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## The Lands and Forests Division

*Robert Stetson*

The Civilian Conservation Corps reforested our hills by planting seedlings during the 1930s, but little is documented about a state program that took place just after World War II and continued this work: the Lands and Forests Division of the New York State Conservation Department.

But first, let me introduce myself: my mother died in the early 1940s, and Joe McGuire (the brother of a family friend) invited me to Gilboa for the summer. Joe and I worked on the road crew for the then-superintendent of roads Vern Pickett. Living on the farm of Joe and Sophie was one of the biggest events of my life. He taught me self-confidence and self-esteem, and from the time that I met them they always considered me part of their family. When I was discharged from the Army Air Corps in the spring of 1947, I came home to Joe and Sophie.



Joe and Sophie McGuire home, ca. 1947. Although we were poor, we did not recognize the harsh reality of it and we unfortunately did not even own a camera. This photo was taken by a friend in 1947.

At that time, we did not have electricity or running water, and heating and cooking was done by burning wood. This was not too great a problem as the McGuire home was in the woods between the Brown and Leroy Farms, and was within sight of the Leonard Hill fire tower.

By 1946–1947, Joe was working for the New York State Conservation Department in the Lands and Forests Division erecting the Leonard Hill fire tower, and I joined him for the final stages. After the construction was finished, this division was organized by county, with the purpose of thinning the reforested public lands and providing jobs for returning veterans.



Sophie McGuire & Bobby Stetson during summer of 1945

After we finished with the fire tower, we worked the state lands in the Burnt Hills area above Blenheim during the summer of 1947. We were to tend the area by thinning the forest and removing undergrowth. This was necessary as very large trees would prevent light from entering the forest and kill the younger trees. We would cut and fell a tree without damaging the younger growth, or alternatively girdle the tree by removing bark from around the trunk. This would kill the tree but would leave it standing to provide a wind shelter for the younger trees. The forest would mature and the dead tree would eventually fall and rot, causing no problem.

There was a section of Burnt Hills that contained rock oak trees. These were not planted but came from a number of old seed trees. Many of these giant trees were old, had become hollow, and provided homes for porcupines, the slowest reproducing rodent in North America (with a gestation period of over 200 days). Nevertheless, porcupines damage a lot of pine trees as they eat the tender bark and eventually kill the tree. Therefore, we destroyed their habitat by removing as many of the hollow oak trees as we could find.

We also worked on the large stand of larch trees that the CCC had planted in Broome Center and Manorkill. These trees were about 12 inches in diameter and were mixed with white and red pine. There, we had to remove gooseberry bushes that caused blister rust.

During the summer months, one man (usually one of the older men) was selected to find a spring, while during the winter months a man was selected to keep a fire burning. As a rule there were over 40 men working in the general area. We all carried our own axes—some double bladed, though the majority carried a single-blade plumb axe. We had use of a chain saw that was borrowed from another camp under special circumstances. This was a two-man chain saw with a five-foot blade and weighed 112 pounds.

We lived at home and drove in groups. Usually we were at the site in less than an hour after picking our riders up. Most areas had a small shack that contained special equipment, and one such place was on an access road near the Ferris camp overlooking Potter Hollow. We probably worked 4 or 5 acres on a good day. It was hard work and one of the hazards was stepping on a nest of yellow jackets. We had small pieces of rags that we would use to warn of a nest, but it was not uncommon to get up to 30 stings and possibly be taken to the doctor.

We discovered the remains of what turned out to be an original homestead from the Indian Wars. We found the hand-dug basement and the remnants of the log foundation; and you could see where wild animals had gnawed away the wood while eating the grease and salt located in the kitchen area. In addition there were wild hops growing around the foundation where they had cultivated hops. A large tree that was many years old had grown in the center of the basement. This homestead between Betty Brook Road and the old CCC Road was reported to Albany, and we were told that they had no knowledge of it being there since it had been

abandoned during the Indian Wars. Eventually we were told that they did identify the family who had fled. In retrospect it was only by a stroke of luck that we came upon it at all, as the area was completely in a heavily wooded area with considerable undergrowth.

In 1945, the rate paid for working on the Conesville Township Road doing manual labor was 25 cents per hour; if you operated the truck it was 35 cents per hour; the pay for a private in the army was \$50.00 per month; and the Lands and Forests Division was paying 75 cents per hour in 1947—a big boost in the pay scale of the time. However, by 1948, the division had only a few veterans remaining on the crew; farm workers had been exempt from military service and thus the area had fewer returning veterans. Also, the smaller peacetime demand for agricultural goods had driven domestic agriculture into a slump. The bottom line was that the program quickly lost its sheen as a veteran's program and started to be viewed as a public works program for the out-of-work. The program had significantly raised the standard of living in the community, but the funds began to run out in the fall of 1948 and the layoffs were not far behind.

Some might call this program a “pork barrel,” but I considered it a really good, beneficial program. It restored the forests—remember the 130 cords of wood we consumed each year and the reality that forests were essential to life at that time—while supporting veterans and raising the standard of living in the area. But even a good program may not last, so you have to depend on yourself. It is crystal clear to me that education is the key to success. If there is anything to be learned from this, it would be to “educate yourselves and your children.”



Leaving Gilboa, Bob returned to school, studied hydrodynamics, and went to work for a wunderkin who was trying to create an artificial valve for the aorta. It was a team effort that needed plastics and hydraulic engineers as well as medical personnel. Bob's task was to build simulators using experimental plastics and to conduct flow studies with them. The project succeeded early in 1968 and was later sold to a pharmaceutical conglomerate. Forty years later, Bob has now been successfully outfitted with the latest version of that life-saving device.

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