

Tools for Trails

Part 2

“Pulaski”

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Note: This is Part 2 of a series of articles providing a brief history of the tools used today on the trail.



Pulaski - the trail tool of many trail builders has a history. What makes this tool so popular, yet so dangerous? Perhaps a quick look at the origins of this tool and then a comparison of its application may be enlightening.

Ed Pulaski was born in 1868 in Ohio. There is some debate that he was the great-grandnephew of the Revolutionary War hero – Kazimierz Pulaski. By the time he was 40 years of age, he moved west and worked as a miner, railroad worker and even tried his hand as a ranch foreman.



Ed joined the US Forest Service as a Forest Ranger on the Coeur d’Alene National

In 1908, Ed

Great Fire of 1910



Little North Fork of the [St. Joe River](#), Idaho

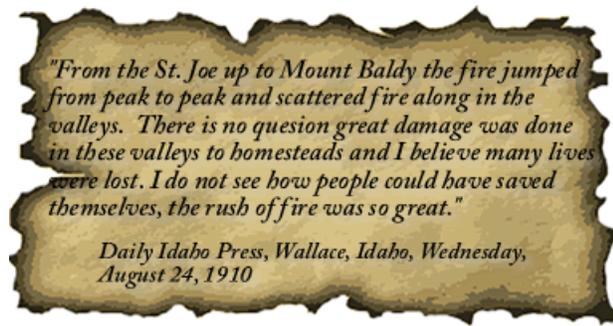
Location	Washington , Idaho , Montana
Date	August 20–21, 1910
Burned area	3,000,000 acres (12,000 km ²)
Ignition source	not officially determined
Land use	logging , mining , railroads
Fatalities	87

Forest. Two years later, Idaho and the Montana area suffered the driest weather conditions to date – thus sparking thousands of small brush fires throughout the state of Idaho. A run away fire soon blossomed into the “Great Idaho Fire” [Big Blow Up] and on August 20th all Forest Service rangers were called into action to battle this fire which threatened several towns.

Ed’s crew was mobilized from the town of Wallace, ID. He commanded 45 firefighters as they marched into the firefight. Nobody realized the intensity of this particular fire event as the blazes raced up the mountain. Soon, his crew became trapped in the firestorm and Ed Pulaski had no choice but to order his men into an

abandon mine shaft and told them to lie down or otherwise be shot. He was serious and threaten to pistol shoot anyone that tried to leave the mine. The crew endured

intense heat and suffocating smoke by lying down prone in the mine where there is no oxygen. Everyone passed out – but in the morning, 40 men were able to make their way back to Wallace and tell the tale of



heroism that Pulaski performed.

The Idaho Fire must have had some effect on Ed Pulaski firefighting mentality as the next year he figured out that two tools were cumbersome and he fashioned a new tool that worked as one. "While Pulaski was still recovering from his 1910 ordeal, he first created the tool in his own blacksmith shop in 1911 and perfected it over the next several years. Similar tools had been in use before for clearing land, but not for firefighting. This new tool was christened the Pulaski right from the beginning."¹



The strange new tool was obviously named after the inventor. "The Pulaski came into wide use by the Forest Service after 1913, and in 1920 the Forest Service began contracting for the tool to be commercially manufactured."²

"Developed to grub and chop duff during forest fires, the Pulaski combines an axe bit with an adz-shaped grub hoe on a 36 inch wood or fiberglass handle and weigh about 5¹/₂ pounds. It is preferred by many trail crews for loosening dirt, cutting through roots, or grubbing brush because it is widely available and easier to carry than single-purpose tools. Unlike grub hoes or mattocks the Pulaski is a sharp-edged tool, and should not be used in rocky soil. With the bit and adz keenly honed, a Pulaski is an excellent woodworking tool for shaping the notches and joints of turnpikes, bridges, and other timber projects. A sharpened Pulaski should be marked to discourage anyone from mistakenly dulling a Pulaski meant for timber work by using it for digging."³

¹ <http://www.spokesman.com/stories/2010/aug/17/pulaskis-legacy-alive-standard-fire-tool/>

² [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pulaski_\(tool\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pulaski_(tool))

³ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pulaski_\(tool\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pulaski_(tool))



“When using the hoe, stand bent at the waist with your back straight and parallel to the ground, knees flexed, and one foot slightly forward. Hold the handle with both hands so the head is at an angle to your body, and use short, smooth, shallow swings. Let the hoe hit the ground on its corner. Use the ax end to chop large roots after the dirt has been cleared by the hoe. Always wear safety goggles while grubbing to guard against flying chips of rock and dirt.”⁴

“Carry the Pulaski at your side. Grip the handle firmly near the head and point the ax end away from your body and down. Sharpen the cutting edge like an ax. When sharpening the hoe, maintain the existing inside edge bevel. Never sharpen the top of the hoe.”⁵

The Pulaski is still used by forest firefighters as a tool of choice. For trail builders, there is a less strenuous demand on the tool as its application is used for popping out roots to chopping on stumps. This tool can be a very dangerous tool if misused. Youth seem to gravitate to this tool's ability to send chips flying. More importantly, the Pulaski is not a 'Paul Bunyan' logging tool. It should very rarely be used in overhead swings – rather a grubbing stance is recommended for clearing trail. Every tool in a trail builder's inventory has a particular usage. The Pulaski should be used as the last effort to clear tree roots, stumps and other vegetation in the trail.

⁴ <http://www.americantrails.org/resources/info/tools5.html>[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pulaski_\(tool\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pulaski_(tool))

⁵ <http://www.americantrails.org/resources/info/tools5.html>[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pulaski_\(tool\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pulaski_(tool))