



George Wilcox Peavy

1869-1951

George Wilcox Peavy was one of the spriest, cheeriest, most energetic and forward-looking “elder” foresters to ever roam the Pacific Northwest. He was a pioneer who became a professional forester before there was any profession in this country, who pioneered a great forest school, who became a Fellow of the Society of American Foresters and who finally became a college president.

“Dean” Peavy was born on a farm near Howell, Michigan, on November 12, 1869. He went to the University of Michigan, received his B.S. degree in 1895 and then tried school teaching. After a fling at being high school principal and then newspaperman, he was stimulated by Gifford Pinchot’s call for foresters and went back to Michigan. He left Ann Arbor with a M.S.F. degree in 1905 and entered the U.S. Forest Service.

In 1910, Peavy was called to Corvallis, Oregon, to head the new independent Department of Forestry, later to become the School of Forestry of Oregon State College. In a field virgin to forest educators, he helped the school prosper and grow until it became one of the largest forest schools in the country.

Partly through Peavy’s foresight and energy, the first acres of a school forest, aptly name Peavy Arboretum, were purchased and the

initial 181 acres were dedicated in 1926. The main body of these forested hills north of Corvallis is now McDonald Forest, totaling 6,581 acres and named after Mrs. Mary L. McDonald, whom the Dean interested in his visionary dream. The school’s forest became a workshop for fernhoppers, a laboratory for forest education and a test tube for new ideas in reforestation and cultural movements of forests. The Dean made the Arboretum a center for social education, where his boys gained a love of their profession and a respect for simplicity and for true democracy.

For years, Dean Peavy served as chairman of the faculty committee on student affairs, where his understanding of youth and his friendliness made boys who came to him looking down leave looking up.

In 1932 Peavy was asked to take the Presidency of the College, a job requiring considerable tact and fairness at a time when Oregon’s system of higher education was in the throes of reorganization. For seven years the Dean served capably as “Prexy” but seldom missed gatherings of Oregon foresters.

Upon his “retirement” in 1940, at an age when most men are no longer active, the Dean stepped back briefly as Dean Emeritus of the School of Forestry and then entered actively in civic affairs. He had been a member of the Corvallis School Board from 1916 to 1925, but now took on still more active roles. He became Benton County Chairman of Civilian Defense during World War II and also Chairman of the American Red Cross. At the age of 77, in 1946, he campaigned for mayor of Corvallis, “to give the town some young ideas,” won easily and was re-elected for a second term in November 1950.

Essentially a family man, Peavy married Leona Bradley of Fowlerville, Michigan, in 1894. They observed their 50th wedding anniversary in 1944. Mrs. Peavy died in 1947. She mothered three children, Darwin, Norbert and Bradley. Peavy remarried in 1948 and his wife, the former Georgia Bibee, survived Peavy at his death on June 24, 1951, at the age of 81. He had remained active almost to the last, with a fighting spirit that could not be stilled.

Peavy lived in Oregon 31 years. He helped build up Oregon’s education system, develop its leaders and conserve its forested wealth. Yet he was not provincial. In 1926 he was one of a party of American foresters who attended the International Forestry Congress in Rome. Upon his return, he said: “Europe challenges us...to bridge the gap between the cutting of our last stand of virgin timber and the time when a new crop is available...Europe asks us if we have sense enough to put our forest lands at work growing timber crops.

One of the Dean’s best-loved side jobs was his seat on the Oregon State Board of Forestry (1911-1941). In this mixed group of widespread interests, his wisdom, vision and fairness helped chart Oregon’s now well-established place in pioneering sound legislation favorable to the progress of private forestry. He could amalgamate the interests of state, private and federal agencies in a unified program.

The Dean also knew how to shuck his worldly cares. For 22 summers, he explored remote parts of Oregon and Washington with a graduate of his first class of forestry in 1910. Because he loved the simple life, the Dean’s graduates and friends in 1935 built him a “cabin in the hills,” on a high point in the McDonald Forest, on the occasion of the school’s 25th anniversary. In this two-room cabin of Douglas fir logs and sugar pine shakes, the Dean could “batch” in woodsman style.

Peavy was an eloquent, inspiring and gifted speaker and was much in demand throughout the state. Many of his prophetic statements concerning military training, forestry and education have been recorded for posterity. His faculty messages were stimulating. He conceived it to be that one of the functions of American education was to arm with understanding, a leadership which could stand between the forces of inflexibility and radical change. It was education’s function to arm the young men and women with basic facts and then foster in them the willingness and ability to weigh these facts.

It is as a supplier of ideas that Dean Peavy will perhaps be best remembered by the forestry profession to which he contributed a generous lifetime of devoted, selfless service. He was a great, though modest man, whose highest pleasure it was to spend an hour with forestry friends, preferably young foresters. Dean Peavy had an intense and abiding faith in American youth, a faith which is being proved day after day as “his boys” carry on the proud tradition of George’s idealism and his belief in the future of forestry. The Dean’s spirit will be posterized forever in Oregon’s forested hills, which were his world, and the state owes much to him for his capable leadership.