

**“AND HE SHEWED THEE HIS GREAT FIRE”:
Remembering the Great Fires of 1910**

Remarks delivered at the rededication ceremony at the firefighters’ memorial,
Woodlawn Cemetery, St Maries, Idaho on 20 August 2010

“And upon earth he shewed thee his great fire;
and thou heardest his words out of the midst of the fire”
Deuteronomy 4:36

A HUNDRED years ago, on this day, at this spot, American society and American nature collided with almost tectonic violence. Spark, woods, and wind merged into a cavalcade of conflagrations that overran forest from the Selways to the Canadian Rockies. Observers quickly dubbed them the Big Blowup. And perhaps at least some of them recalled a passage in Deuteronomy, “Upon earth he shewed thee his great fire; and thou heardest his words out of the midst of the fire.” The fire was indeed shown, and the words heard, but their meaning was obscured by the sheer immensity of their revelation.

THIS WAS the first great firefight by the U.S. Forest Service, or for that matter, by the federal government, which is to say, the nation as a whole. Large fires had followed frontier landclearing like ravens to carrion. But these fires were on public wildlands, and they became the first contest that challenged national power and will. As the scene evolved it called into being the whole apparatus of an American style of wildland fire, from a mass mustering of crews to emergency funding to postfire rehabilitation. Equally, it defined their meaning: it crafted a story to explain what had happened and what it signified.

As the weeks wore on, the fires had crept and swept, thickening into palls during calms, then flaring in wild rushes through the crowns. The fledgling Forest Service, barely five years old, tried to match them. It rounded up whatever men it could beg, borrow, or buy and shipped them into the backcountry. The regular Army contributed another 33 companies. The crews established camps, cut firelines along ridgetops, and backfired. Over and again, one refrain after another, the saga continued of fires contained, of fires escaping, of new fronts laid down. Then the Big Blowup shredded it all. That day 78 firefighters died. One crew on the Cabinet National Forest lost four men; one on the Pend Oreille lost two; rest of the dead fell on the Coeur d’Alene.

The Coeur d’Alene was ground zero. In the St. Joe Mountains between Wallace and Avery, some 1,800 firefighters and two companies of the 25th Infantry manned the lines when the Blowup struck. A crew north of Avery survived when Ranger William Rock led them to a previously burned area, except for one man who, panicking, shot himself twice rather than face the flames. A crew on Stevens Peak lit an escape fire in bear grass, then lost it when the winds veered, and one man died when he stood up and breathed the searing air. A crew at the Bullion Mine split, the larger party finding its way into a side adit, the rest, eight in all, died in the main shaft. On Setzer Creek some 28 men, four never identified even as to name, perished as they fled and fought their way uphill and fell in a collapsing ring of death. A gaggle of 19 spilled off the ridge overlooking Big Creek and sought refuge in the Dittman cabin. When the roof caught fire, they ran out. The first 18 died where they fell, in a heap along with five horses and two bears; the 19th twisted his ankle in crossing the threshold and collapsed to the ground, where he found a sheath of fresh air. Two days later Peter Kinsley crawled, alive, out of a creek. Another group dashed to the Beauchamp cabin, where they met a party of homesteaders. A white pine thundered to the ground and crushed two men immediately, while trapping a third by his ankle; he died, screaming, in the flames. Another seven squirmed into a root cellar where they roasted alive.

And then there was the crew cobbled together by Ranger Ed Pulaski. He had gone to Wallace for supplies and was returning on the morning of the 20th when the winds picked up their tempo and cast flame before them. He began to meet stragglers and then a large gang spalled off from the main ridge

camp. All in all he gathered 45 men, and with the smoke thickening in stygian darkness turned to race down the ravine of the West Fork toward Wallace. One man lagged and died in the flames. Pulaski hustled the rest over the trail before tucking them into a mine shaft. Then he hurried down canyon with a wet gunny sack over his head before returning and herding the group into a larger shaft, the Nicholson adit, which had a seep running through it. Pulaski tried to hold the flames out of the entry timbers and the smoke out of the mine with hatfuls of water and blankets. But by now the men were senseless. They heard nothing but the din, felt nothing but heat, saw nothing but flame and darkness, smelled only smoke and sweat. As the firestorm swirled by the entrance, someone yelled that he, at least, was getting out. At the entry, rudely silhouetted by flames, he met Ed Pulaski, pistol drawn, threatening to shoot the first man who tried to flee.

THOSE WERE the raw events. They ended with 78 dead, a sickened but enduring Ed Pulaski, a landscape seared and in places scoured, an agency deeply traumatized and perilously indebted, and a policy under fierce scrutiny. From its origins the Big Blowup had been a double firefight, one in the field against flames and one in Washington over the politics of fire and state-sponsored conservation. But it is just such entanglements with a broader culture that make big fires into great ones. The 1910 fires swept over the Canadian Rockies with hardly a whisper, but they smashed against the American Rockies because here the hammering flames struck an institutional anvil with a clang that still rings through America's wildlands.

The Great Fires seemed decisive in their significance – how could they not be? But in truth a long struggle emerged to extract meaning from the events, and it is that ambivalent ordeal that brings us here today. We are commemorating not so much the facts – there have been fires larger, more expensive, more damaging, more starkly flung in the face of public opinion, and more deadly. Rather, we are remembering the significance that has been attached to those facts. Commemorations do not emerge of themselves. They are made, and how they are made is a part of what they celebrate.

It took many decades, but what happened that day evolved into a creation story. This was a struggle as troublesome as manning firelines, for the meaning of the fires could veer as unpredictably and suddenly as the flames on the St Joe Mountains. The belief that fire ought to be managed on the public lands was, in 1910, an idea with many prophets but few converts, and the assertion that such fires ought to be fought was even more heretical. Most of the general public was indifferent or hostile to aggressive fire control, bar fires that immediately threatened property or lives. Rural Americans relied on fire - burned everything from ditches to fallow fields - and accepted the occasional wildfire as they did floods or tornadoes.

So as reports screamed across telegraph lines, it was not clear how the fires would be interpreted. Those actually on the ground considered the Great Firefight an utter rout. On the Lolo National Forest, supervisor Elers Koch declared the summer a "complete failure." Despite unparalleled efforts by the Forest Service, assisted by the Army, the flames had roared over the Bitterroots with no more pause than the Clarks Fork over a boulder. At national headquarters, foresters fretted whether the Great Fires might be the funeral pyre of the besieged Forest Service. In fact, those far removed from the flames saw them otherwise. They chose to see Pulaski's stand, not his flight. They saw a gallant gesture, not an act of desperation. The Forest Service's critics claimed the agency had been granted ample resources and had failed. Its defenders replied, the agency failed only because it had not been given enough. Both groups could point to the Big Blowup for confirmation.

In one astonishing moment the entire package of American fire protection presented itself, like a crystal suddenly materializing out of a solution. It was all there, not least the display of political theater, with the firefight as a test of legitimacy and will. Perhaps surprisingly, the tide of public opinion turned in favor of the Forest Service. The agency successfully defended its 1911 budget. The Weeks Act that would provide for the eastern expansion of the national forests by purchase and for federal-state cooperative programs in fire control, stalled for years, broke through the congressional logjam in February. In March a beleaguered Richard Ballinger, Gifford Pinchot's political rival, resigned. Foresters redoubled their efforts to crush light burning, and all it implied; then they turned on

other scoffers of fire protection. By now the Forest Service had the memory of the fires spliced into its institutional genes.

The Great Fires were the first major crisis faced by Henry Graves, Pinchot's handpicked successor, leading the agency after the patriarchal Pinchot had been dramatically fired by President Taft. The next three chief foresters - William Greeley, Robert Stuart, and Ferdinand Augustus Silcox - were all personally on the scene of the fires, had counted its costs, buried its dead, seized upon "smoke in the woods" as their yardstick of progress. Not until this entire generation passed from the scene would the Forest Service consider fire as fit for anything save suppression. Three months after the Big Blowup, Silcox wrote that the lesson of the fires was that they were wholly preventable. All it took was more money, more men, more trails, more will. And in 1935 Gus Silcox, then chief, had a chance to revisit that interpretation, and ended by promulgating the 10 AM policy, which stipulated as a national goal that every fire should be controlled by 10 o'clock the morning following its report. The veteran of 1910 would allow fire no sanctuary as he applied the full force of the Civilian Conservation Corps and the federal treasury. He would refigure the Great Fires, and this time he would win.

CHIEF FORESTER Silcox had identified what he regarded as the "lesson" of 1910 and applied it 25 years later in a form that would perpetuate itself for another 40 years. But history is full of lessons – the Great Fires boiled over with them, as littered with lessons as its burned landscapes were with jackstrawed white pine. The issue was not whether there were lessons but which lessons to seize upon, how to interpret their particular significance, and what parts of them might apply in very different circumstances. They could mean everything, and nothing. It was not certain that the Great Fires mattered beyond a founding generation of foresters or outside the Northern Rockies. On most issues, after all, the American fire community has a notoriously short memory: it obsesses over next year's firefight, not last year's, much less last century's.

Perhaps nothing better testifies to fire's shock than the painful inability of the Forest Service to find a suitable memorial for its fallen firefighters. No one had imagined scores of dead; there simply existed no bureaucratic mechanism to inter them properly, much less to honor their sacrifice. And no one had expected a similar need to translate those brutal facts into a narrative that could endow them with the kind of meaning that makes for a usable past. Like bodies of the fallen, the narrative of the fires had a hasty field burial until it was later exhumed and reburied into a more thoughtful setting many years later.

The 50th anniversary, for example, contrasts sharply with today's. While fire remained fundamental to the Forest Service, it had evolved over the years into a mild annual ritual or annoyance rather than an extraordinary catastrophe that threatened to burn the agency to its roots. In the summer of 1910 Henry Graves had declared that fire protection was 90% of American forestry. By 1960 it commanded less than 15% of the agency's operating budget. Such as there was, interest in commemorating the Great Fires was sparse and resided in local personalities. Knowledge of the crisis had so ebbed that no one could locate the site of the Nicholson adit, better known as the Pulaski tunnel, the defining moment of the Blowup.

Today, the fires' commemoration has achieved a wider reach. The reasons are many but among them are the revival of wildland fire as a national spectacle and political problem, the replacement of a fire-threatened rural frontier with a fire-threatened exurban one, and a reconnection of fire with the broader culture, for which Norman Maclean and *Young Men and Fire* are largely responsible. By recovering fire's valence to the national culture these events have allowed the Big Blowup to reclaim its status as a great fire. The Nicholson adit has been declared a national historic site. The Pulaski tunnel now climaxes an interpretive trail; the Pulaski tool is universally identified as the distinctive symbol of wildland fire management; the Pulaski story has become the plot pivot to our national narrative of fire. The sites of the fires have become hallowed ground.

THE NARRATIVE legacy of the Great Fires now reads as follows: The young Forest Service found itself threatened on many fronts, and fire was not only among those threats but a visible test on its

ability to do what it claimed needed doing. After the Big Blowup it determined to exclude fire so far as possible. It unwisely took out of the system a necessary natural element and created an institutional juggernaut that seemed ready to destroy the forest in order to save it. For the past four decades the federal agencies have tried to pick up the pieces from the wreckage wrought by fire control amid growing ecological insurgencies. The buildup of fuels and the havoc of fire-famished ecosystems have spawned megafires and degraded biotas. Now the need is for more of right kind of fire. This master narrative ends with a modernist twist, an implied irony that by honoring the victims of the Big Blowup we are perversely celebrating a massively wrong turn in America's environmental history.

This is where the received narrative, as written, must end. But I do not believe that is where we need or want it to go. The story of the Great Fires explains much of why the scene today looks the way it does. It does not explain what it *ought* to look like. It does not tell us what we should do. For this we need a new narrative, one that does not begin in August, 1910 nor end in ironic condescension.

We don't need to scrap the old narrative – it's too good, and as we see about us, it may be indispensable, for the fires burned in a moral universe no less than in mountains. Their story reminds us that we live in a world about which we know only a little yet a world in which we must act, which is to say, in a world in which character – for which hubris, recklessness, tenacity, courage, wisdom, and loyalty – matters more than rates of spread and fireline intensity. Now, no less than then, events can overtake our best ideas and intentions. So even as we retell the epic of 1910, we should recognize that we need to fashion another story, one equally compelling and convincing, to add to it. In this regard, the Great Fires can again instruct, for they tell us what it takes to embed a fire in a culture in ways that can both inform and inspire. Fires alone, no matter how large, are not enough: it is how they interact with their sustaining society that matters.

It took years, then decades, and now nearly a century to create suitable memorials for those who fought the fires. These sites bear witness to how the Great Fires of 1910 engaged with their times. The story of how Americans and their fires interact today has not yet gelled into a comparable story. A century hence, let us hope we will have crafted such a narrative, a testimonial better suited to the complex relationship we have with our land, one not dominated by metaphors of fighting and dying but of working with, renewing, and regenerating.

Today we honor those who fell in answering a call to arms and adventure. Tomorrow we can hope such calls will indeed be a thing of the past.

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