

# MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

## *Images in History*

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If we ask most people what image comes to mind when they think of “forestry,” we might very well find that most still answer the “forest ranger;” that brave and honest frontiersman protecting the forest from fire. To others, the image may have changed over the years as the job of the forester has evolved. In some ways though, the day-to-day job has come full circle.

America’s first federal forester spent the majority of his time behind a desk compiling data and writing report after report, all the while never getting in the field. Some foresters today might say that they share the same fate, chained to their desks pushing paper and not getting their hands dirty doing the activities that drew them to the profession in the first place.

Was this first desk jockey Gifford Pinchot, the first American-born scientifically trained forester, and the first head of the United States Forest Service? Or was it his predecessor, German-born and German-trained forester, Bernhard Fernow, the first trained forester in the government’s employ? No, it was Franklin Hough, a physician from Lowville, New York, who had come to recognize through his work on the federal census of 1870 that the eastern forests were rapidly disappearing. After three years of trying to get Congress to authorize a forestry study, Congress made provisions for one by slipping a rider into a general appropriations bill for the Department of Agriculture in 1876. Hough was appointed as federal forestry agent in August of that year. The bill allotted \$2000 to compile a report on the condition of American forests. This would not be the last time that a critical forestry measure would be enacted as a rider to another bill.

Hough’s experiences set several other precedents for what would become the United States Forest Service in 1905. In 1881, Congress established the Division of Forestry within the Department of Agriculture and appointed Hough its first chief. He soon fell into disfavor with his boss, who removed him from office two years later. This would not be the last time a chief of forestry would be removed for clashing with an administrative official.

Congress left Hough on a short fiscal leash, just as it would do time and again to many of his successors. One of the major problems in the first few decades of the Forest Service’s history was the lack of money for salaries. *Esprit de corps* and a love of the great outdoors might feed a ranger’s soul, but



he needed a decent income if he also hoped to put food on the table. Those posted to the central office in Washington in the early years fondly remembered how the meetings of the Society of American Foresters, held at the Pinchot home, meant unlimited cold milk and gingerbread—often the best meal they might receive for the week. In 1920, a survey of 210 ranger stations showed only 46 with running water and 3 with bathtubs. The low salaries and poor living conditions led many to leave the service and seek employment elsewhere. Neither the image of a gaunt, grungy ranger living in

squalor, nor that of a gentleman like Dr. Hough in a tie and vest behind a desk for that matter, is one that immediately comes to mind when one thinks of the early foresters.

But these were not the images that Pinchot and other foresters cared to let the general public hold of rangers. Rather, romanticizing the image was encouraged as a recruitment tool. A century ago, the best way to attract college age men into the young profession was through magazine articles and dime store novels. The image of the fierce, brave, and honest forest ranger truly came into being with novels, especially in “boys’ books,” as author Jeff LaLande calls them.

The lead article in this issue of *Forest History Today* traces the evolution of fictional forest rangers in print and on the silver screen over the last one hundred years. The forest ranger began as a selfless hero who fought against the unjust or against the forest’s “rapacious foe,” fire. In more recent times, the roles are reversed. The forest ranger is portrayed as the villain—a heartless bureaucrat who loves the law more than the land and those who use it—and is at odds with independent ranchers and lumbermen. In the recent resurgence the fictional ranger is portrayed as flawed, a complicated employee who simply responds to the difficult situations because it’s a job, not a higher calling. The settings of the more recent work will come as a surprise to many.

With this issue, we begin the countdown to the centennial celebration of the USDA Forest Service in 2005; when the forest reserves were transferred from the Department of the Interior to the Department of Agriculture. Over the next several issues, we will be featuring articles about the Forest Service in recognition of the agency’s century of service and exploring how images of history shape our decisions today and contribute to our pursuit of sustainability in the future.