

Resolution of Respect

Forest W. Stearns

1918–1999

During his lifetime as a professional ecologist, Dr. Forest W. Stearns became internationally known and a legacy in his own right. He died on 8 September 1999 at his childhood home near Saint Germain in northern Wisconsin. It seems fitting that he should have died at Found Lake, since it was during the summers there with his mother, an amateur botanist, that he developed a lifelong interest in plant and animal ecology and preservation of natural communities. He died talking with his close friend and present owner of the property, Dr. Gene Likens, while sitting under his favorite trees overlooking the Lake. Throughout his career he was never away from his beloved northern Wisconsin for very long. At the height of his career, he was a pioneer researcher in the field of landscape ecology, an editor, an author, and a leader in the Ecological Society of America and American Institute of Biological Sciences. Although he was 80 years old and 11 years post retirement at the time of his death, he continued to be professionally active and co-authored a book chapter and an article on savannas within the last year.

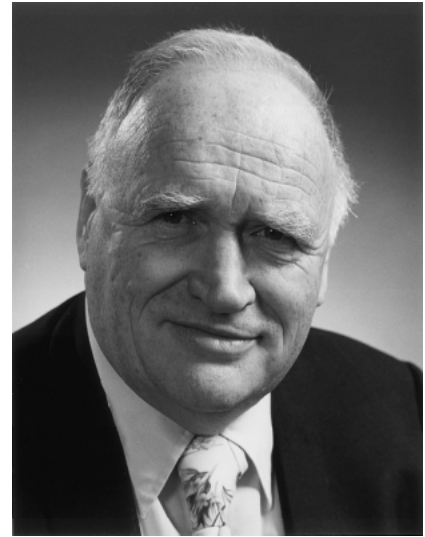
Forest was born on 10 September 1918 in Shorewood, Wisconsin, graduated from Shorewood High School, and subsequently attended Harvard University, where he received a baccalaureate degree in 1939. That same year, he became a graduate student in the Department of Botany at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and received a Master of Science degree in 1940. His work toward a Ph.D. degree was interrupted when he entered the U. S. Army Air Force, where he served from 1942 to 1946.

When he returned to the University of Wisconsin to complete the Ph.D. degree, he found that John T.

Curtis had transferred his research interest from plant physiology to plant ecology, and thus Forest had the distinction of being Curtis' first Ph.D. student. In 1947, he was awarded the degree with the completion of his dissertation, "The composition of the sugar maple–hemlock–yellow birch association in northern Wisconsin." Doing the research for his dissertation must have been like returning to his "home" in northern Wisconsin.

During his subsequent 40 years as a teacher and researcher, he was associated with a variety of agencies, beginning as an instructor and assistant professor in the Departments of Botany and Biological Science at Purdue University (1947–1955), and later as a researcher with the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station (1956), Project Leader with the Southern Forest Experiment Station at Vicksburg, Mississippi (1957–1961), and the North Central Forest Experiment Station (1961–1968). In the latter position, he supervised the Wildlife Habitat Research Project at Rhinelander, Wisconsin, once again returning to his summer home at Found Lake. One aspect of this project was the study of how scale affected wildlife use of forest openings. During this project, he became one of the first researchers to promote the use of remote sensing in wildlife habitat research.

His last professional position was with the Department of Botany at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee (UWM), where he was Professor from 1968 to 1987, and Chair from 1973 to 1977. He taught courses in urban ecology, environment and man, advanced plant ecology, and scientific writing for journals. During his tenure, he trained 11 Ph.D. students and 37 M.S. students, at least seven of whom later received a Ph.D. from other institutions. Substantial field work was required of his students, as Forest felt it was the best way to learn about natural systems.



His students have become university faculty, environmental educators, botanical garden or arboretum directors, and natural resource personnel.

At the University of Wisconsin, he developed a strong interest in urban ecology and the urban–rural interface, landscape ecology, biogeography, and primary productivity of wetland and upland communities. He was responsible for developing the field of urban ecology in the United States and pioneered a regional approach to exploring solutions to urban system problems. Forest was the first researcher to receive a National Science Foundation grant in landscape ecology, specifically to study change along an urban–rural landscape gradient in southeastern Wisconsin.

Forest was a prolific writer, and his publication list is lengthy. He was author or co-author of 40 journal articles, 10 book chapters, one textbook, three Wisconsin Transactions articles, and 120 additional publications including research notes, articles in proceedings, reports, station papers, reviews, and technical bulletins. He co-edited two indexes covering 30 years of articles published in the journal *Ecology*.

His contribution to professional service was as extensive as his writing. Chronologically, he was: Direc-

tor of Phenology Program/International Biological Program (1969–1971); Principal Investigator/Urban Systems Project (1972–1974); Vice President (1971–1972), Treasurer (1972–1974), and President (1975–1976) of the Ecological Society of America; Member and Chair of the Wisconsin Scientific Areas Preservation Council (1973–1989); a member of the Governing Board and Executive Committee (1974–1980), President-elect, and President (1980–1982) of the American Institute of Biological Sciences; for the Wisconsin Academy of Science, Arts, and Letters, Council Member (1976–1979) and Editor of *Transactions*, (1978–1981); a member of the editorial boards of *Urban Ecology* (1980–1986), *Journal of Biogeography* (1981–1990), *Landscape and Urban Planning* (1986–present); Botanical Editor for *Ecology* (1962–1968), Coordinating Editor for *Ecology* (1968–1971); and Consultant to Argonne National Laboratory (1972–1977). He was a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Forest also served on a variety of other university, city, and state councils and boards, and was a member of about 15 professional organizations.

Forest was recognized as a warm and caring teacher. Dr. Thomas Crow, until recently head of the Ecology Landscape unit at the North Central Forest Experiment Station, Rhinelander, Wisconsin, noted: “He is a great teacher. His students love him and want to maintain a close relationship with him.” One former student said that he was greatly impressed with Forest’s devotion to his students, and his willingness to shift his research interest to accommodate them. Not surprisingly, Forest said he was proudest of his association with at least two generations of students at UWM and what they had taught him (*NC News*, North Central Forest Experiment Station, St. Paul, Minnesota, 1995). To his students, he became known as “Papa Bear” because of his burly physique and enthusiasm for helping students with field work. At the time of his retirement in 1988, his students endowed an award in his

name at the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts, and Letters.

After retirement, he continued to lecture on ecology, write articles, and take an active role in various organizations. Interestingly, many of his awards came after retirement: Wisconsin Academy Citation for furthering ideas of the Academy and service to the state (1986) from the Wisconsin Academy of Science, Arts, and Letters; Wisconsin Idea Award (1990) from the Center for Resource Policy Studies, University of Wisconsin, Madison; award from the Wisconsin Natural Areas Preservation Council (1990) “Recognizing Forest Stearns for his Contributions to Conserve and Protect the Natural Heritage”; Certificate of Appreciation for “Exceptional Performance and Level of Service provided to the Department of Natural Resources and State of Wisconsin (1990) from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, Madison; Outstanding Environmentalist (1991) from the College of Natural Resources, University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point; and the Scientific Roundtable Award on Biological Diversity Issues (1992) from the Chequamegon and Nicolet National Forests, Wisconsin.

In recent years, weakness resulting from post-polio syndrome and diabetes progressively limited his movement and travel. However, he remained a volunteer with the Landscape Ecology unit at the North Central Forest Experiment Station in Rhinelander, and stopped in several times a week to exchange ideas and be a resource for other professionals. During these years, he also much appreciated the visits by professional colleagues and former students. He once said these visits were his means of staying informed about ongoing research, but when I, or occasionally my forest ecology class, visited him at his current home on Lake George, near Rhinelander, Wisconsin, he always seemed current and gave as much information as he received. However, visitors were not his only source of information. In his two living rooms, the numerous (maybe as many as 45) journals, which contin-

ued to arrive throughout the retirement years, were neatly arranged on tables alongside recently published books. In his basement, library stacks of reference materials filled the space. In his large office that looked out through a greenhouse containing his favorite orchids, there were more books, and many stacks of papers, notes, data sheets, and nearly completed manuscripts alongside a computer. His numerous awards hung on the wall. And any visitor was supplied immediately with coffee or soft drinks and fresh cookies baked by his gracious wife, Ruth.

Besides Ruth, Forest is survived by his daughters Carlin Hibbard and Andrea Stearns of Eau Claire, Wisconsin, his son Jay of Virginia, two brothers, Perry Stearns of Arizona and David Stearns of Florida, a sister, Rodora Leyse of Idaho, and a number of grandchildren, cousins, and nephews. He was preceded in death by a son, Timothy. When I asked Carlin what she remembered about her father when she was growing up, she said, “He always seemed to have a manuscript in his hand, and when we rode with him, he made too many stops to check the vegetation.” Jay recalled that his father was an Eagle Scout, he was in his father’s troop, and that together they started several troops in St. Paul, Minnesota. Jay also indicated that at Harvard University, Forest was a heavyweight boxer. A final note from the family was that like many ecologists, his pictures were mostly of plants and vegetation; there were very few of people.

Forest Stearns is gone, but the legacy continues through his thoughts and ideas in his writing and his students. He was an outstanding mentor and role model for young ecologists. He was dedicated to teaching and research until his death. The scientific community has lost a valued and endearing member. His ashes will be scattered over the land overlooking Found Lake.

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Addendum, Forest Stearns

I was with Forest Stearns when he died. We had just finished a pleasant lunch with our wives at our cabin on Found Lake. The conversation was lively, wide ranging, and interesting. Forest and I were working on the details of a manuscript about the recovery of the pine forest following lumbering and fire in the

1890s in this area of Wisconsin. It was under these towering, now 100-year-old pines, that he died, peacefully and without pain. True to form for the consummate ecologist, minutes before he was describing to his wife, Ruth, the sensitivity of “bracken to frost.”

I had known Forest for some three decades as a professional colleague, and more recently as a dear

friend. Although he was a highly regarded and honored scientist, he was equally respected as a warm, kind, and considerate human being. He will be missed, but remembered fondly and respectfully by very many.

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