Recollections of Early Days in Forestry Education at the University of Missouri

By MURRELL WILLIAMS TALBOT

A backward glance of some 45 years, to the first two years of forestry education at the University of Missouri, may at least serve to amuse, if not instruct the Class of 1959! Leaning on this dubious justification, I am pleased to comply with Director Westveld’s request for a few impressions of conditions in 1912 and 1913, by a member of the first class in forestry at Old Mizzou.

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Start it was found the students had no forest vocabulary and were able to see and size up individual trees or stands of trees with difficulty. By taking one student at a time, it was found that most of them in a short time were able to give some reasonable solution. Such ability in reading the forest is considered essential to future success. The location and building of roads and trails through the forests were studied, as well as bridges and wood culverts for water drainage.

The reestablishment of the Department of Forestry at the University of Missouri in 1946 had been followed with great interest, because of the need for forestry in the management of the vast areas of forest lands in the state. Surely Missouri boys with a special knowledge of forest conditions in the state should be in charge of future development. The high prices paid for lumber is a sign for the need of growing timber on all forest lands. Farmers generally all over the state should have a woodlot for the growing of wood products for use on the farm. Missouri should be as competent in the productivity of true forest lands as she is in agricultural land. Dr. Westveld and those associated with him should be proud of the results already attained. The Missouri Forest School has already taken its place among the other Forest Schools in the Land Grant Colleges. The land in the Ozarks granted to the University at the time of its establishment, if still possessed by the University, should become an example of the possibility of Forest Management.

It is a matter of satisfaction that a graduate of the Penn State Forest School, Professor P. W. Fletcher, is helping to bring to fruition that which I began so imperfectly a half century ago.

The Pennsylvania State University, having lost its Forestry teachers in 1913, and with a marked increase in the number of Forestry students, asked me to return. I could not refuse, for I had given my best to the development of the Forest School there. It was impossible for me to leave at once, with the increase in the number of forestry courses to be taught and also the necessity of “pipping up” the students for the U. S. Forestry examinations in the early spring. Mr. E. C. Pegg, graduate of the Yale Forest School, was obtained as instructor to teach some of the Forestry courses. He was an older man whom I felt was capable of taking over my work.

Best wishes for the future of the Forest School at The University of Missouri.
Several questions concerning the genesis of the Department of Forestry immediately come to mind. Why was forestry education introduced? What were the circumstances which resulted in the establishment of the Department? To whom belongs the credit for decisive action at that particular time? Comprehensive answers to these and related questions I shall leave to persons in best position to know: Dr. R. H. Westveld, Director of the School of Forestry; and Dr. J. A. Ferguson, Professor of Forestry, emeritus, Pennsylvania State University, and the first head of the Department of Forestry at Missouri. A few supplement observations may, however, be of passing interest.

First, a moment to remind ourselves of the forestry situation in Missouri in 1911. This background holds the key, it seems to me, of a more clear understanding of the events that led to the conclusion that there was a real need for an expanded curriculum. What was that situation?

By and large, Missouri timberlands were in very poor condition. Heavy cutting of old-growth shortleaf pine was in full swing. Virgin pine stands were rapidly disappearing. High-grade white oak, black walnut, eastern cedar and other premium species were already becoming scarce. In fact, most stands of mixed hardwoods had been “creamed.” Provision for timber reproduction was given scant or no attention. Cutting by most owners and operators was done without regard for future crops of timber. Clearing of timber land for cultivated crops was still occurring, and widespread annual burning to improve grazing conditions was common practice. All in all, the evidence seems clear that the forest resource in Missouri had been heavily deteriorated by 1911.

I don’t know what a study of the records would reveal, but I think it doubtful that this run-down condition of forest lands, and the continuing downward trend, were very widely appreciated by the general public. The situation was, of course, apparent to the comparatively few buyers of veneer logs, barrel-stave operators, railway-tie contractors, and lumbermen who were beginning to feel the squeeze for an adequate supply of timber of desired species and high quality. True, there were the professional foresters and other students of land in allied fields; but these, too, were few in number, and as yet lacking in public acceptance and in opportunity to inform and influence very large segments of public opinion.
Development of forestry in the Missouri Ozark region was bound to be slow for yet another reason; there was virtually no basic information on which to build sound forest practices geared to the soil, climate and vegetation found in this distinct ecological province. No research had been started. Little thought had been given to a second cut, to watershed management, or to maintenance of productivity—much less to the harmonizing of timber growth with other uses of the land.

How to halt deterioration of site and stand, how to harvest the several important timber species most efficiently, and how to insure future crops, were largely unknown, excepting for limited adaptations of principles developed in different types and in other Forest regions.

Who, then, started the successful drive for establishment of a Forestry Department to meet the obvious need for an expanded forestry program in Missouri? His force, vision and administrative ability are matters of common knowledge. The name of Dr. F. B. Mumford stands out. As Dean of the College of Agriculture and Director of the Agricultural Experiment Station, he had a lot to do with it. From close contact with him, following graduation, I know of his personal interest in forestry and his concern over the neglected timber resources of the State. There was no center of forestry instruction, demonstration and basic training concerned directly with the problems of the Ozark region and contiguous areas. He sensed that the time was right to act; and he acted.

Another name comes to mind: that of Dr. J. C. Whitten, Professor of Horticulture, who, more than any other person, guided my interests toward a career in forestry. With gratitude I remember him for his generous and kindly student counselling of a somewhat bewildered Sophomore as how to best combine his dual interest in engineering and land. He discussed with me the implications of the great fires in Montana the previous year (1910) which, indirectly, had focussed considerable public attention on forestry as a challenging profession. He pointed out the need for more trained men. So far as I know, Dr. Whitten's name may not appear in any history of forestry but, in retrospect, I have a strong suspicion that his genuine interest in conservation extended across departmental lines, and that at least he gave much moral support to the proposal to start professional forestry education in Missouri. Credit in varying degrees belongs to various others, but for the full credit story I defer to historians Ferguson, Westveld and colleagues. Suffice it here to remind the reader that someone obtained the necessary approval, and someone persuaded J. A. Ferguson, acting head of the Forest School of Pennsylvania State University, to come to Missouri to start the new program. So, ground was broken—or more accurately, part of a room in the old Agricultural Building was borrowed—for the fledgling Department, in September, 1911. And so classes got under way.

In due time, we organized "bull" and "gripe" sessions, formed a Forestry Society, subjected a small plantation of catalpa trees to pruning by "scientific" (?) methods, and introduced shade trees of Columbia to calipers and hypsometers! We built a float for the parade on Stunt Day, and donned our woods togs for the annual Ag costume ball: the Barn Dance. Forestry education was a going concern!

Since fame is such a fleeting thing a roll call of the first graduating class in forestry (1913) may be permitted here: J. E. Pixlee, V. C. Follenius, E. L. Anderson and M. W. Talbot. Not only in space, but also in specialized
equipment, materials and other teaching facilities, the contrast between "then" and "now" is striking. No laboratories. No materials exhibits. Not even a forestry library. No school forests or experimental forests. At first glance not a very inspiring set-up one might say—in comparison with the present forestry establishment with its all-round facilities of which Director Westveld and faculty, and the whole university, may justly be proud. But, as of 1912, that first glance would be erroneous. For we did have two things that went far toward counterbalancing the deficiencies—things that still loom large as a rich college heritage—even after the passing of a lot of years. We had a propitious era and the unique personality of "Prof." Ferguson.

"Conservation," both as a term and as a philosophy of the development and sound use of our public lands and natural resources was brand new in America, having been coined just a few short years before under the dynamic leadership of Theodore Roosevelt and the crusading zeal of Gifford Pinchot. The new idea was catching on. It was in the air. I caught it, and was fortunate to sign up for a forestry career in that atmosphere.

Starting a new department on such a "shoe string" would have discouraged men of lesser stature and faith. But nothing fazed Ferguson. His good humor—and his sense of humor—never deserted him. Irrepressible, enthusiastic and resourceful, he was an inspiring teacher of embryo forestry students. True, he poured on the home-work, but they always came back for more. These qualities have never left him. He still "sparkles." No wonder he made such a fine record at Penn. State! I'm grateful for the initial shove he gave me toward my "checkered career."

The first summer camp was in the Ozarks, several miles out in the short-leaf pine woods from West Eminence, Shannon County, on the holdings of the J. B. White Lumber Company, and reached by their logging trains. Certain happenings seem to have left especially vivid recollections, possibly because of reminders from old photos of incidents of that eventful summer. I've never forgotten the good fellowship—the evening "sings," "Fergies" (Prof. Ferguson's) lunch-stop pep talks, and escapes to ye olde swimmin' hole. Also unforgotten are the heat, the ticks, the chiggers and the "skeeters," even though such minor irritations are to be expected, I suppose, in the kind of a job a lot of foresters "hire out" for. Not all foresters, however, go in for camp dish washing but, again judging from one of those aforementioned photos, Vic Follenius and I did—at least part time. In 1912, the Department lacked a few of the now-standard facilities, such as a full-time cook and "bull cook." "Even the substitute cook (Ferguson) had his troubles. It seems, as he recently reminded me, that 'you can't always tell what's roving around in the woods.' Besides foresters, he might have added; and even foresters had to learn that the hard way, in our camp! For Ozark razorbacks—the genuine article—'got in and ate up most of the grub.' What then? Simple. Merely another item in the day's agenda for the Professor of Forestry: hitch-hike a log-train ride into town for 'seconds.'"

But our notorious first class also did a few other chores. Between forays from our tent camp to gather required field data (along with a fresh supply of chiggers and fire-wood) we wrote reports—nine of them; in fact, if I can trust the following list which I recently found during some archaeological digging in my old files: