

THE BIG BURN

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In the summer of 1910, a massive wildfire swept across the Northern Rockies, devouring more than three million acres in 36 hours and confronting the fledgling United States Forest Service with a catastrophe that would define the agency in the nation's fire policy for much of the 20th century. *The Big Burn*, inspired by the best-selling book from Timothy Egan, provides a cautionary tale of heroism and sacrifice, arrogance and greed, hubris and, ultimately, humility, in the face of nature's frightening power.

In the spring of 1905, the first group of fresh-faced graduates of Yale's Forestry School began to arrive in the bawdy frontier towns of the West. These first employees of the Forest Service were given the monumental task of managing the newly created national forests in the Northern Rockies. They served under the founder of the Forest Service, Gifford Pinchot, an eccentric patrician with an almost missionary zeal for conserving America's public lands and a close friend of fellow conservationist Teddy Roosevelt.

One of Pinchot's first hires was young William Greeley, who was given the task of overseeing 29 million acres; each of the 160 rangers under Greeley would be responsible for almost 300 square miles of national forest. The previous two years had been dry but nothing could have prepared the fledgling Forest Service for the severity of the drought that befell the Northern Rockies in 1910. Fires broke out continually and were fought by the rookie rangers as best they could. On the smoldering mountains, the young Ivy League rangers were joined by Ed Pulaski, an older Western frontiersman, jack-of-all-trades, and man of the people, whose skill and calm would prove invaluable on the evening of July 26, 1910, when a violent lightning storm lit up the sky, igniting more than 1,000 fires across 22 national forests.

Back East, Roosevelt's successor, William Howard Taft, fired Pinchot just as Greeley desperately needed additional men on the ground to fight the ever-increasing number of fires. He quickly hired every able-bodied man available, even emptying the jails and sending convicted murderers to the front lines. Finally the federal government relented and Taft sent 2,000 troops to the Rockies, including seven companies from the African American Buffalo Soldiers.

By the second week of August, the number of fires had doubled, and on the evening of August 20, hurricane force winds of 70 miles per hour fanned the flames of the fires into one gigantic blaze, igniting the horror of what would come to be known as the Big Burn. When it was finally over, more than three million acres of forest had been burned and a billion dollars' worth of timber had been lost. Soot from the fires darkened skies as far away as Boston and a layer of ash blanketed the ice of Greenland. But it was the human toll that stunned the nation—many were injured, scores had lost their homes, and more than 78 firefighters perished in the flames.

No sooner had the smoke cleared than the debate over the lessons of the Big Burn began. One hundred years later, the legacy of the Big Burn can be measured in the growth of the U.S. Forest Service and in fire suppression policies that demanded that every fire be fought—a policy most now think is misguided.

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