

Outdoors

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IF YOU'VE EVER bought trees for reforestation in central Wisconsin, you probably got them at the Griffith State Nursery near Wisconsin Rapids.

Edward Merriam Griffith, the man for whom the nursery was named, virtually invented modern forestry in Wisconsin. He was the state's first chief forester, created a forest fire-fighting system, fought for the expansion of state forests, urged a different taxation system for forested land, established the first state tree nursery at Trout Lake, helped bring the U.S. Forest Products Laboratory to Madison, promoted the improvement of farm woodlots, sought to reintroduce moose and elk to the state, helped establish the state park system, warned against the drainage of wetlands, and was the first professional forester to detect forest fires from an airplane.

And Griffith promoted rural zoning, arguing that most of the land in the north should be devoted to tree-growing because it wasn't suited to agriculture.

Griffith had an eye for beauty and outdoor recreation, and pushed for creation of a state forest to protect the Brule River's trout and scenery. If the forests were protected tourism would blossom in the north, he predicted. And, he argued, forests were vital for the protection of watersheds.

He had a great appreciation for northern Wisconsin. "Within this area is one of the most wonderful lake regions in the world," he once said, though he was also heard to wish, "If only it had one mountain." (Others have had the same wish. Rib Mountain doesn't count. It was Rib Hill before the tourism promoters got hold of it.)

You might think such a foresighted person as Griffith would have been universally honored in his own time. And you'd be wrong. He lost his job.

Griffith was born in 1872 in Brooklyn, N.Y. He studied forestry in Germany because there was no forestry school in the United States at that time. Then he was a forester for the U.S. government, working in South Dakota, Hawaii and the Philippines and studying forest conditions in Asia and Europe.

Until the turn of the century Wisconsin had been the country's biggest lumber producer, but now it was on the decline, with the best of the virgin timber gone.

Griffith assumed office as Wisconsin's chief forester in 1904, when he was 32 years old, and immediately set out to enlarge the state-owned forest reserves. This was not a wholly popular idea. There were people who believed the future of the north was in agriculture, and when a soil survey which Griffith helped promote showed that much upstate land was unsuited to farming, people in Vilas and Oneida counties felt insulted.

Even the need for forest fire protection wasn't fully accepted, despite the enormous damage done by fires at Peshtigo in 1871 and at Phillips in 1894. For settlers, fire was a way of clearing slash left by logging. Few people saw the value of second growth timber.

Some felt that the tax base of the north was being eroded by state land acquisitions. (It was being eroded, too, by property that went tax delinquent because the owners couldn't make a living farming.)

"The whole system of forest taxation is wrong," contended Griffith, "for it puts a premium on forest destruction." Rather than logging selectively, lumber companies were cutting and getting out to escape the tax burden.

Griffith took his show on the road, lecturing whenever he had a chance and stopping at newspaper offices to preach the gospel of forestry while waiting for trains.

His critics included a dean of the College of Agriculture in Madison who felt there was never enough farm land and who promoted marsh drainage projects in central Wisconsin, some of which proved disastrous.

Other opponents were those who feared the loss of tax base and people who didn't want the state to own too much lake frontage.

But what really ruined Griffith was the state constitution's ban on internal improvements. The ban was put in the constitution because of problems eastern states had had when they tried to finance canals.

Fearing that forestry could be considered an internal improvement and would be banned, an amendment to the state constitution was enacted to exempt it, but it was overturned by the state Supreme Court in 1915 on a technicality. Chief Justice Winslow dissented, arguing that forestry was a proper activity of any civilized state, but Griffith left office and moved to Connecticut. He died in 1939.

After his departure, the constitution was amended properly to permit a state forestry program, the forest crop law was enacted to ease the tax burden on woodlands, county forests and two national forests were created and county zoning laws were passed.

When the Vilas County Board approved a rural zoning ordinance in 1933, one of the members said, "We have done everything Mr. Griffith advocated. He should have had our support."

A good history of Griffith's work was published in 1982 by the state Department of Natural Resources. It was written by F.G. Wilson, a story himself. Wilson joined Griffith in the Wisconsin forestry program in 1911.

He held many positions with the state, including chief ranger, before his retirement in 1952. A state forest nursery at Boscobel is named for him.

Historian Malcolm Rosholt of Rosholt passed on a copy of Wilson's book to me. He interviewed Wilson a couple of years ago, when the old forester was 100 years old. "I was there more than an hour and he never stopped talking," Rosholt marveled.