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When Forestry Was Young

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FELLOW Foresters, fellow alumni and friends: We are assembled for a multitude of purposes. To record our general interest in conservation as a principle, to bear testimony to our special faith in forestry as an instrument of conservation, to gather inspiration from a great educational institution renowned throughout the world for its agricultural leadership, to express our faith in the courage and consistency of the people of this great commonwealth whom it serves, and in all this to pay tribute to the work and services of one who for a full quarter of a century has carried the banner of progress for our common ideals and common objectives, Prof. G. B. MacDonald, dean and creator of the Ames School of Forestry.

I have known Professor MacDonald for nearly a quarter of a century. I wish I could justly claim some credit for having in some way contributed to his success in our profession. Instead of doing so, I must admit that the obligation, if any, is reversed and that he contributed to successful administration by me. It was while I was serving as Regional Forester at Ogden, Utah, that Professor MacDonald appeared in the official picture of forest administration as I was then experiencing it. He had taken his bachelor's degree in forestry at Nebraska in 1907, had served with credit and promise as a member of the Forest Service and from 1910 was the directing head of the new school of forestry in this institution. You are all aware that in the earlier days the Forest Service was charged with "bottling up" the resources of the National Forests and thereby preventing the development of the West. The orgy of land speculation, which eventually swept over the entire nation, originated in the West. Some of it was due to the booster spirit of the region; in California, particularly, much was due to a desire to attract population. No small amount was due to high pressure salesmanship connected with great irrigation projects.
USUALLY such projects involved very expensive engineering works. Only by most optimistic estimates of crop returns and land values could their construction be justified financially. Orchard land, cantaloupe lands, sugar beet lands, alfalfa lands were all quoted in values of hundreds of dollars per acre, and 160 acres of “just land” was supposed to represent a fair stake in any event. So the thing for the man to do who lacked capital was to get himself a 160-acre tract of land—not to use himself, but to sell to someone else. I shall not take up your time by further discussion of our forest homestead and land classification difficulties. I mention it at this time, because the situation in southern Idaho was particularly difficult, and in my dilemma I turned to the one place I knew of where good agricultural land was not a myth but a reality, to Iowa, and in Iowa to its great agricultural college at Ames.

I reasoned that the man in charge of the forestry course at Ames should be well qualified to judge good farm land and to decide where the tall trees should give way to tall corn. I also felt that a Nebraska graduate was sure to appreciate the value and service of trees and would be well fitted to deal justly with both farm and forest. So I entered into negotiations with the young man then teaching forestry at Ames. In short, I turned to the educator and exponent of conservation whose work and accomplishment we honor here tonight.

I was fortunate in securing Professor MacDonald’s services to direct a survey party on the south fork of the Payette River in the Boise National Forest. The narrow strip of bottom land along that river carried a heavy stand of mature ponderosa pine. This land was all applied for by would-be homesteaders in Boise, Chicago, Pittsburgh, and points east—glib talkers and persuasive letter-writing farmers who had never “husked a potato or dug a hill of corn.” But there was also pending an application from a lumberman from Michigan who wished to purchase two hundred million feet of sawtimber from this watershed. This problem of alternative selection, for conservation and perpetuation of existing forests or imaginary farms, was put up to Professor MacDonald to solve. In the light of later developments, the answer now seems simple, but in the befogged mental atmosphere of that period it was not so clear.

MY TIME was so crowded with the many problems of the region that I found little opportunity to go into the Payette problem personally with Mac, either before he started the field work or after it was finished, so he faced the task of formu-
lating the answer unaided, and was left to work out his own salvation, and mine, and the forest's. Confidentially, the key to such measure of success as I have achieved in the Forest Service is that I have been willing to accept full responsibility and just as full credit for other men's good work. Professor MacDonald determined the destiny of those lands and, thanks to his vision and good judgment, the government owns most of the bottom land along the Payette; it is not a region of abandoned log cabins; we do not have to pay half-starved settlers for fighting fires which they themselves start as a means of gaining a livelihood not possible of realization from an isolated tract of stump land unsuited for cultivation and remote from markets. True, the timber has not been sold, but it stands there, unencumbered and ready for use whenever needed, and when cut, it will be marked with less uncertainty of results than if cut twenty years ago. Meanwhile, our nation's needs have been met from other sources nearer the consumer—good business, good economics, sound conservation.
A proper regard for historical perspective required us to record that Professor MacDonald was one of a group of remarkable young men who turned their attention to forestry during the earlier years following the transfer act of Feb. 1, 1905. They came into the west bearing the torch of conservation from Yale and Harvard, Cornell, Biltmore, Ann Arbor, Nebraska and the earlier schools of forestry. Brilliant, fearless, honest, impetuous crusaders of the “square deal,” as conceived and advocated by Gifford Pinchot and backed by the great Theodore of glorious vision and mighty soul.

TO THOSE “Robin Hood” boys—not limiting membership to a single institution—I am in no small degree indebted for an outlook and vision which has given me three full decades of enjoyable and—I hope—useful public service. It would be unappreciative on my part if I were to fail in this acknowledgment.

As probably the earliest alumnus of this great school to adopt forestry as a career, I ask your kind indulgence while, for the moment, I turn aside from the primary subject of the evening and describe the strange twists of Fortune’s wheel which directed the course of my life into such a strange and then wholly uncharted sea of endeavor.

I was a forest supervisor before the advance guard of “Robin Hood” came into the greenwood of the West. Some of my more ancient auditors may recall that I never “joined” or “entered” the Forest Service, but was “acquired,” like the Philippines. Since it cannot be concealed, I may as well confess to that part of my shady past which is of record, trusting that the unrecorded parts will remain buried in the charity of oblivion. It is vain for me to attempt to deny that I was once an editor. I participated in the wars between the copper kings of Montana, W. A. Clark, Marcus Daly, and F. Augustus Heinze. An unfriendly commentator would say that my part was that of a gladiator or hired Hessian of the Fourth Estate. A friendly Boswell would assign to me the part of what we of the Forest Service today would call a trained public relations man. I came through that war unmarried by six-gun, but I still bear the scars of conflict on my soul and on many a vivid page of memory. I imagined myself a publicist, but actually was merely a pawn in a battle for supremacy between great predatory interests. Through the smoke of battle, in a happily inspired moment, I saw and grasped an opportunity to become a forest supervisor in the General Land Office. It was a political appointment, and I owed
my selection to Congressman Joseph M. Divon, afterwards U. S. Senator from Montana, an ardent advocate of forest conservation and Roosevelt’s campaign manager in the crusade of 1912.

DOUBTLESS if I were to admit that I am ashamed of having once served time in the General Land Office of the Department of the Interior, its personnel would get back at me by declaring that they are just as ashamed of it as I am. Be that as it may, after serving in the Department of the Interior from 1903 as supervisor of the Bitter Root Forest Reserve, I was brought over from the General Land Office of that department by the transfer act of Feb. 1, 1905, at Hamilton, Montana, along with some dusty letter files, 17 letter-press copy books, 6 axes,—one without a handle—5 shovels, and a broken Dutch oven and some other miscellaneous property. There was also transferred one young, ambitious and woefully ignorant forest supervisor. The broken Dutch oven was promptly condemned as useless by the first visiting inspector after the transfer, who looked long and thoughtfully at the supervisor as though doubtful as to the procedure made and provided for cases such as his. Doubtless my escape from the same fate as that which befell the decrepit Dutch oven may be attributed to a gap in the hastily compiled instructions of the “New Deal” of that day.

During my first five years following Feb. 1, 1905, I met many of the gallant young sprigs of green who made the history of the early years of the Forest Service. From them I learned what I could. Occasionally I fancied they learned from me. In 1907, as chief inspector of what is now Region One, I had as my assistants F. A. Silcox, R. Y. Stuart, Paul G. Redington and George A. Cecil, four horsemen beyond compare, the most gallant, resourceful, efficient, loyal and trustworthy quartet of foresters that ever went afield. Gladly and proudly I hailed them as “My Boys.” Three of the four became bureau chiefs; the fourth, George A. Cecil, as a leader in conservation circles in southern California, has filled a place no less important and honorable. I am indebted to each of these four horsemen and many others of similar traits and training, but of less spectacular careers, for much of the thought and vision which has enabled me to participate rather intimately in the inner councils of the forces of conservation for a full generation.

I HAVE already spoken of the field work in land classification done by Professor MacDonald at a somewhat later period—a period which we may call the “Middle Ages” of the Forest
Service as contrasted with the age of the pre-Raphaelites which I have just described. It is to pay tribute to the work done by Professor MacDonald during the nearly a quarter of a century which has intervened since that day of economic pioneering that we are gathered here tonight. As the Nestor of Ames Foresters, I consider it an honor and privilege to voice briefly and sincerely our appreciation, admiration, and respect. The Ames School of Forestry is his monument. Rarely is it within the power or province of one man to contribute so largely to the foundation and perpetuation of a great public institution.

This school is numbered as one among the fourteen schools in the United States which “adequately cover the field of forestry instruction.” Such is the rating which has been given it as the result of a study by the Society of American Foresters of all forestry schools in the Union. This is the more remarkable when due consideration is given to the fact that this has been achieved in a state without commercial forests, without the backing of a lumber industry, and where conventional agriculture overshadows all other occupations. Talk about tolerant species! The fact that this school has been able to survive and thrive in the shade of such dominant interests, to my mind, places it and Professor MacDonald in a class by themselves, and is evidence of a grim courage and unwavering faith. No other forest school started in a prairie state has ever survived, to say nothing of achieving national recognition.

Comparisons are odious, and I would not utter a single word which might be construed as reflecting in the slightest degree upon the merit of any one of the other thirteen approved schools of forestry. Yet justice demands that we credit the Ames school with the fact that its purpose has been to serve the educational needs and aspirations of the young people of the state. It has not been promoted by rich endowments; it has not educated foresters in order that the federal government, the states, or commercial lumber interests might secure trained specialists or that as timber land owners they might obtain skilled managers. The springs of the existence of this school of forestry arise in the urge to the avocation by the seeker after knowledge and an urge to service, and not from the urge of employers or the plans of an industry seeking profits.

This school does not owe its existence to the pressure of land economics or the commercial needs of the State, but to the
intellectual needs of each succeeding generation of its young people. I have a very vivid recollection of the valiant fight which Professor MacDonald waged to save it from destruction when it was proposed in the name of economy to discontinue the forestry course because Iowa had no great lumber industry that needed to employ its graduates. In that struggle Professor MacDonald had the unwavering support of former President Pearson, just as he had always been loyally supported by every president of Iowa State College and by a loyal and sympathetic faculty down to this day of honorable maturity.

IT HAS been an inspiration to be with you at this time. The presence of Society members from neighboring states is not only evidence of your appreciation but of our common ideals and objectives. I shall not take advantage of your helpless condition to bore you with a sermon or irritate you with a lecture. I shall not attempt to tell you how the Society, this school, or this nation should be run. Naturally, I feel confident of my ability to so enlighten you if I elected to do so, but since it might not be appreciated, I shall carry the secret with me to the grave.

The evening wanes. I promised the program committee my talk would be brief, but I cannot resist the temptation to dwell for a moment on the lengthening shadows of life before I say good night. To Him who orders all things well, I owe a great debt of gratitude. Life has not been all joy, nor yet all sorrow. I have shared the sunshine and shadow, war and peace, toil and rest. Life embraces all emotions and its incidents are infinite in variety. Time once passed can be lived over again in memory only. Yet if it were given to me to have planned my life in advance and order things just as I would, I would ordain that I should be born in a log cabin on the banks of the Des Moines River in Humboldt County, Iowa, while yet the stream ran clear and teemed with fish, while the unbroken prairie riotous with flowers stretched away from my father's field as far as the eye could see; to have heard the clatter of myriad waterfowl on their spring and fall exodus; to have learned how to labor in the field and feel the joy of doing a man's part in replacing waving fields of sloughgrass with rustling fields of corn; to have graduated here at Ames in '96; to have shouldered a Springfield rifle and enlisted as a private soldier in '98; to have become a forest supervisor in western Montana in 1903; to have been transferred to the Department of Agriculture in 1905; to have married the girl of my choice that same fortuitous
year and to have lived with her and my work happily ever after; to have become chief inspector of Region One in 1908, supervisor of the Sequoia National Forest in California in 1909, Regional Forester at Ogden, Utah, in 1910; to have directed the segregation of 160 million acres of federal lands between 1914 and 1919 and their permanent dedication to forestry; to have served as Associate Forester for over fifteen years under three great chiefs without an unkind word; to have had the joy and privilege of being here with you tonight, and to here and now, as an alumnus of Ames, acknowledge the debt of gratitude I, along with many others, owe to the beloved instructors of my day to this great institution, to Dr. Beardshear, Dr. Stanton, Dr. Pammel, Dean Marston, Dean Roberts, Dr. Osborne, Dean Curtiss and others equally beloved and cherished in the rosary of my recollections. With these giants of the past, Professor MacDonald will take an honorable place in the memories of the young people for whom he has supplied equal visions, equal ambition to advance and equal courage to persevere.

I close by extending to him and to each of you individually, my best wishes clothed in the words made immortal by Joe Jefferson in his character as “Rip Van Winkle”: “Here’s to your health and your family’s good health; and may you all live long and prosper.” Good night!
OPPORTUNITY

"With doubt and dismay you are smitten,
You think there's no chance for you, son?
Why, the best books haven't been written,
The best race hasn't been run,
The best score hasn't been made yet.
The best song hasn't been sung,
The best tune hasn't been played yet.
Cheer up, for the world is young!

No chance? Why, the world is just eager
For things that you ought to create;
Its store of true wealth is still meager,
Its needs incessant and great;
It yearns for more power and beauty,
More laughter and love and romance,
More loyalty, labor and duty;
No chance? Why there is nothing but chance!

For the best verse hasn't been rhymed yet,
The best house hasn't been planned,
The highest peak hasn't been climbed yet,
The mightiest rivers aren't spanned.
Don't worry and fret, faint-hearted,
The chances have just begun.
For the best jobs haven't been started—
The best work hasn't been done!"

—Berton Braley.