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A Funny Peculiar Opportunity

By Steven E. Jungst

When I was a young boy, I used to spend almost all of my time during the summer with my dog, Jiggs. Jiggs was a Rat Terrier with one gimp leg that he acquired while doing battle with a pickup truck in the middle of a busy street. That incident didn't deter his ambition to tangle with most anything I pointed him at, and consequently, he and I used to while away much of the summer "hunting snakes". When we hunted them "for keeps," I would put Jiggs on a long chain and walk him through a likely area. Whenever he saw a snake, he would grab it, and shake it until it didn't resist anymore. Jiggs was almost never wrong about how many shakes it took to dispatch a snake, and sometimes we left quite a trail.

Occasionally, my goal was not to rid the world of snakes, but rather to collect a few live specimens for "study." This required a short chain for Jiggs and quick action on my part. The dog, not appreciating the difference between hunting "for keeps" and collecting specimens, went about his job in the usual manner. However, once he grabbed a snake in his mouth, it was up to me to run the length of the short chain, leap on the dog's back and extract the snake before Jiggs finished hunting "for keeps."

On more than one occasion, my mother observed me hanging on to a snake's tail while being thrashed around the pasture by a frenzied Rat Terrier, and on more than one occasion, she would comment afterwards, "Steven, you're funny and I don't mean funny ha, ha." To her, most things were either funny ha, ha (comical) or funny peculiar (strange). Usually when she commented about me being funny peculiar, Jiggs would snicker in a knowing way and nod his head ever so slightly.

I have never asked my mother, but I suspect she might classify the rapid increase in the number of summer volunteer positions for students as funny peculiar. Certainly there is not much comical about paying for tuition, room and board, books, and an occasional pizza during the school year and then working for free during the summer.

One certainly can't blame agencies for pushing the volunteer system. There has never been a lack of work to do in forestry, but there have, on occasions, been shortages of money to get the work done. Consequently, during the current budgetary squeeze, it isn't really surprising that the idea of getting the work done at a very small cost (typically, volunteer positions provide a bunkhouse or a place to pitch a tent free of charge, and \$8 to \$16 a day for money to spend on food). All of what the volunteer announcements say is true, and much of it applies to forestry students at Iowa State. A typical announcement for a volunteer position might list the following benefits:

1. Professional training and experience in career discipline,
2. official work experience that can count toward future employment with natural resource agencies,

3. the opportunity to work with experienced professionals,
4. the opportunity to see and explore scenic mountain, river and forest country, and
5. the opportunity to earn college credit while making a meaningful contribution to the preservation of forest lands.

The reasons that ISU forestry students have not leaped at such opportunities appear to be twofold. First, since the ISU Forestry Department has, for many years, required students to have this kind of experience before they can graduate, the benefits extolled are not new to students, but the idea of not getting paid is. Secondly, because of other curriculum requirements, there is no way for ISU students to earn college credit for the experience. It is true that almost all volunteer work does fulfill the requirement for summer experience, but that is simply a requirement that is checked off on the student's senior requirement sheet and does not carry any actual credit.

The agency which provides the volunteer positions also suffers some disadvantages. Perhaps the most serious, but least obvious, is that only those students who can afford to go to school all winter and work without pay during the summer will volunteer. And, those students do not necessarily include the ones who could do the best job for the agency.

The picture is not completely black, however. During the spring of 1983, I have had more volunteer announcements come in than I can possibly fill. It is relatively easy for students to obtain work in the volunteer program, and as the announcements say, it is work experience that can count toward future employment. Last year, we had only a few students employed in volunteer positions. This year, at least two of them have been hired back in paying summer jobs. When that happens, I can find little fault with the volunteer program. Whether this practice becomes widespread remains to be seen.

We will continue to hope that agencies using volunteer programs will revert to paid employment as soon as possible for the benefit of all concerned. Until they do, students who can afford to volunteer will gain valuable experience and have a somewhat funny peculiar opportunity to demonstrate their abilities to potential future employers.

