



Robert L. Furniss

1908-1980

Robert L. Furniss was the consummate entomologist. His exceptional technical abilities, combined with his keen interest in studying insects, enabled him to become the recognized authority on insects of the Douglas fir region and a leading figure in the Northwest for establishing innovative pest control techniques. As a concerned professional he fostered outstanding work relations between public and industrial foresters and entomologists through numerous committees on which he served and organizations he helped formed.

Robert Furniss was born on September 8, 1908 in Portland, Oregon, but spent his youth in New York state. His fascination with insects developed early. From the age of three on, he was bringing home his particularly prized specimens to share with the family. This fascination developed into a hobby in high school and eventually became his major in college. Sports were another of his major interests. He was a star athlete in golf briefly and lacrosse and earned considerable local acclaim as a mountain climber later in life.

Furniss graduated from Syracuse University in 1920 with a Bachelor of Science degree in Forest Entomology. Shortly thereafter he

went to work for the Bureau of Entomology in California studying the devastating bark beetle outbreaks occurring there. While working near Bass Lake in the Sierra National Forest, he met Frances Heath of San Francisco whom he married in 1932.

In 1935 Furniss was transferred to Portland, Oregon, where in 1942 he was promoted to head of the Forest Insect Laboratory. During the early years of his career he began assembling a collection of native forest insects. His dedication to this task led to his discovery of a new species of weevil that was named in his honor, *Cylindrocopturus furnissi*. Furniss' outstanding capacity for hard work and his devotion to improving his insect collection never failed to amaze his co-workers. A boss on one of his first jobs said he was the "only man I know who can cruise timber on a dead run and collect insects at the same time."

Furniss realized the importance of cataloging, classifying and evaluating the important insect pests and as a result he developed one of the finest insect collections in the country, plus an improved system of recording data on insects. He displayed a remarkable ability to discern the relationship between insect, host and environment. He

was recognized for these abilities and was assigned to the United States National Museum for a period in 1938-39 to assist in similar work there.

In the 1940's Furniss led the field in developing techniques for aerial surveys of insect damage and for aerial spraying of insecticides to control destructive infestations. His promotion of aerial surveys advanced that important control technique from its inception to the significant place it now holds in Northwest forestry. In 1948 his innovative spraying techniques helped save the Douglas fir forests of Oregon and Washington from possible destruction by the spruce budworm. These same techniques have been successfully applied on forestland throughout the United States and Canada.

Because of his extensive knowledge of bark beetles, Furniss was asked to serve on General MacArthur's staff in Japan during 1949-50, to analyze the insect problems that were destroying Japanese forests and to recommend control measures. In addition he helped to draft forest insect control laws for the Japanese government to improve their forest management methods. Furniss was highly regarded for the valuable analyses he made of pest problems. His sincere goodwill won him many new friends among the Japanese foresters and entomologists, some of whom stayed with Furniss on their later visits to the United States.

Furniss traveled extensively in Mexico and Central America on his vacations. A "bug catcher of long standing," he spent as much time collecting insects specimens for the collection as he did photographing the scenery. Color photography was a great hobby that nicely aided his research.

The forestry profession benefited from Furniss' devotion to public service. He recognized the advantages of cooperation between the forestry industry and public agencies and worked hard to further that goal. His activities led to the formation of the Northwest Forest Pest Action Council, a public forum representing private, state and federal forestland managers dedicated to protection of forests from insect pests. This council became a model for similar groups throughout the United States and Canada.

Furniss was also active in furthering the work of several professional societies and in establishing in 1949 the annual Western Forest Insect Conference, a model organization of forest entomologists of the Western United States and Canada. He was an active member of the Portland City Club, serving on many committees. Some of his notable positions on societies and boards included Chairman of the Columbia River Section of the Society of American Foresters, President of the Oregon Entomological Society, Committee on Pest Control and Wildlife Relationships of the National Academy of Sciences and Associate Editor for Forest Pathology and Entomology for the *Journal of Forestry*.

In 1954, Furniss was appointed Chief of the Division of Forest Insect Research at the Pacific Northwest Forest and Range Experiment Station in Portland, Oregon, and in 1966, he was promoted to Assistant Station Director. Despite his heavy administrative workload and the constant public demand for his services, Furniss wrote well over a hundred publications and articles during his career. Upon retirement in 1966, he wrote and published an award winning book, *Western Forest Insects*, which went into its second printing a year

after it was published. It has become a popular field manual and forestry school textbook. For this accomplishment he received a certificate of appreciation from the Chief of the Forest Service. Other awards he received include the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Superior Service Award in 1961, the Western Forestry and Conservation Association "Outstanding Achievement in Forestry" award in 1962, and in 1963, he was made a Fellow of the Society of American Foresters.

After retiring, Furniss and his wife Frances were able to spend more time in their garden that they had landscaped with bonsai trees and other unusual plants. Furniss was especially fond of rhododendrons and spent his last years researching insects that attacked the plant. Friends enjoy remembering the summer of 1979, when Furniss purposely stopped his usual pest control activities and allowed insects to settle on his rhododendrons, all in the interest of his research. He ruefully led friends through his garden showing off the various blights, mildews and insects that had descended en masse in his garden.

Furniss became very active in the Portland Chapter of the American Rhododendron Society and in 1974 was awarded with the bronze medal award for his volunteer work as Book Chairman and for his studies of insects on rhododendrons. He completed many long-envisioned club projects with his dedication and vitality. An endowment fund was established in his memory at the Society.

Furniss won the respect of friends and co-workers with the high standards he set and kept for himself. He was an able leader who will be remembered for his "quiet forceful guidance." He was an optimistic man who

made friends easily and "seemed to bring out the best in all those he worked with." Robert L. Furniss died December 7, 1980, survived by his wife, Frances, a sister and four brothers, including Malcolm, an entomologist.