

Walter J. Perry (1873–1959) worked at many jobs—most notably mining and logging in Mexico—before finding his “real life’s work” in the U.S. Forest Service. After joining the Forest Service in 1910 at age 37, he served on four national forests in New Mexico and Oregon as a forest ranger and timber manager until he retired in 1936. As a forester, these excerpts from his 1938 memoir published by Wilderness Associates in 1999 attest, he was both philosopher and humorist. Perry’s timber management philosophy, shared with the many young graduate foresters he “broke in” on the job, carries an enduring ethical message.

THE MAN WITH THE MARKING AXE

BY WALTER J. PERRY

(Edited by Les Joslin)

The farther I went in forestry the better I liked it. Also, it appeared to me then, and still does, that I was holding a job of top-notch responsibility and importance—proper management of a timber sale area. Certainly, I thought, the chief function of the Forest Service was to protect, improve, and conserve forest resources, and chiefly the dwindling timber supply. Also, I was then, and am still, convinced that a man can as timber sale manager do more per square acre, per days work, or anyway you figure it, to promote true forest conservation than he could in any other position.

I believed that a man in charge of a timber sale must know why this or that should be done—and then to it that way; that he should be able to visualize how his sale area would look fifty years hence, when it would stand before future foresters and the public to praise or damn his judgment; that he must be able to rise above the handicap of continually thinking “I wonder if this would get by the inspector?” or “The marking rules say so-and-so for this sort of place—or do they?” when no set of rules could be put on paper that would adequately cover all the ever changing conditions and circumstances. In short, if he could not become his own, and most critical, inspector, then he was not ready to be turned loose in the woods on his own. These ideas I tried to

put across to the young men working with me, but never in the form of cut and dried “lessons” or “lectures.”

The key to successful implementation of a timber sale in the ponderosa pine forests Perry worked was “marking” each and every tree to be cut.

Marking consists first of selecting the trees to leave standing, and calls for intelligent weighing of many factors, such as maturity and health or thrift of the timber, liability to windthrow following cutting, necessity for seed trees, insects, etc. In short, it calls for all the knowledge and experience a man can bring to bear on it—and then some. Much of this knowledge can be acquired nowhere but in the woods, and then only under the spur of great interest.

The mechanical part of marking consists simply of striking a clean-surfaced bark blaze at breast or shoulder height with a keen-bladed special hatchet and stamping on this with the head of the hatchet the letters “U.S.” This operation is repeated on the base of the tree below stump height. Whether a man is fast at this job, which may be a big and time-consuming job on a large sale, depends upon several things. He will be slow unless his judgment is such as to enable him to weigh all the factors and make his decision as fast as he

can get to the trees, if he is either lazy or physically unfit for hard work, or if he does not avoid lost motion in getting around to his timber.

Perry’s experiences as a timber sale manager added another dimension to this personal and professional work ethic. His paper on tree marking and log scaling, published in the April 18, 1918, Southwestern District (Region



COURTESY OF WALT PERRY COLLECTION

Lumberman (as forest rangers and timber managers were sometimes called at the time) Walt Perry cruising timber on the Carson National Forest, New Mexico in June 1924.

since 1930) daily bulletin, set what District Forester Paul G. Redington called “a standard worthy of emulation on the part of others” that was “worthy of quoting.”

Probably the first essential in a man who would do credible work in marking is a deep-felt interest in the forest as such—a love for it. A monthly pay check—no matter how large—cannot buy this kind of interest. The man must have brought it with him to his first assignment. If it is well rooted, in deep soil, it will endure. Flanking this essential interest should be a knowledge of the subject—the more complete the better—but an education without the interest is of little value, it will die of disuse. On the other hand, a man imbued with the proper spirit will acquire the essential knowledge by observation and study and apply it to his work.

The man who, after a few months or a year or so in the timber, reaches the conclusion that he has cornered all the information worth while; shuts up shop and looks no further, then and there ceases to grow; he thereby admits either his inability or unwillingness to learn; he will soon find himself overtopped.

As a timber marker, remember that there is no other class of field work which it is more important should be done correctly than yours. Right or wrong, your work stands for the next half-century or so at least. Do not be discouraged by the thought that you will not see the ultimate

results of any special care or effort you may put into your labor, or that your special endeavors in that next line may be offset by the carelessness or ignorance of the next man. Your grandson, or his son, will mark this tract next time—and do a better job of it—being possessed of a more complete knowledge. And remember that in the entire range of Forest Service outdoor activities, there is no other class of work of more engrossing interest, more wholesome, or more elevating. It is entirely worthy of your steel. It’s a man’s job. Go to it.

And “go to it” Perry did, to the extent he became well known both for his skill as a forester and his speed as a marker ...both for his sense of responsibility and his sense of humor.

At that time each forest in the District that had operating timber sales issued monthly a mimeographed sheet known as a Sales Letter, and these were exchanged between forests. The idea was to foster an esprit de corps among men in this work, give them a chance to blow off steam occasionally, and facilitate the exchange of ideas. The sales men did the writing...

One district...set, among other standards, a standard day’s marking as 300 trees. This figure was ridiculously low.

Well, some guy, sometime, someplace, had boasted that he had marked 1,000 trees in a single day. One day I marked 1,050

trees, and in my sale letter tooted a couple of toots about it. The next month some guy over in Arizona came back at us, intimating that we on the Carson were in the kindergarten class. Said he had stepped out and marked over 1,100, giving the date and quoting book, chapter, and verse. Huh! That would never do! I marked some 1,300 trees and invited him to shoot at that!

Instead, the Office of Forest Management at Albuquerque shot—and how! I don’t remember the exact wording, but what it meant was: “What the Hell! What do you guys think you’re doing, just running a race to see who can make the most blazes on trees or marking timber?” That ended the battle of the marking axes—in so far as our newsletters were concerned.

Later a “gyppo” logger showed up on the job suddenly and I had to start him in on a separate unmarked area. Also, winter was coming on, and there were a few inches of slushy snow on the ground and more falling. The first day I marked 1,685 trees in 7 hours and 50 minutes. It so happened that [Carson National Forest] Supervisor [Earl W.] Loveridge [later assistant chief of the Forest Service for administrative management and information] and an inspector came over before this timber was cut, and after they had looked over the area and found nothing to criticize, I told Loveridge. He just grinned and said, “All right. All right—but don’t let Albuquerque hear about it!”

Albuquerque was right, of course. The first consideration was the quality rather than the quantity of work done—only I knew darned well that I marked no tree until sure I wanted that tree cut. □

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Editor’s Note: *Walt Perry: An Early-Day Forest Ranger in New Mexico and Oregon* (ISBN 0-9647167-2-0), edited by Les Joslin (205 pages, 32 historic photographs) and published in 1999, is available from the publisher, Wilderness Associates, P.O. Box 5822, Bend, Oregon 97708, 541/330-0331, for \$15.95 postpaid.



COURTESY OF WALT PERRY COLLECTION

Evan Worth Hadley (left), Walt Perry’s assistant scaler, and junior foresters Gillet and Cottham with log scaling tape and calipers.