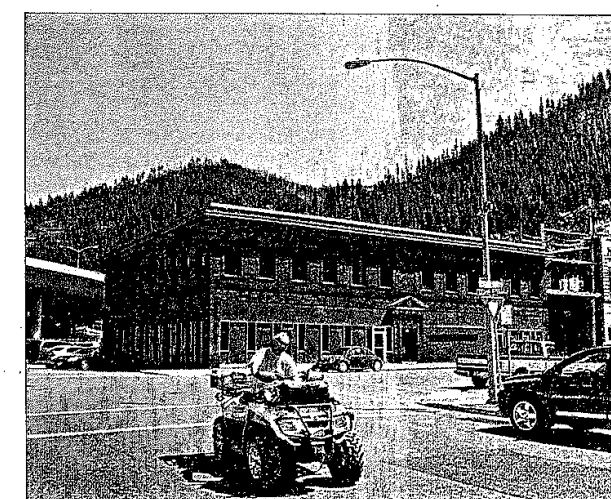
INFO: Nez Perce National Forest, Fenn Ranger Station, (208) 926-4250.



PHOTOS BY RICH LANDERS richl@spokesman.com
Pink mountain heather was in bloom as David Moershel of Spokane hiked the Stateline Trail on the Bitterroot Divide between Idaho and Montana. He started at Cascade Pass southwest of Superior, Mont., for the 6-mile trek to the source of the St. Joe River and St. Joe Lake.



University of Idaho Barnard Stockbridge Collection



GETTING AROUND | A modern-day horse and buggy roars around the corner that was once home to Samuel's Hotel in Wallace. The fire of 1910 burned the hillside in the background, left, and destroyed this eastern part of Wallace.

Fire of 1910 set pace for Forest Service response

■ It's been 100 years since the biggest fire in U.S. history ravaged rural parts of Montana, Idaho and Washington.

WALLACE (AP) — Each year major wildfires in the West are fought like military battles, with firefighters deploying by ground and air, bombers dropping retardant on flames and incident commanders plotting strategy behind the lines. These often epic campaigns are largely the result of the Great Fire of 1910.

The largest in U.S. history, it burned an area the size of Connecticut, wiping out whole towns and killing 86 people in remote areas of Idaho, Washington and Montana.

This is the 100th anniversary of the Aug. 20-21 firestorm that ended the era when wildfires were often allowed to burn them-

selves out. The fire, also known as the Big Burn, spawned a wildfire-industrial complex that employs thousands of people to extinguish forest fires each year, even though many think those efforts will likely result in larger, more destructive fires.

"For decades, the Forest Service told a clear and compelling story of fire-fighting as good versus evil, the moral equivalent of war," Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell said in a spring speech in Boise marking the Great Fire.

Things are different now. Fire is seen as necessary and beneficial, although the decision on when to let it burn and

when to put it out continues to spark lots of debate.

There was a different controversy in 1910. The Forest Service, just five years old and hated by business interests that wanted to exploit Western timberland, could not get money from Congress to fight wildfires.

But the devastation of the Great Fire outraged the nation, and Forest Service Chief Gifford Pinchot used the disaster to double the agency's budget.

Crews were hired and trained, equipment was bought and eventually the agency set a goal of reaching each reported fire by 10 a.m. the next day.

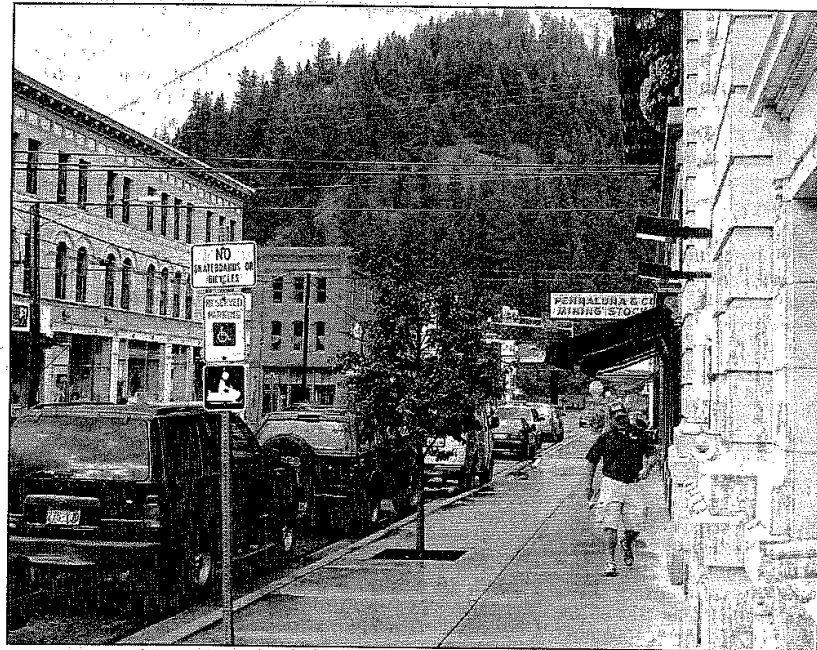
"Today we are seeing the tragic results," Tidwell said.

Forests that have not seen big fires in decades are overgrown with fuel, a problem exacerbated by drought, climate change and tree-killing insects. As a result, wildfires have been getting bigger.

While the total land scorched by wildfire was about 3 million acres per year in the 1990s, fires have suddenly exploded in number and size.

Since 1999, there have been 242 wildfires exceeding 50,000 acres, more than twice as many as in the previous two decades, Tidwell said. More than 8 million acres burned in 2005 and more than 9 million in 2007.

Some experts predict future fire seasons with up to 12 million acres burning, he said. Nearly 28,000 homes, businesses and out-buildings have burned in wildfires in the past 10



Nicholas K. Geranios / Associated Press

Part of downtown Wallace is seen Aug. 11.

years, Tidwell said.

In the long-running debate over federal wildfire policy, Tidwell favors a mixed approach calling for reduction of fuels in forests, working with communities to reduce fire risk through smarter planning, and responding to wildfires in a proportional way.

But a solution that will please everyone isn't likely.

Aggressive fire suppression inspired people to build homes in areas prone to wildfires, knowing that firefighters would protect them, said Matthew Carroll, a forestry professor at Washington State University.

"There is a long-standing assumption in these communities that Smokey Bear is going to come and rescue me," Carroll said.

The problem is becoming worse as more people move into forested areas, at the same time the timber sales that provide funds for Forest Service operations like firefighting are being cut, Carroll said.

In addition, climate change is blamed for drying out forests.

"The size and scope and

elevation of fires since 1988 is huge," said Jack Potter, chief of sciences in Montana's Glacier National Park, which was created just three months before the Great Fire.

Despite a century of fires, the Big Burn of 1910 remains singular.

Fires broke out all summer as forests withered in high temperatures. Up to 3,000 fires of different sizes were burning the morning of Aug. 20, 1910, many sparked by trains throwing sparks from their rails.

That afternoon, hurricane-force winds whipped the flames together into a few giant fires. Walls of flames many miles wide and hundreds of feet tall raced through the forests. Residents and isolated crews of men who had been battling small fires ran for their lives.

"The fire turned trees and men into weird torches that exploded like Roman candles," one survivor told a newspaper.

The fire produced breathtaking escapes, as trains loaded with evacuees roared across burning trestles to seek refuge in tun-

nels. Entire squads of firefighters were wiped out.

Before it was over, 10,000 men were on fire lines, including homeless men brought in on trains from Spokane, Wash. The U.S. Army was called out.

"This was the first great attempt to fight large fires," said Steve Pyne, a professor at Arizona State and author of "Year of the Fires" about the disaster.

The fires were eventually doused by rain and snow.

Experts wonder whether a similar catastrophe is brewing.

"I was recently asked whether the Big Burn could happen again and what we would do if it did," Tidwell said.

He noted recent giant fires like the Biscuit Fire in Oregon, the Rodeo-Chediski Fire in Arizona and the Murphy Complex fire in Idaho generated conditions similar to the Big Burn.

But firefighting crews are far more professional today.

"Today, a megafire on the order of the Big Burn isn't likely to have the same catastrophic results," Tidwell said.

THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

MONDAY, AUGUST 16, 2010

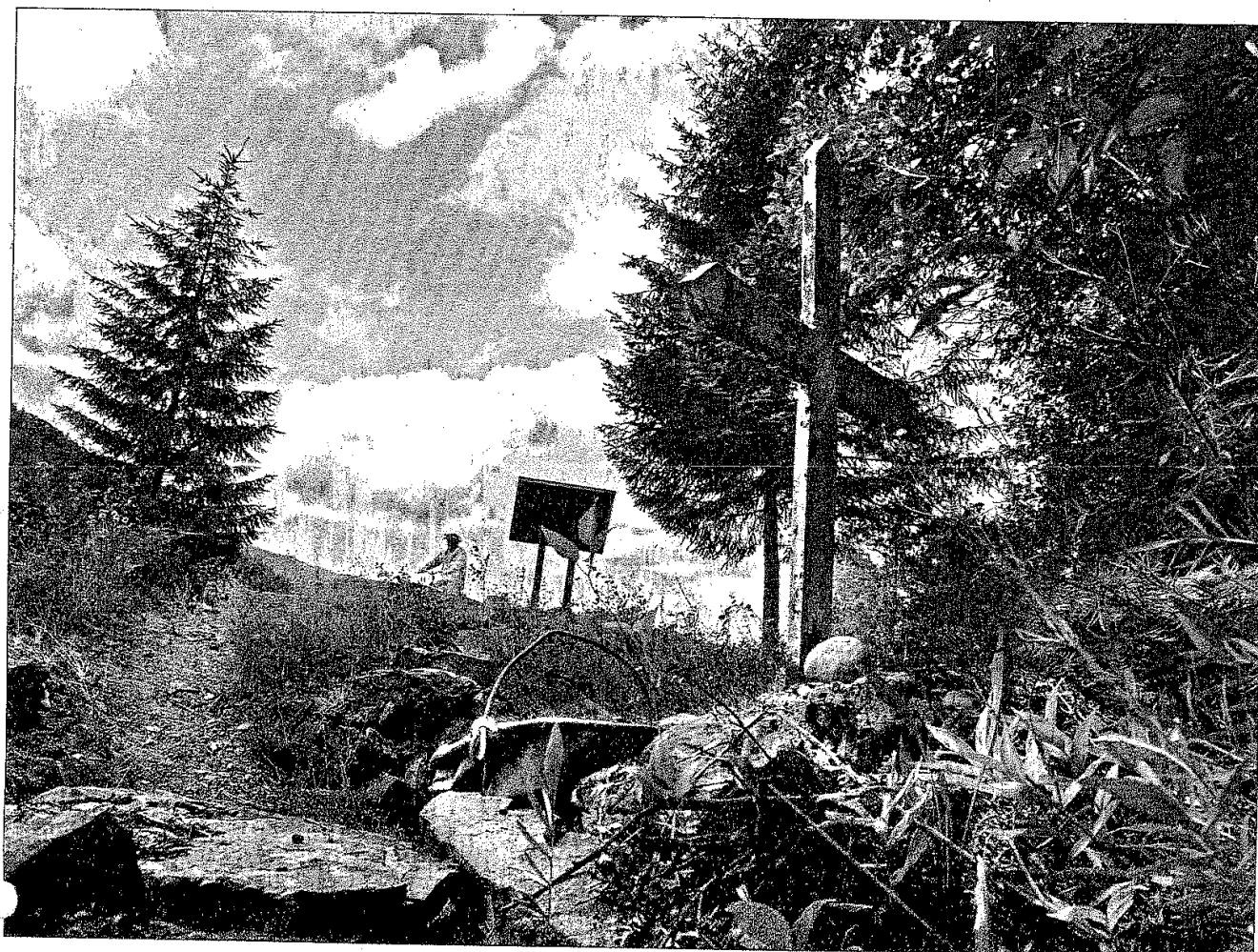


PLENTY OF SUN ▲ 90 ▼ 61

WWW.SPOKESMAN.COM

FLAME AND RUIN
THE FIRES OF 1910

Reminders of rescue



Bike riders on the Route of the Hiawatha near the Idaho-Montana border pass the grave of a "gandy-dancer" marked by a cross and stones. The man reportedly jumped from the train and perished in the flames, and was later buried along the rail line.

PHOTOS BY CHRISTOPHER ANDERSON chrisa@spokesman.com

Trains that may have contributed to starting fires also brought hundreds to safety along Hiawatha route

By Jim Kershner

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

Last summer, 33,000 mountain bikers from all over the world rode the Route of the Hiawatha. This summer's crowds are on track to break that record. The parking area at the East Portal will soon be doubled to handle the throngs.

Do they have any idea they're pedaling directly into the heart of the 1910 Big Burn?

Actually, they might, if they're paying any attention at all.

The signs are everywhere — and we mean actual signs. The Hiawatha is studded with prominent historical markers titled "The 1910 Fires" and the "The Big Blowup," just to name two. This month, the U.S. Forest Service erected additional signs at the East Portal to commemorate the fires'



Bicyclists approach the end of the Taft Tunnel, the longest of several former railroad tunnels on the Route of the Hiawatha. The tunnel is more than a mile long. It's dark, wet and spooky, and cyclists seem to love it.

About this series

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.

Through Sunday in print and at spokesman.com, The Spokesman-Review will examine the fires and their legacy.

Today on the Web: spokesman.com/1910fire

- **Photo gallery:** Large-format look at the Route of the Hiawatha
- **Audio slide show:** Staff writer Jim Kershner narrates "The Big Burn of 1910"
- **Tales of heroism and sacrifice:** Photography, audio and excerpts
- **Then and now:** Large-format photos compare 1910, present day
- **Timeline:** Breaking down the events of the 1910 fires

See FIRES, A6

FIRES

Continued from A1
centennial.

So, those who pause for a little light reading along the way soon understand that the Hiawatha's main attractions – its tunnels, including the 1.7-mile St. Paul Pass (Taft) Tunnel – saved hundreds of lives during the most ferocious hours of the conflagration.

And most bicyclists surely can't miss the white, wooden cross, just outside of one tunnel, accompanied by the sign: "A Gandy-Dancer's Grave?"

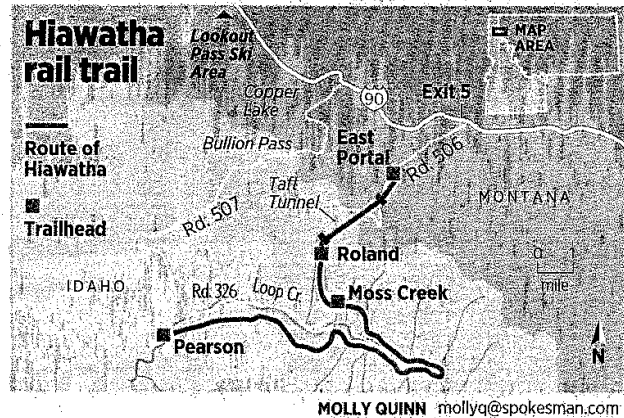
This is the spot where an anonymous "gandy-dancer" (railroad worker) was buried after he leapt in terror from a rescue train bound for the safety of a nearby tunnel. His terror was understandable – the heat was intense enough to blister the paint on the rail cars. Nobody, least of all the engineer, knew if the burning trestle would take the weight of the train.

Still, that gandy-dancer should have stayed aboard. The train made it across the trestle and into the tunnel, and his was the train's only death. The other passengers later went back, found his body and buried him.

Meanwhile, this route – and the panorama that surrounds it – contains more stories than historical markers can possibly tell.

For instance, this very track – the Milwaukee Road (short for the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific) – actually helped cause the Big Burn.

Those old steam locomotives threw out orange cinders like Fourth of July sparklers. The friction of steel wheels on steel rails also struck sparks into trackside brush. The forest rangers out of Wallace acquired a fleet of "speeders" – like bicycles that could be pedaled on railroad tracks – to follow behind the trains and put out small fires. But they couldn't get them all.



The Route of the Hiawatha

What: A 15-mile rails-to-trails mountain biking route, crossing the Bitterroot Range in Montana and Idaho, with 10 tunnels and seven high trestles

Highlights: The 1.7-mile St. Paul Pass (Taft) Tunnel

Where: Trailheads at each end

► East Portal (higher), accessible from I-90 at Taft Exit 5 east of Lookout Pass

► Pearson (lower), accessible out of Wallace over Moon Pass near the North Fork of the St. Joe River

Cost: Trail passes: \$9 each; \$6 for children 3-13. Bus shuttle ride back up to East Portal: adults \$9, children \$6.

Ticket office: At the Lookout Pass Ski Area, which operates the Route of the Hiawatha for the Forest Service, at the Idaho-Montana state line on I-90. Call (208) 744-1301 or go to www.skilookout.com/.

So it may have been no coincidence that the most ferocious fires in the Big Burn were centered right around this new line, completed only a year earlier. But the railroad can't take all the blame. More fires were started both by lightning and by people burning slash or clearing land. The Big Burn began when thousands of small fires melded together in one giant, wind-driven blowtorch.

The most dramatic stories from 1910 involve the very structures that make the Route of the Hiawatha stand out among mountain bike trails: the tunnels and trestles.

A number of books describe the Milwaukee Road's role, including Stephen Pyne's 2001

"Year of the Fires," Timothy Egan's 2009 "The Big Burn," Ruby El Hult's 1960 "Northwest Disaster: Avalanche and Fire" and Sandra A. Crowell and David O. Asleson's "Up the Swiftwater" in 1980. The information in this story comes largely from those books – and from the Hiawatha's own historical markers. "Up the Swiftwater" does a particularly thorough job of describing the three harrowing rescue runs that locomotives made on the hellish day and night of Aug. 20, 1910.

One engine crew was returning from a routine run that afternoon when a telegraph operator flagged them down and told them that the wild railroad town of Grand Forks had burned to the ground and the depot at nearby Falcon was about to catch fire, too.

So the engineer hooked up a boxcar and backed six miles to Falcon (a sign on the Hiawatha commemorates the old site of Falcon) and found a panic-stricken crowd. The people barely waited for the train to stop before they piled on, clinging to whatever they could find.

The jammed train chugged out of the depot just before the Falcon platform caught fire.

The 13-mile trip to Avery was the stuff of nightmares. The engineer and his assistant had to stay on their knees to avoid

exposure to the blistering heat – except when they had to stop to clear downed trees off the tracks. The most harrowing moment came when they approached a bridge and saw that it was on fire.

"Why, all that you could see of a bridge was a wall of flame, but we crossed it," said engineer Johnnie Mackedon. "I hooked her up, threw her wide open, and then we lay down on the deck to protect ourselves from the heat."

The train finally made it to Avery at 2 a.m.

Meanwhile, another train, out on fire duty, also became a rescue train. It picked up about 167 smoke-smudged stragglers from Grand Forks and Falcon and started for Avery. The fire's heat had grown unbearable.

Everyone had to lay flat in the rail cars to keep from being scorched. When the train reached Tunnel 27, only 470 feet long, they had no choice but to stay there. The full fury of the Big Burn was roaring through – they couldn't even stand at the tunnel entrances without being burned.

They spent a roaring, smoky night in the tunnel and made it down to Avery the next morning.

The third rescue train came out of Taft, Mont. The crew of a work train saw the mountains flash with fire and immediately went on a rescue run up the

The trauma of the Big Burn also contributed to the decision to electrify the entire stretch between Avery and Harlowton, Mont., which eliminated the fire hazards of steam locomotives.

Over the next few decades the Milwaukee Road became one of the premier railroads in the country, and the stretch over the Bitterroots became famous for its scenery – once the trees grew back. Its high-speed train from Chicago to Seattle, inaugurated in 1947, was named the Olympian Hiawatha.

The last Olympian Hiawatha came through in 1961 and the last freight train in 1980, when the route was finally abandoned. The Forest Service opened it as a rails-to-trails route in 1998, and then opened the Taft Tunnel section in 2001. They gave it the name Route of the Hiawatha. It could just as easily been called the Route of the 1910 Holocaust.

Meanwhile, one old-time railroad worker from Avery is responsible for the existence of that gandy-dancer's white cross. For decades after the fire, this signal worker took it upon himself to maintain that grave – which was then commemorated with a historical marker when the bike trail was developed.

Otherwise, 33,000 mountain bikers would glide past that spot every year, oblivious to what happened on a terrible day in 1910.

Montana side of St. Paul Pass. It picked up nearly 400 workers, who were still finishing up work on the Milwaukee Road's bridges and trestles. The train steamed into the big Taft Tunnel, where they found refuge from the heat and flames. But an engineer and conductor decided to detach an engine and boxcar and look for people west of the tunnel.

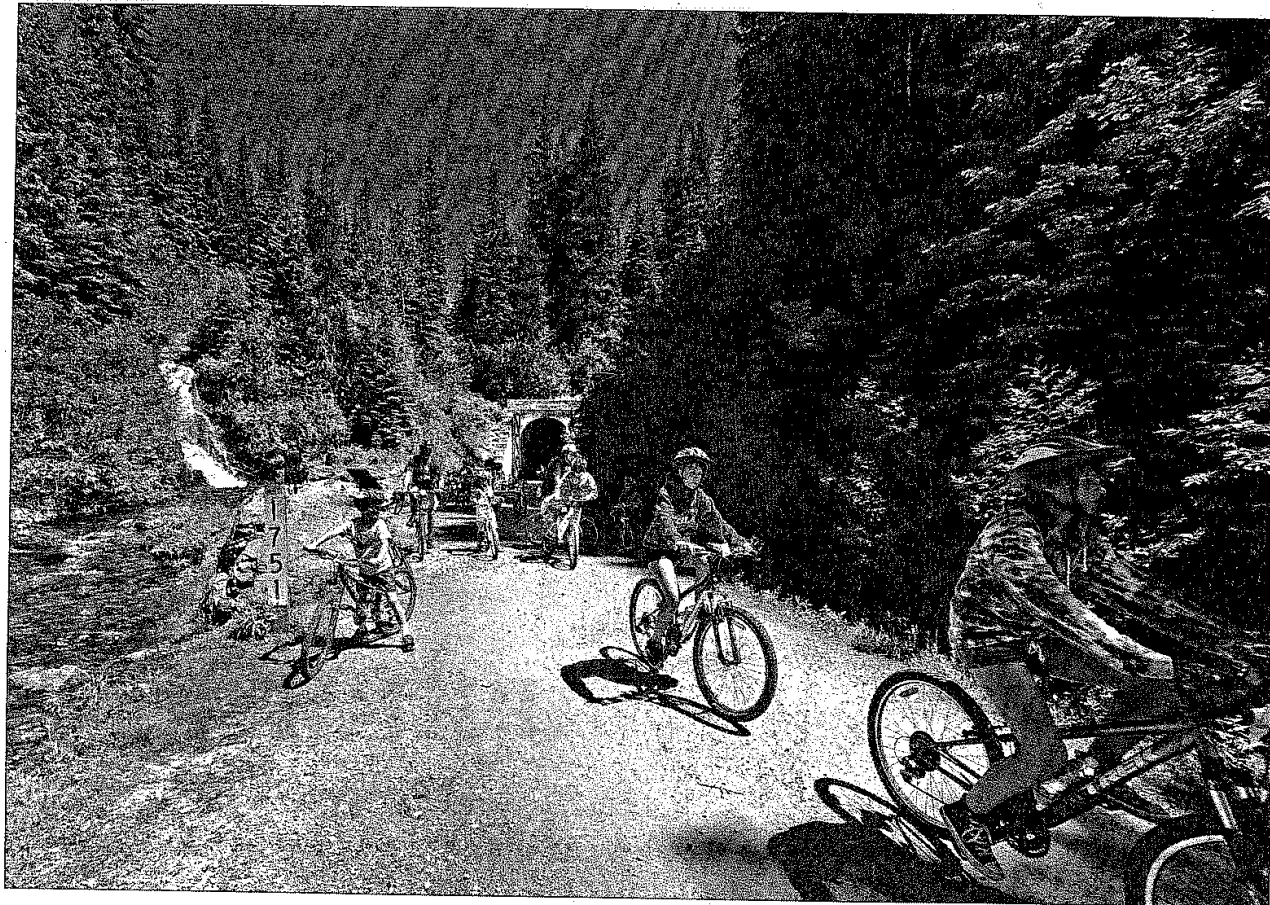
They found about 47 more, many of them Hungarian and Montenegrin laborers. By the time they were all on board, the holocaust was in full roar.

Bridges and trestles to Avery were gone and the bridges back to the Taft Tunnel had now collapsed. They were trapped. The only hope of refuge was to get to a smaller tunnel, Tunnel 22, but a burning trestle was in the way. The engineer opened the throttle and screamed over the trestle. This, according to lore, is where that lone gandy-dancer jumped. But the trestle held and the train steamed into the tunnel, where everyone rode out the rest of the firestorm.

Many of these same laborers were put right back to work, in the next weeks, to rebuild all of those burned bridges and trestles. The Milwaukee Road was back in business within a month.

FLAME AND RUIN

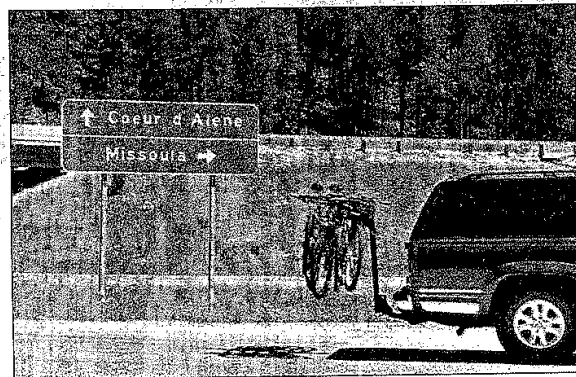
THE FIRES OF 1910



Bicyclists emerge from the darkness of the Taft Tunnel and into the light of a sunny day in the Lolo National Forest.

PHOTOS BY CHRISTOPHER ANDERSON chrisa@spokesman.com

The fire of 1910 destroyed Taft, Mont., which now is just an exit off Interstate 90 on the way to the Route of the Hiawatha.



Series lineup

- **Sunday:** What happened during the fires of 1910, and why they matter today.
- **Today:** 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.

Fire commemorations

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

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 to 17, 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, at the Thompson Falls Library.

- Trout Creek Commemoration: A full day of activities Friday 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

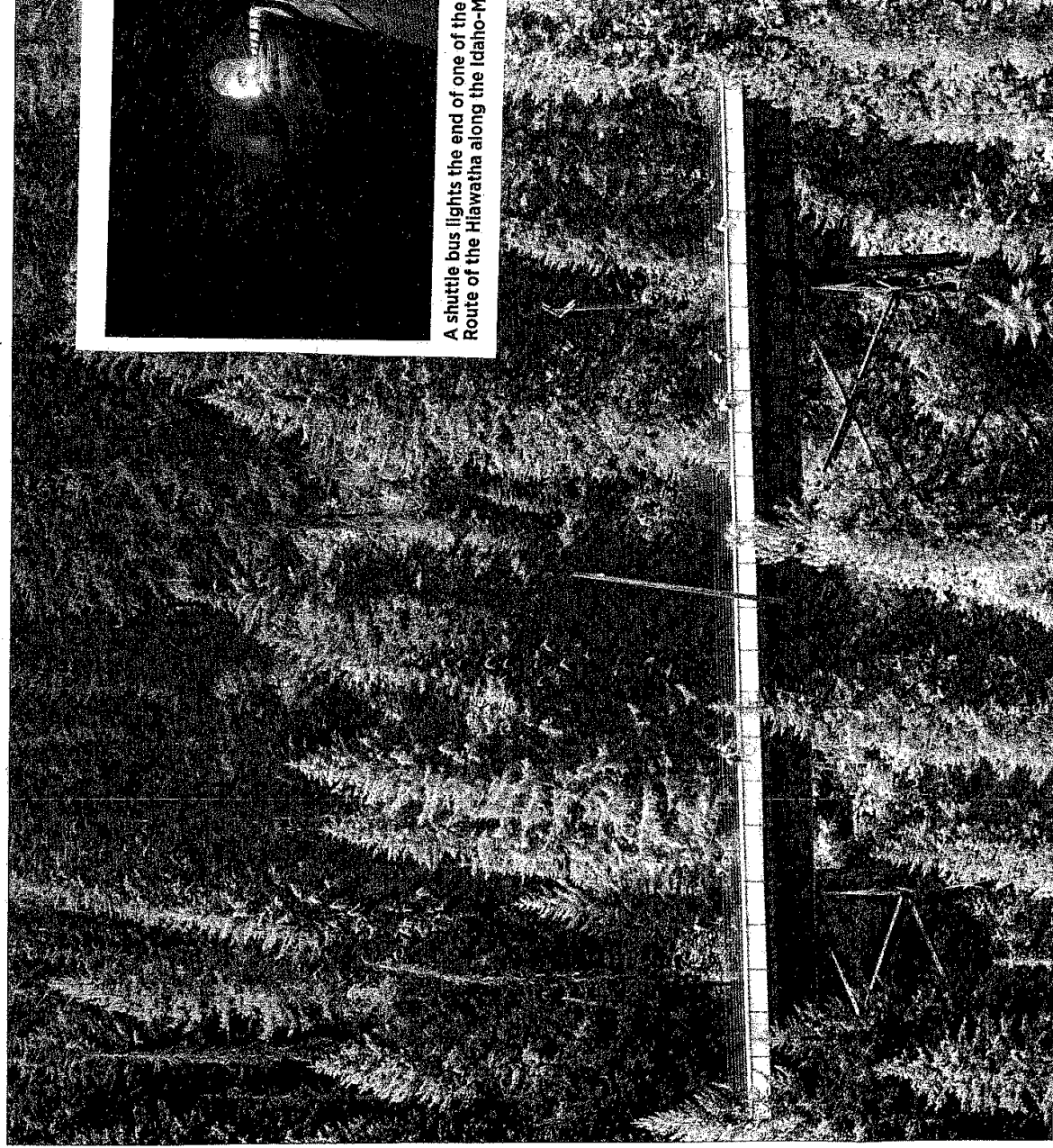


A chipmunk with its mouth full of peanuts looks for another handout along the Route of the Hiawatha.

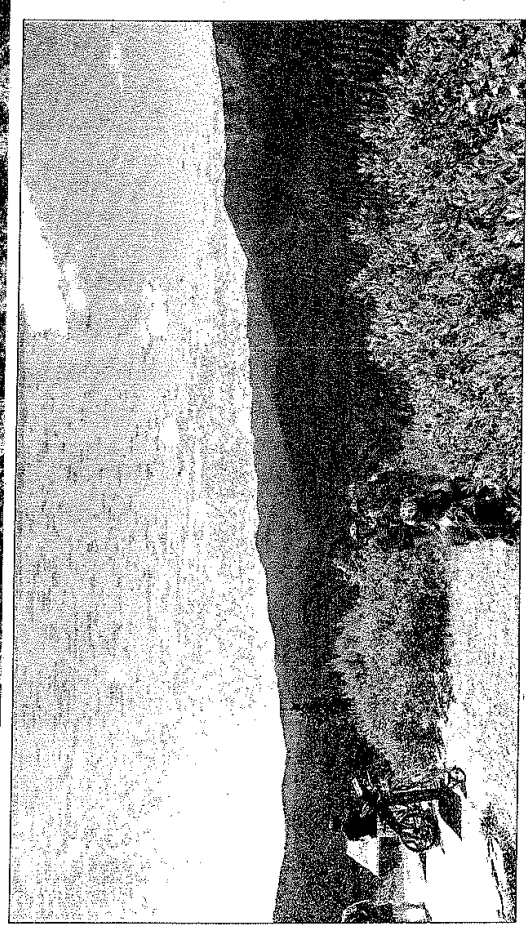
SR

On the Web: View large-format photo galleries of the Hiawatha and then-and-now scenes of 1910 devastation and present day at spokesman.com/1910fire.

Resurrection trail



A shuttle bus lights the end of one of the tunnels on the Route of the Hiawatha along the Idaho-Montana border.



Bike riders on the Route of the Hiawatha stop for a photo at a promontory looking southeast.



Bicyclists move through the treetops as they cross a trestle on the Route of the Hiawatha. The trail pierces the area burned in 1910.

PHOTOS BY CHRISTOPHER ANDERSON chrisa@spokesman.com

TUESDAY, AUGUST 17, 2010

SHOSHONE NEWS-PRESS

A walk in their footsteps

Volunteers re-enact Pulaski hike

By RONALD BOND
Staff writer

WALLACE — Awesome. Phenomenal. Educational.

Those were just a few of the words used to describe the re-enactment of the firefighters' hike led by Edward Pulaski during the height of the 1910 Fire.

The re-enactment happened Saturday with more than 40 hikers, many from outside the Silver Valley, taking to a trail from Lake Elsie to West Placer Creek and into the Pulaski Tunnel before painting up and walking into Wallace resembling burn victims.

"It went great," said Jim See, president of the Pulaski Project and an event organizer. "Everybody really enjoyed it. You could see the enthusiasm ... Everybody was very attentive."

See said the excitement was evident the entire day, as the hikers were eager to take on the trail and learn about the feat accomplished by Pulaski and his men.

"You could tell on the bus ride up, people were just talking and faking in the whole experience," he explained.

While walking the trail, the hikers stopped several times as guide Hugh Marconi pointed out aspects of the terrain and trail the 45 men hiked to safety a century ago.

"It really, really gave you a better insight into what those guys sacrificed and what they experienced," Historic Wallace prime minister Rick Shaffer said, adding that it cleared up and verified some information about the fire and hike that he was unsure of.

Shaffer said he has biked the trail many

times. "But many who were on it for the first time were amazed at the feat."

"People were asking how he could have done it," Shaffer said. "Pulaski kept those guys in line, and kept the whole thing moving. It was just incredible how he could have pulled that off."

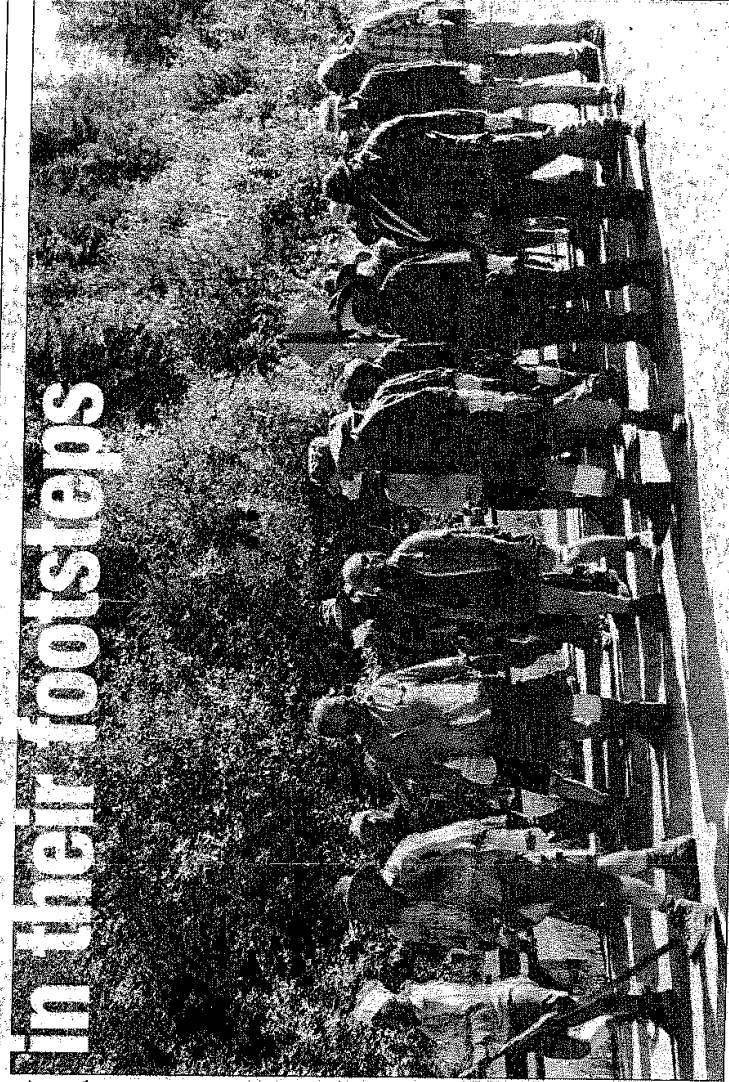
"In my opinion he is a hero. He is truly a hero," Shauna Hillman said of Pulaski.

While informational, the hike was also a chance toward the end to have some fun. Just below the tunnel, about a mile from Wallace, the hikers were greeted by a group ready to affix them with bandages, fake wounds, fake blood, and ashes so they could walk into town looking somewhat like the group Pulaski led.

"We thought that would add a little drama to the experience," See said.

Hillman, a member of the Historic Wallace Preservation Society, said she loved that so many "serious hikers" from outside of the area took part in getting painted up for the last jaunt into town.

"I thought that that



— Photos by RONALD BOND
Above: Most of the group that hiked Pulaski's Trail Saturday took the time to get painted up for the final stretch, which was a walk into Wallace, where they resembled burn victims.
Below: Debbie Morris paints up Rick Shaffer for the re-enactment walk into Wallace Saturday. More than 40 hikers took part in the Pulaski trail hike, and most of them donned face paint and tattered clothing to resemble the firefighters led by Ed Pulaski.



community," she said.

She added that the trip gave her a new perspective on the area.

"After this hike and after reading a few books about the 1910 Fire, you never go up Placer Creek and look at it the same again," she said.

Shaffer said the event, organized by the 1910 Fire Commemoration Committee and aided by the Forest Service and the Idaho Department of Land, was a perfect preface into a week where many events are slated to remember the blaze and those affected by it.

"It was a great lead-up

THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

TUESDAY, AUGUST 17, 2010 |  SUNNY AND HOT ▲ 92 ▼ 59 | WWW.SPOKESMAN.COM

FLAME AND RUIN
THE FIRES OF 1910

Discovering safety



CHRISTOPHER ANDERSON chrisa@spokesman.com
Carl Ritchie, a retired U.S. Forest Service archaeologist, stands in front of the famous Pulaski Tunnel. Ritchie explored the area of the West Fork of Placer Creek to find the mining tunnel, named for the ranger who saved his crew by leading them into it during the 1910 fires.

Archaeologist traced Pulaski's footsteps to find tunnel that sheltered firefighters

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

The west fork of Placer Creek is a friendly little stream, trickling through a narrow canyon lined with ferns and cedar trees.

Follow a two-mile trail up the creek, and you come to the Pulaski Tunnel – a legendary part of the 1910 Fire story. It was here that “Big Ed” Pulaski ordered 45 firefighters into a mine shaft on the night of Aug. 20 and told them to lie face down.

“One man tried to make a rush outside, which would have meant certain death,” Pulaski later wrote. “I drew my revolver and said, ‘The next man who tries to leave the tunnel I will shoot.’”

Today, Pulaski’s story is told in interpretative panels along the trail. The mine shaft itself has become a shrine to 1910 Fire buffs, who hike the trail in tribute to the capable, quick-thinking assistant Forest Service ranger who saved most of his firefighters during North America’s worst firestorm.

But for decades, the tunnel’s location was a

See PULASKI, A6

About this series

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. Through Sunday in print and at spokesman.com, The Spokesman-Review will examine the fires and their legacy.

Today: The search for the Pulaski Tunnel.

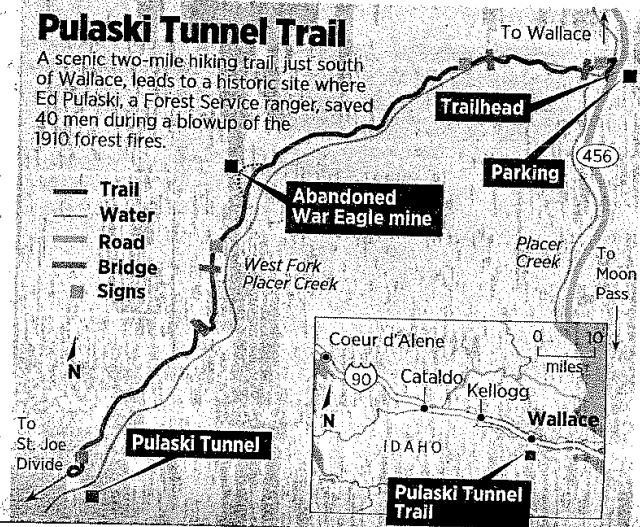
Wednesday: The men who fought the fires.

On the Web

► spokesman.com/1910fire



Photo courtesy of U.S. Forest Service
After the 1910 fires and the story of Ed Pulaski’s heroism, the tunnel he put his crew into to save them from burning was rediscovered and protected.



FLAME AND RUIN THE FIRES OF 1910

PULASKI

Continued from A1

mystery. It faded into obscurity after the last survivors died. In 1979, Carl Ritchie's supervisor at the Panhandle National Forests gave him an assignment: See if you can find the Pulaski Tunnel.

"Everyone knew the drainage, but no one knew where the tunnel was," said Ritchie, a retired Forest Service archaeologist. "I interviewed different people who purportedly knew where it was, but I quickly learned that no one really knew anything about it."

Ritchie took on the project. He bushwhacked along the creek, studied old photographs taken shortly after the fires and pored over old mining claims and surveyor's reports.

Early on, Ritchie pieced together some important clues. The tunnel was close to the creek. It was one of five drilled by miners in the canyon. An old Forest Service sketch put the location at 1 1/2 miles up the west fork of Placer Creek.

Like the tunnel, Pulaski himself is something of a mystery. He was born in Ohio and left school at age 15. Letters from an adventurous uncle, who wrote vivid accounts of his life in mining camps, fueled Pulaski's own decision to head west. Pulaski was in Murray, Idaho, in 1884 for the gold rush. He worked as a packer, labored in mines and lumber camps, and picked up blacksmithing skills. By the time the Forest Service hired him as an assistant ranger in Wallace, Pulaski was 40 years old, a seasoned outdoorsman.

"Big Ed," as he was called, stood 6 feet 4 inches. Despite the jocular nickname, photos of Pulaski show a serious man, dark-haired, dignified and somewhat enigmatic.

"Mr. Pulaski is a man of most excellent judgment; conservative, thoroughly acquainted with the region, having prospected through the region for over 25 years," wrote William Weigle, supervisor of the Coeur d'Alene National Forest. "He is considered by the old timers as one of the best and safest men to be placed in charge of a crew of men in the hills."

But the lack of formal education cost Pulaski the ability to advance in the Forest Service. He was an assistant ranger, earning \$75 per month.

Ritchie never doubted

that he'd find the tunnel. It was a matter of logical deduction. He was looking for a hole in the hillside, within six or seven feet of the West Fork of Placer Creek. Prospectors had built a cabin on the other side of the creek, where the canyon flattened out.

Since there was no trail at the time, Ritchie drove in on an old Forest Service Road above the creek. In earlier days, mule trains packed supplies over the road from Wallace to Avery.

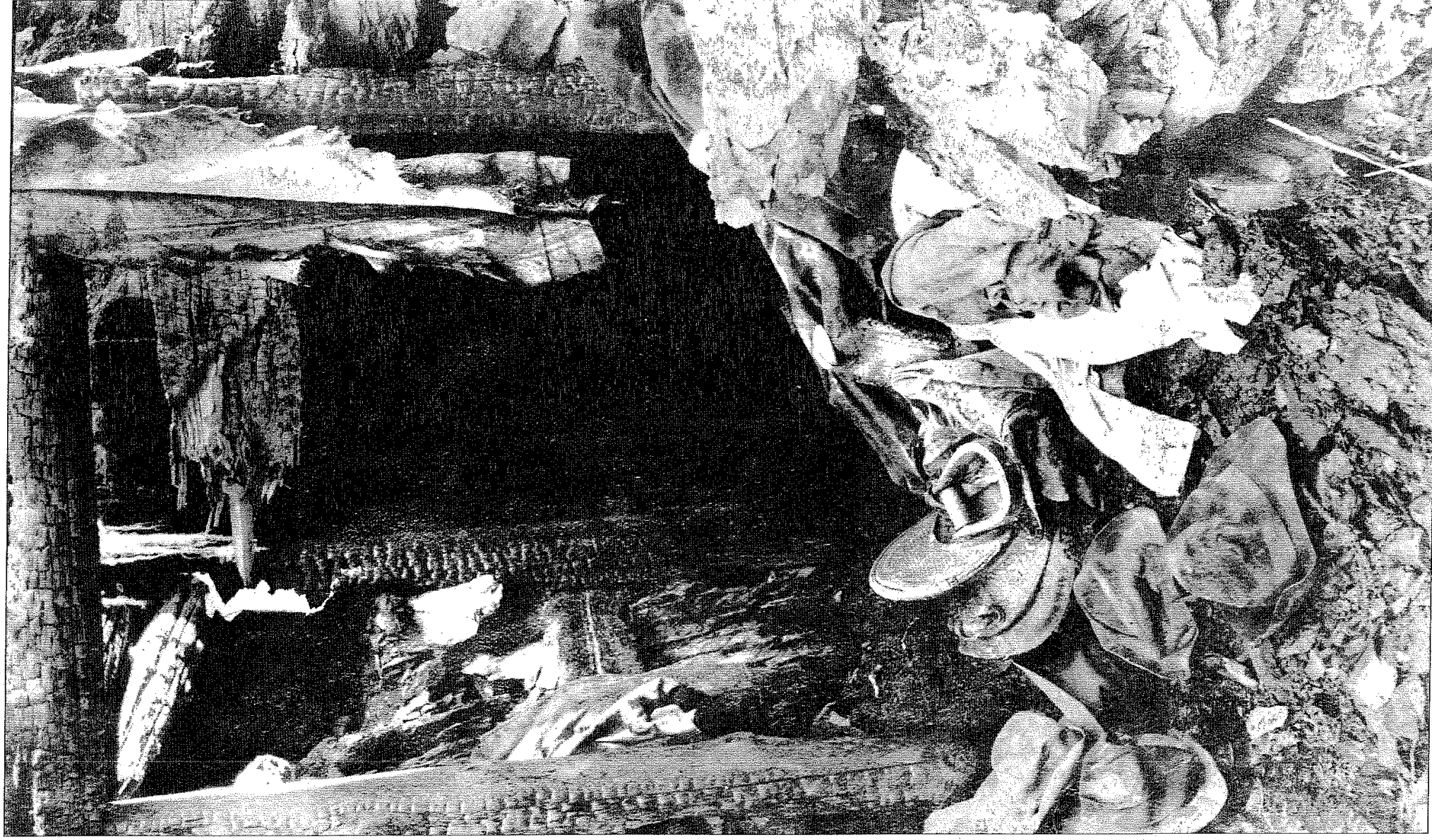
As he tramped through underbrush along the creek bottom, Ritchie scanned the hillsides. His trained archaeologist eye was looking for waste rock piles, the debris left over from mining excavations. From his research, Ritchie knew that at least five mine shafts had been drilled in the canyon walls.

"I was pretty good at visualizing things, and I walked the whole creek bottom," Ritchie said.

First, he found the War Eagle Mine's waste rock pile.

Pulaski was actually

trying to reach the War Eagle Mine as fire surrounded the crew. He knew the mine's deep shaft, bored 1,300 feet into the canyon wall,



Clothes, saddles and blankets are piled at the entrance to the Pulaski Tunnel after the fire of 1910 swept through Wallace and Ed Pulaski saved his crew by hiding them in a mine tunnel. He saved 40 men, but five crew members and two horses died.

Photo courtesy of University of Idaho Barnard Stockbridge Collection

would provide shelter. But events unfolded unpredictably on Aug. 20, 1910, as unpredictable as the winds that whipped smaller forest fires into an inferno.

Pulaski was in charge of 200 firefighters between Wallace and Avery. On the night of Aug. 19, he'd ridden into Wallace to gather up food and first aid supplies for the crews.

He had dinner with his wife,

Emma, and 10-year-old daughter, Elsie. The fire would reach Wallace, he said, instructing them to take shelter on a pile of mine tailings near the family's Burke Canyon home, where the rocks would keep the fire from approaching. On the morning of Aug. 20, he headed back up the mountain. His parting words to his wife: "I may never see you again."

Pulaski was with about 45 men

on Striped Peak when the fire blew up. "A terrific hurricane broke out over the mountains," he later recalled. "The wind was so strong that it almost lifted men out of the saddles, and the canyons seemed to act as chimneys, through which the wind and fires swept with the roar of a thousand freight trains."

Firefighting became futile. "Boys,

See PULASKI, A7

FLAME AND RUIN

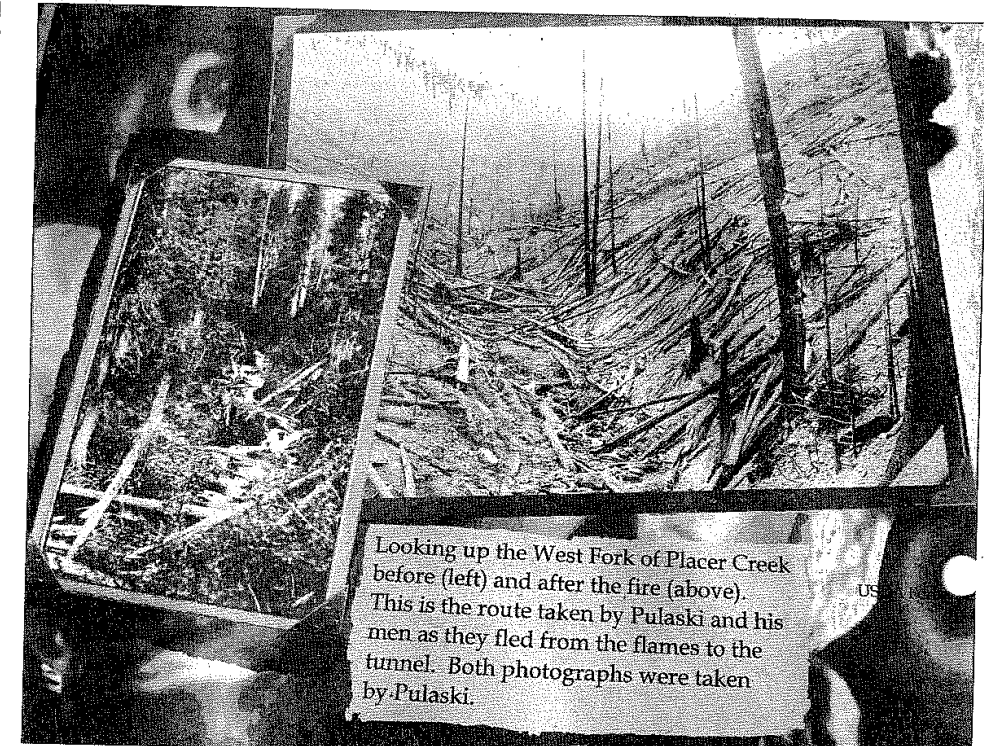
THE FIRES OF 1910



Water tumbles and streams down the West Fork of Placer Creek several miles outside Wallace. Forest Ranger Ed Pulaski led his crew of firefighters down this jumble of rocks and trees lining the creek while trying to escape the fires that threatened to wipe out Wallace in August 1910.

CHRISTOPHER ANDERSON chrisa@spokesman.com

An educational sign on the Pulaski Trail shows the West Fork of Placer Creek several miles outside Wallace, the route Ed Pulaski and his men took to reach the tunnel. Pulaski shot both of the photos.



Looking up the West Fork of Placer Creek before (left) and after the fire (above). This is the route taken by Pulaski and his men as they fled from the flames to the tunnel. Both photographs were taken by Pulaski.

CHRISTOPHER ANDERSON chrisa@spokesman.com;
Photo and sign courtesy of U.S. Forest Service

TODAY ON THE WEB

[spokesman.com/
1910fire](http://spokesman.com/1910fire)

- **Photo gallery:** Large-format look at the Route of the Hiawatha
- **Audio slide show:** Staff writer Jim Kershner narrates "The Big Burn of 1910"
- **Tales of heroism and sacrifice:** Photography, audio and excerpts
- **Then and now:** Large-format photos compare 1910, present day
- **Timeline:** Breaking down the events of the 1910 fires

PULASKI

Continued from A6

it's no use," Pulaski told the crew, according to one survivor's account. "We've got to dig out of here. We've got to try to make Wallace. It's our only chance."

The men fled with the fire on their heels, a black bear racing alongside them. Trees exploded into flame, then toppled under 60 mph winds. One man fell by the trail, either hit by a tree, or unable to go on for other reasons.

Pulaski gave his horse to an ex-Texas Ranger who was limping from rheumatism. As they headed down the West Fork of Placer Creek, the fire surrounded them. Pulaski contemplated taking shelter in the War Eagle Mine, but discarded the plan when he realized the mine was still too far away. Instead, he led the men to a shallow opening drilled by miners called an adit while he looked for a larger one — the Nicholson tunnel.

The men and two horses crowded into the Nicholson tunnel, but their feeling of refuge was short-lived. Mine timbers near the entrance were smoldering, sucking oxygen out of the shaft. Pulaski wrapped wet blankets around the timbers and used his hat to scoop muddy water out of puddles on the mine floor. His hands and hair burned. The fire seared his eyes.

Over the next five hours, the fire raged. Panicked men screamed, moaned, convulsed and retched. One tried to strangle another.

"The tunnel became a mad house, a hellhole where five men would die," Ritchie wrote in a Forest Service report.

Pulaski kept the frantic men inside the tunnel at gunpoint. Finally, the tunnel was quiet. The men had passed out, some never to awaken.

Ritchie found the Nicholson tunnel in October 1979. Frost had stripped the leaves from the brush, making the portal easier to spot.

The entrance was low, but a bit further inside, the 80-foot-long tunnel opened into a gallery-like area that rose to about 20 feet in height. Ritchie found an enamel coffee pot, along with two steel drill bits and an old dynamite box. About half of the tunnel was blocked by falling rock.

"The timbers inside the mine were burned," Ritchie said. "But there's nothing that said, 'Pulaski was here.'"

The discovery still sent ripples of excitement through the Forest Service and the local community. Before he retired, Ritchie led about two dozen hikes up the creek to the mine shaft, and spoke at local chambers of commerce meetings.

Community members lobbied for nearly \$300,000 in federal appropriations to pay for the trail and interpretative signs.

Today, visitors can look down at the gated portal from the trail above the creek. Charred timbers were recently installed around the opening for the 1910 Fire's anniversary.

The rock opening itself is draped in ferns and other greenery. It's hard to reconcile the lushness of the site with photos taken after the fire.

They show a blackened landscape, scorched trees scattered like pick-up sticks.

Around 5 o'clock the next morning, the men started to stir. Pulaski's body lay motionless near the entrance.

"Come outside boys, the boss is dead," one of the survivors called out. "Like hell he is," Pulaski replied.

"I raised myself up and felt fresh air circulating through the mine. The men were all becoming conscious," he wrote in an account of the fire.

Five men and both horses had perished in the tunnel. The survivors hobbled painfully back to Wallace, their path strewn with smoking logs and burning debris. They were parched, but the creek water was too hot and ashy to drink.

Pulaski had to be led down the mountain. He was temporarily blinded and spent two months in the hospital with pneumonia. He and his wife exhausted their savings paying for other firefighters' medical bills.

Today, Pulaski's story is the iconic tale of the 1910 Fire.

"His story just typified the cowboy. The strong, tall cowboy who saved the day," said Russ Graham, a research forester from Moscow, Idaho. "A mystique developed around the rugged outdoorsman who had firsthand experience on the land, and who used it to save his crew."

But there was no glorious ride into the sunset for Pulaski. After the fire, he was a broken, bitter man.

Pulaski returned to work with damaged lungs and blindness in one eye. A colleague, Roscoe Haines, tried to get the Forest Service to compensate Pulaski for his health problems. When that failed, Haines tricked Pulaski into submitting an account of the night in the tunnel to the Carnegie Commission, hoping its Hero Fund would reward him for saving the firefighters' lives. The commission also turned Pulaski down.

In perhaps the most painful blow, the Forest Service refused to fund a granite memorial that Pulaski designed for the fallen firefighters. The \$435 cost would require "an act of Congress," the Forest Service said.

"He really felt that the government abandoned him," said Jason Kirchner, an Idaho Panhandle National Forests spokesman. "He felt that the government owed these firefighters a huge debt of gratitude. Some received remuneration, but it wasn't consistent across the board. That offended him."

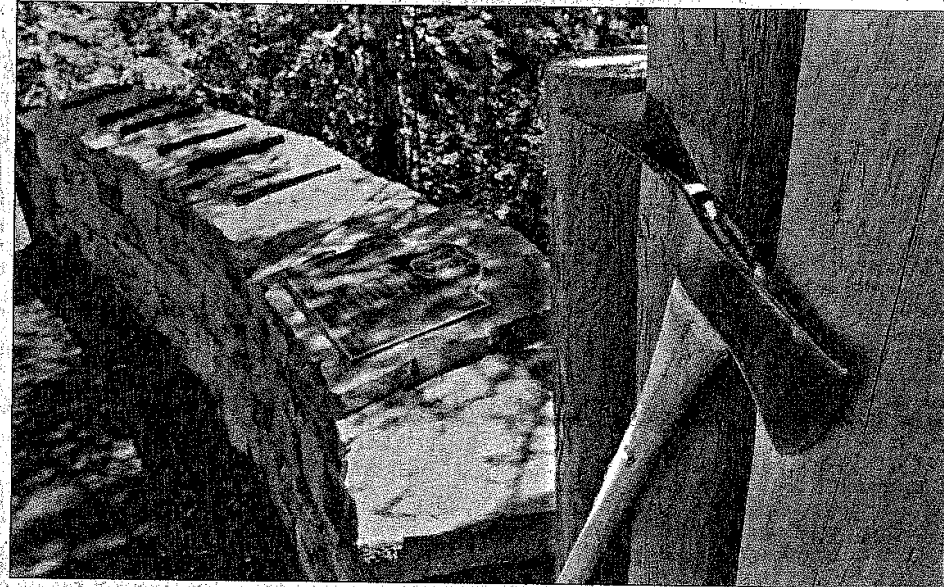
Pulaski retired from the Forest Service in 1929. He died two years later, of complications from injuries he received in an automobile accident.

As part of the 1910 Fire Commemoration in the Silver Valley, local residents raised \$45,000 for the granite firefighters memorial. It matches Pulaski's design and will be dedicated at noon Saturday in Wallace.

Pulaski would be pleased, Ritchie said.

"He wasn't an attention hog. He only wrote one little piece about the fire," Ritchie said. "But he would have liked the recognition for his men."

Source material for this account: "My Most Exciting Experience as a Forest Ranger," by Ed Pulaski; "Pulaski: Two Days in August, 1910," by Carl Ritchie; "Year of the Fires," by Stephen Pyne; "The Big Burn," by Timothy Egan.



CHRISTOPHER ANDERSON chrisa@spokesman.com

A Pulaski firefighting tool is featured at the exhibit wall above the Pulaski Tunnel several miles up the West Fork of Placer Creek outside Wallace. Ed Pulaski combined a mattock with an ax, and perfected the tool in the years following the 1910 fires.

Pulaski forged his name in history with creation of firefighting tool

By Jim Kershner

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

Every soot-smudged wildland firefighter knows the name pulaski — even if they don't know the man Pulaski.

That's because Ed Pulaski cemented his legacy when he welded the head of a mattock (or grubbing hoe) onto an ax head.

It turned out to be the ideal tool for hacking a fire break in the woods. One side could chop a tree; the other side could scrape and dig. To this day, the Forest Service issues them to most wildfire crews.

Pulaski, still recovering from his 1910 ordeal, first created the tool in his own blacksmith shop in 1911 and perfected it over the next several years. Similar tools had

been in use before for clearing land, but not for firefighting. This new tool was christened the pulaski right from the beginning. Pulaski's version was the prototype for the tool that the Forest Service, by 1920, was issuing to thousands of firefighters.

The original pulaski tool is housed reverently in a glass case at the Wallace District Mining Museum. You can see the weld line where he attached the mattock head to the ax head. You can see the initials "EP" stamped into the side, signifying Big Ed's authorship.

Pulaski thought about patenting his invention but never did. He probably never made a dime off it.

Yet it was this tool, even more than his 1910 heroism, that keeps his name alive today. Now, you can buy updated lightweight or super-sized versions — but they're still called pulaskis.

Famed Pulaski Tunnel open

■ The tunnel saved the lives of Forest Service men during the 1910 Great Fire.

WALLACE (AP) — The mine shaft where Forest Service ranger Ed Pulaski saved his men during the Great Fire of 1910 is now a tourist attraction.

A two-mile trail up Placer Creek leads to the Pulaski Tunnel, where Pulaski ordered 45 firefighters into the shaft the night of Aug. 20, 1910, to escape what would be the biggest forest fire in the nation's history.

Pulaski ordered his nervous men to lie face down, according to an article in *The Spokesman-Review* on Tuesday.

"One man tried to make a rush outside, which would have meant certain death," Pulaski later wrote. "I drew my revolver and said, 'The next man who tries to leave the tunnel I will shoot.'"

Most of the men stayed, and all but five survived. Pulaski became a nationally known hero.

But over time his memory faded, and so did the location of the mine. It faded into obscurity after the last survivors died.

In 1979, Carl Ritchie's supervisor at the Idaho Panhandle National Forests asked him to find the Pulaski Tunnel.

"Everyone knew the drainage, but no one knew where the tunnel was," said Ritchie, a retired Forest Service archaeologist.

Ritchie bushwhacked along the creek, studied old photographs taken shortly



Christopher Anderson / The Spokesman-Review

Carl Ritchie, a retired U.S. Forest Service archaeologist, stands in front of the famous Pulaski Tunnel near Wallace on July 26. Ritchie explored the area of the West Fork of Placer Creek to find the mining tunnel, named for the Forest Service ranger who saved his men during the Great Fire of 1910.

after the fire and pored over old mining claims and surveyor's reports. He pieced together some important clues: The tunnel was close to the creek. It was one of five drilled by miners in the canyon. An old Forest Service sketch put the location at one mile up the west fork of Placer Creek.

Ritchie found the Nicholson tunnel in October 1979. Community members lobbied for nearly \$300,000 in federal appropriations to pay for a trail and interpretative signs.

Today, visitors can look down at the gated portal from the trail above the creek. Charred timbers were recently installed around the opening for the fire's anniversary events.

Pulaski was born in Ohio and was in Murray, Idaho, in 1884 for the gold rush. He worked as a packer, labored in mines and lumber camps, and picked up blacksmithing skills. By the time the Forest Service hired him as an assistant ranger in Wallace, Pulaski was 40 years old.

Pulaski was with about 45 firefighters between Wallace and Avery when the big fire blew up.

"A terrific hurricane broke out over the mountains," he later recalled. "The wind was so strong that it almost lifted men out of the saddles."

Pulaski ordered his crew to evacuate.

As they headed down the West Fork of Placer Creek, the fire surrounded

them. Pulaski led the men and two horses into the Nicholson Tunnel.

Mine timbers near the entrance were smoldering, sucking oxygen out of the shaft. Pulaski wrapped wet blankets around the timbers and used his hat to scoop muddy water out of puddles on the mine floor. His hands and hair burned.

Over the next five hours, the fire raged. Panicked men screamed, moaned, convulsed and retched.

Pulaski kept the frantic men inside the tunnel at gunpoint. Finally, the tunnel was quiet. The men had passed out.

They awoke the next day. Five men and both horses had perished in the tunnel. The survivors hobbled back to Wallace.