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Training for Forest Administration

By Fred Morrell, District Forester, District 1.

The management of forest lands in the United States, both public and private, during the next two or three decades, will not on the whole be an intensive one. The greater percentage of foresters, either in public or private employ, will during that period be engaged in what we call forest administration. The practice of forestry in America during the immediate future might be likened to the practice of medicine in a country such as India, for example, where the social, religious, political and economic conditions are such as to make the practice of the profession as we know it in the United States, impossible.

In the United States we have what might be termed an “intensive” practice of medicine. In India the practice is and must for a long time ahead be decidedly “extensive”. A physician in India, either employed as a public health officer or engaged in private practice, would accomplish most in the saving of human life and the physical upbuilding of the people by following a greatly different practice than would be most efficacious in this country. It would not, for example, be desirable that he give such intensive service to individual cases. His time would be better used in giving simple treatment to more people, and that would ordinarily call for less highly specialized training. The profession would find itself engaged largely in questions of sanitation, diet and isolation for contagious diseases. These would be the urgent things that would, if proper attention be given them, bring the greatest returns in the way of health improvement. They are the things necessary as a basis on which to practice more intensive forms of medical treatment. Unless they be done, careful hospitalization, superior surgery, etc., would be lost in the quagmire of filth and debility. And these jobs of sanitation, isolation, diet, etc., may be termed “administrative medicine.” Most of them do not require a high degree of attainment as a scientist. They require rather:

First: a sufficient education in medicine to know why they are done and to recognize symptoms;
Second: an understanding of the people amongst whom the work is to be done, including such things as religious and political customs, home surroundings, personal habits and personal characteristics of the people;

Third: an adaptability to the particular jobs that are to be done, a courage to put into effect the best procedure or to modify it when that is desirable for any of the considerations listed under number two, and;

Fourth: a will to learn by observation, study and through competent counsel.

The forest official may be in grazing work today—

If we substitute in the above the forester for the physician, the trees for people, we shall have a true picture of what the majority of foresters will have to do in the United States during the next two or three decades. It is not contended that this represents all of the job of foresters in the country. The administrator of medicine in India could not go forward satisfactorily without the help of the research physician, devoting his time to discovery of new treatments and new methods. Indeed, the need for scientific research in medicine under the conditions described is much more urgent than the need for it in the profession in this country.
because there are so many more problems, a solution of which is necessary before an efficient medical health service can be effected.

Forestry in America, then, needs highly trained specialists who will devote their time to the solution of problems that will be beyond the abilities of the men engaged in administration. The writer does not mean to imply that there are any hard and fast lines between forest administration and forest research. All men engaged in forest research will in a degree be engaged in forest administration and all men in forest administration in a degree will be engaged in forest research. The terms are used only in accordance with common practice to indicate the broad differences which fuse each into the other.

What then, are the most important things that a man should get during a four-year undergraduate course if he is going to be one of the majority engaged in administration? Referring back to our simile, he needs to gain, first, a sufficient knowledge of forestry to know why things are done as they are, to appreciate the technique of the specialist and to recognize when, where, and how it should be applied. Second, he needs to gain enough knowledge of forestry that he can understand the type of forests in which he is to work and the relation between them and the climatic and soil conditions of the region. He should know the forest and he should know the habits and life of the individual trees. Most of the knowledge that he needs in practice can be secured from others. He does not, for example, need to do the research work necessary to compile yield tables for pine, spruce and other species on the several quality sites on the forest, but he does need to know how to recognize his soil and forest types and to apply the tables that specialists work out for him. It will not be his job to work out the life history of a pine bark beetle or a fungus and determine what its effect on a tree or the forest will be, but he does need to know what the specialist can tell him about these things and what remedial measures, if any, are practicable. Third, the administrator of a forest property will be engaged on a problem of pine today, one on fir tomorrow; he will be engaged in a problem of silviculture today, one of fire control tomorrow; he will be engaged in administration of a grazing resource today, and of a recreation resource tomorrow, etc. That calls for what we term “adaptability.” What are the characteristics that make a man adaptable, and how can he develop them in a forest school? I think the answer to the first part of the
question may be found in a discussion of point 4 of the simile.

Adaptability means ability to make a correct observation, to seek counsel, to study, a will to learn, and ability to bring an untrammeled viewpoint to a fresh problem, to see all sides of it and to sort out the wheat from the chaff. Given sufficient time, a man may do all of these things well for one job or for a number of jobs, and yet not be adaptable to varying conditions and changing problems. If the administrator approaches his task with too great thoroughness he will spend more time on one thing than he can afford to the neglect of another more important task. If, on the other hand, he does not inquire carefully enough into the problem before him, does not see the angles to it that are different from other jobs, does not collect sufficient information on which to base judgment and does not concentrate on the problem for a sufficient time to see it through to an ultimate conclusion when his program is made, he will be continually in difficulty through basing conclusion on insufficient information and study. It is the writer’s opinion after many years in a supervisory position that the mistakes of forest administrators are much more frequently due to failure to go into matters thoroughly enough rather than disposition to be too intensive.

Referring back to the simile again, while it is true that the practitioner engaged in sanitation, diet and isolation...
does not frequently have use for a high degree of specialization, he must all the time use the greatest care to see to it that he understands all of the conditions surrounding the particular situation that he is for the moment engaged in, and that the very best practices that have been worked out be put into effect just as far as is possible in each case. Handling things en masse, there is a natural disposition for him to slight the refinements of study and observation and the refinements of practice. The disposition in forest administration at least, is to fail to apply these principles to the daily job. A development of methods of work that will overcome that difficulty is in my judgment the most important thing for the forest school student to strive for. As a supervisory officer, I am not as greatly concerned over the amount of dendrology, forest economics, agristology, etc. that the forest school student can recite when he comes into an administrative job as I am with how much he will learn and how much he will apply after he is on the job. If he can make a good recitation, so much the better, but if he is adaptable, if he will apply himself to a thorough study and thorough analysis of the job that is before him, he will usually find that, through observation, study of literature at hand and seeking counsel, he can get the information which he needs. Then if he has the necessary intellectual honesty and industry, he will put in effect the best practice.

Other things being equal, I would prefer a man who has made mediocre grades and has this attitude of mind than one who has made excellent grades, but who is disposed to approach problems with preconceived opinions or who maintains the attitude of knowing all about what to do in the particular instance. Usually, however, the writer believes that good grades in school are a mark of what has been referred to as adaptability. A man gets good grades because he does observe, does study, does analyze and does base conclusions on a thorough knowledge of his subject. The man who will dispose of his assignment in school with a “lick and a promise” is likely to dispose of his assignment when he gets out into the world in the same manner, and it is just that disposition to dispose of questions without thorough investigation, to assume that accuracy is not necessary, that details are not of great consequence, that causes men to fail in administrative work. In other words, a very large measure of what we term a “research attitude of mind” is necessary to the successful administrator. To be sure, he must handle his work with speed and promptitude, he must shift rapidly from one thing to another, but he must nevertheless be thorough.