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Recommended Citation
Bolluyt, Keri (2001) 'A Bit of Forestry Department History: Ms. Frances Flick (B.S. '39)," Ames Forester: Vol. 88 , Article 10. Available at: https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/amesforester/vol88/iss1/10

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A Bit of Forestry Department History:
Ms. Frances Flick (B.S. '39)

By Keri Bolluyt
Junior in Forestry

Being a woman in the Forestry Department at Iowa State University, I have come to take some things for granted. Walking into my classes in Bessey Hall, I know there will be other women in my classes and sometimes I will have a female professor. When we went to camp, we knew there would be a female professor and a cabin for the six girls to call home for three weeks. And when all is said and done, I know there are jobs to be found in a field that is opening up more and more to women.

Now, step back sixty-five years and imagine how different things were for Frances J. Flick when she came into the Forestry Department in Curtiss Hall as the only woman student. She came to try something different, and that is exactly what it was.

After finishing high school in Des Moines, Frances first entered Westhampton College in Virginia hoping to become a writer. However, following in her sister's footsteps did not turn out to be her calling so she came back to Iowa and entered Iowa State College in 1936. In the beginning, Frances' male classmates told her that the faculty would make everything very difficult for her so that she would change her major. She found this to be anything but true, and settled into the department quite well.

In the summer of 1938, Frances' class set off for twelve weeks of Forestry camp at Sumter National Forest near Walhalla, South Carolina. The fifty-five male students stayed in cabins at their camp that was recently abandoned by the CCC while Frances was housed with the camp faculty's family. When they would go on the road to visit other National Forests or timber companies, Frances usually stayed with families in nearby towns. She missed out on much of the camp's evening activities as they occurred wherever the boys were camping. Overall, Frances said that camp was a great experience, but wished that she could have been more involved with the whole camp as we are now.

When Frances graduated in 1939, the Forestry field was still suffering from the Depression, and there were very few jobs to be found, especially for one of the few
women in the field. So Frances decided to go to Library school at the University of New York at Syracuse. Once she obtained her Library Science Degree, Frances was hired at the US Department of Agriculture Library in Washington, D.C. She was hired one year after Gifford Pinchot died and left his collection to the USDA Library, and due to her background, she was put in charge of the Forestry area. When people from the research department would come in, Frances would help them find articles that were useful to them. In 1949, the first computer Library search program was developed for the USDA Library, and she would race the computer to find articles, often winning. Frances was also invited to the home of Mrs. Gifford Pinchot for Baked Apple meetings. This had been a favorite dessert of Mr. Pinchot, and Mrs. Pinchot would invite foresters and others in the field over to her house to discuss current issues and eat baked apples. When the Oxford system of classification was developed in England, Frances went to Oxford and lived there for two months while figuring out the library classification service. She came back to the United States and wrote an article for the Journal of Forestry describing the system and stating that it would not be the wave of the future.

Throughout her life, Frances said she loved to be in different places and see different things, and her career path is a testament to this fact. Besides living in Washington, D.C., she also worked for the New York State College of Forestry at the University of Syracuse. There, she was in charge of the Range Management Library while working with Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Forestry advisor. She’s studied European silviculture improvement cuttings in France, and worked at the University of Arizona as a bibliographer. Her most recent assignment was in Guatemala in the Library of the University of San Carlos.

After her myriad of experiences, you would think Frances would have endless stories to share with a current forester. However, she was more interested in hearing about what the field is like now. While looking through her endless collection of books, we came across field guides that we are still using today, just earlier editions. She was fascinated by the variety of classes we are taking and the developing importance of conservation education. During the hours I was visiting her, I think I told more stories than she did. Her retirement home is being remodeled right now, and there is a large Shingle Oak tree right outside her window that is suffering from the soil compaction caused by heavy machinery. She went to the home’s director to make sure that he knew what was occurring. Though she is no longer in the field, she cannot and will not stop learning about forestry and caring for the trees.

In the forests of South Carolina and Tennessee this summer, wielding a machete through the underbrush along with sturdier male members of Iowa State college’s forestry class is slim, gray-eyed Frances Flick of Des Moines. Frances, now a junior, started taking forestry to “be different,” liked it and continued.

With both hands upraised, Frances gives the rodman the “O.K.” during surveying operations. Part of her job will be lugging the 28-pound transit over rugged country. Only one girl has ever obtained a degree in forestry at Iowa State College. In forest camps this summer, Frances is staying with the wife of a faculty member.

Frances handles a man-sized task through the day, but when evening rolls around, she’s still just a co-ed and the same hands that swing a vicious machete wield a comb daintily in preparation for a date. She’s popular with her Gamma Phi Beta sorority sisters who call her “Plicker.”

(article from the Des Moines Tribune 1938)