

On August 20, 1910, a forest fire raced unchecked for one hundred miles in two days, to devastate one million acres of wilderness in the Idaho Panhandle and northwestern Montana. Eighty-seven persons perished in the flames and countless numbers of forest creatures were destroyed.

If you could see a little black bear clinging, high in a blazing tree and crying like a frightened child you could perceive on a very small scale what happened to the forest creatures.

At twelve o'clock noon on August 10, 1910, Supervisor J.E. Barton at Sandpoint, Idaho, received a telegram from Fire Guard William Brashear at Cabinet: "Send a man to relieve me, fires out of control, men should be withdrawn to safety." Brashear was in charge of several firefighting crews located south of Cabinet near the northern foothills of the Bitterroot Range. He had been a logging contractor with a background of experience that well qualified him for the job ahead.

Since this was before the time of autos and good roads, no action could be taken until the train went east at 5:00 p.m. Supervisor Barton asked me to go to Cabinet and take charge, since I was deputy Supervisor at the time. But before I left we received a second wire, this time from Brashear's cook: "Brashear and ten men trapped in the fire, all assumed to be dead."

John Keefe, Forest Ranger from Clark Fork, met me at Cabinet. We proceeded to the fire front, now within one mile of Cabinet. John was a tall, lanky lad of twenty from the Idaho State School of Forestry. He was quite an athlete and held the track record for his college.

We learned that Brashear, after sending the wire, decided that immediate action was urgent since the wind had increased to a gale. He returned to camp, turned his horse over to the cook with instructions to warn distant crews. Brashear then hurried up the mountainside on foot to warn an isolated crew of ten men.

The cook and about thirty men who were working east of Brashear's party reached Cabinet safely after a mad race ahead of the flames. They had met a boy taking lunches on a pack horse to Brashear's party, threw the boy on the pack horse, and turned him about to lead the race toward Cabinet. None of the men who had been in the big stampede would return to the fire front with Keefe and me, but we got six Finlanders who lived in the vicinity to volunteer.

We selected the intersection of two skid roads as a strategic location to try and check the fire. It had spent some of its force and slowed down at nightfall. I was acquainted with this locality and knew that one skid road led to the firefighters' camp.

It was 2:00 a.m. when Keefe and I decided we could venture through the fire front in a race to the trapped men although the fire was still dangerous, burning intermittently through the tree tops. I had left an automatic pistol on the skid road with the Finns. Days later it was found with the breech clip blown out, cocked and locked solid, a souvenir of the fire. One man asked us to watch for his abandoned suitcase. All that remained of it was the metal rim.

We would run awhile, then lie down at intervals to get fresh air. Continued exertion in the smoke and heat will cause a person to faint. We passed a dead porcupine in the road as we traversed a blackened area of death and destruction where no living animal or bird remained. I was reminded of a vast graveyard. The small fires flickering dimly in the darkness high in the blackened snags could be candles burning for the dead.

Upon reaching the spring near where the camp was located we shouted until our parched throats were hoarse but got no reply. Then we climbed out of the burned timber upon the ridge to the clearing. There in the darkness we saw the huddled forms. We thought they were all dead, but to our relief we found they were sleeping the sleep of exhaustion after their ordeal. Some had their heads covered with the charred remnants of coats and blankets.

Brashear's dog lay dead in the clearing. Two men crazed with fear had bolted and perished in the flames.

The race with the fire had been hopeless and Brashear had led the men to the clearing, warning each man to soak his bedding in the spring and lie down under the wet covering. He knew this was their best chance to survive. Brashear was the only man to soak his blanket at the spring. Nothing could live at the spring since it was in a ravine in the timber. The spring was boiled dry when Keefe and I reached it.

Brashear had made a futile attempt to stop the two men who ran off. The rest of the crew were about to panic and run when he knocked a man down with a mattock handle and threatened to brain the first man to try and run. They lay down, heads toward the wind, as the fire raged past on each side of the clearing, flames hundreds of feet high fanned by a tornadic wind so violent that the flames flattened out ahead, swooping to earth in great darting curves, truly a veritable red demon from hell.

At daybreak we found the charred bodies of the two men. Brashear's eyesight was temporarily impaired. Several men were sent to the hospital for minor burns.

John Keefe remained to guide the men out by the best route while I returned in haste to Cabinet to reorganize the firefighting. This was quite a problem since tools, supplies and records had been destroyed in the fire.

This fire before being checked burned to the outskirts of Cabinet and fired the timbers in the railroad tunnel nearby.

The Forest Supervisor of the Coeur d'Alene Forest had lost all contact with a large party of firefighters located about seventy miles north of Wallace, Idaho. This area was accessible from Cabinet by a journey south of about twenty-five miles across the summit of the Bitterroot Range. I was delegated to go and investigate their fate.

A husky young graduate from Michigan University, named Gillis, accompanied me on this trip. We were about to start when a woman came to our camp asking for help. Her husband, during a drunken spree, had beaten up the family and smashed the furniture. We went to her home but the place was deserted. The doors were open and a little old pack pony had wandered into the house. We found him with his nose in the flour barrel. He was brown color and looked comical with his face decorated with flour. We appropriated the horse and a pack saddle, then with a light pack we started for the North Fork.

We stopped that night at a sheep camp just over the summit of the range. There was no trail beyond so we left the pony there. As we descended into the valley we both suffered violent headaches from smoke. We were approaching the northern limit of a fire that had burned an area forty miles wide and seventy miles in length.

We found the abandoned campsite of the missing men and tracked them westward until we were assured that they had safely crossed the Coeur d'Alene Range to Lake Pend'Oreille. We were not acquainted with this area and did not carry enough food for such an extended journey. As

darkness overtook us on the mountainside we stopped, made two fires and lay down between them. I had shot a blue grouse on the way. We cooked it on sharpened sticks and picked the bones clean. At first dawn, we went on, picked up the pony and returned to Cabinet.

By the time we had returned to Cabinet, the great fire was declared a National emergency. All efforts were directed to the protection of homes, towns and private property. Guards were placed at the entrance to mountain valleys and no unauthorized persons were allowed to pass.

After organizing the firefighting at Cabinet, I joined a party of forty laborers who were enroute from Spokane by train and guided them to a fire near Noxon, Montana. Men worked in relays all night, shoveling dirt to check the flames, and saved a homesteader's buildings. His pasture fence had burned down and the calf was removed into the house.

I carried a small canvas tarp and got a little sleep that night for the first time in over fifty hours. This fire was in the Cabinet National Forest.

I returned to Cabinet to find a desperate appeal for help from a settler located across the Clark Fork River. I summoned the faithful Finns and started but the boat was on the wrong side of the river. The Finns carried a cedar telephone pole to the river for me and riding astride the pole I paddled across and got the boat. My feet and legs in the water acted as a stabilizer to keep the log from rolling.

The Cabinet Gorge is now a noted scenic attraction where the river is compressed to rush through a rock crevice so narrow that the river virtually runs on edge. It was here at the mouth of the gorge in a big eddy that I crossed the river.

We found the settler in desperate straits. The Finns worked all night and checked the advancing flames.

The greatest loss of life occurred on the Coeur d'Alene Forest to the south near Wallace, Idaho.

You may wonder what methods are used to check a forest fire. A forest fire usually slows down at night to travel on the ground. Our greatest efforts were made from 3:00 a.m. until noon. A scout goes ahead, marking the route for the fireline, followed by axemen who clear the way for men with mattocks and shovels. These men dig off all rubbish and leaf mold to form a shallow trench. When the fire is checked at the trench some standing snags with fire in the tops remain. These are called sparkers and are felled.

Firefighting methods are greatly improved today by the use of bulldozers, portable pumps and parachute jumpers. The greatest advance has been in fire prevention, catching them at the start, benefited by an improved network of trails and telephone lines and by use of lookouts, radio, and parachute jumpers.

The destruction of animal life in the forest fires, as noted by the writer, is not pleasant to contemplate. The clowning bear, the chattering squirrel, even the fleet-footed deer, all suffer death in the forest

fire. The animals that escaped the flames and were seen near our camp were dazed. Squirrels and chipmunks could be picked up, deer fed near the camp.

Today, even with the improved methods of firefighting, a Forest Ranger carries a heavy load of responsibility for the safety of his men. Danger is ever present. Under certain conditions a small fire, started in a mountain valley, builds up pressure and explodes, just as the fire in your furnace or stove sometimes backfires with a minor explosion. The surrounding mountainsides are ablaze from bottom to top in an interval of minutes and a man located above the initial blaze is doomed. During the second stage the heat develops air currents which may be augmented by high winds to fan the fire into a racing, raging monster beyond control.

When nature goes on the rampage, man's efforts are futile. I recall the legend of the young man who, while writing his Civil Service examination for Forest Ranger, came to this question, "What would you do in case of a crown fire and a head wind?" His answer: "I would run like hell and pray for rain." Right.

(Note: The fire near Cabinet has been described by Elers Koch as the Dry Creek fire. After so many years, man's memory is not always reliable, but the spring was not in the clearing at the campground; rather it was in the nearby timbered ravine. It may be there now, but was boiled dry by the fire. -- EGS)