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The more things change, 
the more they remain the same

by Dr. George Thomson

FEBRUARY in the Midwest can be rigorous. When wind-chill factors in the minus forties are added to the concerns for enrollment, budget and employment, it is not unusual to recall such notable quotes as “winter of discontent,” and “be not a summer soldier and a sunshine patriot,” and “these are the times that try men’s souls.”

Certainly there is a remarkable awareness of pending austerity that is felt by each one of us—students attempting to establish themselves in permanent jobs, faculty members seeking for research grants, travel funds and equipment, and administrative officers trying to hold organizations together. Perhaps even more debilitating are the suspicion that conditions may not improve for awhile and the shallowly disguised feeling of hurt arising from the conviction that we are too nice a people to be so beset.

Personally, I take a good deal of comfort in the realization that my parents had it a great deal rougher when the really hard times of the 1930’s befell them. My Dad didn’t even look up from hoeing in the garden that rainy day in 1932 when my mother called out to him that the third and last bank he had money in closed its doors for good. He didn’t even hit me when I said in my eleven year old innocence that I supposed that we still had a thousand dollars, didn’t we? It turned out he didn’t even have ten dollars. Why comfort from that? Well, mostly because I figure that if he survived and lived a long and satisfying life then I certainly can too, particularly when I consider how much better protected and educated and healthy we all are now than people were then.

But what cheers me most is the amazing resilience that goes with being young—and a forester. Nothing seems to change that. I cannot possibly do better than submit, wishing it were my own, a letter from that amazing man and first and longest-tenured department head, Gilmour (Prof. Mac) MacDonald, when he wrote the following letter to his beloved Ames Foresters fifty years ago this month. Read it and rejoice.

February 17, 1931
Dear Ames Foresters: I would like to make this letter a personal one to each of the old Ames foresters but with the memories of two hundred “grads” before me, this would be some job. How much would we prize the opportunity to sit down with each one and talk over, with some, that first year out of college and with others, the problems and achievements that a decade or two has brought to them. Yes, we would have echoes from many corners of the land—echoes from the federal forests of North and South, East and West; from the states; from the private timber interests and from foreign fields. Each one with his special work, with his plans, his hopes and ambitions, striving for accomplishment in a niche in the profession of his choice.

Indeed it is surprising what the field for foresters embraces. If we had the space we might dwell upon Morris’s and Beveridge’s horned toad farm down in Arizona or Wall’s attempts to produce cacti resistant strains of range stock in the southwest; or better still Wiggins’s versatility in South Africa in managing a native brick factory and sawmill, while serving as chief operator for appendicitis, running the Mission and serving as Chief Advisor to the Prince in his domestic affairs. An interesting chapter might be Merritt’s tree farms on the Alaskan Glaciers or Ling’s Agricultural School in the Orient. If time permitted we might hear from Hartman—and others in the creosoting game, in regard to the use of the pressure plants, during periods of depression, for sheep dipping.

It would be interesting to hear from the Madison Laboratory. The recently developed glues, we are told, will hold anything with the possible exception of foresters to their profession. Truax should continue his work.

We would like to report on our rather formidable list of forest supervisors. However, we seldom hear from them since we understand that when they are in from the field all their waking moments are spent on various and sundry reports.

Here at Ames another winter quarter will soon be drawing to a close. A dozen of the seniors (more or less) are beginning to wonder if the “exam,” will be as hard, as long, or as obscure as it is reported to have been last year. The freshmen are getting inquisitive about summer camp location. “Say, Prof., is it true that camp this summer is to be held in Alaska or is it in New Hampshire?” “I sure hope it will be in the West.” “How many blankets should I take?” “Do they ever have any fishing?” “Is the water cold?” “Are the snakes bad?” etc. Well anyway we are going to have a good camp of 25 to 30 men. We are considering possible locations on the Whitman, Deschutes, and Crater National Forests in Region 6 and also locations in West Virginia, Pennsylvania, New Hampshire and Vermont.

While Prof. Jeffers is at New Haven, Prof. Clark has the measurement class well entertained or at least occupied. Prof Larsen’s class in “72b” also has
a worried look as the quarter draws towards a close. Prof. Horning has about convinced his products class that there is still some hope of saving a small field for lumber against the inroads that the Iowa cornstalks have made in the building game. Bode is getting the farmers out in the state so much interested in planting shelterbelts and windbreaks that there is some fear for the acreage of corn, wheat and hogs.

Since last September we have had a number of special lecturers who have added much interest to the work of the Department. These included R. C. Hall of the Forest Taxation Inquiry; Dr. George R. Hopping of the Division of Entomology, Alberta, Canada; John C. Kuhns, Supervisor of the Whiteman National Forest; Dr. H. L. Shirley of the Lake States Forest Experiment Station and in addition we are expecting Dr. C. A. Schenck of Darmstadt, Germany for a series of lectures in May.

During the present depression a number of the boys have been shifting around. When they stop rambling long enough for us to get a line on them again, we will get out a news letter and give you the latest developments.

I suppose most all of the old gang will be looking for some of the “old line” advice before closing. Well, here it is: Eyes up; drive safely, but keep moving with the traffic; let the other fellow dangle the crepe. Then remember that the depression has not seriously affected the price of ink and paper.

Sincerely, G. M. MacDonald.

If we had no winter, the spring would not be so pleasant: if we did not sometimes taste adversity, prosperity would not be so welcome.—Anne Bradstreet, 1664.

—George W. Thomson
February 11, 1981

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