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The Only Woman Forester in South Africa

by Marietjie Burger

Gone are the days of “male” and “female” occupations. Women are breaking down the barriers in many occupations once considered male territory only, such as forestry and engineering. This trend will hopefully increase through the Eighties as women become more self confident. I look at Forestry as the use of a natural resource for the benefit of man, but also having a strong conservation objective. Thus Forestry in the Eighties offers a variety of jobs to anybody indirectly wanting to help their fellow man, and willing to face new challenges.

Forestry has long been imagined as an outdoor, all-weather job, one that involves a lot of work needing physical strength. At one stage in the early 1900’s this may have been true, but with modern technology, machinery, and computers, this is far from the case today. Granted, there are still times when strength is necessary to do a particular job, but it is certainly not the norm. If a person so chooses, he or she may apply for a position that will be outdoors and all-weather.

The outdoor, all-weather aspect has been one reason for women not opting for Forestry, an unfounded reason as already mentioned. Other reasons may be that a woman did not take mathematics and sciences in high school; or feels that she can’t tackle math and science, so gives up before even starting, or the lacks self confidence to compete for a position working with, and surrounded by, men.

The major stumbling block for women in Forestry is that many of their male counterparts do not take a woman seriously. This tends to be especially true in management where a woman holds a supervisory position over older men. The men are unwilling to acknowledge the woman as their boss. But the opportunities far outweigh the stumbling blocks, which should be viewed as part of the challenge of entering a male-dominated field. The opportunities in Forestry are there wherever you want to go, be it within the USA or internationally, if you are willing to work hard and cover most interest areas in some way.

Being in Forestry can be a true test of patience for a woman, because the men’s attitudes towards women need to be broken down and changed, which is a slow process.

Some attitudes towards women in Forestry are:

- chauvinism, which is the basis for most of the following attitudes
- she is an outdoor tomboy if she is interested in Forestry or any male-dominated field.
- women are only in a male-dominated field to find a husband.
- a woman will get married and/or pregnant and stop working or move.
- a woman can’t hold her own, thus is not an effective supervisor.
- a woman will not want to pull
- Do not always depend on male superiors for job advancement opportunities; create your own.
- Some men are very willing to help, but sometimes in a way that makes it difficult to do things on your own, or they don’t let you do things on your own at all.
- Men will try to put women down, thus a woman’s mistakes are noticed a lot faster than a man’s.
- People will be more critical towards a woman, so avoid using feeble feminine excuses, otherwise valuable ground may be lost.
- You can still be feminine, and enjoy cooking and sewing, etc. But when there is work to be done, do it.
- There is a problem of being “tuned out” by men in gatherings and meetings.
- There is a problem of not getting credit when it is due.
- Do not let men push you around.
- Learn to turn obstacles into opportunities, and tokenism into an advantage.
- Learn to handle men without bruising their egos; not always possible.
- Have determination, don’t give up, keep trying.
- A woman has a big responsibility, in that the attitude towards all women in Forestry will depend on how she shapes up and does the job.

With the job situation as it is presently, international opportunities be they Peace Corps, exchange programs or otherwise, must not be overlooked. Interna-
tional experience can be extremely valuable, not only in Forestry, but in human relations and learning new languages. A woman, first and foremost, must realize before leaving the USA that there will be a cultural difference between home and the new assignment. Thus there will be a difference in how a woman is regarded and accepted in the new location. The chauvinism will probably be more pronounced and a woman may need the help of a male superior to get males and general labor beneath her to heed her. Don't be discouraged, ask questions boldly, be prepared to adjust. You should manage well. You will also find that you tend to get away with quite a bit due to being a foreigner. If you make a habit of it, though, you will just put your supervisor's back up and then you will run into lots of problems. Stand your ground, don't let yourself be trodden on, and you will earn respect as an equal.

A few examples from my experiences both in the USA and South Africa: 1) A group of us were on a field trip for 3 days, I being the only woman. Three of us took turns cooking, my turn being the first night. On the second night one of the men approached me at 6 pm asking when supper was, I said that I did not know since I was not cooking. They also demanded coffee as though I was a maid and it was my duty to make it. I told them nicely that they could make their own since I was not drinking any. They were surprised on both accounts and realized that I was not automatically cook and tea-girl, and would not be pushed around.

2) At a field day put on by the Directorate of Forestry for private timber growers many of the private growers thought that I was just along for a day out of the office and the free lunch and knew little about Forestry. However when I asked some intelligent and relevant questions, and once corrected one of the speakers on a point, a new attitude developed toward me.

3) Once labor and people beneath me realize that I know my field and am their boss I find that I get more and sometimes better work out of them than some of my male contemporaries. I found that patience and careful explaining of things in simple terms may be necessary.

4) Labor, at first, thought that I couldn't always do the work that I asked of my crew. But I knew I would get their respect if I did some of the work and didn't just supervise. I worked with my labor doing coppice reduction in eucalyptus, clearing slash, painting and measuring trees, and in the nursery. If you get your hands dirty you are not looked on as a lazy boss.

5) People find it quite amazing that I am qualified in Forestry, do the field work etc., but still enjoy, and am fairly good at, sewing, knitting, and cooking.

6) The men are unwilling to let me do field work and go out on my own, if it involves any travelling. They also don't let me carry my own equipment if they are not carrying much, or do hard work, such as soil augering, when I am with them, because it will make them look bad if word gets back to the station.

7) Being the only professional woman in the field in South Africa, I am invited to attend all sorts of congresses, meetings, and field days locally and otherwise, so people can see "what" I am. Most are interesting and give me a chance to meet valuable contacts in all sectors of Forestry.

8) I was being given work that a male contemporary found dull, boring and did not want to do. When I found that he was getting the credit I made it clear that I had done the work and put in a complaint. As a result of this action that problem was solved. However, this is a continuing problem. For instance: I did all the organization and made the catering ar-

rangements for a large field day and was given no credit. The credit was given to the incorrect person, who made no effort to correct the error. I have also given ideas at meetings and been shrugged off, only to find the same idea implemented later with all the credit going to my male contemporaries. 9) I tend to go ahead and do things that I am accustomed to doing myself, without thinking about whether it is accepted for a woman to do. People shrug and let me do it saying "she is an American."

Forestry is an interesting and challenging career and the opportunities are there if you work hard, and take things in your own stride. It will still take time before women are readily accepted as equals in Forestry. But, if we women keep giving a good performance, and we seem to be doing so, perhaps it will not be too long. So work hard and don't give up trying, but also remember the responsibility of being a woman in Forestry.

References:

Marietjie Burger graduated from ISU in May 1981, with a BS degree in Forestry — Natural Resource Management. Marietjie has a diverse background of Forestry experience. While attending ISU she was a research assistant for the Phyto-Engineering unit and worked seasonally for the US Forest Service on the Fremont National Forest, Paisley, Oregon. Before arriving at her current job at Saasveld Research Center, George, Cape, Marietjie spent 18 months working for the Natal Forest Research Center, Pietermaritzburg, Natal.