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A Glimpse Into the Life of "Prof. Mac"

Ames Forestry Club

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A HARD-FOUGHT football game was in progress at Iowa State Field in the fall of 1910 when the Cyclone field was north of Engineering Hall. The faculty was playing the seniors who had just finished their season's schedule and were in good condition. It was hard work for the faculty, but they were putting up a great battle for theirs was a team of football heroes of the past not accustomed to defeat.

At the end of the third quarter neither team had scored. The faculty quarter-back had exhausted his bag of tricks and was about worn out from tackling and breaking holes in the line for his ball carriers. He was calling signals now; the back-field suddenly shifted to a new formation; the ball was snapped from center; strange, the diminutive quarter reached for it himself. He dropped it to his toe and it flashed in a clear arch between the goal posts 40 yards distant. The score stood 3 to 0 in favor of the faculty. In a few minutes the surprise play was repeated and the game ended 6 to 0.

That game did two things. It won a victory for the faculty and introduced the new forestry professor, G. B. MacDonald, better known now to all his student and alumni friends as “Prof. Mac,” to Iowa State College as a football hero and a man who does things. Everyone on the field and in the crowd who watched the game immediately developed a strong liking for the new professor, not because he won the game but because of the way he played it.

WHY did he do so well in that game? Those who know him say it was because he concentrated with all his might on each play and forgot the sidelines; because he knew the strength and ability of each man on the field and never lost command of the situation; because he threw himself into every play with an unconquerable fierceness and yet with the skill of one who knows his own limits; because he never spared himself at any time; because he loved to do and dared to do where others feared and hesitated and failed.

It might well be said that Prof. Mac has carried his football
style into everything he does in life for he succeeds with each assignment equally well.

In the 25 years since 1910 as head as the Forestry Department at Iowa State College, Prof. Mac has seen the department grow under his direction from a mere handful of students with one instructor to a present enrollment of over 300 with a faculty of six. He has sent many of the boys he taught out to fill jobs of apparently greater responsibility than his own and has in many cases inspired them to success when failure seemed inevitable.

Prof. Mac may well be proud of his alumni who were rated near the top on the basis of responsible positions recently by the Society of American Foresters. He may also be proud of the fact that the Society rated Iowa State among the fourteen approved forestry schools in the United States from the standpoint of training given, in spite of the fact that Iowa is not considered a forest state.

ALTHOUGH unfailing in his loyalty to Iowa, Prof. Mac's early life was spent in the neighboring state of Nebraska. He was born at Carleton, Neb., only one-quarter mile from the Kansas line, on March 9, 1883, and was christened Gilmour. His father was a Presbyterian minister of Scotch descent. The family moved successively to Hubbel, Hopewell, and Unadilla, Nebr., where his father held pastorates.

His family assert that he and his four brothers lived the lives of normal boys with no more than the usual number of boyish escapades to their credit. One of these included an investigation of the effect of tobacco on growing boys. The results of this research were reported most inopportune at the parsonage by five very sick boys when their mother was in the midst of entertaining some ladies of the church.

When young Gilmour was in the fourth grade the family moved to Lincoln where the boys completed their schooling. At Lincoln High, Gilmour became interested in football under the able coaching of Dr. G. E. Condra, now Dean of the Conservation and Survey Division, and State Geologist, University of Nebraska.

One year of college without a definite objective was too much for this impatient young man. He left school in 1902 and went to California where he worked on a fruit ranch for a short time and then found a better job in a large department store in Sacramento. In the summer of 1904 when one of his brothers died he gave up his job and hurried home to Lincoln.
While there he decided to continue his college education although he was still uncertain as to the field since none appeared attractive. Then Dr. Condra suggested a new field that offered great possibilities for a young man—forestry. The idea was exactly to Gilmour's liking. He enrolled in forestry at once.

For relief from books he interested himself in athletics where he soon acquired a reputation as a star performer in both football and track. He played either end or quarterback on the football squad and as a member of the track team was a pole vaulter. During a dual track meet with Ames in 1906, Prof. Mac took first place in that event.

In the summer of 1905 he worked at the Forest nursery which had just been established at Halsey, Nebr. Then he returned to school in the fall and the following year was again employed at the nursery for eight months during the spring and summer. With him was Carlos G. Bates, present senior
silviculturist for the Lake States Forest Experiment Station. Together they labored many long, hard days. Prof. Mac still recalls excursions in search of botanical specimens made by lantern light in order to save the daylight hours for heavier work.

In the fall of 1907, Prof. Mac received the degree of bachelor of science in forestry. He had taken a civil service examination before graduation and his appointment with the title of forest agent and expert arrived shortly after graduation.

At about the same time he was offered a fellowship at the University of Montana which he declined in favor of the Forest Service appointment. His first assignment took him to the Medicine Bow National Forest in Wyoming on a seed collecting job. Fresh from college and with no advance expense allowances or equipment he was instructed to collect thousands of bushels of Douglas fir and lodgepole pine cones. He proceeded to round up a crew of young tree climbers and managed during the course of the fall to collect and extract approximately 3000 bushels of cones.

He discovered that squirrel caches were the most convenient source of cones, but circumstances arose which made it difficult to capitalize on the squirrel's savings. Women's organizations in the locality learned of his intentions and attempted to stop his work by a little notorious publicity. However, in spite of the opposition and a natural sympathy of his own toward the little beasties, he was convinced the sentimentality was not justified and completed the job.

He spent the winter of 1907 in Washington, D. C., working for S. N. Spring, Chief of the Department of Forest Extension, and now dean of the Syracuse school of forestry. Here his work involved the making of planting plans and nursery reports and correcting Civil Service planting exams.

In the spring of 1908 he was detailed to start a forest nursery at Pocatello, Idaho, and to conduct planting operations on the Pocatello National Forest. That fall he was assigned to the Section of Forest Planting in the District (now Regional) office at Missoula, Montana, where W. B. Greeley was district forester and F. A. Silcox was assistant district forester.

Early in 1910 he was placed in charge of the Boulder, Montana, nursery, where he assumed the task of enlarging a small unit to one of 8 million trees in 4 by 12 foot beds. He obtained a leave of absence while there in order to go to Lincoln and marry his home-town sweetheart on February 1, 1910.
While in Lincoln he met an old friend, C. A. Scott, who was teaching forestry at Iowa State College, and who was anxious to be relieved of his duties long enough to investigate an offer of the state forester's position at Manhattan, Kansas. Prof. Mac helped him out by filling his place at Ames during the month of February, 1910. Prof. S. A. Beach, vice-dean of Agriculture and head of the Department of Horticulture and Forestry, was very well impressed with Prof. Mac and his bride, and when Scott accepted the Kansas job, Prof. Mac was offered the teaching position.

He declined the offer and returned to Montana. However, after reconsidering, he decided to accept and was at once hired for the following fall. Meantime the worst fire season in history (1910) had broken out over Idaho and Montana and Prof. Mac fought fire continuously throughout the summer.

In fact, he refused to leave the big blaze until the last train which would carry him to his new job on time arrived.

As a forestry professor, Prof. Mac was immediately alive to the possibilities of forestry in Iowa. He convinced the school that one forestry instructor wasn't sufficient for training professional foresters and secured the services of Nelson C. Brown, now of Syracuse and author of several forestry text books, for one year. From that time the number of instruc-
tors has gradually increased and Prof. Mac has worked hard to secure the best men in the field.

Not satisfied with educating the students in forestry Prof. Mac extended this education to the general public. He was instrumental in organizing the work of the Iowa Conservation Association the purpose of which was to crystallize conservation sentiment in the state. As secretary of this organization for many years he was one of its most active members. He also published several bulletins on forestry subjects for general distribution to the public. One of these embodied a survey of timber resources of the state and contained ideas on land classification that economists are now beginning to put to use. This is one of the instances in which his vision was out ahead. Another of those instances occurred when, as a result of his wide knowledge of Iowa’s natural resources, he assisted in working out a detailed “Twenty-year plan” which was ready for use in 1932. Then a year later when President Roosevelt requested the states to throw 200-man camps into immediate action on state conservation projects no state was in a better position to do so than Iowa. And Prof. Mac was shouldered with the duties accompanying the title of Director of Emergency Conservation Work in charge of Civilian Conservation Camps in Iowa.

At the same time under the CWA set-up he was in charge of the Forest and Wasteland Survey in the state which later served as the basis for planning the purchase areas for the national forest program in Iowa.

FOR many years he had interested himself in soil erosion as a problem for foresters. He could see the relation of forestry to erosion and farming so clearly that he had a plan for the three already formed before the soil conservation program was up for consideration in Washington. Then came the conservation boom and CCC Camps were set up almost overnight in every state. Technicians and directors in Washington searched for a plan applicable to conservation and farm lands but found none. When Prof. Mac presented his plan to Director Fechner it was taken immediately to the president and approved without delay. The same day telegrams were sent to the directors of the several states giving starting instructions on a workable plan.

A keen understanding of his surroundings has thrown jobs on Prof. Mac many other times. During the World War he
was assigned to the task of collecting data on available forest products that could be used by the army. This included running down black walnut for gun stock material. Another task has been that of deputy state forester under the secretary of agriculture from 1918 to 1935. In 1935 when the Fish and Game Commission and the State Board of Conservation were combined, he was appointed state forester under the present Conservation Commission.

It would appear that Prof. Mac has always been the serious, hard-working forester. However, such is not altogether the case. His "outside" activities are as numerous as his conservation activities for he likes people as well as he likes trees. He has always contributed his time, money and talent to student activities outside the class room where he is found a favorite.

He early became affiliated with the Collegiate Presbyterian church as an active member and later as an officer. At present he is a life elder which is an honor held by only one other person of this church at Ames. Also he is a trustee of the Westminster board which is a body organized to administer the affairs of the church at the three state schools in Iowa.

The high idealism of the Boy Scout movement early attracted Prof. Mac's attention, and he volunteered his services. He was scout master of the second troop organized in Ames, in 1913. Since that time he has maintained his interest and has attained the highest honor in the organization, known as the Beaver Award. In 1933 he received his 20-year Veteran's Award and in 1934 was elected to honorary membership in Alpha Phi Omega, Ames eagle scout honorary fraternity.

His work has been so highly valued by the voting populace that he has been reelected city councilman for the past fourteen successive years.

Although he seems to accept all jobs with equal willingness, Prof. Mac found one job at the school which, by his own admission, he thoroughly disliked—that was five years as committeeman and five years as chairman of the student discipline committee. This committee, which held jurisdiction over all students both on and off the campus, was abolished in 1928. The interesting but distasteful tasks included everything from "okay ing" class excuses to expelling students from school.

On some occasions the committee took the punishment. Approximately 500 students in one case had walked out on
classes and the president ruled that none could return until they had individually appeared before the committee and presented their cases. Prof. Mac and his fellows worked all the daylight hours and much of the night every day for two weeks to complete the job.

From the busy life he leads, no one would guess Prof. Mac was much a family man. However, he has a family of which he may well be proud. All his success he attributes to his wife who is as talented and active as he himself. She also loves the woods and camp life and with the children they have many good times together on camping trips and at their summer cottage on the shore of Cass Lake in Minnesota.

The children are Gilmour, age 25, Donald, age 21, Mary Janet, age 19, and Ruth, age 11. Gilmour is married, and is now working in Missouri after having received a B. S. degree in mechanical engineering at Iowa State College. Donald and Mary Janet are both attending college here at present. Incidentally, Mary Janet is one of Iowa State's 1936 Bomb beauties.

When Prof. Mac was procurement officer for 40 CCC camps as well as supervisor or director, councilman or consultant for several other organizations it appeared the school was losing him altogether. However, he has again managed to rid himself of many minor duties; the Soil Conservation Service and the Park Service have relieved him of responsibility for their camps altogether, and he finds some time for teaching. He still considers the school by far his most important job and always finds time to steer a baffled student or a faltering alumnus back into his course.