

Appreciation of George H. Wirt

*Delivered at the dedication of the George Wirt historical marker
at the forestry nursery site at Penn State Mont Alto.
10-28-2005.*

By Peter Linehan

The story of George Wirt and forestry begins with Dr. Joseph Rothrock. He is called the father of forestry in Pennsylvania. He was also a savvy politician. He convinced the Legislature to fund the Forestry Commission in 1893. Then after two years of fact-finding he produced a dramatic report, with pictures, showing just how bad-off the forests had become. He convinced the legislators again that they had to act. They had to spend the money to buy the land for forest reserves around the state. And they named Rothrock forest commissioner to get the job done.

Rothrock was also a fantastic judge of character. He could find just the right person for the job. He found people who would dedicate their lives to the cause of saving the forests of Pennsylvania. His wisest choice of all was young George Wirt. He didn't have to go far to find Wirt. George was the son of Rothrock's best friend in his home town of McVeytown, Jacob Wirt. He had watched George grow up and he must have sensed there was something special about this precocious boy, the youngest of six children.

So in 1900 when Rothrock and George's father approached him about going into this new field of forestry, George didn't hesitate. He borrowed the tuition money and went to the mountains of North Carolina to study with Karl Schenck at the Biltmore School, which was then the only active field-oriented forestry school in the United States.

The course at Biltmore lasted for a year, including a three month study tour of German forests and forestry practices. Years later George told how Schenck could be hot tempered and hard to get along with. Yet all the students respected him and his ideas. Schenck made a great impression on George and they corresponded a great deal after George came to Mont Alto. At this point no one really knew quite what an American forester was supposed to do or how he would do it.

In 1901, George returned home and became Pennsylvania's first professional forester. At that time the forestry department consisted of Dr. Rothrock, the commissioner, and Robert Conklin, his then clerk. George started work by surveying land for the state forests around the state. He investigated timber trespass on state lands. He wrote a guide on tree planting. He wrote articles for *Forest Leaves*. He gave many speeches on forestry around the state.

Then in 1902 he was sent to the site of the abandoned Mont Alto Iron Works to manage a new 22,000 acre state forest, start a seedling nursery, and begin training new foresters that the state so desperately needed.

George moved into Weistling Hall. He invited his widowed sister to help keep house. That summer three apprentices came to help with the work, including Ralph Brock who has also been honored here. A year later Mont Alto was named as the new forestry academy and the first class of 13 students arrived in the fall of '03.

At this point George was all of 22! From the pictures we have around campus it's hard to see him as the stern leader his students later described. Those early pictures show a very handsome young man, hardly distinguishable from his students in that wonderful group photo hanging in the Millstream. In fact, in the portrait hanging in Conklin he seems almost too pretty, not what you would expect a forester too be at all. He was no Paul Bunyan!

Yet in the pictures that we can now see in the display in the General Studies building, of the faculty and of students at graduations taken just a few years later, George is definitely the authority figure in the center of the picture. He has a moustache now. He is the Chief Justice, deferred to by his peers.

There are several fundamental reasons why George succeeded so well, both at Mont Alto and in the many years he served as the State's Chief Fire Warden. These are Hard Work, Character, Passion and Commitment, Scholarship, and Courage. Here are a few examples.

Hard Work: The students at Mont Alto received free tuition room and board. But they were considered to be state employees. They worked at least half their time here in the nursery, fighting fires, building roads, and bridges; anything that needed to be done. And George Wirt was right with them, leading by example.

Here are a few quotes from Wirt about hard work:

"The students have understood from the beginning that their object in being here, and the State's purpose in having them here, is work. They are subject to be called to do anything that comes up in the management of a Reservation, and at any time of the day or night." (FL 1903)

"A shiftless young man has no business in the forestry service." (FL 1909)

He juggled many tasks in those first few years. He wrote to parents, fixed the furnace in Weistling, bought hay for the horses, arranged for songbooks for the students, bought scientific instruments, designed the curriculum, taught the courses, and ran the nursery.

Scholarship: Wirt dedicated himself to the study of forest science. At one point he translated German forest economics texts into English. His notes are still usable today. He felt that students had to have a good background in math and general sciences and did his best raise the level of instruction.

He wrote numerous articles on all aspects of forestry for *Forest Leaves*. Here are just a few of his writings for the 1923-24 period:

June 23 "How to Fight Forest Fires"

October 23 "Our Campaign Against Forest Fire"

February 24 "Shall We Prevent Forest Fires or Merely Control Them?"

April 24 "Burning Up Millions"

December 24 "Forestry in Every Day Life"

Passion and Commitment George gave 46 years service full time commitment to the work and the cause. Here's what he had to say about the profession of forestry:

There are hardships to be endured at times which are far from being pleasant. On the other hand, from many standpoints it is the most pleasant and most healthful work that could be imagined. (Letter to Frederick Wistar 1904)

Character: His notes for a speech to the first class of students (that I have put on the Mont Alto forestry website) sound like the Boy Scout oath, law, and motto all rolled into one. Yet Robert Baden-Powell didn't conduct the first experimental scout camp until 1907 and Scouting didn't come to the US until 1910. But George had it all down here at Mont Alto in 1903.

He expected students to behave with character. Here was a quote from Forrest Dutlinger on being punished by Wirt with six-months confinement to campus (campusing) for swearing at a state employee at Caledonia Park:

"I was called in, I confessed to having carelessly made the statement. No, I didn't even know the man. But I was given a six-month's campus. I wasn't allowed to leave the school grounds for six months.

Yes, he was real straight-laced and drinking and searing were just two things he wouldn't tolerate."

Dutlinger didn't resent the punishment and seemed to accept its justice sixty years later.

For George character and church-going went hand in hand. Here is what Dr. Rothrock wrote about activities at Mont Alto in 1904:

"And not least, at Mont Alto the officers of the Forest Academy have gathered in more than fifty children, who otherwise would have been, for the most part, at large on Sunday, and organized a well conducted Sunday School. Morality may well be counted then as an element in the work of the South Mountain Reservation." (FL 1904)

Courage George faced the challenges of his career with a great deal of courage. Describing how he faced the task of starting a new school from scratch he said:

"That program, when it was formulated, was the result of a lot of praying. ...[His worry was..] whether I'd measure up to their (students') requirements and what they'd need, and at the same time please the doctor and everybody else that was concerned on the outside. You had no example or precedent to follow. I got my books and ponied up to the mountain."

In a 1941 article in the Journal of Forestry, Wirt, even though he was still a state employee, took the opportunity to criticize political favoritism and interference in the running of the forestry department.

"Then there came into power 'those who knew not Joseph,'" and politics just about wrecked the whole organization and program" (JOF 1943)

George knew how to motivate people. When he started his career forest fires were common everywhere. The laws just weren't being enforced. Most courts wouldn't convict an arsonist. Yet over time George organized one of the most superb volunteer fire fighting organizations in the country. He made it everyone's civic duty to prevent and fight forest fires.

Here's what he had to say about choosing and motivating fire fighters:

"In the first place, they had to be able-bodied; in the second place, they had to be good citizens in the neighborhood, anybody that anybody could

recommend. Sometimes we got some whoppers but, frankly, I think we made more men good citizens than we ever made fire fighters. ... As I say, I don't know how they did it or why they did it, but I can say definitely, without boasting, that I think most of my success in organizing the wardens and their crews was pure and simple flattery perhaps, appealing to their better side and the fact that they weren't fighting fire for the protection of the forests from fire, but they were fighting fire for the protection of the community. And everybody in the community lost if fires occurred. (oral history)

If George Wirt could somehow come back here today, I think it wouldn't take him long to fit back in. He would quickly grasp the use of computers to analyze forest data and communicate the forestry message. He would appreciate GPS and digital maps to improve forest management. But he would ask all of us hard questions about our enthusiasm, commitment, and work ethic.

I would like to finish with some comments from Henry Clepper, a Mont Alto graduate who worked in the Pennsylvania Forest Service and later became the editor of the Journal of Forestry and the executive director of the Society of American Foresters. In a 1945 appreciation of Wirt he wrote:

Foresters who have the honor of serving under him usually begin by dreading his causticity and end by admiring him as much as it is possible for one man to admire another. In former years the possessor of a satirical tongue and a most critical eye – he has mellowed with the years – he was a holy terror to any young forester whose work he inspected and found wanting. Paradoxically, he seemed to have a fond regard to anyone whom he castigated, and it was a heartening, if somewhat disconcerting, experience to have one's results privately criticized but one's intentions publicly defended, if defense were needed. Impatient with sloppy work, he is sympathetic and understanding when one puts forth his best efforts, even if that best is none too good. Moreover, he never criticizes an unsatisfactory job without explaining a better way to do it. ...

He is a master of the verbal thrust known colloquially as "a dig." But his barbs are seldom painful. Usually they merely tickle – a fact well known to HENRY CLEPPER.

[Home](#)
