JAMES WALLACE PINCHOT (1831 - 1908)

One Man's Evolution toward Conservation in the Nineteenth Century

By Nancy P. Pittman

Those familiar with Gifford Pinchot know that in his much-quoted autobiography, *Breaking New Ground,* he attributes to his father, James W. Pinchot, the enviable title of "Father of Forestry in America." This has long been discounted by historians as an admirable, if somewhat excessive, display of filial devotion. Yet James Wallace Pinchot, nineteenth century businessman, patron of the arts, and early conservationist, merits at least a page in history for an intellectual evolution to a conservation ethic—an ethic which appears to anticipate the Progressive, utilitarian, professional ideal by almost a full generation. There is no doubt that James Pinchot had a profound effect on Gifford Pinchot's developing career.

Letters between father and son, in which the two men share ideas and strategies about conservation, flow back and forth with great regularity as early as 1885 and continuing unabated until the elder Pinchot's death in 1908. Gifford Pinchot went on to become one of the defining figures in American conservation because he brought to the debate about the nation's forests a unique synthesis of the romantic wilderness ideal, scientific professionalism of European forestry, principles of economic efficiency, and an enduring faith in the democratic process.

James Pinchot's intellectual route to conservation is a microcosm of the contradictory and fermenting 19th Century period—when science and culture had not yet spun apart into separate spheres dominated by professionals, and when socially aware men and women still expected to be able to solve the great problems of their day. The overwhelming issue for the American psyche in the late nineteenth century was to come to terms with the implications of industrial capitalism, of which the tremendous despoliation of the nation's forests was the most dramatic and visible. Although there was widespread nostalgia for a lost wilderness as early as the 1840's, and a growing fear of resource depletion, no effective way had yet been found to halt or even slow the destruction. It was in this climate that James Pinchot evolved from businessman—to gentleman—to conservationist—through the unlikely route of art collecting.

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James Pinchot

THE FRENCH PINCHOTS

James Pinchot was born in Milford, Pennsylvania in 1831, the second son of a first-generation French storekeeper. His father, Cyrill Pinchot owned the "Old French Store" which sold "Dry goods, Yankee notions, Boots & Shoes, ready-made clothing, provisions, hardware, shirtings, sheetings....calicoes.....silks, poplins, broadcloths....sugar, coffee, tea, salt, molasses, fish, ham shoulders, [and] Pickled Pork." In the days before industrialization, the owner of a general store was likely to be one of the wealthiest and best informed men in the region, with his finger most directly on the pulse of the nation's economic heartbeat. Cyrill also took part in the grand sport of the nineteenth century—logging. In the days before railroads, Cyrill Pinchot and his three sons would purchase land in the virgin woods of the Delaware Valley, set up saw mills, clear-cut as much timber as possible, and then lash the logs together into rafts to float downstream during spring floods. The common practice everywhere was to sell the land after the resource was exhausted, denuded of everything but stumps, and move onto the next stand. Finding customers for the lumber was the hardest part of the enterprise. By the age of seventeen, James had emerged as a talented young businessman with an entrepreneurial bent. It was clear that Milford (pop. 300) was no longer sufficient scope for a young man of Pinchot's abilities.

Seventy miles to the southeast, New York City stood as the center of American commerce. Its visceral energy matched Pinchot's own and fueled his fierce determination to succeed. Although only nineteen years of age when he arrived in 1850, his firm carriage, piercing eyes, bushy sideburns and handlebar mustache gave him an air of sophistication and gravity that bred confidence in those around him. After a two-year stint in the

dry goods business, James opened the wallpaper firm of Partridge, Pinchot, and Warren, which sold paper hangings, window shades, tassels, curtain fixtures, and cord. Unusually sensitive to art and design, Pinchot displayed a natural affinity for wallpaper, which was fast becoming one of the hallmarks of the growing, bourgeois middle-class. By 1860, Pinchot had one of the largest and best-stocked warehouses in New York City, representing the best firms from both France and England. His success, as Gifford noted years later, was greatly "out of proportion to the amount of money invested."

But James Pinchot had not come to New York just to make money. Following his natural, visual proclivities, he discovered what was to become the ruling passion of his middle years, art-collecting. Drawn in to art community through his friendship with Irish-American sculptor, Launt Thompson, James met the five artists who were to become his lifelong friends: Sanford R. Gifford, Jervis McEntee, Eastman Johnson, John Weir, and Worthington Whittredge. All part of a younger generation of Hudson River School artists, they still painted in the characteristically grand style of heightened natural scenes. Over the next twenty-five years, Pinchot supported the work of these artists, befriended them, and collected their art with the same degree of passion that he invested in his business.

In 1863, he was elected to membership in the Century Association, an exclusive club of authors, artists, and amateurs of letters and fine arts who virtually ruled the cultural life of New York City. Richard Morris Hunt had become a member in 1858 and Frederick Law Olmstead in1859. Many artists of the Hudson River School were members, including James' particular friends, Sanford Gifford, Worthington Whittredge, Eastman Johnson, and Jervis McEntee. This was the peer group he had been searching for—intellectually distinguished men of taste who discussed and defined the great intellectual questions of the day. With his induction into the Century Association and his marriage a year later to Mary Eno, daughter of the wealthy real estate magnate, Amos Eno, Pinchot had shed his small-town origins and begun his evolution into a man of wealth and distinction.

Mary Pinchot

photo courtesy of Grey Towers

Pinchot was particularly proud of his friendship with William Cullen Bryant, who was more than forty years his senior. Owner and editor of the *New York Evening Post*, Bryant was the unofficial leader of New York's cultural life during most of the 19th century. Known as "the muse of nature," Bryant's poetry expounded the romantic ideal of nature as the spiritualizing influence that would counteract the degrading and mechanicalizing effects of industrialization. These ideas shared a visual equivalent in the paintings of the Hudson River School painters and helped Pinchot structure an important first step in his understanding of the role of nature in an industrialized society.

Hudson River School artists in particular took it as their task to record the beauties of the American wilderness before they disappeared. And not only to record but to heighten the romantic aura surrounding the wilderness, and thus make it palatable to the general public. This was accessible art, easy to look at, sentimental, romantic, and highly realistic in an era before photography. These artists accomplished for Pinchot, and for many others, the necessary purpose of awakening him to an awareness of what it meant to lose the wilderness.

Historian Char Miller and others have suggested that Pinchot's conversion to a conservation ethic was sharpened by a sense of guilt over his own family's role in the despoliation of the forests. One painting in particular, *Twilight at Hunter Mountain*, by his friend Sanford Gifford, seems to have served as a touchstone for Pinchot. It shows a slashed-over stand of hemlocks, its haggard stumps haphazardly jutting up into the foreground, with a solitary figure standing in the middle ground at twilight, signifying the end of pure, wild nature. Many years later, Pinchot himself alluded to the damage that his family's logging practices had helped to bring about. "The [passenger] pigeons are extinct, the smaller brooks where we fished are often dry, venison and bear meat are luxuries, and the forest from which they all sprung has largely disappeared."

NATURE VS. INDUSTRIALISM

As a businessman, Pinchot certainly accepted and profited by all that an industrialized America had to offer. But, influenced by his new friends, he began to have serious qualms, not so much about the direction that a highly capitalized nation was taking, but about its side effects, especially on nature. The Romantic tradition had emerged as a nostalgic expression of nature's already broken

wholeness and beauty. By 1850, Emersonian ideas of nature—as a transcendental influence that brought one closer to God and to innate goodness—had permeated the mindset of intellectuals. The cult of nature became firmly established; in fact, a deep and sincere appreciation of nature became the mark of a true gentleman. Nature could not be entirely sacrificed to the process of industrialization. And yet, unless one was willing to deny God's obvious plan for resource-rich America, one had to find a way to accommodate the powerful commercial forces which depended on the often-savage use of those resources. It was this conundrum that gnawed at thoughtful 19th Century men like James Pinchot.

TAKING ACTION

Men like John Muir, Henry David Thoreau, and George Bird Grinnell were making a powerful case for wilderness preservation. But romantic, aesthetic ideals, and recreational needs were not in themselves sufficient to convince lawmakers to set aside land for wilderness protection. Because nobody wanted to plant themselves firmly against the ideas of abundance and progress, what was needed, in this deeply utilitarian country, was a utilitarian reason to stop the destruction, without stopping profits.

In 1864, one year before Gifford Pinchot was born, George Perkins Marsh published his book *Man and Nature, the Earth as Modified by Human Action,* which laid the groundwork for just such an approach to conservation. In fact, it was around the destruction of trees, "God's first temples," as Bryant called them, that Marsh first laid out one his most important scientific, one might even say utilitarian, concerns, specifically the view that forest destruction dried up water supplies. This pioneering book very likely had an important influence on James Pinchot, who later gave the book to Gifford before he went to college. Certainly the book was being read and discussed by many of his contemporaries, including Charles Sprague Sargent, the nation's leading expert on trees. *Man and Nature* supplied the rationale for the first, big wilderness preserve in the East, the Adirondacks. As the New York State Park Commission stated: "Without a steady, constant supply of water from these streams of the wilderness, our canals would be dry, and a great portion of the grain and other produce of the Western part of the state would be unable to find cheap transportation to the markets of the Hudson River Valley."

By 1883, as it was generally believed that clear-cutting was indeed lowering the water levels of the Erie Canal and the Hudson River, even people with no previous interest in wilderness began to add their voices to the clamor for wilderness protection. The *Tribune* noted that stripping the Adirondacks of their trees would be "tampering with the goose that lays the golden egg." These ideas were very congenial to James Pinchot. Although conservation was still largely dominated by the romantic/materialistic dialectic, as a businessman, Pinchot did not shy away from a utilitarian principle of turning a profit. What made him unusual was his ability to contain within himself two apparently conflicting ideas: the romantic vision of wilderness and its use in moderation as a human resource. The businessman and the artist coexisted comfortably within James Pinchot.

During the '70's and '80's, as Pinchot became more involved with conservation, his affiliations began to shift away from art and more towards science and forestry. He became a member of the American Museum of Natural History, the New York Botanical Garden, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the American Academy of Political and Social Science, the American Scenic and Historical Preservation Society, the American Geographical Society, the New York Society of the Archaeological Institute of America, and the Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks, and the American Forestry Association.

Pinchot's interest in forestry had been piqued as early as 1871 when he and his family had moved to France for an extended sojourn. During his three years abroad, he traveled widely in Europe. It was there that Pinchot first encountered European ideas of practical forestry, and he seized upon this approach, with its inherent commercial benefits, as the only one that stood any chance of being incorporated into America's deeply utilitarian mainstream. As he wrote in *World's Work,* "It was only after seeing forestry practiced in France that a solution came to my mind..." Magazines like *American Sportsman* and George Bird Grinnell's *Field and Stream* did not begin advocating forestry until the early 1880's, with Grinnell advocating mostly German forestry techniques. By then, Pinchot had already been thinking about possible solutions to forest conservation for almost a decade.

In the summer of 1885, Pinchot decided to take action. Just as Gifford was about to leave for his first year at Yale, Pinchot asked his son if he would be interested in studying forestry, a discipline for which there were not yet any schools in the United States. Looking back many years later, Gifford Pinchot remembered the conversation and was amazed at his father's perspicacity:

'How would you like to be a forester?' asked my foresighted father, one fortunate morning in the summer of 1885, just before I went to college. It was an amazing question for that day and generation—how amazing I didn't begin to understand at the time. When it was asked, not a single American had made Forestry his profession. Not an acre of timberland was being handled under the principles of Forestry anywhere in America..... At a time when the few who considered forestry at all were discoursing, deploring, and denouncing, nothing more, my father, with his remarkable power of observation and his equally remarkable prophetic outlook, looked ahead farther and more wisely than the

rest. While they talked, he compared the forest conditions on two continents and clothed his thoughts with action. He had seen foresters and their work, and the results of their work, in France and elsewhere in Europe. He was fond of quoting the great sayings of one of his heroes, Bernard Palissy, the inspired potter, naturalist, and philosopher, who died in the Bastille, that neglect of the forest was 'not merely a blunder, but a calamity and a curse for France.' Without being a forester himself, my Father understood the relation between forests and the national welfare.

A year before this conversation, James Pinchot had purchased several hundred acres of land, with a majestic view overlooking the town of Milford, the Delaware River, and the Kittitiny Ridge. He hired Richard Morris Hunt to design a large French Chateau with three towers and fifty rooms. Grey Towers, completed in 1886, was a direct reflection of the Romantic ideal that linked house, town, river, and mountain into one landscape. Only a few hundred yards from Grey Towers was the wildness of the Sawkill Gorge with its giant riparian pines and hemlocks and its series of cascading waterfalls and quiet pools. This was the landscape that helped to inspire both James and Gifford with a lifelong conservation esthetic.

By 1900, both James and Gifford, his career now securely launched, were convinced that the success of forestry depended on establishing a professional school that would educate American foresters. In 1900, James Pinchot and his sons endowed Yale University with $150,000 to start a forestry school modeled on European forestry methods but adapted to American conditions. James Pinchot also made available his own 1,400 acre property in Milford, Pennsylvania for the establishment of the first Yale Forest School Summer Camp. He financed the construction of a large mess hall, a lecture hall, and several smaller buildings in the woods. A line of canvas tents housed the students.

Perched on a plateau near the Sawkill Creek, the Yale Camp was the first summer school of forestry in the country, a place where forestry students could get out of the classroom and learn the practical field skills of forest management. Far from the urban setting of the Yale campus in New Haven, students might start their day with a cold swim in the Forester's Pool, an ancient, deep-green hollow above the Sawkill Falls. A young **Aldo Leopold '09** wrote home joyously to mother: "That swim was a dandy! The pool is down in the rapids & falls of the Sawkill, and is an absolute novelty. It isn't more than fifteen yards long, but deep! And you dive into it by sliding over a five foot waterfall!...I cannot half describe what fun it is, but I haven't yelled so loud or enjoyed anything so much for years and years as I did that swim." During the two-month summer session, students mixed classroom courses such as Botany, Dendrology, and Silviculture, with practical field work including Surveying, Plant Identification, and perhaps an overdose of tree planting. Days often ended with a large campfire and raucous singing before students retired to their tents. The intense camp life and field work helped create a professional ethos that marked Yale graduates forever and was transferred to the conservation institutions they joined.

Shortly after the Yale Forestry Camp began, James Pinchot established the Milford Experimental Forest to carry out research on forest regeneration in the Poconos, the very land which his family had helped to deforest a generation earlier. He also built Forest Hall, a large, elegant, Norman-style stone and stucco building situated at the main crossroads in Milford. Designed by Calvert Vaux, the building was used for classrooms for the Yale Camp and as offices for the Milford Experimental Forest. By 1904, James Pinchot had created a substantial infrastructure for the advancement of forest conservation, both in New Haven and in Milford.

When Gifford's career moved to Washington D.C., James and his wife Mary bought a house at 1615 Rhode Island Avenue in order to provide their bachelor son with the kind of household necessary to support the political aspects of his work. The Society of American Foresters was conceived in the Pinchot household and for many years held its meetings there. Mary Pinchot played the role of hostess and was a familiar site in Congress during the Pinchot-Ballinger controversy. But it was James Pinchot who remained a powerful, guiding force in his son's life, quietly advising Gifford behind the scenes until he died in 1908.

Gifford was not the only person who recognized the important role that James had played in helping to institutionalize the ideas of conservation. Yale University, in conferring an honorary Masters degree in 1905, made note of James Pinchot's contribution to conservation. "His clear perception of the ill certain to result to our country from the destruction of its forests led him to practical and efficient efforts for development in America of the scientific study of forestry." The Society of American Foresters noted at his death in 1908 that "The cause of forestry has lost one of its earliest, wisest and most effective supporters." And the Department of Agriculture wrote the following resolution, which read in part, "Resolved, that, in particular, as a founder of the School of Forestry at Yale University, Mr. Pinchot takes his place among the great benefactors of American agriculture, in that, in the endowment of this school, an influence of far-reaching significance and increasing value to the conservation of our natural resources has been set in motion."

Nancy P. Pittman is writing a book on the Pinchot family.