The Life and times of Wayne H. Scholtes- A distinguished Professor

George W. Thomson

Iowa State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/amesforester

Part of the Forest Sciences Commons

Recommended Citation

The Life and times of
Wayne H. Scholtes — A distinguished Professor

By Dr. George W. Thomson

We dedicate books, issues, and bridges to people we admire, or owe something to, or can profit from—one or the other—seldom all three. This is the exception. WAYNE H. SCHOLTES has left his mark on all of us, and we dedicate the 1983 AMES FORESTER to him as a token of appreciation for those gifts of student-oriented and good-humored effort unstintingly given.

But even recognizing that we enjoyed knowing the man and will miss him once the Spring of 1983 is past, there should sensibly be more to a dedication than just the acknowledgment of debt. Isn’t there a model made animate in the Wayne Scholtes we know that makes us better people—foresters, soil scientists, citizens, men, women—than we would have been if we hadn’t known him? If that is so, then the recent small shower of gifts, plaques, money, bald-headed cats, dedications and honors were all just fripperies. The real recognition and monument to him as a teacher resides in people, young and old, who turned out better than they might have done if they had not known him. If we consider that 1200 foresters graduated here since he started teaching Forest Soils in 1951 and that most of them had his course, then there are already a sizable number of dedicated “issues” walking about.

Wayne, the Midwesterner typical of most of us Iowa State foresters, was born in 1917 into the ordinary German-English working-class family where his father worked as a welder in Clinton, Iowa. It is no clearer to Wayne Scholtes than it is to most of us just when he decided to become a forester, but he graduated from high school in 1935 and came on to Iowa State that fall as a part of what would become the biggest graduating class in the first 35 years of Iowa State Forestry. Forty-five graduated in 1939, Wayne’s year, and 63 in 1940. This number wasn’t matched until 1949, 1950 and 1951 when 74, 100 and 73 graduated after WW II and that number hasn’t been duplicated since. The life-long enthusiasm that Wayne has exhibited as a Forester-Agronomist may be accounted for by the fact that he was a student during the period of great emphasis on forests and soil conservation that was stimulated by the New Deal recovery programs of President Franklin Roosevelt and popularized in Iowa by the great cartoonist for the Des Moines Register, Ding Darling.

Wayne, known then not as Doc, nor Knocker, nor even The World’s Greatest Soil Scientist, but as Tiger, went to Summer Camp at Mormon Lake, Arizona in 1936. There is a spring there that is still called Iowa State Spring on official Forest Service maps. During 1937 he worked as a field technician at the Hugo Sauer Nursery in Rhinelander, Wisconsin for the Lake States Forest Experiment Station. He also, as did many of us in those days, worked part-time at what is now the Iowa Conservation Commission nursery south of Ames. Looking back at the confidential records that we keep on all alumni, it is somewhat disconcerting to discover that the "Tiger", who has always spoken frankly of his great physical prowess, was given a "C" for Physical Vigor by his high school teacher and his counselor. (But then, I too, was another of those "100 pound weaklings" that furtively read Charles Atlas body building ads when I was in high school. What do high school teachers know? GWT)

After graduation in 1939 Wayne worked as a temporary with the Forest Service and the Bureau of Indian Affairs, then called the Indian Service, at the Red Lakes area in northern Minnesota. Then, perhaps at the encouragement of Prof. R. B. Thomson who had been at Iowa State before moving on to Duke University, Wayne received a scholarship to Duke where he earned his M.F. degree in Forest Soils in 1940. It was at this time that Francis X. Schuscher and T. S. Coile of forest mensuration and forest soils fame were at Duke. There is little doubt that the combination of nursery work at a Forest Experiment Station and graduate work at a school world-famous for quantification in forest soils provided the stimulus for Wayne to retain his interest in soil science during the long years of World War II in that hectic 1940 decade before his university teaching career began.

After graduating from Duke, Wayne returned to Iowa State College to begin work on his doctoral program. But this activity was, in turn, interrupted by permanent assignments in August, 1941 with the Soil Conservation Service as Junior Soil Scientist at Bedford, and then Shenandoah, following a special trip on June 19, 1941 to North
Dakota to marry Gladys Tofte. We can assume that the loess hills of southwestern Iowa made a sizable impression on Soil Scientist Scholtes and laid the groundwork for the many subsequent class trips taken to that unique-in-Iowa area.

From 1942 through 1945, Airman Scholtes served in the Army Air Corps as weather observer with the 19th Weather Squadron with most of the two-years of overseas duty being in Cairo, Egypt and a few months in Iran. After three-and-one-half years in the Army Air Corps, Wayne returned to Gladys and his first-born daughter, Beth Ann, in December of 1945 and took up his duties in the SCS in Red Oak as Soil Scientist.

By January 1, 1947, Wayne and his family had come to Ames with a transfer from SCS to the Bureau of Plant Industry. This gave him the opportunity to resume his course work and research toward his doctorate. Relatively few college professors set out to be teachers (often the trauma of a college education makes further consideration of a life in the classroom untenable) and so was it with Dr. (as of 1951) Scholtes. But continual exposure to university life at Ames perhaps swung the balance toward a university career.

Dean Louis Thompson has often commented that when he first heard Wayne's delivery at a Toastmaster's meeting it was evident to him that the man simply must become a teacher. Few have had reason to regret Dean Thompson's recommendation and Wayne Scholtes' decision to become a teacher. As a feature story in 1960, News of Iowa State put it, "He discovered at once that audiences--and this is particularly true of students--respond best when serious talks are laced with a bit of drama, an apt story or a moment of humor."

So many faculty members heard about the Scholtes style that there was some fear that the College of Agriculture would soon be made up of imitators of Wayne. But, of course, most soon discovered that, while imitation is a sincere form of flattery, there was more to it than throwing chalk, showing slides and calling students "knockers". Thankfully, the imitators soon desisted, but through the three decades of Scholtes teaching there has been a real awareness by students and teachers that sound teaching need not, and must not, be boring. It should be noted that not all students immediately realized that Wayne Scholtes was both highly competent and thoroughly serious about his subject matter. Many was the mid-term grade given to those who remembered the jokes but forgot what they illustrated.

Widely known as a teacher and widely respected as a soils expert, Wayne was called on to solve diverse questions in such matters as C14 dating of pre-glacial wood excavated from highway cuts, the aging of the Effigy Mounds in northeast Iowa by analyzing soil profile development, and tracing the origin of the loess-capped ridges or "pahas". His research and consultation and obvious gift for exposition brought him in contact with many specialists and added to an already extensive repertoire of illustrations that enlightened and occasionally bedazzled students.

For many years he was a director of Iowa State's Soil Science Institute and was simultaneously serving as featured lecturer at the Conservation Institutes and the National Science Institute at Northeast Missouri State College, the Life Science Institute at West Virginia University, and the Earth Science Institute at Iowa State. He was a visiting professor of agronomy at the University of Illinois (1958) and the University of Arizona (1966 and 1969). Since the beginning of this department's contact with the Trees for Tomorrow Camp at Eagle River, Wisconsin, Wayne has exposed the high school students from three states to the marvels of the soil and its science.

I have particular reason to be grateful for Wayne's diversity because he went to the 1953 Forestry Camp in Wyoming in my place so that I could finish the field research on my own doctorate. It was perhaps merely bad luck that a polluted irrigation ditch was temptingly present when Wayne and the entire class got thirsty one afternoon. It's certainly unfortunate that Wayne's most vivid recollection of that beautiful Medicine Bow country is "Camp Fever".

In the summer of 1962, Scholtes was a member of a team sent by Iowa State, under the auspices of the State Department, to Uruguay for three months to propose work plans for assistance in the agricultural development project in that country. He returned to Uruguay for two years with his family in 1963 as a soils specialist at the Faculties of Agronomy in Montevideo. It was in 1968 that he taught at the University of San Carlos in Guatemala in the first regional seminar for Central Americans. He was awarded the Diploma de Reconocimiento for his teaching and leadership. He returned there to teach a seminar in 1969 and was awarded a second diploma.

During this period of foreign service from 1963 on, Dr. Scholtes was exposed to the conflicting programs of an emerging socialist state. He came back to the U.S. filled with concerns for the changing attitudes in America. Over a two-year period he gave a speech entitled "Have I been Where You Are Going"--not once, but over 200 times. It aroused a good deal of attention--favorable if heard by those of us of a conservative mind and less so by those of a more liberal bent. As the period of these talks coincided with the period of accelerating campus unrest and the radicalization of old standards, as predicted for the "greening of America", people began belatedly to recognize a deadly serious aspect of Wayne Scholtes that they had not seen before.
Honors have come to Wayne from the professional and academic community with appropriate regularity. He was twice named Professor of the Year in the College of Agriculture in 1961 and 1972, and in 1980 he received the Outstanding Teacher Award for the University. The university's most prestigious award was made in 1977 when he was given the permanent title of Distinguished Professor and the annual stipend that accompanies that honor. In 1985 he was elected to Fellow of the American Society of Agronomy and to Fellow of the Soil Science Society of America in 1976. Gamma Sigma Delta, the national agriculture honorary society, awarded him the Award of Merit in 1967. This was followed by the National Agronomic Education Award from the American Society of Agronomy in 1968. In this last year of Wayne's teaching career he was awarded the Frudden Award by the Iowa Society of American Foresters for his life-long contribution to forest soils and foresters. The impressive aspect of the various forms of recognition that have been given Wayne Scholtes is not so much the number of awards as the diversity. Perhaps even the diversity of awards, in turn, is not as impressive as the considerable span of time that the awards cover. Wayne seems to have "lit running" in his career as a teacher scientist and kept up the pace throughout his entire career.

But to those of us who know Wayne as a professional colleague and contemporary, his greatest attribute is found in his personal bravery and an absolutely adamant refusal to accept the past 15 years of increasingly worsening health as a reason to diminish his output or to dim his devotion to teaching. His fight against Parkinson's disease has been unrelenting and his domination of this debilitating disorder continues to be an example for all in contact with him. A gift of eloquence, good humor and intelligence must ultimately be regarded as just that—a gift. But courage, strength of spirit, conviction of what is right and the fortitude to do what is right are developed traits and it is for these less spectacular, less colorful things that two generations of forestry students can be proud to say, "I once had a class from the World's Greatest Soil Scientist—and I was smart enough to know that he was someone special."