

## First Hand Accounts of the 1910 Fires

By Lincoln Bramwell, USDA Forest Service Chief Historian

As the summer approaches, we come closer to the 100th anniversary of the 1910 Northern Rockies fires.

That summer in 1910, thousands of fires swept across Oregon, northern Idaho and western Montana, culminating in a firestorm that consumed over 1 million acres in a single 24-hour period between August 21 and 22.

Although the fires burned 3 million acres in Idaho and Montana, they affected the entire country's forestlands for the next century.

The heroic and somewhat pyrrhic efforts of the Forest Service's overwhelmed rangers, who lost 78 firefighters in the firestorm, touched the hearts of the public and prompted legislative action.

Following the fires, the Forest Service committed itself to extinguishing every fire in the national forests, a policy the agency followed for nearly a century. To support this effort, Congress doubled the agency's budget the following year and more importantly facilitated passage of the 1911 Weeks Act.

The Act provided the statutory foundation for the agency's cooperative agreements with private landowners and states for fire suppression and forest management. In addition, the Weeks Act authorized the agency to purchase private forestlands east of the Mississippi River, creating the eastern national forests.

Here is a look back at the 1910 in the words of the people who were there. Click on the photos to see a larger version:



*For days an ominous, stifling pall of smoke had hung over the valleys and mountain. Crews of men, silent and grim, worked along the encircling fire trenches. Bear, deer, elk and mountain lions stalked stary-eyed [sic] and restless through the camps, their fear of man overcome by a greater terror. Birds, bewildered, hopped about in the thickets, their song subdued, choked by the stifling smoke and oppressive heat. No rain had fallen since May...All nature seemed tense, unnatural and ominous. - **Joe Halm***

**Left: A fire rages near the Bullion Mine near Wallace, Idaho. USFS Photo**

*To appreciate the difficulties of the situation facing me then,...one must remember...there were but few miles of trails, low-standard ones at that, and almost no roads in the forested country. There was no such thing as radio, and telephone connections with people in the rural districts who might have been willing to help were almost entirely lacking. - **Theodore Shoemaker***



**Right: Breakfast at fire camp, Avery, Idaho. Courtesy Historical Museum at Fort Missoula.**



*The air felt close, oppressive and explosive. Drift smoke clouded the sky day after day. District Forester W.B. Greeley, en route to Missoula over the Great Northern, wired from the train to be met at the depot. His first question was, "Where are the fires?" –*  
**Clarence Swim**

**Left: Region One District Forester William B. Greeley. USFS photo.**



*In the face of all these difficulties the little force of rangers and guards struggled desperately, and in many cases effectively, with the constantly recurring fires. By July 15 over 3,000 men were employed as firefighters. Men were shipped from Missoula, Spokane, and Butte until the supply of floating labor was exhausted. –*  
**Elers Koch**

**Right: Lolo National Forest Supervisor Elers Koch. USFS photo.**



*Finally the climax came. With the humidity down to almost nothing, the southwest fire wind from the Snake River desert whipped into a gale that lasted two days. Hundreds of fires that had been burning for days picked up and joined in the advance of the terrific sweep of fire which roared out of the wilderness forests of the Clearwater, St. Joe and Coeur d'Alene country in Idaho, across the Bitterroot Mountains into Montana to a distance of 40 or 50 miles. The sky turned first a ghastly yellow, then darkness shut down in the middle of the afternoon. When all was over a large part of the town of Wallace had burned. Saltese, Haugan, Deborgia and numerous ranches and ranger stations were left in ashes. -*  
**Elers Koch**

**Above: Smoke column approaching Wallace, Idaho. Photo courtesy University of Idaho Special Collections.**

*With the evening came the wind from the south carrying the Red Terror toward us...Among those mighty mountains which seemed one mass of flames were many precious lives, we knew, fire fighters and prospectors, and we wondered how they could possibly escape. –*  
**Mr. Swaine**

*Looking down the valley, one could see the fire coming on with a rush and a roar that once seen and heard can never be forgotten, and the flames leaping 300 feet high meet in an arch extending from one hill top to the other. A fierce gust of wind would strike the summit and flames would leap clear across from one summit to the other in one continuous stream of fire for a distance of over a half mile. It would have been a most beautiful sight had one not realized that in the next moment you might be caught in its fiery folds and know no more. -*  
**Arthur Hogue**



**Right: Wallace, Idaho, burning at night. Photo courtesy University of Idaho Special Collections.**



*The whole twenty-five miles of railroad through the rugged country between Avery and the Taft Tunnel was swept by a consuming blast of fire... Between Avery and the Taft Tunnel there were probably 1,000 people... These were picked up by work trains, at the last moment, with bridges blazing, and at imminent danger to the trainmen's lives. Trains were run into tunnels and held there while*

the fire swept by, consuming everything up to the tunnel portals. Sixteen bridges, from 120 to 775 feet in length, were burned in this section. - **Elers Koch**

**Left: Fire refugees in western Montana. Photo courtesy Historical Museum at Fort Missoula.**

The mine timbers at the mouth of the tunnel caught fire, so I stood up 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 ... 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 and felt fresh air circulating through the mine. The men were all becoming conscious. It was five o'clock in the morning... - **Ed Pulaski**

Consequently, when fires had completely surrounded us, and were crowding within a few feet of our doors, and sparks raining like water, it was unnamously [sic] agreed that the town [Mullan, Idaho] must surely go unless the entire west, north and east could be protected by backfires...It took courage to start more fires with surrounding country already a sea of fire and the wind a veritable fury but it was our only chance...There was now no outlet. Fancy a deep bowl which is completely lined with seething flames, yourself a spectator in the center, and you can in some degree conceive the scene. - **Mr. Swaine**



**Right: The entrance to War Eagle Mine where Ed Pulaski saved his crew. Photo courtesy University of Idaho Special Collections.**



In order to save anything at all we had to begin firing the buildings on the outskirts of the town [Avery, Idaho], and then the terrible work of forcing the backfire towards the big blaze began. I will never forget the sight. An impassable wall of fire was eating its way down the hillside. Our backfire, which had assumed huge proportions, was creeping up towards it. In exactly four and one-half minutes after we started our fire, the two met. Never have I seen anything like it. Plunging at each other like two living animals, the two met with a roar that must have been heard miles away. The tongues of fire seemed to leap up to heaven itself and after an instant's seething sank to nothingness. We had won, but the strain

of those four and a half minutes had exhausted us and we sank down and lay there in the ashes babbling incoherent thanks to God. - **Thaddeus Roe**

**Above: Civilians light backfires near 6th Street in Wallace, Idaho. Photo courtesy University of Idaho Special Collections.**

David Bailey survived at Beauchamp's homestead by diving into a creek. He wrote: "It was while holding a covering over my head that I burned my hands. We were in the creek for about two hours, I believe, and we were all shaking from the cold as though we were suffering from the fever when we piled out..." Seven of his comrades who fled into a cave were, in Bailey's words, "cooked alive." "All of them tried to get at the very end of the small hole and



they were piled up in an awful heap. It was impossible to take out their bodies, for they would fall to pieces."

**Right: Beauchamp homestead before the fire. USFS photo.**



*The most pitiful sight ever witnessed in Mullan occurred Sunday morning when the 15 survivors of the Boulder creek fire limped into town. All were staggering and all carried their arms in the air. They were badly burned and only relief that could be obtained was by holding their hands 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 that they could not at first give a coherent account of what had occurred. - **The Daily Idaho Press, Wallace, Idaho, Aug. 22, 1910***

**Injured firefighters Mr. Zeller (left) and Anton Canjar photographed in Wallace, Idaho. Photo courtesy University of Idaho Special Collections.**

*The greenness had vanished. The canyons and hillsides were covered with a twisted mass of broken blackened trees, in some places five trees deep. It reminded me of jackstraws more than anything else. Great pines almost two hundred feet long were there, broken, twisted and fallen, the product of hundreds of years of slow but sure accumulation of food from the earth and air. What a sad sight it all was for one who had viewed the same country from this spot only a few months before. - **William W. Morris***



**Right: Heavy burn near Fallon, Idaho. USFS photo.**



*In all directions there was nothing left but the burning stumps of once-beautiful trees; a downed monarch of the forest, fallen to the ground, fed the fire along its entire length. There were hot ash-heaps where trees had criss-crossed in falling and met hot destruction together. Appalling desolation everywhere. - **Orland Scott***

**Left: Temporary St. Joe Ranger Station two weeks after fire. The Station was completely destroyed. USFS photo.**

[http://www.fs.fed.us/fstoday/100521/03.1LOOKING\\_BACK/1910fires.html](http://www.fs.fed.us/fstoday/100521/03.1LOOKING_BACK/1910fires.html)