In 1941 the American Forest Products Industries (AFPI), a trade promotion subsidiary of the National Lumber Manufacturers Association, launched a public relations campaign to counter growing negative public opinion about the forest industries and check the threat of federal regulation of private lands. Efforts included publishing a magazine and providing articles and fact sheets to media outlets and authors. After World War II, AFPI became a nonprofit organization, serving as the public information arm of the forest industries. (In 1993, the successors to the AFPI and NLMA became part of the American Forest & Paper Association.)

In publicizing the activities and accomplishments of the forest industries, AFPI made great use of photographs. Issues and topics depicted in photographs included forest management, fire prevention, recreation, multiple use, conservation, wildlife, and wilderness. Photos distributed by AFPI were used in press releases, informational and promotional publications, educational aids, articles, and ads, many of which are now in the AFPI collection housed at the Forest History Society. Photographs from this collection have been integrated into the larger FHS photo collection and are viewable in online photo galleries, at www.forest-history.org/Research/FHSPhotoGalleries.html.

Featured here are images by Kenneth S. Brown, an AFPI photographer in the 1950s and possibly the 1960s. It is believed that he was a freelance commercial photographer who had worked for Weyerhaeuser Timber Company in the 1930s and 1940s, photographing structures like railroad bridges to show the different uses of wood in construction. One of several photographers employed by AFPI, Brown apparently worked in the Pacific Northwest. The span of his career is uncertain because AFPI photographers were not credited in print, and he did not record dates as part of his photo information.

The typical AFPI images that appeared in national publications like Parade and National Geographic and in the organization’s own Forestry Digest, a monthly magazine, were group shots at award ceremonies or pictures of men operating machines, with the occasional aerial forest fire image to highlight the problem of wildfires. What is interesting about this series of photos by Brown, which we think were all taken in the 1950s in the Pacific Northwest, is how he played with perspective when photographing mundane subjects like firefighting equipment or lumber camp buildings. Instead of shooting a group of buildings or a bridge straight on, he shot from angles that not only showed depth of field but also engaged the viewer (FHS668, FHS3568, and FHS4445). In his photos of tools, he brings an unexpected aesthetic to very simple subjects: he frames each photo so as to remove them from their normal context. In FHS5919, he uses shadow and lighting to make a dramatic presentation of a fire pump and other hand tools. (Compare that with the treatment of the same tools by an unknown photographer in FHS5930.) In others, he simply uses a different angle—like shooting a line of fire pumps from below with two different orientations—to provoke an emotional reaction. It is not known why he took these particular images, whether as part of an assignment or for his own pleasure. But they do remind us that a firefighting tool can be more than just a tool—it can also be the subject of art. It just depends on one’s perspective.

BY JAMES G. LEWIS
A shovel, axe, and fire pump. Photographer unknown. (FHS5930) Compare the presentation of these same tools with Brown’s on the next page.

Trestle bridge (FHS668)

Fire lookout tower (FHS3568)

Logging camp housing (FHS4445)
Fire pump, mattock, axe, and shovel (FHS5919)
Fire pumps (FHS3940)
Shovels (FHS5921)
Mattocks (FHS5918)
Fire pumps
(FHS5916)
The forest debate continues…

For more than a century, Americans have carried on a debate about their forests, and the sometimes-heated discussions continue today. In his updated version of American Forests: A History of Resiliency and Recovery, Douglas W. MacCleery traces this debate from the time that forest management first came to the United States and became the center of the conservation movement to the present.

MacCleery’s history of recovery establishes that the “timber famine” that Theodore Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot so stridently forecast in the early 20th century never occurred. He shows that logged lands have come back, either through natural processes or by human effort, unless converted to agricultural or urban use. Also, many species of wildlife—once dwindled—are again abundant, forested watersheds are better protected, and the number of forest acres that burn each year has been dramatically reduced.

Nonetheless, as MacCleery points out, the new forests are different from the original forests, which had evolved according to nature’s rhythms and in response to native peoples’ significant manipulation. And while some wildlife species thrive under the new conditions, others do not. Appreciation of the forest as an ecosystem increases, but the debate continues.

Coming this spring

“...In a democracy, the best decisions are made by informed policy makers with support from informed citizens. Forest cycles are long and a historical context is essential.”

—From the Foreword by R. Scott Wallinger and Steven Anderson