Toughness of Spirit and the Pursuit of Excellence

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Toughness of Spirit and the Pursuit of Excellence

by George W. Thomson
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It stands to reason that any 80-year-old organization will have its ups and downs. However, this department's students, faculty and alumni can profitably look back on those years since 1904, when Iowa State Forestry began, with the sure conviction that excellence has been pursued here by many means.

A particularly revealing time to observe was that of fifty years ago when times were hard and the environment was in bad shape because of exploitive use and lack of concern. But this was the time, too, when we were perched on the brink of one of the great conservation movements of our history — the Emergency Conservation Work (ECW) program that led to the famed CCC that set so many foresters on the road to successful careers.

G. B. MacDonald was State Forester for Iowa then as well as Department Head for Forestry and newly appointed Director of the ECW. Each of these positions was immensely demanding and I, as one of his successors, marvel at the energetic excellence of this pioneering forester. In the 1934 AMES FORESTER Professor MacDonald wrote, "I should like to take this opportunity to pass out a word of encouragement to the Ames foresters, especially those engaged in the Emergency Conservation program, and to commend them on their participation in a movement which may have results in the future far beyond what we can now see." The correctness of Prof. Mac's encouraging and optimistic prediction can now be seen in the recreational roads, shelters and lakes built; the eroding hillsides healed; the streams improved and the forests planted; the tree diseases controlled, and forest fires fought.

Much has been written of the impact of the various conservation programs that sprang from that national emphasis on conservation stimulated by an astute President and hundreds of forestry professionals. But the success stories that are of most interest to those of us directly involved in forestry in 1984 are those about the people whose careers began in the depressing times of the thirties but culminated in success during the ensuing fifty years. For example, the article in this present AMES FORESTER by the renowned Dr. William Duerr is significant because he is the same Bill Duerr who was the student editor of the 1934 AMES FORESTER. Another example lies in the interesting story in this issue about the cutting of the 1983 National Christmas Tree as told by Larry Gibson of the Class of 1933. He writes that he played croquet beside that tree where it was newly planted at the CCC camp near Fifield, Wisconsin when he was a newly graduated "Ames Forester" and stationed there. Fifty years later he helped saw down that tree and prepare it for its trip to the White House grounds in celebration of the Golden Anniversary of the Civilian Conservation Corps. These are but two of the many illustrations of the obvious fact that there is life and a successful career even after the beginnings look bad.

It would appear that the most appropriate confirmation of excellence of a university is found in the people who have graduated from it. Their contributions to society as well as to the profession and practice of forestry, then, are more worthy measures of excellence than are buildings, budget and bally-hoo — although it must surely be recognized that each of those play a part in the admitting, guiding and graduating of ultimately successful people.

"For excellence, it seems to me," said President Parks in his inaugural address in 1965, "is a process of becoming, rather than a state of being... it is in the striving for excellence that an institution develops that spirit and tone, that lively community of learning, that creative environment for scholarship which makes for excellence."

Common talk among foresters, whether they be industry or government employed, woodlands or manufacturing oriented, teacher or student, neophyte or old-timer, is that present conditions are hard, the future is uncertain and the public image of forestry is distorted. When pessimism is the dominant theme of a profession bad times are made to seem worse. Students see little reason for diligence if effort is not to be rewarded; curriculum planners find
themselves ill at ease in proposing truly demanding courses; lessened expectations lead to declining enrollments and several pillars of excellence weaken — the numbers of superior students decline in both real and relative terms, stimulation of faculty members is reduced and, in turn, the excitement of the classroom fades. Finally the retrogression continues as fewer students are attracted and the essential flow of financial support and the esteem of popularity wane.

The foregoing scenario could be played out right now for all the elements of pending tragedy are at hand. If one were to believe with each new depression that such travail had never been imposed before it might be tempting to repeat the childhood lament:

Oh, I wish I were dead now.
I'll take to my bed now.
I'll cover my head now.
And have a good cry.

But the most casual of historic observation shows us that we have always had bad times rolling through like storm fronts in March. Thomas Paine warned of being a "summer soldier and a sunshine patriot." Dickens immortalized the stage-setting paragraph that begins, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times..." President Parks spoke to the ISU faculty in 1969 of "...an age of crumbling illusions. Old images are having to give way to new realities. Traditional beliefs are being shattered, or being forced to face new tests, new challenges."

If history, both ancient and recent, is to tell us anything then it must surely be that we are destined to be seasoned and hardened by adversity. Therefore, if that be so and difficulty is the norm then that difficulty is really of no more significance than uphill is to the bicyclist. It's there, either boring or demanding, but there, and is the obvious opposite side of the more pleasant condition of coasting downhill.

As the Depression of the thirties led to the CCC's and a widespread conservation movement for foresters, and as World War II provided the GI Bill for thousands of service men and women and offered an entré into forestry, so may we yet look for signs of good things to come from this past decade of declining fortunes in professional forestry. While perishingly Pollyannish to expect good to come from every ill there may well be signs of new realities that can raise our profession to new heights.

Let us consider a few of our least favorite things. Summer employment through volunteerism. While I believe firmly in charitable activity and going out of one's way to learn, even if not paid, I must admit to a reluctance to having young foresters sold short and forced into working for nothing. However, the bright side is that the government agencies who are soliciting volunteer labor admit to some embarrassment about this, and a strong tendency appears to exist to give really good guidance and experience to the volunteer with the extra incentive of offering paid work to those who have first volunteered. Summer volunteers seem to be coming back to campus with less money than their paid counterparts but with high enthusiasm for the experiences gained.

Restricted employment after graduation. Nothing galls the educator and the newly-graduated so much as finding that professional education is difficult to market. Yet there is proven biologic advantage in survival of the fittest. Agencies and industrial organizations have become tougher but more efficient and are similar to students who, facing graduation, have made decisions to further their education and prepare for a world that demands, but also recognizes, talent. Having lived through some very plush times and watched poor quality people do as well as high quality people because there were apparently no limits to employment and reward, I have witnessed considerable dissatisfaction by the talented who found that, just as bad money drives out good, so do soft times allow the weak to prevail. A stronger profession made up of the best people may result from present travail.

Restricted support for education. The structure that has provided for excellence in teaching, extension and research in the past seems to be crumbling with society seemingly unwilling or unable to pay the bills. In the community of students and faculty that makes up the university this seems a cruel burden. None-the-less, strictures prompt us to reevaluate what is important and consider anew the charge, beloved of economists, to properly allocate scarce resources. Forestry schools now have banded together to reduce duplication of research effort and to identify areas where new work needs to be done. While it is not to be expected that one state university would send its students to another state's school there is beginning to be a tendency to share such items as summer camps, specialized equipment for teaching and research and to support one another in numerous ways. Bit by bit our profession is getting leaner and the professionals are getting stronger.

Society's dim view of the conservation professional. In a land of abundance there is little prestige in knowing how to make the infinitely available go a little further. But in lands where the reservoir of wood can be seen to be nearly empty and where the amenities of recreation and esthetics and the necessities of clean air and water are at risk the resource manager takes on new prestige. When that time comes to America, continued on page 11
organization.

The Forest Service may not have all of the answers as to how to become an "Excellent" organization as described by Peters and Waterman. However, the top management of the Forest Service recognizes the need to communicate a clear vision of excellence to all Forest Service managers. A major challenge to the organization will be its ability to create a climate in which the seeds of excellence can grow to maturity. If one message clearly resonates from recent literature it is that we Americans have done well on instilling the harder management values of planning, control, and quantitative decision making in our managers, but have not always been able to merge these with the softer values of employee motivation, work spirit, organizational development, and human potential. When Forest Service managers can successfully bring all these components into concert, they will have succeeded in reaching their goal of true excellence.

Computers . . . con't. from pg. 18

help solve a myriad of complex forestry problems. These modern electronic wizards allow us to "see" the forest as never seen before. They allow us to extend the frontier of knowledge in remote sensing, inventory analysis, management/planning optimization, and growth and yield modelling of virgin or established forests. The abilities of massive data storage, retrieval, and analysis by computers helps foresters to better manage the tens of millions of forested acres around the World. We, as foresters, are stewards of valuable natural resources—land, soil, water, wildlife, and forests. As such, we need all the tools modern science can provide to help us become effective, knowledgeable, and creative foresters. One advertisement by a large industrial firm says "the future is now," and another says "we can't wait!" Another saying, one from forestry, is "We don't plant trees for this generation---we plant them for the future generations." All of these sayings are true! We need to make the best decisions today for the benefit of the future generations. We need the ability to see the future, as clearly as possible, to aid in these complex decisions concerning forests and all natural resources. The modern computer is our eye to the future and our link with knowledge from the past. Just remember though: the computer may act as our eye, but not our brain. We are the decision-makers, not the computer.

Toughness . . . con't. from pg. 6

foresters will be glad that they did not compromise themselves by merely hoping for better times but took pride in their own pursuit of excellence.

Nowhere can I find a better nor older statement about the pursuit of excellence in the face of adversity than this one written around 700 BC by Hesoid. "Badness you can get easily, in quantity; the road is smooth, and it lies close by. But in front of excellence the immortal gods have put sweat, and long and steep is the way to it; and rough at first. But when you come to the top, then it is easy, even though it is hard."