



# *Charles S. Cowan*

**1887-1969**

Charles Steven Cowan grew up on a farm along the Campbell River on Vancouver Island, British Columbia, in the late 1800s. His father, Bruce Napier Cowan, was an engineer who helped design the government railway across Canada.

The eldest of eight children, Charles was encouraged to seek his education in Scotland. At age 14, his father paid his fare to Scotland with the admonition that after his first year he was on his own and would need to earn scholarships to continue his education.

Cowan finished preparatory school in Scotland and then won a Rhodes Scholarship in Forestry at the University of Edinburgh. This was the first Rhodes Scholarship ever awarded in Forestry. After Charles graduated from the University of Edinburgh, he studied engineering at Oxford University for two years.

Stocky and muscular, Cowan excelled in sports. He was the British Isles Amateur Lightweight Boxing Champion in college, and played on the national rugby team, as well as

briefly holding the 100-yard-dash record for the British Isles.

After he had completed his engineering studies, Cowan went to India in the service of the Crown and worked as a forester.

While he was in India, Canada gained Dominion status, which meant that it would form its own forest service. Cowan heard about the plans for establishing a forest service for the Province of British Columbia. This intrigued him, and in 1912, after an absence of almost two years, he returned to British Columbia. He joined four other foresters and became the Assistant Chief Forester on the staff of the newly-formed provincial forest service.

In British Columbia the vast majority of the rugged forestland is owned by the provincial government. In the early 1900s very little was known about the extent of government-owned lands. Cowan's work with the forest service involved mapping the wilderness areas and evaluating the quality of timber.

When World War I began in 1914, Cowan was assigned to France as an infantryman in the Canadian army. The war claimed all five of his brothers and one sister. Cowan was wounded twice, first in Mesopotamia (now Iraq), where he was awarded Britain's second-highest valor award, the Military Cross, for single-handedly repelling a Turkish advance. He suffered a second, nearly fatal wound, in France while he was serving as a Major in the British Flying Corps, commanding a squadron of fighter planes. His plane crashed and a portion of his skull was destroyed. Surgeons inserted a metal plate but he was left with a serious stutter. Major Cowan, as he was known throughout his career, later worked to correct the stutter and went on to become a well-known forestry speaker.

After the war, the recovered Major Cowan returned to forestry and within a short time, married a nurse from British Columbia – Adelaide Alexander. They were married on August 8, 1920, and had two children, Bruce Napier and Patricia Eileen.

In 1927, Charles Cowan moved to Seattle to become the Chief Fire Warden of the Washington Forest Fire Association. Applying the expertise of a forester and the precise planning of an engineer, he launched the first comprehensive program of fire protection in the Pacific Northwest, regardless of ownership boundaries. Primarily through his efforts, cooperative forest protection with state and federal agencies was achieved. This included originating or revising a number of state and federal laws. So vigorous was his work before the legislature and administration that he was dubbed 'Mr. Forestry' by Governor Langlie, a title succeeding governors adopted.

In a period when the concept of sustained yield was little understood, and governmental agencies struggled just to exist, cooperative effort and realistic planning did not come naturally or easily to many, and the problems did not disappear. Charles attacked the problems with a strong sense of the future of the forests and with the tirelessness of an

evangelist tempered with the wit of a Bernard Shaw.

His witty, articulate speeches were all the more remarkable since he had to overcome the stutter caused by the head wound he received in World War I. His son, Bruce Cowan, said, "I remember my dad practicing in front of a mirror for hours at a time, until he had completely removed any trace of stuttering."

In 1939 Charles joined with a group of timberland owners and state officials in deciding that an organization was needed to educate the public about fire prevention. Thus, Keep Washington Green Association was formed, and Charles helped organize and promote the organization. Soon, other states followed Washington's example, and today all states have an agency that disseminates information about fire prevention.

Accepting the added responsibility of helping with Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps in Western Washington, Cowan pushed for access roads into areas of acute fire danger and for the federal government's contribution to a lookout system that ultimately covered the forestlands of the entire state. Emergency fire crews were formed and accommodations built for them.

Mechanically innovative, Cowan was instrumental in adapting and creating fire fighting equipment. Lightweight backpack pumps with outboard motors, routing teeth for caterpillar tractors to make fire trails, and special lightweight hoes were all redesigned by Cowan to increase efficiency. The invention of a quick-release hose coupling by the energetic forester was patented in the name of the Washington Forest Fire Association, with the provision that the plans be made available to anyone who needed them. And, before the bulldozer came on the scene, Cowan developed a fire plow that is in use in some areas today.

In the early 1920s developments in meteorology gave new insights into causes of low and high fire danger. Cowan learned that

the higher relative humidity in the air reduced the danger for forest fires and the lower relative humidity increased the forest fire danger. He recommended that the forest industry use these findings to prevent forest fires.

He also strongly advocated that the logging operations shut down and send their men home when severe fire weather conditions prevailed. This was considered a radical idea at the time, but now it is common practice.

Responding to the forester's need for more information about fire prevention, Charles Cowan put his years of knowledge gained from experience into the book, *The Enemy is Fire*.

In forest protection fire is not the only enemy. When the hemlock looper, a voracious caterpillar, threatened the forests of Pacific County on Washington's southwest corner, Cowan's talents were called upon. In 1931 he organized and supervised the first aerial insecticide dusting operation. He designed a hopper to attach to the plane that could carry up to 1000 pounds of insecticide. The aircraft, a Ryan monoplane, took off from the Long Beach Peninsula and dropped the insecticide from 40 feet above the treetops, effectively killing the caterpillars.

According to his son, Bruce, Cowan gained his greatest satisfaction from forestry as a motivator. "Many who have reaped the laurels of accomplishment in the field of forestry received that special, personal interest

from Charlie that turned them in the right direction or boosted them a step higher toward greater accomplishment," said Bruce.

Charles Cowan left a legacy of green forests that were preserved by his tireless efforts to implement fire protection measures. When he joined the Washington Forest Fire Association in 1927, the average annual fire loss on state and private forestlands in western Washington was 127,000 acres. When he retired in 1958, the annual fire loss had been reduced to 7,000 acres. Garrett Eddy, past president of the association, said in the 1969 annual report, "The record shows that the course of our fire history was immediately and dramatically altered after Charles Cowan arrived. We of Washington State owe Mr. Cowan much."

The University of Washington's Foresters' Alumni Association made Cowan its first honorary alumnus in recognition for his many achievements in the prevention of forest fires and improvement of forestry practices.

Cowan was an active member of the Society of American Foresters and a Fellow in that organization. He was Secretary-Treasurer of the Washington State Forestry Association from 1928 until 1958. He was also Treasurer of the Western Forestry and Conservation Association from 1928 until 1958. Cowan was a registered professional engineer in Washington and British Columbia.

More than any other man, Charles W. Cowan influenced the fire prevention and forest protection practices in the Pacific Northwest.