

*Thomas Wright occupies a special place in the history of British Columbia forestry. He is considered by some the first modern “industrial” forester in B.C. But he has worn several hats—academic, consultant, company Chief Forester, and private woodlot owner—and he has worn each one with enthusiasm, dedication, and conviction. This article is adapted from a biography of Tom Wright published by the Forest History Association of British Columbia.*

# TOM WRIGHT

## PIONEER BRITISH COLUMBIAN FORESTER AND TREE FARMER

**B**orn in 1916 in Warren, Pennsylvania, Tom George Wright was the eldest of four children. His father died when he was six years old; and Tom and his siblings were raised in great poverty. As a youngster, Tom was obsessed with the outdoors, and this led to a career in forestry.

Tom Wright put himself through Pennsylvania State University by washing dishes and marking wood technology lab exams. His outdoor work experience began with the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), a U.S. federal employment program that ran from 1933 to 1942. For \$1 a day, Tom built dams for fish habitat and cut *Ribes* (currant) shrubs to control white pine blister rust.

He obtained his bachelor's degree in forestry from Pennsylvania State University in 1937, and then spent two summers cruising timber for the U.S. Forest Service in California and Utah. Tom subsequently attended graduate school at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. He chose forest economics as a specialty, in spite of there being very few forest economists in North America at that time. After concluding his studies, Wright was granted a master's degree in 1939.

### EARLY CAREER IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

Coincidentally, the Department of Forestry at the University of British Columbia (UBC) was searching for a forest economist, and a job offer made its way to Tom at Duke University. He accepted and departed for B.C. in October 1939.

Tom was the first Special Lecturer in forest economics at UBC. He also taught forest policy, forest history, mensuration,

fire protection, and forest surveying. The only other members of the small department were Malcolm Knapp and Dr. Braham Griffith. There were very few students then (five graduated in 1939, ten in 1940, two in 1941, seven in 1942, and four in 1943) and no research forest.

During the summers of 1941 to 1943, Tom Wright worked as a consulting forester. Wanting to learn about logging operations first-hand, he approached Sidney Garfield Smith, the Managing Director of Bloedel, Stewart & Welch, Ltd.—one of the major coastal logging companies—in the spring of 1941 and asked for a job as a chokerman. The reply was “Mr. Wright, come back and see me in a week.” Tom thought this was strange as he was only after a chokerman's job. He returned as requested and learned that Smith was sending him out to look into the company's forest practices and to study the effects of slash burning in particular.

Tom spent the summer of 1941 examining past and present logging operations, fire effects, and natural forest regeneration at three of the company's Vancouver Island operations. The pay was \$6.00 a day, less \$1.25 for room and board, “maybe a little more than what a chokerman would make.”<sup>1</sup> He thus became the first forester to work for a logging company in B.C. in the capacity of forester rather than forest engineer.

**BY JOHN PARMINTER**



Tom Wright at the Meadowview Ranger Station, Cache National Forest, Idaho, 1937.

Slashburning was contentious and had been for many years. The B.C. Forest Branch considered slash burning to be necessary because logging operations in the Vancouver Forest District were creating 40,000 acres of cutover land each year and, all too often, the slash spawned forest fires which spread over the landscape.

In 1938 one such wildfire burned 74,495 acres on eastern Vancouver Island. A total of 60 million board feet of felled and bucked timber belonging to Bloedel, Stewart & Welch, Ltd. and six other logging companies was lost as well as 14 million board feet of cold-decked timber belonging to three companies. In addition, \$74,950 worth of logging equipment was destroyed, along with 20 road and logging railway bridges. If that wasn't enough, some of Bloedel, Stewart & Welch, Ltd.'s fall 1938 slash burns at Franklin River, south of Port Alberni, escaped and destroyed adjacent timber.

The company was seriously concerned and charged Tom Wright with examining the issue from a scientific perspective. A lot was at stake. He described the situation at the Franklin River operations thusly:

*Huge contiguous skidder settings had been laid out, there were no seed tree blocks in between, and after the fires the whole country looked like the Sahara Desert. The moss had burned off the rocks and great expanses of open rocks were showing up on the sidehills. So I figured, well, I'll go out and see if any seedlings have become established in the past three years. This was 1941. I carried out a seedling tally and, owing to the bounty of nature and some good seed years, nearly the entire area was restocked.*

Wright filed a detailed report in November of 1941. It described the survey methodology; the relationships between logging methods, seed trees, hillslope aspect, site characteristics, and natural regeneration; the advantages and disadvantages of different logging layouts to natural regeneration; the pros and cons of slash burning and planting; and the implications of different reforestation policies to the forest industry and government.<sup>2</sup>

In the spring of 1942 Tom went back to Franklin River to carry out some reforestation trials. He was provided with a choker-man as an assistant:

*I spent three days personally planting seedlings in several areas in an effort to find out what the results would be. I can recall getting on the railway speeder with a bucketful of seedlings and a mattock. And I remember the strange looks I got from those loggers—looking at this guy with a bucket of seedlings going out into the woods!*

Later in 1942, he started the "Rocks on Stumps" research project, consisting of 60 sample plots in a logged and burned area. The bearing and distance from every plot to a nearby stump were

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noted and a rock placed on each of these reference stumps, following the advice of Charlie Dunham, the Logging Engineer. He said that wooden stakes would eventually rot and fall over but "nothing will ever happen to a rock on a stump."

Tom and his assistant worked carefully and diligently—mapping, describing, and photographing each plot in detail. They knew the potential long-term value of the work:

*The short-term objective was to describe the area as it was in 1942. The long-term objective was to study the plots in future years to assess the changes in the soil, the vegetation, and the forest crop. It was a basic ecological study, with the greatest stress placed on the long-term objectives of the project, many decades into the future.<sup>3</sup>*

Appearances were deceiving, hence the need for rational scientific inquiry. As Tom said:

*Looking up into the area from the Alberni Canal, for example, the exposed granite rocks made it appear that there had been great damage to the land. However, there never was any soil on those rocks, only moss which had been burned to expose the underlying rock. As noted in the 'Rocks on Stumps' maps, the stumps were between the rocks, not on top of them, and the surrounding mineral soil was still in place. The exposed rocks covered twenty percent of the area but the edges of the granite boulders gave the impression, from a distance, that a greater area of land had been damaged by the fire.*

In the mid-1980s, a graduate student from UBC, Mike Curran, set out to relocate and study the plots that Tom Wright had established four decades earlier. Mike spoke to Tom before going to Franklin River and said he was going to use a metal detector to find the plot centers, which were marked by railway spikes. Tom replied "just look for the rocks on the stumps."

By following that advice, and using Tom's detailed maps, Mike found all of the plots and concluded that the original work was "very accurate and precise." Curran would remark:

*Mr. Wright was well ahead of his time; his work could put many of us current researchers to shame today. A number of fundamentals for good (and transferable) research documentation have stood the test of time in his work; we should strive to make these the common denominator in all current research.<sup>4</sup>*

## B.C.'S FIRST INDUSTRIAL SUSTAINED YIELD MANAGEMENT PLAN

In 1942 and 1943 Tom Wright carried out additional work for Bloedel, Stewart & Welch, Ltd., in the Port Alberni Forest Working Circle. He analyzed timber cruises and inventory reports, calculated the yield capacity, and presented three separate forest management plans.<sup>5</sup> The complete report constitutes the first sustained yield forest management plan prepared for an industrial company in British Columbia.

Tom calculated that if hemlocks and true firs were included in plywood manufacture and if pulp production increased, employment in the local wood products plants could also increase. Better utilization of the cut timber and establishment of additional manufacturing facilities would further add to the workforce. Thinning or partial cutting in 150,000 acres of second-growth stands would increase the annual cut by from 10 to 20 million board feet.

Tom enjoyed knowing the loggers and living in the bunkhouses. He admired their skill in topping spar trees, rigging skylines 2,000 feet up a hillside, building railroad bridges, and constructing roads. Above all, he appreciated the warm welcome he received:

*The men in the bunkhouses, so many of them with a wife and children back in town, spent their working lives in the bush in the logging camps. At that time, a forester in a logging camp was*



*Tom Wright as Chief Forester of Canadian Forest Products Ltd., in front of a 670-year-old Douglas-fir growing in the Chehalis River valley. Diameter outside bark of the tree at breast height was 120 inches. 1948.*

regarded with curiosity. They were not regarded as a very significant factor in the woods. However, Sidney Garfield Smith had written a letter to all his superintendents, telling them 'Mr. Wright is coming and I want you to give him your full co-operation.' So I had a wonderful experience in those camps.

## IN THE ARMY

In 1943 Tom Wright had a tough decision to make. Sidney Garfield Smith offered him the position of Chief Forester of Bloedel, Stewart & Welch, Ltd., but Tom decided instead to join the U.S. Army. He was assigned to the 796th Engineer Forestry Battalion and served in France, Belgium, and Germany, landing at Utah Beach some time after D-Day. The primary responsibility of his army unit was to observe local timber harvesting operations and then obtain and deliver timber to repair damaged bridges.

Tom described some of his impressions of European forestry:

*The visitor to Europe's forests is always struck at the outset by the completeness of their utilization. We have all read about using every scrap of wood down to the twigs. But to see this total utilization is to appreciate more than ever how precious is every cubic foot of wood in Europe. It is this strong demand for timber which makes it possible for the Europeans to practice such intensive forest management.<sup>6</sup>*

These observations made an impression, and the issue of more complete utilization proved to be of major importance later in Tom's career.

Tom Wright was demobilized in 1946 and returned to B.C. He obtained summer work with the Powell River Company, examining some of their logged areas on the lower coast. All were old clearcuts, and many had been harvested by A-frames set up on rafts anchored on the ocean shore. He found these areas to be well-stocked with naturally-established tree seedlings.

In the fall of 1946, Tom returned to UBC as an Associate Professor and resumed teaching—this time forest policy and forest protection. Many returned servicemen chose forestry, raising total enrollment in the department to 351 students in 1947.<sup>7</sup>

## CHIEF FORESTER, CANADIAN FOREST PRODUCTS LTD.

Tom Wright spent less than two years at UBC and then accepted the position of Chief Forester of Canadian Forest Products Ltd. (Canfor) in 1947, a position he held until 1962. The company began on November 12, 1938, when John G. Prentice and L.L.G. "Poldi" Bentley formed Pacific Veneer Company Limited. Operating from this base, Prentice and Bentley soon acquired sawmills and logging operations.

In 1944 they purchased Beaver Cove Timber Company Limited from the Puget Sound Pulp and Timber Company, bringing with it large areas of timberland in the Nimpkish Valley on northern Vancouver Island. In 1947 the company reorganized under the name Canadian Forest Products Limited. As their first Chief Forester, Tom Wright managed the timberlands of the Englewood and Harrison Mills logging divisions.

Not one to lose touch with the forest, Tom Wright maintained his interests in fieldwork and research. In 1947 Henry Hansen, the Supervisor of Falling and Bucking at Englewood (in the



Bill Garrard in front of the 390-year-old Douglas-fir, western hemlock, and western redcedar stand in the Nimpkish Valley, northern Vancouver Island. 1947.

Nimpkish), told Tom that the finest stand of Douglas-fir he had ever seen was then being felled. Fully aware that Henry had been falling since the age of 15 and knew a good stand of timber when he saw it, Wright wanted to understand the history of the stand and the reasons why it was so exceptional.

So they delineated a seven-acre area and studied the age, size, height, and volume characteristics of the trees in the stand. Other information was obtained by boring and aging trees in adjacent forests, counting annual rings on stumps in logged areas, and analyzing timber cruise information. Company forester Glen Patterson and Bill Garrard, a university student, did much of that work.

The stand of Douglas-fir, western hemlock, and western redcedar turned out to be 390 years old. It became established in about 1550 after a forest fire swept through 86,000 acres in the Nimpkish Valley. The average height of the Douglas-firs was 278 feet, and the tallest was 305 feet. This stand scaled out at 210,000 board feet per acre, with 24 Douglas-firs per acre of an average DBH (diameter at breast height) of 62 inches. The largest was 95 inches across. The stand was on a gentle slope and surrounded by higher ground and mountains, ensuring year-round groundwater seepage and exceptional productivity.

Sometime later, Tom examined a timber cruise of the Nimpkish carried out by the James D. Lacey Company's Portland, Oregon, office in 1908. The best stand was a parcel of forty acres with a volume, in excess of 8 million board feet, or 200,000 board feet per acre. It was the only "forty" in the Nimpkish Valley with that much volume, and it was exactly where Tom Wright, Henry Hansen, Glen Patterson, and Bill Garrard carried out their study.

Canfor joined the pulp industry by acquiring a controlling



*A large Douglas-fir in the Nimpkish drainage on Vancouver Island. Left to right are Bill Smith, Tom Wright, and Glen Patterson (Division Forester). Early 1950s.*

interest in the Howe Sound Pulp Company Limited in 1951. They operated an unbleached kraft pulp mill at Port Mellon, on the west side of Howe Sound, just northwest of Vancouver. Canfor's motivation was to have a manufacturing outlet for its own waste wood.<sup>8</sup> Even as Canfor expanded, Tom Wright saw a definite role for the small forest land owner:

*It is in the interests of the country to encourage timber growing on small ownerships to the maximum degree possible. With a stable, diversified market for logs and a steady demand for pulpwood, the small owner can practice the most intensive forestry in the community. So long as the pulp industry depends on 'farmer wood' for a proportion of its raw material, it should participate in programs of co-operation and demonstration which will encourage the small owner to manage his property in the most profitable manner, on a long term basis.<sup>9</sup>*

The role of the small operator was on Tom's mind because seven months earlier his four blocks of Crown-granted land on the Sechelt Peninsula northwest of Vancouver had been designated as B.C.'s first Taxation Tree Farm; a tenure designed to enable forest management on small private land holdings. While Tom could see the big picture from the perspective of a Chief Forester of a large coastal company, he had not lost sight of the potential for forest management on a smaller scale.

Tom Wright's interests also included the extensive stands of the central Interior. The standard practice was to bring the logs directly to hundreds of what were mostly bush sawmills, produce rough lumber, and then take that to Prince George for finishing in the planer mills. In 1956 Tom examined forest practices in the area and concluded that just 25% of the timber volume logged was actually converted into lumber. The rest was wasted, burned, or used to fire the mill boilers.<sup>10</sup>

Feasibility studies were carried out to determine whether a pulp mill could be established in Prince George. Tom Wright worked

with Larry deGrace, President of industrial Forestry Service, Ltd., to formulate an approach that classified stands as either pulpwood or sawlogs, depending on their age, size, and volume characteristics. Wright and deGrace suggested that if pulp mills became established, they should bid only on pulpwood stands, not for sawlogs. In March of 1961, amendments to the *Forest Act* gave the Minister authority to designate Pulpwood Harvesting Areas (PHAs) and grant options for pulpwood harvest.<sup>11</sup>

In May 1962, Canfor announced plans for a pulp mill at Prince George that would have an initial daily production of 500 tons of fully bleached kraft pulp, and they were awarded Pulpwood Harvesting Area Agreement (PHAA) No. 1 on November 22, 1962. It covered 8 million acres. The pulp mill was called Prince George Pulp Company, and a new logging and milling subsidiary (Takla Holdings Limited) was formed to permit trading of harvested sawlogs for pulpwood.<sup>12</sup> The Prince George Pulp Company mill opened in April 1966. This was followed by Northwood Pulp mill (owned by Noranda Mines Ltd. and the Mead Corporation) and the Intercontinental Pulp facility (a collaboration of Canfor and Feldmeuhle AG of Germany) that went into production in May 1968.<sup>13</sup>

The city of Prince George, the surrounding region, and the forest industry there were radically transformed in just a few years thanks, in part, to the efforts of Tom Wright. Ray Williston (then the Minister of Lands, Forests and Water Resources) later reminisced that Tom Wright's arrival in his office with the news that the Prince George sawmill industry's efficiency was just 25% marked a major turning point on the road to closer utilization of the timber resource:

*That meeting made the most powerful impression on me of anything that happened while I was Minister.<sup>14</sup>*

## BACK TO UBC AS DEAN OF FORESTRY

In 1962 Tom Wright left Canfor to assume the position of Professor and Dean of the Faculty of Forestry at UBC. The President of UBC, John B. Macdonald, announced the appointment, saying:

*The Board of Governors feels that it has found in Wright a person whose guidance and leadership will lead to more intimate ties with an active industry, and the expansion of graduate and research work, which will be to the benefit of both parties.<sup>15</sup>*

Tom felt that forestry graduates required a background in silvics, harvesting, manufacturing, and basic sciences; an appreciation for the humanities; and skills in self-expression, communication, and leadership. He provided an insight into the profession at the annual meeting of the Woodlands Section of the Canadian Pulp and Paper Association in 1963:

*...the forester must possess a genuine love for the bush, perhaps to the point of being somewhat of an odd ball in the eyes of his saner compatriots. Who other than a forester would fend with black flies and mosquitoes, or crawl like a snake through the weeds, or spend endless hours in the open with the rain running down the back of his neck? Who else would argue silviculture into the small hours as if it really mattered whether spruce was*

*harvested in strips or blocks or under a selection system? What other professional man will go off with his wife and children and live at a lonely crossroads where there is nothing but the trees, the sawmill and the big sky? Let's face it, this man is a bit of an odd ball. We need more men like him in the profession.*<sup>16</sup>

#### RETURN TO CANADIAN FOREST PRODUCTS LTD.

Tom Wright was Dean of the Faculty of Forestry for two years and loved every minute of it. Yet, he moved back to Canfor as their general manager of Coast Logging and Forestry after receiving an offer he couldn't refuse in 1964:

*L.L.G. Bentley called me one day at the university and said 'Can you buy me a cup of coffee?' To which I agreed, of course, and he came up to the campus. We went to the Faculty Club. He said 'Tom, we can't get along without you. Please come back and join Canfor.' So I said okay. And it was just that simple.*

Tom stayed with Canfor until 1972, during which time he enjoyed the challenge of combining logging operations with the objectives of practicing forest management. Other foresters such as Glen Patterson, Roy Jewesson, and Ken Thomas played large roles in meeting the challenge, along with the many capable loggers and administrative staff at the various operations.

Tom Wright was a leader in initiating innovative forestry practices in the Nimpkish area, even before Canfor obtained their

Tree Farm License there in 1960. Considerable research was carried out on pruning, thinning, fertilization, growth and yield, and planting of exotic species. In Canfor's other operations, in central B.C. and northwestern Alberta, feasibility studies examined different mill designs. After leaving Canfor, Tom worked as a consultant and devoted more and more time and effort to managing his tree farm on the Sechelt Peninsula.

#### PRIVATE TREE FARMER

Early during his first career at Canfor, Tom Wright started Taxation Tree Farm No. 1, soon after the enabling legislation was passed in 1951. He acquired the first parcel of land that year, and three others were purchased in 1952, when official status was obtained for the management unit.

These lands had been logged or burned around the turn of the century. By the early 1950s they were covered with second-growth forests of Douglas-fir, western hemlock, western redcedar, red alder, and maples and were considered unsuitable for real estate development. On weekends, Tom scouted out and examined dozens of such properties. When he found one with an acceptable price and forest cover suitable for long-term forest management, he bought it.

His private holdings were assembled more or less at random, but Tom Wright didn't need to worry about competition as no one else was interested in scrubby second-growth in those days. He explains his motivations thusly:



*Tom Wright in front of a western redcedar stump (with springboard notches) on his Witherby Tree Farm near Port Mellon. 1958.*



Tom Wright in a logged and planted opening on his Tree Farm in 1974.

*My obsession was to own land with trees on it. I would just pick up parcels of land when I could find them and then find the means to pay for them. A working person can buy an annuity or a life insurance policy for his or her old age, but I'd decided to buy trees. It was just my philosophy—I figured it would be a sound investment.*

*"I just made a formal application [to Victoria] and to my astonishment they approved it as Tree Farm No. 1 [April 1952]."*

My obsession was to own land with trees on it. I would just pick up parcels of land when I could find them and then find the means to pay for them. A working person can buy an annuity or a life insurance policy for his or her old age, but I'd decided to buy trees. It was just my philosophy—I figured it would be a sound investment.

Tom soon went to his banker to arrange a loan. The banker asked how long it would be until some income was received from the land. Tom replied that it would be at least 10 but more likely 30 or 40 years. The banker asked what price could be expected for the logs. Tom had to admit that he didn't know. The banker asked what road building and other operations would cost. Tom had to say yet again that he didn't know:

*I can still hear his hollow laughter echoing through the bank.<sup>17</sup>*

Mortgaging the family home and furniture got the tree farm operations underway, and development of management plans and logging activities commenced almost immediately.

Two reservoirs provide water for fire suppression and the tree farm's nursery. Since 1987 the nursery has produced "giant seedlings" grown in one-gallon pots and fed a good diet of fertilizer. The objective is to provide large Douglas-fir and western redcedar seedlings for planting on highly productive sites and those subject to brush competition, thus avoiding the high costs of scarification and brush control. This is just one example of Tom's ability to deal creatively with challenges:

*I figured, if you can't beat the brush you should walk in and join it. These were super high sites and I was planting with wide spacing, about seven by seven meters. I've never seen seedlings grow so big!<sup>18</sup>*

Since retirement from Canfor in 1972, Tom has spent a lot of time on the tree farm and woodlot. His son Bill is the full-time manager of operations, looking after the management plans, including protection and harvesting. The experience has shown Tom that

*...a great opportunity now exists to further increase the harvest by utilizing the huge volumes of small wood in our extensive second growth stands. We can follow the lead of the sawmilling industry of the interior which has attained world-wide competitive efficiency while utilizing logs of an average size comparable to, and often smaller than, the small logs derived from the Witherby Tree Farm thinnings.<sup>19</sup>*

Many different groups have toured the tree farm and woodlot operations over the years to learn of the Wrights' small-scale forest management philosophy and to see their successful application of this philosophy.

#### APPOINTMENTS AND AWARDS

During the last Royal Commission on forestry in B.C., which took place from 1975 to 1976, Tom Wright acted as a forest advisor to the commissioner, traveling with the commission to the major forestry communities in the province.

Tom received the Association of B.C. Professional Forester's (ABCPEF) Distinguished Forester Award for 1986 in recognition of his significant contributions to forestry in B.C. The 1987 annual report of the association said he:

*...is credited with carrying out the first basic regeneration surveys undertaken by a private forestry company in B.C. and with being the first industrial silvicultural forester in the province. His active participation in the ABCPEF, University of B.C., CIF [Canadian Institute of Forestry], CFA [Canadian Forestry Association], Western Forestry and Conservation [Association] and Council of Forest Industries of British Columbia have earned him the enduring respect of his peers.<sup>20</sup>*

Tom was also made an Honorary Member of the Canadian Institute of Forestry, of which he is a long-time and active member. In fact, he has certificates marking 50 years of membership in both the Canadian Institute of Forestry and the Society of American Foresters.



Tom Wright on his Witherby Tree Farm in the 1980s.

Now content to live in Vancouver with his wife, Virginia, Tom still maintains his interest in forestry. He is often in touch with his son regarding management of their tree farm and woodlot license. British Columbians, whether foresters or not, should be thankful that Tom Wright imparted his knowledge to more than one generation of foresters. His contributions have had a lasting impact on forest management in this province. □

John Parminter is a Research Ecologist with the Research Branch of the British Columbia Forest Service. He is a founding member of the Forest History Association of B.C. and recently received the Association of B.C. Professional Foresters' Distinguished Forester Award.



This article was adapted from the book by John Parminter entitled *Tom Wright: Recollections of a Pioneer Forester and Tree Farmer* published by Trafford Publishing, Victoria, B.C. List price is US \$9.75 (Can \$15.00) plus shipping and taxes. The ISBN is 1-55212-463-0. Order on-line at [www.trafford.com/robots/00-0128.html](http://www.trafford.com/robots/00-0128.html); 1-888-232-6804 or 250-383-6864.

## FOOTNOTES

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Italicized quotes are from interviews between Tom Wright and Gerry Burch conducted on May 2 and December 3, 1997, and another by Gerry Burch, Glen Patterson, and Ralph Schmidt conducted on December 23, 1998. I am also indebted to Tom Wright for providing access to his files and photographs as well as for meeting with me for another interview. All photos in this story are courtesy of the Tom Wright collection.