

# School Forests: Opportunity and Challenge

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**What are school forests? What is their status in Wisconsin? What is their primary purpose? Who is responsible for the school forests? Can they be effective tools in education?**

The school forest idea as an educational tool is not something new. It was a borrowed idea put to practical use over 30 years ago to help solve a Wisconsin resource dilemma. Youth of the state were called on in this program—and they did the job under dedicated leadership.

Back in the early 1920's, northern Wisconsin was a grotesque cut-over, burned-over country. Much of this land was not adapted to farming. Counties were plagued with the problem of tax-delinquent lands which contributed nothing to their vital operating budgets for schools, roads, and other public needs. The economic future of this region was dependent either upon slow natural forest regeneration or a vigorous reforestation program which would put these idle acres back into production more quickly.

In 1925 the late Dean H. L. Russell of the College of Agriculture learned of the successful development of school forests while visiting Australia. Publicly-owned tracts in Australia were being planted and cared for by the school children as an educational project. The timely idea seemed to be very applicable to Wisconsin.

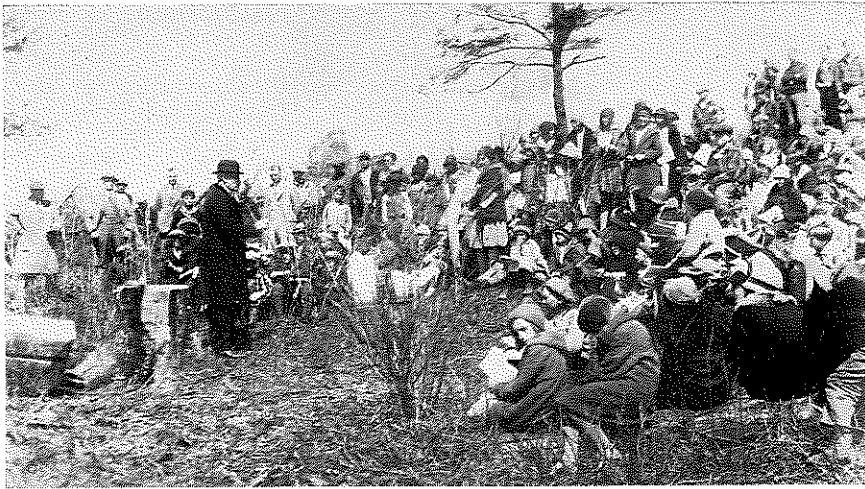
**MOTIVATED** by Dean Russell's suggestion and the stimulation of the Forest County Land-Use Planning Committee, the people of Forest county adopted the idea of school forests to promote the urgent reforestation program. In 1927, after the Legislature gave school districts legal authority to own land for school forest purposes, three tracts were

donated or purchased for the Crandon, Wabeno, and Laona school forests.

The following spring the first school forests in Wisconsin were officially dedicated. During the initial ceremonies the "man-size" job of handplanting idle acres was started by the school children. So that students could catch the spirit of the important part they were to play in this program, a school forest covenant was repeated and signed by class members. This pledge was to be repeated each year by the student-body to reemphasize its entrusted obligation. Year by year these planted trees grew—and year by year people became more convinced that forests could be "planted back."

**BACKED** by the energetic promotion of the late "Ranger Mac" McNeel, former state 4-H Club leader, the school forest project grew quickly. In 1949 the Wisconsin statutes were revised (Sec. 28.20) enabling the city, village, town, or school district to purchase, if necessary, a tract of land for a school forest. Registered tracts are ". . . eligible to receive free planting stock from state forest nurseries and the services of foresters in preparing and carrying out planting and forest management plans. No trees shall be cut except those marked or designated for cutting by a state forester . . ." (Sec. 28.21).

The Wisconsin Conservation Department, Extension forestry office, other public agencies, and private industry have materially assisted in the establishment and development of school forests.



The Laona school forest was dedicated in 1928. Among the speakers was the late John Callahan, at that time state superintendent of schools.

A complete Conservation Department register of community forests, maintained by the University Extension Forestry office, currently lists 337 school forests with a total of 25,502 acres. These tracts are located in 50 counties and vary in size from 20 to over 800 acres. These figures show that the school forest idea has become firmly rooted in Wisconsin.

Unfortunately figures alone do not measure the *effectiveness* of the program. The fundamental purpose of establishing a school forest is more than just securing a tract of land, registering it, and then planting trees furnished free by the Conservation Department. A school forest is intended to be primarily an outdoor laboratory, available to all grades and courses, which provides real experiences for both girls and boys for the understanding, planning, and management of interrelated natural resources. These experiences, when jointly planned and shared, can stimulate desirable growth and cooperative action of both youth and adults in the community.

Cooperative community participation is a prerequisite to the continued success and usefulness of school forests. Expe-

rience has shown that this program will move forward or falter according to the enthusiasm or presence of a key person charged with administering the local program. Unfortunately there are many tracts now on the community forest register that are no more than legal descriptions of land. These school forest programs ceased with the passing of an early, spirited leader. School redistricting has also resulted in the abandonment of tracts which are potential educational resources for the newly integrated school district.

To insure effective continuity, the responsibility for developing and maintaining an active school forest program should not rest with one individual, but rather with a joint school and community committee. An advisory committee made up of interested citizens and technicians, such as foresters, soils men, and wildlife specialists, can be of inestimable assistance to educators and school board members in formulating and activating a school forest plan which can be integrated into the school curriculum.

The school forest program is not just another extra-curricular activity for stu-

dents which requires an undue amount of time for educators and parents. With cooperative planning all classroom activities can be effectively integrated with the opportunities afforded by a school forest. As an outdoor laboratory, the school forest offers an opportunity to develop an understanding of nature's community and the interrelationship of all natural resources. This understanding is requisite to intelligent management of the land—it was in the past and will be in the future.

The school forest can also be used to demonstrate the economic values resulting from managed land. All too often, however, the school forest is administered in terms of an economic "dollar sign" enterprise to the practical exclusion of its real fundamental value—the development of basic understandings of the re-

sources subject to management decisions. It is important that the local school forest project be periodically reappraised to keep its objectives in proper perspective.

For the past 30 years, the school forest program has been an effective educational tool in promoting reforestation. This project, however, should not be relegated solely to spring tree-planting, but must be expanded to cover all natural resources. Man does not manipulate one resource without affecting the others. The school forest offers a unique educational opportunity and challenge to Wisconsin schools and communities—for "youth develops when youth builds." Youngsters will continue to give a good account of themselves if we will guide their seemingly boundless energy in the proper direction.



Thirty years later, in 1958, the Laona school forest was re-dedicated. Here a Norway (red) pine was being planted as a memorial tree.