

The Big Burn- Timothy Egan

A Summary

The Big Burn starts off describing Gifford Pinchot and Theodore Roosevelt's intimate friendship and their passion for preservation of public lands. Pinchot became politically active after graduating from forestry school in France and returning to America, where he and John Muir founded a conservation caucus. Together Muir and Pinchot travelled the U.S. in search of natural treasures found on public land; to write a conservation commission report to submit to congress. The report was ultimately dismissed but the connection with Muir introduced Pinchot to the then Governor of New York, Theodore Roosevelt.

Once McKinley passed away and Theodore Roosevelt became President he employed Pinchot and a team of ten to create the United States first Forestry Department. Roosevelt spent a lot of time changing the Republican party platform by breaking up big business monopolies and creating national parks, monuments and forests.

This friendship would lay the foundation for not only the creation of public lands but the policy they were managed by to present day. One of the main convincing factors urging congressmen to preserve and regulate public lands was the fire in the Bitterroot mountains in Idaho that this book documents. Before the fire, the creation of public lands was controversial and often times meant outlaw communities set up camp in the middle of these forests with only the forest rangers to police them. Forest rangers had little authority, therefore these towns were often overrun by brothels, bars and gambling establishments.

After the fire, all these towns were wiped out and the need for forest management and fire mitigation became a more widely accepted topic. Pinchot himself did not want fire suppression to be the only function of the forest service but that became a primary task. Looking ahead to present day we can see the ramifications of decades of public land policy directed at fire suppression and rising global temperatures.

Not only does the Big Burn document public land policy it also tells first person accounts of people impacted by the fire. This was a time of mass immigration in the United States and this is reflected in the personal stories of those in the Bitterroots during this time. Just as immigrant labor was used in the mining and timber industry they were also employed by the forest service to fight fires. This was a risky job that had never been attempted before and had little funding. The forest fire fighting crews were mainly comprised of locals trying to protect their homes and Italian, Hungarian, Irish and prisoners. These groups of Europeans were often discriminated against at the time and had a hard time finding good paying, safe jobs. In a sense they did the undesirable work that the rest of the U.S. residents did not want to do and often sacrificed their lives for it. It was only

then after they had died defending other peoples land that the returning towns folk gave up their prejudice towards them.

Even buffalo soldiers were recruited to fight fires from the Spanish American war where they had been enlisted by Roosevelt. To the local towns folk of Idaho this was their first and maybe only interaction with black people. The buffalo soldiers were given the most undesirable tasks, which they carried out without complaint. They also volunteered to stay behind with the town's folk to protect their land after everyone else had fled. This made an impression on some of the colonizing white population that was documented describing the heroism of the buffalo soldiers.

These cross cultural interactions were still heavily steeped in racism even to those European immigrant populations still not deemed "white" enough. This really put in perspective the social construct of race and who is allowed to be white and who is not. The buffalo soldiers heroism changed a few minds about racist stereotypes but they would never be considered part of the white Idaho community.

This book made me reflect on historically marginalized groups of people and the ongoing discrimination of populations of people in the U.S. today. Historically marginalized groups of people were encouraged to do hazardous, low paying work because there were no other alternatives for them. This is still seen in American society across many agricultural and industrial sectors. I also reflected on the growing wild fires we are experiencing today and the public land policies still in place since the forest services creation. The Big Burn gives historical context to the creation of the public lands system and touches on topics such as racism that the U.S. is still struggling with to this day.