

Albert Wiesendanger

1893-1989

Mention the name Albert Wiesendanger to any forester who worked in the Pacific Northwest during most any part of the 1900s and you might get one of these responses: “He was a living legend in forest fire prevention,” or “He came to my grade school with a fire prevention film and his harmonica in the 1920s; he came back years later for a visit to the same school with my kids and grandkids;” or perhaps, just a simple response, “He was Mr. Keep Oregon Green.”

For more than 71 years, Albert Wiesendanger worked in professional forestry and fire prevention jobs in a career that spanned a lifetime. Albert worked 39 years with the USDA Forest Service in the Portland, Oregon, regional office and on the Mt. Hood National Forest, then “retired” to another 32 years as executive secretary for Keep Oregon Green Association, a privately funded organization with the objective of preventing people-caused forest fires in this number-one timber state in the nation.

Even at age 92, Albert lived alone in his Salem, Oregon home, which was filled with awards and memories of those 71 years. Albert was born in 1893 in Portland, Oregon, the second of three sons whose parents had emigrated from Switzerland.

In 1909, Albert saw an opportunity when the local paper offered a special gift of two 50-cent passes to a roller rink with any 20-cent ad placed in the classifieds. He

quickly wrote his ad, “a good bright boy wants office work,” accepted his two tickets and went skating.

Soon he got a telephone call from the Forest Service which was just establishing a new regional office in Portland, decentralized from the agency’s only other office – the three-year-old Washington, D.C. headquarters. Albert was interviewed and the “bright boy” was hired as an office messenger at \$30 a month. His knowledge of Portland made him popular with the new Forest Service personnel.

During this time, he set up a desk and provided office help for Gifford Pinchot, first chief of the Forest Service, during his extended visit to the Pacific Northwest.

When Albert considered a promotion to the Post Office, the district supervisor arranged for an equal promotion with the Forest Service and his pay jumped to \$70 a month.

Soon Albert was delivering supplies and firefighters to local fires. From this he developed an interest in a career as a forest ranger, which meant a tough test. He studied some forestry books and practiced throwing a diamond hitch (used in holding a load on a mule) on a sawhorse in the headquarters basement. He passed and was soon assigned to a new campground and ranger station at Eagle Creek in the Columbia Gorge, east of Portland.

At Eagle Creek, Albert became a one-man chamber of commerce for the Forest Service. He oversaw the development of the Eagle Creek Campground, recognized as one of the first in the nation to be operated by the Forest Service.

His fire prevention work was mainly directed at the railroads and the low-grade fuel they burned. Albert would stand on the Bridge of the Gods at Cascade Lakes and spot the many forest fires being set by trains passing through. Then, with the help of the railroad crews and others, he would go after the fires.

About this time, Albert met and married Mickey who spent her life working as an unpaid Forest Service employee and following him on his fire prevention travels in later years. They had been married 63 years at the time of her death in 1980.

During one of his winters in Portland, Albert stumbled on something that would boost his career forever. He had watched other Forest Service employees use lantern slides to give educational talks to scout groups and others. Not impressed with some of these dry presentations, Albert thought he could entertain, as well as educate. He put together a talk of his own, well illustrated by scenes of what the forest meant to the people of Portland – water for their homes, wool for their clothing, timber for their homes and fun places to visit.

“I told people,” Albert once recalled, “that if you help protect these trees, they’ll grow day and night for you, and they’ll provide you with good dividends.” The presentation that Albert made was such a hit that he was soon swamped with requests

from schools, service clubs, and other organizations.

With that, Albert’s career in forest fire prevention was launched. He worked with a traveling “showboat,” a special truck and power generator to show fire prevention slides to school children and Civilian Conservation Corps all over Oregon.

Albert then spent six years at Mt. Baker Lodge in northern Washington in fire prevention and recreation work.

In 1939, Albert was assigned to Mt. Hood’s Timberline Lodge, a rustic ski lodge built by the Civilian Conservation Corps as a new winter recreation site. Here, his educational programs continued to be popular and he rubbed shoulders with many famous people, including the Crown Prince of Norway, whom he later visited in Norway after the prince became king.

With the start of World War II in December, 1941, Timberline Lodge was closed and Albert was promoted to district ranger for the Columbia Gorge.

By 1948, his reputation was growing statewide. A forest fire prevention organization, Keep Oregon Green, was looking for an executive secretary. Albert was visited by a recruiting team and encouraged to apply for the job.

He turned down the job once, which prompted another visit by the recruiting team. Albert weighed the facts, talked to the regional forester, and finally elected to give it a try if it would help fire prevention. In June 1948, Albert and Mickey moved to Salem and to a new career.

He expanded past practices at Keep Oregon Green by involving people, starting with the governor. Former Governor Charles Sprague had helped organize Keep Oregon Green in 1942 and every governor since then had been honorary president of the association.

On his many trips throughout the state, he would make frequent stops at county commissioners' offices, radio stations, newspapers, and forestry offices. There would be a quick message, a small gift, such as a "magic jar opener" or a pen, and then off he would go.

In his travels, Albert moved so fast and covered so many parts of the state that people seldom realized he was a one-man staff, with only a secretary back at the office. He would post signboards at key road locations with the familiar Keep Oregon Green tree and message. And restaurants loved the detailed map of Oregon that Albert commissioned to be drawn. Thousands of these placements were sold to entertain and educate Oregon residents and visitors.

In 1968, he was surprised at the annual meeting of the Society of American Foresters when he was escorted to the speaker's platform as Governor Tom McCall concluded his speech. The governor presented Albert with the Silver Smokey award, the highest individual award in the nation for forest fire prevention. It was only the second award that had ever been made, the first going to the artist who had drawn Smokey Bear for posters.

Four years earlier, in 1964, he had received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the

Western Forestry and Conservation Association. At that time, he still had 16 years of work ahead of him. He also was awarded a Citation for Outstanding Service to the State of Oregon and the forest industry by former Governor Mark O. Hatfield. Other awards followed from both regional and national organizations. One that made him very proud was his selection as a Fellow in the Society of American Foresters. At the time, he was one of only four non-college graduates to be honored by the national professional society.

Another activity that made him proud was the success of the 30-Year Club for Forest Service employees. He conceived the idea in 1935 after talking to a telephone company employee about that firm's Pioneer Club. Albert was the club's last surviving charter member.

In 1980, when Albert decided to retire a second time, he received a personal letter from Oregon Governor Victor Atiyeh, stating in part, "For the active contribution you have made to your community – I salute you." Accompanying the letter was a signed statement by the Governor, proclaiming June 13, 1980, "Albert Wiesendanger Day" in Oregon.