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The Making of a Forester: Field Experience for the Nineties

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Foresters, when I was in college, were inclined to talk about 1980 as the future, but when I started teaching the magic year had become 2000. I am now startled to discover that the year 2030 is the year of destiny. I suppose long range planners such as Foresters are lucky in that almost no one involved in futurist activity is around to be embarrassed when some cynic realizes that the prediction fell flat. Perhaps my age will protect me as I set out to consider how the summer job of 1997 will differ from the Ag. 104 activities of 1987.

If I really thought that the only difference in the “apprentice-type” summer job would be in the type of beer can one picked up in campgrounds or that Stage II inventory of genetically improved trees was going to be different than what it is now I don’t believe that I would bother making predictions. But there will continue to be changes in summer work. We lost the summer jobs on look-out towers (one of the truly great experiences of the newly-married) because of aerial surveillance and vastly improved road access. We lost brush piling and tree pruning when new concepts of economics and silviculture raised questions of the practicality of old practices. Scaling jobs disappeared as the rising price of logs made green-horn mistakes too painful. The Forest Experiment Station jobs simply disappeared under the misguided pressure of diminished funding for any effort that couldn’t return immediate dollar gain.

Yes, excellent career training opportunities have disappeared in my own lifetime and the loss is sorely felt. But then polio and tuberculosis disappeared in that same lifetime, too, just as did the slide-rule and citronella. There is no need to fear change in a society as vibrant as ours.

Advancing technologies and changing demands on our forests will certainly affect our profession which, in turn, will affect our curriculum, our employment, and the nature of the experience gained from the seasonal job. Sensible prognosticators will be reluctant to predict that kind of summer work that a forestry student can expect. Who in his or her right mind would have predicted the variable-plot prism, 3-P sampling, the programmable hand-held calculator, the radio collar, the digitized map, the 3-D simulation, the computer-connected data recorders and that host of developments in areas that even now are alien to me?

Perhaps the only truly safe ground from which to launch prediction lies in the belief held by most that practical experience early in one’s career is important because it broadens one’s horizons, provides the neophyte with a professional view, orients one’s self to the realization that a profession exists outside of books, teachers and classrooms, and puts to rest the fear that there is not life after college.

A second belief, possibly less sound than the first, is that practical experience will become even more important than it has been in the past. The student can readily agree with this statement on financial grounds.
because the apparently endless increase in the cost of going to college demands more dollar outlay than one's family can readily afford. The forester-educator and the employer of foresters, however, might see more to the "experience is good" assumption than just the defraying of the cost of school because the new employee makes the best impression when he or she can exhibit practical skills. But students now have less opportunity to participate at home in those "dirt-oriented" activities common to forestry and farming. It is simply less likely that the forestry student of 1987 will have worked with tractors, trucks, chain saws, sharp tools, livestock, fences, soil, water, stinging insects and non-fun sweat because the increasingly urban, father-employed-away-from-home (and probably mother) lifestyle of the pre-collegiate days precludes these experiences.

Although there is no reason to expect that forestry graduates will only work on horse districts or will pull boards from the green chain and thus need "farmer/blue collar" skills, there is something to ponder in Leopold's comment that people appear to have forgotten where breakfast comes from. Resource managers, particularly at a time of great dissension as to which use of our resource is the most important, need to be aware as never before of the gritty side of multiple use.

We come readily to the conclusion that we now live in a society more urban than the one into which forestry was born. It is therefore appropriate to say that foresters should have the chance to become more urbane in order to address the concerns of the city dweller who feels that the amenities of the forest are continually being endangered by pocket practicality. The once contemptuous disregard of "dicky-bird watchers" by public and private foresters alike has now been matched by the equally contemptuous disdain of that highly vociferous and reasonably literate public whose personal income seems not even remotely related to the cutting and marketing of trees, the grazing of cattle, the shooting of elk, the impounding of water and the mining of mineral.

Obviously the forester in college can't get exposure to much more than a tiny portion of the problems, attitudes and customs of his or her future profession so it is probably more realistic to discuss ways of improving the experience than to predict what the experience may be. The trend in public service, unless Congress and the Presidency make another of the pendulum-like swings that characterize political motivation, is toward lessened employment with emphasis on hiring fewer, but better prepared, people. Such a trend can scarcely be criticized so long as the truly qualified are retained rather than those elements of voting blocs that are currently "popular". None-the-less, the emphasis on getting more from fewer should bring attention to better grades, advanced degrees and to quality work experience. If the European concept is a realistic fore-runner to what will be done in the United States we may see an increase in experience requirements such that one could have to have a year long practicum in another country before graduation or that one may have to have had two years of career work before being admitted to a forestry school. In other countries there may be a two-year military commitment before going to college. Any of these already-in-place requirements tend to make a single summer of work, as now required, seem insignificant.

Supposing, though, that the United States forester does not have to face such stringent requirements for an "apprenticeship". Would we not seek an experience that was as productive as possible? My own hypothesis is that there have been, are, and will continue to be, really excellent Ag. 104 jobs available. To my mind the only condition presently missing from summer work is that of the employer exerting the effort to provide an experience by which the student will either be improved as a future employee or will become a sympathetic and knowledgeable supporter of the agency or company providing the experience. Either of these conditions are much to be desired for there is no surer end to a profession than the continued employment of the disinterested or incompetent on the one hand or, on the other, trying to progress to profitable and productive ends when surrounded by an ignorant or unfriendly populace.

How then to improve the work experience in the future? Past procedures of proven effectiveness need merely be reestablished. Unfortunately, procedures that were commonplace for the quarter century after 1950 have fallen into disrepair or, by imagined or real political pressures, have been demolished. Here are listed six recommendations for the future that worked well in the past in optimizing the benefit to
students from a summer's employment:

- Return personnel officers to their former level of authority so that hiring decisions can be made at the agency or company level where the work takes place.
- Let personnel officers work directly with the forestry faculty member assigned to placement so that those who hire can learn directly from those who best know the interests and competencies of each student.
- Assign interested employees to the task of providing a rounded, professionally stimulating and result-producing summer of work. The exposure of the summer student or disenchanted perennial seasonals devoid of hope for themselves is as debilitating an experience to the young professional as one could invent.
- Demand and recognize productive, full-time effort from the summer student. Provide correction, evaluation and a private critique that becomes a matter of college and employer record.
- Compensate fairly by budgeting the necessary salaries for the training officer and the wages for the summer student. Volunteerism is a notable trait and may well utilize the talents and selflessness of the non-professional but without the incentive of wage and the knowledge that work effort is recorded the day after day devotion to labor by the career oriented young professional can easily be abrogated.

- Select professionally challenging forestry training tasks for the improvement of the young forester. Time after time we find students returning to campus from jobs where the rest of an inventory crew, for example, was made up of the unprepared and the undedicated who had no education, or plans to continue in, forestry. If technical work is to be done assign it to those who know the rudiments and can improve from the practice.

If the foregoing old and established successful procedures were to be reinstated there would be fewer autumnal bull sessions devoted to "From what I saw this summer I sure don't want to work for ________".

There is one remaining improvement that has not been much used by Forestry Schools. As long as the summer experience is required to improve the education of the student there should be another investment made by the university granting the degree. It is probably not enough merely to make job possibilities known to students. The task of on-campus education should be carried to the field. This does not mean faculty supervision of the student worker but might well mean funding of one or two faculty members to visit each student on location to discuss the nature of the summer experience and to carry on non-confrontational discussions with the students's training officer to find how the student is doing and to discuss ways of improving the student or the job. Engineering schools have done a good deal of this and, very likely, some forestry schools have, as well.

And that is it--summer training carried forward on the wave of the future. Look not for what is, but what should be.