



Missouri Department of Conservation & Top of the Ozarks RC&D Forestry Committee

The following column is the second in a series intended to benefit woodland owners.

The history of Missouri's forests:

The era of awareness

By Bruce Palmer

It was not until 1928 that Missouri's depleted forests received any official attention. That year, the Missouri General Assembly authorized a Department of Forestry under the Board of Agriculture. The Board appointed Frederick Dunlap as State Forester and hired Paul Dunn as a District Forester. Dunn moved to Ellington, where his primary job was fire prevention. He once reported that at least three-fourths of the land outside the state parks burned off twice each year.

Dunn drove around his district in a Model T, hauling a trailer with a movie projector and generator. He had one film, "Trees of Righteousness." Dunn wore out five prints of it showing it to every school district in Reynolds and adjoining counties.

In 1931, the Governor vetoed the forestry appropriation and abolished the Forestry Department. State Forester Dunlap concluded that it was impossible to stop forest fires in the Ozarks.

In 1929, the Missouri National Forest Association successfully lobbied the Legislature to permit the federal government to purchase land in Missouri for a national forest. Eight purchase units were set up in 1934-35, and the national forests became a reality. Eventually 1.5 million acres of cut-over forest land was acquired.

Conservation efforts were also underway on the state level. Voters approved the constitutional amendment creating the Conservation Commission in 1936. This new agency included a forestry division, an innovative idea

at a time when most other fish and wildlife agencies were separate from forestry departments. The early Missouri conservationists recognized that a healthy forest resource was essential to healthy fish and wildlife populations.

The Conservation Commission hired former Forest Service employee George O. White as State Forester in 1938. Fire control was his first big job. Borrowing an idea from Paul Dunn, the "Showboat" was put into operation to educate the rural folks not to burn. This was a truck with a generator, picture screen and projector, and operator. It took forestry movies into the Ozark hills where there was no electricity. The pictures were shown outdoors, in crossroad stores, at country churches and schools. This mobile entertainment operated for 12 years, continuing even through World War II.

Gradually, fire prevention programs began to pay off. Once fires were reduced, efforts could be turned to managing the forest. Foresters planted seedlings, harvested trees damaged by fire and removed undesirable trees. Private landowners learned how to improve their forest and wildlife habitat.

Tremendous progress in Missouri's forest management has been made. The once-impossible task of fire control in the Ozarks is a reality. Today less than one-tenth of one percent of Missouri burns each year. Deer and turkey are found in record numbers. And once again, Missouri is a leader in wood products. Conservation - wise use - has made all this possible.

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