



# Merle Stephen Lowden

1911-1995

Merle Stephen Lowden was a career forester with the U. S. Forest Service who made major contributions in fire prevention and control during his 37 years with the agency. Throughout his career he was respected and admired by his co-workers. They admired his ability to solve major problems and to win cooperation from others. He had a reputation of always sharing the credit for any accomplishments he made.

He was born January 17, 1911 in the small Willamette Valley town of Brownsville, Oregon, the first of two sons born to Edgar S. Lowden and Mabel M. Buell Lowden. His father was a farmer and a trucker.

After completing his basic schooling in Brownsville, Merle enrolled in Oregon State College where he received his Bachelor of Science degree in forestry in 1932 and his Master's degree in forestry in 1933. During his college years he worked for Hammond Tillamook Lumber Company at Garibaldi, Oregon, for the Bureau of Chemistry and Soil as a dry kiln operator, for the Willamette National Forest as a lookout, and as a forest technician in the Portland regional office of the Forest Service.

He received a forester appointment with the Forest Service in 1934. For five months he participated in presenting the "Showboat" fire prevention program to Civilian Conservation Corps enrollees and the public. This was a cooperative educational program of the Forest Service and the Oregon Department of Forestry. He moved on to work a year and a half as a junior forester with the Umpqua National Forest. While working in Roseburg, he married Gertrude Delphine Laird on December 29, 1935. Together they raised two daughters, Linda and Barbara.

Merle continued to advance quickly during the next five years. In 1936, he became an assistant district ranger on the Gasquet District of the Siskiyou National Forest which at that time extended into California. He accepted a new assignment in 1939 as a staff assistant in the forest supervisor's office of the Deschutes National Forest in Bend. Two years later he moved on to the Portland regional office where for three years he was a staff assistant in the Division of State and Private Forestry.

Merle's next advancement came in 1944 with his promotion to assistant forest supervisor on the Fremont National Forest headquartered at Lakeview, Oregon. In that position he cooperated with federal military officials in 1945 in the investigation of a ground explosion of a crashed World War 2 Japanese balloon bomb. A pregnant wife of a local minister and five young children on a picnic all were killed. This tragedy occurred within the Fremont National Forest north of Bly, Oregon. This was the only loss of civilian life from

enemy action in the continental United States during World War II.

Merle was promoted in 1946 to forest supervisor of the Fremont National Forest, a position he held for the next four years. In 1947 he directed the Forest Service's efforts in the search for a missing airplane that had crashed in the Fremont National Forest southwest of Lakeview. Oregon's top three elected state officials and their pilot died in that crash. The bodies of Oregon Governor Earl Snell, Secretary of State Robert S. Farrell, Jr., Senate President Marshall Cornett, and their pilot Cliff Hogue were recovered after an extensive search by one hundred volunteers.

For his leadership in this search and in keeping the news media informed, Merle was highly commended by local, state, and national news media covering the tragedy. Typical of this were remarks by a major Portland radio station news director:

*"This could not have been done without the wonderful cooperation of Merle Lowden, supervisor of the Fremont National Forest. His assistance was invaluable; his courtesy and understanding of our problem aided materially in our transmitting the story of this tragedy to the people within our listening area. I cannot commend Mr. Lowden too highly."*

Merle's speaking skills were demonstrated in 1944 when he took first place in a contest of three-minute speeches during a regional Forest Service conference.

In 1950 he was promoted as Assistant Regional Forester in charge of the Division of Information and Education in the Portland regional office. A year later he transferred to become Assistant Regional Forester for State and Private Forestry for the North Central Region with offices in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. There he directed cooperative federal and state programs in fire protection, tree nursery production, and forest management assisting state forestry agencies in nine states.

In 1956 Merle's performance led to his promotion as Chief of Fire and Aviation for the Forest Service stationed in Washington D.C. In this position, he was responsible for directing the suppression of wildfires on 225 million acres of national forests. He served as chairman of an inter-agency committee preparing for potential fires caused by any enemy attacks in rural areas of the United States. He also originated the idea of a set of standard firefighting fundamentals for every firefighter to follow. Merle started the first national fire training school and guided the development of the forest fire control training simulator that provided fire manager trainees a realistic setting. He also guided the development of an inexpensive fire shelter and a fire trenching machine to build fire line. He also directed the establishment of a national fire danger rating

system that replaced many local systems.

At the request of the State Department Merle traveled to several foreign countries providing advice on developing firefighting organizations to control major fires. He traveled to Argentina to 1962, Dominican Republic in 1967, to Mexico in 1968, and to Chile in 1969.

Merle retired in 1971 after a 37-year career with the Forest Service. He returned to Oregon and resided in Portland. During and after his career, he was recognized with many awards for his lifetime career. In 1971, a month before his retirement, Merle was presented a Silver Smokey Award by the Cooperative Forest Fire Prevention Committee. This award recognized his leadership in creating in-service workshops and training films. He had served on the executive council of the Forest Service's cooperative forest fire prevention campaign for 15 years, the longest tenure of anyone serving in that capacity.

Awards also recognized his lifetime contributions to forestry presented after his retirement. These included the National Honor Award from the Organization of Professional Employees, Department of Agriculture in 1981. He served on that organization's national council when it was formed in 1975. Other awards were the John A. Beale Memorial Award from the Society of American Foresters in 1984 and the Oregon Society of American Foresters Bob Kintigh Lifetime Achievement Award in 1989.

In 1985 Merle proposed organizing the Oregon Society of American Foresters Foundation. Since then this organization has provided \$160,000 in scholarships to over 30 Oregon State University forestry students. He also was affiliated with the Masonic Order and the Benevolent and Protective Order of the Elks.

Merle kept in touch with other retirees and current employees of the Forest Service through the 30-Year Club of the Pacific Northwest Region serving as editor of their newsletter "Timber Lines." He also was the first editor of Northwest Woodlands, a four-state regional publication providing resource management information to family forest owners. Merle also did volunteer service for the World Forestry Center as chair of their education committee that proposed educational programs and activities of the Center. He was an avid supporter of the Portland Trailblazers basketball team and seldom missed home games.

Merle devoted much of his retirement years in managing and nurturing the Lowden Family Tree Farm, his 300-acre tree farm located not far from his birthplace.

Merle passed away on January 21, 1995. He was survived by his wife, Gertrude, daughters Linda Millard and Barbara Bledsoe, four grandchildren, and 12 great-grandchildren.