

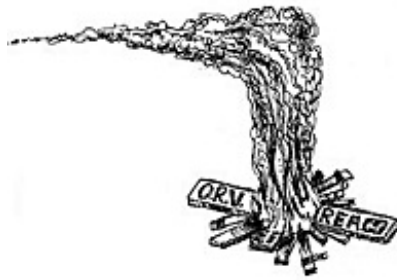


Pleistocene wildlife header graphic by Sergio de la Rosa Martinez

Issue No. 55

August 31, 2013

Around the Campfire with Uncle Dave Foreman



The “Antediluvian” Years of the National Forests

Sitting about an earlier Campfire, I spun the tale of how the great eastern forest was hewn down in the 1800s. Though cutting down the forest seemed to have an unbreakable hold on the national mind, a few Americans called for keeping some forest, and their words were seeds that led to protection of millions of acres of wildwood at the end of the century.

While doing a “Grand Tour” of Europe in 1851, the great New York City newspaperman Horace Greeley was taken aback by how tamed the European landscape was. It made him understand how worthwhile and standalone the American wilderness was. He wrote home asking Americans “to spare, preserve and cherish some portion of your primitive forests.”^[1] In 1858 Henry David Thoreau wrote about his wilderness canoe trips in Maine for the *Atlantic Monthly*, in which he asked, “[W]hy should not we...have our national preserves...in which the bear and panther, and some even of the hunter race, may still exist, and not be ‘civilized off the face of the earth’—our forests...not for idle sport or food, but for inspiration and our own true recreation?”^[2]

These early stands for threatened wildwood led others to become upset by the scalping of the Great Eastern Forest. The first to take steps here was not the federal government, but a state. There is little of which to be proud in American history for some years after the Civil

War when business became the business of America, and New York City became its capital. Nonetheless, in such an age of materialism and from the city of Mammon itself came the first great day in American forest preservation. With the heartfelt backing of the New York City Chamber of Commerce, the Governor of New York signed a bill in 1885 for the Adirondack Forest Preserve in the northern end of the state. In 1894, the New York State Constitutional Convention etched in stone the stewardship of the state-owned lands in the Adirondacks as “forever wild” in that state's highest law.[\[3\]](#)

Though New York’s setting aside the Adirondacks was in the news, little heed was given the few words riding the General Revision Act of 1891, which authorized the President to “set apart and reserve...public land bearing forests...or in part covered by timber or undergrowth, whether of commercial values or not, as public reservations.”[\[4\]](#) This provision, which was the beginning of the National Forest System, was the brainchild of President Benjamin Harrison's Secretary of the Interior, John W. Noble, and of Bernhard Fernow, head of the Division of Forestry.[\[5\]](#) When its full meaning and weight was later grasped, this rider was called the Forest Reserve Act. The day Harrison signed the bill into law (March 3, 1891) is truly a red-letter day in our history, and Harrison’s signing led to the coming look of our landscape and to the ongoing free soul of the American folk as have only a few other things. Noble, Fernow, and Harrison should be acknowledged as great early conservationists. The three also stand more rightfully as the daddies of the National Forests than does Gifford Pinchot. On March 3 we should have a picnic in a nearby National Forest, roast weenies or whatever, and toast John, Bernie, and Ben with the best champagne we can afford. Be sure to take whatever kiddies you can round up. March 3 should truly be an American holiday (holy-day).

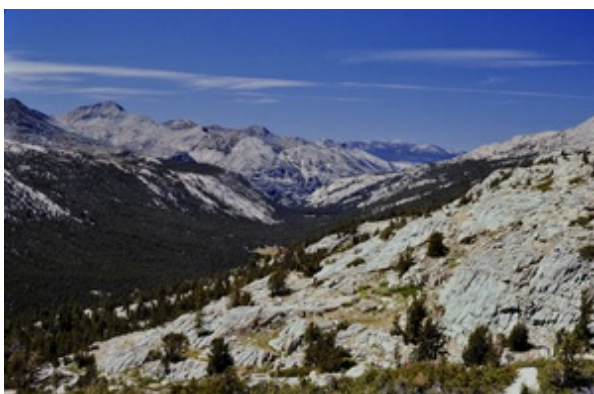
Noble and Fernow wanted the forest reserves so the Department of the Interior could stop the lawless mad rush to cut down the wild, unmapped forests of the West for fast bucks by landskinners. Although little-known today, easily reached pinewoods in the West had already been heavily logged. In 1891, J. G. Bourke mourned logging around Flagstaff, Arizona. “What was the forest primeval at one time has since beenraided by the rapacious forces of commerce...I cannot repress a



© Arizona Historical Society, Logging in the Chiricahuas

sentiment of regret that the demands of civilization have caused the denudation of so many square miles of our forests.”[\[6\]](#) Almost as soon as Geronimo gave up his guns, sawmills rushed into the back-of-beyond Chiricahua Mountains within sight of Geronimo’s surrender site.

Unhappy with such greedy logging of lands in the Rocky Mountains and the Southwest for mine timbers, railroad ties, boards, firewood, and charcoal, President Benjamin Harrison forthwith withdrew 13,000,000 acres in the West as fifteen Forest Reserves under the Forest Reserve Act.[\[7\]](#) In world history, this is a standout political act. The political drive behind Harrison was to shield watersheds in the mountains for downstream water flow for farming, homes, and industry. More than a hundred years ago, towns downstream of the high forests of the West backed such stewardship. At first, these Forest Reserves were off-limits to logging and livestock grazing, since keeping watersheds healthy was their end. For conservationists such as John Muir, Forest Reserves were the answer to the threat of wide-open, wasteful logging on the public lands.



With the setting up of the Forest Reserves, public lands were truly a done deal that would not be forsaken in America. More than anything else, I believe our network of public lands sets the United States off as a bulwark for conservation in the world. It was Benjamin Harrison, one of our lesser-known presidents, who drove in the golden spike to anchor the keeping of some public land as the public’s land forever.

© Dave Foreman, The Sierra Forest Reserve was one of the first set aside.

There are three widespread misunderstandings about the Forest Reserves withdrawn under the 1891 law's authority. One is that land was withdrawn only for the utilitarian grounds of keeping watersheds from harm. Two is that reserves were mostly unmanaged and uncared-for after being withdrawn. Three is that these early Forest Reserves were open to logging, mining, livestock grazing, and other make-a-buck uses. James Muhn set things straight in his chapter for the worthy anthology, *The Origins of the National Forests*. In truth, from the beginning, Forest Reserves were chosen for scenery, recreation, and wildlife habitat, as well as for watershed protection. Notwithstanding a lack of funding and few field agents, steps were taken to shield the reserves, and all grazing, mining, and logging was banned from them.

Secretary of the Interior John Noble ordered that the reserves would "preserve the fauna, fish and flora of our country, and become resorts for the people seeking instruction and recreation." Muhn wrote, "He also expressed willingness to withdraw those areas of 'great interest to our people because of their natural beauty, or remarkable features.'" [8] Noble is an unsung American hero and visionary—a twentieth-century man who lived in the nineteenth century.

Under the following Cleveland administration (Harrison was a Republican and Cleveland was a Democrat), Noble's great work could have been undone, but the new Secretary of the Interior, M. Hoke Smith, built further on Noble's framework and put out regulations on April 14, 1894, that were published "in local newspapers and posted along forest reserve boundaries....No one, it announced, could 'settle upon, occupy, or use any of these lands for agricultural, prospecting, mining, or other business purposes.' They could not 'cut, remove, or use any of the timber, grass, or other natural product,' fires were forbidden, and the grazing of livestock was 'strictly prohibited.'" [9]

Shepherders, a low breed of Men then, in California's Sierra Forest Reserve swiftly tore down the notices. Sheep were brazenly driven into Oregon's Cascade Reserve, as well. Timber cutters also trespassed. Not backing down, Smith went after wrongdoers in the federal courts. He won with a federal court ruling in Oregon in the fall of 1896. [10] Congress and two presidents and Secretaries of the Interior from clashing parties had stood up for the making of a new system of public lands withdrawn from disposal and under amazingly tough stewardship. Now the federal courts said not only were the withdrawals constitutional but that also was bold, tough stewardship for keeping the Four Horsemen of the Frontier out—settlers, grazers, miners, and loggers. This stewardship, forsooth, went against the whole thrust of Manifest Destiny and the holy belief that land and raw goods were good only if put to work for Man. Hoke Smith also is more rightfully another daddy of the National Forests than is Pinchot. And, so, don't forget to raise a glass to Hoke and Grover, too, when you do so for John, Bernie, and Ben. Thank them for what we have today.

The 1891 law "merely established reserves; it did not provide for their management," writes historian Samuel Hays. Lovers of wild things from Muir to the sportsmen of the Boone and Crockett Club hoped to keep logging, livestock grazing, and other commercial uses out of the forest reserves. They wanted the reserves held for their wildlife, watershed, and "picturesque" settings. Up-and-coming forester Gifford Pinchot, however, called for "management" that would bring logging, livestock grazing, and dam building. [11]

In 1896, with a \$25,000 appropriation from Congress, Secretary of the Interior Hoke Smith set up an advisory commission to put forward management choices for the forest reserves. Harvard botanist Charles Sprague Sargent and John Muir called for shielding forests as wilderness, but Gifford Pinchot and Arnold Hague of the U.S. Geological Survey thought their job was to "get ready for practical forestry." The commission deadlocked. Sargent and Muir seemed about to win when President Grover Cleveland withdrew another 21,000,000 acres of new Forest Reserves on February 22, 1897. Then on June 4, 1897, Congress passed the Forest Management Act, which opened the reserves to the kind of heavy management and commercial exploitation Pinchot wanted. [12] By that time, William McKinley, a Republican and champion of business, had taken office as President, and signed the bill.



The forest reserves were put under the General Land Office in Interior; Pinchot lobbied to have them shifted to his Bureau of Forestry in the Department of Agriculture, and at last got his way in 1905. To get backing from the western establishment for this shift, he called for opening the reserves to cattle and sheep grazing. For this, the American National



Livestock Association hailed Pinchot in 1901. Letting great flocks of sheep and herds of cattle into the forest reserves was

© Dave Foreman, Unbridled logging and grazing in mountain watersheds caused flash floods and

arroyo cutting

more than a political ploy by Pinchot to gain backing for the transfer. Hays writes that “Pinchot felt that his major problem was to restrain the influence of those who wished to leave [the forest reserves] in their natural state, untouched by lumberman or stockman.”^[13] Underline this, please. Pinchot saw as his main foe not the landscapers, but the landkeepers.

The split between Muir and Pinchot was such that one of Muir's dearest friends, Robert Underwood Johnson, an editor of the leading literary magazine of the day, *Century*, came to call Pinchot a “de-conservationist.” And, wrote Roderick Nash, Pinchot, as organizer of the 1908 Governors' Conference on the Conservation of Natural Resources, “carefully kept Muir, Johnson, and most other preservationists off the invitation list.” Nash also wrote that Muir, after seeing that Pinchot had the forest reserves under his thumb, switched his work to the National Parks—federal lands that could be warded from logging and livestock grazing.^[14]

For a little while in the 1890s the United States protected its Forest Reserves to keep them wilderness. We might call this short time the “Antediluvian” years of the National Forests. The years before the Deluge of saws, axes, cows, sheep, and pickaxes.

Gifford Pinchot is rightfully called the Father of the U.S. Forest Service, but he is not daddy of the National Forests. That good name belongs to Noble, Fernow, Harrison, Smith, and Cleveland.

And so, go into a National Forest on March 3 and make merry for the six years, way back in the 1890s, when John Noble, Bernhard Fernow, Benjamin Harrison, Hoke Smith, and Grover Cleveland gave the nation true forest reserves.

Dave Foreman

On a family picnic in the Cibola National Forest



This issue of Around the Campfire is adapted from my forthcoming book Conservation vs. Conservation.

^[1] Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, Fourth Edition (Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 2001 (1967)), 101.

^[2] Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 102.

^[3] Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 116-121.

^[4] Section 24 of the Act of March 3, 1891.

^[5] I have to think that they were at least somewhat inspired by what New York State had done with the Adirondacks.

^[6] J. G. Bourke, “On the Border With the Crook,” U.S. Geological Service Survey Paper, quoted in Kieran Suckling, “Fire & Forest Ecosystem Health In The American Southwest: A Brief Primer,” Southwest Forest Alliance, May 27, 1996.

[7] Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 133.

[8] James Muhn, "Early Administration of the Forest Reserve Act: Interior Department and General Land Office Policies, 1891-1897," in Harold K. Steen, ed., *The Origins of the National Forests* (Forest History Society, 1992), 260.

[9] Muhn, "Forest Reserve Act," 265.

[10] Muhn, "Forest Reserve Act," 265-267.

[11] Samuel P. Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation Movement 1890-1920* (Atheneum, New York, 1979 (1959)), 36.

[12] Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 135-137.

[13] Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency*, 41.

[14] Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 138-139.



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