

Chapter 1 - The Southwest and the Forest Service

Secretary of Agriculture James Wilson's directive of February 1, 1905, held special significance for the people of Arizona and New Mexico. Wilson announced the transfer of the Forest Reserves to the Department of Agriculture as authorized by Congress (H. R. 8460) on that same day. Some 21 million acres of public lands, almost one-eighth of the surface area of Arizona and New Mexico, were now to be administered by a regional subdivision of the Forest Service. "All land," Wilson said, "is to be devoted to its most productive use for the permanent good of the whole people. ... All the resources of the forest reserves are for use."¹ In 1908, Chief Forester Gifford Pinchot appointed Arthur C. Ringland the first District Forester of the newly organized Southwestern district, or district 3. These Forest Service "districts" became "regions" after 1930.

The Forest Service was charged to maintain the permanence of the resources of the National Forests, while providing for their use. The great concern of Congress, as reflected in the Organic Administration Act of 1897, was to continue the prosperity of the agricultural, lumbering, mining, and livestock interests directly dependent upon the water, wood, minerals, and forage of the public domain.² Over the past three-quarters of a century the use of the renewable and nonrenewable resources of the Southwest had increased at a rapid rate.

The Public Domain

When the United States acquired the territory comprising Arizona and New Mexico by treaty with Mexico in 1848, those lands not owned by private individuals, including earlier Spanish and Mexican land grants, nor reserved by treaty for the various Indian tribes became a part of the "public domain" and open under various laws to settlement, purchase, and use. Only after the American Civil War and the completion of the great transcontinental and regional railroads, such as the Southern Pacific, the Santa Fe, and the Rio Grande Western railroads, did the great change in public use of the land begin. Cutting timber, mining, and raising cattle, for centuries household or domestic operations, had begun to become monolithic corporate enterprises with national and even international markets.

Timber production in Arizona and New Mexico, estimated at some 8 million board feet in 1879, rose to 22 million in 1889, and 67 million in 1900. Cattle grazed on the open ranges of the forests and public domains in ever-greater numbers. Cattle herds, which were estimated at 172 thousand head in 1880, increased to over 1.5 million head by 1890. By 1900, once-lush grasslands were in danger of becoming bare, rock-strewn earth. In 1879, the territory of Arizona urged the sale of all of the territorial timberlands at public auction, and in 1880 Congress authorized the citizens of Arizona and New Mexico to "fell and remove timber from the public domain for mining and domestic purposes." By 1900 it was becoming painfully clear to south-westerners that the renewable and nonrenewable resources of the Southwest were being depleted?³ In 1891, Congress had given the President the authority to create forest reserves.

Forest Reserves

By the General Provision Act of 1891, Congress authorized the President to designate particular areas of the forested public domain as “reserves,” set aside for future use. The first such reserve was the Yellowstone Timberland Reserve, which later was divided into the Teton and Shoshone National Forests. These reserves, which were increased in number and doubled in size by President Grover Cleveland in 1897, were by law completely closed to public use and were devoid of management or supervision. In the Southwest the 311,040-acre Pecos River Forest Reserve was established in 1892, and the Prescott, Gila River, and Santa Rita Forest Reserves, encompassing millions of acres, were established before 1908.⁴ Although Congress restricted the authority of the President in 1897, authorizing him to establish reserves only to preserve timber, protect watersheds, and provide lumber for local use, use of the forests by southwesterners for grazing, hunting, mining, lumbering, and recreation generally continued with no other constraint but the natural difficulty of access.

There was some sense among the older Indian and Spanish communities, in and adjacent to the forest, and among cattlemen, that the ancient traditions of open use and access to the land were simply being reaffirmed by the reserve acts and the Transfer Act of 1905. In these communities, people believed that the land belonged to them, at least for the purpose of grazing, wood gathering, cutting timber, hunting, fishing, or recreation, and that the forest reserves, and now the Forest Service, simply reaffirmed those communal rights.⁵ In assuming authority over those public lands in the Southwest, the Forest Service inherited a great system of canyons, mountains, deserts and grasslands, people, and wildlife that characterize a unique sector of the American physical and cultural environment.

Essential Form and Features

It was a land that, long before the migrating tribes or conquering explorers trekked across it, had assumed the essential form and features, including the flora and the fauna, that greet the 20th-century visitor. In Paleolithic times the remnants of the receding glaciers of the last great ice age began to nourish the growth of the forests of the mountain regions and feed the developing river systems.

As the ice age ended, the land away from the mountains became increasingly arid-average annual rainfall is less than 12 inches. In the mountains, which range from 13,000 feet elevation at Wheeler Peak to 5,000 and 7,000 feet in the lower ranges, rainfall averages upwards from 12 to 24 inches annually. The forests and grasslands supported an unusually diverse animal population, ranging from large bears, elk, mountain lions, buffalo, and mule deer to coyotes, jack rabbits, foxes, bobcats, badgers, squirrels, gophers, gila monsters, rats, snakes, scorpions, and tarantulas. On the mountain slopes there were stands of ponderosa pine, Douglas-fir, and Engelmann spruce that grew at elevations of 7,000 to 11,000 feet and enjoyed rainfall of 18 to 25 inches per year. Down the mountainside grew pinyon and junipers, which could thrive with only 12 to 17 inches of rain annually. Still lower were mixed evergreens and scrub oaks, and on the plateaus and valleys, where rainfall fell below 12 inches, was mesquite. The Petrified Forest, a woodland of some prehistoric day, lay strewn along its present site long before the first migrants ventured into the Southwest.⁶

From Hunters to Farmers

The earliest inhabitants trod lightly on the land and forests. As long as 2,000 years ago the Anasazi (perhaps ancestors of the present Pueblo Indians) made the transition from nomadic hunters to farmers living in permanent dwellings. They used the forests for many purposes. They gathered herbs and seeds, hunted, and secured logs for roof beams, ceiling joists, and other construction needs for the large, multifamily stone buildings they erected. The mountain forests they held in awe as the homes of their gods and goddesses. The Anasazi developed religious rituals that were performed high on the mountains, and they regarded Mt. Taylor and Sandia Peak, among other locations, as sacred. Because they needed firewood for heat only in the harsher winter months and wood for cooking or for pottery kilns, and because they lacked metal tools to cut and shape timbers, the Anasazi made few demands on the forests of the Southwest. Later Indian nations, including the Hopi, Zuni, Apache, and other tribes that came to the region as recently as the 16th century, lived with rather than on the forests. The stands of ponderosa pine, as well as the pinyon and junipers on the lower slopes, remained virtually untouched for more than 1,000 years.⁷

Spanish Continue Modest Use

The same pattern of modest forest use continued under the Spanish. Beginning with Friar de Niza and Francisco Coronado, missionaries and soldiers crossed and recrossed the Southwest, building missions, forts, and towns at Santa Fe, Albuquerque, Isleta, Las Cruces, Tucson, Tubac, and many other locations. They built mostly structures of stone and adobe that required only hewed wooden beams for the roofs and similar supports. The Spanish used more of the forest for fuel than did the Indians, and they cut pinyon and junipers for fence posts to enclose their sheep and cattle. But these modest uses did not approach the annual growth rate of timber on the mountain slopes. The forests suffered far more damage from lightning, western red rot, mistletoe, and coronation rust than from the inroads of the Spanish. Perhaps more important to the future of the region, though, was the introduction of the range cattle industry by the Spanish. In short, the pattern of forest growth and decay continued much as it had before the advent of the conquistadores and friars.⁸

Part of Mexico

During the single generation that the Southwest region was part of the Republic of Mexico (1821-48), isolation and lack of transportation stifled any efforts to exploit the forests. Trade with the United States followed principally the Santa Fe Trail, which ran from the Missouri River at Independence, west to the Arkansas River, and on to Santa Fe by way of Raton Pass or more directly across the dry grasslands to the Cimarron River. This trail was a winding, tortuous, dangerous route that took two to three months, depending on the weather, to complete. The value of merchandise doubled enroute, and traders confined their shipments largely to cotton goods, manufactured articles, and tools. The return load was made up of furs, blankets, gold, and silver. Trade with California was equally long, slow, and hazardous. The route ran north of the Gila River to the Colorado River crossing, and on to San Diego across the California desert. A third route ran south to Chihuahua, but it, too, was slow and dangerous, and little commerce came into the region from that direction. The isolation of the land between the Colorado River and the Rio Grande prevented any substantial commerce with the outside world and made subsistence living a necessity.⁹

War In 1846

The declaration of war in 1846 by the United States against Mexico was soon followed by the appearance of an American army commanded by General Stephen W. Kearny. The army speedily occupied Santa Fe, Albuquerque, and other principal settlements along the Rio Grande. Later the same year, Kearny and his army marched along the Gila River to its junction with the Colorado, crossed that stream, and went on to California. Accompanying him was Lt. W. L. Emory, a topographical engineer, whose notes on the expedition provided the best account of the region available in English up to that time. Enroute he described the trees, animals, and birds in the upper Gila Valley as he swung south of the mountains seeking a wagon route for the army trains. He concluded that the entire country had the same physical characteristics and that would-be farmers could not rely on rainfall for agriculture but would have to employ carefully controlled irrigation. As he kept to the lower terrain and avoided the mountain slopes, Emory reported that the region was “destitute” of worthwhile forest trees except on the margins of streams. Indian guides and mountain men could have told him that there were millions of acres of pine, fir, and spruce on the mountains. These, apparently, Emory did not see.¹⁰

The Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in 1848 transferred the territory between Texas and the Colorado River, as well as California, to the United States. In 1850 the region became the Territory of New Mexico with its eastern border at the present Texas boundary. Arizona became a separate territory in 1863. At once presidents, cabinet members, and members of Congress hastened to propose new routes west over which to build a railroad to the new golden state of California. Among the routes most favored by officials in Washington was a line along the 35th degree of latitude and another along the 32nd degree parallel. Both of these roads would run through the new territory of New Mexico.¹¹

Reference Notes

¹ Edward P. Cliff, Chief, U.S. Forest Service to Regional Foresters, Directors, and Area Directors, April 28, 1971, Region 3, Albuquerque, NM, File 1685.

² *Ibid.*; 30 Stat. 34-36; and see Dennis M. Roth, *The Wilderness Movement and the National Forests: 1964-1980*, FS-391 (Washington, DC: USDA Forest Service, 1984), p. 3.

³ Henry B. Steer, *Lumber Production in the United States, 1799-1946* (Washington, DC: USDA Forest Service, 1948), p.11; Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of Arizona and New Mexico, 1530-1888* (Albuquerque: Horn & Wallace, 1889), pp.146-283, 533,601; and see Anne E. Harrison, ‘The Santa Catalina: A Description and History,’ USDA Forest Service, Southwestern Region, Coronado National Forest, Sabino Canyon Visitor Center, pp. 1-14.

⁴ *Facts: Southwestern Region, National Forests of Arizona and New Mexico* (Albuquerque: USDA Forest Service, Southwestern Region, 19.58), pp. 3257.

⁵ Walter Graves, interview.

⁶ Bert M. Fireman, *Arizona: Historic Land* (New York: Alfred Knopf,1982), pp. 17-27,40-42; Erna Ferguson, *New Mexico: A Pageant of Three Peoples* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1.973), pp. 3-14; Quincy Randles, “Pinon Juniper in the Southwest,” and C. Otto Lindh, “Ponderosa Pine in the Southwest,” in U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Trees: The Yearbook of Agriculture, 1949* (Washington, DC, 1949), pp. 342-346, 347-351.

⁷ Thomas Y. Canby, “The Anasazi: Riddles in the Ruins,” *National Geographic*, v.162:5 (November 1982), pp. 562-692; Ferguson, *New Mexico*, pp. 19 52; Joseph A. Tainter, “Native American Use of the Cibola National Forest,” unpublished manuscript (USDA Forest Service Regional Office, Albuquerque, NM, 1982).

⁸ Bancroft, *History of Arizona and New Mexico*, pp. 146-283.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 329-343.

¹⁰ Calvin Ross, ed., *Lt. Emory Reports* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1951), pp. 102-103, 154-155.

¹¹ Bancroft, *Arizona and New Mexico*, pp. 491-493; William H. Goetzman, *Exploration and Empire: The Explorer and the Scientist in the Winning of the American West* (New York Vintage Books, 1966), pp. 265-302.