

# The Applicant Is No Gentleman: Women in the Forest Service

James G. Lewis

## ABSTRACT

For much of the 20th century, the esprit de corps of the Forest Service depended heavily on the notion of the agency as an elite fraternity. The job of forester itself—a combination of lumberjack, frontiersman, explorer, and Old West sheriff—provided an opportunity for men to live the “strenuous life,” that most masculine of lifestyles. The reality, however, was that this boys’ club could not have functioned nearly as well without the women in its midst. It is only within the last three decades of the 20th century that women have been admitted into the fraternity, and only after they forced their way in. The article is adapted from the book, *The Forest Service and the Greatest Good: A Centennial History* (Forest History Society 2005, Durham, NC) the companion book to the film, “The Greatest Good: A Forest Service Centennial Film.”

**Keywords:** history, women, Forest Service, Consent Decree

With the fire season of 1913 approaching in northern California, Assistant Fire Ranger M.H. McCarthy wrote his boss to inform him that the previous year’s fire lookout would not be returning to Eddy’s Gulch Lookout Station because he had found a better-paying job. McCarthy had three applicants to submit for review. He thought so little of the first two that he moved immediately to the third. “The third applicant is also ‘no gentleman,’” McCarthy continued, but would nonetheless make a “first-class Lookout.” McCarthy’s suggestion was so unprecedented, he warned Rider, it “may perhaps take your breath away, and I hope your heart is strong enough to stand the shock.” He recommended Hallie Morse Daggett, “a wide-awake woman of 30 years, who . . . is absolutely devoid of the timidity which is ordinarily associated with her sex as she is not afraid of anything that walks, creeps, or flies. She is a perfect lady in every respect, and her qualifications for the position are vouched for by all who know of her aspirations” (Holsinger 1983).

Daggett proved to be one of the most

effective lookouts on the Klamath National Forest over the next 15 years. Women lookouts proved so invaluable over the next few years that one forester optimistically predicted, “We may have [in] some time not only female forest guards but female forest rangers and even supervisors” (Guthrie 1920). Indeed, by 1920, women had applied for jobs as rangers and grazing assistants, though the agency turned down their applications (Williams 1991).

Like all lookouts, Daggett had a telephone on which her supervisor called three times a day to check in. Every day she climbed a 20-foot pole to take weather readings in winds up to 50 miles per hour. Daggett had a relatively easy time of it compared to other women lookouts. She had a log cabin to live in from the outset, and, once a week, her equally rugged sister made the 6-hour roundtrip to deliver mail and food-stuff. Others might receive visits every 2 weeks, and typically lived in more primitive conditions. Lookouts took in stride such difficulties as sunburn, wild animals, fighting fires, and high winds that blew down their tents (Cornell 1919).

*It’s a Pink-Collar World.* Daggett was not the first female employee of the Forest Service. Women had been working in clerical positions as “typewriters” in the Washington headquarters office for several years before her hiring. This was in an era when men typically filled clerical and secretarial positions, and in many instances, the Forest Service made it clear that women were not welcomed to apply for most jobs, especially those in the field. 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 20th century.

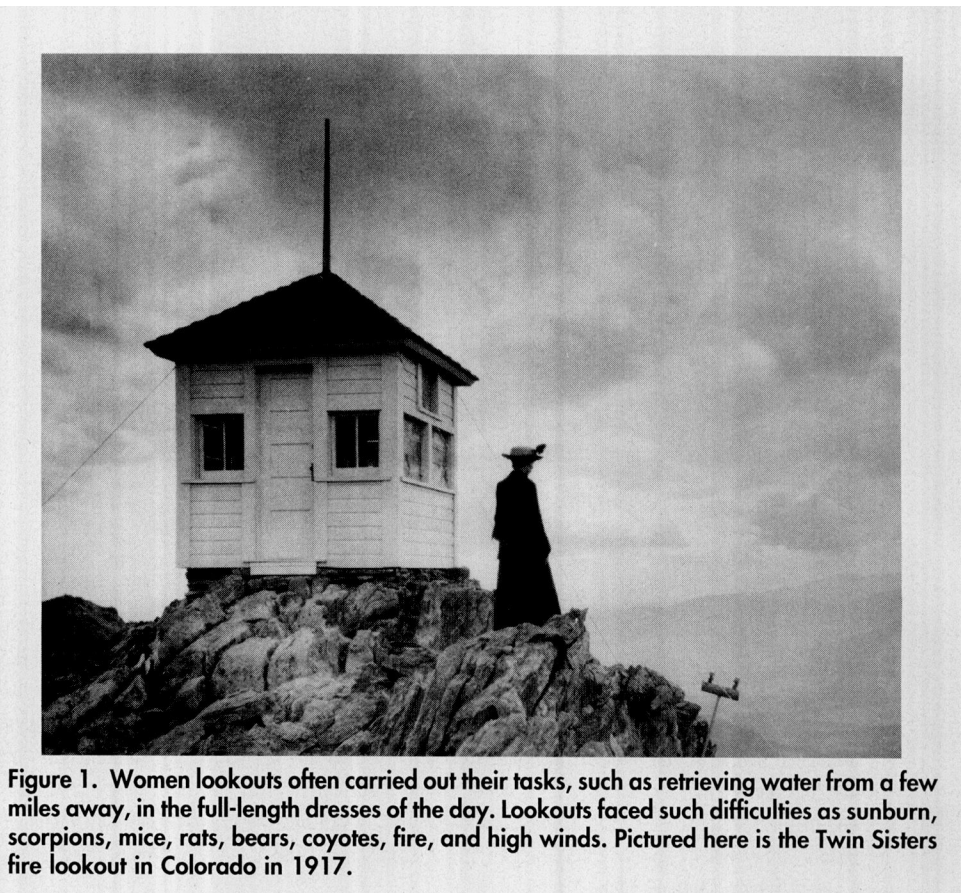
Women rarely worked in the forest supervisor’s office before Chief Gifford Pinchot established District (later called Regional) Offices in 1908, which created several positions for experienced clerks. Initially, the men claimed it required a two-fisted ranger or forest officer to assemble and ship fire tools, roundup volunteer fire fighters from bars and saloons, and other “manly” tasks. Reality soon set in, and the men found they did not want to—or could not—do the paperwork the job required. Female clerks soon found themselves tackling that work along with that of the two-fisted ranger. Office work quickly became a “pink collar” job.

The district clerk soon proved to be the power behind the district ranger’s throne. The district clerk, usually a local woman but sometimes a man, provided continuity between district rangers as they rotated through, briefing the new ranger on the local staff, issues, and personalities. The clerk

took care of expected duties such as payroll, issuing various permits, and hiring seasonal employees, working as much as 11 hours a day, 5 days a week. With the ranger off in the field, the clerk became the public face of the Forest Service. She “had to be schooled in what the agency was all about,” and be able to talk to users of the national forest—ranchers, miners, loggers, or vacationers—about the Forest Service’s regulations regarding their many and varied uses of the national forests and grasslands. It has become agency folklore that the district clerk of the 1950s and 1960s did the job of 12 people today (Leisz 2004, Becker 2004).

The wives of forest rangers and supervisors, however, found themselves doing some of the two-fisted work for no compensation while also trying to maintain a household and raise a family. The Forest Service considered wives a convenient and necessary free source of labor on understaffed and underfunded ranger districts. In addition to routine clerical duties, they fought fires and served as nurses and camp cooks on the fire lines, and then helped prepare fire reports by estimating timber and forage losses, and finally analyzed the causes of the fires. When Washington refused to send more equipment because records showed a particular forest had their allotment, wives dug into their personal finances to pay for tools. They also hosted visiting stockmen, hunters, or forest supervisors overnight in their homes. Forest Service administrators often viewed those who refused to take on the role of active helpmate as disloyal and as a hindrance to their husbands’ careers. Rangers with uncooperative wives tended not to stay in the Forest Service very long (Pendergrass 1990).

In the early years, several wives saved their husbands’ careers because of their behind-the-scenes contributions, something the Forest Service quietly acknowledged. Charles Shinn was on the brink of losing his job on the Sierra National Forest when his wife became his paid clerk. She complemented his field abilities with her office managerial skills. Despite rules against nepotism, the need for good field leaders was such that Shinn’s superiors kept him on as long as his wife Julia worked for him; when Charles retired in 1911, Julia continued serving as a Sierra office clerk until 1923. Rangers relied on her advice so heavily that her husband’s replacement had to notify all forest personnel that they were to come to him—not Julia—to discuss their problems. He knew he could not establish himself as



**Figure 1.** Women lookouts often carried out their tasks, such as retrieving water from a few miles away, in the full-length dresses of the day. Lookouts faced such difficulties as sunburn, scorpions, mice, rats, bears, coyotes, fire, and high winds. Pictured here is the Twin Sisters fire lookout in Colorado in 1917.

supervisor as long as the men looked elsewhere for leadership and advice (Shinn 1930).

During the two World Wars, the Forest Service scrambled to cover its responsibilities. In response to mobilization demands of World War I that decreased its male workforce, the agency hired more women lookouts and clerks. One even patrolled a district in the Pacific Northwest on horseback and carried camping gear for overnight stays (Williams 1991). During World War II, the Forest Service introduced its own version of Rosie the Riveter. On the Shasta National Forest (now the Shasta-Trinity National Forest) women workers were nicknamed “Shasta Susies.” The Portland regional office hired 246 women for the 1943 fire season in Oregon and Washington to fill fire-protection jobs, which included some of the “traditional” assignments for lookout service, as well as positions as alternate fire dispatchers, cooks for fire crews, telephone operators, patrolmen, truck drivers, and clerks in rangers’ offices (Williams 1991, Pendergrass 1990). Women took over private industry jobs such as logging, operating mill saws, and scaling lumber traditionally held by men (Caudell 1988). When the war ended, women were ousted from their jobs in favor of men returning home from the war. The GI Bill en-

abled veterans to go to college and get degrees in forestry, leaving little room or incentive for women to compete with men for professional jobs in the Forest Service.

*The Times Are A-Changin’.* From its establishment in 1905 through the 1960s, the Forest Service rarely hired women for professional positions. The few who entered forestry were relegated to office settings or lab work. In the context of the postwar attitude of “a woman’s place is in the home,” and the agency’s focus on timber production, the pressure to keep women out of any Forest Service professional jobs was not surprising. Sexual discrimination was typical of the times and of the agency’s attitudes regarding women in the field. An agency employment leaflet from around 1950 explained the agency’s position: “The fieldwork 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” (US Forest Service 1950). This argument set up a Catch-22: Forestry was man’s work because they had only hired men to do it. To hire women would be to deny that it was “a man’s job.” The only way to find out whether a woman could do the job was to hire one, but no one wanted to hire one to find out whether they could do the job.

This conundrum began to collapse in the late 1960s. The women's liberation movement and the expansion of civil rights to include the banning of sexual discrimination and harassment signaled a huge cultural shift for the Forest Service, but it was slow to realize the ramifications. In 1976, women held fewer than 2% of full-time professional jobs in the Forest Service, 15% of its administrative and technical work, but, not surprisingly, dominated the clerical positions, holding 84% of them. Consequently, it was not until 1979 that the agency appointed its first woman district ranger, Wendy Milner Herrett, who had started her career as a landscape architect at Region 6 headquarters in Portland, OR. Herrett oversaw 346,000 acres on the Blanco Ranger District of the White River National Forest in Colorado (Frome 1984). Her appointment proved a foreshadowing of changes in more ways than one. Not only was she a woman, but also she did not come out of the traditional forestry or engineering fields, either.

Herrett's promotion aside, Forest Service leadership did not address the problem of discrimination against women in the workplace until a lawsuit in 1973 forced them to do so. At the agency's experiment station in Berkeley, CA, Gene Bernardi, a female Forest Service sociologist, applied for an advertised position, but the hiring supervisor decided to wait for a suitable applicant—a male. 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 (California). The Forest Service agreed in 1979 to what is known as the Bernardi 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% of the jobs in each of the Service's job series and grades. The Forest Service agreed to monitor progress and to enforce the rulings, despite the Reagan administration's argument that the Bernardi decree represented little more than a hiring quota system. Its opposition to the decree hindered the Forest Service's efforts to comply, leading US District Court Judge Samuel Conti to extend its terms until 1991; in

1992, the parties agreed to a new settlement, which expired in 1994.

Forced to implement the Bernardi Consent Decree or find itself in contempt of court, the Forest Service began to make a determined effort to increase the number of women at the GS-11 through GS-13 levels to give them the amount of experience and exposure needed to move into the upper echelons of the agency's administration. Aiding its efforts in this respect was the coincidental implementation of several environmental laws that expanded the agency's responsibilities. The Forest Service's reluctance to change its emphasis on timber management had led Congress to pass laws in the 1970s, such as the Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act and the National Forest Management Act. Since their implementation, public land management decisions have been subject to intense federal judicial scrutiny, just as the agency's hiring practices have been.

The shift away from intensive timber management that began in the 1970s and 1980s created an immediate and substantial demand for new employees with expertise in nonforestry areas, such as wildlife biology, recreation, and sociology. Many of these new employees questioned the status quo in land management as well as personnel management, and knowingly risked their jobs—and in some cases, their personal safety—to publicly speak out against bad practices in both areas.

Just as these pressures intensified, the Forest Service's budget and payroll were slashed due to the Balanced Budget and Emergency Deficit Control Act of 1985 (more popularly known as the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings Act). Aimed at reducing the skyrocketing federal deficit, the act required many agencies to make severe budget cuts. Forest Service employees in the traditional fields found that the doors flung open for new scientists and women were marked "exit" for them. Between 1983 and 1992, jobs in the traditional fields of engineering and range management decreased, while employment in nonforestry fields generally increased (Thomas and Mohai 1995). Technology contributed to job losses, too. The introduction of desktop computers 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 5,000 positions (Table 1).

**Table 1. Women employees by category as a percentage of the total forest service workforce.**

	1981	1991	2001
Professional	11.9%	36.9%	30.7%
Technical	17.5	33.5	32.7
Administrative	31.8	68.4	59.1
Total	27.8	43.5	38.5

Source: USDA Forest Service 2002, Thomas and Mohai 1995.

Though the Forest Service stepped up its recruiting of women, those efforts were not going to help those already working in the Forest Service. 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* (now *Women in Natural Resources*) began publication in 1983 "to provide ideas and information for, from, and about women in the forestry profession" (Frome 1984). The journal gave women a place to safely voice their concerns and problems, to learn from one another, and to diminish the isolation they felt while navigating difficult terrain in the various male-dominated land-management agencies.

Professional women who entered the Forest Service during this period brought with them a different perspective on the relationship between humanity 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 similar beliefs to the women in the first survey. Subsequent studies have shown little or no difference in attitudes concerning general environmental issues, but did show that 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 has had a measurable impact on the agency's management focus. This shift in values now more closely reflects those of the general public, helping the agency better align itself with the constituency it serves (Thomas and Mohai 1995).

Nevertheless, change has not been easily negotiated. In the 1990s, a backlash



**Figure 2.** Smokejumpers Lori Messenger (right) and Jeanine Faulkner take a break while fighting the Trio Lake fire on the Lolo National Forest in 2000. When working as fire lookouts in the early years, women were not allowed to fight fires, even if it immediately threatened their post. Now they may be found working as smokejumpers and hotshots, and doing other once-unthinkable firefighting jobs including piloting aircraft. While many men objected to the hiring of the first female smokejumper in 1981, two decades later, women like Messenger are working alongside their husbands in firefighting units. To retain veterans who are married with children, the Forest Service is experimenting with allowing couples like Messenger and her husband, Scott Jones, to share one spot on the smokejumpers' list for the 2005 fire season.

erupted in Region 5 against the Bernardi Consent Decree. Four male employees filed a suit to stop its implementation on behalf of themselves and all other employees not within the plaintiff class. When the courts turned them away, three others joined them in filing a second suit, claiming reverse discrimination. That, too, was dismissed. Regional foresters in other regions resented having women they had recruited and trained for professional and technical positions 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, so additional lawsuits were filed in the late 1990s. As part of one settlement agreement, the Forest Service established the Monitoring Council in 2001 at the Regional Offices in Vallejo, CA, to implement an action plan. The council had its office sign vandalized on three occasions, an indication of the continuing animosity. The culprits were never caught, which left a sense of unease among workers (USDA Forest Service 2003).

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 Forest Service personnel management practices, when combined with the introduction of professionals from nontraditional fields, have had an irreversible impact the Forest Service's culture. Today, roughly one-third of all district rangers and forest supervisors are women (Sullivan 2004). Implementing policies important to women employees, such as maternity leave and flexible work schedules, which did not exist when Bernardi initially filed suit, have also benefited all workers, both male and female. Career training made available to men and women has helped employees from both groups 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.

Although their numbers have increased in Forestry, Range, and Engineering, the categories from which most of the agency's line officers are typically chosen, women have remained underrepresented in those fields (Frome 1984, Office of Personnel Management 2000, USDA Forest Service 2002). Because of the technical de-

mands 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 wryly noted in 1984. He also observed that the real problem was not race or gender, 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 could 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 (Unknown 1984). But the total number of women working in the Forest Service continues to lag behind that of women in the national civilian workforce by about 8 percentage points. In all likelihood, the agency's hiring practices will remain under the scrutiny of the federal courts until parity is achieved.

## Conclusion

The Forest Service continually failed to recognize and reward women's abilities and contributions, and kept them out of the "manly" traditional professional fields, even though women had already proven their manifold abilities. Faced with legal action in the 1970s regarding how it managed the land and its personnel, the Forest Service had no choice but to change its ways. It took female employees forming their own "fraternity"—more precisely, a legal class—to gain access to higher administrative posts within the Forest Service. Women continue to file lawsuits because gender remains a roadblock to advancement. In many ways, their contemporary situation is similar to Ranger M.H. McCarthy's 1913 plea to his boss to ignore Hallie Daggett's sex and hire the most qualified applicant. Women in the Forest Service, or those wanting to join the agency, continue to ask the same of today's hiring supervisors—that they evaluate only an applicant's accomplishments and qualifications, and not her gender.

## Literature Cited

- BECKER, G. 2004. Interview transcript for the film *The Greatest Good*. US Forest Service History Collection, Forest History Society, Durham, NC.
- CAUDEL, J. 1988. Women loggers. *Forest World* 4(4):22–23.
- CORNELL, E. 1919. Extracts from diary of Miss E. Cornell, Sanger Peak Lookout Station,

- Siskiyou National Forest, 1918. *The Six Twen-ty-Six* 3(12)(October):9–13.
- FROME, M. 1984. *The Forest Service*, 2nd Ed. Westview Press, Boulder, CO.
- GUTHRIE, J.D. 1920. Women as forest guards. *J. For.* 18(2):151–153.
- HOLSINGER, R. 1983. A novel experiment: Hallie comes to Eddy's Gulch. *Women in Forestry* 5(2):21–25.
- LEISZ, D. 2004. Interview transcript for the film *The Greatest Good*. US Forest Service History Collection, Forest History Society, Durham, NC.
- LEWIS J.G. 2005. *The Forest Service and the greatest good: A centennial history*. Forest History Society, Durham, NC.
- OFFICE OF PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT. 2000. *2000 Demographic profile of the federal workforce*, Table 1. Available online at [www.opm.gov/feddata/demograp/2000/00demogr.pdf](http://www.opm.gov/feddata/demograp/2000/00demogr.pdf); last accessed July 28, 2004.
- PENDERGRASS, L.F. 1990. Dispelling myths: Women's contributions to the Forest Service in California. *Forest and Conservation History* 34(1):17–25.
- SHINN, J.T. 1930. The ranger's boss. *American Forests* 36(7):459–460, 481.
- SULLIVAN, T. 2004. Transforming the Forest Service: Maverick bureaucrat Wendy Herrett. *High Country News* December 6. Available online at [www.hcn.org/servlets/hcn.Article?article\\_id=15160](http://www.hcn.org/servlets/hcn.Article?article_id=15160); last accessed December 20, 2004.
- THOMAS, J.C., AND P. MOHAL. 1995. Racial, gender, and professional diversification in the Forest Service from 1983 to 1992. *Policy Studies Journal* 23(2):296–309.
- US FOREST SERVICE. 1950. *A job with the Forest Service: Information about permanent and temporary jobs with the U.S. Forest Service*. File folder: Women in the F.S.: Employment policies. US Forest Service History Collection, Forest History Society, Durham, NC.
- USDA FOREST SERVICE. 2002. *FY 2002 Affirmative employment plan (AEP) update and FY 2001 accomplishment report for women and minorities*. Available online at [www.fs.fed.us/crl/title\\_vii/correspondence/fy02\\_aep.doc](http://www.fs.fed.us/crl/title_vii/correspondence/fy02_aep.doc); last accessed on July 28, 2004.
- USDA FOREST SERVICE. 2003. *Region 5 women's settlement agreement, monitoring council report, first report r[egion] 5 women's settlement agreement (Donnelly v. Veneman)*. US Forest Service History Collection, Forest History Society, Durham, NC.
- UNKNOWN. 1984. Field notes. *Pacific/Southwest Log* 3:7.
- WILLIAMS, G. 1991. *Women in the Forest Service: Early historical accounts*. (Unpublished manuscript), US Forest Service History Collection, Forest History Society, Durham, NC.

*James G. Lewis (jglewis@duke.edu) is the staff historian at the Forest History Society, 701 William Vickers Avenue, Durham, NC 27701. Critical feedback and editorial input for this article from Char Miller, Cheryl Oakes, and Dianne Timblin deserve acknowledgment.*