Dedication

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JUST A FORESTER

J. A. Larsen

I do not own a foot of land:
Nor am I rich in earthly goods;
But this can be a blessing now
That I have learned to love the woods.

No mining stock or other shares
In oil or steel or grain I hold;
But I possess the jeweled drops
Of rain and frost of gleaming gold.

Cathedral stillness 'neath the height
Of canopy like priceless glass
In ever brilliant beams of light
Suffuse my early morning mass.

The crested mountain tops afar,
And shimmering gleam of yonder lake,
Will lure my spirit like a star.
It's there whichever trail I take.

Through hail or rain or tender snow
I step with joyful heart far more
Than he who wears his life away
Within a dark or dismal store.

I am not bound by town or state;
For cool refreshing streams I ask;
Aroma of the spruce and pine;
The trail that leads me to my task.

All these are mine, to see to feel;
To treasure, not to buy or sell;
Of Natures priceless legacies;
All that within the forests dwell.

A gleam at sunset and the call
Of distant lonely whippoorwill;
The rumble of the water fall
When day is done and night is still.

In yonder lowly cottage gleams
My evening star, I seek my ease
Beside the lowly flickering beams;
A hut, a home, a book, and peace.
DEDICATION

The 1977 Ames Forester is dedicated to "Skipper" who was America's most senior Forester when he passed away in his hundredth year.
Dr. J. A. Larsen—

A National Treasure

George W. Thomson

Author’s Note: This dedication was written one week before the death of Julius Ansgar Larsen on January 4, 1977 and was composed in the hope that he would read it at the time of his one hundredth birthday celebration. But our old friend is now at rest under a red oak tree in the University Cemetery in Ames.

Farvel, Julius. Gud velsigne deg!

Even if we could ignore our recently stimulated interest in a bicentennial of history and even if we tired of the concept of the Renaissance Man, we could scarcely overlook the long and intriguing life of Julius Ansgar Larsen. We are almost never fortunate enough to know a man or woman whose lifetime of professional activity more than spans the period through which our profession has existed. Let us look, in this one hundredth year since his birth, at that amazing forester who is known the country round as Skipper.

First called “The Skipper” and later just “Skipper” by close friends and, usually behind his back, by impudent school boys (I, myself, never got up the courage to call him Skipper until I was 51 years old), it was assumed that there was a connection to the sea. Indeed there was and from Dr. Larsen’s own notes is the story:

“I was born in Drammen, in southern Norway, December 13, 1877. In Drammen the forested mountain plateau descends in gentle slopes to the brimming Drammen River and fjord inlet. Snow and ice prolong the winter; larks and song sparrows, anemones and cowslips greet the spring. Square-rigged sailing vessels lie at anchor in the harbor, readying for their summer trips to carry lumber and pulp to England, coal from England to Baltic ports—and eventually returning home with coal for the winter and toys from England for the children.

My father and older brother were seamen. They studied navigation during the winters, rising from ordinary positions to those of first mate and captain, eventually getting into the England-Australia transport.

As for myself, after finishing primary school I spent two seasons coastwise sailing with my father on his sloop, freighting sand, brick and lime to Oslo. After that, there were two seasons onboard the Alf, then the Berna, in the England-Quebec trade, with coal outward and white pine logs returning. In 1895, instead of homing for the winter, the Berna headed for Trinidad with a load of coal. We never reached that port, for one very stormy dog-watch the mainmast, sails and rigging tumbled into the ocean. At that moment two of us were aloft furling the fore-royal sail. The braces connecting the spar caused it to flutter so much as to make our hold extremely precarious. We could well have been pitched into the sea. Fortunately, after that the trade winds brought us into Bridgetown Harbor on the island of Barbados. This was shortly before Christmas. The Berna could not be repaired in this port, was judged unfit for by-the-wind sailing to reach Trinidad, and was condemned. The crew was paid off and sent home to Norway. However, I asked and received permission from the consul to travel to New York. Thus my dream of coming to America was suddenly realized, and I came to my two sisters in New Haven, Connecticut.”

From 1896 to 1901 he attended evening classes for immigrants and studied English, German, Latin, and arithmetic while working days at the Winchester Arms Company. At the end of that period he attended the East Maine Conference Seminary at Bucksport, Maine to prepare for Yale entrance examinations. From 1904 to 1910 he attended Yale, first in the undergraduate school and then in the School of Forestry for graduate work. It was during this period that he became increasingly interested in nature studies from botany through geography and picked up his first formal training in sketching and the painting that was to
become so much a part of him. Finishing his forestry course work during field camp in Louisiana he prepared for and wrote his Civil Service examinations and on July 4, 1910 received his first professional appointment to the Blackfeet National Forest in Kalispell, Montana. He was now 33 years old, essentially the same age as the first forestry course in the nation—the one designed at Iowa State College in 1878. We can now observe his professional life for the next 67 years.

Let’s turn again to Skipper’s own notes:

“That first summer on the Blackfeet coincided with the very worst fire season in history—especially severe on the Northfork of the Flathead River and on the Coeur d’Alene and St. Joe Forests. During the following fall and early winter we cruised burnt timber to be sold, prepared surveys and maps for homestead applications, and made forest-type maps and ranger-area maps for the office.

In March 1911, Jenny Borghild Spieckermann came from New Haven to be my adored bride; in the spring of 1913 we and our six-weeks-old daughter moved to the new Forest Experiment Station in northern Idaho, near Priest River.

At the Experiment Station were only four buildings: office-laboratory, residence, barn and greenhouse. On the Nenton Flat nearby, and on the river bench, were plots for tests of exotic trees and a series of plots of try-outs for all representatives of Western Yellow Pine, also some Douglas Fir, and, later, installations of White Pine and Larch thinning plots. In three weather stations fully equipped by the U.S. Weather Bureau we kept records on different aspects—evaporation, temperature, wind movement, humidity, soil quality studies. When I came to Iowa, I brought a set of soils for testing in the Iowa State University laboratory. This became the basis for my own Ph.D. thesis.”

There are two fascinating points to be derived from the foregoing: Skipper Larsen became Dr. Larsen when he completed his Ph.D. thesis in 1936 using soil collected in 1920—only so scholarly and organized a man could have kept a goal so long in mind. A second notable item comes when we realize that he returned to the Priest River Station in 1976 to address the U.S. Forest Service personnel gathered there to celebrate the 65th anniversary of the establishment of the Station that Dr. Larsen had directed 54 years earlier.

After assignments throughout the Pacific Northwest in the early twenties, he went abroad in 1923 to visit forest experiment station personnel in Europe. In 1924 he was appointed by G. B. MacDonald to the staff of the Forestry Department at Iowa State. During the next forty years he was a
Professor Larsen addressing Forest Service personnel gathered to celebrate the 65th anniversary of the establishment of the Priest River Forest Experiment Station during the summer of 1976.

key staff member and a fixture in the minds of students and returning alumni.

During his tenure at Iowa State he was mostly known for his silviculture classes both on campus and at Camp, although he taught wood technology, fire protection, nursery management, cartography, drafting and almost anything else that "Prof. Mac" felt needed assigning. The day of the specialist had not yet come to forestry schools and versatility was the key to employment.

The stories about Skipper were legion just as his stories about "Priest River Country" were infinitely varied. His insistence that a silviculture student should be able to name all of the rivers in sequence between the Penobscot and the Androscoggin drove Iowa-bound farm boys to distraction, while his interrupting a class to read selections from Thurber or Benchley amazed and diverted us and created a world of literacy before our very eyes. There was not a Freshman at any of the numerous Summer Camps, at which he was either director or teacher, that did not find himself out-walked and out-climbed by the rotund, shiny-headed Skipper who seemed grandfatherly and older than his years.

Probably the amazement that we all feel in celebrating Skipper's hundredth birthday arises from the notion that all we callow youths had thought he was "old" when we first knew him. Truly, I worked closely with Dr. Larsen from the time I was a Freshman in 1940 until I helped sponsor his last one-man art exhibit when he was 90 in 1968 and he seemed essentially changeless during that entire time. Given my own way, I would have Skipper Larsen declared a National Monument!

While students now have no way of knowing J. A. Larsen—even by legend, for most of those who knew the legends are now gone—in any given quarter they may work in one of the plantations that he planted and so carefully monitored through the years or they will be exposed to teachers, such as Dwight Bensend and myself, who took up where Skipper left off by following concepts in courses or at Forestry Camp developed earlier. Skipper wrote some forty technical articles and they mark his progress as a scientist and a scholar. An inveterate actor, raconteur and perfect host, it is not surprising that he published at least fourteen poems and continually participated in Actors' groups.

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Once under a full head of steam he was an after dinner storyteller without peer.

However, it has been his water colors that have drawn the attention of the widest audience, as he has had two solo showings in Ames and one in New York City and he exhibits with the Iowa Art Guild annually. He has sold over 400 of his paintings, with his landscapes and seascapes being immensely popular. From my own Forestry Camp in New Mexico in 1940, I clearly recall his pointing out the particular blue of the sky as being typical of warm desert climates and quite distinct from the blue of Minnesota. I didn't know that. Even more vividly, I recall how poor were my efforts to sketch the 16 different Ponderosa trees to illustrate Dunning's vigor classifications.

My own debt to Julius Ansgar Larsen seems greater with each year that passes. We all search in the lives of those that precede our own for those peaks from which we can see more clearly around us and we seek out those toe-holds on which we can rest to plan for what comes ahead. Once again, I find that Skipper's words are better than mine. From his first published poem, "The Forester":

Ask not ease or wealth or wine,
Or woman to adore thee,
But the friendship of the hills
And the trail before thee.
Seek not idle merriment,
Fame or praise or glory,
But a will to which are bent
The tasks which lie before thee.

And in the 1926 AMES FORESTER, fifty years ago, when Skipper was just a tad of fifty comes this last quatrain from a poem he called, "In My Lookout Cabin":

Shadows—lengthen—twilight softens
Over mountains, lakes and streams;
Darkness 'round me; stars above me;
Life and labor melt in dreams.

Thanks, Skipper. We never expect to see another like you.