



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

Timothy Egan

[Download now](#)

[Read Online](#) ➔

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

Timothy Egan

The Big Burn: Teddy Roosevelt and the Fire That Saved America Timothy Egan

On the afternoon of August 20, 1910, a battering ram of wind moved through the drought-stricken national forests of Washington, Idaho, and Montana, whipping the hundreds of small blazes burning across the forest floor into a roaring inferno that jumped from treetop to ridge as it raged, destroying towns and timber in the blink of an eye. Forest rangers had assembled nearly ten thousand men —? college boys, day workers, immigrants from mining camps ?—? to fight the fire. But no living person had seen anything like those flames, and neither the rangers nor anyone else knew how to subdue them.

Egan narrates the struggles of the overmatched rangers against the implacable fire with unstoppable dramatic force. Equally dramatic is the larger story he tells of outsized president Teddy Roosevelt and his chief forester, Gifford Pinchot. Pioneering the notion of conservation, Roosevelt and Pinchot did nothing less than create the idea of public land as our national treasure, owned by and preserved for every citizen. The robber barons fought Roosevelt and Pinchot's rangers, but the Big Burn saved the forests even as it destroyed them: the heroism shown by the rangers turned public opinion permanently in their favor and became the creation myth that drove the Forest Service, with consequences still felt in the way our national lands are protected? — ?or not —? today.

The Big Burn: Teddy Roosevelt and the Fire That Saved America Details

Date : Published October 1st 2009 by Houghton Mifflin

ISBN : 9780618968411

Author : Timothy Egan

Format : Hardcover 336 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, North American Hi..., American History, Environment, Nature

 [Download The Big Burn: Teddy Roosevelt and the Fire That Saved A ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online The Big Burn: Teddy Roosevelt and the Fire That Saved ...pdf](#)

Download and Read Free Online The Big Burn: Teddy Roosevelt and the Fire That Saved America
Timothy Egan

From Reader Review The Big Burn: Teddy Roosevelt and the Fire That Saved America for online ebook

Jonathan says

First off, let me start by saying that Teddy Roosevelt is the man. Anybody who cares about wilderness conservation or has visited a national park should be thankful that he was our president. Egan's book is not only about the great forest fire of 1910 (the titular big burn), but about Roosevelt's efforts to set aside land for future generations. There is plenty of backstory as Egan explores the kinship between TR and his appointed head of forestry Gifford Pinchot, a kinship which ultimately led to the creation of protected forests and national parks. Egan's description of the unstoppable blaze, and the response of the forestry service as well as ordinary citizens as they made futile attempts to contain the blaze made for a harrowing read. He also puts the fire into proper context, highlighting both the political and industrial climate of the times. The ending seemed a bit hurried in comparison to the in-depth and well paced beginning and middle, but since the book was primarily about the fire and not a history of the forestry service I can be forgiving. This was a great read for American history buffs, as well as anyone interested in the origins of our country's conservation movement.

John says

Timothy Egan, who brilliantly brought the Dust Bowl era to life in "The Worst Hard Time," serves up more real-life gloom and doom with "The Big Burn."

This is the story of the worst wildfire in American history, the Great Fire of 1910, which burned 3 million acres, destroyed several towns, left 85 dead and many others disabled for life. It's also the story of the U.S. Forest Service, in its infancy and cruelly underfunded in 1910, and the valiant efforts of its rangers to fight the fire. And it's the story of how the fire shaped the Forest Service for decades to come.

All brought together in a compelling 283 pages.

My guess is that the publisher, not the author, chose the subtitle "Teddy Roosevelt and the Fire that Saved America." Although Roosevelt is a major character in the first part of this book, he's not the central character. That would be Roosevelt's chief forester, Gifford Pinchot. And what a character for a nonfiction writer -- equal parts brilliant visionary; inspirational leader; incorrigible rebel; and odd duck. Another character who plays a greater role than Roosevelt is a ranger named Ed Pulaski, a heroic but tragic figure in the story.

Moreover, the third part of Egan's book makes one doubt that this fire "saved America." Egan suggests, in fact, that it sent the Forest Service down a wrong path that is only recently being corrected -- a path of excessive logging and overzealous fire management.

Great nonfiction writing starts with great reporting, and it's clear that Egan did his homework in preparing this book. He weaves together dozens of stories in a narrative that never grows dull. Even the first part, in which Egan sets the stage by tracing the development of the Forest Service, is spiced with anecdotes that move the story along.

If there's anything more frightening than being overtaken by a wildfire, I don't want to know what it is. This is a frightening book. Egan makes it vividly real.

Irene says

This is a highly readable account of the August 20, 1910 raging forest fire, the largest in U.S. history. Egan gives a detailed account of the efforts of the poorly funded, poorly trained rangers who risked their lives to contain the fire for a country who refused to compensate the families of the dead or pay the medical bills of the horrifically injured. Egan argues that the embattled backers of the nascent Forest Service was able to use this event to gain support and funding for this agency. However, they were unable to protect the forests from the ravages of the timber industry which continued to clear cut public lands for private profit.

Melki says

"There was no damn horse fast enough in the country to keep ahead of that fire."

All the world was on fire - flames overhead, flames to the left, flames to the right, the ground was alive.

One August day in 1910, the largest wildfire in US history swept across Washington, Idaho and Montana. The newly established and woefully underfunded Forestry Service struggled to combat the flames. Firefighters were recruited from nearby mining towns.

They came because it was a job, paying twenty-five cents an hour - though many were paid only with promises. Rangers and immigrant alike, they shared but a single thing; not one of them knew how to engage a wildfire of this magnitude.

Egan's book starts with a slam-bang tale of the fire bearing down on the town of Wallace, Idaho. The story told reads more like a novel than a historical account, with heroes bidding goodbye to loved ones and wealthy men shoving women to the ground in an effort to board one of the few trains out of town. It's a tense few pages, with the fates of all concerned left untold.

Then the pace is slowed for a bit as the major "behind the scenes" characters are introduced, specifically Teddy Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot. The two shared a friendship and also a vision that the *"rights of the public to the national resources outweigh private rights."* This opinion was unpopular with the lumber barons and other business owners hoping to profit from the heavily wooded lands. These chapters, while necessary, are about as thrilling as reading about rich men having tea parties, which, in a way, is essentially what the pages entail.

Soon enough, we're back to the fire. In Wallace, chaos reigns as the mayor tries to keep his male citizens around to fight the blaze. But their efforts prove to be futile.

The heat burned against Weigle's and up his nostrils. Flames all around. The back of his hand caught fire for an instant, the skin stinging, as if a dozen hornets had poked him. When his mop of red hair started to burn with a sickly smell, he reached for a handful of gravel from the road and rubbed it on his head. But now the fire was in front of him, big downed timbers engulfed by tongues of flame across the dirt road. He could descend no more. He had no choice but to go back up hill yet again. He remembered a tunnel he had passed, a mining hole. Trudging onward in the black of a burning night, Weigle found the mine about a half mile along the way. If he was to survive he had to crawl inside and wait out the firestorm.

43 fire fighters hid in the War Eagle mine shaft

But hiding from the blaze inside tunnels proved to be the wrong answer for some.

The air had been cold but it quickly warmed, and then just as quickly went stale and hot. The outside heat was sucking all the cold air from the tunnel. How long till the oxygen was gone?

Wallace after the fire

The author provides an excellent account of the fire and its aftermath, and detailed epilogues on all parties involved. This is definitely one of the more thrilling nonfiction books I've read. It should be a welcome tonic for anyone who thinks that reading about history is boring.

Beth says

This was an all-county-read for my county library. It was the most popular all-county-read by far, and the many discussions and special events arranged around the book were well-attended. This was probably because we live in a forest-fire threatened area, surrounded by pine beetle-killed trees that are highly flammable. It was fascinating to read about this horrific fire in the past and imagine it happening again and how we could or could not prepare for and fight the blaze.

I also found the history of Gifford Pinchot (the first US Chief Forester), President Teddy Roosevelt, and the founding of the US Forest Service enlightening. I had previously read *The River of Doubt: Theodore Roosevelt's Darkest Journey* about a later adventurous and life-threatening challenge in Teddy Roosevelt's history, and this book was a great companion to that.

Jeanette "Astute Crabbist" says

Over the long term, greed was the winner of this battle. Some things never change. We could use another Teddy Roosevelt here in the 21st century. Progressive, outspoken, tenacious, and so gifted with words.

This book is a lot more about politics than it is about The Big Burn. I agree with another reviewer who said the title is misleading, as the book is much more about Gifford Pinchot than Teddy Roosevelt. Also, it is never made clear how the fire "saved America." Still, there's much to learn of history here, especially if you like politics.

A lot of heroes emerged during the fire, saving many lives and suffering permanent debilitation. It's shameful that the government never gave them adequate compensation or recognition, especially in the case of Ed Pulaski.

The book is not very well organized, and Egan somehow managed to stretch a 100-page story out to 280 pages. It's worth reading, but there are things about his writing and set-up that bugged me. I think Norman Maclean writes more memorably about men and fire here: <http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/30...>

Will Byrnes says

In 1910, the US Forestry Service was in its infancy. Teddy Roosevelt had put Gifford Pinchot in charge of the founding agency. But robber barons and local commercial interests used all their resources to try to smother the infant in its crib, using their control of media to lobby against and lie about the Forest Service, and using their money to corrupt public officials in order to deny the Service the manpower and resources needed to actually protect the growing quantity of land held in public trust. Then, in a drought-parched lands of eastern Washington, western Montana and northern Idaho, the greatest forest fire in US history sparked a major change in public consciousness.

Egan offers historical context for this story, writing about the politics of the day, the forces, personalities and motives involved. As America saw its frontiers vanishing, a president took on the task of preserving some of the nation's wilderness for future generations. Some things never change. Just as today's robber barons are willing to despoil the entire planet to bolster next quarter's bottom line, so the big business interests of 1910 were more than happy to spend the nation's future to enrich their present.

When a wildfire broke out in the western forests, it was the Forestry Service that was charged with keeping it under control. Pinchot had oversold his vision of the service, believing that forest fires were an aspect of nature that man, and in particular the Service, would be able to control. He was wrong. And short-sighted, penurious Congressional funding for the Service ensured that there would be insufficient resources to manage any but the most modest blazes.

Entire towns were wiped off the map. In some cases this probably represented an improvement. Hundreds of people lost their lives, fighting the fire, fleeing it, or attempting to hide. Egan offers us personal stories of the people involved, the local rangers who tried to organize firefighting squadrons, townspeople who joined the battle, or trampled women and children to save their own lives.

I would have liked for Egan to offer more science in explaining the particularities of this fire. And it might have been informative, if gruesome to go into some of the details of why death by fire is so horrific. Some of that can be found in Daniel James Brown's compelling book, *Under a Flaming Sky*, about an earlier firestorm in 1894.

There are characters aplenty in *The Big Burn*, people with whom one can identify, and there are clear lessons to be gleaned that are applicable to contemporary issues. *The Big Burn* is a fast-paced read that is engaging, informative and thought-provoking.

UPDATES

July 5, 2012 - Egan's column addresses what can only be called The Burning Time as the summer of 2012 puts the lie to deniers of global warming

Lauren says

Compelling story about the "Big Burn" fire in the Bitterroot Range of the Rocky Mountains in Western Montana and the Idaho panhandle. The fire itself was the catalyst and early justification - albeit a tragic and

land-altering one - for the need for a national Forest Service. The book tells of the early conservationist "triumvirate" of Gifford Pinchot (the first chief of the Forest Service) and his more famous partners, Teddy Roosevelt and John Muir. While Pinchot and Muir differed philosophically later in life, they both understood the importance of setting aside the great forests of the United States FOR the people. Teddy Roosevelt, ever the politician but also one with a true heart for the land, made this a reality in his presidency.

The fire occurred after Roosevelt's presidency in 1910, when the Forest Service was constantly berated and denigrated for the work that they did in the forests, and on the national stage in Congress. Well before conservation thought was part of our national ethos, the wilderness was seen as dark, sinful, and in need of industry and development - it was believed to be God's work (along with manifest destiny) to plow the forests, using all of the timber, building cities and roads, as well as industry for the good of man and progress. Conservationist thought (and preservationist, even more so) flew in the face of this Puritan work ethic. Valuing the untouched land was a foreign concept. However, with the Bitterroot Fire, the Forest Service was able to make a case for governmental regulations, protection, and of course, fire safety. Countless lives were lost and small frontier towns burned to the ground in this fire.

The book spends about 1/3 of its whole on the fire, describing some accounts of survivors. The rest of the book dips into the biographies of Pinchot and Roosevelt - their boxing and wrestling matches in Rock Creek Park in DC! - and their enduring friendship and influence over each other. The final third shows the aftermath of the fire, both in Montana and Idaho, but also in the Capitol, and most importantly in policy and law enacted later.

Marc says

Outstanding, highly readable history of the Great Fire of 1910 that burned 3.2 million acres in and around the Bitterroots National Forest in Idaho and Montana. The author moves deftly between (a) the immediacy of the fire and the experiences of people caught up in it, and (b) the powerful business and political interests whose actions both contributed to and were affected by the disaster.

Timothy Egan has done a tremendous amount of research, but what emerges most clearly (and powerfully) are the very personal stories of the people involved. And the experiences, thoughts, and emotions of common people (homesteaders, cooks, forest rangers) are described just as carefully, and in as much affectionate detail, as those of corporate titans, senators, and presidents (Roosevelt and Taft).

In the end this rather compact book serves as a history not just of the biggest U.S. fire of the 20th century, but also of the (fascinating) national politics of the first dozen years of the century, and of the origins of the U.S. Forest Service. Highly recommended.

Jean says

Teddy Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot were motivated to protect land under attack by the wholesale rape of the west by timber barons and railroad magnates. In the early 1900's the West was opening up; land seized from Native Americans was given away. Timber barons and railroad magnates grabbed land to consolidate their hold on the untouched American wealth of land, timber and minerals. In response, Roosevelt created

National Parks, attempting to protect some of the land from the rapacious land-grab. It is fascinating to learn of the influence of other visionaries of the time such as John Muir.

To bolster support for the newly minted National Parks, Roosevelt promoted the claim that they could prevent disastrous forest fires. The foresters took this charge to heart and worked diligently to achieve this unattainable goal. Here we see the seeds of disasters to come when man tries to deny a force of nature.

In retaliation, Congress underfunded the fledgling Forest Service, hoping that it would be too weak to interfere with timber thieves and bogus homesteads (homesteaders sold them to timber companies for \$8,000, 1910 money!). Congress refused to pay for shovels, horses, or food. These insults were nothing compared to how they would treat the victims and survivors of the Big Burn. One hundred years ago, Congress proved it was as short-sighted and mean-spirited as the one we live under today.

In 1910 a 'perfect storm' of dry weather, flammable fuel, electrical storms, and sparks and embers from railroads and human activities, produced America's largest wildfire of 3 million acres. Understaffed, underpaid, and paying for their own tools and supplies, foresters fought the 'Big Burn' of 1910 in the Bitterroot area (Washington/Idaho border). Inhabitants(bankers, saloon owners, etc), lately arrived to profit from land and wages, refused to sign up to protect the land they were profiting from. They ignored warnings, then panicked when fire approached. Well-to-do merchants fought women for seats on evacuation trains.

As a reward for dying protecting the people of the Bitterroot, foresters received \$500 for ONE memorial, and nothing for the medical bills and disabilities of the heroes of the Big Burn. Forest Service employees invested their health and lives in protecting the forest that Roosevelt had charged them with. They were rewarded with death; quick in the fire or lingering afterward: blind, burned and lungs damaged. Doctors refused to treat them when their personal money ran out. The bureaucrats of Washington, DC, tools of Congress, denied and denied and denied. Sound familiar?

Even the Carnegie Hero Fund refused to recognize the sacrifice of Ed Pulaski, blinded and disabled while saving the lives of 45 men in his crew. He is the inventor of the Pulaski axe that foresters use to this day. Pulaski never earned a dime from this invention.

Such are the wages of working for the Federal Government ruled by the wealthy Congress, who deny payment to employees while taking 'perks' for themselves. Eventually Congress converted the Forest Service into the servant of the timber industry that it is now. Now they 'save' the forest by designing the roads that enable the clear cutting of western forests. Visitors to national forests must beware the timber trucks. Foresters that try to serve the forest are suppressed by managers who serve the party in power.

This is a chapter of American history that needs to be replayed, reevaluated, and learned from. The author tries to rescue this story of mistreatment as ultimately hopeful but it is very hard find the good news in this painful chapter.

Kurt says

I first heard about the 1910 event known as "The Big Burn" many years ago while reading about hiking trails in my home state of Idaho. The magnitude of this huge forest fire intrigued me at the time; so, when I saw a book on the bestseller list with the title **The Big Burn** I immediately took notice.

I really enjoyed reading this book. It has so many qualities that make it my kind of book: Nature, Idaho, History, Conservation, Adventure, Politics, Tragedy, Disaster, and best of all - excellent writing and storytelling.

Clif Hostetler says

As indicated by the title, this book is about a wildfire that occurred in 1910 that burned about three million acres in northeast Washington, northern Idaho, and western Montana. The book also details some of the political issues focusing on Theodore Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot (the first Chief of the United States Forest Service from 1905 until his firing in 1910).

The fire provides the impending drama in the book's narrative because the reader doesn't know until the end of the book which of the characters that were introduced earlier in the book will survive. The book suggests between 100 to 200 died in the fire (Wikipedia shows a lower number). The discussion of Theodore Roosevelt's rise to power and the formation of the National Forests provides the setting and background in which the action occurs.

I found it particularly interesting to note the many similarities with events of today. Of course the one obvious similarity is drought in the western U.S. and the resulting numerous wildfires. There were also economic and political similarities. The disparity of wealth distribution was at an all time high at the turn of the century, and big business interests had many politicians under their influence. Sound familiar?

Prior to the big 1910 fire the U.S. Congress was slowly starving the U.S. Forest Service of funding. Critical politicians accused it of government meddling into the rights of private business to exploit natural resources. The fire resulted in raising public awareness surrounding national nature conservation and highlighting the forest rangers and firefighters as public heroes.

This explains the book's subtitle reference to "... Fire That Saved America." In other words the destruction caused by the fire resulted in steps to save certain portions of the National Forests as untouched wilderness areas. It also resulted in enhanced attention to the prevention of forest fires which over the years has led to unintended consequences.

Patty says

This is the kind of history book I love to read. The author spends the time to get as many actual quotes as possible and then weaves them into the story as narrative rather than as statements. Egan brings alive Teddy Roosevelt, his "forester" Pinchot and the many people in the Bitterroot Mountains of Idaho/Montana who were there in August of 1910 when the entire forest burned in a couple of days. The ones who survived tell compelling stories of what it was like when the fire came at them pushed by hurricane force winds.

The back story of how the U.S. Forest Service was established and so underfunded that it almost ceased is fascinating although not as compelling as the story of the fire. It is necessary so you understand how something that destroyed so much was responsible for saving an agency and establishing a firm foothold for our National Forest system today.

Highly recommended.

Darwin8u says

“Better for a man to fail, he said, even "to fail greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.”

? Timothy Egan, *The Big Burn: Teddy Roosevelt and the Fire that Saved America*

A good history of Great Fire of 1910/the Big Burn and the fledgling years of the US Forest Service. Act one covers most of the major players: Teddy Roosevelt, Gifford Pinchot, Senator Heyburn, William Taft, Elers Koch, Bill Weigle, Joe Halm, and Ed Pulaski. Act two covers the fire. Act three, the aftermath. While the secondary title is perhaps a bit hyperbolic (really, the *Fire that Saved America?*) it certainly cemented the Forest Service and their rangers into the hearts and minds of America.

I remember, one summer when I was nineteen, volunteering in Grand Junction, Colorado to help the Forest Service carve the Kokopelli Trail in the McInnis Canyon National Conservatory near Fruita, Colorado. The tool I used? A Pulaski. Later that year, I was living in Glenwood Springs, Colorado in 1994, the summer the South Canyon Fire raced down Storm King Mountain killing 14 hotshot firefighters from Oregon. I remember friends from HS and college going out and joining Forest Service hotshot fire crews. I remember just a couple years ago, in Idaho, my brother's brother-in-law and father-in-law flying water bombers fighting a fire that was burning part of the Southern Sawtooth National Forest that bordered my father's dry farm near Burley, Idaho. Fires and the Forest Service are in my blood and in my family. This book was a great look at its beginning. It was a good book on conservation and the early Forest Service, just not a great one.

Randy says

Timothy Egan writes great books (as well as strong columns for the New York Times). He tricks us a bit with the sub-title. Although there is much about Teddy Roosevelt the main character of this tale is really Gifford Pinchot, the nation's first forester and father of the US Forest Service and the man most responsible for saving what's left of America's forests. Another of the featured characters is Ed Pulaski, an original forest ranger who was so damaged by the The Big Burn that he never really recovered. I spent a summer with the Forest Service on a fire crew wielding a pulaski on a daily basis. It is a great tool for building trail and fire line. It's been years but I can still close my eyes and see the yellow-white heart of a tree root as I sliced it with the axe end of the Pulaski then flipped the tool over to hoe away rotten cedar and red dirt. Pulaski was an embittered victim of the fight between conservationists and timber interests. He never received compensation for his fire storm injuries which left him a shell of his former self. In spite of his injuries he spent time at the forge devising this most useful of tools (the Forest Service now stocks 10,000 Pulaskis) but was never able to patent his invention. Pinchot, drummed out of office by adversaries in the Senate never gave up his fight and he used the Big Burn, which Egan turns into one of the most exciting reads you can imagine, to gain even more land for conservation. Most interesting is the description of the early days of the Forest Service when a handful of acolytes from Yale turn up in the wilds of Idaho and Montana to do battle with railroaders and miners in towns so evil one dare not speak their name. Most no longer exist, burned to a

crisp in the Big Burn. What a great book!
