A Forester's 50 Year Flashback

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A Forester's 50 Year Flashback

It was the spring of 1938. I had just visited the former Kaiser's hunting lodge at Rominten in East Prussia and my next destination was the Pfeil forest district which borders on the Kurische Haf in northern East Prussia — a most inaccessible spot. If the magic carpet of the Thief of Bagdad had been in my possession, it would have been most convenient in getting to Pfeil. As it was, I changed trains several times, until at last I was riding a narrow-gauge line which covered thirteen miles in two hours, and then I was forced to go afoot. After about two hours of walking I finally arrived at the office of Forstmeister Kramer.

In the early afternoon we began a tour of the district in the Forstmeister's Oppel. Before leaving his office, however, the Forstmeister made certain that he had three essential pieces of equipment with him before he started into the field, namely: field glasses, gun, and his truest friend, his office dachshund. None of the foresters I had met up to this time would venture into the field without these three accessories!

As we rode along the wood roads, seeing the fine stands of hardwoods interspersed with fertile meadows — very much the same type of forest I had seen at Rominten — the Forstmeister told me about his district.

Thirteen years ago, when Forstmeister Kramer had been transferred to the Pfeil district, he found he was unable to make any timber sales in the springtime. And it became apparent to him that here in this district, where an abundance of seed and moisture prevailed, his predecessors had been relying on costly planting operations to regenerate unstacked areas. In searching for the reason for this, Forstmeister Kramer found that the elevation of his district was about two feet above sea level. When the wind blew in from the Haf, water was driven up into the natural drainage courses, and the whole district flooded. Natural regeneration was at a standstill and logs could not be skidded out of the woods on inundated roads. Forstmeister Kramer decided to do something about this. He had engineers go over the district and design a series of drainage ditches. When these were dug by a nearby Arbeitslager (work-camp) and the area drained, it was found that in some places where the swamp muck was six feet deep, it compacted to about a foot. In most places, however, the muck compacted two or three feet. Now any seed that was shed would be able to germinate and produce a tree by sending its roots down through the thin layer of muck and anchoring itself in the firm clay instead of, as heretofore, only germinating — and after the watertable lowered — to die.

To keep the water from coming in from the Haf, a dam was built. The ditches which drained the district flowed into the basin formed by this dam; and this excess water was then pumped out into the Haf. The dam also keeps the water from rising in the ditches when the wind is off the Haf.

By draining the area of its excess water, Forstmeister Kramer was able to carry on logging operations during the spring, and he could also rely on the forest to reproduce itself without having to plant.

By exercising forethought in the construction of the ditches, the problems of erosion and the filling up of the ditches has been eliminated to a great extent. Immediately following the construction of the ditches, the banks were stabilized by seeding them to grass. At either side of the channel, where the bank joins it, eight-inch rolls of birch and willow branches were placed parallel to the banks in order to retard the undercutting action of the stream. If this had not been done, the banks would have slid into the channel and soon filled up the ditches. In order to facilitate cleaning out the silted-in material, the ditch channels have been stacked for depth. Since there is only a difference in elevation of two feet, it becomes important to keep the ditches clean and the water moving to insure adequate drainage. Incidentally, I learned that the grass grown on the banks is luxuriant enough to produce salable hay crops.
Around four o'clock we passed by the Arbeitsdienst Lager — which had built the ditches — and the Forstmeister asked me if I'd like to see what it looked like. Of course I said yes. On entering, the first thing we saw was a group of rookies learning how to stand to bicycles and mount, i.e. they were learning to get on their bikes in unison. Another group was learning the manual of arms, substituting shovels for rifles. Further down the road I saw a platoon of boys heading for the athletic field. I began wondering whether the boys did any reclamation work at all, but the Forstmeister cleared me up on that count. The boys had put in their time for that day and were relaxing.

The general appearance of the Arbeitslager is much like that of our CCC camps. The barracks, however, have a homier atmosphere. Each one is divided into three or four rooms which house fifteen men apiece. These men are held responsible for their rooms, and any creative work — such as wood carving and painting — with which they care to decorate their rooms is encouraged.

As we went through the bath house I learned that hot water for baths was available only twice a week. The same orderly also told me that the bed mattresses were made of straw so as not to make life too easy in camp, but rather to prepare the boys for the rigorous life in the field with the infantry. As we passed a small room with bars before the windows, I was told that here boys who committed misdemeanors could for several days ponder, undisturbed, over their offenses!

In addition to showing me his forest the Forstmeister told me something of how his household functioned. It was true, he said, that the city was quite distant from Pfeil, but nevertheless, he had a small empire of his own and right at home at that. So that the Forstmeister may be self-sufficient, the forest service rents him a sixty-acre tract which a nearby farmer farms for him. Another family is employed to tend his cattle and do other odd jobs about the house. Since the school is distant, a governess instructs his four sons in the three R's. A nurse takes care of the year-old baby, and two maids do the housekeeping and cooking. Not bad!

Wherever I went I found one thing hard to determine, and that was whether a Forstmeister was first a forester and second a hunter or vice versa! In most cases it seemed to be the latter. Forstmeister Kramer was no exception. He had a well-stocked gun rack, and outside in one corner of the yard was a large dog pen. Here were some good bird and deer dogs as well as a small white Eskimo-like dog whose usefulness I questioned. The Forstmeister said the dog had been given to him by a friend from the north country for moose-hunting.

Immediately after a hospitable supper Frau Kramer wanted to know if the Forstmeister was going snipe hunting. I raised an eye-brow. Was the old college trick of taking a person snipe hunting the way to initiate foreigners? But after asking a few questions I discovered that snipe hunting was no joke, but a venerable tradition among foresters. I went along, out of curiosity, but I believe I got something more out of the hunt than the mere shooting. The cock snipes fly twice during the evening twilight — the time depends on how early in the spring you are hunting them. This evening they were scheduled to fly between 6:45 and 7 o'clock. The hen calls to the cock from the ground
as he makes his low, swiftly-darting flight over the tree tops. We heard the hen call, and I eagerly hoped to see the cock in flight, but the light was fading so quickly that we began to give up hope of seeing him. All of a sudden, at our right — out of gun range — he darted by. I only saw a dark spot pass, but I heard his wings beat the air! We waited in vain for the second flight, but by then it was much too dark to see anything. On our way home, the Forstmeister tried to tell me why the sport was so eagerly followed. From what I gathered, the snipe season is the first to be opened, and it is quite an incentive to the foresters to get their shooting eyes in shape. And then, it gets the forester completely overcame the desire to shoot a snipe that we missed our one and only shot of the evening!

After the shooting I had a very interesting conversation with the Forstmeister in his trophy-bedecked study. Deer, moose, antelope horns and picarry tusks hung from the red tapestried walls. In these colorful surroundings he told me that the forest lay within the boundaries of the moose game refuge which extends from Memel to Koenigsberg. And the next day, while with the Forstmeister, I had the good fortune to see seven of these large animals for the first time in my life. We were riding along the edge of a birch compartment when I saw two moose feeding on alder shoots. I asked the Forstmeister to stop the car so that I could photograph them, but he said it would be better to go along very slowly since to stop the car would cause the moose to dash deep into the woods and we'd never see them again. We didn’t stop and I got my picture!

Besides these moose, I saw red fox, deer and black storks. The latter migrate from the Holy Land to northern Germany. These birds have become a tradition with the German people in a different sense than with us! To them it means springtime and a successful harvest if a pair of the long-legged birds choose their chimneys on which to build nests and raise a flock of young. Sometimes the storks do not arrive because sand storms divert them from their course.

The Pfell forest which is one of the larger ones, contains an area of 15,000 acres of which 12,000 are hardwood; and the remaining 3,000 acres are in swamp land. Alder stands make up about 50% of the forest, birch 20% and spruce about 25%. The rest is found in Scotch Pine on the high moor. This pine is not harvested, but is used only as ground cover. The birch which grows in this district is very valuable for veneer, selling for $25.00 per cubic meter.

I was told that the moose consider alder bark as a very dainty bit of food and since alder when reproducing itself comes in very densely the moose are used as the means of thinning out the stands. Those trees which appear to make future merchantable boles are selected and painted with a mixture of tar, soda and steer’s blood. Beginning at the base, the mixture is smeared on the boles to a height of six feet. This acts as a repellent to the moose who then eat only the bark of the undesirable and surplus alder trees. This also makes it possible for ash seedlings to grow in the same stand. The whole procedure, however, is not quite as simple as it appears on paper. The repellent mixture is dark in color and the south sides of the trees tend to sun-scald. To avoid this, all the south sides are whitewashed. Anyone, seeing for the first time a stand so treated, is indeed privileged to be bewildered, as I was.

That night I slept in a Bauernhof. The next morning, after the biggest breakfast I had in all Germany consisting of three eggs, sausage, bread, all the butter I wanted, and coffee, I met the Forstmeister and we again toured the forest. There was more to learn about the ditches. He impressed me with the fact that it was extremely important that water should not be allowed to stagnate in the forest; for if it did, reproduction would be at a standstill and cutting methods would run amuck. I saw evidence of this when we passed a shelterwood cutting. Many of the mature trees had been windthrown because the site was still not sufficiently drained.

From here we went on past a large field on which brick-like pieces of ground were piled up. This area was being rented by the forest service at $160.00 per acre for the purpose of stripping off the peat. This peat is very young, light brown in color, and after it is dried and baled, it is shipped to greenhouses and nurseries where it is used for packing.

Noon was fast approaching and it was time for me to depart. Forstmeister Kramer drove me to the station and bade me farewell. I journeyed on, happy in the fact that I had seen and learned so many new and interesting things from such a considerate host.

— Hugo B. Werner