

# BIG ED PULASKI AND THE BIG BLOWUP

Gerald W. Williams



There are many stories about the Big Blowup of August 20–21, 1910, when a massive million-acre firestorm charred vast areas of national forest and remote towns in western Montana and northern Idaho. More than 85 lives were lost. The Montana towns of DeBorgia, Grand Forks, Haugan, Henderson, and Taft were completely destroyed.

In Idaho, the flames swept around the frontier town of Wallace, destroying many homes and buildings. Wallace sits in Silver Valley, a peaceful valley 40 miles (64 k) long, east of Coeur d'Alene and west of Lookout Pass. The community was very small in 1910; even today, there are less than a thousand residents.

Wallace was home to Ed Pulaski, whose tale is the most enduring story associated with the Big Blowup. In the summer of 1910, Pulaski was 42 years old. A native of Ohio, he had wandered west at age 16 to work in the mills and mines of Montana and Idaho. In 1910, he was barely 2 years into his Forest Service career as the district ranger on the Wallace Ranger District, Coeur d'Alene National Forest.

"Big Ed" was a physically imposing man. Like others in the USDA Forest Service, Pulaski was leading a crew of firefighters against the Great Fires of 1910, which hit the Northern Rockies beginning in July. "By August 19," wrote Charles K. McHarg (1931), "Pulaski had about 120 men on the St. Joe/Coeur

"Some men went berserk, clamoring over the prostrate bodies, choking, gasping. Others praying. Others laughing."

—William Chance, survivor in the Pulaski mine

d'Alene divide working on fires in the two Big Creeks." The stage was set for an encounter between a massive, uncontrollable forest fire and the fortitude and determination of a small group of firefighters trying to save their lives.

## From the Horse's Mouth

In 1923, the journal *American Forests and Forest Life* held an essay contest asking subscribers to write about their most exciting experience as a forest ranger. Pulaski submitted his story "Surrounded by Forest Fires," which was printed in the journal's August issue (see the sidebar). After that, he "never wrote another word about the Great Fires or, for that matter, spoke of them further in any formal way," noted the fire historian Stephen J. Pyne (2001).

Pulaski told a simple story. On August 20, there was "a terrific hurricane" that was "so strong it almost lifted men out of their saddles."\* The winds carried fire for miles, joining the fires, which "swept with the roar of a thousand freight trains." The intense smoke and heat made it difficult to breathe.

Fear became a factor. Men packing in supplies to the firefighters simply dumped their loads and fled back to town. With "the whole world" seemingly ablaze, many firefighters "thought that it really was the end of the world." Pulaski abandoned all hope of fighting the fires and simply tried to get his crew to safety.

He managed to gather 45 men. Barely making himself heard "above

## PULASKI'S STORY

*Editor's note: Ed Pulaski formally told his story only once, in the August 1923 edition of American Forests and Forest Life. The following excerpt illustrates his simple, straightforward style.*

On August 20 a terrific hurricane broke over the mountains. It picked up fires and carried them for miles. The wind was so strong it almost lifted men out of their saddles, and the canyons seemed to act as chimneys, through which the wind and fires swept with the roar of a thousand freight trains. The smoke and heat became so intense that it was difficult to breathe. The men who were packing in supplies refused to go to their destinations, dumped their loads, and fled back to Wallace. ...

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\* Early fire crews often used horses and mules to reach remote fires and resupply firefighters in the back-country.

the noise of the fire and wind,” he directed the men to take blankets and follow him. “Trees were falling all about” and it was “almost impossible to see through the smoky darkness,” but Pulaski was familiar with the backcountry trails. He led his crew to an old mine tunnel, reaching it just in time before the fire closed in behind them.

Pulaski ordered the men to lie face down to keep from suffocating, “for the tunnel was filling with fire gas and smoke.” One man panicked and tried to rush into the firestorm, but Pulaski stopped him at gunpoint. “The first man who tries to leave this tunnel I will shoot,” he said.

When the mine timbers caught fire, Pulaski hung wet blankets over the entrance. Filling his hat with water from the mine floor, he doused the burning timbers. “The men were in a panic of fear, some crying, some praying.” Many passed out from the heat, smoke, and fumes. Pulaski battled the blaze at the mine entrance until he, too, lost consciousness.

Pulaski remained unconscious for hours. Then he heard someone say, “Come outside, boys, the boss is dead.” “Like hell he is,” he replied. It was 5 a.m. on August 21, and the men were becoming conscious. Dragging themselves outside to a creek, they found the water still too warm to drink. Five men never regained consciousness. The rest staggered back toward Wallace. Rescuers met them on the way.

The survivors were “in a terrible condition, all of us hurt or burned.” Pulaski himself was temporarily blinded, with terrible burns on his hands. He spent nearly two months in the hospital, recovering from



*Homestead in the Northern Rockies on the eve of the Big Blowup. Homesteaders fled the flames to local towns, which were often evacuated by train. Photo: B.L. Wheeler; USDA Forest Service, Boise National Forest, ID, 1909.*

blindness and pneumonia. His experience left him with “poor eyes, weak lungs, and throat; but, thank God, I am not now blind.”

## A Survivor’s Story

Sherry Devlin (2000), a staff writer for the newspaper *The Missoulian*, recounted a letter from William Chance, a member of Pulaski’s crew, about the heroism of Big Ed. Chance was new to firefighting, barely a day on the fireline when the Big Blowup came.

“Fire came at us rapidly,” wrote Chance. The blaze was unimaginably ferocious. Pulaski told his men to follow him back to town. However, the people of Wallace had ignited a backfire, trapping Pulaski and his men between two converging walls of flame. The crew took refuge in an old adit.

The firefighters were skeptical about their chances of surviving inside the tunnel. But Pulaski “emphasized his point with his sixshooters.” “Inside, the tunnel was a mad house,” Chance wrote. “Some men went berserk, clamoring over

the prostrate bodies, choking, gasping. Others praying. Others laughing. I’ll never forget one man lustily singing, ‘The Pride of the House is Mama’s Baby.’”

Chance passed out. Awakening, he crawled toward the mine entrance and found Pulaski there, badly burned after trying to extinguish burning timbers with his hands. Chance helped Pulaski and others crawl down the mountainside to Wallace. In town, Pulaski took the hungry to a restaurant and the rest to a hospital, then went home to his wife and 7-year-old daughter.

## Pyne’s Story

Stephen J. Pyne (2001) offers a comprehensive account of the Pulaski story in his masterful book *Year of the Fires* (see the sidebar). On August 20, Pulaski and others were riding up the West Fork when the fire began burning behind them. Perhaps these new fires were backfires started by residents of Wallace to save their town.

Pulaski began to lead the crew to safety, but the fire threatened them

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“The first man who tries to leave this tunnel  
I will shoot.”

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—Ed Pulaski

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from all sides. “They advanced but haltingly, as Pulaski would dash ahead to scout the way and then return to lead the terrified group to the next spot.” The terrified men stuck with Pulaski only because they did not know the trail.

Pulaski, “with a wet gunnysack over his head,” located the Nicholson Mine and determined it was safe. Then he led the men toward it. “The final dash was a horror,” with one man lagging behind and dying. Finally, Pulaski urged the remaining 44 men into “a shaft 75 to 80 feet deep, barely the height of a man, with a trickle of water running through it.”

The crew retreated as far as possible into the mine. “[T]he men packed the narrow passage like oats in a feedbag, while Pulaski tried to beat out the flames at the entrance with a horse blanket and a hat full of water.” Others might have tried to help. With “their fresh air shrinking and their fears swelling,” the men began to panic. At least one man tried to push his way out, but at the entrance “he met Big Ed Pulaski, pistol in hand, who said that he would shoot the first man who tried to leave.”

Pulaski finally passed out at the entrance to the mine. When he regained consciousness, “[h]is lungs were a mess, his eyes almost useless.” Those inside the mine

“were a little better off,” and the men dragged themselves out of the mine. They called roll and realized that some men were missing. Five were found dead inside the tunnel. Two horses had also survived inside the mine “but in such wretched condition that they were shot on the spot.”

### Folk Hero

Big Ed carried the scars of the Big Blowup, especially on his hands and face, for the remainder of his life. For years, he was the only person who regularly tended the graves of the fallen firefighters. Pulaski worked on the Wallace Ranger District for another 20 years, retiring in 1930. He died in 1931 from injuries associated with an auto accident. For a nation suffering through the Great Depression, Ed Pulaski became, according to Pyne (1982), “a celebrity, a symbol of a strenuous life spent bravely battling the reckless waste of natural resources. ... For firefighters he became a folk hero.”

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## PYNE TELLS THE PULASKI STORY

*Editor’s note: Stephen J. Pyne, the leading fire historian in the United States, conducted exhaustive research on the Big Blowup for his book Year of the Fires (2001). The following excerpts illustrate Pyne’s masterful account of Ed Pulaski’s story.*

The final dash was a horror. Only the fact that they were trailing the creek, tucked into the ravine, while the flames raced with the wind along the upper contours of the slopes, likely spared them from being instantly incinerated. By now the fire was around them, and the winds bellowing like thunder, and the embers thick as snowflakes. The tortured winds snapped off giant cedars and hurled them across the hills. ...

The crew became almost senseless. They could neither hear nor speak nor see nor taste nor barely feel. They clung to one another and ran and stumbled along the trail, only because that took less thought than anything else they might do. Richard Wood lagged and died, possibly crushed by a flaming tree. Along the way a bear joined the cavalcade. ...