

Profiles in Forestry: J. Edwin Carothers

By Samantha Horn

His physical condition may no longer allow him to be fully active in the industry, but Edwin Carothers still has a heart for forestry.

Carothers retired from Louisiana Tech University in July 1986 after serving as a professor of forestry there for more than 20 years.

“I have many students out in the woods in forestry all over the country, especially in Louisiana, Texas, Mississippi, and Arkansas,” he said.

Although Carothers spent much of his adult life in North Louisiana, he grew up in Doddridge County, West Virginia. He graduated from the University of Michigan with a bachelor’s degree in forestry and he has a master’s degree in forestry from Iowa State University and a PhD from Michigan State University.

Carothers said he was deeply involved in 4-H club work as a young boy and even won its most outstanding honor.

“I was a member of the noncollegiate livestock judging team in Chicago in 1931,” he said. “This was a great honor and I still have my picture up there [on the mantle]. We went from West Virginia to Chicago, stopping at Ohio State University and Purdue University and the University of Illinois to practice livestock judging. For a boy of 15, this was a great experience.”

Carothers said he became interested in forestry when he was in seventh grade.

“Mother wanted me to be in agriculture, but I stayed with my desire to be a forester,” he said. “Her first cousin worked with the United States Department of Agriculture and one day I overheard him telling my Mother there was no future in forestry. I did not listen to him or her or take his advice seriously.”

Carothers said there was a time in the 1920s when many leaders in agriculture and forestry thought all of the timber would soon be gone.

“They thought there would be a timber famine,” he said. “But they did not consider reforestation and young timber growth.”

Carothers said he observed during the next 20 years that timber famine was not true and there was, in fact, more timber being grown than harvested.

“I came to Louisiana in 1937,” he said. “When I told people where I was from, they often did not hear the ‘West’ and thought I came from Old Virginia.”

Carothers worked for four months for Long-Bell Lumber Company Creosoting Division in Shreveport before taking a job with what is now known as the Natural Resources Conservation Service. This work was with the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC.) After more than four years with the CCC in Bienville Parish he took a position with the department of forestry at Auburn University in Auburn, Alabama.

In the fall of 1956, Carothers began teaching at the University of Arkansas–Monticello and remained there for more than nine years before beginning his tenure at Louisiana Tech.

“In teaching, I tried to stimulate students, both men and women, to explore and think about the issues of the day and the basic fundamentals of economics and policy,” he said.

Carothers was selected twice as Outstanding Teacher in the College of Applied and Natural Sciences at Louisiana Tech.

He was also actively involved in helping students find summer internships before graduation.

“I often told my students they should have a least one summer’s experience in a Western state,” he said.

Since retiring more than 20 years ago, 93-year-old Carothers has remained interested and involved with forestry.

“In retirement, I have been allied with Forestry Alumni, the Society of American Foresters, and the Louisiana Forestry Association (LFA),” he said. Carothers joined SAF in 1938 and was named Fellow in 1989.

Carothers joined the LFA in 1956 and has served as a member of the board of directors for more than 20 years. In his years in the forestry industry, Carothers said he has seen many changes, especially in logging techniques.

He said one of the biggest changes he observed was the shift from traditional methods such as “stick measuring” to “weighing” raw wood products.

Carothers also said he has seen the industry take a more active role in politics.

“I have seen the LFA and the forestry industry become involved in politics, which is centered on assistance to landowners in the forestry industry,” he said.

Carothers said one of the biggest challenges facing forestry today in Louisiana has to do with the regeneration of bald cypress.

“This is being studied, analyzed and hopefully resolved, so cypress can be grown in rather low wetlands,” he said.

Another problem Carothers said troubles the industry is coastal erosion. “Before [Hurricane] Katrina, we were losing approximately one acre of marshlands every 15 minutes,” he said. “Therefore, LFA and SAF are interested in the future of marshlands because you cannot grow trees in saltwater.”

Carothers said there are also a lot of arguments today against clear cutting.

“This is an argument that has a false basis because clear cutting is a tool for foresters to use in regenerating forests,” he said. “But in the tropics, such as Brazil, clear cutting becomes destructive clear cutting that leads to destruction of the soil. Destructive clear cutting is much different than clear cutting in the United States.”

Another concern many people in the forestry industry have is one that plagues many industries across the nation—the economy; however, Carothers does not seem too worried.

“When the housing industry rebounds, the forestry industry will become more important than today in supplying lumber and plywood as well as recreational opportunities,” he said.

Horn is a journalism major at Louisiana Tech University. This article, which was published the Louisiana Forestry Association’s Forests and People magazine, appears here with her permission.