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Old or new, these are MUST READ (or must watch) pieces of media. Books, video, radio and other media featured here are items we consider essential to your knowledge about our forests, our environment, and the humans who influence each of them. Stay informed about the environment. And tell us about "Must Knows" you find.

The Big Burn: Teddy Roosevelt and the Fire that Saved America

by Timothy Egan
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009, 336 pages

Review by Jim Walker

A fascinating read on fire, *The Big Burn: Teddy Roosevelt and the Fire that Saved America*, tells the story of the great conflagration of the Northern Rockies in August 1910. The big burn was the largest forest fire America has ever seen, a wind-driven firestorm that consumed "three million acres in barely two days." That is four times the size of the entire Chattahoochee National Forest! It is a dramatic story indeed, with thousands of people fighting for a place on evacuation trains leaving soon-to-be-destroyed towns and others, first fighting the fire and then fighting to save their own lives.

Despite the book's title, the big burn is not its main subject; Egan uses the fire as a frame within which he tells the story of the establishment of forest reserves – what we now know as our national forests – and the creation of the U.S. Forest Service. The heroes of the big burn were rangers of the newly created Forest Service such as Joe Halm and Ed Pulaski, whose stories are told in the book. The political heroes of the fight to save public lands were Teddy Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot.

Roosevelt, as president, more than tripled the area of forest reserves, adding over 100 million acres, much of it singlehandedly in the face of ferocious opposition from robber barons plundering the country's public lands, and their corrupt political lackeys. For my money, he was the greatest conservationist in the history of this country, at least in terms of his accomplishments. Without Teddy Roosevelt, this country would be a much different, poorer place, and he deserves his place on Mount Rushmore.

Pinchot, whom Roosevelt appointed as the first chief of the Forest Service, was certainly a very strange fellow, but he knew what he wanted and how to get things done, often through his close friendship with Roosevelt. After reading *The Big Burn*, I have a more balanced view of him than primarily as John Muir's opponent in the Hetch-Hetchy dam fight. And Pinchot brings the story close to our neck of the woods, since his truly bizarre love affair with his fiancé began during his time at the Biltmore Estate just up the road in Asheville.

The Big Burn contains two stories, one of the fire itself and the other of the fight to conserve public lands. If the former is more dramatic, the latter is undoubtedly more significant in its consequences, more so even than the ruin of millions of acres of timber, the total destruction of numerous towns, and the loss of over 100 lives. Egan tells them both well.

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