“New Faces, Same Old Values”: Revisiting a History of Attitudes Towards Women in the Forest Service
By James G. Lewis

In light of the recent news about the systemic and system-wide problem of sexual harassment in the U.S. Forest Service, and other federal land management agencies, I thought it useful to offer some historical perspective. In short, this is not a recent problem. The following excerpt from my book The Greatest Good and the Forest Service: A Centennial History (2005), from the chapter entitled "New Faces, Changing Values," demonstrates that women—and minorities, too—have almost always struggled to be seen as peers and equals in the Forest Service, particularly in the timber and fire management areas, which traditionally have been the domain of white males. If I were writing this chapter today, I might instead call it “New Faces, Old Values.” Because it seems that the only thing that has changed is the names of those involved.

What stood out to me when revisiting this passage are the parallels between the agency's timber management era in mid-20th century and today's era of fire management—first, that if you wanted to advance up the organization's ladder quickly, you worked in those fields because that's what dominated the agency's focus and budget. Second, conforming and peer pressure to conform meant not questioning authority. Those who did, whether they are female or from nonforestry backgrounds, were marginalized. Last, sadly, that the attitude held by some towards women working in timber then and fire now hasn't substantially changed much over the last half-century. There have always been notable exceptions, of course, of men helping women make their way, as in the cases of Deanne Shulman and Geraldine “Geri” Bergen Larson. Too often, though, it's been like what Gene Bernardi encountered in 1973, who, when left with little choice, sued the agency over sexual discrimination.

A decade after Gene Bernardi filed suit, a Forest Service employee noted, “Given the Forest Service’s traditional values, it’s a big step to open up the organization to women and minorities. It'll take time, but we’re getting there.” Thirty-five years later, with the agency’s employment practices under continued scrutiny, the agency appears far from there.

The foresters and engineers who dominated leadership positions [in the 1950s] came from similar backgrounds. They were white males, usually from middle-class families and rural, conservative backgrounds. They trained in one of twenty-seven forestry programs that all emphasized timber production yet required little if any understanding of nontimber resources.1 Those with military experience were unlikely to question authority and placed the interests of the agency above their own.…

In 1960, Herbert Kaufman published a study of administrative behavior in the Forest Service. He sought to learn how field personnel operating under the agency’s decentralized system, which allowed the lowest-ranking officers to make decisions without consulting superior officers, succeeded at consistently high levels. Kaufman found that the Forest Service recruited men with technical knowledge and practical skills who also had the will to conform and carry out what he called “the preformed decisions” of their superiors, which could be found in the ranger’s bible, the Forest Service Manual.…2

Rangers also kept diaries and filed reports that would eventually reveal deviation. Because personnel were rotated every two to three years, any inconsistencies might be found and reported by one’s successor. In such an atmosphere, a forester who questioned operations might...
be labeled a troublemaker and place his career at risk. By handling personnel this way, Kaufman noted, the Forest Service “enjoyed a substantial degree of success in producing field behavior consistent with headquarters directives and suggestions.”

Within the agency, there may have been disagreement about what to do or how to do it, but once a decision was made, everyone accepted it and worked to implement it. That a forester’s peers rarely questioned his decision contributed to a sense of always doing what was best for the land. The emphasis on conformity and obedience fostered what one forester called the “myth of the omnipotent forester,” an attitude that came to dominate the agency’s thinking. In the mid-1960s, a seasoned forester told newly hired foresters, “We must have enough guts to stand up and tell the public how their land should be managed. As professional foresters, we know what’s best for the land.”

**Women: The Deskbound Years**

Women had worked in clerical positions as “typewriters” in the Washington headquarters office since the agency’s Division of Forestry days. Before World War II, the agency hired very few women for professional positions. Eloise Gerry, the first woman appointed to the professional staff of the Forest Products Laboratory, just after its opening in 1910, is a noteworthy figure not only because of her scientific achievements but also as an exception to the men’s-club attitude that prevailed well into the late twentieth century. In the 1910s, the agency began hiring women as draftsmen, bibliographers, and what would later be called information specialists but made it clear that women were not welcome to apply for jobs that took them into the field. That remained the agency’s position until the 1970s.

Serving as a clerk provided the other major opportunity for women in the Forest Service. Before Chief Pinchot reorganized the Forest Service and established regional offices in 1908, women rarely worked in the forest supervisor’s office. The reorganization created new jobs and the opportunity to move west. Initially, men deemed the work too rough for women, contending it required a “two-fisted ranger” or forest officer to assemble and ship fire tools, round up volunteer firefighters from bars and saloons, and perform other nonclerical tasks. As the men advanced, however, women found themselves tackling the work of the “two-fisted ranger” as well as paperwork. Office work quickly became a “pink collar” job.

A district clerk was the backbone of the organization, providing continuity between district rangers as they rotated through and briefing the new rangers on local issues.

Clerks took care of expected clerical duties such as payroll, issuing permits, and hiring seasonal employees, and worked as much as eleven hours a day five days a week. With the ranger often in the field, the clerk also became the public face of the Forest Service. Clerks “had to be schooled in what the agency was all about” to interact with users of the national forests—ranchers, miners, loggers, or vacationers—concerning rules, regulations, and local conditions. It became agency folklore that the district clerk of the 1950s and 1960s did the job of twelve people today.

The Forest Service did hire thirteen women with forestry degrees before World War II, but they remained deskbound, prevented from doing the ranger’s rough-and-tumble job in the field. In 1934, the Forest Service appointed Alice Goen Jones as an entry-level junior forester in Region 5. Jones had a degree in forestry from the University of California at Berkeley, but the agency’s position on women as forest rangers had been made clear three years before her appointment in *The Forest Rangers’ Catechism in Region Five* (1931): “Women are not appointed by the Forest Service as members of the field force even if they pass the civil service
examination.” Jones remained in research throughout her career and, as late as 1972, still encountered sexual discrimination.9

World War II temporarily allowed women to get out from behind their desks and demonstrate their field skills. In addition to Forest Service positions such as fire lookout and patrol, cooks for fire crews, telephone operators, patrolmen, and truck drivers, women took over traditionally male jobs in private industry—logging, operating mill saws, and scaling lumber. But when the war ended, women were removed from their jobs in favor of men returning home. The end of the war also spelled the end for the old-style ranger who had gotten the job because he lived in the area and knew the land and his neighbors. After World War II, as land management became more professional and complicated, a ranger needed to have a college degree. The G.I. Bill enabled veterans to go to college and earn degrees in forestry.

After World War II, the Forest Service continued to discourage women from applying for junior forester positions. Officials held to the old assumption that a female forester would get pregnant and resign to start a family or subordinate her career to that of her husband and move away. And if she married a forester, nepotism laws required one of them to leave the Forest Service.10

An agency employment leaflet from around 1950 stated the agency’s position on women in field positions: “The field work of the Forest Service is strictly a man’s job because of the physical requirements, the arduous nature of the work, and the work environment.”11 The only way to find out whether women could do the job was to hire them, but that was not permitted: it was a man’s job. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, which required employers to provide equal employment opportunities, meant the agency would have to change its hiring practices….

The feminist and civil rights movements were slow to affect the Forest Service. As late as 1976, women held eighty-four percent of clerical jobs in the agency and fifteen percent of administrative and technical jobs, but fewer than two percent of full-time professional jobs.12 The career of Geraldine “Geri” Bergen Larson was typical of the handful of women with a forestry degree. Although she ranked at the top of the 1962 forestry class at Berkeley and then earned a master’s degree in botany, Larson had to work in research and public information instead of in the field, as she hoped to do, from 1967 to 1972. Her work on environmental issues and her educational background led to her appointment as the regional environmental coordinator for Region 5 in 1972, an unusual position for a woman to hold at that time. She developed regional policy to implement the National Environmental Policy Act, consulted in the field with people working on environmental impact statements, and coordinated those and other similar activities with the Washington office and other federal agencies.13

Larson still wanted to work in forest management. Bob Lancaster, the forest supervisor on the Tahoe National Forest, discussed her aspirations with Doug Leisz, the regional forester. Leisz hesitated because Larson’s husband, who owned his own business in San Francisco, would have to move in order for her to advance in the agency. She and her husband worked out a compromise that allowed her to accept the appointment as deputy forest supervisor of the Tahoe National Forest in 1978, making her the first female line officer. She took over the Tahoe in 1985 and became the first female forest supervisor in the agency’s history.14

A year after Larson made it into the field as deputy forest supervisor, the first woman candidate for smokejumper training arrived at McCall smokejumper base in Idaho. Women were not hired on a permanent basis to fight fires by a federal agency until 1971, when the Bureau of Land Management put an all-female firefighting crew to work in Alaska. The Forest Service reluctantly followed suit in the continental United States, at first fielding all-women crews, then
integrating women into existing firefighting teams. The agency debate about placing women in a
dangerous occupation foreshadowed the later national debate about women in the military; both
centered on whether women had the strength and temperament for traditional male jobs.15

By 1978, women had joined hotshot crews and helitack units, in which firefighters rappel
from helicopters. The following year, Deanne Shulman, a seasonal firefighter since 1974 who
had served on a hotshot crew and a helitack unit, applied for and was accepted into the
smokejumpers program at McCall. When Shulman reported for training, she was told that she
did not meet the minimum weight threshold and was immediately dismissed. As she packed to
leave, she learned from some sympathetic male jumpers that, over the years, several men who
were underweight had not been dismissed. Allen “Mouse” Owen, a four-foot-eleven, 120-pound
Vietnam War vet who had received congressional waivers on the height and weight requirements
and had been with the smokejumpers for ten years, contacted her and encouraged her to fight for
her rights.16

Shulman did not dispute the legality of her termination but argued that the weight
requirement had been waived for others and that she should receive equal treatment. When her
initial complaint to the forest supervisor proved unsatisfactory, she filed a formal Equal
Employment Opportunity complaint. The Forest Service, faced with unwanted media scrutiny
over the dismissal, reconsidered and offered her another chance as long as she met the minimum
weight when she reported, which she did. Shulman completed the training in 1981 to become the
first female smokejumper in the United States. Other women soon followed, and another closed
door was permanently opened.

Other doors had begun to open as well. The Forest Service appointed its first woman
district ranger, Wendy Milner Herrett, in 1979. Herrett had started her career as a landscape
architect at Region 6 headquarters in Portland, Oregon. As district ranger, she oversaw 346,000
acres on the Blanco Ranger District of the White River National Forest in Colorado.17 Her
appointment foreshadowed another change: unlike other district rangers, she was neither a
forester nor an engineer.

The Consent Decree
Forest Service leadership did not formally address the problem of discrimination against women
and minorities in the workplace until a lawsuit in 1973 forced them to do so. At the Forest
Service experiment station in Berkeley, Gene Bernardi, a female Forest Service sociologist,
applied for a position but the hiring supervisor decided to wait for a male applicant. In 1973,
Bernardi sued on the basis of sexual discrimination under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of
1964, as amended by the Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1972, and won compensation
but not the job. She and several other women then filed a class-action lawsuit over the hiring and
promotion of women and minorities in Region 5, which covers all of California.

In 1979, the Forest Service agreed to a consent decree, which the district court approved
in 1981. The decree meant the agency had to bring its California workforce into line with that of
the state’s civilian labor force by having women in more than 43 percent of the jobs in each job
series and grade. The Forest Service agreed to monitor progress and enforce the rulings. The
Reagan administration argued that the Bernardi decree represented little more than a hiring quota
system, and its opposition delayed the Forest Service’s efforts to comply, leading U.S. District
Court Judge Samuel Conti to extend its terms until 1991; in 1992, the parties agreed to a new
settlement that expired in 1994.
Forced to implement the consent decree or find itself in contempt of court, the Forest Service began to increase the number of women at the GS-11 through GS-13 levels to give them the experience and exposure that would qualify them for higher administrative positions. Aiding its efforts was the implementation of environmental laws, such as the National Forest Management Act, that expanded the agency’s responsibilities and required more workers with backgrounds in recreation management, sociology, and other nonforestry disciplines, disciplines that many women had entered because they held more opportunities than did forestry. The rapid promotions of women, however, proved a powerfully divisive issue among employees. Many felt that the consent decree put “accelerated” women in an unfair position, forcing them to succeed or be judged as failures. Some did succeed, to the benefit of the Forest Service, but others did not, and both they and the agency “lost.” The shift away from the concept of meritocracy in hiring and promotion practices generated resentment within a few years and created a difficult work atmosphere in Region 5.18

Though the Forest Service stepped up the recruiting of women following the consent decree, with so few women in management or in the sciences to serve as mentors or role models, women began seeking ways to connect with one another. The journal Women in Forestry (later Women in Natural Resources) began publication in 1983 “to provide ideas and information for, from, and about women in the forestry profession.”19 The journal gave women a place to voice their concerns and problems, to learn from one another, and to diminish the isolation they experienced in male-dominated land management agencies.

Professional women entering the Forest Service brought with them a different perspective on the relationship between humans and the environment. A survey conducted in 1990 found that “women in the Forest Service exhibit greater general environmental concern than men” and in particular were more in favor of reducing timber-harvest levels on national forests and designating additional wilderness areas. Another survey found that nontraditional professionals (regardless of gender) held beliefs similar to those of the women in the first survey. Subsequent studies have shown little or no difference in attitudes concerning general environmental issues between men and women, but women exhibited “significantly more concern than men about local or community-based environmental problems.” Taken together, the studies suggest that the increase in the number of nontraditional employees had a measurable impact on the attitudes of other employees and was changing the agency’s management focus. Forest Service employees’ values are now more closely aligned with those of the general public they serve.20

Minorities and Cultural Biases
While women made their way into new positions in the agency, African Americans held the fewest jobs of any race at all levels. African Americans had to overcome cultural bias not only in the Forest Service but also within the black community itself. When Charles “Chip” Cartwright considered forestry in the 1960s, agricultural careers carried the stigma of field labor during slavery. Cartwright had been discouraged from studying forestry by his college professors for that reason.21 But Cartwright’s summer job as a Forest Service fire lookout made him want to persevere. After graduating in 1970, he became one of the first African American foresters in the agency and was subsequently the first African American district ranger in 1979, the first African American forest supervisor in 1988. He took charge of Region 3 (Southwest) in 1994 and was succeeded in 1998 by Ellie Towns, the first African American woman appointed regional forester. Shortly after becoming district ranger in Washington’s Okanogan National Forest in
1979, Cartwright began working with black community leaders in nearby Seattle, hoping to attract black youths to enroll in the Young Adult Conservation Corps and forestry schools. Unlike African Americans, Americans Indians and Hispanics have long been associated with the Forest Service. Because of the agency’s early strategy to hire locals who knew the land and its users best, some of the first rangers in the Southwest came from the local Hispanic population. In fact, three members of one family were serving as rangers before the 1905 transfer, and four Hispanic rangers were listed at the time of the transfer on the nation’s most remote ranger district, the Cuyama District, in what is now the Los Padres National Forest in central coastal California.

But those early hiring practices had long been abandoned, and in the 1980s, Hispanic employees in Region 5 filed a class-action lawsuit. The resolution they reached with the Forest Service in 1992 required the agency to actively recruit, hire, and retain more Hispanics. A second settlement agreement in 2002, like the consent decree of 1979, included further measures to bring the number of Hispanic employees in line with California’s workforce, of which Hispanics comprise about thirty percent. As of 2003, Hispanics accounted for about ten percent of the Region 5 payroll.

The Arrival of the Ologists
Implementing the National Environmental Policy Act and the National Forest Management Act created demand for new types of employees, such as wildlife biologists, hydrologists, recreation experts, economists, archaeologists, and sociologists—collectively, ologists. Some of these new employees questioned the status quo in land management as well as personnel management. Some knowingly risked their jobs—and in some cases, their personal safety—to speak out publicly against land management practices with which they disagreed. The willingness of some to confront the old-guard foresters and engineers earned them the epithet combatologists.

There were several reasons for the differences. Studies conducted in the 1980s found that older foresters who had risen to managerial positions had typically joined the agency between ages nineteen and twenty-four years, an impressionable age, during the agency’s heyday. They were so loyal to the agency’s mission and methods that they were said to “wear green underwear,” “be green-blooded,” or “speak the green language.” They had been indoctrinated in Forest Service culture and were reluctant to question authority. During the 1980s many older timber managers viewed wildlife management and the other nonforestry sciences as an unwelcome constraint on timber harvesting, and they were not shy about voicing that opinion.

In contrast, the ologists had joined at about age thirty, after attending graduate school. Their graduate studies encouraged loyalty to their professions and emphasized independent research and thinking rather than the conformity and uniformity that had characterized past decision making in the agency. The continued emphasis on timber fostered resentment over the low priority given to the other uses they had been hired to help manage, leading some ologists to question making a long-term commitment to the Forest Service. In addition, female ologists often found it harder to fit in with the male-dominated Forest Service culture and to juggle career and family.

The willingness of combatologists to take on their bosses revived a whistle-blowing tradition in the Forest Service that began with its first chief. Gifford Pinchot had challenged Interior Secretary Richard Ballinger and President William Howard Taft over disputed Alaskan coal leases in 1910 and was fired for insubordination. In the 1910s and 1920s, researcher Raphael Zon argued with Chiefs Graves and Greeley on behalf of an independent research
branch and was transferred out of Washington for speaking his mind. Arthur Carhart and Aldo Leopold both resigned from the Forest Service in order to freely advocate for their visions of wilderness. In the 1980s, John Mumma and Jeff DeBonis and other combatologists also wanted to see the Forest Service do what they believed was best for the land and for the public. In doing so, they were carrying out Zon’s exhortation: “The success of the Forest Service is based on the encouragement of free expression of new ideas. If forestry is to make progress in the States, the same principle should be recognized even if it calls forth resentment from those who do not want or cannot keep pace with new developments.”

Budgets Cuts and Backlash
Just as all of those pressures intensified, the Forest Service budget was slashed because of the Balanced Budget and Emergency Deficit Control Act of 1985 (more popularly known as the Gramm-Rudman Act). Aimed at reducing the federal deficit, the act forced the federal government to cut payroll and services. The Forest Service saw a twenty-five-percent reduction in staff. Employees in the traditional forestry positions found that the doors flung open for new scientists and women were now marked “exit” for them. Between 1983 and 1992, jobs in engineering and range management decreased, while employment in nonforestry fields generally increased. Some employees took early retirement, taking their expertise with them. Technology contributed to job losses, too. The introduction of desktop computers, especially the Data General system, in the mid-1980s eliminated the need for typing pools and many of the women who staffed them. In all, between 1980 and 1990, the Forest Service eliminated approximately five thousand positions.

The workforce cuts under Gramm-Rudman prompted a backlash against the consent decree of 1979. In October 1985, African American employees in Region 5 filed a class complaint over their “gross under representation” in the workforce. The Forest Service filed a motion to dismiss the complaint on the basis that it was in conflict with the consent decree; the courts dismissed the complaint in 1991. In 1990, four male employees filed suit to stop the consent decree’s implementation. When the courts turned them away, three others joined them in filing another suit, this time claiming reverse discrimination. That, too, was dismissed.

Regional foresters in other regions grew resentful when the women they had recruited and trained for professional and technical positions were reassigned to Region 5 to satisfy the consent decree. The transfers increased the number of women working in that region but did not eliminate harassment and discrimination, and so additional lawsuits were filed in the late 1990s. As part of one settlement agreement, the Forest Service established a monitoring council in 2001 at the regional offices in Vallejo, California, to implement an action plan. Unknown persons vandalized the council’s office sign on three occasions, an indication of the continuing animosity.

Two Steps Forward, One Step Back
Although their numbers have increased in forestry, range, and engineering, the categories from which most of the agency’s line officers have traditionally been chosen, women have remained underrepresented in those fields. Because of the technical demands of these positions, the Forest Service could not easily promote from within: “You can’t change a G-3 clerk into a District Ranger,” one male district ranger noted in 1984. The real problem was not race or gender, he said, but experience and education, which take years to acquire. The district ranger suggested that efforts to get women and minorities into those positions and into management
should begin with recruiting from colleges, a strategy the agency has been pursuing to ensure that the composition of its workforce increasingly resembles that of the American labor force.32

In addition to providing training to eliminate discrimination and harassment in the workplace, the Forest Service launched several programs, such as Work Force 1995: Strength through Diversity, designed to achieve an “ideal” workforce as defined by the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978. On the whole, diversity programs and improved personnel management practices, combined with the introduction of professionals from nontraditional fields, have had an irreversible impact on Forest Service culture. By 2004, roughly one-third of all district rangers and forest supervisors were women.33 Implementing policies important to women employees, such as maternity leave and flexible work schedules, which did not exist when Bernardi filed suit, have benefited men as well as women. Career training has helped both male and female employees advance and become more responsive managers in a period when the Forest Service has to serve more forest users with fewer agency resources than ever before.

Despite the progress in hiring and retaining a diverse workforce, problems remain and lawsuits continue to be filed. As one Forest Service employee noted in 1984, “Given the Forest Service’s traditional values, it’s a big step to open up the organization to women and minorities. It’ll take time, but we’re getting there.”34

Now more than thirty years later, with the agency’s employment practices under continued scrutiny, the agency is still trying to get there.

3 Kaufman, The Forest Ranger, x.
4 Doug Leisz, interview for The Greatest Good: A Centennial Film, transcript, U.S. Forest Service History Collection, Forest History Society, Durham, NC.
7 Williams, “Women in the Forest Service,” 1.
8 Doug Leisz, interview; and Getrude Becker, interview.
10 James, “Women in the Forest Service,” 17.
11 “A Job with the Forest Service: Information about Permanent and Temporary Jobs with the U.S. Forest Service,” (c. 1950), 3. In the U.S. Forest Service History Collection, Forest History Society, Durham, NC.
13 Jacqueline S. Reinier, An Interview with Geri Vanderveer Bergen (Durham, NC: Forest History Society, Inc., 2001), 55–63. When Larson graduated from the University of California at Berkeley in 1962, she received the highest academic distinction ever bestowed upon a University of California forester to that time, receiving honorable mention for the University Medal, the highest student award given at commencement exercises, and was also elected to Phi Beta Kappa. Forestry Education at the University of California: The First Fifty Years, edited by Paul Casamajor (Berkeley: California Alumni Foresters, 1965), 206; and Michael Frome, The Forest Service, 2nd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1984), 68. Known as Geraldine Bergen Larson during most of her Forest Service career, after the death of her husband in 1987, she legally changed her name to Geri Vanderveer Bergen.
14 Reinier, 63–65; and Doug Leisz, interview. Larson’s husband kept his business and they took turns commuting on weekends to see one another.
Michael Thoele, *Fire Line: Summer Battles of the West* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 1995), 139. Thoele has a chapter on what he calls “the sisterhood of wildland fire.” The Forest Service has not kept good records on female firefighting crews, so it is not known with certainty when women were first hired as firefighters by the agency.


Katherine Frome, *Forest Service*, 66.


Quoted in Miller, “Militant Forester: Raphael Zon.”


In 1990, a group of male employees from Region 5 moved to intervene in the female employees’ Title VII action. The district court denied their motion, holding that it was untimely. The court affirmed in an unpublished disposition (*Bernardi* v. *Yeutter*, 945 F.2d 408). Shortly thereafter, male employees brought a separate action against the Forest Service, challenging the terms of the consent decree. The district court dismissed that action, holding in part that the male employees could not bring an independent action challenging the terms of a consent decree (*Levittoff* v. *Espy*, WL 557674). The male employees petitioned for a writ of certiorari, which the U.S. Supreme Court denied. *Levittoff* v. *Glickman*, 117 S. Ct. 296 (1996). The cases are summarized in *Donnelly v. Glickman* (9716648), accessed at http://news.findlaw.com.


