



Gifford Pinchot: Walrus of the Forest

By Sandra Weber

Grey Towers National Historic Site is the home of conservationist Gifford Pinchot, first chief of the U.S. Forest Service.

How did his childhood influence his love of the outdoors?

Gifford Pinchot wanted to be a forester. He was smart, hardworking, and wealthy. He could have studied law, medicine, or banking, but he chose forestry.

It was an odd choice, since there were no U.S. foresters at that time. In the 1870s and 1880s, it was thought that American forests were big enough to last forever. There seemed to be no need to save trees or replant for the future. Wooded hillsides were cut bare.

Pinchot realized that America's forests would not last forever, and he worked hard to change what was happening. He was so successful that he was appointed head of the U.S. Forest Service and was often called the Father of Forestry.

Love of the Outdoors

What made Gifford Pinchot so interested in forestry? It started with his boyhood love of the outdoors, mostly at his family home in Pennsylvania. He liked to ice-skate where no one else had skated before. He enjoyed walking in snow where only animals had traveled. And in the summer, he loved to catch fish in places where others had had no luck.

In the late 1870s, when Gifford was 13 years old, his parents took him to the Adirondack Mountains in northern New York State. Gifford poked about in a little brook, hunting for turtles. Instead, he spotted a seven-inch trout. He carefully backed away without scaring the fish and ran to the hotel.

After finding a rod and line, he went in pursuit of bait. Gifford caught a grasshopper, put it on the fishing hook, and then dropped it into the pool. "The trout was just as eager as the boy," recalled Pinchot. "He bit, I jerked, and the result was wholly satisfactory to me, whatever the trout may have thought about it."

Gifford showed his prize to his family. They admired it and then cooked it for dinner. A few days later, Gifford's father gave him his first fly rod and taught him how to cast. Then he invited his son to come along on a trip into the wild woods.

Gifford eagerly joined the excursion. He spent every day fishing with his new rod. At night, he enjoyed campfire stories, the croaking of bullfrogs, and the scream of a panther. "What a thrill!" he wrote. "The impression it made upon me was as lasting as a footstep in wet cement."



Chief Forester Pinchot (center) and his forest rangers.

The trip gave Gifford a taste of wilderness and had much to do with making him a forester, he said.

Forests as a Way of Life

Gifford went on to study at Yale College and then at forestry schools in Europe. When he returned to the United States, landowners hired him to manage their large timberlands, making him the first American-born professional forester.

Gifford Pinchot often disagreed with others about the goal of forestry. Some people wanted to preserve all

the forests. “They hated to see a tree cut down,” wrote Pinchot. “So do I, and the chances are that you do too. But you cannot practice Forestry without it.”

Pinchot believed that some forests should be preserved for the future but other forests should be cut and used to fill practical needs, like supplying timber. He realized that the same thinking could be applied to rivers, mineral deposits, soil, and wildlife. “Conservation” was his name for this idea, and he said the goal of conservation was the use of the Earth for “the greatest good, for the greatest number, for the longest run.”

When New York State governor Theodore Roosevelt needed advice about the state’s forests in 1899, he called Pinchot. The two men talked forestry, and then they enjoyed two of Roosevelt’s favorite activities: wrestling and boxing. Roosevelt won the wrestling match but was knocked down in the boxing contest. Pinchot remarked that he “had the honor of knocking the future President of the United States off his very solid pins.”

Snowy Woods

After his visit with Roosevelt, Pinchot headed to the cold and snowy Adirondack woods. He decided to climb Mount Marcy, the highest mountain in New York State. Pinchot later called the trip “foolish.” The wind was so strong that he had to crawl up the icy slopes on his hands and knees. But he pushed on and became one of the few men to stand alone atop Mount Marcy in winter.

When he returned from the mountaintop, his friend looked at him and laughed. Icicles hung about his eyelashes, and his beard was coated with ice. His friend thought Pinchot looked like a walrus—a walrus who loved the forest.



Pinchot’s Home Today

In 1963 Pinchot’s family donated Grey Towers to the American public and President John F. Kennedy dedicated it as a conservation leadership and resource conference center, museum and educational facility, managed by the U.S. Forest Service and partners.



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