

# [PDF] The Big Burn: Teddy Roosevelt & The Fire That Saved America

Timothy Egan, Robertson Dean - pdf download free book

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#### Description:

When Theodore Roosevelt vacated the Oval Office, he left a vast legacy of public lands under the stewardship of the newly created Forest Service. Immediately, political enemies of the nascent conservation movement chipped away at the foundations of the untested agency, lobbying for a return of the land to private interests and development. Then, in 1910, several small wildfires in the Pacific Northwest merge into one massive, swift, and unstoppable blaze, and the Forest Service is

pressed into a futile effort to douse the flames. Over 100 firefighters died heroically, galvanizing public opinion in favor of the forests--with unexpected ramifications exposed in today's proliferation of destructive fires. Just as he recounted the Dust Bowl experience in (a National Book Award winner), *The Big Burn* vividly recreates disaster through the eyes of the men and women who experienced it (though this time without the benefit of first-hand accounts). It's another incredible--and incredibly compelling--feat of historical journalism. --Jon Foro

### **Amazon Exclusive Essay: "The Ghosts of 1910" by Timothy Egan, Author of *The Big Burn***

Nearly a hundred years ago, a big piece of Rocky Mountain high country fell to a fire that has never been matched--in size, ferocity, or how it changed the country. I was drawn to this fire in part because of its mythic status among my fellow Westerners. But I was reluctant to try and tell this story because everyone who had lived through it had gone to their grave. With *The Big Burn*, I could look into the eyes of people who survived the Dust Bowl and hear their stories--firsthand. They were happy to pass them on. I was the baton.

With *The Big Burn*, the stories would have to come from ghosts. That fire burned 3 million acres and five towns to the ground in the hot sweep of a single weekend. It also killed nearly a hundred people. So, my task was to listen to the dead--those Italian and Irish immigrant firefighters in their letters home, those first forest rangers in memories collected in volumes stashed away in mountain towns, and in the notes and diaries of two great men who founded the Forest Service. One, Teddy Roosevelt, is a voice that lives nearly as loud today as when he bestrode the world stage. The other, Gifford Pinchot, was less known, but his legacy, like that of Roosevelt, is everywhere in the public land that Americans now claim as a birthright. And what's more, Pinchot himself was married to a ghost for nearly 20 years, one of the more fascinating things I found in the haunt of the Big Burn.

(Photo © Sophie Egan)

### **Photographs from *The Big Burn* (Click to Enlarge)**

#### **A Q&A with Timothy Egan**

**Q:** Tell us something about that great fire.

**A:** Well, it was the largest wildfire in American history, based on size. In less than two days, it torched more than three million acres, burned five towns to the ground, and killed nearly one hundred people.

**Q:** Wow. How big is three million acres?

**A:** Imagine if the entire state of Connecticut burned in a weekend--that's what you have here.

**Q:** And yet in your subtitle you call this the fire that saved America.

**A:** That's right. This happened in August 1910--next year will be the one hundredth anniversary. It came just after Teddy Roosevelt had left office, and left a legacy of public land nearly the size of France. But after Roosevelt was gone from Washington, in 1909, the Forest Service, the stewards of his legacy, came under attack. Gilded Age money wanted the rangers gone, the land placed in private hands. Enemies in Congress were constantly sniping at the young agency. And people out west were suspicious of the value of "Teddy's green rangers," as they called them. They thought they were all college boys, softies, city kids.

**Q:** So how did the fire change that image?

**A:** It made heroes--almost mythic heroes--of the young men who led platoons of firefighters into a sea of flames. The government had marshaled ten thousand people, an army of young men, immigrants, and volunteers, to fight the fire. It was the first large-scale effort to battle a wildfire in U.S. history. The big-city daily newspapers here and abroad covered it like a war. The firefighters failed, because the Big Burn was so big and moved so quickly. But they succeeded in one respect: it turned the tide of public opinion, and Roosevelt's "Great Crusade" was saved. But at an awful cost. Those men should never have died. The fire was a once-in-a-century force of nature, and nothing could have stopped it.

**Q:** How so?

**A:** The fire moved faster than a horse at full gallop. It's been estimated that it consumed enough trees to build a city the size of Chicago. And it burned at nearly 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit in spots, incinerating the ground down to bedrock. No army of bedraggled men with shovels and picks could stop that.

**Q:** After writing a book about the Dust Bowl, what drew you to a fire from 1910?

**A:** I guess I'm working my way through the elements, going from dust to fire! Narrative history, basically just storytelling, is such a thrill to develop. You relive several lives through this drama. You inhabit their time. Like , this book follows a dual-track story and several real-life people through this event.

**Q:** How did you hear about the Great Fire?

**A:** I've heard about the Big Burn since I was a little kid, camping in Montana and Idaho with my family. It had this larger-than-life status. And then, as a New York Times reporter covering the West and many wildfires, I found that this fire was a sacred text.

**Q:** What surprised you about the story?

**A:** I think it was Voltaire who said history never repeats itself, but man always does. As with the story I tried to tell in *The Worst Hard Time*, here you have a classic tale of human beings against nature. Hubris plays a huge role. In the end, nature wins, of course. Nature always bats last, as they

said after the Bay Area earthquake that disrupted the World Series.

**Q:** What else came as a surprise?

**A:** I was hugely impressed with Roosevelt and his chief forester, a very strange and original American now nearly lost to our history named Gifford Pinchot. These were two easterners, born into wealth, who crusaded a century ago for the Progressive Era idea that a democracy and public land were inextricably linked. They always talked about land belonging to “the little guy.” It was a radical idea then, at a time when the gulf between the rich and poor was never greater. Roosevelt and Pinchot were both traitors to their class, in that sense. And both were--how to say this--odd people.

**Q:** What do you mean by that?

**A:** I mean it in a positive sense. They went skinny-dipping together in the Potomac, boxed and wrestled, climbed rocks and rode horses through Rock Creek Park, all while at the pinnacle of power, while hatching these conservation ideals. And Pinchot, the founding forester, on top of everything else, was married to a ghost--a dead woman, a true spiritual union--for nearly twenty years.

**Q:** What was that all about?

**A:** He was a quirky guy, very smart but also very spiritual.

**Q:** And Teddy Roosevelt, did he live up to the image carved on Mount Rushmore?

**A:** More so. He was such a...multitasker! A presidential polymorph! He wrote something like fifteen books before the age of forty. He climbed the Matterhorn after doctors told him he was doomed to a sickly, indoors life. And he took on the entrenched, powerful moguls and politicians of the Gilded Age.

**Q:** So the story you tell is really two stories, as you mentioned earlier: the founding of American conservation and how this fire saved it?

**A:** Precisely. I'm always interested in the collision between man and nature. But again, what struck me as unusual in this case was how the collision preserved something bigger, more lasting--the idea of conservation itself.

**Q:** So the fire was a good thing?

**A:** I don't think the families who lost their loved ones would say that. I try to focus on five or so people who faced this beast on the ground. You know, history is not always about Great Men. It's also about people in the margins, who rarely get recognition, who make it turn. And in this case, you

had some Italian and Irish immigrants, a tough female homesteader, some African-American soldiers, some brave and young forest rangers--all of whom were heroes, as important to how this fire changed history as were Roosevelt and Pinchot.

**Q:** Aside from the conservation legacy, why is a fire from a hundred years ago important today?

**A:** We're entering an age of catastrophic wildfires, so the experts say. Big parts of the West will burn over the next decade. In those forests you have all this fuel built up: dead and dying trees. The land wants to burn, perhaps needs to burn. A big part of the reason why goes back to the Big Burn. I don't want to give away a story twist, but you'll see late in the book that another lesson--perhaps tragic, certainly misguided--was taken away from the Big Burn. It's with us in a very big way.

**Q:** How, specifically?

**A:** We're seeing bigger, hotter, longer, earlier wildfires around the country today, and much of them can be traced to the wrong lessons of the Big Burn. Firefighting now accounts for nearly half of the Forest Service budget. This was not what Roosevelt had in mind.

--This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

**From Publishers Weekly** Starred Review. Egan, National Book Award winner for *The Worst Hard Time*, spins a tremendous tale of Progressive-era America out of the 1910 blaze that burned across Montana, Idaho and Washington and put the fledgling U.S. Forest Service through a veritable trial by fire. Underfunded, understaffed, unsupported by Congress and President Taft and challenged by the robber barons that Taft's predecessor, Theodore Roosevelt, had worked so hard to oppose, the Forest Service was caught unprepared for the immense challenge. Egan shuttles back and forth between the national stage of politics and the conflicting visions of the nation's future, and the personal stories of the men and women who fought and died in the fire: rangers, soldiers, immigrant miners imported from all over the country to help the firefighting effort, prostitutes, railroad engineers and dozens others whose stories are painstakingly recreated from scraps of letters, newspaper articles, firsthand testimony, and Forest Service records. Egan brings a touching humanity to this story of valor and cowardice in the face of a national catastrophe, paying respectful attention to Roosevelt's great dream of conservation and of an America for the little man. (Oct.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

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