

Surrounded by Forest Fires

My Most Exciting Experience as a Forest Ranger

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Winner of the First Prize in the Ranger Story Contest

DURING the summer of 1910 forest fires were everywhere in the Cœur d'Alene Mountains of northern Idaho. For weeks there had been no rain and the woods were drier than I had ever seen them. The intense heat of the sun, combined with strong winds which sprang up during the day, served to scatter the fires in all directions. Crews of several hundred men were working twenty-four hours a day throughout the mountains, endeavoring to hold back the fires.

The Supervisor of the Cœur d'Alene National Forest, whose headquarters were in Wallace, Idaho, had detailed me to go from one fire camp to another to direct the men in the battle against the flames, and to see that the packers properly distributed supplies. Although we worked day and night and did everything that could be done to control the fires, little headway was made because of the dryness of the forest and those strong winds.

On August 20 a terrific hurricane broke over the mountains. It picked up the fires and carried them for miles. The wind was so strong that it almost lifted men out of their saddles, and the canyons seemed to act as chimneys, through which the wind and fires swept with the roar of a thousand freight trains. The smoke and heat became so intense that it was difficult to breathe. The men who were packing in supplies refused to go through to their destinations, dumped their loads, and fled back to Wallace. Thou-

sands of dollars' worth of blankets and supplies were thus lost.

That afternoon the wind swept the mountains in circles and joined the fires. The whole world seemed to us men back in those mountains to be aflame. Many thought that it really was the end of the world. Under such conditions, it would have been worse than foolhardy to attempt to fight the fires. It was a case of saving our

lives. I got on my horse and went where I could, gathering men. Most of them were unfamiliar with the country, and I knew that if they ever got out they would have to be led out; but those that I got together were so panic-stricken it was very difficult to make them understand what I wanted them to do. Added to that, it had become very dark, although it was but little after mid-day.

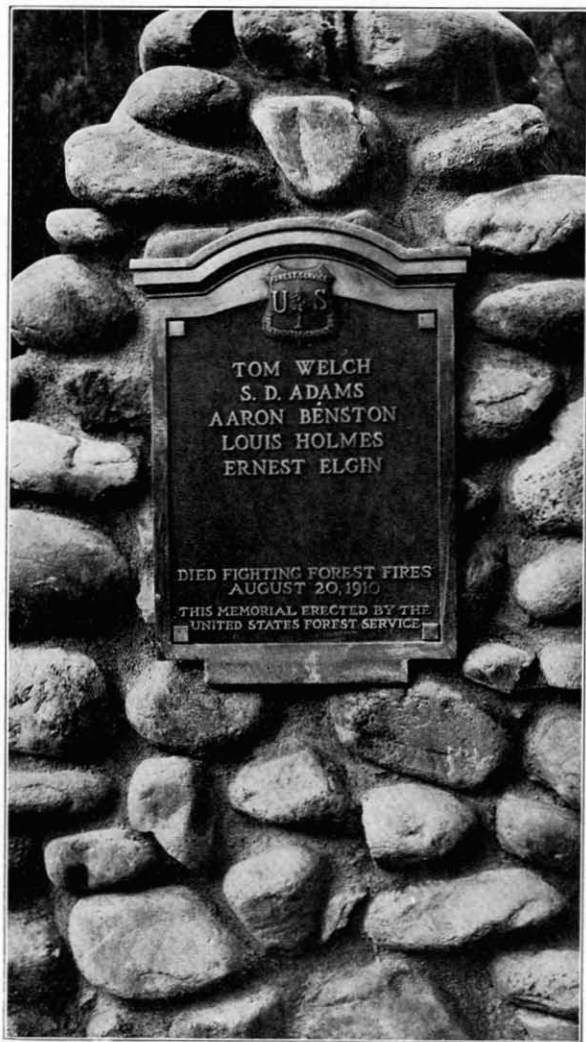
I finally collected forty-five men. My voice was almost gone from trying to call above the noise of the fire and wind, but I finally succeeded in making them understand that if they would seize blankets from the camp stocks and do just as I told

them, there was a chance of our saving our lives; otherwise they would be burned to death. Trees were falling all about us under the strain of the fires and heavy winds, and it was almost impossible to see through the smoky darkness. Had it not been for my familiarity with the mountain trails, we would never have come out alive, for we were completely surrounded by raging, whipping fire.



WE WERE COMPLETELY SURROUNDED BY RAGING, WHIPPING FIRE

My one hope was to reach an old mine tunnel which I knew to be not far from us. We raced for it. On the way one man was killed by a falling tree. We reached the mine just in time, for we were hardly in when the fire swept over our trail. I ordered the men to lie face down upon the ground of the tunnel and not dare to sit up



A MONUMENT TO BRAVERY

During the holocaust of 1910 many lives were lost, and in recognition of some of those unsung heroes who, burned and smoke-scarred, battled and choked out their lives on the far-flung fire-line, the Forest Service raised this rugged monument. Suitable headstones with bronze tablets were erected over as many of these "heroes of peace" as could be traced, for they died as truly in the service of their country as did those on Flanders' poppy-covered fields.

unless they wanted to suffocate, for the tunnel was filling with fire gas and smoke. One man tried to make a rush outside, which would have meant certain death. I drew my revolver and said,

"The first man who tries to leave this tunnel I will shoot."

I did not have to use my gun.

Two horses were in the tunnel with us. The horse I was riding I had given to an old man who could not keep up with us in the race to the tunnel. I often wonder what happened to the bear that came down that fiery trail with us and insisted on getting in our way. But at the time I gave no thought to bear or horses. Outside the tunnel the canyon was a raging furnace. The mine timbers caught fire, so I stood at the entrance and hung wet blankets over the opening, trying to keep the flames back by filling my hat with water, which fortunately was in the mine, and throwing it on the burning timbers.

The men were in a panic of fear, some crying, some praying. Many of them soon became unconscious from the terrible heat, smoke, and fire gas. The wet blankets actually caught fire and I had to replace them with others soaked in water. But I, too, finally sank down unconscious. I do not know how long I was in this condition, but it must have been for hours. I remember hearing a man say, "Come outside, boys, the boss is dead." I replied, "Like hell he is." I raised myself up and felt fresh air circulating through the mine. The men were becoming conscious. It was 5 o'clock in the morning.

We tried to stand up, but our legs refused to hold us; so we dragged ourselves outside to the creek to ease our parched throats and lips. Our disappointment was terrible when we found the stream filled with ashes and the water too warm to drink. We counted our number. Five were missing. Some of the men went back and tried to awaken them, but they were dead. As the air outside became clearer, we gained strength, and finally were able to stagger to our feet and start toward Wallace. We had to make our way over burning logs and through smoking debris. When walking failed us, we crawled on hands and knees.

How we got down I hardly know. We were in a terrible condition, all of us hurt or burned. I was blind and my hands were burned from trying to keep the fire out of the mine. Our shoes were burned off our feet and our clothing was in parched rags. We were covered with mud and ashes. Some time during the morning a rescue party met us. These men had had a hard time themselves and were in a very poor condition to help us. Later, as we dragged our way down through Placer Creek, we were met by some women from Wallace. They had hot coffee and whiskey, and although we appreciated the kindness of those brave women, we could take nothing but cold water.

We finally reached Wallace and were put in the different hospitals. Those who had died were later brought out on pack-horses. Part of Wallace had burned in that same fire, so when my injuries were dressed I insisted upon going to my home, to make sure that my wife and little daughter were all right. I got a man to lead me, for the world was black to my eyes; but when I found my home and family safe, they sent me back to the hospital, where I stayed for nearly two months with blindness and pneumonia. My experience left me with poor eyes, weak lungs, and throat; but, thank God, I am not now blind.