

**MY SUMMERS AS A FOREST FIRE FIGHTER:
On the Centenary of the Big Fire of 1910 in Northern Idaho**

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As I gathered material for writing about the Big Fire of 1910 in Northern Idaho, I was disappointed that there have not been that many fires this season. It was as if we had to have a very bad fire season to commemorate the centenary properly.

I remember that everyone on my three fire crews had this perverse wish that the forests would be aflame everywhere. I imagine that some soldiers might the same way about the lack of combat action after years of training and boot polishing. Each of my crew bosses had been army sergeants, so I consider my three summers under their command as almost the equivalent—in terms of discipline and danger —of military duty.

When we got the call and loaded up in the C-47s (or one time a Boeing 727), our spirits were high and our excitement continued even after days of 12-hour shifts. Only on about the fourth day of “mopping up” did we get bored and wanted to return to our base. Lots of fires meant hard work but good money, and my paychecks were directly deposited to my graduate school savings account.

Getting a fire call was also a lot more exciting than taking down telephone wire to the fire lookouts on our ranger district. I was the only one who seemed to enjoy climbing the trees to remove the insulators. I got pretty good at switching from “pole” to “bark” spurs depending on the tree, but there were also a few times when I made unscheduled and painful descents.

One hundred years ago last month, Ed Pulaski, a ranger in Wallace, Idaho, had only two hundred men to patrol the ten miles of fire lines they had dug around the fires in their district. Idle men in Wallace refused to heed Pulaski’s call to join the battle. On August 20 the weather changed dramatically, and Pulaski found himself and 45 men running from an intense crown fire. They took refuge in a mining tunnel where five died of smoke inhalation. The survivors stumbled into Wallace the next day.

There had been at least 1,000 fires burning in Northeast Washington, Northern Idaho, and Western Montana, but the hurricane-force winds of August 20 created a firestorm that consumed 3 million acres. Over the course of three days, eight towns burned to the ground and 87 people died, 78 of whom were fire fighters. It is still the largest, but not the deadliest, fire in U.S. history.

I grew up in Medford, Oregon, and I spent the summer of 1963 cutting firewood for the huge campground at Diamond Lake, just 20 miles from Crater Lake National Park, one of the great natural wonders of the world. After using a chain saw 7 hours a day, I became quite skilled at felling trees and “bucking” them up. This experience meant that I would get one of the sawyer positions on the fire crews on which I worked. It was definitely better than hours of hacking the ground with a 7- inch-wide “adze hoe.”

During the summer of 1964, I was initially assigned to the fire lookout on Mt. Zion in the Olympic National Forest. This was supposed to be my summer of spiritual enlightenment—the name of my lonely perch was perfect—but I discovered that I was not a very good hermit/yogi, or whatever my immature self thought I was. I was saved by incredibly bad weather and was brought down to join a “brush disposal” crew. We dug fire line around logged-off units,

preparing them for controlled burns. They already had two sawyers so I spent the rest of the summer swinging an adze hoe.

In the summer of 1965 I returned to the Crater Lake area and worked on a 12-man regional crew at the Toketee Ranger Station. It was there that I was introduced to the “pulaski,” the combination hoe/axe that Ed Pulaski invented so that he did not have to carry two tools with him. As the sawyer I cleared brush and trees out ahead, while the pulaski men cut roots and dug the initial fire trail as the hoe men finished it behind them.

The 1965 fire season was a slow one. Every afternoon we would watch the thunderheads build up in the east and we would sometimes drive madly after one lightning strike after another, but only one of them ignited a tree. The flames were doused by rain before we arrived. Our only major fire was a 1,000-acre blaze on the Gifford Pinchot National Forest, and nearly every crew in the West was there to get some experience. It was on this fire that I saw a helicopter go down, killing the three men on board.

In the summer of 1968 I joined the interregional 25-man crew stationed at Big Smokey, north of Twin Falls on the Sawtooth National Forest. I was one of two sawyers and we had a very busy summer fighting fires from the Wenatchee National Forest all the way down to the Coronado National Forest on the Mexican border. Instead of pine and fire trees we were swatting at burning Joshua Trees there.

My last season fighting fires was on the Rogue River National Forest. The 25-man crew was stationed at Union Creek just 20 miles south of Crater Lake. I was on my way to Germany on a Fulbright, so I was determined to make as much money as I could before starting on my dissertation on Martin Heidegger. In a tight job market I was not at all sure that I could get a teaching job.

During the last weeks of the summer of 1969, I had this premonition that a killer tree was going to wipe me out. My sawyer assistant—we called him “Beetle Bailey”—had been begging all summer to use the chain saw. I was so spooked about a possible accident that I handed him the saw and said “Here, Beetle, it is all yours.”

The second duty of a fire-fighting sawyer, after clearing the way for the hoe men, is to fell all the dead snags inside the burn. If they are left standing, they can shoot sparks across the fire line. The second scariest moment of my fire-fighting career was during a wilderness fire on the Okanogan Forest in Northeast Washington. As I started the final cut on a smoldering snag, air rushed into the opening and flames started shooting out. I had no choice but to leave the saw in the tree and run for my life. I came back later and was amazed to see that a molten mass had run down the hill. The only solid thing left the bar and chain. My boss charged it to the fire, and I got a new saw when I returned to our Union Creek base.

The biggest forest fire scare I ever had also happened on the Okanogan. At dusk our Rogue River crew had been ferried in by helicopter to a point above a small fire 500 feet below us. Going against basic rules of forest fire fighting, we were ordered to hike down to the fire (never do this!) and start our fire line. A night wind kicked up and we barely made it to safety at the helipad above us. The next day we learned that the fire had grown from a few hundred acres to 6,000 overnight. We could see the huge cloud of smoke from the coin-op laundry in Twisp, Washington.

As I read about forest fires these days, I'm struck by at least two things. First, the crews these days take far more safety precautions than we did. We did have basic fire safety lessons, but the only special equipment we had was orange, fire-proof shirts. We didn't have any of those fire tents that are now standard issue. I also shudder every time I think of the fact that I carried my saw gas on my back, and that my gas-soaked shirt would have made me into a deadly torch.

The second thing that has changed is that we rarely encountered structure fires, except for a few cabins and corrals. Now it seems that nearly every forest and range fire report contains news about home being threatened or destroyed. People are taking great risks by building dream homes in the woods.

Most August skies in my hometown of Moscow are obscured by smoke, and our raft trips on Idaho's rivers are sometimes spoiled by smoke in the canyons. My son-in-law called from Edmonton to say that smoke from fires in British Columbia, 350 miles away, lay heavily over the city. We hear in the news that people are suffering from a dense, deadly haze in Russia. The Russians are now experiencing the equivalent of Idaho's 1910 holocaust. As of August 12, over 26,000 fires have consumed 1.9 million acres and have destroyed 2,000 homes.

I urge both fire fighters and soldiers to suppress their natural desire for excitement and good wages and be content with the good fortune of fewer fires in our forests and even fewer fire-fights in trouble spots around the world.

Nick Gier taught philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years.