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Guest Columnist

This Land Was My Land

By TIMOTHY EGAN

MOUNT HOOD, Ore.

Most Americans don't own a summer home on Cape Cod, or a McMansion in the Rockies, but they have this birthright: an area more than four times the size of France. If you're a citizen, you own it — about 565 million acres.

The deed on a big part of this public land inheritance dates to a pair of Republican class warriors from a hundred years ago: President Theodore Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot, first chief of the Forest Service.

Both were rich. Both were well-educated. Both were headstrong and quirky. Pinchot slept on a wooden pillow and had his valet wake him with ice water to the face. Teddy and G.P., as they were known, sometimes wrestled with each other, or swam naked in the Potomac.

In establishing the people's estate, they fought Gilded Age titans — railroads, timber barons, mine owners — and their enablers in the Senate. And make no mistake: these acts may have been cast as the founding deeds of the environmental movement, but they were as much about class as conservation.

Pinchot had studied forestry in France, where a peasant couldn't make a campfire without being subject to penalties. In England, he had seen how the lords of privilege had their way over the outdoors. In the United States, he and T.R. envisioned the ultimate expression of Progressive-era values: a place where a tired factory hand could be renewed — lord for a day.

“In the national forests, big money was not king,” wrote Pinchot. The Forest Service was beloved, he said, because “it stood up for the honest small man and fought the predatory big man as no government bureau had done before.”

A century later, I drove through the Gifford Pinchot National Forest on my way to climb Mount Hood, and found the place in tatters. Roads are closed, or in disrepair. Trails are washed out. The campgrounds, those that are open, are frayed and unkempt. It looks like the forestry equivalent of a neighborhood crack house.

In the Pinchot woods, you see the George W. Bush public lands legacy. If you want to drill, or cut trees, or open a gas line — the place is yours. Most everything else has been trashed or left to bleed to death.

Remember the scene from “It's a Wonderful Life,” when Jimmy Stewart's character sees what would happen to Bedford Falls if the richest man in town took over? All those honky-tonks, strip joints and tenement dwellings in Pottersville?

If Roosevelt roamed the West today, he'd find some of the same thing in the land he entrusted to future presidents. The national wildlife system, started by T.R., has been emasculated. President Bush has systematically pared the budget to the point where, this year, more than 200 refuges could be without any staff at all.

The Bureau of Land Management, which oversees some of the finest open range, desert canyons and high-alpine valleys in the world, was told early on in the Bush years to make drilling for oil and gas their top priority. A demoralized staff has followed through, but many describe their jobs the way a cowboy talks about having to shoot his horse.

[In Colorado, the bureau just gave the green light to industrial development on the aspen-forested high](#)

mountain paradise called the Roan Plateau. In typical fashion, the administration made a charade of listening to the public about what to do with the land. More than 75,000 people wrote them — 98 percent opposed to drilling.

For most of the Bush years, the Interior Department was nominally run by a Stepford secretary, Gale Norton, while industry insiders like J. Steven Griles — the former coal lobbyist who pled guilty this year to obstruction of justice — ran the department.

Same in the Forest Service, where an ex-timber industry insider, Mark Rey, guides administration policy.

They don't take care of these lands because they see them as one thing: a cash-out. Thus, in Bush's budget proposal this year, he guts the Forest Service budget yet again, while floating the idea of selling thousands of acres to the highest bidder. The administration says it wants more money for national parks. But the parks are \$10 billion behind on needed repairs; the proposal is a pittance.

Roosevelt had his place on Oyster Bay. Pinchot had a family estate in Pennsylvania. Bush has the ranch in Crawford. Only one of them has never been able to see beyond the front porch.

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