

# THE Newsletter of the Forest History Society

# CRUISER

## Founding Director Interviewed

### Rodney C. Loehr Remembers FHS Beginnings

The Forest History Society was founded in 1946. In the more than four decades since, the Society has had only three executive directors: **Rodney C. Loehr**, 1946–1950; **Elwood R. Maunder**, 1952–1977; and **Harold K. Steen**, 1978 to date. Recently, the *Cruiser* interviewed Loehr on the Society's earliest years.

During World War II, Loehr served as historical officer for the Joint Chiefs, and in 1945 returned to the history faculty at the University of Minnesota. When the Society (then called the Forest Products History Foundation) was founded in 1946 as a branch of the Minnesota Historical Society, Loehr accepted appointment as director. Under the plan, he was to work halftime for the university and halftime for the Society, but he recalls that "both were fulltime jobs."

Loehr credits **Theodore C. Blegen**, eminent historian and dean of the University of Minnesota Graduate School, as being the Society's "real father." He also remembered that Blegen had been able to take advantage of **F. K. Weyerhaeuser's** interest in history and attract start-up funds through grants to the Historical Society. Basic resources in hand, Loehr went to work.

"When I started out, the first thing to do was to define the subject. Where are the limits of the subject, what should be included?" Loehr's first searches turned up a scattering of books and articles but not much more. He took another tack, establishing an interim definition of "forest history" that began in the forest but stopped at the sawmill. Marketing, products manufacture, and use of those products were not included; instead, he decided logging and transporting logs to the mill would be the core of the field.

Loehr gave top priority to generating secondary forest history literature – books and articles – that would become the building blocks for a "national history." By 1950, the Society had produced twenty publications, eight by Loehr himself.

Since then the Society has reexamined the definition of "forest history" and has broadened it substantially to include forest resource professions, agencies and institutions, and the conservation movement itself. Production of secondary literature was augmented in 1957 with publication of the journal



Rodney C. Loehr was the first director of the Forest History Society.

now called *Forest & Conservation History*, and the Research Program has yielded sixteen books. The Library Program now maintains a bibliography of fourteen thousand citations to the secondary literature, a far cry from the "scattering" that Loehr had found earlier. The Library has also identified six thousand groups of records held by four hundred archival institutions in the United States and Canada, a rich resource for scholars interested in "forest history." Finally, the Society has contributed to the continent's archival troves by locating and facilitating the deposit literally of tons of records, as well as more than two hundred oral interviews with leaders of industry and professions.

Toward the end of the interview, the *Cruiser* asked Loehr whether in 1946 the Society had been envisioned as a permanent institution, rather than a five-year project to complete all necessary work. "Permanent," he answered, showing that historians can predict the future as well as interpret the past.

## Percy Research

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