

## SHOOT: Over 100 Years of Forest Service Photography

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Photography and the Forest Service have long gone hand in hand. From its early days, the Forest Service used visual images for public education and interpretation as well as for national forest management purposes. As photographic technology has changed over the course of the past century, Forest Service photographs have continued to provide an important means for education, interpretation, and administration.

In 1896 and 1897, Gifford Pinchot took photographs while traveling as an investigator for the National Forest Commission and as a special agent for the Department of the Interior to document proposed federal forests and land use. Some of these photographs would be added to the official agency photograph collection, which began when Pinchot arrived to lead the Division of Forestry in 1898. He required forestry agents to include black and white photographs with field inspection reports. Each forest was to send negatives and relevant documentation to the Washington Office where the negative was added to the permanent collection. Although the Division had no forests to manage—the forest reserves were still under the domain of the General Land Office in the Department of the Interior—Pinchot understood the power and ability of photography to educate the public about conservation.<sup>1</sup>

Photographers captured various forestry activities and land conditions. In the late nineteenth century, large format glass and celluloid negatives were the norm. The first “official” photograph for the collection was taken by future chief Henry Graves, who snapped images of cutover lands in upstate Franklin County, New York, in 1897. Another unique image from the early days is #523656, which captures Theodore Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot together on a trip of the Inland Waterways Commission in October 1907. Despite their close friendship and Roosevelt’s support for Pinchot’s work, it is the only known photograph of them alone together.<sup>2</sup>

With the transfer of the reserves to the Forest Service in 1905 and the renaming of the reserves as National Forests in 1907, photographs continued to educate the public, provide a management tool, and document activities on the national forests. At one point, there were over 650,000 numbered photographs in the official Forest Service collection, but today only about half remain. Still, this makes it one of the world’s largest single collections of twentieth-century forestry photographs. The National Archives in College Park, Maryland houses the original negatives and approximately 70,000 mounted prints with captions. The photograph collection continues to serve as a resource for scientists, natural resource professionals, and historians.

### THE PROCESS AND PROCESSING OF THE COLLECTION

Pinchot tasked George Sudworth, a Forest Service botanist who had photographed California’s giant sequoias, with crafting agency photographic guidelines. In 1906, Sudworth issued instructions and principles on camera use, photo composition, and image types. The process

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<sup>1</sup> Char Miller, “Gifford Pinchot, Photographer,” *Environmental History* 8 (April 2003): 312-315. Leland J. Prater, “Historical Forest Service Photo Collection,” *Journal of Forest History* (1974): 28-31.

<sup>2</sup> Image #523656 is available on the Library of Congress’ American Memory website, <http://memory.loc.gov>.

involved assigning consecutive numbers to negatives in the order in which they were received in Washington. This number was printed on the bottom right corner of the image and continues to provide a crucial means for identifying historical photographs. Field notes from the photographer were added to an index. The Washington Office created print browsing files that could be searched by subject, location, and chronology. Many of these early photographs documented forestry practices, homesteading, mining, grazing, wildlife, towns and cities, scenic and historic places, construction, recreation areas, wilderness, and research.<sup>3</sup>

Photography quickly became routine in the Forest Service and proved useful on every forest. By 1920, the collection included over 159,000 pictures and by 1940 over 400,000. Between July 1911 and September 1920, photographs were assigned numbers 1A through 50543A. In 1920, the “A” was dropped and numbering began with 150,000 and continued to 866,000. Photographic direction in 1937 emphasized that the agency “has a need for good photographs, and field officers are urged to take advantage of every opportunity to obtain unusual and meritorious pictures. To this end cameras and film are supplied.” The process involved the photographer recording the image description, which included location, state and forest, month and year, features, activities, tree and flora species, and names of mountains and rivers. The film and descriptions were then sent to the Washington Office, where it was developed. Prints were returned for field review with the photographer selecting negatives for the permanent file and returning them to Washington where permanent numbers were placed on the negatives. Generally, all developing and printing was completed by the Washington Office, but policy allowed for local development with Regional Forester approval. Requests for additional prints were handled by the Information and Education division.<sup>4</sup>

Through World War Two, all official photographs were collected in the Washington Office. After the war, policies were relaxed and by the mid 1960s, the process of collecting still photographs in the Washington Office stopped. By this time, black and white photography had been eclipsed by 35mm color slides, which have now been replaced by digital photography. From 1965-1978, between eighty to ninety percent of images added to the permanent collection were color slides. While these were used widely in various programs and publications, they also presented conservation problems because slides deteriorate far more quickly than black and white film. In 1979, of the 750,000 images in the collection, 525,000 were black and white negatives and 225,000 were color slides. Out of the 750,000, 135,000 captured images of work activities. Negatives numbered 1 through 423,000, which covered the years from 1897-1942, were all transferred to the National Archives by 1979. As a result of growing space and storage concerns in the Washington Office in the mid 1980s, nearly 70,000 prints were transferred to the National Agricultural Library for proper care. These negatives are now part of the collection at the National Archives. In the late 1980s, the Forest Service cooperated with the National Agricultural Library and the University of Maryland to produce laser discs of 34,000 black and

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<sup>3</sup> Prater, “Historical Forest Service Photo Collection.”

<sup>4</sup> Alan Fusonie and William Hauser, “The Forest Service Photograph Collection and Laser Disk Technology at NAL,” Agricultural Libraries Information Notes, USDA 13:9 (February 1988) in “History: Forest Service—Photograph Collection,” Forest Service Headquarters History Collection, Forest History Society, Durham, NC (hereafter FHS). Quotation from Form 166, Photographic Direction, USDA Forest Service, November 1937, FHS.

white images covering 69 general subjects, 500 color slides, 55 botanical illustrations, and 175 maps. Some of these discs still exist, although equipment for reading them is limited.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to the official collection, many unofficial photographs were taken and stored in Forest Service offices in less than ideal circumstances. For many years, these local photograph collections have helped meet individual forest and ranger district needs. Some of these images still survive in a variety of locations across the country. Old photographs on Forest Service ranger districts, experiment stations, and forests have often been unearthed for various publications or events, interpretive displays, or for repeat photography projects examining change over time. Many have been catalogued and digitized to foster ease of use. The number of unofficial photographs, which also included images rejected by the Washington Office, are likely greater in number than official photographs.

## INDIVIDUALS BEHIND THE PHOTOGRAPHS

In the early days, the Division and later Bureau of Forestry operated as a sort of extension service and public information office. In addition to taking photographs, staff also purchased photographs of logging, city landscaping, tree types, land devastation, erosion, fire, and insects from outside sources. As part of a generation who increasingly viewed and used photography as a documentation tool, Pinchot envisioned possibilities far greater than mere publicity. While Jacob Riis used photography to bring attention to squalid urban conditions in *How the Other Half Lives*, Pinchot and the foresters of the Forest Service used their cameras to focus attention on the nation's forests. These images, like their urban counterparts, proved crucial to the Progressive Era conservation movement. Interestingly, Riis' son, John, worked for the Forest Service in Montana and Oregon from 1907-1913 before following in his father's footsteps and becoming a journalist in Richmond, Virginia. The younger Riis published *Ranger Trails* in 1937, reflecting on his time with the Forest Service.<sup>6</sup>

Forest Service photographer and Washington Office photo manager Leland Prater knew more about the photograph collection than anyone else. Prater retired from the agency in 1966 after working with the photograph collection for 30 years. In 1962, he devised a computer system to code photographic information, which included more than 23,000 negatives when he retired. As a volunteer in retirement, Prater continued to catalogue and code photographs into the 1990s.<sup>7</sup>

K.D. Swan is one of the best-known Forest Service photographers, having spent thirty-seven years with the outfit. His memoir, *Splendid was the Trail*, captures his experiences carrying heavy and cumbersome photographic equipment into the forests as well as the relationships he developed with the people and places of the west. Originally from Massachusetts, Swan received his graduate degree in forestry from Harvard and was appointed a forest assistant in Montana in 1911. Hired the year after the Big Blowup, Swan entered an agency focused on preventing and

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<sup>5</sup> Still Photography Management Study, USDA Forest Service, Winter 1978-79 and "The Forest Service Photo Laser Videodisc" fact sheet, October 1987, both in "History: Forest Service—Photograph Collection," FHS.

<sup>6</sup> John Riis, *Ranger Trails: The Life and Times of a Pioneer U.S. Forest Service Ranger in the West on the La Sal, Santa Barbara, Cache, and Deschutes National Forests, 1907-1913*, ed. Les Joslin (Bend, OR: Wilderness Associates: 2008).

<sup>7</sup> Prater, "Historical Forest Service Photo Collection."

controlling fire. In 1913, he was reassigned to the Missoula regional office as a topographic draftsman and spent the remainder of his career working out of that office, much of the time in public information. In the 1920s, the region established an Information and Education branch that used photography to help inform the public and agency personnel about the forest, emphasizing their value to the nation and the work involved in managing forest lands.

Many of Swan's photographs depicted lumbering on national forests as well as methods of logging, milling, and transportation. Domestic life, fashions, and social conditions were also captured, providing an important part of the historical record. Many photographs initially focused on efforts to prevent and control forest fires. In the 1930s, Swan captured CCC and forest recreation. His photographs appeared in agency as well as national publications such as *National Geographic*, *New York Times*, and *The Christian Science Monitor*. Swan's images, along with many others, were also used in Forest Service "showboats," where personnel traveled with photographs, slides, and motion pictures to discuss forest conservation. Forest Service collections at the Denver Public Library contain materials from various "showboat" presentations along with the original glass negatives and lantern slides used by Forest Service personnel. Swan, like many of his colleagues, presented numerous programs each year. Like his Forest Service photographer colleagues, Swan's work helped build support for conserving natural resources.<sup>8</sup>

## ACCESSING THE COLLECTION

Today, collections remained scattered but the internet places several extensive photo collections at the user's fingertips. Over 500 Forest Service images are digitized in the National Archives' online Archival Research catalog. Nearly 3,600 images from the photograph collection at the National Archives are online through the Forest Service website. Current efforts involve digitizing all 70,000 photographs in the permanent historical collection and adding them to a comprehensive web-based searchable digital image library that will include all Forest Service historic and current photographs. At the Forest History Society, over 13,000 images from Region 9 are now searchable online. National Forests in Region 3 have each posted 100 historical images online. The Southern Research Station has over 3,300 historical images online and the Rocky Mountain Research Station has posted photographs related to several historic experimental forests and stations. The *Greatest Good* film website contains a variety of historic Forest Service photographs. The Second Alaskan Aerial Survey contains aerial photographs of areas in and adjacent to the Tongass National Forest during the 1920s. Photographs were taken by the Navy's Alaskan Aerial Survey Detachment and record the physical and surface features of the Tongass and the neighboring islands of the Alexander Archipelago.

A variety of other Forest Service photographic materials exists at the National Archives, including images of international forest management, cooperative assistance programs, and overseas forestry activities from 1900 to 1970. *Views from the National Forest, 1915-1933*, consists of four albums of photographs from the collection that were assembled around 1933 and loaned to four railroad lines—Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe, Southern Pacific, Southern Railway, and Union Pacific—for display in their lounge cars. In addition to individual photo

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<sup>8</sup> Kirby Lambert, "Forest Images by K.D. Swan: Pictures Needed in the Telling," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 56 (Spring 2006): 60-64; "Splendid Was The Trail: Photographs of the National Forests by K.D. Swan, 1911-1947," <http://www.fs.fed.us/rl/centennial/swan.shtml>.

captions, a running narrative provides an introduction to the goals and efforts of the Forest Service, including information on erosion, conservation, fire prevention, reforestation, forest and range management, CCC activities, and recreation opportunities. This album is available online through the Forest History Society.

More than thirty-five years ago Charlotte Palmer wrote, “Historians who wish to interpret the current concern for ecology in its historical context will be grateful to Gifford Pinchot who initiated a full-scale photographic history of the American environment when he became chief forester.”<sup>9</sup> At the beginning of the twentieth century, Pinchot used photography to educate Americans about forest conditions and the need to manage them properly. Photography helped him make his case and contributed to the rise of professional forestry in the United States. Forest Service photographers captured some truly amazing imagery and their work has helped a later generations examine the development of forestry in America. A 1958 Forest Service publication reminded personnel that photographs could help tell the story of Forest Service work and “inform the American people how we are managing the national forests.”<sup>10</sup> The combination of digital photography and the internet now enable the Forest Service to use photographs not only as a research tool but also as an educational tool for a global audience. In the twenty-first century, photography continues to prove vital for conducting the Forest Service’s work and communicating agency programs and activities to the public. Forest Service photographs capturing past agency activities now provide opportunities to explore the nation’s changing landscape over the previous century, and with continued conservation and digitization, will continue to do so well into the next one.

#### Online Forest Service Images:

National Archives Forestry Images: <http://www.archives.gov/research/arc/topics/forestry/>

Forest History Society Photograph Database:  
<http://www.foresthistory.org/Research/photos.html>

Views from the National Forests: <http://foresthistory.org/Research/Views/ExhibitEnter.html>

U.S. Forest Service Image Database: <http://fs.jorge.com/default.html>

Region 3 Historic Photographs: <http://www.fs.fed.us/r3/about/history/photo.shtml>

Southern Research Station Collection: <http://toto.lib.unca.edu/findingaids/photo/usfs/Default.htm>

Rocky Mountain Research Station Photographs: <http://www.rmrs.nau.edu/imagedb/bcollection.shtml>

*Greatest Good* Photograph Galleries: <http://www.fs.fed.us/greatestgood/film/gallery.shtml>

Alaskan Aerial Survey Photographs: [http://www.fs.fed.us/r10/spf/fhp/repeat\\_photo\\_se/index.php](http://www.fs.fed.us/r10/spf/fhp/repeat_photo_se/index.php).

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<sup>9</sup> Charlotte Palmer, “Conservation and the Camera,” *Prologue* (Winter 1971): 183-196.

<sup>10</sup> *Making Good Pictures*, USDA Forest Service Handbook, 1640-Audio-Visual Media, June 1958, FHS.