

Austin Cary, the Father of Southern Forestry

By Roy R. White

EDITOR'S NOTE: This paper was read at the annual meeting of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association in Detroit, Michigan, April 20-22. Other papers read in the session entitled "Architects of American Forestry" were on Gifford Pinchot and William B. Greeley. Dr. White wrote his Ph. D. dissertation at the University of Florida on the career of Austin Cary. He is presently resident lecturer in history at the University of Maryland, Newfoundland Extension.

In contrast with his more renowned contemporaries, Austin Cary was an obscure logging engineer in the Forest Service. Yet the story of the life and work of this latter-day Johnny Appleseed has reached legendary proportions in the southern pine country. Cary, a New England Yankee, dedicated himself to the awesome task of bringing forestry and conservation to a region reluctant to accept, and ill-equipped to practice, these innovations. His success places him in the forefront of noted American foresters and his character warrants a position peculiarly his own.

Cary's life, his work, and his influence on forestry pivot around his self-selected role as a maverick. He was an individualist who, while loudly denouncing real or fancied opposition, thrived on the challenge it offered. When assigned to the South in 1917, he was in late middle-age, a long career, highlighted by unorthodoxy, behind him.

A Lone Wolf

As a boy he preferred his own company or that of the hardy woodsmen he met tramping alone through the Maine woods surrounding his home. In school he devoted himself to study, shunned all social contacts and, when he graduated at the head of his class at Bowdoin College, was already known as a "lone wolf." Unprepossessing in appearance, of medium height and stocky, he grew a mustache and beard while an undergraduate—possibly to cover facial blemishes; he wore them the remainder of his life. Blunt, tactless, and blandly indifferent, he eschewed the social graces and amenities. In company he was frequently a bore, sulking in silence or departing in indignation should any subject but forestry be raised. One suspects he found secret delight in flaunting propriety whenever he entered a fine restaurant or hotel in field dress, complete with knapsack and tools, or indulged in his notorious penchant for kicking off his shoes at dinner parties. To his intimates, who were few, he was often less than civil. In this respect there is no more apt characterization of this lonely man than that of Inman F. Eldredge who, in a letter to Cary, referred to him as a "brutal friend."¹

Professionally Cary was as much out of step as he was socially. He was, he boasted, a "self-taught" forester, in sharp contrast to the college-trained colleagues he sardonically labeled "so-called foresters . . . by virtue of a diploma."² Taciturn, obdurate, and opinionated, he was generally in disagreement

with his fellows on policy and methods of promoting forestry. Stubbornly loyal to his version of practical forest management, he rejected the carefully conducted, narrowly prescribed research practiced by professionals. "Research in forestry," he expounded, "would be a lot better directed and more fruitful if we were practicing forestry more."³ Partial to the interests of business and industry he flayed all proposals for government regulation or control, frequently without regard for merit. A forester's duty, according to Cary, was to make forestry so attractive to private enterprise that men would, in their own interest, follow his lead.

Pioneer Forester

The sources of his economic and political philosophies are readily discernible. Born in 1865, into an old, well-to-do New England family, he inherited not only an estate that made him financially independent but also the standard Puritan outlook. Reaching maturity in the Gilded Age, a property owner and businessman himself, he wholeheartedly subscribed to the tenets of his class. Rugged individualism, private enterprise, laissez-faire, and the ideal of the self-made man were fundamentals he accepted without question. It was axiomatic that he would apply his conservatism to his profession. It was ironic, too, that his decision for forestry as a life's work should lead him into a government service that was among the first to encourage, in the interest of conservation, government ownership and control.

His choice of forestry as a profession, was, he said, "natural, desirable, and inevitable even." Afflicted with extreme nervousness and insomnia he sought strenuous physical exertion in the outdoors as an antidote. His lonely excursions through the Maine woods and association with woodsmen had provided him with a respectable knowledge of lumbering. After studying entomology and biology at Johns Hopkins and Princeton universities he received a Master of Science degree at Bowdoin so his education fitted him for the profession. More important than these, however, was his love for the forests and his expressed feeling that "It is an inspiring thing for a man to be a pioneer in anything."⁴

Pioneering he certainly was; at the time the word "forestry" was not in Cary's vocabulary.⁵ In 1890 there were no forestry schools in America, there was no forestry profession worthy of the name. Adopting

the rugged, demanding life of New England lumber camps he became a "cruiser," a position which offered little in theory but much in practical experience. As a concession to the embryo profession he visited Europe and the Biltmore Estate in North Carolina, frankly dubious of their value to a man of his experience. In 1898, "the first American calling himself a forester to do any such thing," he accepted employment with a large paper manufacturer in New England where, although he failed to introduce his methods of conservative lumbering, he acquired experience in industrial forestry that was to influence his entire career. In desperation he turned to teaching, serving four years as an instructor in practical forestry at Harvard and Yale. Embittered and discouraged by what he considered a "lack of business sense" in college instruction, in 1909 he accepted a position as Superintendent of Forests for New York state, a near-disastrous brush with politics which left him in a state of nervous collapse in less than a year. After two decades as a forester he had little to show for his efforts.

Rejected by Pinchot

Throughout this long period as a free-lance forester and sometimes teacher Cary harbored a consuming, if inexplicable, ambition to obtain government employment. Considering his qualifications, there seemed ample reason for hope. He had, in these years, made a reputation as a forester and teacher. He had written many articles and published his highly successful, *Manual for Northern Woodsmen*. Bernhard E. Fernow was a personal friend who commissioned him for limited government projects. Through his teaching and work he was associated with most ranking foresters, among them Henry S. Graves, William B. Greeley and Gifford Pinchot. Fernow, who Cary badgered for years, in all likelihood would have employed him had his budget permitted. Cary understood Fernow's situation but there was less understanding when Pinchot became Chief Forester in 1900 and, with Roosevelt's backing, expanded the Forest Service. Although he was well aware of their philosophical difference Cary pressed Pinchot for an appointment—but to no avail. Pinchot, in fine political style, wished Cary success in his ambitions but hedged on the all-important one of making him a part of his administration.⁶ It was not until the Ballinger controversy, resulting in Pinchot's removal from office and the appointment of Graves as Chief Forester in 1910, that Cary received an appointment as logging engineer in the Forest Service.

The Southland Beckons

In the six years following Cary's appointment Pinchot's reluctance seemed justified. The dour New Englander's economic philosophy, compounded by his belligerency, precluded cooperation with his superiors. While employed as a staff member on the Pacific Coast his relations with Service officials steadily deteriorated. Fortunately, when the situation reached a

climax in 1916, circumstances enabled his old friend, Greeley, now in the Washington office, to offer a choice of assignments. Without hesitation Cary chose the South.

Archaic Woods Practices

From a forester's viewpoint his choice defied reason. By 1917, southern forests were near extinction. Speculators and lumbermen had taken heavy toll from the vast areas of state and federal land released for unrestricted sale following Civil War Reconstruction. Pressured by ruthless competition, taxes, and greed, lumber operators, mostly northern, were stripping the last of the virgin forests leaving cut-out and burned-out land the "curse and shame" of the South. Naval stores production, the oldest woods industry in the country, still functioned through the ancient factorage system. Debt, competition, and a wildly fluctuating market plagued the industry while archaic woods practices depleted the forests. Competent observers were predicting the end of southern forest and forest industries in a decade.

Actually, it was just these deplorable conditions which made Cary's assignment ideal for him and the Service. The West, with its uncut virgin forests, was the focal point of Service activity. Between North Carolina and Louisiana there were no state forest offices and the only federal representation was a station at Pensacola, Florida. Apparently the Service reasoned that Cary could do little harm in this limbo—and possibly some good. Cary was more than content, he was elated. Relieved of hampering supervision, free to devise his own program, he had opportunity to prove his conservative plan for promoting forestry. Into the void of southern forestry he intended to introduce forest practices which would assure a second timber growth on the barren, smouldering land. Significantly, he planned an appeal to southern landowners and operators, large and small. It would be necessary, he knew, to influence a people generally hostile to strangers, notoriously adverse to change, and shackled by a near-feudal economy.

Fire First Problem

Fire was the first problem to draw Cary's attention. The recurrent fires that inflicted a staggering loss in timber prohibited a second growth on cut-over lands. The mind of the southern rural population was the major cause. Forest fires were a prerogative, as natural and necessary as ham and hominy. It was, and had been, local custom to fire the woods periodically to provide forage for livestock, and many imagined the flames would eradicate the dread boll weevil. And it was frustration that drove the Forest Service and state organizations to rely on strict legal regulations for the only feasible answer—one that was repugnant to the average Southerner. Cary pointed out the fallacies of this program and, when his ideas were rejected, took matters into his own hands. He persuaded landowners to conduct experiments which,

verified by his research, convinced him that intentional firing of woods under safeguards at proper intervals, a plan previously recommended by Herman H. Chapman, was the solution. In defiance of authority he recommended this program. To the official mind this was "heresy of the worst type," but in time controlled burning was adopted on all levels.

Forestry Salesman

Meanwhile, Cary was giving his attention to the rejuvenation of the forests and forest industries of the South. In retrospect his program seems amazingly simple. Briefly stated, he planned to point out to the individual owner the error of his ways, teach him the practices that offered redemption, and, appealing to economic interest, encourage him to reform. But to his contemporaries, observing the shambles left in the path of exploitation and knowing the rural Southerners' attitude, Cary was unrealistic. The talents of a master salesman were hardly enough and the dogmatic, introverted Yankee was a most unlikely prospect for the role.

Nevertheless, with his characteristic aplomb, Cary began his task. He spoke at meetings and wrote articles lauding the potential of southern forests. He purchased land in Florida which he worked to learn the business for himself. He established contacts by personal visits and by mail, seeking ideas, offering his own, constantly probing for that first stir of interest to which he could add momentum. Because the myriad of small operators and landowners engaged in turpentine presented a special problem he devised a particular scheme. After gaining the factors' enthusiastic support he recruited Miss Eloise Gerry, a personable young lady from the Forest Products Laboratory who was an expert on pine, and George P. Shingler, a chemist in the Department of Agriculture who had devised greatly improved distilling methods into a team which offered something to everyone in the turpentine industry. In a carnival atmosphere they toured the backwoods of the turpentine belt where, encouraged by factors, and doubtless grateful for a diversion from their drab existence, crowds of country folk followed the trio through the woods and gathered in churches, schoolrooms, and theaters. There the rustic audiences were treated to lectures, demonstrations, and slides on practices designed to increase financial returns and preserve the forests. In this way the word was carried throughout the pine country's most remote areas.

Lumbermen Listen

In the lumbering industry Cary was most successful through personal contacts. He spent his summers in Maine and as he traveled to and from his headquarters in Florida he took a meandering path to the sites of lumbering operations. His unprepared hosts first saw him when he careened up to their place in a battered government issue "tin lizzie," its back seat loaded with baggage, roots, tools, soiled clothes, cor-

respondence, and other paraphernalia he threw over his shoulder. Crumpled, stained, his white beard dyed with tobacco, his only outward claim to respectability his celluloid collars and cuffs, he announced himself a government agent named Austin Cary and immediately asked about their problems. The problem presented, he invariably suggested, "Let's go out in your woods and see." After inspecting the holding, comfortably seated on the ground propped against a tree, sharing his personal stock of crackers, sardines, chocolate bars, and coffee, he suggested an experiment on a little plot "to see what it would do." With little to lose most were willing to make this small beginning and when Cary departed he usually left a friend and a convert to forestry. Revisiting at intervals, he gave each of these projects his personal attention, all the while suggesting new experiments. Over the years forest management on private land spread throughout the South.⁷

Information derived from this unofficial research was put to excellent use. A voluminous correspondence, indicative of his success, accumulated in Cary's personal files. In addition he recorded in hundreds of little notebooks each bit of data, results of experiments, scraps of dialogue, and miscellaneous personal items. From this mass of seemingly unrelated, and to all but himself undecipherable, information he prepared reports on research covering periods up to ten years. Operating as a clearinghouse, he provided, from his research and that of cooperating lumbermen, advice and instruction on every phase of timber growing. The culmination of this work appeared in prolific writings; numerous articles published in trade and professional journals analyzed the data and outlined complete programs for profitable forest management.

Yankee Charm Succeeds

Cary's success in selling forestry in the South was a personal one. He did not, as did some other foresters, ally himself with one large company and, although Chief Forester Greeley appreciated his effectiveness,⁸ the Service made small contribution to his work. Somewhere in the larder of Cary's personality there were the ingredients for a living prototype of Caldwell's journeyman and Faulkner's peddler. In a direct, unpretentious fashion he met men at their own level, gained respect for his knowledge, confidence in his integrity, and, most important, sincere affection. Provincial Southerners were charmed by the Yankee rebel who so enthusiastically flaunted his disrespect for propriety and authority. Cary protested that the economic incentive was instrumental in the growth of southern forestry, and perhaps it was, but appreciation of him as a person was the deciding factor.

In the early 1930's, with a new forest turning the South green once again, and little more than constant encouragement needed for continued progress, Cary considered his task accomplished. Moreover, he was assured by the discovery of a process for making

white paper from pine that his hopes for a southern paper industry, a project he worked hard to promote, would be fulfilled. Nearing retirement age and far from well, he informed the Forest Service of his intention to "bang around less . . . live more quietly."⁹ And so he did—until explosive events in Washington shattered the hush of southern forests.

As a mere logging engineer, all he aspired to be, Cary was out of the mainstream of national forestry. Nevertheless, his thought on government's proper role in economic life was well-known, especially since his vehement opposition to Pinchot's plans during the hassle occasioned by the Capper Report in the early 1920's. In this instance, confident of Greeley's and the administration's conservatism, he retired early in the conflict—after demoting Pinchot to "an aggravation."¹⁰ However, he kept a wary eye on the situation after Greeley left the Service and was not surprised when the new leadership, strongly influenced by Pinchot and supported by Secretary of Agriculture Wallace, announced a program of extensive government land acquisition.

"Piracy" Opposed

On this score Cary was personally involved, for this "piracy," as he saw it, meant a negation of all he had done in the South. He was not then, if he had ever been, the arch-conservative so many of his contemporaries thought. On the contrary, his southern experience had mellowed and molded his laissez-faire philosophy into views close to Jacksonian economic democracy. Southern landowners, if forced into selling out because of hard times, would forfeit the promised rewards for their years of forest management. To prevent this, the irascible New Englander charged out to do battle with his enemies. He sniped at the policy by writing and visiting his southern associates, distributing copies of his old speeches and articles. To foresters supporting the program he wrote bludgeoning letters, copies of which he mailed to his friends. Finally, he fired a salvo in the form of "An Open Letter to President Franklin D. Roosevelt," a bitter denunciation of government land acquisition. Service officials suppressed the letter but were in a quandary as to what could be done to suppress the author. The agreement reached was that an attempt to silence him would be more painful than suffering his opposition.

It was just as well. On his retirement in 1935, to the plaudits of some and the consternation of others, Cary released his letter to Roosevelt for publication. Many Southerners were with him, those who felt they had "a live representative in Washington in [his] good self."¹¹

So were conservationists such as his old friend, Herman H. Chapman. Henry S. Graves urged him to ". . . go to it"¹² and Raymond S. Hoyle suggested he ". . . continue to hammer along this line."¹³ But with this last contribution Cary, apparently confident of the outcome, withdrew to remain in relative seclusion until his death of a stroke in 1936 on the Univer-

sity of Florida campus. The effect of his efforts to stem government land purchase is debatable, still it should be noted that of the country's regions the South has far the least percentage of publicly owned land.

Dixie Reforested

Judged solely as a forester Cary deserves the highest rank but his role as a champion of the South demands even greater recognition. Singlehandedly, he set out to encourage and educate landowners in forestry, the end result to be a stable forest industry based on conservation and perpetual yield. In the generation since his death the progress of southern forestry and forest industries unmistakably bear the imprint of his work. No other section can match the South in private forest land and private forestry. Today the lumber, turpentine, and paper industries are a mainstay of the economy, pointing the way toward real industrial progress. These are stable industries, based on a continuous source of raw material, the forests. Southern landowners, from small farmer to industrial giant, are supplying this demand by following the principles and practices initiated by Cary. Many Southerners he "got under their own trees" are now leaders in forestry and conservation. A second forest growth, carefully nurtured has, as he foretold, transformed Dixie into the "timber garden of the world." Forest history will record the South's fond remembrance of, and respectful gratitude to the "Yankee peddler of forestry," Austin Cary.

Footnotes

¹ I. F. Eldredge to Cary, August 24, 1927, Cary Files, U. S. Forest Service Regional Offices, Atlanta, Georgia.

² "News and Notes," *Forestry Quarterly*, XIII, No. 2 (June, 1915), 284.

³ I. W. Bailey to Cary, ca. 1927, Austin Cary Memorial Collection, University of Florida School of Forestry Library, Gainesville, Florida.

⁴ "News and Notes," *Forestry Quarterly*, XIII, No. 2 (June, 1915), 284.

⁵ Austin Cary, "Forty Years of Forest Use in Maine," *Journal of Forestry*, XXXIII, No. 4 (April, 1935), 934.

⁶ Gifford Pinchot to Cary, August 8, 1905, Records of the Forest Service, Department of Agriculture, Record Group No. 95, National Archives, Washington, D. C.

⁷ James H. Jones, Oral History Interview, July 10, 1959; Brooks Lambert and Ed Leigh McMillan, Oral History Interview, July 8, 1959; Transcriptions of Tape Recordings, University of Florida Forestry School Library, Gainesville, Florida.

⁸ W. B. Greeley to the Secretary of Agriculture, November 18, 1924, Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, Department of Agriculture, Record Group No. 95, National Archives, Washington, D. C.

⁹ Cary to Ward Sheppard, April 25, 1929, Cary Collection.

¹⁰ Cary to E. T. Allen, February 17, 1922, Cary Collection.

¹¹ H. L. Layton to Cary, June 28, 1933, Cary Collection.

¹² H. S. Graves to Cary, January 13, 1936, Cary Collection.

¹³ R. J. Hoyle to Cary, January 15, 1936, Cary Collection.

The full text of Dr. White's doctoral dissertation is on file in the P. K. Yonge Memorial Library of the University of Florida and in the Forest History Society Library. The Society is now seeking sponsors for publishing this work. Any person, professional group or business organization which would like to contribute to the support of this publishing venture is encouraged to communicate with the Society.