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Chuck Maynard
Iowa State University

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Forestry in the Developed Nations

Chuck Maynard

Standing in a bicentennial forest plantation is an eerie feeling. I was walking through a 200-year-old oak forest in Germany and asked if it was a virgin stand. My guide laughed and replied, "No, this is a second or third rotation oak plantation." The term "planned forest" took on a whole new meaning for me!

During the summer of 1978 I studied forest genetics and tree breeding in Europe. I was based at the International Agriculture Center, Wageningen, The Netherlands, studying elm and poplar breeding with Ir. Hans Heybroek, but excursions took me to Germany, Scotland, and France. Add to that weekend trips to Denmark, Switzerland and other parts of Germany and France, and you have a very busy summer.

The overall impression of Europe is one of contrast: the very old with the very new. Several places I visited ultra-modern laboratories housed in 200 to 300 year-old buildings, or drove off a modern interstate onto a winding, narrow cobblestone road through a village that hadn't changed in 100 years. My wife and I were visiting Lucerne, Switzerland, the weekend it celebrated its octacentennial.

I think the most fun was visiting foresters from other countries. I could never decide whether to be amazed at how different things were, or amazed at how similar the people were. Foresters seem to be the same all over. They will cheerfully take off half a day to show you their forests, even if it is pouring rain. They will gladly wade knee-deep in an alder bog to help dig root nodules or drive around all afternoon looking at poplar stands.

Even many of the trees looked familiar, some because they were imported from North America, others because they have very close relatives over here. On these excursions it was brought home to me very quickly the importance of good old dendrology, much as I disliked the course. Most people knew enough English to communicate about food, shelter, or clothing but specialized subjects like plant identification were impossible. Often I knew the common name of a similar looking North American species in English and they knew the common name of the new plant in Dutch, German, or French, but unless both of us knew the Latin name, communication ground to a halt.

Holland, or more correctly, The Netherlands, was also a fantastic place for anyone interested in plants or landscaping. The country has about the same percent forest cover as Iowa but the feel of the place is much more "woodsy." Nearly every field is surrounded by a shelterbelt, thus even highly agricultural areas similar to Story County (but even flatter) look wooded. This visual variety in the landscape leads to a much more pleasant view, at least to a forester.

The size of The Netherlands is also intriguing. Early one morning Ir. Heybroek said we were going up into the northern part of the country to look at some elm plantations. I started worrying about what to pack, how much cash to take, how cold it would get and whether we would be back by the weekend. When Ir. Heybroek came back I started asking questions, he laughed and said, "Don't worry, we'll be back by lunchtime!"

All in all it was an entirely fantastic summer and I strongly urge all foresters to try and get some experience outside the U.S. It changes both the way you look at your own country and makes you appreciate it more. Above all, it makes you realize that there are dozens of ways to organize a political system, a social system, a religious organization, or a research program, and most of them work pretty well.
These are the collected thoughts of a forester in a summer job. In trying to put into words the experiences of a summer, some things have clouded while others have become crystal clear with time. The following is a random assortment of experiences that might show a portion of a forester's education.

I spent the summer of 1978 involved as the Forestry Intern of the Story County Conservation Board, Colo, Iowa. Although Story County does not have endless tracts of virgin forest, forestry is alive and doing well in the midst of cornfield deserts. The Intern was to maintain recreational plantings of trees and shrubs in the parks of the county and to provide planning and expertise in forest management on undeveloped land.

The position started as a part-time job in April. Let me add a note here about the hatred Landscape Architects have for foresters. The LA in the office left one month before I started but he had enough time before he left to order about 5000 bare-foot seedlings one foot tall. He also ordered species that only a nursery owner could love. I spent many agonizing weekends, not to mention the skin on my hands and the knees of my jeans, planting trees in "natural" positions. I imagine the LA giggling to himself at his new job. It has been rumored the age of miracles is over: not true. We found a tree planting plow to help us plant 2000 aspen on small, rolling hills in one of the parks. Because of school, I was not present when this group of trees was planted. The crew doing the planting did fairly well with just a few minute mistakes, such as forgetting to document where the trees were planted, planting a "couple" trees upside down, and planting a "couple" too high. (No, roots will not later leaf out!) I spent the rest of the summer trying to find all the trees for mortality counts, entomological reports, and weeding.

Full-time work started at the closing of spring quarter. I immediately learned a number of things about the workings of the organization and the relationship of the Intern to that organization. To insure the continuance of knowledge, let me pass on a few tips I picked up in my forestry work: 1) When installing gypsum board on a ceiling, one uses your head to hold the board up while starting the nails with both hands. (Let's hear it for higher education) 2) When you are in a boat feeding caged fish, one must be sure to hang on to your keys and pencils or take up diving. 3) A tractor with a loader can become hopelessly stuck on a shallow, steeply sloped soil that has been inundated with rainfall. 4) Retired farmers are almost as handy with machinery as a green college forester.

The summer continued with various work in the planting beds, in picnic areas, and on reports. I ran a mid-season mortality check on all new plantings. It was at this time that I noticed that trees were disappearing completely. Instead of a dead stick or a spike with leaves being present, nothing was left in an area that should have been a baby forest. I then discovered the affliction which can be well described in one word; lawn mower. Although the trees were flagged, marked with stakes, or had the grass scalped back from around them, they were being eaten by the motorized rabbit. My subsequent talk with the men responsible apparently made quite an impression, for several weeks later I noticed a healthy stand of newly planted trees with a tree in the middle, browned and dying. Upon investigation, the tree had been cut with the mower, but it had been taped up in place.

The Youth Conservation Corps came in mid-summer. I worked about four weeks with all the kids. The sheer number of people involved instills nightmares to any organizer but allows fast movement through simple operations, thus bottlenecking in technical or complex points of the work. I always seemed to be involved with the bottleneck and spent my time shuffling from point to point while the kids moved in leaps and bounds in their work. I had a lot of TSI and trail work projects ready for them but the norm was more work projects than workers and time.

Let me touch on a point that weighed heavily on my mind all summer; office politics. At no point in my textbooks did they mention the pains involved. The problem centered around the power role-structure of the organization with, I may add, the Forestry Intern's position in the middle. Added to this, forestry attitudes of a professionally trained forester differ in style and kind from attitudes developed in a recreational-arboriculture background and this leads to "discussions." I was very fortunate being exposed to this situation because of what I learned from it. Along with various biological-aesthetic factors, I learned to keep clear of other peoples power struggles, and to provide, at all times, the best professional information possible, regardless of the attitudes of other employees.

My summer was great with chainsaw, tree spade, and technical work adding to my knowledge of practical forestry. The documentation through reports and investigation helped me put the textbooks onto paper. So, the saga of Joe Forester had ended for the summer. Back at school I felt more at home with forestry.

Hickory Grove Park is the main facility of the Story County Conservation Board.

Big Rabbits and Politics
Kim Coder