

Co-op With The Forest Service

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I left Iowa early last March for Ironton, Ohio, and six months as a Co-op Forester on Wayne National Forest in the Ohio River Valley. Southern Ohio has a topography similar to northeastern Iowa and has a forest of oak, hickory, tulip-poplar and smokestacks. The land is beautiful, though much of it is abused. The air along the river is often brown and smells of "money."

On my first day, I was fingerprinted and filled out the thousand forms required for government employment. The Compartment Exam (timber inventory) Forester was short-handed so I was assigned to him first. He was new and was inexperienced in training new recruits like myself. I was thoroughly confused after training. One technician on the Forest was particularly adept at compartment exam (also called compex) and I contrived to spend a couple of days working with him to learn some more about it.

Traditionally, compartment exam is done by two or more people working individually in different units within the forest. While I was training I tagged along with someone else then had to go out on my own. There were problems with my going alone: a) I still wasn't very good with the compass and I kept ending up in the wrong place, b) I wasn't very good at estimating my pacing up and down steep hills and again I'd end up in the wrong place, c) I was scared of the snakes, hillbillies and stills my co-workers kept warning me about, d) I was scared of ending up in the wrong place. I lasted three days alone. Then they let me take a YACC (Young Adult Conservation Corps) enrollee with me. He didn't know what was going on either, but when I got us lost, he'd sit down and be a "landmark" while I wandered around and tried to find out where we were. I never became very skilled at compartment exam, but I wish I had. I love long walks in the woods alone, but this business of being in the right place. . . .

Through compex and everything else I did, the District Ranger (my boss) was very supportive and never

lost sight of me as a person. Whenever anything or anyone different came on the Forest, he had someone "get Elaine" because "she might be interested in this." I spent a week with the survey crew, a day with the forest hydrologist, visited tree planting operations, and went on tours given to visitors on the district. The attitude of the Ranger made the Co-op good.

In mid-May we finished compex and the focus of attention shifted to our recreation area, Lake Vesuvius. Hence, my next job assignment was helping to ready the recreation area for summer. The manager of the recreation area gave me job assignments according to his three basic policies: 1) start at the bottom 2) include hard physical labor, 3) give the Co-op student lots of variety. In the month I worked for him I painted an office, collected garbage, poured concrete, mowed campsites, replaced tent and table pads, worked with the YACC, scrubbed pit toilets, set sign posts, painted signs, loaded firewood, scrubbed floors, rode with the law enforcement officer, shoveled gravel and hiked nature trails with the naturalist.

After that hectic month I moved on to another job assignment. The Youth Conservation Corps was scheduled to begin June 19, and on June 8, Ohio State informed us they were unable to send us the four student (workstudy) work leaders they had offered. Once again I was assigned to fill in where we were short-handed. As a YCC work leader I got first line supervisory experience and learned a lot. The eight weeks of YCC were among the worst and best weeks of my life. Sometimes I felt like I was doing well; I was afraid (when I started) of doing badly. I did badly often, I learned and I grew, but it was torture. One of my supervisors tried to "prepare" me by describing mistakes I could make. The other supervisor responded to all requests for advice with "You're doing fine, go ahead" (and then four weeks later told me I was doing poorly). I'm still confused about how to be a supervisor. I thought that a supervisor

knew the work, started it, helped do it, and kept the job running. My fellow work leaders left that more in the hands of the kids and they had more fun. Hmmm?

Suddenly the six months were almost over. I spent the last two weeks (after YCC) helping on the recreation area again. My last week the forest supervisor came to inspect a timber sale which he thought was poorly done. I was included in the day-long inspection tour of the sale and the two hour conclave he held afterward. The decisions made were as follows: The US Forest Service is not in business to make money. It is in business to use public forest lands wisely to provide for timber, recreation, wildlife, watershed, and grazing needs of the present and future, and to do this in the best possible way, spending extra time and money (if needed) to protect and maintain the usefulness of the land. I found this attitude refreshing. It made me proud to be a Forest Service employee.

Then it was time to pack my car and head for home and ISU. . . a bittersweet time for me. I was happy to be going home, sad to be leaving and glad to be leaving. I was very glad that I had come and worked for the Forest Service. And I will always be glad I took those six months off from school to learn about the "real world" and "dirt forestry." The feelings I got from the experience can be summed up in the words of this folksong:

"How can you ask if I'm happy going my way?

You might as well ask a child at play.

There's no need to discuss or understand me,

I won't ask of myself to become someone else

I'll just be me . . .

If I had wings, no one would ask me, Should I fly?"