

Reuben B. Robertson



In Less Than a Life Span

As head of a leading southern paper firm since 1906, Reuben B. Robertson has helped nurture scientific forestry from infancy to young adulthood

By RAY GARRETT

A FEW years after the turn of the century a young Ohio lawyer left his native Cincinnati for North Carolina and a new career in an infant industry. The fledgling barrister was Yale-educated Reuben B. Robertson and the job for which he forsook a position with his father's legal firm was management of a wood fibre plant.

The year of decision for Mr. Robertson was 1906 when scientific forestry in the South was little more than a phrase on the tongues of a few farsighted pioneers. In the more than four and a half decades that have followed, both Reuben Robertson's adopted career and forest management have reached heights beyond the dreams of most men.

It was Reuben Robertson's father-in-law, Peter G. Thomson, who persuaded him that the challenge of managing a pulp mill outweighed the rewards of practicing law. Mr. Thomson, after organizing the Champion Coated Paper Company in Hamilton, Ohio in 1893, had decided Canton, North Carolina was the ideal location for a new pulp mill and that his son-in-law was the man to manage it. Reuben Robertson agreed to give it a try, and thus was launched an outstanding career in the pulp and paper industry.

Mr. Thomson selected Canton as the location for the fibre plant because it offered an excellent combination of a plentiful and cheap timber supply, abundant and intelligent labor, suitable water and accessibility to markets.

Among the earliest of the many friendships which Mr. Robertson and his bride, Hope, quickly made in their new location was that with Dr. Carl A. Schenck who was then forester for the great Vanderbilt Estate. It was Dr. Schenck who organized the Biltmore School of Forestry.

Mr. Robertson, in later years, credits these early contacts with Dr. Schenck's inspiring leadership for the sympathetic interest in the work of the scientific foresters which has continued throughout his business career.

The very thing which had influenced the selection of Canton as the site for the new pulp mill militated against whatever casual considerations of forest conservation there might have been at the time. Actually, little was known about good forestry practices. There were less than a hundred trained foresters in the entire United States, and the

number of areas managed for sustained yields was negligible.

The industrialists who depended upon forest products for their raw material were afflicted by an economy of abundance. The vast woodlands of the Appalachians seemed inexhaustible. When forest fires got started, they were allowed to sweep unchecked through the cut-over lands of the South. Cuttings were carried on with total disregard to future growth possibilities.

And small wonder. Stumpage could be bought cheaply. After it was cut, it could be replaced just as cheaply.

The easy and inexpensive acquisition of standing timber, coupled with the abundance of available labor, resulted in high production rates of forest products. Eventually they glutted the market, which meant cut-throat competition and ruinous prices. The forests were being rapidly depleted by practices which could only result in the de-





Two Champion foresters in a thinned stand of 32-year-old loblolly pine

struction of one of our greatest natural resources, unless something constructive could be done.

It wasn't easy to convince dollar-conscious individuals that their best interests, and those of the entire country, lay in the philosophy of farming, rather than mining the for-

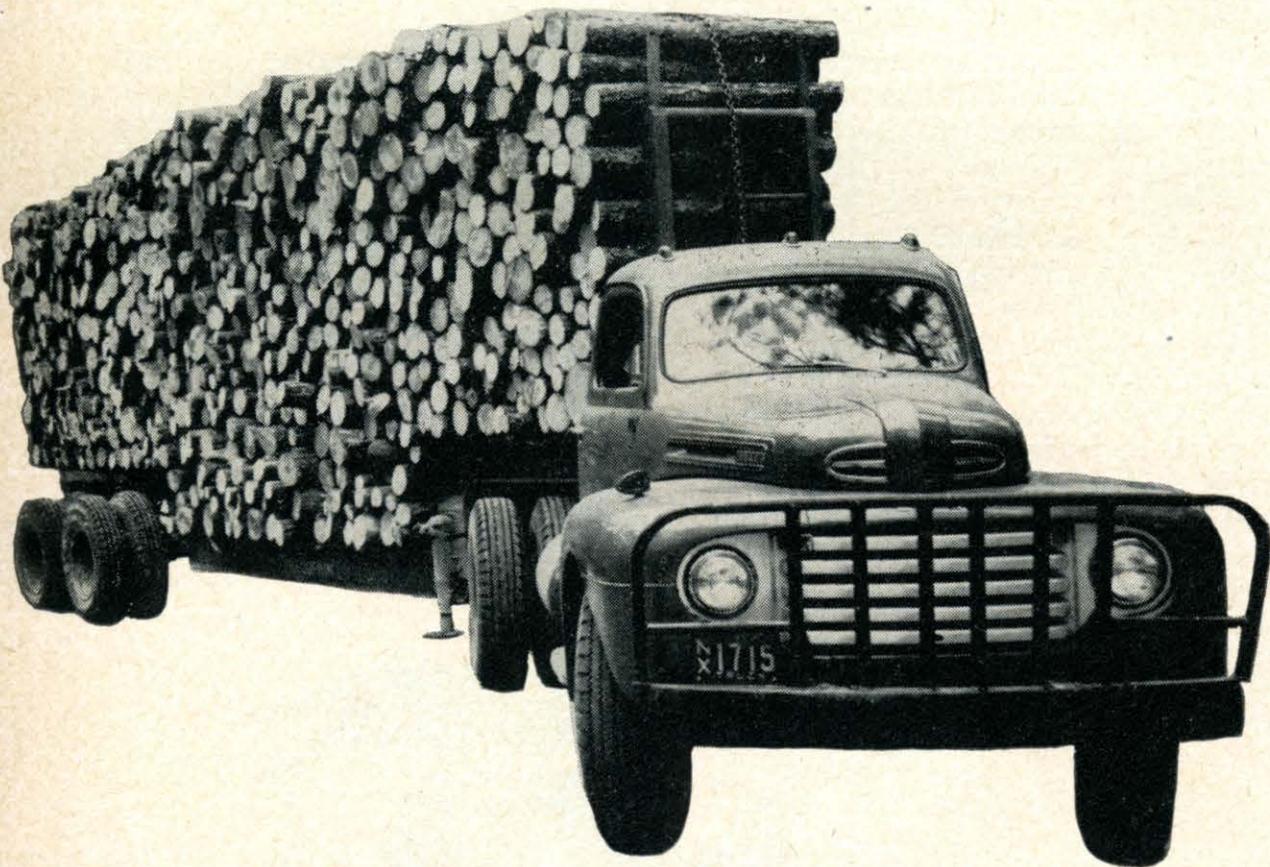
think twice about future supply, unless he happened to be interested in long-term forest management. He had no monetary incentive to make him realize that improvement cuttings, the planting of seedlings or even the most rudimentary forms of forest fire protection, could pay off.

size, to meet competitive market conditions. In coordination with the pulp manufacturer, who is interested in total volume and is not so dependent on size, the two interests jointly permit a shorter rotation period than would be possible if lumber alone were the crop.

Logical as the premise reads after the fact, there was still the matter of developing good management practices. In those early days, very few schools of forestry had been established. Statistical information about woodlands of the section was both difficult to obtain and of doubtful accuracy when it was received.

Mr. Robertson took the lead in lending his support to the state and federal agencies which were just coming into being. He lost no opportunity to express his views on the conservation of forest resources to the general public. A convincing public speaker, he carried the new idea to audiences in many parts of the country. Among his official positions were: presidency of the North Carolina Forestry Association; chairmanship of the North Carolina Wood Utilization Committee, organized under the U. S. Department of Commerce; membership in the Southern Appalachian Research and Advisory Council to the U. S. Forest Service.

In 1920, Walter J. Damtoft joined Champion as its first professional forester. He came to the company after eight years with the U. S. Forest Service. By that time Champion had acquired about 100,000 acres of timber lands in the Great Smokies



Huge trailers keep wood rolling from forest to mill

est resources. When pulpwood stumpage was going at 25 cents a cord and sawlog stumpage was selling at anywhere from a dollar to seldom more than five dollars a thousand board feet, there was no practical encouragement for anyone to

The answer, which was a long time in coming and which is yet still far from complete, lay in properly coordinating the utilization of forest products.

The lumberman, working an area alone, can use only logs of a certain

area, purchased in large tracts from private sources.

Now began a program to obtain the sympathetic support of smaller land owners. Mr. Damtoft's duties at the outset were principally the clearing of titles, working out problems of transporting timber from the interior of the wooded areas by rail and other means, protecting the forests from fires, and the initiation of good, sound forestry practices.

In 1933 the government acquired the Smoky Mountain area for the establishment of a national park and Champion relinquished 90,000 acres for this purpose.

Diminishing supplies of wood which is followed, in a free market, by rising prices, helped furnish the stimulus necessary to shake landowners out of the lethargy that prevailed as regards the wastage of our forest heritage. But it needed vision and enthusiasm, too.

Since 1933, Champion has been engaged in carrying out an intensive pinelands development program in the Carolinas, Georgia and Tennessee. In 1936 Champion opened another pulp mill at Pasadena, Texas, near Houston, which is in the heart of the Texas pine belt.

Champion's special interest in Southern pine is based upon its own development of a method of bleaching pine Kraft pulp to make it suitable for the manufacture of white printing paper.

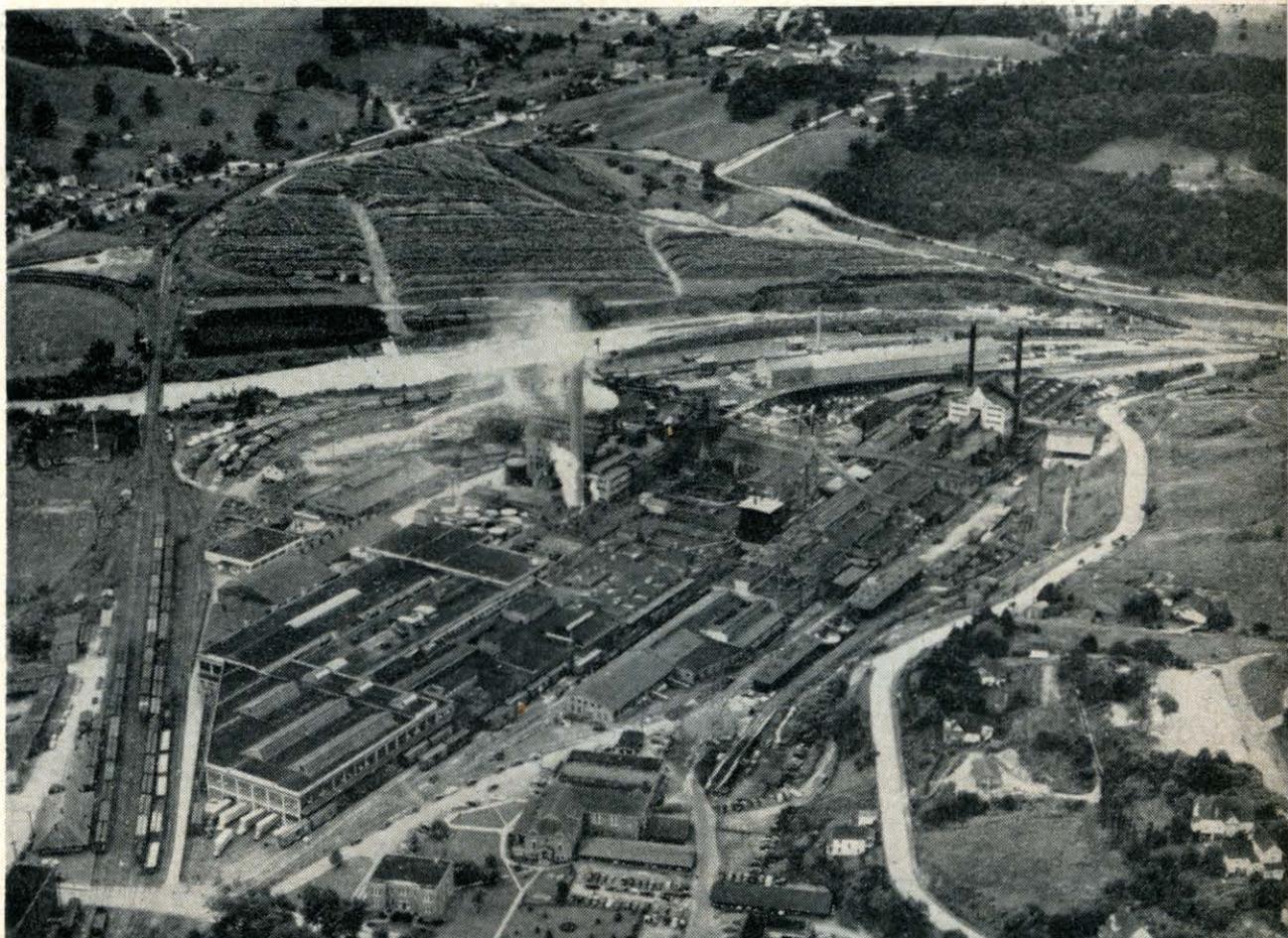
The development of better forest management, in Champion areas as throughout the country, has been vital to the national welfare. Pulp and paper people, with high wages exceeded only by skilled workers in the machine tool industry, are a stabilizing influence in many an industrial area. In western North Carolina, for example, pulp and paper is the largest industry as measured by the creation of income and expense.

The challenges, and the changes which have been brought about by meeting them, in Mr. Robertson's 50 years of devoted service to forest conservation have been nothing less than revolutionary. And it is within the life span of few men to be a continuous part of such a productive program.

It is clear that the coming of paper mills to the South was an im-



Champion's plant at Canton, North Carolina. It is ideally located to take advantage of a plentiful supply of timber.



portant influence in spreading enthusiasm for and developing knowledge of timber conservation. By virtue of their very size and the enormous concentrations of capital involved in their development, the permanence of their raw material supply is a fundamental requirement.

But it is more than coincidence

that the long term best interests of the mills lie in the encouragement of the owners of small tracts to follow the same cutting practices that are essential for the proper management of larger acreages.

The development of electric power, of educational efforts, of permanent markets for forest products, have permitted paper mills to perform vitally helpful functions for the communities in which they operate.

The progress in wiser utilization of the products of our forests has been great since Mr. Robertson started his projects in 1906. He firmly believes that the forces of education, of far sighted self interest, of national necessity, should maintain the momentum that has been gained and so carry the science of forest utilization to far greater heights than could have been foreseen 50 years ago. He is emphatic that we have by no means reached perfection.

Mechanical planters speed Champion's reforestation

