

This month's theme:
The Forest Fires of 1910



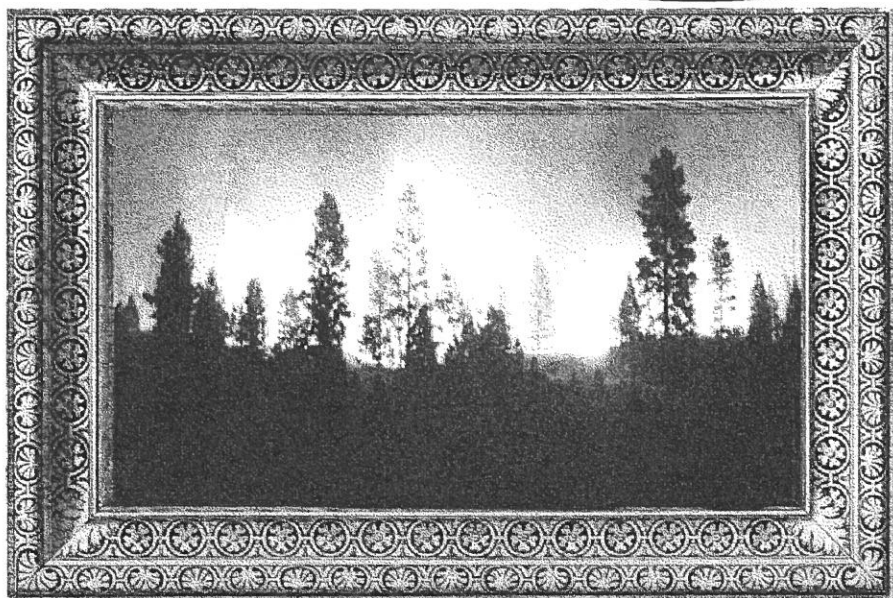
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The Newsletter of the Idaho State Historical Society's Junior Historian Program

PROSPECTOR

March, 2004



The Year of the Fires

The year was 1910 and Idaho was experiencing one of the worst summer droughts the state had ever recorded. For the residents of mountain towns like Wallace, Idaho the hot, dry weather was more than an annoyance. The drought had turned the surrounding forest of green trees into brown matchsticks. The conditions were ripe for disaster.

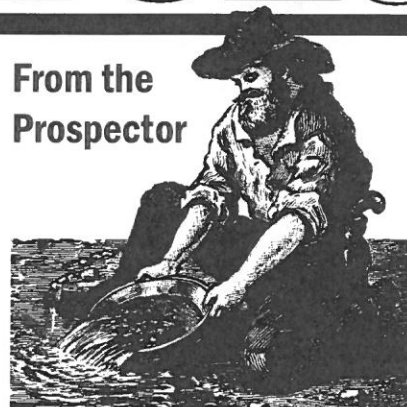
Nobody knows for sure how all of the small fires began, but their causes were probably simple enough. A

few lightning bolts from a passing storm could have kindled the first blazes. Campers leaving their fires smoldering surely set a number of little fires as well. In other areas, tiny flames sparked by trains could have ignited grass near the railroad tracks. By the end of May, the stage was set. Driven by high winds and dry forest conditions all of the small fires began to build to enormous sizes and spread at speeds that were impossible to control.

As summer passed, the fir

Continued to next page

From the Prospector



Howdy Prospectors!

Well it looks like the weather people have good news. This winter there was lots of snow in the Idaho mountains. Lots of snow means a nice green spring and if the moisture keeps up, the forests will be a safer place this summer. When the forest is wet, it's less likely to burn. Fire is a natural part of life in the West, but sometimes those fires get out of control.

This month we're going to tell you about one of the worst forest fires in Idaho history. Back in the early 1900's we didn't have the equipment, personnel, or know-how to deal with a big fire. If a big fire started the best thing to do was get out of its way.

Enjoy the exciting story of the great fires of 1910!

The Year of the Fires Continued

frightened population of Idaho watched the fires grow larger and larger. Finally, on August 20 their worst nightmares were realized. On this day, conditions of weather, geography, and fire direction would add up to cause an explosive surge unlike any other ever seen. It has since been called the "Big Blow Up." At the peak of this natural disaster, smoke was flung as far away as New England and soot sank into the ice in Greenland.

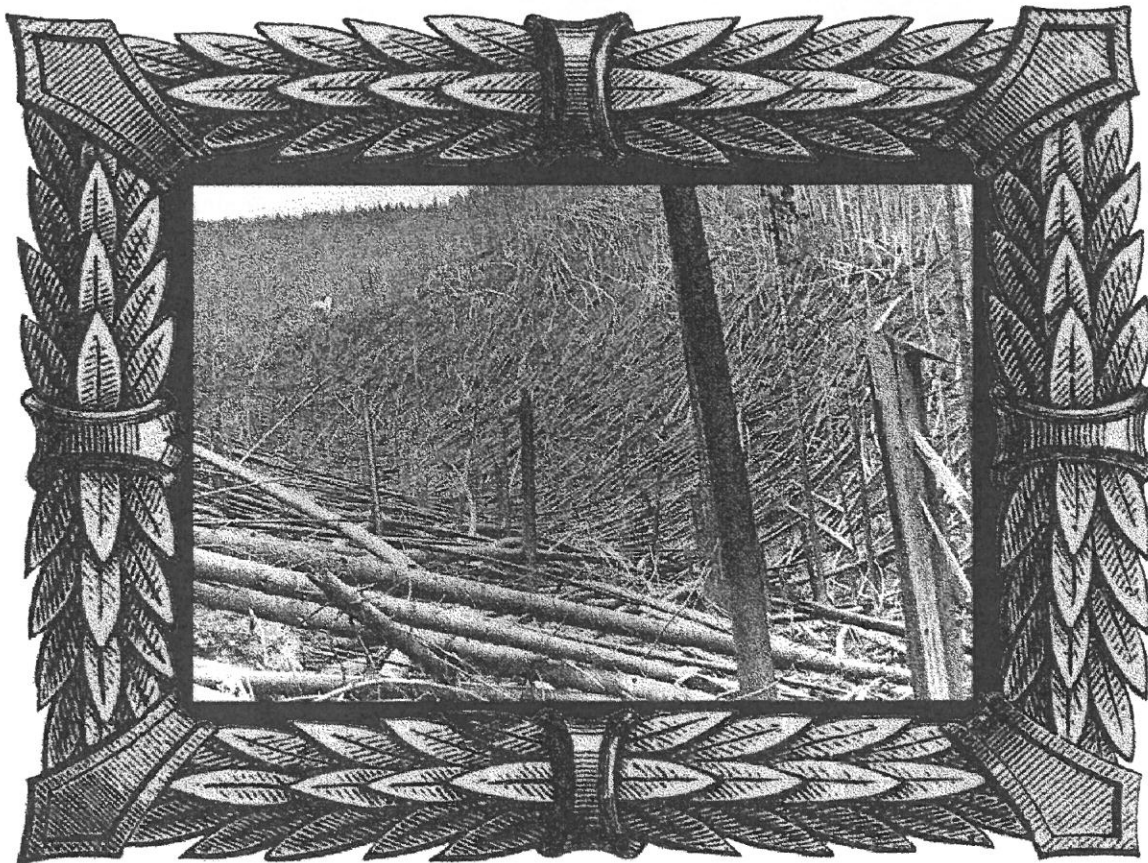
It wasn't until late in the afternoon on August 20 that the town of Wallace was fully aware of the danger that threatened them. Sometime after 2 p.m. the mayor, Walter Hansen, ordered the fire department to sound the

evacuation horn. All women and children were to leave their homes and all of their belongings to find sanctuary in nearby towns. All able-bodied men were to report to fire duty. The mayor threatened jail time for those who did not report. People scrambled madly to leave. Trains were filled and rushed to nearby towns such as Kellogg and Spokane, Washington. Although most of the town's residents hurried to leave or report to fire duty, many ignored the mayor's orders. A number of people refused to leave behind their homes and everything that they had worked so hard to obtain. Some of the men were cowards and tried to board the trains. When refused, some of

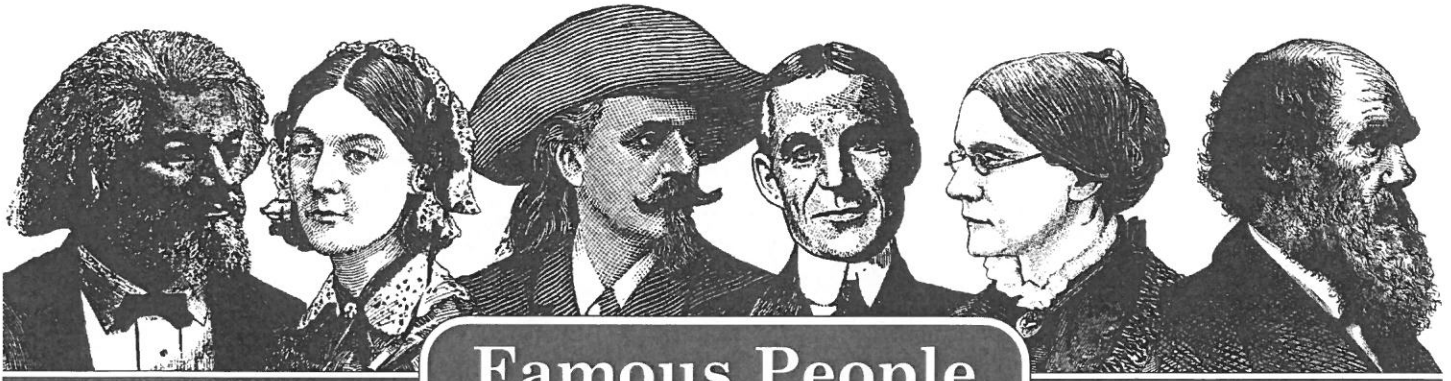
them jumped on the railroad car's roofs and rode out of danger.

The fire spread rapidly, consuming telephone and telegraph lines. Despite the efforts by all the brave men combating the fires, the blazes reached the edge of Wallace. Flames began moving into the town. The fires grew so large that many fire fighters lost hope of putting the blazes out. Many crews had to run for safety while others just gave up. However, those fighting the blaze were able to stop the spread and protect the majority of the town. Approximately two-thirds of the town was saved, leaving only one-third charred.

Continued on page 5



The Forest After the Big Blow-up



Famous People

Ranger Ed Pulaski

One of the heroes of the fires of 1910 was ranger Ed Pulaski. Pulaski was born in Ohio in the late 1860's. At fifteen he moved to Idaho and began to explore the state. In his long career, Pulaski worked in mines, helped build railroads, and was a foreman on a ranch. In 1908, he joined the U.S. Forest Service and became a ranger in the northern region of the state.

On August 21st, Pulaski and a crew of men were several miles out of the town of Wallace when the flames caught up with them. As the choking smoke and heat surrounded them, Pulaski rushed the terrified men through a mountain valley, hoping to make it back to town before the fire consumed them. They ran as fast as they could, at one point joined by a frightened black bear who was also fleeing the flames, but they couldn't



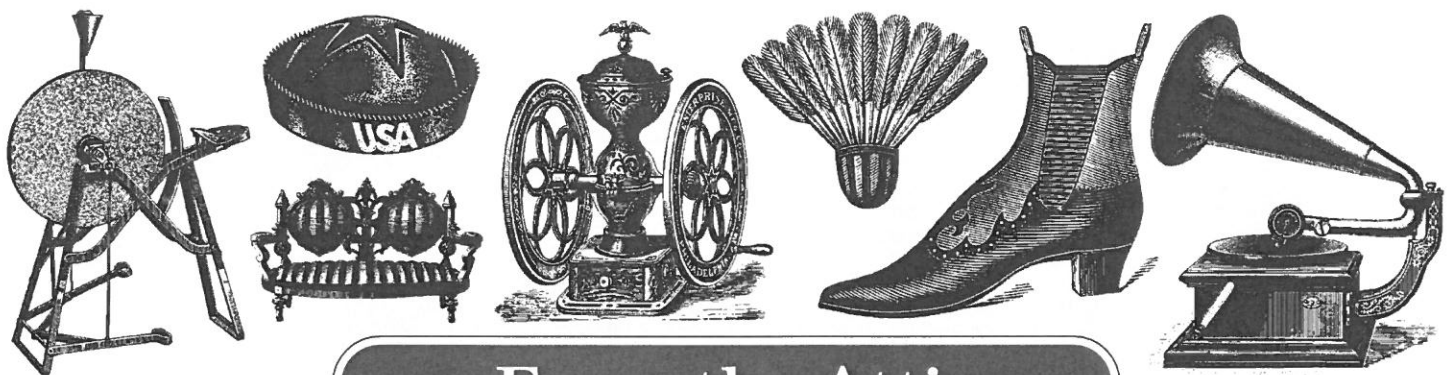
escape the approaching firestorm.

Realizing that they had to stop running if they wanted to survive, Pulaski herded the crew into an abandoned mine shaft. Instantly the fire exploded around

them. The men lay on the floor while heavy smoke filled the tunnel and flames leaped through the cave-like opening. When one of the men panicked and try to rush outside, Pulaski stood guard with a pistol and forced him back to the ground. Soon the heat and lack of air caused the men to pass out.

Five hours later the group awoke to a scene of devastation. They stumbled through the valley of ash to a nearby creek, but found it almost too hot and acidic to drink. Weak and wounded, the groups headed toward Wallace. Although several of the crew had suffocated in the tunnel and others had bad burns, Pulaski's quick thinking had saved the majority of the men. Al-

though he never asked to be memorialized, Ranger Pulaski's leadership is remembered today as one of the most heroic acts in that devastating year of fire.❖



From the Attic

The Pulaski Tool

Fighting fires is hard work. To be successful, fire crews have to carry the best possible equipment to take on the flames. A good fire-fighting tool has to be a lot of different things. It has to be portable, so a firefighter can easily carry it into remote areas. It has to be durable, so it won't break under the strain of hard work. And it helps if it's versatile, so that a fire fighter can do multiple jobs without having to switch tools.

Many of the basic firefighting tools would be familiar to everyone. Crews use shovels and rakes

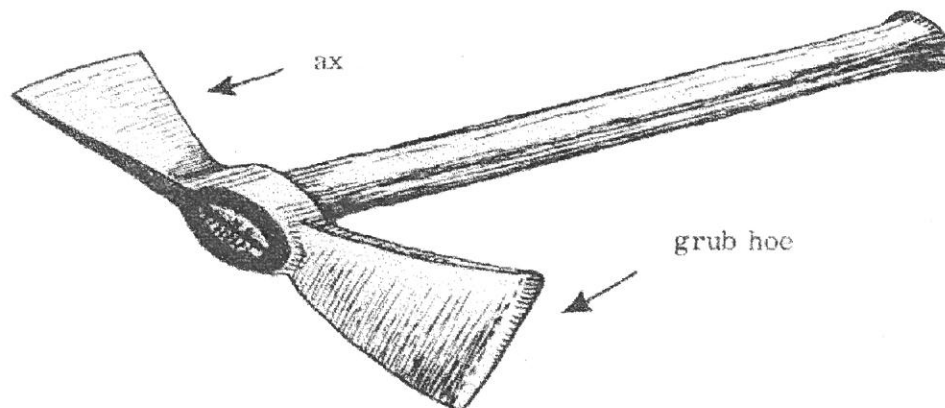
to create fire breaks and throw dirt and sand on top of flames. They use axes and saws to cut through trees and underbrush, reducing the fuel that a fire needs to burn. And they might carry gas torches to start backfires that stop big fires in their tracks.

One of the most famous fire-fighting tools, though, is one most people haven't heard of. In 1911, Ed Pulaski, a hero of the great fires of 1910, introduced a tool we now call the "Pulaski."

Pulaski noticed that a firefighter needs a basic cutting and digging tool. Instead of carrying two

different pieces of equipment, it made sense to combine them into one simple tool. Using a friend's blacksmith shop, Pulaski created a tool that on one end of its head had an axe and on the other end, a mattock or grub hoe.

Although the forest service was at first reluctant to manufacture the new tool, Pulaski was persistent. Eventually fire fighters across the West came to realize the value of his invention. Nowadays a Pulaski tool is one of the standard pieces of equipment issued to forest firefighters.❖



The Year of the Fires Continued

On August 22, the weather changed and began to bring relief. The winds that had gusted well above 50 miles per hour stopped. The air became more and more humid. By August 23, nature had come to the rescue. Light rains began to fall at lower elevations, while snow fell up higher. As the rain continued, the temperature began to drop. A week later heavy rains fell, ending the disaster. As August ended, so did the fires.

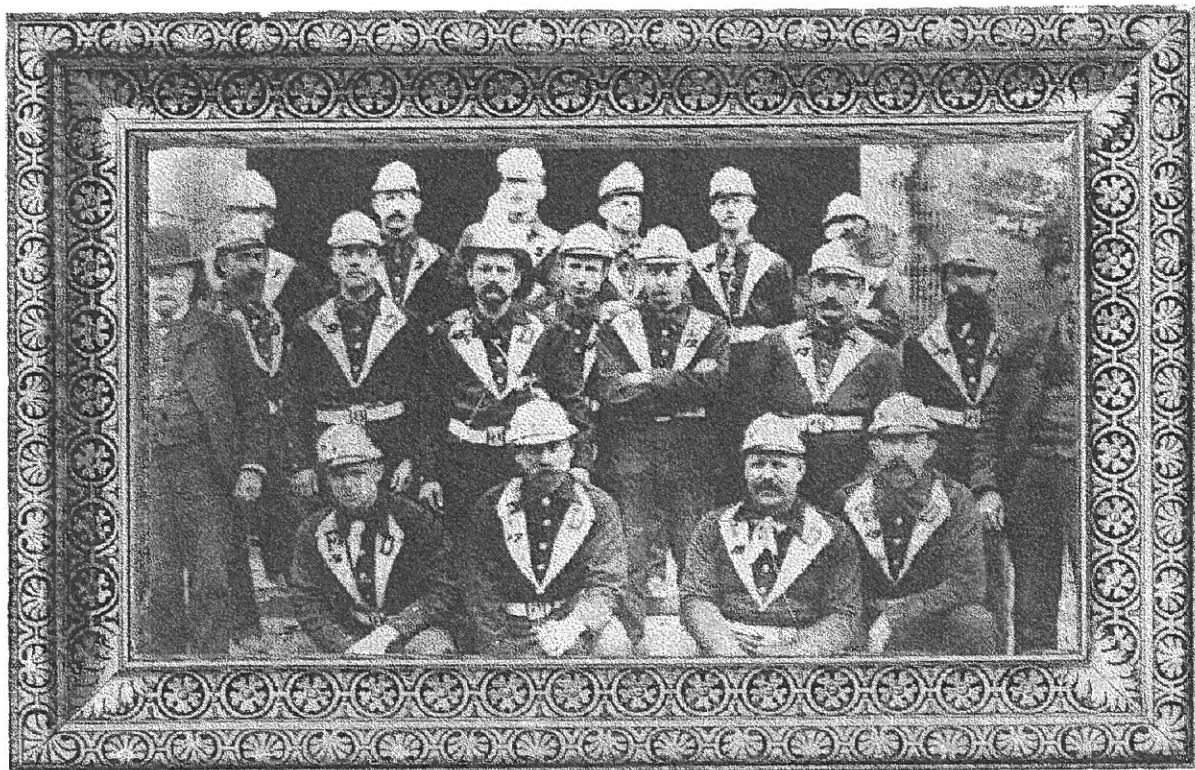
What made this fire so different from others of the past? The geography in this region consists of very tight mountains,

sharp valleys, dense forests, and a very rugged landscape. These factors, along with such extreme weather, made the fires nearly impossible to control with the techniques and technology available in 1910.

In the end, the fires caused more damage than the region had ever seen. The series of over 1,700 fires destroyed over 3,000,000 acres of land, approximately the size of Connecticut. The land destroyed included national forest as well as private property, buildings, and homes. The fire claimed 85 lives and left 125 people missing. Seventy-

eight of those lives taken by the fires were firefighters working to contain the fire's spread and protect people.

The fires of 1910 were reported in newspapers throughout the country. The publicity showed the human devastation as well as the great loss of timber. This awareness helped the entire country recognize the importance of protecting and preserving the forests for future generations. As a result, technology has provided efficient techniques for combating natural fires in order to save the resources and preserve the beauty throughout the country. ❖



An Early Wallace Fire Fighting Crew

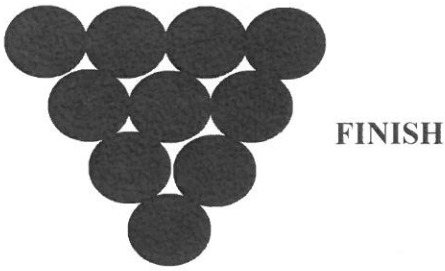
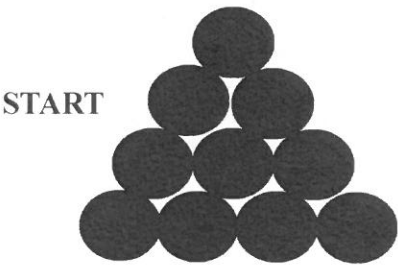
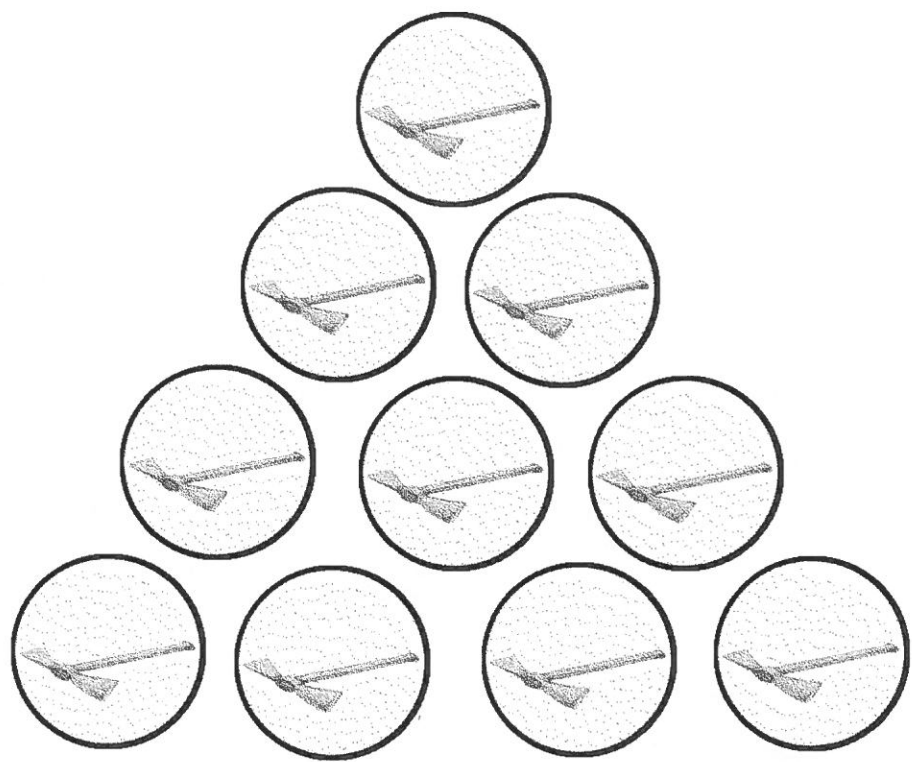


The Fun Page

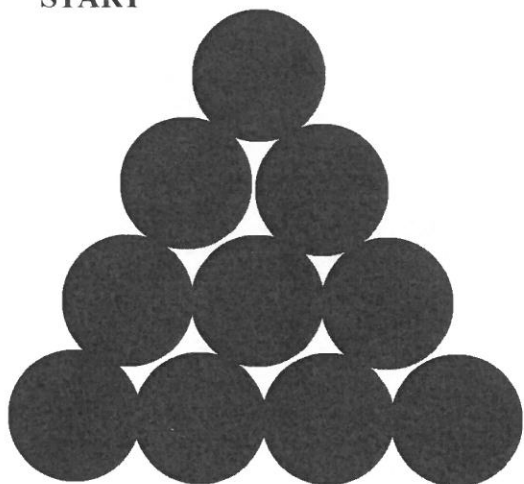
One Hot Puzzle

You're the fire boss in charge of 10 crews of fire fighters. Your team has arranged itself in a triangle to attack a giant forest fire head on. Suddenly the wind shifts and the fire changes directions. You must quickly move your fire crews to face the new challenge. Cut out the circles on this page or find

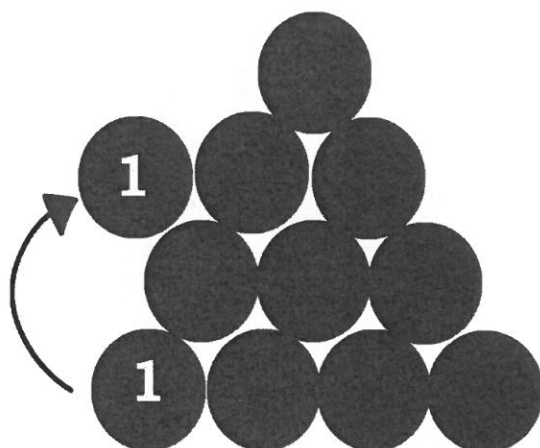
ten coins and arrange them in a triangle like the one pictured below. Then, one coin at a time, see if you can make the triangle face the other way in only three moves. The only other rule is that every time you move a circle to its new position, it must be touching two other circles. Good Luck! The solution is on the next page.



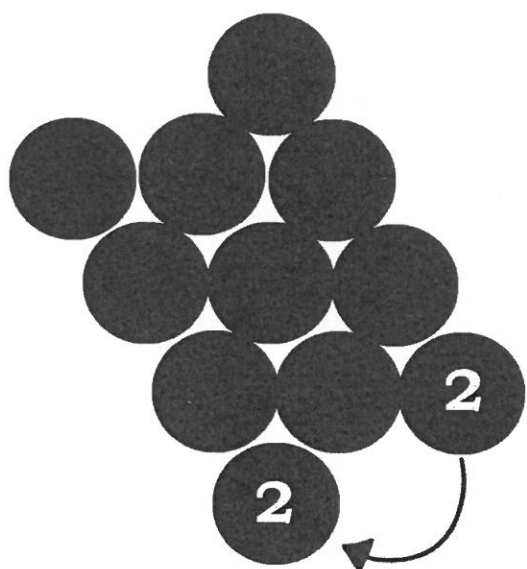
START



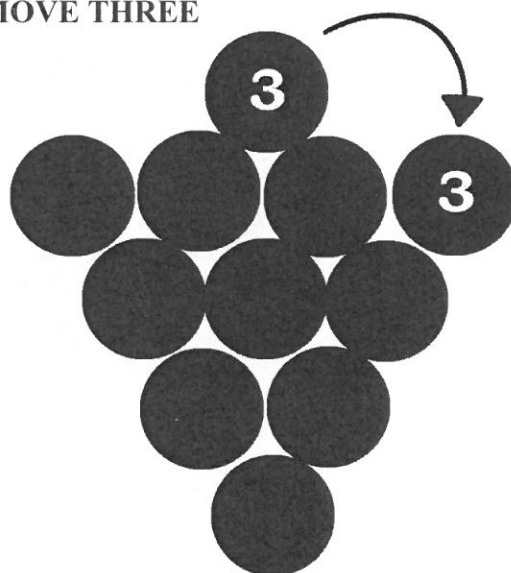
MOVE ONE



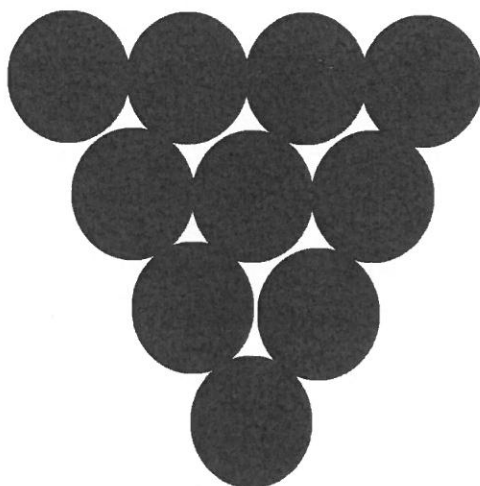
MOVE TWO



MOVE THREE



FINISH





Next Month's Activities

Now it's your turn, Prospectors. Pick from one of the activities below or make up your own forest fire project and send it in to our prospector headquarters. We'll take some of your best work and print it in next month's magazine. Remember to include your name, your town and school, and the name of your Prospector Club charter. We can't wait to see what you send in.

Fire Tools: A fire-fighter needs good tools if he or she is going to be effective. In the early 1900's, Ed Pulaski invented a clever tool that could chop and dig that is still being used today. Can you invent a better tool? Use your imagination to design a futuristic tool that would help a modern fire fighter attack a forest blaze. Draw a picture and give us a short explanation of how the tool works.

Smoke Jumpers: One group of elite fire fighters are known as smoke jumpers. Smoke jumpers are brave men and women that

look on the internet and find out some more information about this dangerous and exciting job. Send us a short report and share with us what you found.



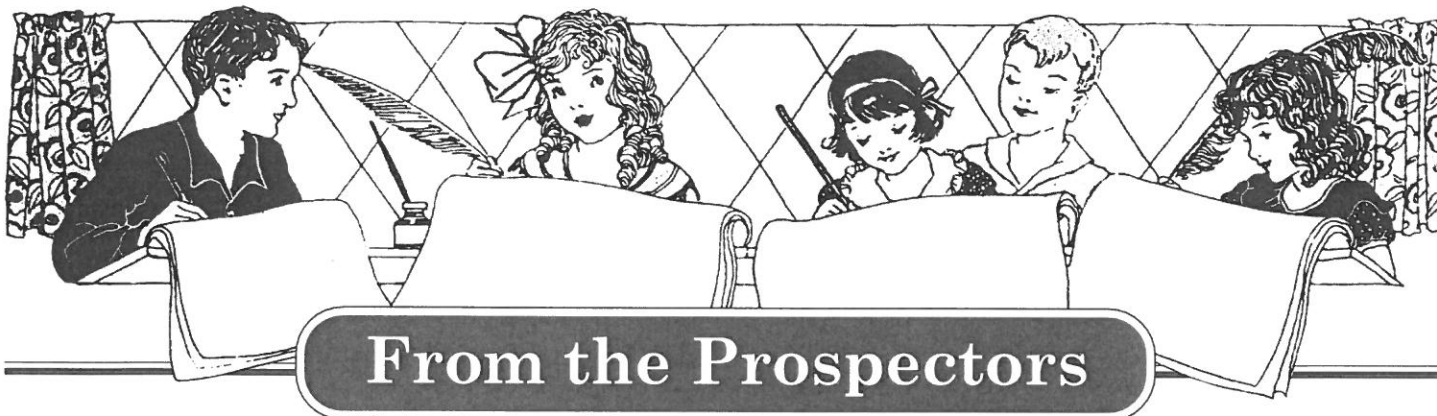
The Big Blaze: What would you do if you were caught in a forest fire? Write us a short story telling about your adventures with the big blaze. Did the flames come close to your house? Did your family escape to safety? Did you save the day by thinking of a creative way to put out the fire?

Send in your work by April 12th to:

Prospector Club
Lucky Noah
Idaho State Historical
Museum
610 North Julia Davis
Drive
Boise, ID 83702

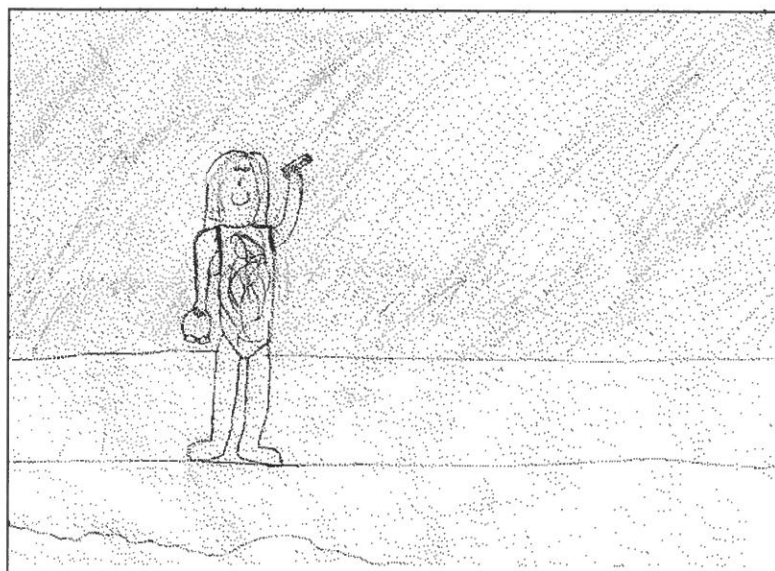
jump out of airplanes and parachute into remote areas to battle forest fires. Go to the library or

Or email it to us at
kzwolfer@ishs.state.id.us



From the Prospectors

Look at these great projects inspired by our last issue on Mary Hallock Foote. Great work, Prospectors!

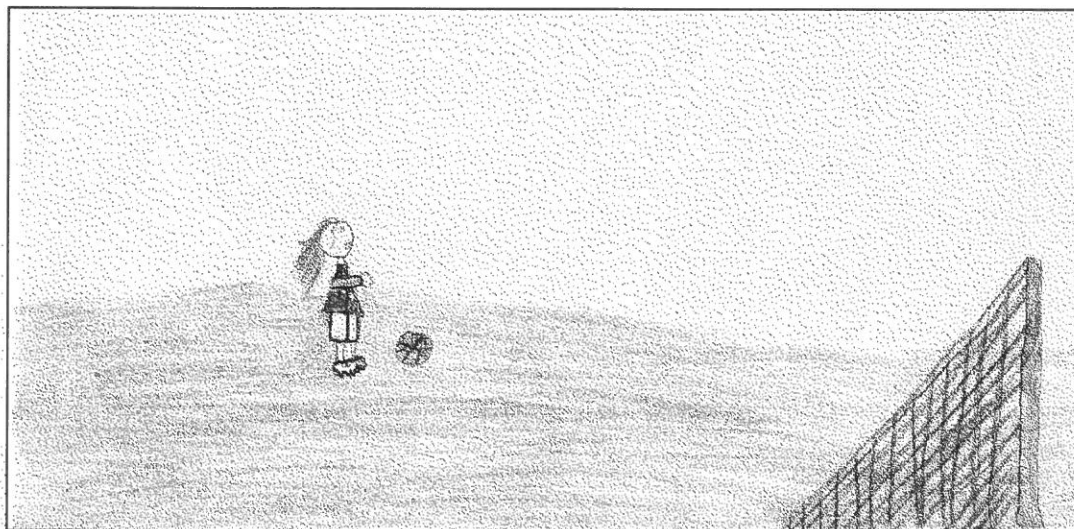


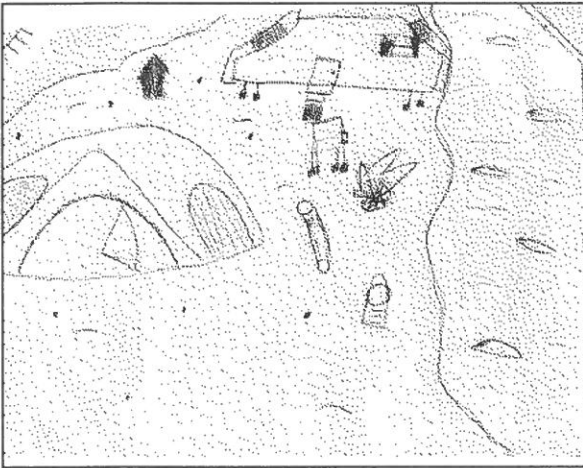
This scene inspired me because I was in the swim team championship and I got the ribbon. I worked and worked to get a blue ribbon all summer long. I was sad because I had never gotten a blue ribbon. There at the championship I earned two blue ribbons.

Katie Mondada
Riverside School
Boise

This scene is important because soccer is one of my favorite sports.

Lauren Conrad
Riverside School
Boise



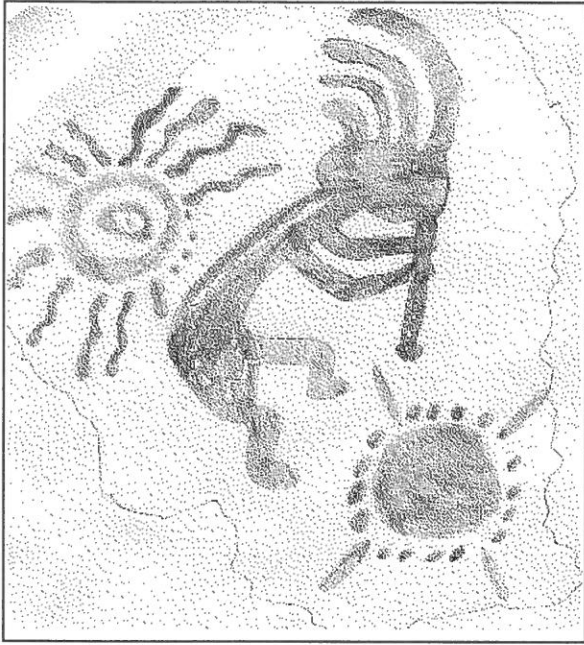


I had a great time when I was in McCall, Idaho camping in the woods. I also had fun because I was with my friends. I hope everyone should go camping sometime in their life in the wonderful state of Idaho.

Natalie Koskella
Riverside School
Boise



Paul Schroeder
Riverside School
Boise



The reason I choose the kokopelli person is because the picture I drew is a rock with the kokopelli carved on. We got this rock here in Idaho. It is in a collection with other carved rocks. I like this rock a lot because of its amazing shape and carving

Robby Gonzalez
Riverside School
Boise

Life of a Child in a Mining Camp

By Caitlin McDevitt/Riverside School

Life in a mining camp was an exciting adventure for a child. When I was eight years old, my father told my family that we were moving West because of the gold rush. People had found gold in certain parts of the West. My father wanted to strike it rich. It took a long time to decide what to pack and what to sell. We couldn't bring everything, only the basic necessities like flour, clothes, and seeds. The trip was bumpy and long. The landscape was almost the same as we drove until we reached the Rocky Mountains.

I have a large family. I have four sisters and two brothers. Their names are John, Peter, Bethy, Hanna, Caroline, and Sarah. My name is Annie Bemett. My sisters weren't sure about moving West. My brothers were excited, and hoped to become millionaires. I liked my life in the East, but I wanted some excitement somewhere else. I was looking forward to the trip. My mom did not want to leave the East. She had lived all her life in the East. All her family and friends were there and wouldn't come. Father was the head of the house so mom had to come.

According to mom, the West was uncivilized compared to the East. There were rugged snow covered mountains in the West compared to the grassy hills of the East. It was brown, dry, and dirty out West. I missed the pretty, green, lush landscapes of the East. There were funny creatures out West that I had never seen before. Prairie dogs would pop their heads up out of the ground, noticed we were looking at them and pop back down. Their holes were dangerous. Oxen and horses could step in a hole and break their leg, so could you. The West may have been different from the East, but I loved it all the same.

After we arrived in the mining camp, we started to look for gold. I learned how to pan for gold. I had to fill the pan with black sand from a creek far from the camp. I swirled the pan gently beneath the water. If there was gold it would settle to the bottom of the pan and the sand would wash away. It was hard work. One day while I was panning for gold, I found gold and kept finding more and more of it each day. All my family helped mine for the gold. In a month we had found \$700 worth of gold. After a year, we had found \$100,000. My father was very proud of me, because I was the one who originally found the gold.

We spent five years out West mining for gold, then we moved back East. I lived there for eight years. Living in the East wasn't what I wanted. I missed the rugged landscapes of the West and moved back. I loved mining for gold.

Miners in Rhyme

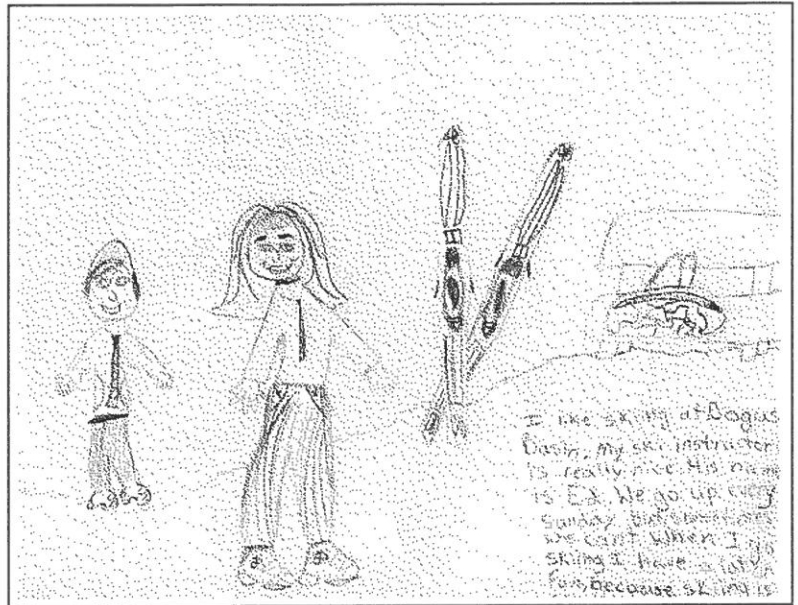
Once there was a woman,
Who moved way out west.
The reason that she did,
You may never guess.

She was a famous artist,
Her husband was a miner.
She moved out west to draw the
land,
That proved to be much finer.

She did not like this place,
Though she did her very best.
They did not even have money,
To attend the Christmas Fest.

Now that you've figured it out,
Maybe now you'll see.
If you do some research,
You'll find out more than me!

Katie Knick
Riverside School
Boise



Whitney Greener
Riverside School
Boise



Soccer has been one of my favorite sports for many years. Soccer inspires me because it is a fun and challenging sport that requires hand eye coordination, speed, accuracy, power, and strength. Soccer is fun because it is a sport that gets people all fired up. I hope everybody tries soccer. Soccer is fun!

Roman Bernardo
Riverside School
Boise

Resources for Teachers

Books

Brown, A. and Davis, K.

Forest Fire: Control and Use

McGraw-Hill Book Company. 1973

An overview of the science of forest fighting.

Cohen, S. and Miller, D.

The Big Burn: The Northwest's Forest Fire of 1910

Pictorial Histories Publishing Co. 1978

Pyne, S.

The Year of the Fires: The Story of the Great Fires of 1910

Penguin Books, 2001

A comprehensive account of the great fire and its influence on the way the country perceives the West.

Spenser, B.

The Big Blowup

The Caxton Printers, Ltd. 1956

The story of the great fires of 1910.

Web Sites

The Big Blow-up

www.missoulian.com/specials/1910/tome.html

Eyewitness Accounts from the 1910 Fire

www.idahoforests.org/fires2.htm

Games and Activities for Kids on Fire Prevention

www.smokeybear.com

Lesson Plan

Local History

For the May issue this year we'd like to try something different, but we need your help. For the last issue of the year we'd like to have a local history theme. Since there are Prospector chapters all across the state, we were hoping each class would write a short history of their school, town, an important local person, or interesting past event that happened nearby. We'd then print as many of these as we can in the May issue.

Each class submission should be no longer than a couple of paragraphs. Feel free to include a few photographs or drawings if they are pertinent to your story. Hopefully, this exercise will give the students a chance to take pride in their local history while learning other interesting facts from across the state. The deadline for May issue submissions will be April 30th. In the meantime, don't forget to download our other issues.