Book Review of Blazing Heritage: A History of Wildland Fire in the National Parks, by Hal K. Rothman

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Historical knowledge is a huge part of my introduction to issues in firefighting at the National Park Service. That is why I read Hal K. Rothman's *Blazing Heritage: A History of Wildland Fire in the National Parks*. This book provided me very relevant historical context to the field I am going to be working in for the next year, and possibly for my career.

Blazing Heritage book cover.

Rothman took me on a journey beginning near the end of the nineteenth century with the first efforts to control fire in our first national park, Yellowstone. From the outset, fire was seen as an enemy to fight, and this was agreed upon by the Army, who came in to fight fires, the environmentalist John Muir, and the Secretary of the Interior who made fire suppression an integral part of the government's official guidelines (18-19).

Rothman traces the twentieth century through the context of fire management in the national parks and the changing ideas about the uses and purposes of fire. He discusses the difficulty in changing long-entrenched views about fire suppression in federal government bureaucracies. He successfully argues that a visionary minority within the NPS challenged long-held beliefs through experimentation in light burning at places such as Sequoia National Park (41) and the Everglades (81-86). Through empirical research into the ecological benefit of prescribed fires by NPS employees, Rothman shows that the movement for wiser land management gained a foothold in the NPS.

He also argues that this movement was challenged at almost every turn through the twentieth century, most notably the La Mesa fire of 1977 (137) and the great Yellowstone fires of 1988 which burned one third of the park (157-190). Despite the hazardous conditions of dense fuel brought on by years of fire suppression in the national parks, the NPS's propensity to prescribe fires and mitigate years of misguided practices was brought into question by the public (158, 200), politicians (166-167), and the media (158, 185); convincingly shown by Rothman.

If there are any lasting impressions that Rothman wanted readers to take away from *Blazing Heritage*, it was probably that the history of firefighting in the national parks can serve as a reminder that land management can never be perfected, that fires *will burn*, and that the best we can do is to provide the resources to best handle wildfires, wisely manage our resources, and foster relations with the world outside land management for a better understanding of the issues.

Rothman, Hal K. *Blazing Heritage: A History of Wildland Fire in the National Parks*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.