Timothy Egan's *The Big Burn:* a Bully Read

by Larry Freeman, PhD
The Shipley Group, *Senior Consultant*

I highly recommend Timothy Egan's *The Big Burn: Teddy Roosevelt and the Fire That Saved America*. To use Teddy's favorite adjective, it is a bully book. The book's subtitle originally caught my eye. How could a disastrous wildfire save America? And what was Teddy Roosevelt's connection with the wildfire? I answer these questions below.

My goal in this brief newsletter is to introduce you to Egan's book. I will have succeeded if you look for a copy on Amazon. And Egan's skillful writing will more than repay your money and time if you order it.

The "Big Burn," also known as the "Big Blowup," refers to the great 1910 wildfire season, ending with some 3 million acres of green forest burned on the two single blowup days of August 20 and 21. These two tragic windy days climaxed an extremely dry summer, with dozens, perhaps hundreds of smaller fires in the preceding weeks. The U.S. Forest Service, then only five years old, fought many of the smaller fires successfully. But the understaffed Forest Service, even with help from some 4,000 Army troops and many volunteers, was overwhelmed on August 20 and 21. Those two days showed that no human actions could have saved the trees, much less the many small towns in central Idaho. Wallace, Idaho, for example, lost over a third of its buildings, and many of its women and children fled on a rescue train to Missoula.

The Big Burn was an Act of God, much as recent earthquakes or tsunamis have been. And as with all Acts of God, we view major forest fires with terror and fascination. It is this fascination that makes published accounts of forest fires so frequently written and so interesting.

My comments address these questions:

1. **What makes Egan's account of the 1910 fire such a good read?**
2. **What are Egan's broader goals, besides the recounting of mere fire events?**
3. **How do Teddy Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot contribute to the dramatic confrontations recorded in the book?**
4. **And, finally, how did the Big Burn help save America?**

I read Egan's *The Big Burn* in a paperback edition (Boston: Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010). Page references cited are to that edition. Amazon currently lists the hardcover edition as available for $10.80; a Kindle version is also available.

1. What makes Egan's account of the 1910 fire such a good read?

Three writing traits make *The Big Burn* a good read:

- Interesting characters, vividly described
- Realistic problems confronting the characters
- Excellent writing

Interesting characters have been the essence of good fiction and drama for centuries. Over 2000 years ago, Greek dramatists knew that a strong cast of characters made a drama successful. Egan's book has a strong cast of memorable characters.

One group of characters in the book consists of ordinary people confronting the wildfire on August 20 and 21. A second group of characters includes Teddy Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot. See question 3 below for discussion of Roosevelt and Pinchot.

Ed and Emma Pulaski, two of Wallace's residents, were two of the ordinary residents confronting the wildfire. Ed was one of the earliest rangers to serve in the Forest Service and is credited to have developed the Pulaski firefighting tool (a combined axe and adze, especially useful digging and cutting fire lines). Ed and his baldly unpaid and eventually underpaid firefighting crew of nearly 50 had the assignment of protecting Wallace, Idaho. They failed and fled for their lives into an abandoned mine. Ed put up water-soaked blankets in the mine entrance and threatened to shoot any of his men who tried to outrun the fierce fire (certain death within yards). Ed and most of his crew survived, despite suffering from bad burns and smoke inhalation.

Emma remained in Wallace while Ed was fighting the fire. She managed to save herself and her daughter when the fire swept over Wallace. (If you want to know how she did it, buy Egan's book!)

Readers of *The Big Burn* first meet Ed and Emma on p. 7. Ed and Emma then reappear in over a dozen other chapters. These later appearances helped me maintain interest in chapters discussing the origins of the Forest Service or the then-current political debates about the use and conservation of the rich natural resources in the United States.

Interesting characters reappearing in later chapters made the book seem like an engaging narrative rather than a dry exposition of the conservation movement or the early years of the Forest Service. (I confess to having bought several dry discussions of the early conservation movement. I didn't finish one of them!)

Realistic problems confront the characters throughout the book. The wildfire is the most obvious. It is interesting to see how everyday people in Idaho and Montana dealt with the wildfire.

But a different kind of realistic problem appears early in the book. As early as p. 9, readers learn that the newly developing conservation movement was at risk. Grover Cleveland established some 20 million acres of forest reserves as early as 1897. But the forest reserves were not well funded or recognized as a valuable effort until early in 1904, when Roosevelt was to launch the agency that eventually became the Forest Service.

Roosevelt appointed Gifford Pinchot to be its first head, but the tiny agency remained underfunded and understaffed. Both ordinary citizens and their elected representatives were debating before 1910 what the role of the government should be in relation to the rich natural resources, including the vast uncut forests in the Pacific Northwest.

Excellent writing in *The Big Burn* sets it apart from other surveys of events at the turn of the 1900 century. Many times I found myself reading a key paragraph and noticing how good the writing was. His writing is one reason that Egan was a winner of the National Book Award for *The Worst Hard Time* (New York: Mariner Books, September 1, 2006).

The following paragraph describes William A. Clark, who was a major opponent of Roosevelt's and Pinchot's conservation initiatives:

If William A. Clark was not the meanest man in Montana, he was certainly the richest and the most hated. He was also a United States senator from the Big Sky State, a position he had initially purchased with bundles of crisp $100 bills handed out to legislators in monogrammed envelopes—W.A.C. stamped on the fold, $10,000 per vote. Clark was a sunken-faced gnomish man with a paintbrush beard and eyes that cut with a slicing stare. He had set out to corner the copper market at a time when the world most needed that commodity for two of the biggest advances in civilization: the telephone and harnessed electricity. Clark purchased cops and courts, newspaper editors and ministers, grand juries—any source of opposition or fair play. Because senators were then chosen by state legislatures, he didn't have to pretend to care about average citizens. (p. 39)

As this profile of Clark suggests, he is the villain in the book. Yes, other politicians fought Roosevelt's and Pinchot's progressive initiatives, including resource conservation. But Clark was the most notable of the gang later called the "Robber Barons." The barons were the nineteenth century tycoons who bought timber acres for pennies and developed copper and coal mines without concern for adverse economic or environmental impacts, such as the living conditions for their underpaid workers.

As noted below, both Roosevelt and Pinchot could see that U.S. natural resources were not endless. Roosevelt, before becoming President, had established himself as a western rancher and energetic outdoorsman. Despite his love of hunting, Roosevelt supported provisions to guarantee that plentiful resources—land, water, timber, fish, and wildlife--would still be available for future generations. Clark had no such goal. Roosevelt was also a founding member of the Boone and Crockett Club, and a hunting club with a conservation ethic as one its tenets.

2. What are Egan's broader goals, besides the recounting of mere fire events?

By 1910, many of the forested acres of Idaho and elsewhere in the Northwest had been set aside as protected Federal reserves. Teddy Roosevelt had established many of these reserves in 1907, shortly before leaving the presidency. Egan delightfully describes on pp. 69-71 the week in late 1907 when Roosevelt and Pinchot worked late each night in the White House to identify suitable acres for new Forest reserves. At the end of the week Roosevelt had legally assigned some 16 million new acres to the U.S. Forest Service (as it later became).

Public debates about the forest reserves continued until the great 1910 fire season, when ordinary citizens began to recognize that Federal management of Forests and National Parks made good sense, especially management of the inevitable forest fires. Congressional leaders continued to limit funding for Forests and Parks, but the public's admiration eventually prevailed and the Forest Service was finally a viable agency.

Sounds like current political debates about the role of the Federal government! This very currency helps make otherwise dry historical discussions in Egan's book come alive. Then, as now, no easy answers exist as to what the States and Federal government should be doing to manage public resources wisely.

Readers of Egan's book in its earliest pages learn that his goal is far more than recounting the events of the historic 1910 fire. He sees the fire as a pivotal event in the political history of the United States. **By 1900, the United States was confronted with decisions about how best to manage its vast natural resources, especially in the undeveloped Northwest. Such landmark decisions are the heart of Egan's book.**

As Egan's book explains, the Big Burn was instrumental in convincing the public that Federal funding should support the establishment of a professional Forest Service. And in the expansion of the Forest Service, support increased for the policy of wildfire suppression. Years later this policy was captured in the Smokey Bear campaign.

Debate over the wisdom of suppression began early. Wildfire suppression turned out to be detrimental to forest resources. As early as the 1920s, researchers discovered that fire was a

crucial ingredient in healthy, producing forests. Egan briefly discusses the changing views of fire suppression on pp. 273-275.

For more details about the 1910 fires and the later development of Forest Service suppression policies, see http://www.foresthistory.org. This address is the Forest Service history site. Once there, search for the Big Burn or the 1910 fire. The site also links to much valuable Forest Service information.

3. How do Teddy Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot contribute to the dramatic confrontations recorded in the book?

Teddy Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot are the most well-developed characters in Egan's book. This is only appropriate, given that the two men turn out to be the heroes of the conservation movement.

Egan's text shows Teddy as a boyishly exuberant Governor (of New York) and as an activist President (when he succeeds William McKinley, who was assassinated in office). And my use of "bully" in the title of this review is a credit to Teddy's energy and his dynamic leadership as a progressive and conservation-minded President. He was a bully President and is now remembered as one of the most outstanding Republican presidents, only slightly less revered than Abraham Lincoln, also a Republican.

Gifford Pinchot receives even more attention--that is, more pages of text--than Roosevelt. This is appropriate because Pinchot was actively involved as Roosevelt's expert advisor and confidant on resource conservation. Pinchot also was important in his role as the first Chief of the Forest Service (as the job was later called).

Early in the book Egan profiles the initial meeting between Roosevelt and Pinchot. As Egan's Chapter 1 says, Roosevelt and Pinchot shared "a peculiar intimacy." Roosevelt and Pinchot knew of each other, both being members of the East Coast social establishment, but had never met until both were adults. They eventually met in 1889 and immediately became the best of friends and colleagues, especially in their efforts to establish a useful and efficient Forest Service.

Their first meeting, as described on pp. 17-21, is unusual. After some initial conversation, then-Governor Roosevelt invited Pinchot to a physical contest. They ended up having first a wrestling match, to be followed by a boxing match. Such entertainment was typical of Teddy, who was extremely proud of his physical skills and who had a professional boxing/wrestling mat in the Governor's mansion. This early chapter sets the tone for the close personal working relations between the two men. History records that Roosevelt pinned Pinchot in this first wrestling match. Egan (p. 25) seems to imply that the boxing was a draw. What was important was that their friendship was immediate and enduring.

Egan provides many personal details about both Teddy and Gifford, as Egan calls them. I was especially interested in Pinchot's background and education. After Yale, he decided that he wanted to study forestry, especially since his family's fortune had been made early in the timber industry. Lacking any U.S. schools with forestry courses, Pinchot eventually studied in France, where forestry skills focused on highly managed forests. The French expected that a good forester would control the growth of a productive forest, including its fires. From this approach, Pinchot later wrote a guide for U.S. forestry, where he stated that with proper management, foresters could control even wildfires (pp. 51-52). Pinchot held this view before the Big Burn occurred. After the fire of 1910, Pinchot is recorded as perhaps doubting that severe wildfires can ever be managed. Such doubts would only be reasonable, given the horror of the Big Burn.

Pinchot's official position (after the Big Burn) was that with enough men and equipment, the Forest Service could eliminate fire from U.S. forests and in the process protect valuable resources and private property. As I note above, finally in the 1920's the Forest Service's policy on fire began to change. Today, the Forest Service lets small natural fires burn, especially in back country sites. Only when such fires threaten houses or other structures does the Forest Service initiate suppression. Current Forest Service actions frequently use prescribed fires (that is, deliberately set fires) as a useful management tool.

But Pinchot's activist philosophy guided the early development of the Forest Service (pp. 239-245). With Roosevelt's help, Pinchot was able to lay the groundwork for a professional cadre of Forest Service employees. The conservation movement was finally launched and even funded! But its enemies, especially those in Congress, continued to work against funding and staffing for the young Forest Service.

4. And, finally, how did the Big Burn help save America?

Egan's Chapter 17: Fallout (pp. 239-249) outlines the most immediate political results of the Big Burn. As I explain above, the policy of the growing Forest Service was that professional foresters could control wildfires. And thus save millions of acres of valuable timber. The Big Burn acres alone would have provided 15 years of timber to the country if they had not burned.

Such resource protections were the heart of the growing conservation movement. Then as Egan records on p. 244, Roosevelt and Pinchot went on a speaking tour of country, preaching the virtues of conservation. As Pinchot wrote (as speech writer) and as Roosevelt stated in his speeches: "Conservation is a great moral issue." The public loved Teddy, wildly cheering him and, in the process, cheering his support for conservation initiatives.

So as I stated above under question 2, Egan returns to the central theme of the book. That is, in Chapter 17 Egan shows how the Big Burn moved public opinion, making conservation a desirable Federal government goal. As Egan also explains, in the increasingly popular support of active

conservation, Roosevelt and Pinchot rescued the Republican Party from the likes of William Clark (as described above under question 1).

Picture what one of Clark's timber sales would have looked like. Tree stumps would stretch from one stream to the next. No buffer strips left to protect fish habitat. Logging roads abandoned to rut and erode. No efforts to replant or replace the damaged land and resources. Such had often been the picture in Eastern forests during both the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Then in the nineteenth century the Robber Barons moved into the upper Midwest. The vast hardwood forests in Ohio, Michigan, and other upper Midwest states had millions of acres of timber cut to provide ties for the expanding railroads and framing wood for the many new towns. Yes, the cut timber provided a useful source for lumber, but at what cost? And where would the next generation get its lumber? When the only goal was private greed, any protections for the common good were often ignored.

Undoubtedly, both Roosevelt and Pinchot realized that without Federal protection, the Pacific Northwest would suffer the same fate in the twentieth century as had the forests in the East and the Midwest. This perspective was the strongest argument for vast Federal reserves and an efficient and well-funded U.S. Forest Service.

So America, especially its forests, was saved from the villainous Robber Barons! This was how Teddy Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot saved America, and this was why Egan added a subtitle to *The Big Burn*.