

Edward Pulaski



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“Big Ed” Pulaski: A Short Biography

Edward Crockett Pulaski may have been born on February 9, 1868, on a farm near Green Springs, Ohio. Like so much in Pulaski’s story, different sources offer different dates. Green Springs is a village in northern Ohio, south of Lake Erie. Ed was the son of Rudolph (1840-1928) and Celia Pulaski (1840-1918). The 1880 federal census listed Rudolph Pulaski’s birthplace as “Poland,” Celia’s as “Ohio.” According to a letter about family history, Rudolph came to America in 1857 and married Celia Crockett, of Tiffin, Ohio, on February 14, 1864. Tiffin is an Ohio town 18 miles southwest of Green Springs. Rudolph became an American citizen October 5 1866. Ed was Rudolph and Celia’s first child, followed by Emma, George, and Mary. The family moved from Ohio to Marshall, Missouri perhaps sometime in the 1870s. Marshall lies in central Missouri, roughly 85 miles east of Kansas City and 660 miles west-southwest of Green Springs. Why they moved is unknown.

Ed’s formal education was limited, although not unusually so for his time. He attended “country school” near Green Springs and “graded school” at Marshall, quitting, as he once wrote, “at about 15 years to make living.” An adventurous uncle, his mother’s brother, influenced Ed considerably as a boy. Ed treasured a series of the uncle’s letters written to his mother from “Fort Wallah Wallah,” beginning in 1851. In 1884, at age sixteen, Ed himself left home for the West. Young Ed took the just-completed Northern Pacific Railway to Thompson Falls, in what was then the Montana Territory. From there, he trekked over the snow-covered trail to the booming placer camp of Murray, in Idaho Territory, arriving in May, 1884, at the beginning of the summer work season. Ed was soon hired as a packer, transporting supplies to Saul Nathan’s general store, the first merchant establishment in Murray. Ed married Emma Zenobia Dickinson on Feb. 7, 1900. They adopted a daughter, Elsie C., and first made their home in Burke and then, later, in Wallace, Idaho.



Ed’s work experience before joining the Forest Service was colorful and varied. Over the two dozen years between 1884 and 1908, when he joined the Service, Ed reported he’d had “about 15 year’s experience as miner steam engineer and smelter man”; he’d had “charge of several quartz mills”; had some experience as a saw mill “engineer and scaler”; and prospected “for several summers.” Ed also worked as a foreman on a cattle ranch in southern Idaho for two seasons; as a saw mill engineer and scaler; and as an independent prospector “for several summers.” In addition, he had work experience as a blacksmith, carpenter, plumber, and contractor.

Pulaski joined the fledgling Forest Service in the summer of 1908. He was forty years old at that point and perhaps wanted a steady job, a regular home, and a career that would put him in the woods. Pulaski was not a typical Forest Service hire. At the time, most Forest Service officers were young, college educated, unmarried, and from the eastern part of the nation. Pulaski’s Forest Service duties were, once again, rich and varied: he managed, controlled, protected, harvested, planted, and monitored the national forest lands for which he was responsible.

According to one summary Ed prepared, he built cabins and trails, examined claims reports, fought fires, put up telephone lines and installed telephones, built houses at Montgomery Creek and Avery, built tool houses and tool boxes, and “controlled all fires up to year 1910 and after.” His Forest Service career covered 22 years, ending in February, 1930, only a year before his death.

“Big Ed’s” heroic role in the Big Burn is the best remembered episode in his Forest Service career. It has been described by many authors in numerous books and magazines. Ed was in charge of a crew of firefighters at a ridge dividing the watersheds of the St. Joe and Coeur d’Alene rivers. Pulaski assembled about 45 men and advised them that they would have to try to make it to Wallace to save their lives. He led them down the West Fork of Placer Creek. As he approached Wallace, the group band encountered flames coming up the canyon. Ed revised his plan, now hoping to get his men to the War Eagle mine, rather than Wallace, for refuge. Fire blocked the way, however, and so Ed reversed course and headed back in the uphill direction to the Nicholson mine, roughly a mile from the War Eagle. All but one of his men, and two horses, managed to make it the mine. Over the ensuing hours the raging fire’s smoke, heat, and fumes sent all the men into unconsciousness. When they awakened early the following morning, one man, seeing Pulaski still lying near the mine portal, said, “The boss is dead.” “Like hell he is,” said Pulaski in response.

In all, six of Pulaski’s men perished, including the man who did not make it into the mine. Both horses died. Of the five men who died inside the mine, two perished by drowning in a pool of water that gathered against the horses’ bodies. Pulaski’s familiarity with the landscape and his cool command of the situation saved the rest of the crew. Nevertheless, the crew’s six deaths continued to occupy Pulaski’s attentions long after the fire. He pressed the Forest Service over a twelve-year period for the creation of suitable grave monuments for them. His efforts finally met with success in 1921, when U.S. Congress awarded \$500 for a fitting monument’s construction, at Nine Mile Cemetery outside Wallace.

Ed Pulaski was a reluctant hero of the Great Fire of 1910. He was not a hero in his own eyes. He rarely spoke of the event. Forest Supervisor William Weigle, however, described Pulaski in the following words:

Mr. Pulaski is a man of most excellent judgment; conservative, thoroughly acquainted with the region, having prospected through the region for over twenty-five years. He is considered by the old-timers as one of the best and safest men to be placed in charge of a crew of men in the hills.

Edward Pulaski name and service are also perpetuated in the pulaski tool -- a combination axe and hoe — that Ed refined for use as a firefighting implement soon after the Big Burn. The Forest Service began using the tool to fight fires in 1913; its commercial manufacture began in 1920. Historian Stephen Pyne called the pulaski “the supreme fire tool,” noting that it “embedded the legend of 1910 more firmly than any agency stunt, congressional memorial, or recovered memory.”

Edward Crockett Pulaski died on February 2, 1931 in Coeur d’Alene, Idaho. He was buried at Coeur d’Alene’s Forest Cemetery. He expired a week short of his 65th birthday. Emma passed away on March 11, 1948. She is buried next to Ed.

What makes Pulaski a hero?

- A. He saved most of the fire fighters in his crew. (38 saved – 6 lost)
- B. He made a number of decisions that indicate heroism.
 - 1. He was in Wallace and decided to return to the forest to round up his men.
 - 2. He left his wife and child in Wallace to face the impending fire on their own.
 - 3. He continued his journey into the heart of the fire though the men leading a pack train of supplies turned back.
 - 4. He rounded up his crew at Lake Elsie above Kellogg despite the increased fire danger.
 - 5. He gave an older fire fighter his horse so he was able to keep up with the crew.
 - 6. He led the crew to a smaller first tunnel and then continued on to find a larger tunnel.
 - 7. He returned to the crew and led them to the larger tunnel.

“S.W. Stockton remembers: Saturday evening a regular hurricane sprung up and in a moment the fire had broken over the branches and was in every direction about us . . . One cannot imagine what a roar of wind there was in those small canyons. The mountainsides were aflame and trees were falling in all directions about us, faster than one could count. The noise of those falling trees only added to the din. It was terrible. In this frightful confusion we tore along single file with Pulaski at the head. At times it would seem that the canyon in front of us was blocked with flame.”

- 8. He ordered the men into the tunnel and fought the fire at the entrance with his bare hands.
- 9. He held some of the panicked men in the tunnel at the point of a gun.
- 10. After he and most of his crew survived the night of fire, he lead the crew to the hospital in Wallace.

Pulaski took a face-full of flame on Saturday night. He was burned over many parts of his body. His skin was raw and festered; he was blind in one eye and unable to see very well in the other. He was in the hospital for a month after the fire.

- 11. After the fire, Pulaski fought for payment to hospital bills incurred by his crew.
- 12. He also fought for gravesite recognition of those who died in the fire.

Pulaski: The Firefighting Tool

Stephen Pyne in Year of the Fires (2001) calls it “the supreme fire tool,” noting that it “embedded the legend of 1910 more firmly than any agency stunt, congressional memorial, or recovered memory.” **Every time a firefighter reaches for a pulaski, he or she figuratively retells “the story of Big Ed and the Big Blowup, the saga of the Great Fires and the year that tried to contain them”**



From Wikipedia:

The **pulaski** is a special hand tool used in wildland firefighting. The tool combines an axe and an adze in one head, similar to that of the cutter mattock, with a rigid handle of wood, plastic, or fiberglass. The pulaski is a versatile tool for constructing firebreaks, as it can be used to both dig soil and chop wood. It is also well adapted for trail construction, gardening, and other outdoor work. As a gardening or excavation tool, it is effective for digging holes in root-bound or hard soil.

The invention of the pulaski is credited to Ed Pulaski, an assistant ranger with the United States Forest Service, in 1911 although a similar tool was first introduced in 1876 by the Collins Tool Company. Ed Pulaski was famous for taking action to save the lives of a crew of 45 firefighters during the disastrous August 1910 wildfires in Idaho. His invention (or reinvention) of the tool that bears his name may have been a direct result of the disaster, as he saw the need for better firefighting tools. The pulaski came into wide use by the Forest Service after 1913, and in 1920 the Forest Service began contracting for the tool to be commercially manufactured.

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INVENTING THE PULASKI

Gerald W. Williams

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Jerry Williams is the national historian for the USDA Forest Service in Washington, D.C.

Most firefighters know that the pulaski firefighting tool was named for Ed Pulaski, the hero of the Big Blowup of 1910. Pulaski, a jack-of-all-trades, is often credited with inventing the tool in the years following the Big Blowup. However, stories abound about the tool’s invention, and not every account is the same.

Early Tools

James B. Davis (1986), a research forester for the USDA Forest Service, noted that the Collins Tool Company developed a tool as early as 1876 that was designed to clear land. This farm tool, still on display at the Smithsonian Museum of Arts and Industry, looked and functioned essentially like today's pulaski. It is not clear why the Collins land grubbing tool was not used either to put out fires or as a model for a practical firefighting tool. As Davis (1986) points out, early fire tools were whatever firefighters happened to have available. Early firefighting usually involved "knocking down" or beating out the flames, because water was generally not available. Beating out was usually done with a coat, a slicker, a wet sack, or even a saddle blanket. "A commonly used tool," notes Davis (1986), "was a pine bough cut on arrival at the fire edge." Farming and logging tools came into use, including the shovel, ax, hoe, and rake. "[L]ittle thought was given to size, weight, and balance," notes Davis (1986).

For many years, "ranger inventors" toyed with the idea of building one tool that could do several jobs and be carried on a horse or pack mule and by a firefighter or tree planter. Many variations of such tools were tried and discarded. Several did rise to the top, including the Macleod tool, invented in 1905 by Ranger Malcolm Macleod on the Sierra National Forest in California. This sturdy combination rake-and-hoe or ax-and-mattock has withstood the test of time, although it never gained the popularity of the pulaski.

Pulaski Origins

Davis (1986) describes the pulaski's disputed origins. Earle P. Dudley claimed to have invented a pulaskilike tool by having a local blacksmith modify a lightweight mining pick. He said he used the tool for firefighting in the Forest Service's Northern Region in 1907. William G. Weigle, supervisor of the Coeur d'Alene National Forest, also took credit for inventing a pulaskilike tool, though not for firefighting. Weigle wanted a new tool to replace the mattock for planting and other forestry work. In late 1910 or 1911, Weigle sent Rangers Joe Halm and Ed Holcomb to Ranger Ed Pulaski's home blacksmith shop to turn out a combination ax, mattock, and shovel.

The device proved to be too awkward for use as a planting tool. But Pulaski kept using and improving it. He abandoned the shovel part and reshaped the ax and mattock blades. By 1913, he had a well-balanced tool with a sharp ax on one side and a grubbing blade on the other. By 1920, the Forest Service's Northern Region had "adopted the tool as its own," according to the fire historian Stephen J. Pyne (2001). The Forest Service asked for commercial production in quantity, and the pulaski and shovel soon became "the dominant, defining tools of fire control" (Pyne 2001).

Pulaski Legend

Ed Pulaski might not have invented the tool that bears his name, but he certainly helped to develop, improve, and popularize it (Davis 1986). Today, many thousands of pulaskis are ordered every year by the Federal Government, as well as by State and county firefighting organizations. Forestry supply catalogs always seem to have a category for pulaski fire tools. For more than 75 years, firefighting has been defined by the tool named for Ed Pulaski. Pyne (2001) calls it "the supreme fire tool," noting that it "embedded the legend of 1910 more firmly than any agency stunt, congressional memorial, or recovered memory." Every time a firefighter reaches for a pulaski, he or she figuratively retells "the story of Big Ed and the Big Blowup, the saga of the Great Fires and the year that tried to contain them" (Pyne 2001).* Year of the fires: The story of the Great Fires of 1910. New York: Viking.