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THE U.S. FOREST SERVICE—A HISTORY

by

HAROLD K. STEEN

Seattle, Washington, University of Washington Press, 1976.

Pp. 356 + xvi, \$15.00.

This is a semi-official history of the Forest Service. It was commissioned by the Forest Service, the research and writing was supported financially by the Forest Service, the agency's files were freely opened to the researcher, and the book is in the public domain as a result. The study was undertaken, at least in part, as a means of the Forest Service participating in the bi-centennial observation of 1976.

The result is the kind of careful, thorough, honest job that one would expect from the Forest History Society and from Harold Steen. The author may be sympathetic to the agency and its objectives but he tries to relate its history as accurately and fairly as he can, criticism and problems along with praise and triumphs.

The account almost ends with 1960. "It seemed inappropriate for a historical work to analyze in detail events of the most recent past. After all, members of other disciplines are better equipped to study issues that are still unresolved. . . . Intensive analysis ends with the passage of the Multiple Use-Sustained Yield Act in 1960. . . ." At the end, in Appendix 1, chronological summary, the Renewable Resources Planning Act of 1974 and the Monongahela decision are barely listed, with no discussion, and the book went to press before the National Forest Management Act of 1976 was passed. As the title says, it is a history, and as such deals primarily with an earlier day.

A major feature of the book is the way Steen has gone to original documents—letters, memoranda, files, documents of limited circulation, and the like. He makes only modest use of secondary materials. His notes on sources lists a great many sources—I can think of none, offhand, which he does not list. But he uses them sparingly in the book, though one may assume that they did provide him with background information. I regard this intensive use of original materials as a strength, an asset to the book. Many of us who are not professional historians tend to use secondary materials entirely, partly because it is so much easier for us, partly because they are more accessible to readers, and partly because they are likely to be sufficiently precise for our purposes.

The account of the Forest Service's antecedents, early history, struggles over the years, growth and development, is one which is generally familiar to all readers of this Journal, and I shall not try

either to summarize or to comment on that history. While there may be exceptions, on the whole Steen comes up with conclusions and accounts compatible with earlier books, such as Dana's *Forest and Range Policy*. Steen has provided us with a fine tuning, a new look from a somewhat different angle, but with a general picture fully recognizable to persons who have read any one of several earlier books. His chronological summary at the back, like the similar one in Dana, is enormously valuable, especially when you wish to know just when a particular event took place. Likewise, his listing of source materials is very useful, again when you want an exact reference to a publication which you know generally. A series of organization charts of the Forest Service at different past dates is an unusual and useful feature.

As I think about this book, I have two strong personal impressions: first, it deals with the trees, not with the forest. That is, the meticulous review of documents provides a detailed picture, but one which sometimes lacks broad sweeping generalities, large descriptions of broad movements, and a wide perspective. Second, Steen narrates, not judges. That is, he tells in some detail what happened, without expressing explicitly his view as to the wisdom—or the lack of it—of the actions he describes. Perhaps I am only saying that the approach and techniques of the historian are different from those of some other social scientists. There is, in my view, a large place for each, and I regard Steen's book as a fine example of the kind of historical analysis I have tried to describe here.

The book is very much worth having and probably worth buying—as books go these days, its price is not excessive for what the book is, though it still seems steep to us oldtimers.

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*Resources for the Future.