



Nils Folke Becker
1891-1962

‘Forestry is one of the soundest, most
progressive and far-seeing policies which
Wisconsin can adopt.’

–Nils Folke Becker

Nils Folke Becker was born in Sweden in 1891, but he left his mark in Wisconsin and the United States as a paper industry leader who believed in sustainable forestry.

He received an Honorary Bachelor of Law Degree from Northland College in Ashland, Wisconsin, a few weeks before he died. A citation from the college on that occasion sums up well what the record shows about Folke Becker:

“Combined with administrative success is your deep respect for the natural resources from which your materials are taken. Primarily through your efforts, the organization Trees for Tomorrow has established itself as the organization that combines the naturalist’s appreciation for his physical world and the industrialist’s foresight in scientific planning for the future. Rather than allowing the land to be denuded, you have exerted vigorous leadership to ensure carefully planned reforestation.”

Folke Becker played a key role in espousing that concept in Wisconsin. As president of Rhinelander Paper Co. from 1935 to 1954, he provided an important voice from industry, one that encouraged sound public and private forestry practices and laws in Wisconsin.

Becker’s wasn’t necessarily a popular message among his industry peers, but he clearly understood that good conservation and sustainable forest yields were not only the right thing to do, but absolutely necessary for the paper industry.

He was a founder and longtime president of Trees for Tomorrow in Eagle River. Trees for Tomorrow was interested in reforestation and forest education. Originally limited to the paper, then the power industries, it was broadened to include a wide cross-section of the public. Many thousands of children and adults have received forestry education at Trees for Tomorrow, which today continues to tell the story of the need for sound forestry practices.

The Wisconsin Forestry Hall of Fame inducted Becker in 1990, saying this: “Folke Becker (was) a dedicated conservationist, business executive and leader in the forestry movement in the restoration and development of forests and forests economy of Wisconsin.

“His involvement and leadership moved forestry forward via constitutional and legislative action in the 1920s, resulting in public funding for forestry, enactment of the Forest Crop Law, forest zoning legislation and creation of the County Forest program.”

Becker also pushed for better understanding of forest pathology and was a leader in seeing that science instituted in Wisconsin.

Wisconsin was in the post logging years when Becker arrived, and he was among those who helped shape a future that left the state rich in both public and private multi-use forestlands. The paper industry and other wood-dependent trades required an ample supply of cut wood, and shortages of the resource forced them to look elsewhere for what was once available at home.

It was time to spring into action in a big way. Becker, a big man, helped lead the effort. But first, he received broad and excellent training in the papermaking industry.

The following account of his early life is found in Becker's front-page obituary in the July 21, 1962 Rhinelander Daily News:

Born in Jonkoping, Sweden, he was educated in Oslo, Norway. His father was a well-known paper engineer and operator who had built pulp and paper mills in both Sweden and Norway.

Becker served in the Swedish Army. He earned a chemical engineering degree at Staedtisches Friedrichs Polytechnikum, Koethen-Anhalt, Germany. After receiving his degree, he also did post-graduate working at Darmstadt, Germany.

Prior to his formal education, he had hands-on experience in a glassine and greaseproof (diversified wrapping paper) mill in Norway. He also worked in Bruderhaus Machine Works, manufacturers of paper machinery in Germany. During school vacations, he worked in pulp and paper mills in Finland and Sweden.

Becker came to the U.S. in 1914. He became a U.S. citizen in 1919 and called the U.S., primarily Rhinelander and northern Wisconsin, home for the rest of his life.

His career in America began with the former Thames River Specialty Co. in New London, Connecticut. A half-year later, he moved on to a position as chemist for the Warren Manufacturing Co. In 1916, he rebuilt the Westfield River Paper Co., Russell, Massachusetts, and became plant superintendent, vice president and general manager in six years.

In 1925 he became a consulting engineer for several paper mills in the U.S. and Canada. He came to Rhinelander in 1926 as mill superintendent. Less than three years later, he was named general manager. He was president of the company by 1935.

Several sources credit him for expanding and modernizing the Rhinelander mill.

"When he joined the firm there were four paper machines. One was replaced in 1928 and four more were added," noted the Rhinelander Daily News. One of those machines, No. 6, built shortly after World War II, was dubbed "Big Swede" in his honor.

The Oneida County Centennial History Edition notes his role: "Under Becker's aggressive supervision, the mill was gradually, literally, rebuilt from top to bottom to attain maximum efficiency." The company likely benefited from his experience in the diversified wrapping paper field, and by 1951, Rhinelander was the largest producer of glassine and greaseproof papers in the world, with an annual output of 50,000 tons, reported the Centennial History Edition.

That same publication took note of a challenge that Becker would address head-on, that of pulpwood supply.

“Until 1941, the company’s main source of pulpwood for papermaking was the Lakes States area. The original source had been within a few miles of the city; as nearby spruce stands waned, the supply had proceeded from more and more distance locales until, by the late 1930s, most mill-pulp was being shipped from northern Minnesota.”

Becker knew about that, and records show he had been preaching good forestry for a number of years.

His Forestry Hall of Fame biography noted this:

“In his capacity as chief executive officer of the then Rhinelander Paper Company, he was active in the early efforts to rebuild a sound forest economy in Northern Wisconsin. During the 1920s, when efforts to move forestry forward via constitutional and legislative action was not always a popular cause, Folke Becker was quoted at a legislative hearing as saying, ‘Forestry is one of the soundest, most progressive and far-seeing policies which Wisconsin can adopt.’ ”

The biography continued:

“His strong involvement in and support of the constitutional change to permit expenditure of state funds for forestry, enactment of the forestry mil tax legislation, the Forest Crop Law and passage of statewide zoning legislation which led to the establishment of the County Forest program during the 1920s are considered by forest historians to have been the greatest accomplishments for the state’s forestry program in any decade. Folke Becker was a key role player in making it all happen.”

As a founder of Trees for Tomorrow and its president from 1944 to 1961, Becker worked closely with Melvin “Mully” Taylor, the group’s executive director and a 1992 Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame inductee.

Taylor recalled the early days of the group’s founding in an article in the 1983 Merrill (Wisconsin) Centennial book:

“Trees for Tomorrow’s first step was to become known and to be accepted. Eyebrows were raised when an industry sponsored organization suddenly emerged with plans for a large-scale reforestation program.

“Reforestation Institute at Rhinelander hand planted 10,000 seedlings, 200,000 free trees were distributed to private landowners and the first machine planting of trees got underway at Camp Tesomas.”

Before long, Taylor noted, landowners were seeking help to manage their second growth forests, and then with timber sales.

Harvesting was becoming more sophisticated, with advanced machinery and the Prentice hydraulic loader. Lightweight chainsaws helped, too, Taylor noted.

“But there was a critical shortage of woods workers,” Taylor wrote. “Trees for Tomorrow established the first logger’s apprenticeship training program.”

Membership in Trees for Tomorrow was originally limited to paper companies, then was offered to power companies and then was expanded to include a broad cross-section of the public, wrote Taylor.

In his essay in the Merrill Centennial book, Taylor quotes Folke Becker: “I believe Trees for Tomorrow brings into focus what can be accomplished when industry, resource agencies, educational institutions, and private individuals join forces behind a common objective – the social and economic welfare of the people of Wisconsin.”

The Forestry Hall of Fame biography notes that Becker also advocated for a better understanding of forest pathology:

“In the mid 1950s, Folke Becker saw the need for a statewide effort at forest pest control as a result of the sustained interest in reforestation and management. This foresight led the Conservation Department to establish the position of forest entomologist. This program that Becker perceived is today staffed statewide with both forest entomologists and forest pathologists.”

Folke Becker was appointed to serve on the Wisconsin Forestry Advisory Council to the then Wisconsin Conservation Commission from 1955-61. “During his tenure on the committee, he participated in and supported recommendations on forestry matters that shaped much of the state’s forestry program for the remainder of the 20th century,” the Forestry Hall of Fame biography said. The biography took note of the committee’s work in that period. It included establishment of a forestry research center for watershed research in the Coulee Region, expansion of future state forest inventories statewide, rather than only in northern counties, a variable quota system for deer, revisions to the Forest Crop Law and training of vocational agriculture instructors in forestry. These were “subjects to which he brought his experience, understanding and support to enhance Wisconsin’s forestry programs,” the biography said.

The Rhinelander Daily News obituary made note of Becker’s work on behalf of business, community and conservation causes. Those were part of the job description for someone of his position in the community. But Folke Becker went beyond the expected and helped lead Wisconsin into a new era, one that saw the reforestation of much of the state and careful management of the resource for many different uses.

NILS FOLKE BECKER
1891-1962

BIRTH: Nov. 7, 1891, Jonkoping, Sweden.

DEATH: July 20, 1962, Rhineland, Wisconsin.

EDUCATION: Chemical Engineering graduate, Staedtisches Friedrichs Polytechnikum, Koethen-Anhalt, Germany.

Postgraduate work, Darmstadt, Germany.

MILITARY: Served in Swedish Army.

BIOGRAPHICAL HISTORY

Came to United States, 1914.

Became U.S. citizen, 1919.

General Manager, Rhineland Paper Co, 1928-Jan. 1, 1957. President, 1935-54. Chairman of the Board, 1954, continuing in that position after retirement.

Mill Supervisor, Rhineland Paper Co, 1926-28.

Held position with Thames River Specialty Co., New London, Connecticut, 1914.

Chemist, Warren Manufacturing Co., 1915.

Rebuilt Westfield River Paper Co., Russell, Massachusetts, 1916.

Plant superintendent, vice president and general manager, Westfield River Paper Co., Russell, Massachusetts, 1917-24.

Served as consulting engineer for several paper mills in U.S. and Canada. 1925.

Among founders, Trees for Tomorrow, 1944.

President, Trees for Tomorrow, 1944-May 1961.

Member, Wisconsin Forestry Advisory Council, 1955-61.

AFFILIATIONS, ORGANIZATIONS

Director, St. Regis Paper Co. (Firm acquired Rhinelander Paper Co. in 1956).
Director, Wisconsin Valley Improvement Co.
Director, Wausau Paper Mills, Wausau, Wisconsin.
President and director, R-W Paper Co., Longview-Washington.
President, Merchants State Bank, Rhinelander, Wisconsin, 1933-45.
Director, Old Line Life Insurance Co. of America.
President, Lake States Yeast Corp.
Treasurer, Ripco Timber Co. Ltd.
Vice President, American Pulp and Paper Association.
Chairman of the Glassine and Greaseproof Manufacturers' Association.
Chairman, Cancer Fund Drive, Rhinelander, Wisconsin, 1945.
Member, Rhinelander Rotary Club.
Member, Rhinelander Country Club.
Member, Union League Club, Chicago.
Member, Cloud Club, New York.

AWARDS, HONORS, ACHIEVEMENTS

Conservation Award, American Forestry Association, "for outstanding contributions to the field of forestry," 1951.

Honorary Member, Northland College Board of Trustees, Ashland, Wisconsin, June 1962.

Honorary Doctor of Laws Degree, Northland College, Ashland, Wisconsin, June 1962.

Member of the ECA industrial team that traveled to Scandinavian countries to share American techniques for increased productivity.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

The Rhinelander Daily News, July 21, 1962. The newspaper ran a lengthy front-page story the day after Folke Becker's death.

Biography and plaque citations from Wisconsin Forestry Hall of Fame.

Oneida County Centennial History Edition.

Merrill (Wisconsin) Centennial book, 1983 (p. 119).

