

THE INITIAL TREE PLANTING ON THE DISMAL RIVER NATIONAL FOREST
by
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The first trees planted on the Dismal River National Forest were planted in the Spring of 1903. This planting consisted of some 5 or 6 thousand wild Ponderosa pine seedlings gathered in the Black Hills National Forest in the fall of 1902, shipped to Halsey and heeled in over winter. When taken from the heelin-bed these seedlings appeared fresh and vigorous, but showed signs of failure soon after they were planted in the hills. Fewer than ten percent of them survived the first summer.

Soon after planting the Ponderosa pine seedlings, a shipment of some 4 or 5 thousand Jack pine (*P. divaricata*) 2 year old seedling were received from Wisconsin. They were in excellent condition when received. They were planted in the hills at once, but like the Ponderosa seedling they too began to show signs of failing, and very few survived the first summer.

The results of the 1903 planting were very discouraging, but we still had faith in the project. We concluded that we had to improve on our technique of planting. We had to devise some practical method of protecting the roots of the seedlings from exposure to the air for even an instant. We concluded the roots must be puddled rather than being kept moist in water.

Another problem needing attention was how to keep the planters lined up when planting to keep the rows of trees properly spaced. We tried setting lines of stakes to guide the planters, but that method failed to work. To correct this difficulty we introduced the side-hill plow, providing furrows for the planters to follow and to set the trees in. This system proved very successful. The furrows followed the contour of the hills and valleys to a degree, but at that they varied greatly in their spacings.

In 1904 and 1905 one year old Ponderosa pine seedling were planted in furrows in the hills, but as in former plantings few survived, and we were again disappointed. We realized that 1 year old trees were too young to survive the summers in the hills, and that it would be necessary to give them at least a year in transplant beds before taking them to the hills.

This was the first project of its kind ever attempted in the United States. No one in the Bureau of Forestry could advise us and the Commercial Nurserymen of the country had no experience with this type of work and we were told we would have to use our own judgement and do the best we could.

Experimental plantings were made on hill sides of different exposures, with different aged stock. Some plantings were made in furrows.

Others between the open bunches of grass, and still others on the shady side of the bunches of grass.

As long as I was in charge we had not reached any definite conclusions, excepting that 2 or 3 years old transplants gave the best results.

A constant source of danger to the project was the possibility of prairie fires. I recall very distinctly a "dry thunder shower" that passed some 2 or 3 miles south of the Nursery one afternoon, that set 3 lightning fires in less than 30 minutes time. Fortunately they all burned out before spreading to the extent of doing any harm.

As a measure of protection we plowed "fire guards" as a protection against approaching fires. In the fall of 1907 a fire, said to have been set by a railway locomotive, came in from the west on a Sunday afternoon. We saw the clouds of smoke about 1:30 P.M. We telephoned warnings to every available source. The 3 or 4 of us at the Nursery at the time, saddled our horses and armed with such equipment as we had at hand, rode out and met the approaching fire. Shovels were our most efficient fire fighting piece of equipment. We met the fire at our outer line of fire guards and managed to keep it from crossing our guards and directed the blaze in a south easterly course until it ran into the Dismal River some 5 or 6 miles up stream from Dunning, and burned itself out. We were on the fire line some 26 or 27 hours before the flames were brought under control.

Later fires have occurred since that time which I know only as a matter of record, as I had no part in them.

There are several other features of interest connected with the development of the project that deserve mention.

The first was securing a bridge across the Middle Loupe River, between Halsey and the Nursery. Crossing the river with a loaded wagon during the cold weather months was a treacherous undertaking. If the wagon stopped in the stream for a single instance, it was impossible to start it again. It was a slow tedious job to haul coal, horse feed and other heavy freight, from Halsey to one end of the foot bridge, then to go back to the ford, cross the river with the empty wagon, then carry the load across the foot bridge on our backs and re-load into the wagon to haul the remainder of the way to the Nursery.

In December 1902 or January 1903, I drew up a petition addressed to the County Commissioners asking for an appropriation for building a bridge across the river.

The petition was signed by every taxpayer in or near Halsey, at that, there were not more than 5 or 6 names on the petition.

Armed with this petition Mr. James McNichol, Ed. Sand's ranch foreman and I, rode to Thedford at the time of the next meeting of the Thomas County Commissioners.

We presented the petition with some argument for its needs. The Commissioners gave us respectful attention. Then they explained that they could not appropriate money to build a bridge across a stream, except on located highways.

To make a long story short, I wrote out another petition asking for the location of a public road leading from Halsey to the Nursery site. McNichol and I signed and presented it before the Commissioners Meeting adjourned. Both petitions were approved and \$100.00 was appropriated to buy the necessary lumber for the bridge. Within a very few weeks we had a wagon bridge across the river located on a public highway. I am not sure that the highway was used for a travelway, excepting for the bridge and the approaches to it. However, it served our needs and was a great convenience, and it made possible the development of our project.

The second feature deserving mention was the building of the cement Block House. In my budget for 1906, I asked for an appropriation for the Supervisors residence and office. A limited amount, \$2,500.00 as I now recall, was granted. Mr. Wm. H. Mast was my associate at the time. We developed plans for the house that were approved. Then we got busy, staked the location, scraped off the surface sand that had some block soil mixed with it. Then we took sand from what was to be the cellar or basement, mixed it with the proper portion of cement and moulded it into cement blocks for the walls of the house.

After we had enough blocks moulded for the walls our next job was to find a stone mason to lay up the walls. The only mason we could locate was a man named Heller, a Kinkaid Homesteader, located some 5 or 6 miles north of Halsey. We interviewed him, he was keen for the job, and wanted a contract. I was not greatly impressed by his personality or by his experiences as a mason as he related them. But it seemed to be Heller or lay up the walls ourselves, and Mr. Mast and I knew that we were not qualified for the job.

We got around a contract by telling Heller, we were not authorized to give a Government Contract, but we could hire him by the day. He accepted our proposition. All went well laying the footing and building the basement walls. However, the work was progressing too fast to suit Heller. One day while I was away on some errand he forgot to leave openings for 2 windows. When I called his attention to his error, he declared there was no provision for windows at that point in the plans. When I called for his copy of the plans he could not locate them. When I produced the office copy, he was sure they were not the same as his set. In due time his copy of the plans came to light and the error was corrected, with about $\frac{1}{2}$ days loss of time by the entire force, 3 or 4 men.

A few days later a similar mistake was made. I had hired Frank Carlin of Broken Bow as Hellers helper. I soon observed that Carlin was a more careful and better mechanic than Heller. I made it a point to have a little talk with him. He realized fully what we were up against. After some insistence he agreed to lay up the remainder of the walls. Heller was promptly fired. Our Concrete Block House was completed in scheduled time and served its purpose as a Supervisors residence and Office Headquarters for many years. At least the cost of the building was held to within the limits of the appropriation, but the furnace had to be installed later as a repair job. It was the first furnace installed in that section of the State.

This is my short and simple story of the initiation and development of the Nebraska Sand Hill Tree Planting Project, which now rates as the most outstanding project of its kind in the world.

The Bessey Nursery was the first federal forest tree nursery developed in the United States. It was developed by the U. S. Bureau of Forestry, which was later and still is designated as the Forest Service of the U. S. Dept., of Agriculture.

This Nursery has supplied planting stock for tree planting projects of all descriptions throughout the Middle Western States. The trees that were grown here from seeds, now grace the landscape and protect the homes of thousands of families the country over. Can anyone challenge the worth of the entire project, or the wisdom and foresight of the promoters of it? I am glad that I had a part in its development, and it is my hope and wish it may continue to be an inspiration to generations yet to come.

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