



# Pete Steen

## *A Career of Contributions*

BY EUGENE S. ROBBINS

*Harold K. “Pete” Steen (1935–2022) served as executive director of the Forest History Society from 1978 until his retirement in 1997. A widely respected and influential forest historian, he was the author or editor of more than a dozen books, many on the U.S. Forest Service. To this day, The U.S. Forest Service: A History, first published in 1976, remains the definitive text on the first half-century of the agency’s history. Pete died in January 2022. To commemorate his life’s work, we’re reprinting these remarks, given at the Spring 1997 FHS Board of Directors meeting by board member Eugene Robbins and published in the 1997 edition of Forest History Today, the magazine Pete established in 1995, followed by one of his many articles “Americans and Their Forests: A Love-Hate Story.”*

Over the past few years as I have grown to know Pete Steen and to view his work with the Society, I have become a great admirer of him as an administrator and as a person. His high ethical standards, his concern for the business of the Society, and his concern for the staff are total and genuine.

Most board members have the opportunity to meet with Pete a couple times a year. If we are lucky, we have a committee assignment that brings us closer to the staff. It is then we begin to notice the dedication of the organization, which stems from Pete’s lead. His marvelous career as the Society’s longest-serving executive is not an accident but the result of his total dedication to the Society and to the study of history.

The Society has had three leaders during its existence, which began in 1946.

The first was Rodney C. Loehr, who got the Society established as the

Forest Products History Foundation of the Minnesota Historical Society. He was followed in 1952 by Elwood Maunder, who was responsible for locating and ensuring the safety of archival material all over the country. He also hired Pete as assistant director in 1969.

Pete had earned a bachelor’s degree in forestry in 1957 and after a stint in the Navy, he returned to the University of Washington to earn his MS in mensuration and statistical analysis. He went back to work as a Forest Service data specialist in forest fire research. Besides what Pete learned from his normal classes, he also learned something about himself. He found scholarly work interesting.

Success at the Forest Service led to an offer of a full scholarship to Yale, including full pay while in school if he would study meteorology. The offer caused him to take stock. He was interested in further study, but did the offer meet his career objectives? It did not, so he took the bold step of resigning from the Service and went back to the University of Washington

to get a PhD on his own. He started with a major in the university’s history of science program but was rescued by one of his forestry professors, who directed him to an interdisciplinary study course centered at the school of forestry.

As a newly minted forest history PhD, he was recruited by both the Society of American Foresters and the Forest History Society. He chose to become Mr. Forest History.

The Society had just uprooted from Yale and was moving to Santa Cruz, California. Here was the situation when the new assistant director arrived: no building, no staff, \$14,000 in the bank, no operating reserves, no library, no resident archive, no documented photo collection, and no written operating policy. The location was an inadequately heated and lighted on-campus house.

During the first few years, Pete began working on the programs that would become the core of the Society and still survive today. He edited the journal, set up the library, processed and indexed manuscript collections, drafted grant requests, did research writing, and acted as technical consultant to the oral history program. He did this along with teaching and acting as UC–Santa Cruz liaison. It was during this period that Pete produced his significant book, *The U.S. Forest Service: A History*. The book is now in its third printing.

In 1978, Pete was appointed executive director of the Forest History Society. The assets then totaled \$140,000. In the year that followed, an endowment campaign was conducted. Pete and his entourage crossed the country with all the flurry of a presidential campaign. They called on all of the major forest products companies to solicit donations and tell the Society’s story. By the end of the

first year, the first million dollars was recorded. They would eventually reach their goal of \$2.1 million.

In 1984 the Society moved to Durham and purchased the new headquarters building, complete with lights, heat, real book shelves, real offices, staff spaces, and parking places. It was also a new personnel start as Pete was the only staff member to make the transition. So using his Santa Cruz experience, he started the resettlement and re-staffing process again. The staff that Pete created is one of his proudest accomplishments. It is a talented and productive staff that can handle a wide range of assignments. With diverse technical skills, the staff carries out the many Society programs to international standards.

Not long after, in 1988, the building was refurbished and doubled in size with the addition of the Alvin Huss archive. The space created still offers us room to grow today. It was a proud day for Pete and the Society when George Weyerhaeuser and Alvin Huss wielded the shears against the opening ribbon.

Pete continued to advance the Society's goals in his time in Durham. He has managed the programs so well that we now have an excellent library and archive, a highly successful journal, the Research and Publications program, the Service and Professional Outreach program, the Awards and Fellowship program, and our newest program, Education.

During his last few years Pete encouraged the board through a new strategic planning process, and with great statesmanship combined our publication *Forest Conservation & History* with that of the American Society for Environmental History. The new publication, *Environmental History*, is excellent in every way.

Pete also initiated our annual publication, *Forest History Today*, and the development of the Issue Series that leads our efforts to give historic perspectives to current issues. It has raised the level of recognition of the Society as more than 25,000 copies of *American Forests: A History of Resiliency and Recovery* have been printed. Our latest in the series, *America's Fires: Management on Wildlands and Forests*, by Stephen Pyne, holds promise as another Issue Series hit.

There are many other accomplishments that fill the years that Pete has so ably served our organization. What is most important to recognize is that he joined an organization in flux without a home, without developed programs, with basically no financial security and no long-range plan. From that modest beginning, we now have an internationally recognized program, a very nice office facility, an accomplished and dedicated staff, over \$4.2 million in endowment, an annual operating budget of over \$400,000, and a new strategic plan to guide our future.

It is indicative of Pete's character and commitment that well in advance of his retirement he began to coach the board through the steps necessary to complete a successful transition to new leadership. He studied the process of replacement and then made information available to the board that would lead it through the process.

In guiding the organization through the years, Pete has brought honor and recognition to the Society and to himself. He has international recognition through his publications and presentations and through his affiliation with IUFRO. He received the Distinguished Service Award from the American Forests and he received

the Distinguished Achievement Alumni Award from the University of Washington.

In the history of organizations, different leadership is required to make the organization survive. Early leaders need to take it through the formation process and give it a purpose to build upon, later leaders need to make the organization significant from a program point of view and secure it financially and to give it the recognition to survive long term. Pete has built the organization and provided a secure base and a plan for the future. It is a fine legacy. It is a well-executed career that leaves us proud of our past and prouder still to have been affiliated with Pete Steen and his marvelous career.

Pete, we thank you for your many contributions to your Forest History Society.

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*Eugene Robbins served for many years on the FHS Board of Directors. This article was first published in Forest History Today 1997: 41-42.*

## NOTES

1. *U.S. Forest Service: A History* has remained in print since it was published in 1976. In 2004, Pete wrote a new foreword for the book that reviewed the biggest issues the agency had faced since the book was first published.
2. Pyne's book was so successful and the topic so important that a completely new edition was published in 2010 under the title *America's Fires: A Historical Context for Policy and Practice*. As of 2022, there are nine titles in the series.

**In addition to his many publications, Pete worked with Vester Dick on two documentary films produced by the Forest History Society. Mary Elizabeth Johnson looks on as they edit *Timber on the Move*.**



