

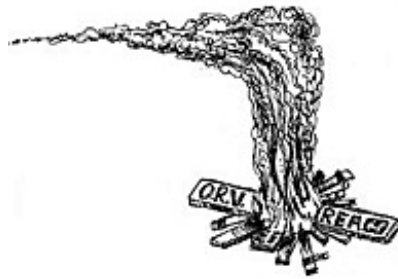


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Around the Campfire

with Uncle Dave Foreman



The Forest Service Against the Wilderness After World War Two

Right before World War Two, conservation and resourcism were friendlier than they had been since the 1890s. With Harold Ickes as Secretary of the Interior, Ferdinand Silcox as Chief of the Forest Service, Bob Marshall as Head of Recreation for the Forest Service, and Ding Darling as Director of the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife, conservation groups like The Wilderness Society, National Parks Association, National Audubon Society, and the Sierra Club were pretty chummy with the agencies—although they kept being watchdogs. Once the Forest Service felt it was here to stay after World War One, many Forest Supervisors and District Rangers settled into a custodial easy chair. There was little call for National Forest timber; in fact, many timber companies were against Forest Service timber sales because such federal sales would undercut the more gainful logging of privately owned forests. Since the “Big Blowup” in 1910 that burned 3 million acres in the Northern Rockies, the Forest Service had become foremost a wildfire-fighting agency, busy with building fire lookout towers and stringing crude telephone lines to the lookouts whether in roadless backcountry or Primitive Areas or reachable by rough “truck trails.” Throwing a diamond hitch and handling mules were needed skills for working in the Forest Service—as well as knowing how to wield ax, crosscut saw, and shovel. Many packtrails for fire fighting were built, some carefully engineered. These trails are still the trail network on National Forests, though many have become roads while thousands of miles have become overgrown and lost.

After World War Two, however, conservationists and resource agencies found themselves at odds, as resource managers started an all-out onslaught against America's last wilderness. The United States Forest Service worked tirelessly to bring its backcountry to heel. Land that yet sneered at the will of Man upset the engineering pride of resource managers as a job yet undone. Roadless areas were seen as lands that hadn't yet had roads chopped through them.

Timber and Roads

With after-war giddiness, the United States was on the road again—and resource agencies were ready at last to manage “their” lands. First to feel this hurry were the timberlands of the National Forests—foresters had been waiting forty years for this glad day. David Clary, retired chief historian of the Forest Service, laid out in flint-sharp thoroughness the growing overlordship of timber extraction in the National Forests in his book, *Timber and the Forest Service*. He wrote, “Before World War II the national forests were mostly custodial institutions,”^[1] but after the war the call for National Forest timber became louder thanks to how logging companies had scalped their private lands thus leaving little to be cut. Since soldiers home from the war were marrying, starting families, and wanting homes, the Forest Service was ready—nay, eager—to build new roads and get out the cut for the Baby Boom. In 1940, the Forest Service sold 1.371 billion board feet of timber, in 1946, 2.470 billion board feet, and in 1952, 4.516 billion board feet.^[2] To cut this much timber from the roadless, back-of-beyond, old-growth wildwood of the West, roads had to be built—often up, over, and down slopes rugged as they came. This rough, tough chore was an engineer's dream and St. George against the dragon for the bulldozer jockeys. The Forest Service loudly asked for more money from Congress, and with it bulldozed timber haul roads throughout the National Forests, splitting up big roadless areas as if splitting logs for kindling. In 1946 the Forest Service came up with “a \$260-million program, extending over thirteen years, to provide for a total of 26,000 miles of roads.”^[3] This request was soon overtaken as the Forest Service, with backing from sawlog senators and representatives, needed more money for more roads to cut more timber to bring lots of money to rural counties in the West. Thus began the “Iron Triangle” of the Forest Service, big timber corporations, and their pet members of Congress.



Unrecovered old clearcut next to South San Juan Wilderness Area © Dave Foreman

The clash was on. The long goal was to log all old-growth forests and road all roadless areas (outside of the piddling handful of Wilderness, Wild, and Primitive Areas) so as to bring self-willed forests and the backcountry under the steady hand of the Forest Service's professional, managerial will. The goal of arrogant resourcism was to make over the Western wilderness into neat, garden-like timber plantations—to take the wild tangle of millions of years of evolution and in no more time than the career of a

professional forester smooth it out into a well-behaved tree farm. Over the last sixty years, the Forest Service has almost done it—and darned well would have done it if not for sundry hikers, climbers, birders, hunters, anglers, paddlers, horse packers, and other wilderfolk standing in the road to thwart “progress” and shouting “No!” “Hell, no!” Nor have the mountains of the West meekly let themselves become so tamed as flatland Kansas field squares.

Let me give a snapshot of growth in National Forest timber cutting and National Forest “Forest Development Roads.” In 1950, 3.5 billion board feet (bbf) were cut. By 1962, yearly “harvest” was up to 9.0 bbf. But for one or two years it stayed over 9 bbf until the early 1990s when it suddenly dropped from 10.5 in 1990 to 3.7 in 1996—back to the cut level in 1950. High points were 1966 (12.1 bbf) and 1987 (12.7 bbf).^[4] Those thirty years must have felt like heaven to Forest Service timber beasts.

I put “harvest” in quotation marks because this Forest Service word for timber cutting is not a harvest at all. As the first in my family born off the farm, I learned from my grandmother that you harvested what you planted and tended. What the Forest Service was doing instead was *mining*—the one-time liquidation of sprawling, deep, dark ancient forests with big trees

hundreds of years old. After the timber mining, old wildwood became a barren hillside bleeding soil and life into once-upon-a-time shady, cold streams, now warm ditches running through torn-up dirt and baked by the sun. In their “arrogance of optimism,” the forest engineers (c’mon, they weren’t rangers), believed they were replacing a “decadent, overmature” forest that was a biological desert with better trees that would quickly grow and be ready for harvest in as little as sixty years.[\[5\]](#)

As for the growth in Forest Development Roads (whose main reason for being was for logging), there were some 160,000 miles in 1950. The engineers and bulldozers went to work slicing through roadless backcountry so that by 1975 there were over 200,000 miles and by 1985 some 350,000 miles— mostly paid for by taxpayers.[\[6\]](#)

National Forest Wilderness Areas

In the 1930s, forest supervisors and district rangers of the custodial bent put up and backed most of the Primitive Areas named by the Forest Service. Theirs was the Forest Service of creaking saddle leather, mule trains coughing in trail-dust, canvas wall tents, and Dutch ovens. They liked to hunt and fish in wilderness. A long pack trip took them back to their early days in the new Forest Service. This was not acknowledgement of wilderness for its own sake but a love of pioneer travel and skills. Such foresters could have a strong bond to their chosen Primitive Areas and yet be against locking up “too much” of the backcountry.

As I’ve written in earlier Campfires, in 1939 the Forest Service put out the “U Regulations,” which bade forest supervisors to do thorough studies of whatever Primitive Areas were on their National Forest. Well thought-out boundaries were to be at last drawn. The Primitive Areas and neighboring roadless lands recommended for permanent protection were to be called Wilderness Areas if over 100,000 acres and Wild Areas if less than 100,000 acres. These U Regulations were mostly the work of Bob Marshall, Director of Recreation for the Forest Service (and the main founder of The Wilderness Society). Alas, Marshall died of a heart ailment as the new regulations were being done. Then, the Primitive Area studies were put on hold by the war.

After the war, conservationists thought the studies would go on as though Bob Marshall were still there to shepherd them. Primitive Areas, whatever their acreage, were most often rugged, scenic mountain ranges within a much bigger acreage of wild, roadless backcountry. The part of the bigger roadless area not designated as a Primitive Area was likely flatter, smoother, and cloaked in bigger trees. Conservationists thought the Forest Service, after study, would ask the Secretary of Agriculture to make new Wilderness Areas of all of each Primitive Area along with much of the roadless acreage around each. Instead, the Forest Service more often than not called for shrinking Primitive Areas and bringing in to the new Wildernesses little if any of the other roadless acreage—so that they could then road and log the unprotected roadless lands *and* what was cut out of the old Primitive Areas shielded by Marshall. What the Forest Service put forward as the new Wilderness Areas had little to no saw-log timber.

The Gila Wilderness in New Mexico tells the tale. Recall that this was the first Wilderness/Primitive Area and that it was Aldo Leopold’s baby. In 1924 at birth, it weighed in at 750,000 acres.[\[7\]](#) But after Leopold left the Southwest, new leaders at the Gila National Forest hacked what was named the North Star Road through the Wilderness, leaving a Gila Primitive Area to the west and a Black Range Primitive Area to the east (following the terminology of the L-20 regulations). Another road was driven like a stake into the heart of the Gila Primitive Area from the south to the Gila Cliff Dwellings National Monument and private inholdings where the forks of the Gila River came together. Ranchers, with the backing of the Forest Service, dammed mostly dry streams with mule-drawn fresnos and even bulldozers to build “stock tanks” deep within the Primitive Area and on its edges.[\[8\]](#) The Gila Primitive Area was 563,000 acres when the U Regs were made before World War Two and was one of the first of the Primitive Areas to be looked at for permanent Wilderness classification after the War.



In 1952, Southwest Regional Forester C. Otto Lindh called for reclassifying 375,000 acres of the Gila Primitive Area as the Gila Wilderness and dropping 188,000 acres of the Primitive Area from any kind of protection—75,000 acres of old-growth ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir on Iron Creek Mesa to the north and over 100,000 acres to the east between the North Star Road and the road to the Gila Cliff Dwellings. One-third of the Gila Primitive Area would lose all protection. The Forest Service wanted to log Iron Creek Mesa

Iron Creek Mesa Lake, Gila Wilderness Area
© Dave Foreman

and believed that the other land was too flat to be kept from Jeeps and trucks—in truth it did not meet their belief of what a “Wilderness Area” should look like. The Sierra Club's Weldon Heald wrote, “[T]he Forest Service proposed to get rid of the headache by cutting off the head.”

The Wilderness Society and Sierra Club were against chopping up the Gila; amazingly (to conservationists today, leastways), so were the folks in nearby Silver City.^[9] Heald, who lived not far away in the Chiricahua Mountains of Arizona, wrote about the August 7, 1952, public hearing in Silver City for *The Living Wilderness*:

For more than four hours a steady procession marched to the lectern and spoke against eliminating one square inch of the Gila Wilderness Area. The American Legion, chambers of commerce, sportsmen's' associations, service clubs, women's clubs, garden clubs, VFW, and every organization in four counties had representatives who spoke or read statements vigorously opposed to any reduction whatsoever. Not one organization in the whole region favored the changes.^[10]

Taken aback, but not beaten, the Forest Service shuffled their proposal a little. On January 15, 1953, the Secretary of Agriculture announced a new Gila Wilderness—410,000 acres keeping Iron Creek Mesa in. One hundred and forty-eight thousand acres, mostly the East Side but also in scattered acreages around the Wilderness, were left of the old Primitive Area and kept as the Gila Primitive Area for study at a later time. When it was restudied in 1972, the Forest Service worked again to cut out most of the Primitive Area, but conservationists got Congress to put nearly all of it in the Gila Wilderness in 1980.

In 1953, the Forest Service got away with taking an ax to the Three Sisters Primitive Area in the Oregon Cascades. Fifty-three thousand acres of lordly old-growth forest at lower elevations along French Pete Creek and elsewhere were dropped from protection and opened up for clear-cut logging. The regional forester told the Sierra Club “that harvesting some of its 1.5 billion board feet of timber would help to prevent the closing of more mills in the area.”^[11] The other acreage, mostly high-elevation volcanoes, rock, and subalpine forest, was redesignated as the Three Sisters Wilderness Area.

Even after the Wilderness Act was being worked on in Congress, the Forest Service still hacked away at Primitive Areas. The Yolla Bolly in northern California was halved. The sprawling Selway-Bitterroot Primitive Area in Idaho and Montana (1,875,306 acres^[12]) was reclassified as a 1,240,605 acre Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness Area and a 216,870 acre Salmon River Breaks Primitive Area. A gravel road was built between the two and 446,906 well-forested acres—nearly half-a-million acres—were dropped from protection.^[13] Michael Frome tells the tale of other Primitive Areas taken to the slaughterhouse in *Battle for the Wilderness*.^[14] Conservationists quickly learned that instead of a growing network of National Forest Wilderness Areas, they were being given half the loaf they thought they already had—never mind what they thought they would get.

This onslaught against the old Primitive Areas for the sake of clearcutting ancient forest is what truly drove The Wilderness Society, Sierra Club, other wildlovers, and many members of Congress to work hard for a congressional Wilderness Act—one that would take away the Forest Service’s lordship over Wilderness Areas.

Dave Foreman



Getting packed for a month-long canoe trip on the Arctic NWR’s Sheenjek River.

Adapted from my forthcoming Conservation vs. Conservation book.

[1] David A. Clary, *Timber and the Forest Service* (University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, 1986), 119.

[2] Clary, *Timber and the Forest Service*, 111 & 125. A board foot is a piece of lumber one foot wide, one foot long, and one inch thick.

[3] Clary, *Timber and the Forest Service*, 117. Since that year of my birth, the Forest Service has built more than tenfold the miles of roads it first offered.

[4] Paul W. Hirt, *A Conspiracy of Optimism: Management of the National Forests since World War Two* (University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1994), xlv. Hirt’s book is just one of many listings for USFS official timber sale figures, both in print and on the web. The books by Hirt and Clary are the key works for understanding National Forest logging in the fifty years from the mid-1940s to mid-1990s.

[5] I take the “arrogance of optimism” term from Paul Hirt’s authoritative book on the post-WWII Forest Service: *A Conspiracy of Optimism*.

[6] There are many sources for these figures, which are not in question. I got mine from a draft 1998 Forest Service report on the National Forest Road System and Use.

[7] However, Bob Marshall mapped over 1.3 million acres of roadless lands in the Gila in 1927—nearly twofold the acreage set aside in 1924.

[8] For you youngsters, a “fresno” is pretty much a mule-drawn bulldozer blade.

[9] In those days, hunters expected to go into the backcountry by foot or horse—not by motors and roads. At first, The Wilderness Society was conned by the Forest Service’s phony line and went along with the boundary shift. Naysaying by locals led TWS to look again and then to fight shrinking the Wilderness.

[10] Weldon F. Heald, “Report from the Gila,” *The Living Wilderness*, Autumn 1952, 27. *The Living Wilderness* is the key primary source for such wilderness fights.

[11] Dennis M. Roth, *The Wilderness Movement and the National Forests: 1964-1980* (Forest Service History Series FS 391, Washington, D.C., December 1984), 49. Roth’s 70-page booklet is an outstanding guide to the wilderness battles after the Wilderness Act. Douglas W. Scott, *A Wilderness-Forever Future: A Short History of the National Wilderness Preservation System* (Pew Wilderness Center, Washington, DC, 2001) is also top-notch.

[12] *The Living Wilderness*, Autumn-Winter 1960-61, 50.

[13] *The Living Wilderness*, Winter-Spring 1962-63, 25.

[14] Michael Frome, *Battle for the Wilderness*, Revised Edition (University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City, 1997) (1974), 134-138.



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Pleistocene wildlife header graphic by Sergio de la Rosa Martinez



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