

THE FOREST RANGER, 1907 to 1944

by Clyde P. Fickes

In 1939 I received a letter from Gifford Pinchot, the founder and first forester of the United States Forest Service, which reads as follows:

1615 Rhode Island Ave., N.W.,  
Washington, D.C.,  
December 11, 1939.

Mr. Clyde P. Fickes,  
Forest Service,  
Missoula, Montana.

Dear Mr. Fickes:

You and I are old-timers. You know what you personally and the Service went through in the early days. You and I both had a part in those days when the foundations of the Forest Service were laid.

The record of how the Forest Service was born, fought, conquered, and grew up is of National importance, and surely ought to be preserved in full.

I want to do what I can toward assuring that the story of what we did, what we faced, and why, gets told straight; and I am trying to put down what I know about it and what I had to do with it, with the idea of printing it in a book. In this undertaking I need and very much want your help.

Many of the men who were in the Service during my time have already been of immense help. They have sent me personal narratives telling what each one did and saw, what he and the Service were up against, and what he thought about it. The result is a composite account of the Service that I am finding invaluable.

But that is not all. Taken together, the narratives are of almost unbelievable historical value. I want to make the collection as complete as possible, and to provide for its preservation, so that the story of the Service may never be lost.

Would you be willing to write down and give me an account of your connection with the Forest work of the Government? If so, I hope

you will let me have, as soon as you conveniently can, whatever you are willing to give at least for the period prior to the World War.

What you send not only will help me with my book, but also will be permanently preserved, with other similar historical material in my possession, in the Library of Congress. Your experience is of great value and should be made part of the record.

In your story I hope you will describe the positions you have filled, your duties in each, the names of persons and places, descriptions of early conditions, and anecdotes--all that you possibly can. And especially dates, so that what you send can be combined with the accounts of others. You cannot put in too many dates.

What I want is anything you can tell, and all you will tell, told in your own way. Above all, I want a picture of your work year by year, and of the conditions under which it was done, the difficulties you had to face, the opposition or cooperation you met, and from whom the friendly or hostile public sentiment of the time, and if it changed, what made it change. In fact, you cannot give me anything that I will not be glad to have. I hope you will include the reason or influence that made you go into forestry.

Furthermore, I shall be immensely grateful for any information you can give me concerning collections of personal papers of your own or former members of the Forest Service--letters, diaries, or whatever else--that would properly form part of the historical material that will go to the Library of Congress for permanent preservation.

I thank you most heartily in advance for your help to your old Chief, who sends you his best appreciation and regards.

Faithfully yours,  
/s/ Gifford Pinchot

A letter was prepared in reply to his request but for some reason or other it did not get mailed. This is how it reads:

Dear Mr. Pinchot:

Thanks for classifying me with the "old timers" of the Forest Service. It is a distinction which anyone of us can always be proud of. In these days, I really like to brag about it. I was such a young sprout when I first came to the Forest Service that it is hard for some to now realize that my term of service, interrupted by several vacations, began so long ago. A story, such as you ask for, must necessarily include some personal history, if only to show the influence which governed my earlier desires to take up the work.

While I was born in Nelson, Nuckols County, Nebraska, in 1884, I grew up during the nineties on my maternal grandfather's farm in

Bedford County, Pennsylvania and in the city of Pittsburgh. My earliest recollections are of a lovely farm surrounded with wooded hills over which I roamed with two shepherd dogs almost at will, being at times a source of some considerable worry to my grandmother and an aunt. My mother had died in Kearny, Nebraska in 1889. Early reading was frontier stories, Indian stories, "Harry Castleman" stories, Cooper's Leatherstocking tales and similar outdoor yarns.

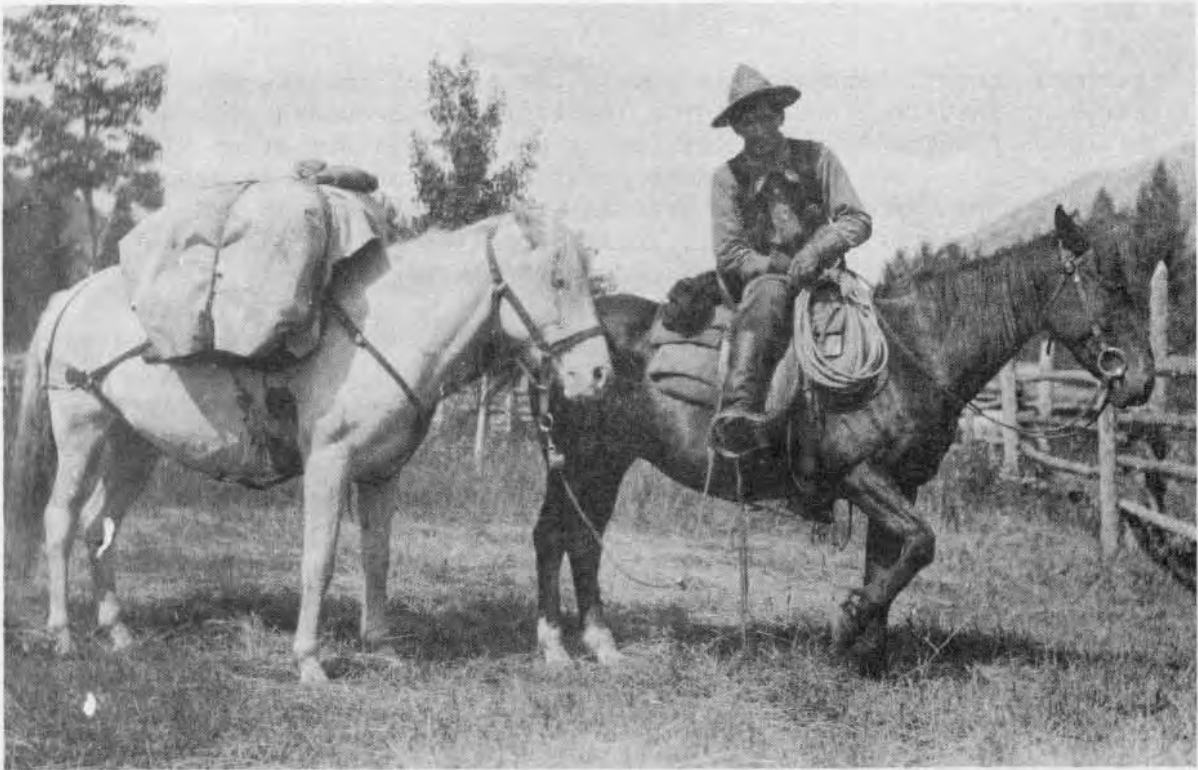
In the summer of 1900 I drifted to Kalispell, Montana, via Nebraska visiting relatives, arriving there on August 1. An uncle, Wm. F. Stufft, had a ranch a mile or so northwest of town; and I stayed with them for awhile. Two uncles had homesteads along the west shore of Flathead Lake. That winter I attended Flathead County High School--the year it was changed from a 2-year school to a 4-year school, so there was no graduation class in 1901.

I returned to the East with my father, and we visited the World's Fair at Buffalo, New York, just a few days before President McKinley was shot by an assassin. I attended school at the Ohio Northern University during 1901 to 1903.

In the fall of 1904 I returned to Kalispell, Montana and have been here practically ever since. A winter trapping in the hills around Tally Lake north of Kalispell, followed by 2 years on stock ranches, working for the Bureau of Reclamation on the location survey of the Milk River diversion canal out of St. Mary's Lake on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation, and other related activities taught me something of how to function in an outdoor atmosphere.

During this period I was reading Munsey's, Pearson's, Everybody's, and similar magazines which were preaching conservation. Being a rabid partisan of Teddy Roosevelt, I naturally was enthusiastic about the policies he was preaching. The forests were something that I knew about; and I readily absorbed the virus of "Forest Conservation," as preached by Pinchot and others. Needless to say, I was surrounded by adversaries on every side. My uncles and cousins were all what I called "land grabbers" and lived accordingly. Roosevelt and his wild-eyed conservation ideas were going to ruin the country by locking it up and giving only the Indians (to hear them talk) a place in it.

About this time, November 1906, my cousin and I made a backpack trip up the South Fork of the Flathead River--just looking the country over--and camped one evening at Fish Lake. By the time we had our lean-to fixed for the night, it began to snow real good. Great big flakes of snow would come drifting down, and as each one hit the water a fish jumped at it. It did not take long to catch all we wanted to eat. In the morning it looked like a good idea to take off for the lower country--which we did. At Beaver Park, on the river, we found a small tent standing and decided to camp there for the night. Along about 8 o'clock in the evening, having built up a good fire which we hoped would last until morning, we laid down to sleep. About



C. P. Fickes, Forest Ranger, Lewis and Clark N.F.,  
Hannan Gulch R.S., on Sun River. August 1907



Hannan Gulch R.S., Lewis and Clark N.F. January 1908

9 o'clock we heard bells, some loud talk and horse noises. It turned out to be Forest Ranger Dan Sullivan and his assistant, Frank Opalka, with a string of packhorses bringing out the camps used during the summer. They were wet, cold, and hungry and happy to see a good fire going and some supper prospects. Also, Sullivan was suffering with an ulcerated tooth that was giving him plenty of grief. The next morning we helped them pack up and traveled down the trail to the railroad where we left them and returned to Kalispell on the Great Northern passenger train. Naturally, we asked quite a few questions about where they had been and what they were doing.

That was my first contact with Forest Rangers and their work, and the impressions received caused me to apply for work on the old Lewis and Clark National Forest in the spring of 1907. At that time, the Lewis and Clark National Forest included practically all the area in Montana between the Canadian line on the north and the Clark Fork River on the south, the Idaho line on the west and the prairie on the east side of the Continental Divide. For administrative purposes, the area had been divided into two sections, with the Great Northern Railway as the dividing line. The headquarters of both Forests were in Kalispell. A man named F. N. Haines was Supervisor of the Northern Division, and Page S. Bunker was Supervisor of the Southern Division. Bunker was on a detail to the Washington Office; and a man named Schoonover, who became the first Supervisor of the Kootenai and died of typhoid fever in Libby, was acting Supervisor, assisted by Ranger A. C. McCain, from the Sun River Ranger District, who became the first Supervisor of the Otter National Forest at Ashland, Montana and the man I made contact with about a job on the National Forest.