Junior Forester on the Sabine

Laurence C. Walker
The letter said to report to the Supervisor of the Texas National Forests in Lufkin. I got off the bus in mid-morning late in June 1948, wearing my only suit, a woolen gray, to make a good impression. Directions given at the bus station sent me south on US 59. My heart sank when, soaking wet and toting my suitcase from downtown, I had been directed to the Texas Forest Service. A kindly forester drove me to the west side of the city to the National Forest supervisor’s office in an old Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) warehouse on State 103. From there a staff forester drove the new junior forester (JF) to San Augustine where I’d settle in on the Sabine National Forest, one of the four forests that comprised the Texas National Forests, now the National Forests of Texas.

Ranger Ivan J. Nicholas and I were the only professionals for the 180,000-acre Sabine Ranger District, which was synonymous with the National Forest of the same name. Ranger “Nick” served in that capacity from 1946 to 1955. But John E. Johnson, a local experienced man (LEM) who began working for the Forest Service (FS) in the CCC days, was indispensable. Though not a professional forester, he had assistant ranger rank and salary. His father before him rode horseback as a fire patrolman in these woods. And from Johnny and Ranger Nick I learned more forestry than in all of my undergraduate studies. Only then did I begin to learn what the work of a forester and the tasks of the professional are all about. From them I learned much silviculture that could be passed along as a forestry school teacher to the next generation. Axes, Oxen, and Men, my history of the Southern Pine Lumber Company, is dedicated to Ranger Nicholas.

The Sabine River, separating Texas from Louisiana, and for which the forest was named, once had been an important artery of commerce. River steamboats carried goods from Beaumont on the Gulf of Mexico to Logansport at the upper end of the Forest. Cotton flowed south, the row cropping of that important agricultural commodity accompanied by the cut-out-and-get-out logging practices being the reason Logansport is no longer a port. Silting of the river and its tributaries occurred quickly and worsened until the Toledo Bend Reservoir was filled with water in 1965-1966.

Silting of the nation’s waterways encouraged Congress to pass the Weeks Law in 1911, enabling the federal government to purchase land to protect the navigability of streams. Some mountain forests in the East and in Arkansas were bought for national forests with this authority. Then the Clarke-McNary Act of 1924, an amendment to the Weeks Law, that encouraged the acquisition of cutover land to assure an adequate timber supply for America’s future. With this authority, the federal government purchased land for the four national forests in Texas.

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National Forest maps still show the location of Camp Brittain, a family "village" of canvas tents located to the south of Haslam, a company town. At Haslam, W.R. Pickering built in 1913 what was claimed to be the second largest sawmill in the country. When he "cut out" in 1936, Pickering took the cash from his sale of land to the government and moved to California's northern timberlands.

The Sabine was added to the roster of national forests when the government purchased Pickering's holdings and land from several lumber-manufacturing companies in 1935-1936 for approximately $2.80 per acre, property taxes prepaid. Timberland acquired in the Purchase Unit covered parts of Shelby and Sabine counties. Mostly mixed stands of loblolly pine (*Pinus taeda*) and shortleaf pine (*P. echinata*) and perhaps twenty-five commercial upland and bottomland hardwoods and southern bald cypress (*Taxodium distichum*), the Sabine also included stands of longleaf pine (*P. palustris*) at its southern end. The CCC established an extensive plantation on both private industry (by contract) and government lands that included slash pine (*P. caribaea* in that day; now designated *P. elliottii*). One locates on maps this vast Moore Plantation extending from Pineland to Yellowpine. The first planting in the Sabine, perhaps in the Texas National Forests, was trees ferried over the river at Pendleton from a Louisiana nursery. No loblolly pines were available for this project the first year.

The first day on the job, the aforementioned Johnny, fifteen years my senior, attempted, I think, to have some fun by getting the new kid from the inner city in the East and with Yankee forestry schooling lost in a logging operation in a river bottom. Leaving me for a reason unknown, he told me to wait. I assumed he was "going behind a tree." After a couple hours there and day's end approaching, I walked out, probably a good two miles, to his pickup. This neophyte didn't intend to spend the night in that moccasin-infested maze of river-bottom skid-road trails, all of which look alike following a harvest. I had not yet encountered alligators. Somehow, I walked straight for the truck as a bee heads for its hive. An hour later Johnny arrived at his pickup. He never said a word. Was it he who was lost in the woods?

I suppose all rookie IF's were asked to check the nuts and bolts on a fire tower. The 110-foot tall "erector set" model at Dreka had no stairs, just an open, one-foot-wide ladder mounted to the exterior of the galvanized iron tower. Later, wire screen was wrapped around the ladder, but not before an elderly lookout had a heart attack on the job. Lowering him was a scary task.

Working alone, before the days of snake leggings and hard hats, I used the official marking ax to blaze and stamp the butts of hardwood trees for a small timber sale. "US" was molded into the hammer head of the short-handled ax. Hearing a swishing sound, I looked down; there at my knee was the open mouth of a moccasin. Instantly I knew why herpetologists call them cottonmouths: inside the jaw is a pure white ball of cotton-appearing flesh. I don't understand the physics of the next maneuver, but I went straight up, then sideways ten feet before gravity brought me down.
Silvicultural Practices

Ranger Nick always made the district's quota for timber sold and harvested. As I recall, we sold enough stumpage in the 1949-1950 fiscal year to pay for the young national forest. Purchase of these "lands that nobody wanted" has to be one of the best deals the government ever made, and the Southern federal holdings would continue to be good investments if radical environmentalists would allow foresters to manage this renewable natural resource.

After protection from wildfire and timber trespass (theft), our principal effort went toward thinning dense natural second-growth and timber stand improvement (TSI). Pine thinnings went to sawmills and pulping plants. TSI involved marking hardwoods that were of commercial value for hardwood mills that marketed them for bridge timbers, crossties, and other purposes utilizing low-quality stems. TSI also involved applying the herbicides ammate and 2,4,5-T, the former in cups chopped into tree bases and the latter in frills made with axes at waist height.

The Bootlegger's Vehicle

Ranger Nick assigned tasks. Among my first was to check out a hardwood timber sale in the Sabine (meaning cypress) River bottom, a broad flood plain of rich alluvial soil. The vehicle issued me — along with a badge ("Don't wear it where it can be seen"), a passkey, a marking hammer, and a government driver's license — was a 1940 Plymouth sedan. We called the revenuer-confiscated bootlegger's car the Taxi, for you could still see the word under the thin coat of Forest Service green paint. Hidden inside the doors' interior panels were shelves for stashing narrow flasks.

When rain came to the bayous, I called it a day, hiked out to the Taxi, and headed for the ranger station, an office above a grocery store in San Augustine, some fifty miles distant. I soon slid off the ungraded, ungravelled dirt road and into a ditch.

The FS was too poor to own come-alongs or any other equipment useful for dragging a car from a ditch to the "road." I had never driven, even in the Army, on an unpaved road; when pure silt mud's involved, it is an art. I hiked to a peckerwood mill operated by two brothers living in adjacent homes. I learned later I "yoe-hoed" at the house of the wrong brother, awakening him from sleep. One would have graciously helped me; the one I selected growled, "Get the tractor from the shed and bring it back."

I'd never been on a tractor saddle, but I did have a flashlight with which to study the gear chart plate. The tractor and I were on our way. By midnight, I had dragged the Taxi to the ridge of the road and returned the John Deere. Another two-hour's hike back to the bayou's edge would have me on my way to a warm, dry bed. So I thought. Cautiously advancing the old car, it quit after a few hundred feet. The gas gauge read empty. But I had filled the tank that morning! Had I pulled loose a fuel line? Checking with the flashlight answered that question negatively. Ah, here's the problem: the bootlegger's
gas tank had been peppered with buckshot. Apparently soap, which gasoline won't cut, had been used to seal the holes, and the soap dissolved while the car sat in the water-filled ditch.

To Shelbyville I then trudged through the mud, arriving just as Mr. Strong was opening the country store. The kindly shopkeeper filled a five-gallon can with gas, left the merchandise in the care of his wife, and on his tractor we went for the car. Another hour later, filling the tank at Strong's store got me back to San Augustine, by then the fuel gauge again read empty.

The FS quickly located a pickup truck for the city-bred forester to drive. Months later, I learned FS auditors turned hand springs when they received the bill for the gas and refused to pay. The FS contracted with Texaco, while Strong's Store sold Gulf. Solution to this problem involved a federal institution in Kansas that manufactured highest-quality paint brushes. As Leavenworth's products were not on inventory in the ranger district's warehouse, Mr. Strong was happy with the barter exchange.

I still hold the record for spending more days stuck in the mud than any forester ever assigned to the Sabine. Driving through slick silt is an art. A young laborer named Castle inherited the art. While he couldn't read and write and, therefore, couldn't get a driver's license, he could manipulate a pickup through every obstacle. On rainy days, Castle met me at the end of the pavement in Patroon and returned me to solid ground when the day's work was done.

Stealing Posties

Ranger Nick asked we to check out an alleged timber theft in Compartment 22. I began the search at one end of the tract, traversing at ten-chain intervals until hearing the which sound of axes hewing a log. The cadence was so perfect it could have been timed by the drummer of a Glenn Miller band. Parting the haw and titi understory brush, I looked upon two large men, their muscular arms the size of my waist. Dressed only in undershorts and with beads of sweat rolling off their shiny black skin, they shaped with precision, using fourteen-pound broad axes, railroad crossties from the post oaks (Quercus stellata) of the upland flat. They worked from opposite ends of the log and on opposite sides, slicing with razor-sharp axes to shape the ties, the bark and wood on the same side of the timber as their naked legs.

Unable to whistle and not wanting to spook these fellows, I sang (probably a hymn!) as I approached. We chatted a while; they'd later haul these timbers by horse and wagon all the way to Haslem, at the north end of the forest.

I carried a pad of free-use permits to issue for government trees. The tiehackers got one that authorized them to cut every "posties" (as both the trees and their products are locally called) on the Sabine district. In other compartments a timber-stand improvement crew busily girdled trees of this species if their presence impeded the growth of pines.
Learning to Plow

Here's where I learned to plow, not with a tractor, but really learned to plow. As all the local workers talked daily of the “forty” they'd work that evening, it occurred to me that I should know something of the effort expended in the task. Ah, there’s an old black farmer behind a mule in yonder field. I parked the FS pickup and walked to him. Few fences restrained people or pigs in those days. I promptly realized he was scared; the shield on a vehicle meant the law. And when I asked him to teach me to plow, he had greater reason to fear. No one in his right mind would want to learn to plow. The old man was probably born with his hands holding the reins of a harness or the handles of a plow. Still hesitant, I offered him a dollar. Now his conviction was affirmed: no one would pay to plow; you get paid for plowing.

Eventually he gave in. I'd go fifty feet and look behind to see how well I'd done. The old man would be bending over, slapping his thighs in a hilarious laugh. Then when I'd look forward the mule would be six furrows over to the left. I'd straighten up the line and, so help me Hannah, I couldn't help it, I'd look back again to see the old man groaning with laughter. And again, that quickly, I'd find myself many furrows to the right.

The plowman earned his dollar redoing my mischief. And I learned a new Biblical lesson from Luke’s gospel that “Anyone who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is in a whole heap of trouble” (paraphrased).

Syrup making on farms within the Forest’s purchase unit boundary was a common site in the fall of the year. Folks cut the cane by hand and pressed out the juice with mule power, the animals circling the press a thousand times to squeeze out the last ounce. They cooked the syrup in vats fired with wood; some they hid away to ferment to a “beer.”

Public Relations

Ranger Ivan Nicholas had a speech defect which most people attributed, because of his name, to a Russian accent. That meant I did the public relations work, gave the school and civic club talks, and originated a forestry noon-time Wednesday broadcast over KDET in Center soon after Jack Bell, its program director, first opened the mike in February 1949.

I talked over the low-wattage AM Station for fifteen minutes. FM had not come along and KDET was so weak you could hardly pick it up in San Augustine, thirty-five miles to the South.

I began each message, “Friends of the Trees,” on one occasion quoting the prophet Joel: “Oh, Lord, to thee will I cry for fire hath devoured the pastures of the wilderness, and the flame hath burned all the trees of the field.” Fires were our big problem, some forty recorded on the north end of the Sabine during a two-month period. I pointed out that the $2000 suppression cost could have been used to gravel roads. To gain interest, I mentioned our people by name: Lamar Duncan on Dreka Tower and Albert Jones at Chambers Hill lookout. I noted that Homer Kay ran the Timber Stand Improvement crew which had to be reassigned to the tougher fire suppression
task when Lamar's and Albert's alidades triangulated on a fire. In these homilies, I promoted such things as San Augustine's Forest Festival, put together by the math teacher, Mrs. Harlow Johnson, Johnny's wife.

I would intersperse a little forest history—ghost towns that resulted from cut-out-and-get-out practices, free-market enterprise, something about photosynthesis, and receipts to the counties, in lieu of taxes, from timber sales:

1937 = $18
1940 = 300
1948 = 15,000
1949 = 33,000

The economy was picking up.

Timber as a renewable resource, the need for thinning, and how landowners should care for their own woodlands were subjects of these radio visits. That we now had nineteen men employed on TSI crews was deemed an important topic, as was the gravelling of certain roads. Graveled roads, I learned, were paved with clay and a few small stones. FS engineers certified to the volume of stone in the contractor's loads, but I saw no reason for it. They remained slippery mud slides to me.

As these were the days of the Korean War and President Harry S Truman's proclamations on timber production and price controls, I employed patriotic themes. This was important, for Southern pulp and paper plants had run "at full capacity from Victory in Japan day to the present."

Ranger Nick thought I should have a uniform for these PR tasks. I still had a fancy National Park Service belt, shirt, and trousers, but I had sold the smokey bear hat and coat. My kid brother's Marine Corps green blouse would be close enough, provided I could replace the brass buttons with official FS leather nubs. So I wrote the Fecheimer Company in Ohio, the FS supplier who, so tearful of my plight, sent a whole set gratuit. Wife Anne altered the Marine style to that of the FS and affixed the buttons. (Dear reader: JFs earned $2666 per annum. That came to $100 in each of the twenty-six every-two-weeks pay periods each year The FS didn't provide uniforms.)

Wildfire Problems

We carried badges, but didn't wear them. Nick's predecessor had been shot at; apparently the scare was justified. We were not policemen, but wildland managers, in spite of the Agriculture Department secretary's directive that we report all stills found along our creeks.

Contrariwise, prior to beginning work (cruising, timber stand improvement (TSI), marking timber for a sale) in a compartment, we made the rounds of nearby country stores, talking loudly of where we'd be working as we drank 5¢ soda pop. Local citizens understood: We'd see where the stills had been. We also wouldn't have to fight incendiaries that weekend!

Ranger Nick sized up the fire situation. It wasn't that our people were setting them; but the payroll showed our people were fighting them. They
earned 35¢ an hour fighting fire. Wages for road, bridge, and trail crews, TSI workers, and timber markers amounted to 40¢. A fellow could put in forty hours at 40¢ and earn some extra dollars on weekends at 35¢. The ranger called everyone to a meeting at the Dreka fire tower work center to announce a new rule: When you’ve worked your forty hours, that’s it for the week. If you chase smoke and hoe lines for ten hours on Sunday at 35¢, then your 40¢ an hour work week will end Thursday afternoon. If a Friday night fire or a set on Saturday occurs, Nick said he would bring in crews from the Angelina district. No accusation was made. The men caught on; their “friends” abruptly ceased setting the woods on fire.

After putting out a fire in the night, we got lost trying to find our way out of the woods. One-by-one, the five-man crew in the moonless night slid down a steep bank and into a creek that, according to our compass and recollection, shouldn’t have been there. We built a fire, dried out, and awaited dawn.

To save money, I’d take the call by a crude radio from the men in the firetowers who had determined a fire’s location by triangulation, and then I’d try to find it. When spotted, I’d return to the truck and, by radio, request the number of fighters required, drafting them from the nearest crew, regardless of its present task. One can wander, even with compass and pacing and maps, an hour or more in dense smoke before finally coming upon the flame.

We all feared an assistant regional forester responsible for fire prevention and control. He’d show up unannounced from Atlanta, inspect fire tool caches placed at various locales and write a report which we got six months later. By then, we couldn’t defend ourselves, and he knew it. All across the South, I learned later, he was not well received.

Calling on a family we suspected of burning the woods, I was invited into the shack built of scrap lumber, the ground beneath visible through cracks in the floor. We conversed briefly, but for this I was totally unprepared: A child, still in diapers and not yet able to walk, was sitting on the floor smoking a cigarette. We classified the fire as a “smoker-caused incendiary,” attributed to one of the older boys, maybe eight or ten years old.

On another occasion, the crew and I called upon a black man to discuss a fire we had just corralled nearby his place. I suppose it was instinct that caused me to greet him with a handshake. Neither he nor the crew—all white men “because we didn’t know how to work blacks” — knew what to make of this violation of a social norm in the woods of Deep East Texas.

**Early Prescribed Fire**

Ranger Nick carried out one of the South’s earliest prescribed fires in the Moore Plantation. Its purpose was to remove hazardous fuel and to improve the range herbage for cattle and wildlife. CCC boys planted the Moore, now a wildlife management area, including in the mix slash pine, the natural range of which does not extend west of the Mississippi River. We intended the fire to run against a south wind. The fire refused to run. About mid-afternoon Nick sent us with our backfire drip torches to a FS road, earlier a tram bed, on the
tract's south boundary, there to set a fire that would run with the wind. It did. It swept clean the soil of herbaceous material, pine straw, and liter until the head and tail fires met! There a brief firestorm occurred, the holocaust consuming everything in about a five-acre area. The controlled burn, apart from this exception, did not injure the planted pines. Fire running with the wind, under prescribed conditions, is a cool fire.

Fifteen years later, searching for sites to show students upon my going to work at Stephen F. Austin State College, after having long forgotten the prescribed burn, I chanced upon charred soil in a large barren zone. To the ranger station I went to learn what had happened here. Out of the compartment file folder fell a piece of rotting, worm-eaten yellow-dog, the cheap newsprint-quality paper on which we hand-wrote memos to the file. I had signed this one in 1948, soon after arriving on the job, calling trees in the one-day field examination loblolly pines. But they were slash pine. I think, as I look back, I reasoned well: the Sabine isn’t within the natural range of P. caribaea and I had never seen the species. To tally the saplings as loblolly pine was logical. The barren area was the site of the firestorm in 1949 noted above.

Special-Use Permits

Once a year we made the rounds of permittees, those folks who farmed a few acres of industry land since before FS acquisition. Two avoid hassles and to keep friends, we issued special-use permits at minimal or no cost. In approaching a permittee’s shack we’d stand back and loudly call out HULLO, lest a vicious dog find your rump tasty, as one did of mine. Finally, someone would appear, see the “gov’ment” shield on the side panel of the pickup, and show fear. Government always meant trouble for these people and, as a Snuffy Smith cartoon of the period illustrated, there was no distinction between the Treasury Department’s revenuers and the Agriculture Department’s foresters. So Snuffy says to Aunt Louise as the tree-badged fellow wearing the Smoky Bear hat walks up the trail, “Shoot him. Works for the same outfit, don’t he?"

When the HULLO is answered, you learn that no Jake lives there. Then, when told you want to give him a free-use permit so he can continue to plant, chop, and pick his cotton, the resident responds, “Oh, that Jake. He’s in the back room.” Many of the Jakes legally could have taken possession under squatters’ rights laws by fencing and farming the land for seven years.

Schools and churches received special-use permits. We even provided free stumpage for them. They got local peckerwood mills to convert the logs into rough-sawn lumber for the buildings.

Land-Line Controversy

One old-timer and his wife inherited the East Texas mean streak. The controversy involved a line being surveyed that separated their property from that of recently purchased government lands. The objection to the work of the surveyors was so strong that the old man ran off the survey party with a shotgun while the Missus, at an appropriate distance, cradled in her arms what
appeared to be a 30-06 rifle. Even the US marshal, sent in from Beaumont, was greeted uncivilly as he stood by the Jacob staff upon which was mounted the forester's compass. As I recall, final settlement of the dispute took place in a federal district courtroom in Beaumont. Old witness trees, cut at the base and carried to the courtroom, convinced the judge that the elderly folks did own the land. FS surveyors were trespassers. But such opinions were not unusual, for jurists and juries in these quarters generally took the side of those opposing the federal government's intrusion into the lives of citizens. They still do.

**Ticks**

Ticks, those pesky vermin transported by cattle and wildlife, agitated every woodworker. The eight-legged arachnids come in three sizes: "seed" ticks (larvae) smaller than the head of a straight pin; "yearlings (nymphs)," about an eight of an inch long; and adults, quarter- to a half-inch depending upon how full are the bellies of blood or of eggs. The South's wood ticks (*Dermacentor*) serve as vectors for Rickettsias, close kin to the typhus organism. Most disease is spread in the nymph stage of these "hard" ticks with life cycles spread over two years.

Brushing against tall grass or herbaceous weeds knocks them off their roots, seemingly by the thousands if they are seed ticks just released from the female adults' belly. The infants fan out quickly to cover your clothes, finding tunnels through garments to one's skin, then digging in for blood. A mulberry branch, the rough texture of its foliage velcro-like, comes in handy for swatting them from clothes. Yearlings do a better job of burrowing into a human's hide, but the fully grown adults, following the last moult, viciously mme for blood. Heat from a match or a lighted cigarette makes them back out. Pulling them out or digging them loose leaves the pincer jaws under the surface of the skin, often resulting in infection. In those days, we didn't have imported fire ants to hold ticks in check (according to some reports) nor deer as their hosts. And the FS didn't provide – if it was then available – repellents.

Ticks must be removed before entering the house. They are destroyed only by being torn apart with the fingernails. Squashing won't do, nor will drowning or discarding. We missed a few, but Lyme's disease had not yet been discovered nor had Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever been diagnosed in East Texas.

Not so bad are the chiggers, the notorious redbugs that burrow under the skin. While an alcohol rub helps soothe the itch, bib overall farmers standing on the town square just scratch wherever it itches. The scene can be hilarious.

I mentioned the lack of deer in the woods. In three years working the Sabine, I never saw a deer. If a sign was seen, a night hunt would soon follow. Locals totally ignored game laws, nor would judges, all elected, preside over a conviction. In East Texas, they said, "We don't harvest game; we harvest game wardens." And it was so. Today, with education, hunting clubs, deer leases, tough laws, and tougher enforcement, white-tails overstock to overbrowse, to their detriment, these woodlands.
I was accepted by the Yale Forest School and the FS at about the same time. Explaining the situation in a letter to Washington: Personnel, I received word to proceed to Texas, take leave without pay in September, and return to the district the next summer. My job, the letter said, would be protected, and it was. Returning from New Haven with a master's degree, I finished out the probationary year and was promoted to assistant district ranger.

As I write, nine professionals and some contractors do the work assigned Ranger Nicholas, John Johnson, and me in the 1940s. And today some 40,000 of the 180,000-acre forest are submerged under Toledo Bend Reservoir.