A Forester With The Corps

Randy Byrd

Iowa State University

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

Part of the Forest Sciences Commons

Recommended Citation

Available at: https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/amesforester/vol71/iss1/21
For me, the summer of 1983 was enjoyable, educational, financially rewarding and full of surprises. Perhaps the biggest surprise was I never left Iowa!

So how did I do it? Detasseling corn? heavens, no! I got a job.

It all began when a friend of the family gave my name to a potential employer. One week later I got a call from the U.S. Army...that is the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

On May 31, 1983 I received my commission as a summer Park Technician (GS-4) and was assigned to the Mississippi River Recreation Resources Project. This project is an extension of the Recreation Resources Management Branch of the Rock Island District (RID), which extends south from Guttenberg, Iowa to Saylorville, Missouri. Included in the Branch are area offices at Coralville Lake in eastern Iowa, Red Rock and Saylorville Lakes in central Iowa. The RID contains over 52,000 acres of bottomland forest on the islands and along the shorelines of the mighty Mississippi River. Rich alluvial soils found on the floodplains support stands composed of mostly silver maple, cottonwood, green ash, and river birch with shellbark hickory, bur oak, pin oak, and pecan as lesser components.

As an assistant to the Project Forester, my duties were very different and more varied as compared to most other summer Park Technicians. I concentrated mostly on stand-mapping, occasionally engaging in timber stand improvement activities such as marking timber or using herbicide injecting equipment. The usual duties of the summer Park Technician involve either park patrol by automobile for the purpose of engaging in visitor contact and compliance, or staff work at visitor centers. These parks and visitor centers are commonly located near rivers and reservoirs equipped with dams or other water control structures owned and operated by the Corps. From my observations, prospects for obtaining one of these summer positions are generally best for persons with prior experience or a college background in forest recreation. However, as exemplified by my good fortune, circumstances are clearly the most important factor.

During the late 60's and early 70's, tree harvesting slowed down and eventually ended as a result of recent research which suggested that selective cutting was not the best method of management to use on these forests. Cutting did not occur again until the winter of 1982-1983, just prior to my arrival in May of 1983. That cut marked the beginning of a new harvesting policy in accord with a new management plan which took effect in April of 1982.

This plan, called the Forest, Fish and Wildlife Management Plan, was the end product of "four years of research, planning, forest inventory and coordination meetings" by the Corps Project Forester and other resource managers from state agencies and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). According to the Project Forester, its major thrust is to "achieve a proper balance of various types of habitat for certain wildlife species by providing a constant supply of different age classes of trees. This is achieved through a regulated cutting cycle." I was hired by the Project Forester to facilitate efforts to implement the plan and to accelerate progress being made towards achieving this goal.

One of the first activities the Corps engaged in under this new plan was to stand-map the forested areas near the Mississippi River. My major role was to assist in completing this task in those areas designated by my supervisor. This noble goal represents a monumental effort which to date has been handcuffed by a limited work staff. The Project Forester essentially does all the planning of the management activities and directs the fieldwork, too. He is assisted in the field by the Corps District Forester and a full-time Park Technician. On various occasions, additional help comes from other Corps employees as well as from employees of state agencies with which activities are being coordinated. As a summer Park Technician I was not only expected to work closely and effectively with other employees, but was also required to assume responsibility for scheduling and carrying out many activities independently. These solo assignments began just two weeks into the job when my supervisor departed for two weeks for Army Reserve Training. This left me with exclusive use of a brand new four-wheel drive pickup and an 18-foot flat-bottomed boat equipped with a Johnson 70hp motor. Vroom!
discovered that many of the areas scheduled for mapping were horrifically unforgiving places. The burning wood nettle often was 10-foot tall and poison ivy was rarely content to remain a vine or even a shrub; it was often present as small one-to-two inch diameter trees. What’s more, I am sure none of us will ever forget how hot it was that summer. Admittedly, the harsh conditions temporarily dampened the spirits at times, but in the long run, it had little impact on the overall quality of my summer with the Corps. The many humorous occasions certainly overshadowed any apparently trying times. Included in the following are just a few of these moments that have not escaped my memory.

1. Travelling by boat to Huron Island with an archaeologist who had just finished his doctorate degree. We had some good conversation and he even managed to convince me that archaeology could be exciting, at least for the moment. When we finally arrived at the island we proceeded to dig some holes and a few deep pits in various locations inside the boundary of an area that was scheduled for a five acre patch clearcut the following winter. If the sediment depth was two feet or more we could be confident that logging activity would not unearth ancient Indian relics. I was hoping to find evidence of Tom Sawyer or Huck Finn, I’d even settle for part of their raft. This island was 1500 acres and was divided by many narrow sloughs and smaller waterways. We quite fondly referred to it as the Iowa version of the Amazon jungle. Reaching the interior of the island by boat required all my refined skills. I was always careful to avoid the submerged logs that were rarely seen until they were first heard.

2. When stand-mapping in the backwaters of the Wapsipini-}

con River, my companion and I got lost. Somehow we managed to walk into a maze of waterways which could not be seen on the aerial photos. My companion had no boots on his feet so I carried him across these waterways. On more than one occasion I remember laughing so hard that I nearly dropped him.

3. The time when I got so excited over a stand of oak I found after mapping in silver maple - cottonwood stands all day, that I tripped and fell headlong into some burning wood nettle.

Looking back on my summer experience, I feel very fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with such a variety of individuals, each one unique in his or her own way, with something different to offer. In my estimation, my biggest accomplishment for the summer was to realize this and to open my mind and ears to hear the wisdom of their years. Moreover, I am now thoroughly convinced that an ambitious approach to work, not the knowledge we acquire at the University, is our greatest asset to a summer employer. An honest desire to do more than what is expected will help one to develop a meaningful, working relationship with an employer. This positive attitude can transform a good experience into a great experience, like my summer with the Corps.

Urban Forestry

by Sharna Robinson

As spring rolls around, the thoughts of summer jobs start to creep into one’s mind, especially when you still need to fulfill your Ag. 104 requirement. Such was my predicament last spring until Dr. Jungst informed me of the opportunity to apply for a job in Urban Forestry. The place was Ft. Dodge, la. and the mission was a city street inventory. As luck would have it, I did get the job which turned out to a summer full of adventure, learning, and fun.

The task of collecting data on all of a city’s trees seemed almost impossible. But, with the guidance of City Forester Richard Straight (I.S.U. alumnus 1980), my partner Tammi and I managed to make fast work of the concrete forest.

The actual collection of data was not very difficult if one enjoys walking some three-hundred plus miles. My dendrology skills were greatly enhanced by the constant contact with trees and shrubs. The more challenging part of the job was tracking down streets from the city maps that were supposed to be there but weren’t, or discovering a new street that had not yet been put on the map. These uninvited headaches were usually solved by a trip to the city engineer’s office.

The most dangerous part of this job came in trying to explain to the grandmothers in housecoats, armed with brooms, rakes, and various other weapons, that you were only looking at the trees and not going to cut them down. Another treacherous part of the job was learning to dodge the children who consisted of anything from the teething toddler to the eight-year-old who wanted to lend a helping hand by donating his chain saw to help us cut down all the trees.