

# Largest wildfire in U.S. history inspires new musical

**Becky Kramer/SR**

One of the best-known stories from the 1910 fire is the tale of “Big Ed” Pulaski, the firefighter who saved his crew by leading them to shelter in an old mine tunnel.

Now, there’s a musical about the unassuming Forest Service ranger from Idaho’s Silver Valley, who became a folk hero for his courage and quick-thinking. The work was commissioned by the Coeur d’Alene Summer Theatre for elementary and middle school audiences. “Living through the Fire” opens this month, with performances in schools from Wallace to Spokane.

Ironically, the show’s timing “had nothing to do with this year’s wildfires,” said Jadd Davis, the theater’s artistic director. “I’ve wanted to do a story about the Big Burn since last year. It’s an iconic piece of the Inland Northwest’s natural history, and there are a lot of interesting characters, including Edward Pulaski.”

“Living through the Fire” tells Pulaski’s story as narrated by his 10-year-old daughter, Elsie. The story starts when a fifth-grader is assigned to read Elsie’s diary for a school project, and flashes back to the summer of 1910, when wildfires burned 3 million acres across the Inland Northwest.

The musical was written by Christian Duhamel, a New York City-based playwright and composer, who grew up in Kellogg. Four actors play the entire cast of characters. The musical lasts about 45 minutes. It was designed for school assemblies, with time for audience questions, Davis said.

In addition to school performances, there will be a public showing of “Living through the Fire” on Oct. 22 in Coeur d’Alene.

The 1910 fire remains the largest wildfire in U.S. history. During two wind-whipped days, the fire consumed forests across North Idaho, Montana and Washington. At least 85 people were killed.

The musical recaps the events of the night of Aug. 20, 1910, when a fire storm overtook Pulaski and a crew of 45 firefighters outside of Wallace. Trees exploded into flame and toppled under 60 hour winds. Pulaski later described the sound of the fire like “the roar of a thousand freight trains.”

He led the panicked men and two horses into the mine tunnel and kept them there at gunpoint when one man wanted to flee back into the flames.

As smoke filled the tunnel, the men passed out. But the majority survived, along with Pulaski, who was temporarily blinded. His resourcefulness is still hailed by modern firefighters.

In the musical, Pulaski's actions on the night of Aug. 20 are interwoven with Elsie's. "She's running from the fire when he's fighting the fire," Davis said. "She's with a friend. The kids are scared and they don't know where their parents are."

"Living through the Fire" is the first musical commissioned by the Coeur d'Alene Summer Theatre, but Davis hopes the tradition will continue with more works about local history.

A grant from the Washington, D.C.-based Max and Victoria Dreyfus Foundation helped support the project.

"A lot of these kids might not be able to afford to see a live theater production," Davis said. "Our goal is to entertain and educate them about local history, while engaging an audience that might not otherwise experience theater."