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From Ames to Absarokee: A salute to Richard (Rich) Faltonson

By Joe Colletti
January, 2001

Thus, Rich’s professional start with forestry in Ames was with the Forest Service in October 1967 when he was hired as a research technician. He worked out of the Forest Service’s greenhouse on hardwood plantation projects directed by Raymond (Ray) Finn. That was a long time ago. It was so long ago in fact that a slimmer Rick Hall (later to be Dr. Hall) still could turn a double play in baseball and was seen watering trees at the greenhouse part time on the weekends.

In 1970, when the Forest Service decided to withdraw from its Ames research location, Rich was hired by Dr. John Gordon as the Department of Forestry’s Greenhouse Research Technician. Rich learned bunches working for Dr. Gordon and still says that working with him was truly one of his most memorable experiences. It was Dr. Gordon who encouraged Rich to complete his undergraduate degree. So, Rich started working part time on a B.S. degree in Horticulture.

Rich has had many and varied experiences with the departmental greenhouse. For example, in the 1970’s, when Rich was working on his B.S. degree, he recalled occasions when working late at the greenhouse (studying all that plant stuff) he heard ghostly footsteps like a woman in high-heel shoes walking down the central hall. He would investigate, never finding anyone or thing! Whoa Nelly!! Also, there were two major hailstorms (one year apart) that caused considerable damage. Rich was told by the insurance adjusters that on average a damaging hailstorm happens only once in 20 years in Ames. Rich was lucky to have only two in 33 years. And, there was the major sleet storm in the early 1980’s that caused ice built-up on the glass roof. The ice slid down onto the flat head-house roof where an 8-inch thick sheet threatened to collapse the entire building. Rich used space heaters in the hall to pump 100-degree air to the ceiling, which melted the ice some. He then very carefully got on top of the roof and chipped off big, thick chunks of ice. Thus saving the day and the greenhouse. Then there was the time when an agronomy corn breeder used a bay in Rich’s greenhouse for his research and stored bags of corn in it. Rich fought a pitched battle with a large
band of "le cockroaches." After massive spraying of a Blackflag type of insecticide, Rich prevailed, but not before playing many games of "roach hockey" which involved bare feet, roaches, and two sets of goals many feet apart in the central hall. Actually Rich borrowed this crunchy game from the Plant Pathology greenhouse people next door.

Rich has been an avid runner for many years. In fact some of his fondest memories are the fun runs with Dick Schultz and me. During the decade of the 1980's the three of us did many noon time and weekend runs together. In 1983 Dick and Rich succeeded in running the Drake Marathon. In preparation for the marathon and while on a two week research junket around the Pacific Northwest studying forest nurseries Rich and Dick did a 20 mile training run along the beach at Newport, Oregon. As a sidebar, Rich was the first Professional and Scientific (P&S) employee at ISU to receive a travel/research grant to visit forestry nurseries in the west with the goal of developing a graduate level forest nursery management course. Rich and Dick did create the course and both enjoyed teaching it.

Back to the beach running story. Rich (and Dick) still talk about that run as being one of the most awesome events of his (their) life. Also, during that decade, the three amigos could be seen once a week attending the Burger King Discussion Group. We ran, then ate, and solved the world's problems and occasionally planned an Iowa Society of American Foresters meeting or something.

Over time Rich's job evolved from being the greenhouse manager into greenhouse manager and research coordinator. When wearing his research coordinator's hat, he worked closely with forestry graduate students and developed many lasting friendships. Rich regularly writes, calls, or e-mails graduates who have

moved on to successful careers around the world from Korea to the Netherlands and many places in between. Rich has indicated that he has been "blessed" with the opportunity to work with many wonderful undergraduates and graduate students.

Rich "ran" a first flight greenhouse. He worked tirelessly to ensure that our greenhouse-based research was done in a secure and sanitary environment. Rich excelled at organizational skills, safety training for the student workers, and contributing beyond the call of duty to field research and student club activities. A good example of his "beyond the call dedication" is when three years ago, I was leading an effort to install a shelterbelt of trees at an outlying ISU pork research farm located ~1.5 hours from Ames. After completing about one-half of the planting I discovered that I had left the other half of trees in Ames. It took only one phone call to Rich and he was on his way with the trees (and driving his personal vehicle). He saved my bacon!

The ISU Forestry Club has been growing seedlings for distribution during VEISHEA, Earth Day, and Arbor Day for over two decades. Each year Rich assisted the students, often in the evenings with preparation, planting, and care of the little seedlings. He took a special interest in ensuring that the students learned about growing seedlings and had a quality product. The Club grows Christmas trees as well. And, Rich was actively involved in assisting students in all phases of producing Christmas trees. He helped with site preparation, seedling planting, herbicide spraying, and shearing/shaping. Almost all of these activities occurred on weekends.

Rich contributed greatly to the profession of forestry outside of Ames. He edited and produced for many years the Newsletter for the Iowa Society of Ameri-
can Foresters (SAF). His Newsletter matched the quality (content and layout) of really big state society newsletters from around the nation. Rich also served as President and led one of the best fall meetings that our Iowa Society has ever had. Rich was recognized for his long term commitment and service to SAF by being elected as a SAF Fellow in December 2000. He is very deserving of this recognition and joins a very select group of foresters.

He also was involved with community service. Rich directed the first American Cancer Society’s Relay of Life event in Story County in 1993. His leadership abilities were key to the success of the first Relay. He built a solid foundation for all Relays since then. After a year as Chair, Rich shifted his service efforts during the Relay to the “Faltonson’s Kitchen.” He, his wife Sue and daughter Rachael, got the food together and served literally thousands of Relay participants for six years.

Rich recently ended his productive career with our department on December 31, 2000. We will have to look long and hard to find someone with the same dedication, wit, wisdom, and friendship that characterizes Rich Faltonson. He was a productive and highly valued member of our ISU forestry family. He contributed significantly to the profession of forestry in Iowa and nationally. And, he strongly believed in giving back to the community through service activities.

He may be retired from the Department of Forestry at ISU, but not from our thoughts. Rich and Sue will build a home in Absarokee, Montana starting summer, 2001. Well, actually their home will be located between Nye and Absarokee, Montana. If you are planning to visit, give them a call first and then head to Midnight Canyon. Look for the home with a small greenhouse attached to it, a pack of husky dogs and a dog sled. And, remember that all Rich wanted, as a tribute was to be able to “mush my team into the sunset. Well Rich, mush on! We will miss you. We thank you and look forward to traveling with your team into the beautiful Montana sunset. Ciao!!