



William B. Greeley

1879-1955

When the American Forestry Association met in Washington, D.C., in 1905, a young recruit to the Bureau of Forestry was in the audience. He was William B. Greeley and had come to hear Theodore Roosevelt address the assembly. The dissertation was not a dull one and Greeley “thrilled” when the president threw down his manuscript and thundered, “I am against the man who skins the land.”

How fitting that Greeley, soon to be the persuasive voice of cooperation between the two factions, should be present at this call to battle.

Soon after the meeting, Roosevelt and his Chief Forester, Gifford Pinchot began their aggressive campaign of national leadership in the forests. Greeley, a recent graduate in forestry from Yale University, was an assistant to Pinchot during these formative years and although he believed strongly in the need for forest management, he didn't always agree with Pinchot's views. The latter saw the forest industry as ruinous, willful and hell-bent on personal gain. Greeley, on the other hand, evaluated it as an industry that could be improved. It suffered, according to Greeley, from high interest rates, inefficient processing procedures, rising transportation costs and unstable taxation.

Another area of difference between the two men was regulatory versus cooperative forestry. As Greeley explained in his book, Forests and Men: “Some of us could not thrill to the call of the trumpets. Perhaps we had done more grubbing in the dirt, trying to make the beautiful ideal work. Perhaps we had labored more closely with the lumbermen in the rough and tumble of fighting fires and cutting timber. Perhaps we had been too close to the economic troubles of forestry industry. At any rate we doubted whether worthwhile forestry could be brought to pass on the free soil of the United States by federal public methods.”

Greeley believed in educating the lumbermen to the financial practicalities and returns of sound forest management, not in using strong arm, “Big Stick” methods. He repeatedly emphasized the necessity of cutting out jealousy and friction among the various concerns. And he asked the practical question, “Why should we let our forests burn up while arguing over who should control the manner of their use?” Greeley was rightfully impatient with those who dallied while the forest burned. As District Forester in 1910, he had stood helplessly by as 3,000 acres of Montana forestland was destroyed, costing 85 lives. It was at this point that he said “The conviction was burned into me that fire prevention is

the No. 1 job of American foresters. So began his attack on forest fires.

Again, his plan was for cooperation. He asked that federal, state and individual landowners join together to protect their lands. He stressed the need for Americans to change their wood burning habits and to be more careful in the forests. He met with various groups and made recommendations for compulsory slash burning, permanent ownership of state timberlands, and acquisition of cut-over lands and strengthening of state fire warden systems. He also asked for more and improved access roads, better means of communication in the forests and more fire fighters.

In 1911 Congress responded to some of his pleas by passing the Weeks Act. It carried an appropriation of \$200,000 for federal cooperation with the states in protecting the forested watersheds of navigable rivers. At that time only 11 states were doing enough protecting of any forestland to quality but Greeley and his associates turned salesmen and gradually the number of cooperating states and the acreage under organized protection increased. Especially successful was the educational outcome of the new law. Said Greeley in his book: "Conferences and meetings on forest protection multiplied. Bulletins on fire equipment and methods appeared. Experiences in different states and regions were compared. The important role in forest fires of relative air humidity was broadcast. Also, forest protection got more attention in the press and in commercial circles."

This entire furor over forestry was abruptly curtailed by World War I. Greeley was sent to France where he gained an outstanding record commanding 21,000 troops turning out lumber for the allies. When he returned he was an even more able and confident forester and two years after the Armistice was named Chief of the Forest Service.

The next few years were spent trying to further legislative enactments pertaining to forestry. One that Greeley definitely had a hand in was the Clarke-McNary Act of 1924. The adoption of the law marked a victory for cooperative and educational forestry but it was not gained without argument, conflict and planning.

Greeley later admitted of these hearings, "I must confess to packing the stands with fire witnesses."

But if it took dramatics to drive the point home, then Greeley is to be commended for his staging efforts.

Greeley was also convinced that a committee instructed to study forest problems should see a lot of the woods. He planned side trips through logging camps, forest stands and old burns. Senator McNary of Oregon, a Greeley sympathizer, jokingly accused him of trying to show them every tree in the United States.

The debate over the Clarke-McNary Act continued upon return to Washington. However, its sections that dealt with cooperative fire prevention, reforestation and extension of the national forests were not the major problem areas now. Taxation aspects were eventually agreed upon and on June 7, 1924, the Act became law.

Bill Greeley had been present throughout the debate and said, "I felt the thrill of being in on the kill, even if the victim was bloodless." On the final day of passage, he had been smuggled into the House cloakroom where he could look directly into the chamber and hear the debate. A page carried his scribbled notes and answers to questions from the floor to Representative Clarke and others.

After almost a quarter century of public service, Greeley resigned as Chief Forester in 1928 and accepted a position with the West Coast Lumbermen's Association. The long battle was over and cooperative forestry was well on its way to reality. About this time, he reportedly told a friend that his hope "before his days were over was to have the opportunity to enter into the actual management of a substantial body of forest land whose ownership adopted a definite plan of reforestation and continuous timber production."

The position with the West Coast Lumbermen offered this opportunity and more. He saw the ultimate goal of his forestry plan realized – that timber could be grown on much of the forestland in the United States by private owners as a commercial crop.

Greeley once said the forestry story is very largely the story of America. It is also the story of Bill Greeley.