

THURSDAY, AUGUST 19, 2010

SHOSHONE NEWS-PRESS

Big Burn 'Voices' to be heard

WALLACE — Silver Valley history is coming to life on the Sixth Street Melodrama stage Sunday evening.

The 1910 Fire historical presentation "Voices of the Big Burn" runs Sunday, Monday and Tuesday evenings through Aug. 31.

This hour-long presentation tells firsthand stories from the fire, shows a slide show of more than 80 Forest Service photographs taken after the fire and the characters read newspaper articles from local newspapers.

Paul and Carol Roberts each portray nine different characters as they tell the stories of forest service personnel, fire fighters, wives, mothers and survivors of the fire.

"It has been fascinating researching for this proj-



— Photo courtesy of the Sixth Street Melodrama

Paul and Carol Roberts perform the 1910 historical presentation "Voices of the Big Burn" that continues running on Sunday, Monday and Tuesday at 7 p.m. at the Sixth Street Melodrama in Wallace. All tickets are \$10 and reservations can be made by calling the theater at 1-877-SIXTHST.

ect, and finding stories people have told or wrote down after the fire," Carol Roberts said. "I even had friends tell me some sto-

ries from their own families about their grandparents' experiences with the fire, and those will also be shared."

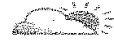
Reservations for Voices of the Big Burn can be made by calling the Sixth Street Melodrama at 1-877-SIXTHST. All tickets are \$10. The theater is located at 212 Sixth St. in Wallace.

Also currently playing at the theater is "Rustlers

at the Ranch, or ... How Swift Can The Taylors Run?" this month's 1910 fire-themed melodrama. It is performed Wednesdays through Saturdays at 7 p.m. and Sundays at 2 p.m. Tickets for the melodrama are \$15 for adults and \$13 for seniors and students, with a special family rate of \$30. All tickets for the Wednesday and Thursday shows are \$10.

THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 18, 2010



A FEW CLOUDS ▲ 91▼ 56

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FLAME AND RUIN
THE FIRES OF 1910

The risk-takers



Courtesy of the U.S. Forest Service

Black troops of the 25th Infantry from Fort George Wright in Spokane were detailed to Avery, Idaho, to fight fires and to maintain order through the hectic days of the 1910 Big Burn.

Big Blowup created jobs for men willing to face danger

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

George Earle was looking for work. The 30-year-old English immigrant had recently arrived in Spokane by foot from Alberta, following the railroad tracks into a new country. An ex-soldier and ranch hand, he was a veteran of both South Africa's Boer War and the grinding physical labor of daily farm life.

In Spokane, Earle signed up for a temporary firefighting job with the U.S. Forest Service. The pay was 25 cents an hour, meals and bedroll included.

"He basically walked into the employment of the fires," said his granddaughter, Barb Montgomery. "That's where his life in this country began."

Earle's story is typical of the men recruited to

See **FIREFIGHTERS, A9**



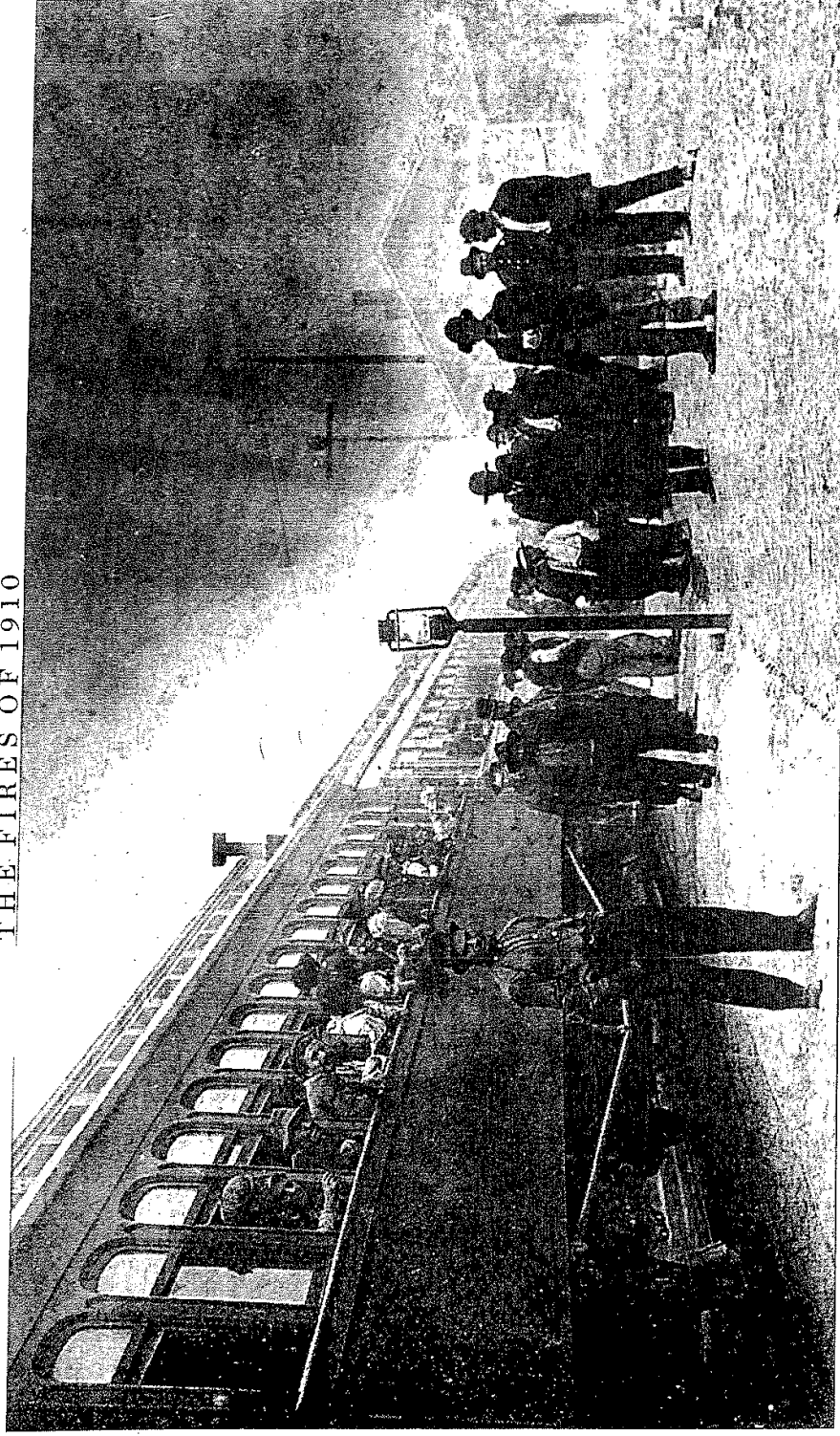
Courtesy of the Museum of North Idaho

Pat Grogan, in white apron, cooks breakfast for his crew at the Avery Ranger Station. He convinced 28 men to stay behind during evacuations; all of them died.

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 and killing at least 85 people. Through Sunday in print and at spokesman.com/1910fire, The Spokesman-Review examines the fires and their legacy.

FLAME AND RUIN THE FIRES OF 1910



Crews get off a Milwaukee Road train in Avery, Idaho, to fight the 1910 fires.

FIREFIGHTERS

Continued from A1

fight the 1910 fires. With forests in flames from the Clearwater River to Glacier National Park, the Forest Service had 10,000 men on the fire lines in Idaho, Washington and Montana. Their job: Keep the blazes from devouring valuable stands of timber and protect nearby towns. Not surprisingly, much of the hot, dirty work fell to immigrants. The fire crews included Croats, Latvians, Italians, Greeks, Germans, Scandinavians and Japanese. Some spoke no English. Others had no woodland experience. They joined other day laborers — a flotam of itinerant men wandering the West.

The men were plucked from hiring halls, lumber camps, mines, saloons, railroad depots and even jails.

"You might have been passing through on a train and grabbed and put on a fire crew," said Jason Kirchner, a spokesman for the Idaho Panhandle National Forests.

As the wildfires grew in number and intensity, one ranger arranged to have 60 prisoners released from the Missoula jail. Elers Koch, supervisor of the Lolo National Forest, hired hobos from trains, sending the sober ones out to fire camp the next morning. Later, President William Howard Taft sent soldiers to assist the firefighting efforts.

Few of the men "had a cent in their pockets," Koch said of his hires, "nor did most of them have a permanent address to which a check could be sent."

Forest Service rangers used "guile, threats and enticements," to staff their crews, wrote Stephen Pyne, author of "The Year of the Fires."

"They gathered the willing, the able, the enfeebled, the derelict, those fleeing murky pasts and those fleeing to dim futures ... whatever the labor markets in Butte, Spokane and Missoula could flush out," Pyne said. John J. Stanton, a 24-year-old Latvian immigrant, hired on for the wages. The average American worker earned about \$13 for a 60-hour work week in 1910. At 25 cents per hour, a firefighter could clear \$15 a week.

"I was looking for a job about the time of the fires broke out

"If we were lucky, there would be enough good lumberjacks in a crew to fill the axe and saw gangs, and the punks and strew bums would be given a shovel or mattock to get the best they could out of it."

Earle earned a much better report from his supervisor. He ended up with Ranger William W. Morris on Graham Creek, a tributary of the North Fork of the Coeur d'Alene River, and stayed until the September rains started.

"Around the campfire at night, I had a chance to size up my crew," Morris later wrote. "One was a young Englishman who fought in the Boer War. He could tell many exciting stories of his experiences, and also was quite a poet and singer. Often, he held the attention of the whole camp as he recited bits of poetry of his own composition, or sang some old English airs."

Morris also praised the work ethic of two Montenegrin firefighters and a lumberjack named Patsy who "dashed into the fire with buckets of water or shovels of earth, as cool as a cucumber ..."

If Earle was typical of the men hired to fight the fires, Morris was representative of the men in charge. He was an idealistic 29-year-old, a recent forestry graduate from the University of Michigan. Like other devotees of Gifford Pinchot, the first chief of the Forest Service, Morris joined the cause of conservation when he was hired by the agency. He sent rapt letters to his family in Chicago, describing his life as a ranger in the Coeur d'Alene Mountains.

Many of the other rangers were also young, relatively untested leaders.

During the blowup on Aug. 20, Morris' crew fled during the night from their ridge-top camp. They made it safely to an opening several miles away.

Stanton's crew wasn't as fortunate. He described escaping to Avery with another firefighter when the fire blew up. At the cook's urging, others remained in camp to eat dinner, Stanton said. None survived.

Later, Stanton was sent with soldiers from Fort George Wright to retrieve the bodies. Nearly 60 years later, the scene still made an impression on him. "Many of the men were in the water of a creek, face down," he recalled. "Their faces weren't

burnt, but their backs were. The water in the creek had gotten so hot that all the fish died."

Stanton was probably describing the crew at Storm Creek, a tributary of the St. Joe River. Led by the 59-year-old camp cook, Pat Grogan, a tough-talking Irishman, 28 men refused orders to evacuate to Avery.

Accounts of Grogan's persuasive speech vary. In one version, he told the men that standing their ground offered the best chance of survival. In another account, Grogan questioned the fire's severity, saying "I don't feel like no six-mile hike this time of day."

Storm Creek proved the deadliest spot during the 1910 Fire. All 28 who stayed died. The rest of the crew reached Avery safely.

In the end, the fires took the heaviest toll on the raw recruits pulled in to work the fire lines. Of the 78 firefighters who died that August, not a single one was a ranger or a soldier, Pyne noted. Many of the bodies would never be identified. The men were simply names jotted down in the timekeeper's record book.

Stanton spent two more summers fighting fires. In 1912, his mother sent him a ticket home to Pittsburgh.

Earle worked for the Forest Service for 31 years. After the fire, he was a timber cruiser, marking burnt logs for harvest. He became a U.S. citizen and retired from the Kootenai National Forest as the timber division's senior ranger.

His granddaughter, Montgomery, remembers Earle as a tall, thin man. He smoked a pipe and entertained his grandchildren with stories of South Africa.

Montgomery works as a geographic information systems analyst for the Idaho Panhandle National Forest in St. Maries. She's also a certified wildland firefighter, as are her son and her husband.

"It's a proud heritage for us," she said. "I think it's in our blood — maybe beginning in 1910."

Sources for this story include:

"The Great Fires of 1910," an article by William Morris, "The Year of the Fires," by Stephen Pyne; "The Big Burn," by Timothy Egan; "Northwest Disaster," by Ruby El Hult; "The Spokesman-Review archives."

Courtesy of the Museum of North Idaho



Courtesy of Barb Montgomery

George Earle is pictured outside a ranger station in the St. Joe National Forest around 1923.

Memorial service

At 3:30 p.m. Friday, a memorial service for the firefighters killed during the 1910 fires will be held at the Woodlawn Cemetery in St. Maries.

and they were looking for firefighters, so I joined the cause," Stanton told The Spokesman-Review in a 1969 interview. "It was pretty good money, but it was a risky job."

Special trains took Stanton and other hires to Coeur d'Alene, where the firefighters were loaded onto steamboats and taken across the lake and up the St. Joe River. Stanton was assigned to a crew near Avery.

Each crew had roughly 20 men. First, they had to find the fires, often hiking several days to reach them. Then, working with hand tools, they could build about a mile of fire line per day.

Desertion was common. One crew walked off the job over rations, complaining that each firefighter got only a small can of beans after a day of exhausting labor. But firefighters also quit for petty reasons, soured by the backbreaking physical work and isolation.

Exasperated rangers wrote about the difficulty of keeping the men motivated. Managing the crews was more difficult than fighting the fires, groused Koch.

"Time and again a whole crew would walk out at a critical time for some trivial reason," he said.

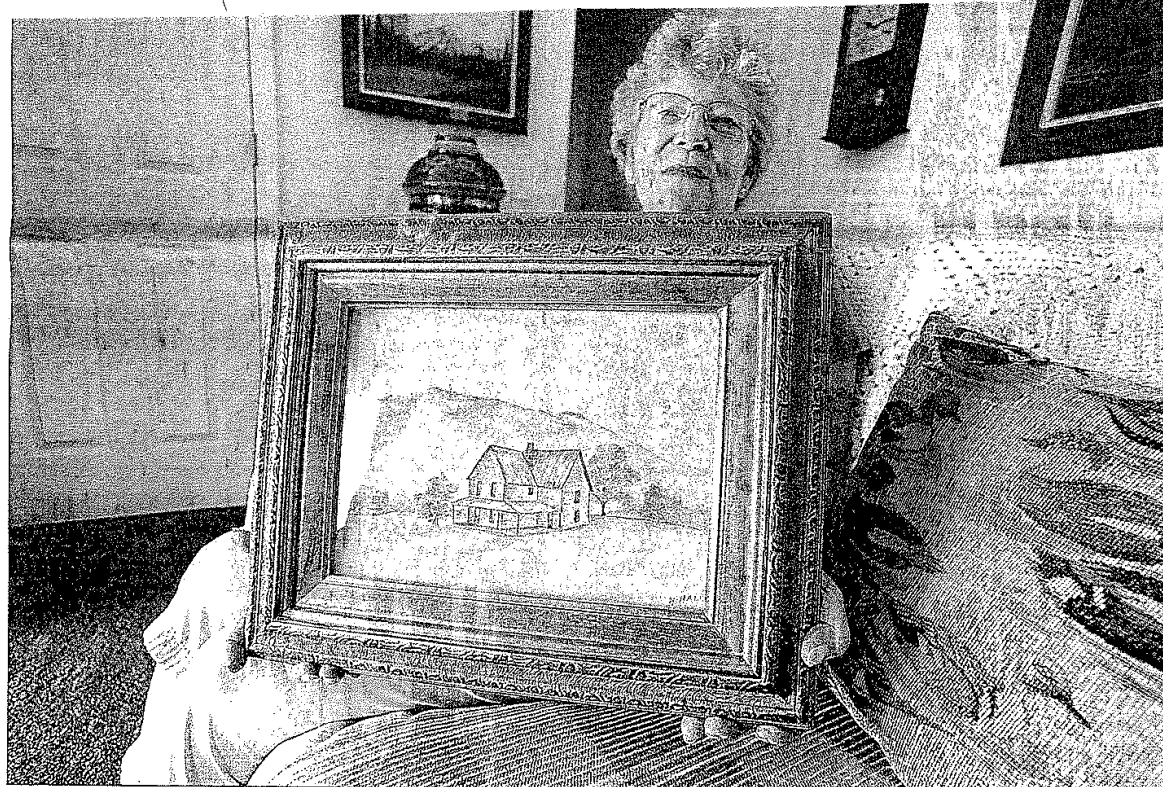
THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

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FLAME AND RUIN
THE FIRES OF 1910

Witnesses to destruction

Aug. 20, 1910, was a night of terror for isolated settlers, prospectors and fire crews scattered in the mountains of North Idaho, Western Montana and Eastern Washington. Without radio communication or Weather Service bulletins, the nation's largest firestorm caught many by surprise. ¶ Eyewitnesses described the fearsome power of the swift-moving flames. "We saw a wall of bright red flame leap from the west ridge to the east ridge of Thomas Creek, a mile wide jump, in a moment of time," recalled Orlando Scott, of St. Maries. "Acres of timber went down in flash and no power on earth could save it ..." ¶ People caught in the fire's path survived by huddling in creeks with wet blankets over their heads, lighting backfires or hunkering down on rocky slopes. Others died horrible deaths, consumed by the flames or gasping for air in the mines and root cellars where they had sought shelter. ¶ Amid the destruction, some survivors described a terrible but awesome beauty. Nature was unleashed.



CHRISTOPHER ANDERSON chrisa@spokesman.com

Dorris Cameron holds a painting done by her mother of the home the family built near Thompson Falls after the 1910 fires.

SURVIVAL STORIES

Families scrambled to escape harm

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

When fire breached the hill behind her family's cabin, Lily Cunningham turned back to watch the brilliant orange glow against the night sky.

"She looked up at her mother and saw that her mother was crying. Lily didn't remember feeling frightened. It was really quite beautiful," said her niece, Dorris Cameron.

Cunningham, who died in January, was the last known survivor of the 1910 fires. She was a 3-year-old when the fire burned the family's homestead on Little

Beaver Creek near Thompson Falls, Mont.

Her father, John Cunningham, had already left in the wagon with her older brother. They were on their way to help save a neighbor's house. Lily Cunningham, her mother and older sister followed, covering the short distance on foot.

Before they left, the family turned their livestock loose and packed their household goods into the root cellar.

At the neighbor's house, Lily was put to bed with the smaller children. She watched out the window as the older

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See FAMILIES, A10

FLAME AND RUIN THE FIRES OF 1910

FAMILIES

Continued from A1

kids used buckets to extinguish small fires caused by flying embers.

Her 6-year-old sister, Helen, was part of that effort. "She told us that the whole sky was lit up and that whole trees were illuminated," said Cameron, Helen Cunningham's daughter.

The men and boys built a fire line and doused the house and barn with water, which kept the buildings from igniting.

The neighbor was Sheriff Joe Hartman. He'd promised John Cunningham that he would help him build a new house if he helped save the Hartman homestead. The Cunninghams lived in a small cabin at that time but had plans for a larger residence.

The fire burned the lumber for the new house, so the Cunningham family spent the winter in a hastily built, two-bedroom log cabin. But the next spring, they got their two-story farmhouse.

All but one of the family's cows survived the fire. So did a rocking chair, family photos and other items stored in the root cellar.

Lily Cunningham spent most of her adult life working as a waitress at the Davenport Hotel and other Spokane restaurants. Last year, the

Sanders County Historical Society started planning an exhibit on her.

"She really didn't understand why they were making such a big fuss over her," Cameron said. "She said, 'It was just a fire.'"

Letter seeking repayment among family's keepsakes

With wildfires advancing toward the town of Falcon, Idaho, Henry Kottkey sent an urgent dispatch to his supervisors.

"The fire's blowing up. I'm worried about my crews and about my family," the ranger reportedly told Forest Service officials.

Kottkey was in charge of fire crews near Loop Creek, a remote tributary of the St. Joe River. His wife, Bertha, was at Providence Hospital in Wallace, awaiting the birth of the couple's third child.

The baby, Hank, was born on Aug. 19, 1910 - the day before the Big Blowup. Bertha Kottkey and her day-old son were evacuated from Wallace by train to Missoula.

"All of the patients were crowded into the caboose," said Bob Kottkey, the couple's grandson.

It was a treacherous trip. A burning trestle collapsed after the train sped over it, but the patients and hospital staff arrived safely in St. Regis, where they caught another train to Missoula.



Courtesy photo

Henry Kottkey, second from left in front, poses for a portrait with his family in the 1930s. He survived the Big Blowup by taking refuge in a railroad culvert. His wife, Bertha, gave birth to their son Hank on Aug. 19, 1910.

Henry Kottkey and his crew survived the fire by taking shelter in a large railroad culvert. The circulation of cool air kept them alive, but Falcon was completely destroyed. The couple lost their house and all their possessions.

After the fire, Henry Kottkey and his family left North Idaho to grow tomatoes in Florida. He later returned to the area, where he and his wife raised eight children. His son Hank - Bob Kottkey's father - became a Forest Service employee.

Among the family's keepsakes are letters that Henry Kottkey wrote to the U.S. government seeking payment for a horse and two

saddles destroyed during the 1910 fire. A government packer had been using them to supply the fire camps.

"It took him over a year to get reimbursed," Bob Kottkey said.

His cousin, Karen Kottkey Chamberlain, remembers her grandfather as a handsome but stern man with steely blue eyes. Her grandmother was more playful.

"We're lamenting the fact that our grandparents didn't talk much about the fire," Chamberlain said. "I'm wondering if everyone was too busy surviving to tell stories. They were very closemouthed. It was a different time."

FIRST-PERSON NARRATIVES

Few left unscarred by flames, anguish

Compiled by Becky Kramer and Jim Kershner
Staff writers

The words of James Danielson, 26, leader of the fire crew on Stevens Peak, written in a letter two years after the fire, as quoted in "Year of the Fires," by Stephen J. Pyne:

Try if you can to place yourself at the head of twenty green men ...

Picture yourself holding up a courage which was superficial to yourself, but to the followers made you their leader. Now picture yourself rushing at 11 p.m. to a shallow rock cut, continually warning the men that there was no need for alarm, when you knew that you might never see the break of the coming day. I say picture again twenty men at the only haven for miles around, gazing on a fire thirty miles wide, approaching at times with the speed of a train, and as it came near men half mad with fright, wishing to leave the place in order to reach some fancied security, but the worst has not yet come.

Imagine, if you can, the wind suddenly changing, the rock cut filled with sparks more dense than any skyrocket that could be shot off in your face, with a temperature that in an instant cooked every exposed part of one's body, with only a moment to realize your condition and then fall down unconscious,

See NARRATIVES, A10

NARRATIVES

Continued from A1

and then, as if this were not enough misfortune, awake to find your clothes half burned off, men crazy with pain, some wanting to commit suicide, some wishing to leave through fire and smoke and darkness for Mullan, others throwing their arms around you begging for God's sake that you better their condition.

"This I say with the three hours' wait until daylight came and the long tramp to Mullan over burned debris is enough to weaken any man's mental as well as physical conditions. Many times I could hardly withhold the cries of pain which came from my whole system. Many times men nearly parted from the rest of the crew, but with my utmost power was able to keep the crew together.

One man died, but Danielson and the rest of his men were able to stagger into Mullan the next morning. Danielson was scarred from his burns.

❖ *The words of a correspondent for the Daily Idaho Press (printed Aug. 27, 1910), describing the scene in Mullan, Idaho, on Aug. 21, when James Danielson and his crew arrived:*

The most pitiful sight ever witnessed in Mullan occurred Sunday morning when the fifteen survivors of the Boulder Creek (Stevens Peak) fire limped into town.

All were staggering and all carried their arms in the air. They were badly burned and the only relief that could be obtained was by holding their arms up. Some of the men were blind from the flames that had burned them, and they held on to the men in front of them. They walked in single file and made a most distressing spectacle. They were so overcome they could not at first give a coherent account of what had happened.

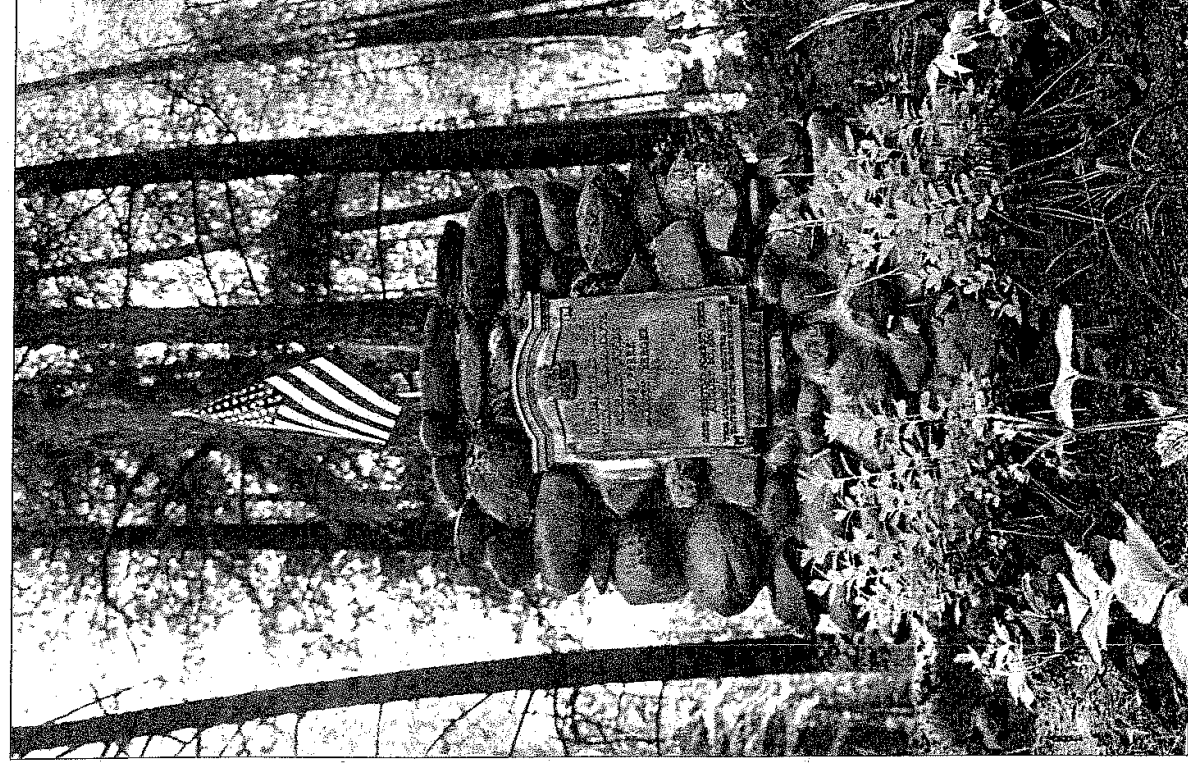
❖ *Deputy Ranger Ed Thenon was in charge of a fire crew on Moose Creek in the Clearwater National Forest. His account is from "When the Mountains Roared," a Forest Service publication.*

"... I heard someone outside my tent calling, 'Ed.' I recognized the voice as Louie Fitting's. I said: 'Hello, what's the matter?' He said: 'Come out here, I just saw a star fall on the hillside across the creek and it has started a fire.' I was outside at once and sure enough he pointed out a small fire starting well up on the hill across the creek from our camp. I knew it was out of reason to think a star could have set this fire, and in looking around to the west, in the direction the gale of the wind was coming from, I saw the sky aglow with pink color spread across a width of several miles. I knew at once all about Fitting's star and where it came from.

The fire was coming at a high rate of speed. Already it was beginning to throw shadows in our camp and we were right in the middle of its path.

Thenon and his men took shelter in the creek. All the firefighters survived, though one had a mental breakdown and was later sent to an asylum.

❖ *The words of Vic Grantham, a fire crew member with Ed Pulaski, after emerging at dawn from the Nicholson Adit, later known as the Pulaski Tunnel, as quoted in "Up the Swiftwater," a history of the St. Joe River country:*



CHRISTOPHER ANDERSON christa@spokesman.com

A grave in the Nine Mile Cemetery in Wallace marks the final resting place of five men killed in the 1910 fires. Another memorial and 48 graves are in St. Maries.

Series lineup

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

We were all paralyzed and couldn't use our limbs so we floundered along on the ground. Someone helped me into the water of the creek. I remember there was a big snag just above me that was burning and threatening to fall on me. I didn't care at the time whether it fell or not. I just sat and looked at it.

❖ *From Joe Hahn, who was in the headwaters of the St. Joe River with a fire crew, as quoted in "When the Mountains Roared."*
Evening found our little party

many miles from camp. We saw the remains of an elk and several deer; also a grouse hopping about with feet and feathers burned off – a pitiful sight. Men who quenched their thirst from small streams immediately became deathly sick. The clear, pure water running through miles of ashes had become a strong, alkaline solution, polluted by dead fish, killed by the lye. Thereafter, we drank only spring water.

❖ *From William W. Morris, a 29-year-old ranger, who was in charge of firefighters on the North Fork of the Coeur d'Alene River, as quoted in "When the Mountains Roared."*

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

Fire commemorations

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. today 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: Today through Sunday

What: Festival of vendors; live music and events. Highlights: Author Stephen Pyne speaks at the Wallace Elks Club, 7 p.m. today (\$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

On the Web: Today at spokesman.com/1910fire

- **Audio slide show:** Reporter Jim Kershner narrates "The Big Burn of 1910"
- **Herolism and sacrifice:** Photography, audio and excerpts
- **Then and now:** Large-format photos compare 1910, present day

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FRIDAY, AUGUST 20, 2010

SHOSHONE NEWS-PRESS

Fire ravaged area 100 years ago



Wallace, as seen after the Great Fire of 1910. The walls left standing were of the Sunset Brewery. The house in the upper left-hand corner was the only house left in that neighborhood after the fire.

By RONALD BOND
Staff writer

WALLACE — One hundred years ago today, the fires that combined into the "Big Blowup" took off. The devastation of the blaze — three million acres burned in Montana and Idaho, several towns destroyed and more than 80 lives lost — is remembered to this day, and many activities are lined up this weekend to remember the anniversary.

The 1910 Fire Commemoration Committee has been busy throughout the summer with events remembering the fire, and has several more planned today and tomorrow in conjunction with the anniversary of

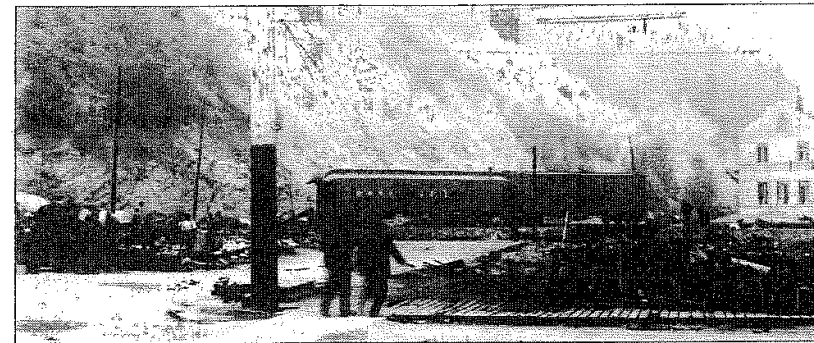
the inferno.

The Sierra Silver Mine Tour has hosted The Ghost Town Trolley all summer, with run times at 11 a.m., noon and 1 p.m., and will continue to every Wednesday through Saturday until Aug. 28. The Trailing of the 1910 Trolley — where characters of people involved in the fire will tell their stories — is scheduled at 2, 3, and 4 p.m. on those same days.

Guided hikes to the Pulaski Tunnel Trail have also been taking place throughout the summer, and are slated to wrap up this Saturday and Sunday.

The play "Rustlers at the Ranch ... or How Swift Can the Taylors Run"

see FIRE, A6



— Photo courtesy of Historic Wallace Preservation Society

The Great Fire of Aug. 20, 1910, the first firebrand landed right back of the building that stood on the corner. The concrete building at the right was the Oregon, Washington R.N. Railroad Depot, just completed.

FIRE from A1

is running Wednesday through Saturday evenings at 7 and Sundays at 2 p.m. at the Sixth Street Theater in Wallace until Aug. 29. The Sixth Street Theater is also hosting "Voices of the Big Burn," every Sunday, Monday and Tuesday at 7 p.m. until Aug. 31.

The events slated for the next few days are expected to be buzzing with people. They began last night with a speaking event with author Stephen Pyne at the Wallace Elks. Pyne discussed his book "Year of the Fires" and talked about the significance of this fire.

Today at noon, a Forest Service dedication at Nine Mile Cemetery in Wallace is scheduled. Author Rocky Barker will discuss his book "Scorched Earth" tonight at the Wallace Elks at 7 p.m., followed by the premier of the documentary film "Ordeal by Fire" by George Sibley. Sibley's documentary, filmed in Wallace, was completed just in time for the commemoration.

"When he came up here, he said he wanted to have it done by our dedication date," Commemoration Committee Chairman Forest Van Dorn said of Sibley. "I believe it will be a big asset ... it's based around the fire here in the Wallace area and this region and the Pulaski Trail."

Saturday is the procession through Wallace, beginning at 11 a.m. near exit 62. The 1910 Ceremony begins at 12:45

p.m. at the Wallace Visitor Center. The event will be emceed by Shoshone County Commissioner Jon Cantamessa, with remarks from Wallace Mayor Dick Vester, author Timothy Egan, Forest Service Director Tom Harbour and Idaho Gov. Butch Otter. The unveiling and dedication of the Fire Fighter Memorial at the visitor center will follow. Also, the Buffalo Soldiers will perform at the Wallace Gazebo beginning at 3 p.m. Another evening event at the Wallace Elks is planned, this time with Egan as he discusses his book "The Big Burn" at 7 p.m. Tickets to both Friday and Saturday night's events at the Elks are \$5.

While the fact that 100 years have passed is reason enough to commemorate the fire, Van Dorn noted the impact it has had is another reason

"One of the main reasons this is a big, big part of history is that it changed how the woods would be taken care of (and) how fire would be handled to help prevent major tragedies like this," he said. "It burned 660,000 acres in Shoshone County alone."

But the fire, though devastating in many regards, also saved the U.S. Forest Service.

"At that time, the Forest Service was fairly new, and it was going to be disbanded until the 1910 fire," he said. "It was what made the Forest Service what it is now, and it's been growing ever since."

And in order to make sure the fire is still

remembered in another 100 years, Van Dorn said the committee is putting together a time capsule, which will be in the memorial and will be sealed at a later date.

Tickets for the author sessions are still available, as are tickets for drawing for a Henry Golden Boy rifle and a Jeep Wrangler. Tickets for the rifle, which will be drawn for Saturday, are \$10, and tickets for the Jeep are \$50. The Jeep drawing will be Sept. 1.

Parking is limited for the ceremony Saturday at the Visitor Center, and attendees are encouraged to park at the high school or in town and walk to the ceremony.

For more information, visit firecoop.org, contact the Silver Valley Chamber of Commerce at 784-8021, Van Dorn at 752-1294 or the Wallace Chamber of Commerce at 753-7151.

THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

FRIDAY, AUGUST 20, 2010

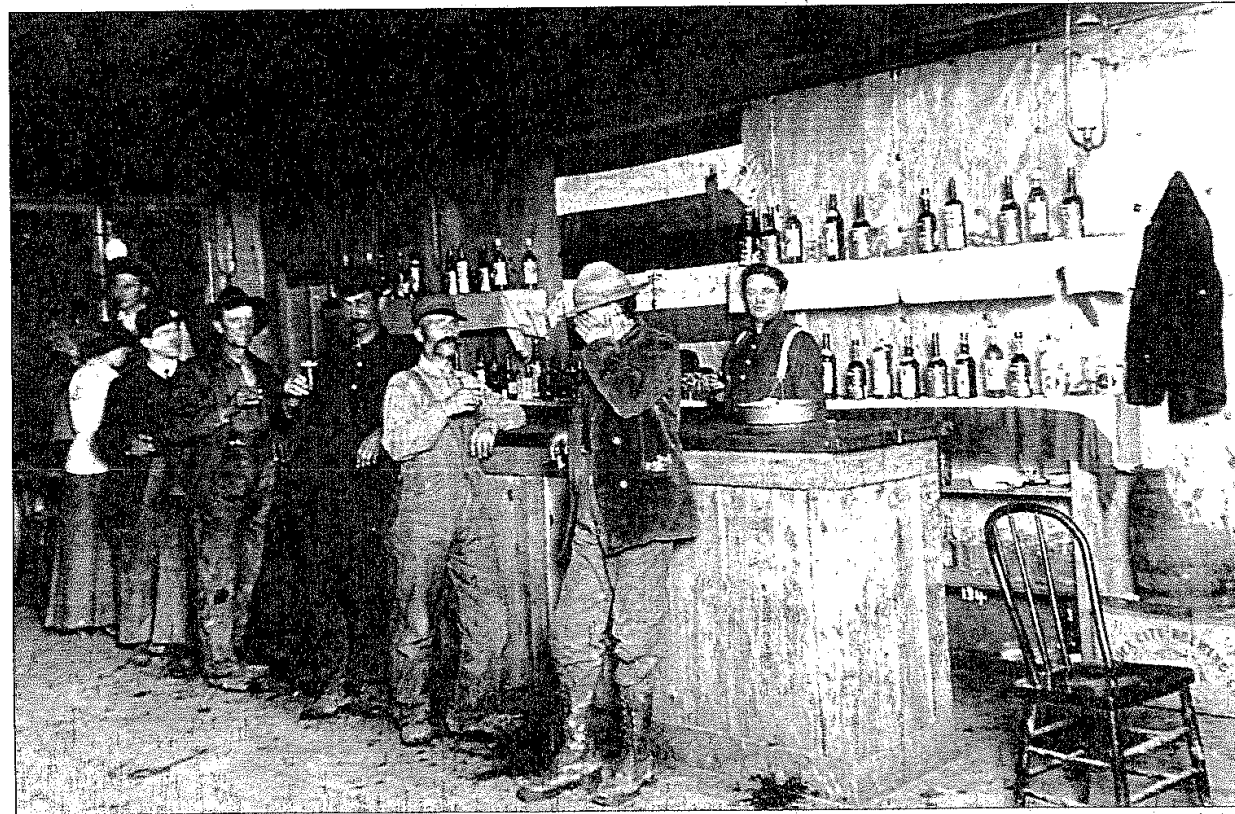


SUNNY AND WARM ▲ 80 ▼ 52

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FLAME AND RUIN
THE FIRES OF 1910

Wiped off the map



Photos courtesy of U.S. Forest Service (above) and Montana Historical Society

Patrons gather at a saloon in Grand Forks, a railroad town in Idaho that was obliterated by the Great Fire of 1910. The electric light on the ceiling indicates a time before a power plant at Taft was shut down in early 1909.

Big Burn destroyed notorious railroad towns

By Jim Kershner

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

Back in 1910, respectable folk believed that the wild, debauched towns of Taft and Grand Forks *deserved* to burn in hell.

They got their wish. Both towns were wiped clean by the Big Burn of 1910.

Search for them today, and you'll find nothing but a dusty and uninhabited freeway exit (Taft) and a tangle of undergrowth below the Route of the Hiawatha mountain-bike trail (Grand Forks).

But from 1907 to 1910, those old towns howled.

Both owed their existence to the

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 and killing at least 85 people. Through Sunday in print and online at spokesman.com/1910fire, The Spokesman-Review examines the fires and their legacy.

most expensive and audacious railroad engineering feat in the nation's history – the construction of the Milwaukee Road over (and through) the Bitterroot Range from

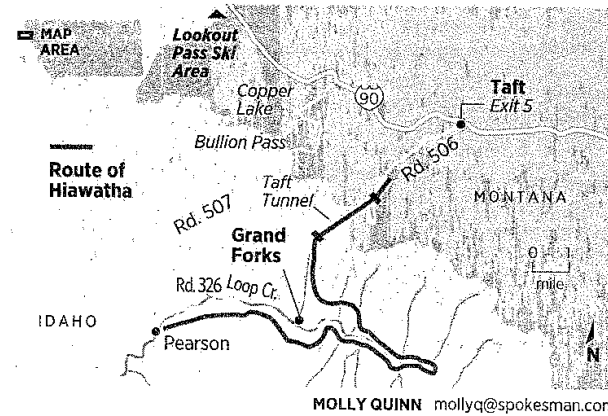
the St. Regis River in Montana to the St. Joe River in Idaho. These rough-hewn towns sprang up overnight as work began on the line's dozens of tunnels and trestles.

Taft was the biggest and most notorious of the new railroad towns. Its population shifted with the arrival of practically every work train, but at its height it was said to be 3,200.

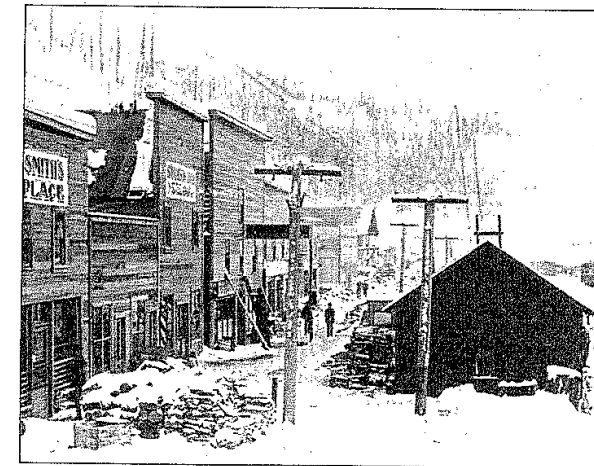
At one point the town had 23 saloons. It also had, according to one contemporary letter-writer, "300 women and only one decent one."

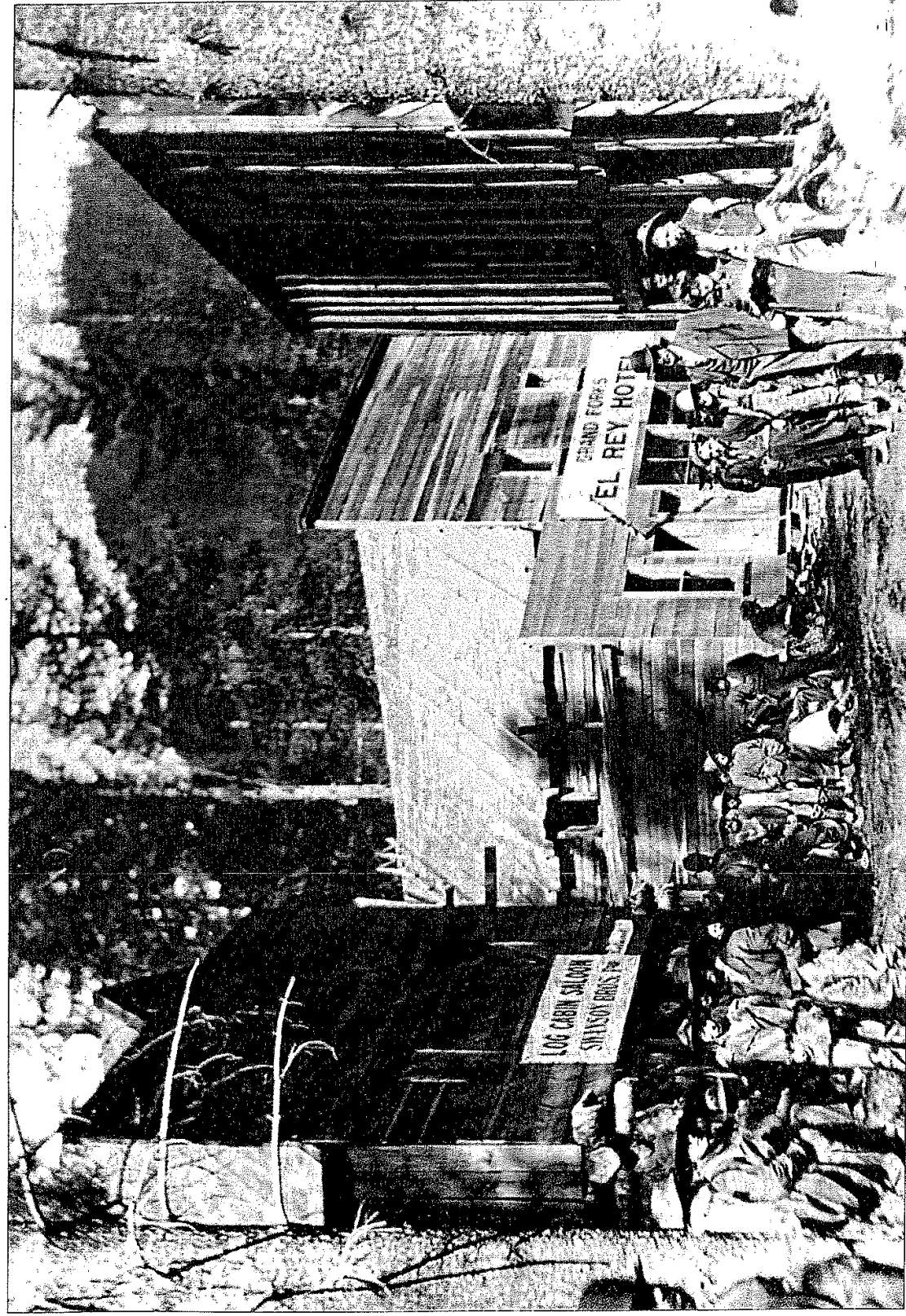
They served the railroad work gangs, who were not exactly model citizens. In the spring of 1907 alone,

See TOWNS, A8



Taft, Mont., was considered one of the most wicked cities in America.





Grand Forks, Idaho, circa 1908, is seen looking northeast from the middle of the town square. Pictured are the Log Cabin Saloon and the Grand Forks El Rey Hotel and restaurant. A barber pole is to the left of the hotel sign. Of the 27 people in the photograph, 26 are men.

Courtesy of U.S. Forest Service

TOWNS

Continued from A1

18 murders were committed. Sometimes, no one even knew a murder had taken place until the spring thaw came and a corpse appeared from under a snowbank.

Taft was also the scene of Balkans-style ethnic tensions. In one notorious incident, the self-proclaimed "king" of a large contingent of Montenegrin laborers was shot by a foreman. An ethnic riot nearly flared; subsequent shootouts left the foreman and five Montenegrins dead.

The very name Taft was a kind of ironic joke, according to a story told in both "Up the Swiftwater," by Sandra A. Crowell, and David O. Asleson, and in "The Big Burn," by Timothy Egan (two books which provided much of the information in this story).

The story, possibly apocryphal, goes like this: In 1907, William Howard Taft, then the U.S. Secretary of War, came through the unnamed — but already notorious — work camp and stopped to make a speech from the platform of his Northern Pacific train. He berated the town as a blight and a smudge on the American landscape and told the assembled throng to clean up their act. The railroad workers gave him a big, drunken cheer (or maybe jeer) — and then, by acclamation, they named the town in his honor.

Taft burned down at least twice before the Big Burn, each time being reborn with more saloons and brothels than before.

In 1909, a Chicago Tribune reporter came through and called Taft "the wickedest city in America."

But there was plenty of competition. When Grand Forks hit its stride, it "quickly went into first place for that

ever-increasing throng of gamblers and rough laborers from the camps. As the hours wore on, the little town became a roaring, seething riotous brawl of drinking, dancing, gambling and fighting humanity."

Grand Forks had burned twice before, once in 1909 by accident and again in July 1910, when a prostitute poisoned a customer and set her room on fire to cover up the murder. By August, the town had revived in hastily built shacks, tents and even a treehouse, which became the place of business for two high-flying prostitutes.

Yet on the afternoon of Aug. 20, 1910, when the winds whipped the mountains into a roaring, red-hot frenzy, both Taft and Grand Forks were defenseless.

The saloon-dwelling population of Taft, to the disgust of the forest rangers, showed no gunption when it came to saving the town. The rangers went from saloon to saloon trying to round up men to work the fire lines, but got few takers. In Egan's words, Taft's denizens had decided that "if they were going to be burned to death in an inferno .. they would go down drunk."

They tried to drain as much whiskey from the barrels as they could before the evacuation train came through. Everyone was staggering toward the platform when the burning embers came raining down and the trees began to topple. The train made it out just before the wall of flame hit.

There was only one fatality — a drunk whose clothes caught fire before he got on the train. A ranger rolled him in the dirt, extinguished him and hauled him to the train. When the man got to Saltsee, he was wrapped in bandages and put in a dark boxcar to recover. A fellow drunk came in to see him, lit a match — and caught the man's

oil-soaked bandages on fire. He burned to death.

In Grand Forks, the inhabitants had time only to race to the train platform at nearby Falcon before the saloons, tents and shacks vanished "in a snuff," according to Egan.

The inhabitants, along with the frightened population of Falcon, huddled at the depot, hoping a rescue train was on the way. It was. An engineer backed an engine and boxcar six miles to Falcon. The frightened people grabbed on to whatever handhold they could find and, after a harrowing trip, made it to Avery.

Both Taft and Grand Forks made desultory attempts to rebuild, but by 1911, the forest rangers managed to shut down the last tent saloon in Grand Forks.

Taft revived partially and served as a staging point when the Milwaukee Road electrified its line over the Bitterroots. But it never regained its former size or notoriety. By the 1930s, the Federal Writers Project reported that Taft consisted of only four buildings, all abandoned.

Today, travelers who take the Taft exit on Interstate 90 won't even see abandoned buildings. There's a sand pile for use by freeway snowplows and some piles of old railroad ties. The old main street is covered by the interstate.

That's more than you'll find at Grand Forks. The green forest reclaimed it long ago. You can drive to the spot where Cliff Creek empties into Loop Creek, but rangers say you can find the old town site "only with metal detectors."

And what might those metal detectors find? Maybe the wires and mechanisms of old player pianos, which played their last ragtime tunes in August 1910.

Series lineup

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

► **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

► **Today:** 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 fires

honor," said ranger William W. Morris.

Grand Forks was at the mouth of Cliff Creek on the Idaho side, down in a lush hollow far below the tracks. It was built around a muddy square, surrounded on all sides by rough wooden saloons, chow houses, boarding houses and "hotels."

Here's how the Forest Service's Joe Halm — famous for his Big Burn exploits — described Grand Forks in a memoir:

"During the mornings, the court (square) was deserted except for a few sobering stragglers sitting on empty beer kegs piled in front of the 12 or 15 saloons.

"... Toward evening, the town would begin to show signs of life and as night came on and as oil lamps began to glow, player pianos began their tinny din, an orchestra here and there began to tune up. Women daubed with rouge came from the cribs upstairs and sat at lunch counters or mingled with the

To ensure the success of these events and the construction of the memorials, the 1910 Committee is seeking donations and assistance from businesses and residential communities. All monies collected will go directly toward the memorials, Wildland Firefighter Foundation, and other fallen firefighter organizations and projects.

Donations will be accepted at all Silver Valley US Bank locations and can also be mailed to:

1910 Fire c/o Forest VanDorn, Box 444 Osburn, ID 83849

A special thanks goes out to the people and businesses who have already donated. The following is a list of \$500 donations or more.

- General Fire Apparatus
- HF Magnuson Family Foundation
- Forest Capital Partners LLC
- Historic Wallace Preservation Society
- Kellogg Rotary Club
- Las Dean Clark
- Tom Nichols
- Silver Summit
- Dave Smith Motors
- Bedrock Masonry
- Zanetti Brothers Inc.
- Alpine Constructors
- F & H Mine Supply
- Harry & Colleen Magnuson Fund in the Idaho Community Foundation
- Greater Wallace Community Development Corporation
- Nipp Family, - Henry, Irene, Ryan, Jayme, Bailey
- Idaho Panhandle Resource Advisory Committee
- Hecla Charitable Foundation
- United States Forest Service
- Idaho Department of Lands
- City of Wallace
- Idaho Fire Chiefs Association
- Shoshone County Fire Chiefs Association
- North Idaho Fire Chiefs Association
- Shoshone County Fire Prevention Cooperative
- Wallace Business Community Association
- Coeur d'Alene River Ranger District Employees
- Western Divide Ranger District Employees—SQF
- Pulaski Project
- Brad and Mary Corkill

Remembering the Fallen

For More Information and Event Registration: www.firecoop.org or 784-0821

Jeep Raffle Fundraiser



PLEASE MAIL THE FOLLOWING INFO TO THE ADDRESS BELOW:

YOUR CONTACT INFORMATION (NAME, ADDRESS AND PHONE NUMBER) AND A CHECK OR MONEY ORDER FOR THE AMOUNT OF \$50

1910 COMMEMORATION
ATTN: JEEP RAFFLE
PO BOX 444
OSBURN, ID 83849

YOUR NUMBERED TICKET STUB WILL BE IN THE MAIL TO YOU AS SOON AS YOUR PAYMENT IS RECEIVED.

OR FOR CREDIT CARDS CALL 208-512-1516

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DRAWING: SEPTEMBER 1ST, 2010
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Silver Valley 1910 Fire Commemoration

August 2010



Anniversary of the Big Blow-up

August 20th and 21st

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