

Skyland Fire

FAQs

Announcement

Frequently Asked Questions

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Fire Information Center
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What is a Pulaski and why is it important to wildland firefighters?

The Pulaski is the first tool in the line of the most basic firefighting resource, a twenty-person crew.



A Story of the Great Fires of 1910. Edward Pulaski, a Forest Service District Ranger, developed the firefighting tool that bears his name.

Excerpted from "Mountains of Fire" by Sherry Devlin in the Missoulian, August 20, 2000, the 90th anniversary of the Big Blowup.

After the blowup, Edward Pulaski told the story of his crew to his wife, who recorded it for him. He was 40 years old and had prospected throughout the St. Joe and Coeur d'Alene for the past 25 years, signing on as a ranger with the Forest Service in 1908. Pulaski and his men - 150 in all - met the great fire on the divide between Big Creek of the St. Joe River and Big Creek of the Coeur d'Alene.

"On Aug. 20, a terrific hurricane broke over the mountains," Pulaski told his wife, who had remained in Wallace with her baby as the fire bore down on the town, escaping at the last moment to the slushy safety of a tailings flat. "The wind was so strong it lifted men out of their saddles. The smoke and heat became so intense that it was difficult to breathe. Under such conditions, it would have been worse than foolhardy to attempt to fight the fire. I got on my horse and went where I could, gathering my men." By the time Pulaski collected 45 men, his voice was nearly gone from trying to shout over the din of fire, wind and falling trees. Not a tree remained standing out front of the fire, so great was the wind.

It was nearly impossible to see through the smoke, nearly impossible to move through the crashing timber. Pulaski knew, from his prospecting days, that two old mine tunnels were nearby, one shorter, one longer. He and his men raced for the longer of the two. On the way, one man was killed by a falling tree. Another fell behind and was caught by the fire.

"We reached the tunnel just in time," he said. "I ordered the men to lie face down upon the ground and not dare to sit up, unless they wanted to suffocate, for the tunnel was filling with fire, gas and smoke."

The mine timbers caught fire. The cold air of the tunnel rushed out, drawn into the fire. Smoke and fire rushed in. Pulaski stood at the entrance, assuring those who might try to leave that he would shoot them, then filling his hat with mine water and throwing it at the burning timbers.

"The men were in a panic of fear, some crying, some praying," Pulaski said. "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." The next thing he knew was the voice of one of his men. "Come outside, boys; the boss is dead," the man said. "Like hell he is," Pulaski replied. It was five o'clock on the morning of Aug. 21.

"We tried to stand up, but our legs refused to hold us," he said. "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 hot 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 cleared and the men gained strength, they were able - although Pulaski did not know how - to stagger down the mountainside into Wallace. "When walking failed us, we crawled on our hands and knees. 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 tunnel. Our shoes were burned off our feet, and our clothes were in parched rags. Those who died later were brought in on pack horses."

LEADERSHIP The Pulaski is the first tool in the line of the most basic firefighting resource, a twenty-person crew. As such, crewmembers refer to their place on a crew as a distinction of honor and importance, for example, 3rd Pulaski, or, the most coveted, LEAD Pulaski. As such, the Pulaski represents leadership to firefighters all over the world.

VERSATILITY The Pulaski has both an axe-head and a hoe. It is a versatile tool, ready to chop or dig; ready to do any job that confronts it. This design represents versatility to firefighters.

HARD WORK The Pulaski is a hand tool. It isn't an automated device, an airplane, a computer, nor is it an easy tool to use. It requires hard work to be effective. The Pulaski represents hard work to all firefighters.

This information demonstrates that the Skyland Fire is being fought aggressively and safely to meet the objectives listed on the main page of the InciWeb.org - Skyland Fire website.

This Fire Update was produced by the Skyland Information Center staffed by PNW Team 3 Incident Management Team.
