

REMEMBER 1910!

IT CAN HAPPEN AGAIN—PREVENT FOREST FIRES

By STANLEY KOCH

IN THE chronicles of Paul Bunyan, folklore's lumberjack superman, time is reckoned from the Winter of the Blue Snow. In Western Montana and the panhandle section of Idaho, events are dated either before or after the great fire of 1910.

In two dreadful days that summer, forest fires traveling at express train speed across the backbone of the Continental Divide destroyed more than 3,000,000 acres of America's waning supply of virgin timber. Towns and villages, mining camps, homesteads, lumber mills and railroad property — all were destroyed in an area as large as the state of Connecticut. Eighty-five people lost their lives, hundreds were severely injured and thousands more escaped with nothing but the clothes on their backs.

Burning firebrands the size of a man's arm were thrown down in the streets of towns fifty miles from the nearest fire line. For days the sun was obscured in Billings, Montana, 500 miles away. Smoke darkened the sky in Denver, and at Kansas City, 1,200 miles distant, the weather man recorded its taint.

The winter of 1909-10 had been normal, the old-timers will tell you, with the usual heavy snowfall in the mountains. But the summer drouths started early all over the region. The hills hardly got green that spring. July followed with intense heat. Crops burned up and the forests became tinder-dry, ready to explode at the touch of a spark.

In June the fires began, started mainly by electrical storms with some assistance from incendiaries and careless railroad crews.

The newly organized forest-protection forces of the U. S. Forest Service were thinly scattered. There were no lookouts, and detection of fires depended on intermittent patrols. In the vast wildernesses of the St. Joe, Clearwater, Salmon and Flathead riv-

ers there were only a few primitive trails along the natural routes formed by the main divides and ridges. The great river canyons of the St. Joe and Clearwater were still almost inaccessible.

In the face of all these difficulties the little force of forest rangers and guards struggled desperately with the constantly recurring fires. On July 15 over 3,000 men were employed as firefighters. The supply of floating labor was exhausted and President Taft authorized the use of the regular Army.

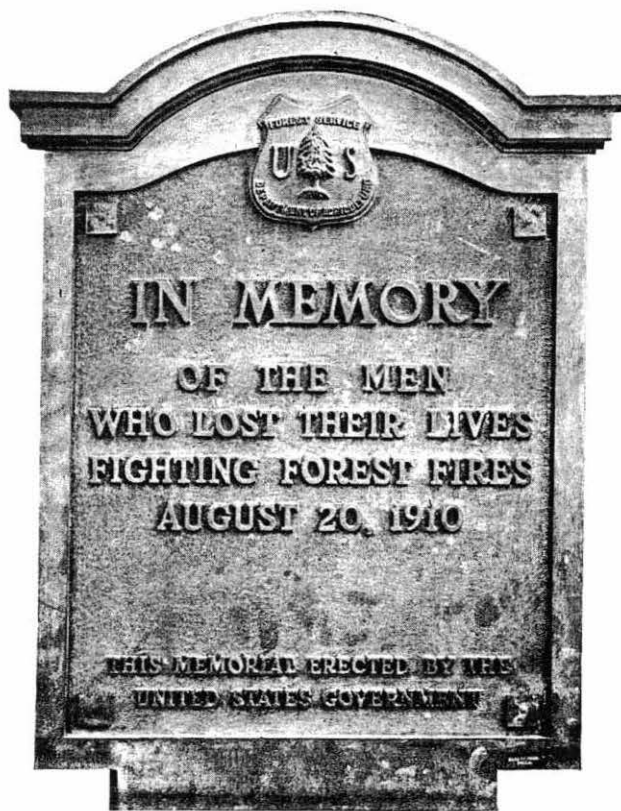
By August 15 weary crews had managed to control some 3,000 small fires and ninety major blazes. As the fire season neared its close, it seemed that the region might still escape without overly heavy losses, bad as the fires had been.

But such was not to be.

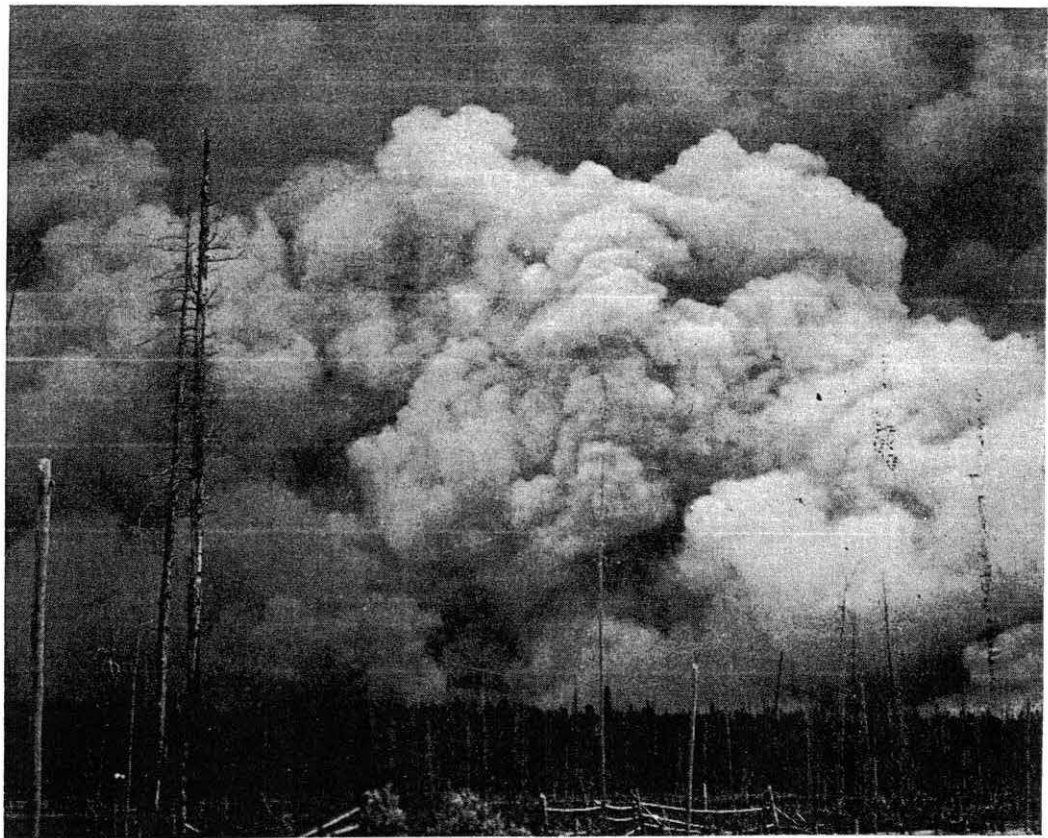
In the canyons and valleys of the timbered country where these isolated fires raged, a resinous, sooty smoke had hung for days, sometimes smothering the sun and turning midday into night. In the villages lamps were

lighted at three o'clock in the afternoon. Conductors on trains carried lanterns all day to read the tickets of their passengers.

"Nature appeared to be stifled under this curtain of smoke," said a writer of the time. "People panted for a breath of air, their lungs burning, their eyes inflamed. The air was oppressively quiet, suffocatingly dead. The stillness of desolation rested above camps and towns. Sounds were muffled as by a vacuum. Birds staggered through the smoky chaos on bewildered wings, panting, lost. Horses strained at their halters, looking upon their masters with strange eyes, uncomfortable by caresses, unassured by words. Where a beast, by a terrified lunge, broke its restraining tether, it dashed away into the wilderness. Even chickens deserted their coops, seeking



Erected at St. Maries, Idaho, this monument speaks today



Above. Billows of fire and smoke, sweeping over northern Idaho and Montana in 1910, turned day into night, took almost a hundred lives, destroyed several towns and paralyzed a region equal in size to the whole State of Connecticut

Below. This photograph taken on the Coeur d'Alene National Forest shortly after the 1910 fires, shows what happened to eight billion feet of standing timber in Idaho and Montana—enough lumber to supply one-third our war needs this year



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refuge at the margin of some stream. Dwellers in the woods and travelers on dim trails saw forest creatures flying in one general direction, as if pursued by a foe that struck a deeper terror than man. Bear, deer, or mountain lions scarcely lifted their heads at sight of a man, or moved out of his path to let him pass."

So fell the evening of August 20, 1910.

On the Lost Horse Trail, deep in the Bitterroot Range, a forest guard stirred uneasily in his sougans (a thin, generally shoddy, quilt). Something pattered on the tent roof. "Rain?" he wondered, and stuck his head outside. Wind was moaning through the tree tops, dropping needles and refuse on the tent. "Damn," he said, "why couldn't it just as well be rain?"

A few minutes later one of his crew of thirty men called him out again. A star, he said, had fallen on the hillside across from camp, setting a small fire. The forest guard swung around, into the wind. There on the western horizon, a fiery glow lit the sky for mile after mile. He knew then what the "star" was and what it meant.

Thus the holocaust began.

Sweeping northeast from the Snake River desert country, dry hot winds soon reached tornado proportions, fanning every blaze into a raging inferno of flame. Little fires exploded into big fires. In the surcharged, gale-driven atmosphere the whole world seemed to burst into spontaneous combustion. Traveling at seventy miles an hour the flames tore across mountain ranges, leaped major rivers and mile-wide canyons as though they were irrigation ditches. The front of the fire was an awe-inspiring spectacle. The first wave of flames towered hundreds of feet into the air while exploding gases shot whistling, incandescent tongues of fire a thousand feet into the sky. The roar of igniting gas, skyrocketing flames and falling forest giants was indescribable.

Men who went through the fire were dumb for days in their struggle for words to measure the fire's horror. "The world was afire," they said, "the earth, the air, everything."

The city of Wallace, Idaho, lay in the path of the first sweep of flames. Riding hell-for-leather down a smoke-choked canyon, trying to warn the restless people, a forest ranger was caught by the flames, forced to abandon his errand and take refuge in a mine tunnel.

At 9:15 on the night of August 20 fire broke into town. By 10:30, when a refugee train loaded with fleeing men, women and children pulled out for Missoula, Montana, a third of the town lay in ashes. Nuns carried the last patients out of Providence Hospital just as flames ignited the rear of the structure.

Wired the telegraph operator of the Northern Pacific Railroad just before the line burned out: "Every hill around town is a mass of flames and the whole place looks like a death trap. No connections can be had with outside towns. Men, women and children are hysterical in the streets and leave by every possible conveyance and route."

Had it not been for cool-headed, heroic work of train crews, loss of life would have reached into the thousands. The Northern Pacific relief train, whistle blowing wildly,

ran east from Wallace, picking up refugees from Mullan, Saltese, Taft, DeBorgia, Haugan and Tuscor. The last four towns were completely destroyed.

The Milwaukee Railroad had just opened up its line through this territory. Along the forty-eight miles of track crossing the Continental Divide from Avery, Idaho, to Haugan, Montana, were a thousand people, mostly railroad employes, their wives and children. A girl telephone operator gave the warning, the line going dead in the midst of her call. Women and children from Avery, on the west side of the Divide, were evacuated in thirty minutes, a company of negro soldiers standing guard on the platforms of the cars as they made their dash through the flames and smoke westward for Spokane. The men and remaining soldiers followed in box cars. On the east side, work trains were ordered to pick up every living soul and make a run for the east, or west to Taft Tunnel, a two-mile bore at the Continental Divide.

Still not accounted for were some fifty workers on the west side of the Divide, between the tunnel and Avery. In spite of flame-swept tracks and burning timber bridges towering a hundred feet above rocky gorges, a volunteer crew set out down the hill with an engine and three cars, knowing they could never get back to the tunnel. When the train reached the refugees huddled along the track, many of them had to be lifted bodily and put aboard. "Groups of Hungarians, bundles of bedding and clothing on their backs, stood with tears streaming down their faces," a trainman reported. "We had to pick some of them up and put them in the cars, but when they once understood that there was a chance for life they fell to fighting, pulling each other from the train, pushing women and children out of the way, but sticking to their bedding to the last. We had to cut the ropes from their shoulders to make them let the bundles go."

Forty-seven people were picked up and a run was made for Tunnel Thirty-two, a short bore but the only available refuge. As it was impossible to see beyond the steam dome of the boiler, the engineer could only pray that he would not plunge through a flaming bridge or crash into a fallen tree. There was nothing to do but go on. He opened the throttle wide, pounding into the smoke. They made the tunnel, but even there the fire reached in after them. Fortunately a rivulet ran through the bore, and by keeping their clothing soaked they managed to endure.

The whole forty-eight miles of railroad through the rugged country between Avery and Haugan was swept by a devouring blast of fire so hot that pick handles, lying in the open beside the track, were utterly consumed. Water in barrels at the ends of bridges boiled and evaporated away, the staves burning down as fast as the water level sank. Ties burned out of the tracks, the rails buckled and kinked like wire, nineteen bridges were destroyed. Everything was swept clean to the tunnels' mouth. But a thousand lives were saved. Only those who could have struggled on foot into the tunnels would have survived. Few could have made it, in that suffocating smoke and searing, blinding heat.

The terrific uprush of fire from the western drainages over the Continental Divide caught every firefighting crew in the territory. Too late to escape, they were doomed unless they could find a safe place to weather the gale-driven flames.

All day Sunday, the 21st of August, reports of terrible loss of life came in as scorched and burned fire-fighters stumbled into town with tales of terror and disaster.

Edward C. Pulaski, grandson of the famous Polish exile, Count Casimir Pulaski, who fought and died for American independence, was in charge of forty-three men about ten miles from Wallace. When the blowup came Pulaski rounded up his crew, most of them un-

He had commanded the men to lie down, with their faces to the ground, but in the hours that followed, the tunnel, filled with smoke and gas, became a madhouse. In a panic of fear, crying and praying, man after man rushed the entrance, threatening to kill Pulaski unless he let them by. But Pulaski drove them back with his revolver until finally, one by one, they fell unconscious. At length Pulaski himself, his lungs seared, his eyes blinded, and completely exhausted from fighting both men and fire, crumpled at the entrance. Hours later he awoke, hearing a man say:

"Come on outside, boys, the boss is dead."

"Like hell he is," Pulaski replied.



The prosperous city of Wallace, Idaho, which was partially destroyed, is shown here starting to rebuild its devastated sections. The city suffered a property loss of one million dollars

familiar with the region, and tried to reach Wallace. Barred by fire, he headed for a nearby mine tunnel, hoping to reach it before the flames overtook them. Already it was pitch dark, though Pulaski's watch showed mid-day. One man, lagging behind, was killed by a falling tree. By the time the men reached the mine most of them were hysterical and panic-stricken. Pulaski was forced to order them into the tunnel at the point of his gun. The forty-two men and two horses crowded into the 100-foot long prospect hole and Pulaski took up his station at the entrance. Fortunately two or three blankets had been salvaged. These were soaked in water and hung across the opening. With his hat, Pulaski dashed water from a small spring over the burning mine timbers and blankets.

It was five o'clock Sunday morning. They counted noses. Five were found dead, back in the tunnel. The two horses were in such bad shape they had to be shot. Burned, blind and smoke-choked, the remaining men dragged and crawled their way into Wallace. All recovered, though Pulaski was in the hospital for two months before he regained his sight.

One crew, racing ahead of the flames, sought refuge in a small creek running through a homesteader's clearing. Seven men, thinking they would be better off in a cave the homesteader had dug in a hill, were burned beyond recognition, and three men lying in the creek were killed by falling timber. The survivors had all the skin burned off the backs of their necks and heads. A seventeen-man rescue crew, bringing packhorses and doe-

tors, spent two days and nights cutting through twelve miles of down timber to reach the clearing.

For nearly a week after the fire it was believed that Ranger Joe Halm had perished with his crew of sixteen men. Halm had gone back into the St. Joe Wilderness, sixty-five miles across the Bitterroot Range, to fight the Bear Creek fire. When a rescue party finally cut through, Halm told his story.

The fire caught them on Saturday afternoon, August 20. Three men, believing safety lay in flight, refused to stay.

"Things did look bad," Halm says. "I slipped into my tent and strapped on my gun. As I stepped out a red glow was already lighting the sky. The men were pointing excitedly to the north."

"She's jumped a mile across the canyon," said the foreman.

Halm put his hand on his gun. "Not a man leaves camp. We'll make our stand on that gravel bar in the creek."

Frying pans, pails and one blanket for each man were moved to the bar. Meanwhile the wind had risen to hurricane velocity.

"Fire was all around us, flames licking the sky," Halm recounts. "Showers of flaming brands fell everywhere. The quiet of a few minutes before had become a horrible din. The hissing, roaring flames, the terrific crashing and rending of falling timber was terrifying. One young giant, crazed with fear, broke and ran. I dashed after him. He came back, wild-eyed, crying, hysterical. The fire closed in. The heat became intolerable. A giant tree crashed across the bar; one man went down, but came up unhurt. A few yards below a log jam an acre in extent became a roaring furnace, a threatening hell. If the wind changed, a single blast from this inferno would wipe us out. Our drenched clothing steamed and smoked; still the men fought. Another tree crashed, cutting deep into the little bar, blinding and showering us with sparks and spray."

Hours later the screaming, hissing and snapping of millions of doomed trees, the showers of sparks and burning brands grew less. The fire gradually subsided. Save for minor burns and injuries, all were safe.

The big fellow who had tried to run the night before slapped Halm on the back and handed him his gun.

"You lost her in the creek last night. You saved my life," he said simply. His lips trembled as he walked away.

So it went with crew after crew. Those who stayed with the trained and experienced forest rangers and guards generally came through alive. The panic-stricken, who tried to make a run for it, were caught by the flames, burned beyond recognition.

The fires swept fiercely on all day the 20th and 21st. On the 22nd and 23rd a change in wind and humidity slowed down the conflagration and then, like a miracle to the worn and wasted people of the northwest, on the night of the 23rd a general rain, with snow on the high ranges, checked the flames.

The following week burning conditions again picked up, and the widespread fires made some advance. Fran-

tic, if ill-informed citizens pleaded with the Army to fire off its big guns to jar loose a deluge from the heavens. When the Army skeptically refused, President Taft was swamped with indignant telegrams. Most of the fire crews had been driven out of the hills. Camps and equipment had burned. But under the spur of the U. S. Forest Service, crews were again organized on a large scale and set about cutting off the spread of fires and opening up trails through the burned country. A good general rain beginning the night of August 31 ended the northwest's thirty-day war.

When the terrible toll of losses was finally added up, 80 fire-fighters were dead on the Coeur d'Alene, Cabinet and Pend Oreille Forests. Two lives were lost in the burning of Wallace and one at Taft. A peg-leg prospector was burned near Joe Halm's valiant stand and three homesteaders lost their lives near Newport, Idaho. Many of the surviving firefighters were terribly burned, and as the pitiful remnants of the crews staggered out of the mountains the hospitals were filled with injured men.

The loss in timber, property and man-days of labor to the logging communities is estimated as high as \$695,000,000. A million dollars worth of property was destroyed in Wallace alone. Nearly eight billion board feet of timber was destroyed, including some of the finest stands of white pine in America.

The writer's father, who was Supervisor of the Lolo Forest at the time, tells of walking through the charred and blackened remains of a once beautiful spruce grove.

"The still warm ashes were knee deep where once I had walked in cool forest aisles. For mile after mile, as far as the eye could reach, lay a smoldering, desolate waste. Stunned and heartsick, I never wanted to see the country again."

As news of the great fire spread over the nation, an outraged public poured vitriolic wrath on Congress for withholding firefighting funds from the Forest Service.

This spring again, the Northwest is restless and uneasy, as the snowline retreats under a warm summer sun and the fire season approaches all too rapidly. With the Civilian Conservation Corps reduced almost to the vanishing point, with every able-bodied man either in the Army or working in war production industries, where, they ask, will firefighters be obtained? And why, this summer of all summers, has Congress wrangled and delayed over voting a few million dollars of fire control funds as protection against another holocaust like that of 1910?

Forest officials hope and believe there can never be another 1910 fire. Yet they know that the shortage of firefighting men and money is setting a stage which needs only a prolonged drought,—common corollary of the searing mid-summer sun,—to create conditions favorable to another blow-up.

So, if you plan to enter forest regions this summer for pleasure or business, remember the potential power of fire in the woods to paralyze great sections of our country and thereby cripple our war effort.

REMEMBER 1910 AND PREVENT FOREST FIRES.