

## The Great Fires

In the summer of 1910, drought, sparks from trains, and lightning touched off wildfires in the West that ultimately scorched three million acres of forest. Smoke darkened skies as far away as Boston. Most of the devastation occurred in two terrifying August days that became known as “The Big Burn” or “The Big Blow-up,” when gale force winds whipped small fires into a violent inferno. One observer said it felt as though the world was coming to an end.

“Smoke billowed up as dense as volcanic blasts, the fire’s convection sucked in air from all sides, snapping off mature larch and white pine like matchsticks, spawning firewhirls like miniature tornadoes, flinging sparks like a sandstorm.”

Stephen J. Pyne, *Year of the Fires*, 2001

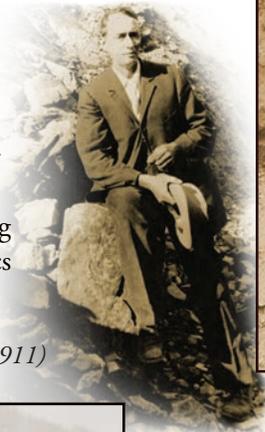


*Mine tunnel entrance shortly after the fire*

## Ed Pulaski's Heroic Rescue

At the conflagration’s height, Forest Service Ranger Ed Pulaski gathered over 40 men, and—with the smoke turning day to night—raced down a draw, taking shelter in a mine tunnel. Pulaski’s heroics saved all but six of his crew.

*Ranger Edward C. Pulaski (circa 1911)*



*Wallace after the August 20 fire (note the new courthouse that was spared)*

## The Aftermath

Before the fires surrendered to a cold front and rain, at least 85 people perished. Much of Wallace and several other towns were in ashes.

“Game animals were killed by the thousands and the stream bottoms were white with the bellies of dead trout. Billions of feet of fine timber had burned, and millions of acres left a blackened waste.”

Elers Koch, Lolo Forest Supervisor, 1940

**Idaho Panhandle National Forest**  
Caring for the Land and Serving People



## Fire Policy Today

The fires of 1910 had a legacy that could not have been foreseen by those who endured them. The Forest Service embraced a 100 percent suppression policy toward wildfire and made it the agency's top priority.

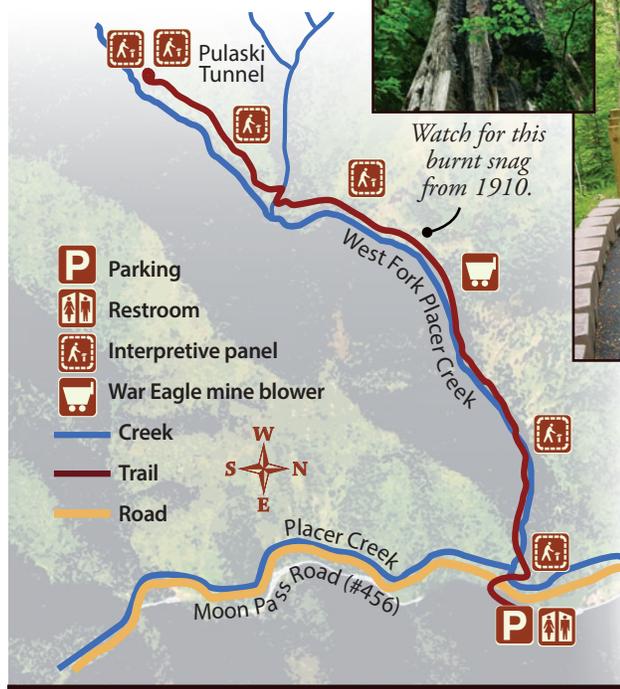
Decades of fire exclusion resulted in unanticipated consequences. The most dangerous, ironically, was the build-up of fuels which created even greater fire hazards. Fire suppression also interrupted the natural processes that some species and ecosystems need to regenerate themselves.



In 1913, Ranger Pulaski developed what is still a primary firefighting tool—the pulaski—a combination ax and mattock.



Watch for this burnt snag from 1910.



Today, fire policy is more complex; fire suppression is more calculated. Fire research, a changing climate, the expansion of communities into wildlands—these are just some of the factors that have transformed how we think about fire. The Forest Service still fights fire, especially to protect communities and the resources people need. Fire is also used to grow healthier forests and to care for our natural resources.

Over 100 years later, the Pulaski Tunnel Trail is a powerful but poignant reminder that we must continue to learn how to live with fire on the land. This trail honors those who risk their lives to fight fire, and those who have died in its ruinous path.



## The Pulaski Tunnel Trail

The trailhead to the site of Edward Pulaski's ordeal during the Great Fires of 1910 is five minutes from Wallace, Idaho. The site's harsh history is now buffered by a thick green cloak of spruce and fir; the West Fork of Placer Creek cascades down the ravine. Signs along the trail tell of the calamitous summer of fire and the people who suffered its scars.



## Know Before You Go

Allow two to four hours for the four-mile round trip to the Pulaski Tunnel overlook. The trail's first 725 feet are paved and accessible. The trail then gains 800 feet in elevation to the overlook. Several benches line the trail, but drinking water is not available.

## For More Information

Coeur d'Alene River Ranger District: Silver Valley Office (208) 783-2363 or Fernan Office (208) 664-2318  
<http://www.fs.usda.gov/attmain/ipnfs/specialplaces>