



Walter F. Sargent

1916-1990

During a career that spanned 33 years, Frank Sargent demonstrated an exemplary level of capability, talent, and professionalism that were to serve him well in directing one of the nation's more difficult forestry endeavors of the 20th century. But he was also devoted to his family, committed to his community and took an active role in public service both locally and for the nation's defense.

More important, Frank Sargent was a people person who slipped easily into conversation with any one of a number of acquaintances and friends. Many fondly referred to him as "Sarge."

Walter Frank Sargent was born June 8, 1916, in Gales Creek, Oregon, to Walter A. and Eva R. Sargent. He was one of five children, having two brothers and two sisters. He attended grade school in Gales Creek and graduated from Forest Grove High School in 1933.

Frank's family history ran deeply in Gales Creek. His grandfather, one of the town's earlier settlers, arrived from Kansas in a covered wagon and was once the area's postmaster. His other grandfather walked daily to his teaching post in Forest Grove, a distance of seven miles.

His mother, too, served as postmistress. She held the position until age 88 and ran the postal operation from the Sargent's family home.

It was in the Douglas fir forests of the adjacent Tillamook region that Frank found his first forestry job and eventually stayed for most of his long and rewarding career.

In the extremely hot August of 1933, the Sargent family home was located close to where many people believed the first, and most catastrophic, of a series of fires began in the Tillamook forests.

Recently graduated from high school, Frank's introduction to forestry soon followed as he and hundreds of others worked the fire lanes in an attempt to control the blaze.

A month later, the fire was stopped, having destroyed a quarter million acres of timberland. As if cursed, the Tillamook region was seared by a major fire every six years for the next two decades.

In 1934, in his second forest-related job, Frank worked for the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) as part of a survey and road construction crew based at the region's Camp Nehalem.

Two years later he entered Oregon State College (now Oregon State University) to earn a degree in forestry. For the next decade Frank persevered, balancing his studies with the necessity of working his way through school.

He worked on fire suppression crews in Benton and Polk Counties for the Northwest Forest Patrol, a private association organized by landowners to protect the forests. And during the summers of 1940 and 1941, he worked in the Tillamook forest region for the Northwest Forest Protection Association.

Indeed, the 1940s was an active decade for Frank. Later in 1941, his studies were interrupted with the onset of World War II. He left school to join the Army, where he served in Europe as a field artillery officer in the Fifteenth Field Artillery Battalion. (Several years later, in 1956, he was awarded a Bronze Star for meritorious achievement in the European Theater of Operations.)

During the war period, he married his wife, Kaye, in Iron River, Michigan on July 22, 1943. Frank returned from the European Theatre of Operations in 1945 on their second wedding anniversary and subsequently went back to the Oregon State campus where he finished his forestry degree.

After graduating in 1946, Frank joined the Oregon Department of Forestry as district forester for northwest Oregon's Columbia County. He and Kaye spent the next year at Pittsburgh Guard Station, an isolated outpost west of Vernonia, Oregon, deep in the Coast Range foothills. They then moved to Beaverton, Oregon, where their son Dennis was born in 1947.

Also during the 1940s, because of the destroyed timber revenue base, private land in the Tillamook was reverting to county, then later state, ownership. The Oregon Department of Forestry was later assigned the task of protecting and reforesting the area, which had become known as the Tillamook Burn. The later effort was supported by a voter-approved \$13 million bond measure.

J.E. "Ed" Schroeder, who later became State Forester, was northwest Oregon area director in charge of the Tillamook restoration project. As one of his first appointments, he named Frank Sargent rehabilitation director for the northwest Oregon district. Frank was to spend much of his 33-year career overseeing the Tillamook's recovery.

"Frank Sargent was an extremely talented individual. He was sharp, perceptive – very capable. In fact, I don't think he ever knew how smart he was," said Schroeder, his longtime friend and coworker. The two foresters, who met while attending Oregon State College, were to work closely together throughout their careers.

In his new position, Frank directed the Tillamook's rehabilitation work including fire suppression and reseeded and replanting of the burned areas.

From the start, he faced seemingly insurmountable odds. Usable timber had to be harvested quickly before disease and decay set in. Snags and undergrowth had to be cleared away before replanting could begin. And in areas of direct seeding, tree seeds were often eaten by rodents before they had a chance to sprout.

When seeds did sprout, the young seedlings became choice browse for the growing population of deer and other herbivores. All the while, fire suppression was an ongoing challenge.

Aside from these challenges, Frank further pursued his interest in public service when he joined the Oregon National Guard in 1949 as part of the 218th Field Artillery Battalion headquartered in Portland, Oregon. He retired in 1976 with the rank of lieutenant colonel.

In 1955, Ed Schroeder was promoted to assistant state forester and Frank was named to his position as northwest district director. There he supervised all fire protection, rehabilitation and management activities on the Tillamook and Clatsop State Forests. Frank used his capable people skills to organize thousands of volunteers who helped replant the Tillamook, from school children and scouts to public service organizations and families. He supervised both contract laborers and convicts who came to reforest the barren hillsides. And he pioneered the use of aerial seeding by helicopter.

Despite the hardships and long hours, Frank continually maintained his approachable style and clearly demonstrated his able management skills. “He always had a good rapport with people,” said his wife Kaye, reflecting on Frank’s many years of working with numerous individuals. “He was a people person,” she said. “It was impossible to go anywhere with Frank without running into someone who knew him.”

Years later, the area was dedicated as the Tillamook State Forest, which remains a lasting tribute to Frank’s dedication and determination. It was he who assembled the organization and talent that eventually turned the charred landscape into a thriving forest. The effort is believed to be the largest forest reclamation project in history.

In 1964, Frank left the northwest area district to become assistant state forester in charge of forest protection activities, based in Salem. One year later, he was promoted to deputy state forester under his long-time friend and mentor, J.E. Schroeder.

“In all the years we worked together, I never had to worry about any decision he made,” said Schroeder. “I’ve never had such a trusting relationship with anyone else. I don’t think he ever received the credit he deserved.”

When Frank was promoted, Ted Maul took over as assistant state forester. “When Frank was in the office he was all business, always very direct, very forthright,” said Maul. “But outside the department we were darned good friends.”

Mike Miller, who worked under Frank as an assistant State Forester in LaGrande, added, “He was one of the best bosses I ever had. You always knew right where you stood with him,” he said. “But if you disagreed with some policy decision, or if you had a different idea, Frank was always ready to listen.”

In addition to his professional duties, Frank pursued other interests with equal energy. He dedicated time to the Cub Scouts and Little League baseball of which his son was a part. He played an active role in the Society of American Foresters and continued his ties with the Oregon State University School of Forestry.

Frank also earnestly pursued his personal interests in Oregon’s unique landscape. He hunted, fished and was an avid gardener. He especially enjoyed fishing the Snake River in Oregon’s Hell’s Canyon.

“Dad really loved the natural beauty of Oregon,” reminisces his son Dennis. “That is why he was a forester, a gardener, hunter, fisherman, and loved to drive through the countryside.”

Frank Sargent retired on December 31, 1979. He continued to hunt and fish with friends until his death in 1990.