

Tree Houses

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"I think my first great realization came through my camera," photographer Edward Weston noted in his Daybook. "At least it brought me into closer contact with nature, taught me to observe more carefully, awakened me to something more than casual noting and romantically enjoying." By looking through his lens, Weston believed he could see into himself, a fusion that made him feel, if only ephemerally, at one with the landscape he hoped to capture on film: "Even then I was trying to understand, getting closer, becoming identified with nature. She was then as now, the great stimulus."¹

Although Gifford Pinchot was no Edward Weston, he shared the artist's belief in the camera's affective power and visual impact. That's why he lugged one with him on an arduous western journey he undertook as Confidential Forest Agent for the Department of Interior during the summer and fall of 1897. Interior Secretary Cornelius Bliss had hired him to evaluate the controversial national Forest Reserves, and to report on which of their 21 million acres should stay within the emerging system, and which should be returned to the public domain.

Pinchot, who a year earlier had examined some of these lands as a member of the National Academy of Sciences Forestry Commission, was delighted with his new assignment—it would get him back into the woods, increase his understanding of their conflicted political context, and enhance his prospects for creating (and heading) a federal agency to manage these astonishing public

lands. This once-in-a-lifetime experience had begun in mid-July, when, with his brother, Amos, he took a train west to Blackfoot, Montana; it concluded in mid-November, after an exhausting tour that had carried Pinchot through Montana, Idaho, Washington, Oregon, Wyoming, and South Dakota.

Everywhere Pinchot traveled, he snapped away at the remarkable landscapes through which he moved. Presumably, he expected these images of badly burned and grazed lands, soaring forests of hemlock or fir or pine, and stunning panoramas would help convince his audience that forestry and foresters were essential to the conservation of the many natural resources and beauties he identified during his work

That's the strategy he had employed in the heavily illustrated 1893 pamphlet he published to accompany the Chicago World's Fair exhibit he mounted about his initial forestry endeavors in Biltmore, N.C.; and when in 1898 he became the fourth head of the Bureau of Forestry (and later as the first chief of the Forest Service). Pinchot made ready use of this modern medium to convey his convictions in congressional hearings, departmental publications, and public assemblies. But if he had expected that his 1898 report to Secretary Bliss would be replete with the images he captured in the west, he must have been disappointed. It contained none of his photographs, a remarkable lapse given the striking quality of this hitherto unpublished exposure of the small mining town of Monte Cristo, Snohomish County, Washington.

As he documented his travels, in words and on film, Pinchot noted the variety of challenges that would confront those who might manage the new forest reserves. Not least of these difficulties, to judge from its regular mention throughout his journal, was fire, which ravaged the forests' economic utility and aesthetic value. While camping along Idaho's Priest Lake in mid-July, for instance, Pinchot photographed "[m]uch old burn," and he jotted down that, except "for the fires this would be an exceptionally beautiful place."²

It was a similar desire to record the complex human impress on the west that led Pinchot to set up his camera on a hillside overlooking Monte Cristo, a community high on the western slope of the Cascades nestled within the Washington Forest Reserve. Getting there had been difficult. Although a rail line between it and the port town of Everett had been constructed in the early 1890s shortly after a prospector had discovered the area's mineral riches, trains did not run every day, much to Pinchot's dismay when he reached the Everett terminus on Friday, August 13. He had to cool his heels until Monday, a delay that allowed him to organize his affairs and settle his accounts, and that also drove the restless 32-year-old forester a little crazy. On Saturday, he browsed the hotel's minimal library: "I read until 2 a.m., fool stories of no account in magazines."³

He was no doubt relieved to board the 7:45 a.m. Monday morning local to Monte Cristo, which was scheduled to arrive in the tiny settlement in the early afternoon. By 7 p.m., he had slung his 20-pound pack on his back, and he and Amos had headed south towards Columbia Peak, on their way to Index; after two days of hard hiking in very smoky conditions, they reached their destination, and caught a train back to Seattle.



U.S. Forest Service photo, negative number 730

For all the brevity of his stay, Pinchot's photograph of Monte Cristo was carefully composed. Its central framing device is the cluster of large stumps that fill the foreground, left and right. They anchor our perspective, which is then repeated in those located farther down the slope, on either side of the street; their mute testimony to the fierce human energy needed to clear and claim this once-thickly wooded hillside is replicated in the clear-cut swath visible on the mountainside that rises up on the horizon.

Just as the stumps reflect the town's hasty construction—the wooden stores and homes, no doubt themselves a product of the fallen tim-

ber, are squeezed in between these massive remains—so, too, does the pathway that falls away from the photographer's feet; as it heads downhill, our gaze trips over the tangle of rock and root. With the forest toppled, the erosive force of rainwater would continue to cut through the town's streetscape, though it was the local mine's closing in 1907 that ultimately turned Monte Cristo into a ghost-town.⁴

Catching it in its heyday is not the only significance of Pinchot's photograph. Indeed, its key structural elements evoke those defining the most important painting in his father's collection of Hudson River School images, Sanford Gifford's "Hunter's

Mountain, Twilight" (1866); Gifford grew up with the painting and would inherit it at James Pinchot's death. Set in the Catskill Mountains, the canvas' foreground depicts a logged-over declivity through which runs a thin trickle of water that carries the viewer's eye towards a farmhouse barely visible in the shadows; this landscape is also replete with stumps, whose litter is reinforced by the distant mountain, which though once cloaked in thick stands of hemlock had been cutover. That Gifford Pinchot, consciously or otherwise, set up his shot of Monte Cristo in the aesthetic tradition of his godfather (and namesake), reminds us that for him the ax was double-edged, "a symbol of economic progress and cultural poverty, of conquest and death."⁵

It is impossible to know when, during his five-hour stay in Monte Cristo, Pinchot took this photograph, though his need for light, and the shadows angling across the rough-shingled roofs, would suggest it was shortly after his arrival. Regardless of the timing, when he left town he would have to walk back over the same elevated vantage point from which he had clicked his shutter, clambering uphill with Amos—who may have been the figure stationed in the photograph's middle ground to provide a human dimension—on their way to the mountain pass where they would camp the night, a high country of "good wood and bad water." He would never return, and so his image of Monte Cristo also marks a temporary intersection between person and place, a visual footprint of Pinchot's presence in the town's truncated history, a still moment in the rush of the day.⁶

In addition to serving as chair of the history department and interim director of the urban studies program at Trinity University, Char Miller is also a Senior Fellow with the Pinchot Institute for Conservation. His Gifford Pinchot and the Making of Modern