

Percy George and *The Pine Tree Menace*

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COLLECTIVELY, FORESTERS VIEW THEIR PROFESSION as the saving grace of American timberlands. According to their version of history, prior to the mid-twentieth century abusive lumbering practices in Arkansas and much of eastern North America ravaged the forests, leaving behind cutover wastelands. Then, the professional forester appeared on the scene to reclaim the lands and restore the forest to some semblance of its past glory. The transformation was warmly received by destitute local populations, with the forester emerging as a hero of almost mythic proportions. Even Hollywood and some novelists embraced this perception, casting the forest ranger in glowing light.¹ The reality, as it is in so many cases, was far more complex.

In truth, many communities harbored individuals who were dubious or even downright hostile, first to the development and social change spurred by lumbering practices that cut only the valuable trees off of a site without regard to the integrity of the land, and then to the succeeding wave of scientific forestry that sought to create, manage, and conserve

¹One such short picture released in 1910, *The Forest Ranger*, starred Gilbert M. "Broncho Billy" Anderson. Born Max Aronson in Little Rock in 1880, Broncho Billy grew up in Pine Bluff but eventually moved to New York City. Other movies portraying heroic foresters include another short entitled *The Forest Ranger* (1912), *Cavanaugh of the Forest Rangers* (1918), *Wings of the Storm* (1926), *The Fighting Forester* (1928), *Raw Timber* (1937), and *Men of the Timberland* (1941); Internet Movie Database, www.imdb.com (accessed November 10, 2010); Dave Wallis, "'Broncho Billy' Anderson (1880-1971)," *Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*, encyclopediaofarkansas.net (accessed November 15, 2010).

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forests in a sustainable manner.² Not surprisingly, those who resisted forest conservation often did so because of concerns about what this new land ethic meant to their ways of life.³ At its core, this struggle melded a number of distinct issues arising from the transformation of an agrarian society into an industrial one, including the perceived loss of traditional values and power structures.

Though not restricted to the southern United States, opposition both to the timber industry and later efforts to implement sustainable forestry may have been most sharply pronounced in this region. Forest-related industries in the South had long walked a fine line between acceptance and rejection in communities affected by poverty, land speculation, natural disasters, racial divisions, and exploitative employers. A certain sectional animosity developed between the northern financiers and mill operators who funded and ran the lumber companies and local populations who had considerably different perspectives.⁴ In the end, the economic and political power of the industry overcame most resistance in the post-Reconstruction South, with some notable exceptions. However, resentment simmered in the hearts of many of the disaffected, often fueled by the abuses of the lumber companies.

At first, opposition to forestry often extended beyond private citizens or local officials to include the timber companies. For decades, the timber industry itself dismissed the need to change its destructive ways, because it considered the forests a limitless resource.⁵ Henry E. Hardtner, president of one of the largest lumber companies in central Louisiana and an early proponent of forestry in the South, was often derided by fellow mill owners for his interest in what was then called forest conservation. Fortunately, Hardtner persisted and expanded his efforts to promote conservation, and his example gradually helped lead other lumber companies to sustainable forestry, including Arkansas's Crossett Lumber Company.⁶

²Kenneth L. Smith, *Sawmill: The Story of Cutting the Last Great Virgin Forest East of the Rockies* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1986), 6-48; Henry E. Hardtner, "A Practical Example of Forest Management in Southern Yellow Pine," in *Proceedings of the Southern Forestry Congress* (Durham, NC: Seaman Printery, 1916), 73.

³For basic definitions of forestry, lumbering, and forest conservation, see John A. Helms ed., *The Dictionary of Forestry* (Bethesda, MD: Society of American Foresters, 1998).

⁴Paul W. Gates, "Federal Land Policy in the South, 1866-1888," *Journal of Southern History* 6 (August 1940): 303-330.

⁵Smith, *Sawmill*, 112-123; James E. Fickle, *Mississippi Forests and Forestry* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 120.

⁶James E. Fickle, "Early Forestry in the South and in Mississippi," *Forest History Today* 7 (Spring/Fall 2001): 11-18; Hardtner, "Practical Example of Forest Management," 71-79; Robert S. Maxwell, "The Impact of Forestry on the Gulf South," *Forest History* 17 (April 1973): 31-35; Fickle, *Mississippi Forests*, 132-133.

By the mid-1920s, a number of the major Arkansas timber operations were seriously considering the management of cutover lands as an alternative to abandoning the area for the western U.S. or bankruptcy. Even the Concatenated Order of Hoo-Hoo, a national lumber industry-based fraternal organization founded in Gurdon, Arkansas, had made the conservation of forest resources and reforestation of denuded lands their principal interest by 1925.⁷ The conversion of the industry to forest conservation did not translate to universal local acceptance of either the industry or forestry, though.

Nowadays, the piney woods of southern Arkansas seem to be an unlikely location for forestry-related strife. Journeying through the low, rolling hills of the Upper West Gulf Coastal Plain takes a traveler through mile after mile of industrially owned tree plantations. Most lands are covered with thick stands of pine, oak, hickory, gum, and other hardwoods. This abundant timber resource fuels a significant industry—with only about 3.4 percent of the nation's forested lands, and just less than 1 percent of its population, Arkansas contributes almost 4 percent of the forest products generated nationwide.⁸ Directly or indirectly, the Arkansas forest products industry currently employs tens of thousands of people with a multi-billion dollar payroll.⁹ During lumbering's heyday between 1895 and 1925, Arkansas forests annually yielded over 1.5 billion board feet of lumber and up to 5 billion board feet for all wood used (including firewood, pulpwood, lath, cooperage, shingles, crossties, and lumber). Manufacturing associated with wood

⁷William L. Hall, "Arkansas' Romance Reforestation," *Nature Magazine* 6 (October 1925): 233-236; Farrar Newberry, "The Concatenated Order of Hoo-Hoo," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 22 (Winter 1963): 301-310.

⁸Arkansas population estimate for 2003, U.S. Census Bureau, *Arkansas Quick Facts*, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/05000.html> (accessed August 23, 2005). In 2002, Arkansas harvested an estimated 680 million cubic feet of hardwood and conifer roundwood from almost 18.8 million acres of forestland; James W. Bentley, Michael Howell, and Tony G. Johnson, *Arkansas' Timber Industry—An Assessment of Timber Product Output and Use, 2002*, SRS-RB-99 (Asheville, NC: USDA Forest Service, 2005), 1. The national figures were 18.2 billion cubic feet of roundwood (10.7 billion cubic feet of conifers, 7.5 billion cubic feet of hardwoods) from approximately 558 million acres of forestland; Richard W. Haynes, David J. Brooks, David B. McKeever, and Kenneth E. Skog, "Overview," in *An Analysis of the Timber Situation in the United States: 1952 to 2050*, ed. Richard W. Haynes (Portland, OR: USDA Forest Service, 2003), 8; Darius M. Adams, Richard W. Haynes, Peter J. Ince, Kenneth E. Skog, John R. Mills, and David B. McKeever, "Timber Demand-Supply Relations: Base Projection," in *ibid.*, 96.

⁹Division of Agriculture, *Economic Impact of Arkansas Agriculture—2010* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas, 2010), 23; Richard A. Williams, "Arkansas Forests—The Timber Resource," in *Proceedings of the Symposium on Arkansas Forests: A Conference on the Results of the Recent Forest Survey of Arkansas*, ed. James M. Guldin (Asheville, NC: USDA Forest Service, July 2001), 17-23.

contributed significantly to the state's economic well-being. In fact, one government report estimated that in lumbering's peak year of 1909 the forest products industry employed 73 percent of all factory wage earners in Arkansas. As late as 1927, 63 percent of these earners were tied to timber, with most of this production occurring in the southern half of the state.¹⁰ Yet surprisingly enough, one of the most vocal agitators against the timber industry also came from that part of the state.

In 1928, Gaston Percy George (better known simply as Percy George) published and distributed a booklet entitled *The Pine Tree Menace*, a vivid example of opposition of forest management.¹¹ A prominent figure in southeastern Arkansas prior to World War II, Percy George was born in Hamburg, Arkansas, on March 25, 1873, the third of ten children of Gaston Percy George (1844-1909) and Josie A. George (1852-1900). He attended Hamburg public schools before spending three years studying literature at Southern Normal University in Huntington, Tennessee. After college, he returned to Hamburg and started working in the law office of R. E. Craig before being admitted to the Hamburg bar in 1898. On January 7, 1907, Percy George married Abigail "Abbie" Eliza Wilson (1876-1936), daughter of longtime Hamburg residents A. H. and Eliza Wilson. During his years in Hamburg, Percy became active with the Masons and in politics, briefly participating in the Arkansas Constitutional Convention of 1917 and serving as Ashley County judge from 1929 to 1932 and 1935 to 1936. In addition to his legal practice, he acquired interests in local banks, a hotel, and other businesses, including newspapers.¹² George edited and

¹⁰J. T. Harris and Hu Maxwell, "Part I.—Uses and Supply of Wood in Arkansas," in *Wood-Using Industries and National Forests of Arkansas* (Washington: USDA Forest Service, 1912), 5-7; E. Murray Bruner, "Forestry and Forest Fires in Arkansas," *Agricultural Extension Service Circular* 281 (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas, 1930), 11-16; John Gray, *Arkansas Forest History* (Little Rock: Arkansas Forestry Association), www.arkforests.org/favorite-history.html (accessed March 27, 2009).

¹¹Gaston Percy George, *The Pine Tree Menace* (Hamburg, AR: self-published, 1928).

¹²Dallas T. Herndon, *Centennial History of Arkansas*, 3 vols. (Chicago: S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1922), 2:386-389; Alice Kennedy Lee, *Excerpts from the Ashley County Eagle, Arkansas, 1889-1914* (Crossett, AR: self-published, 2000), 84, 174; Dallas T. Herndon, *Annals of Arkansas*, 4 vols. (Hopkinsville, KY: Historical Records Association, 1947), 1:257-258; Robert A. Carpenter, Sr., and Mary Imogene Noble Carpenter, *Reflections of Ashley County* (Dallas: Curtis Media Corporation, 1987), 90, 150; Fred W. Allsopp, *History of the Arkansas Press for a Hundred Years and More* (Little Rock: Parke-Harper Publishing, 1922), 56-57; *Proceedings of the Forty-Fourth Annual Meeting of the Bar Association of Arkansas* (Little Rock: Bar Association of Arkansas, 1941), 150.



Percy and Abbie (Wilson) George, circa 1920. Photo from Dallas T. Hernon's *Centennial History of Arkansas*.

owned the *Ashley County Leader*, and it was in this capacity that he wrote the editorials that would be combined into *The Pine Tree Menace*.

The first paragraph of this booklet spelled out George's concerns regarding the growing push for conservation in Arkansas:

A Forest Conservation law to be applied to lands suitable for agricultural purposes is wrong. The attempt to grow pine trees on lands needed and suited for farms and ranches is wrong. Our mind is made up as long as we live with the present lights before us.¹³

For fifty-eight pages, *The Pine Tree Menace* rehashed George's opposition to what he deemed a dangerous usurpation of private property rights by legislation promoted by the timber industry in a conspiracy with the government.

¹³George, *Pine Tree Menace*, 1.

Collaboration between the industry and public officials was, in fact, occurring but not to the nefarious end supposed by George. Since at least the early 1920s, a number of private citizens, timber companies, and the federal government had been pressuring the Arkansas legislature to establish a state agency dedicated to forestry, reforestation, and wildfire protection. The U.S. Department of Agriculture even offered an allotment of \$43,560 in a fifty-fifty cost share to help support the agency in 1929. However, the requisite enabling legislation generated a tepid response, garnering only 15 affirmative votes out of a possible 100.¹⁴ Opposition from people such as George helped delay the establishment of a state forestry commission for years and then contributed to the desperate underfunding of the agency for at least the next decade.

George centered his opposition to this legislation around a number of themes. These arguments can be broadly summarized as:

1) agricultural lands should continue to be farmed or be kept open for homes and crops, not converted back into timber, since forests are uncivilized and reforestation represents the degradation of civilization;

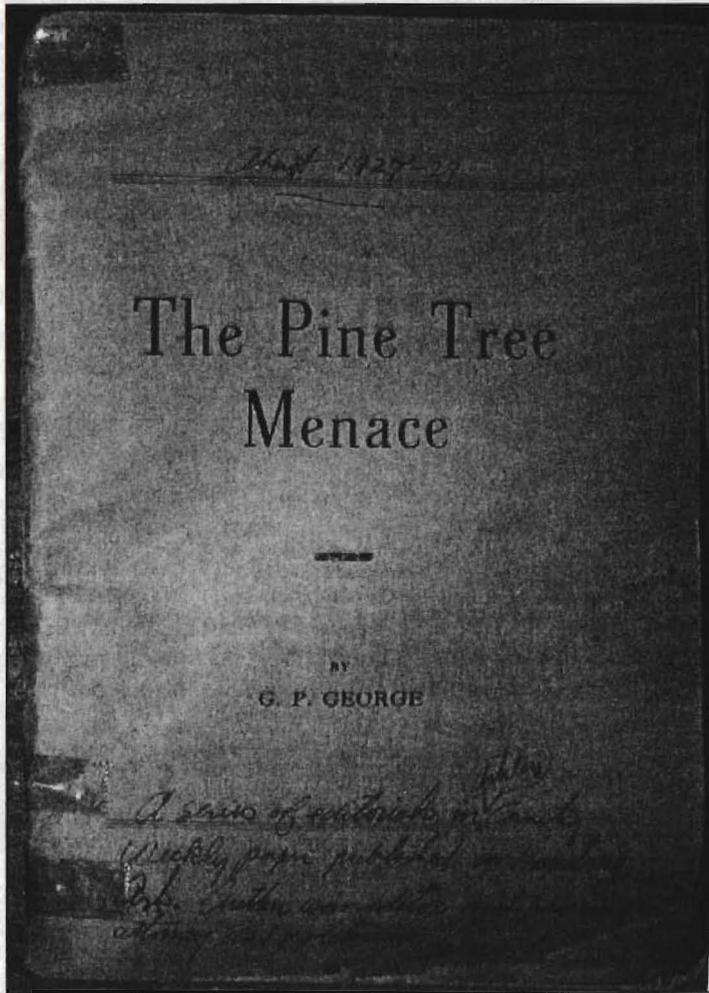
2) the forest conservation law, George imagined, would eventually lead to an immoral seizure of productive farmlands from average citizens to increase the wealth of a few timber barons; and

3) these timber interests were largely northern capitalists bent on exploiting southern forests, with no interest beyond making money and no desire to pay taxes on their timbered properties, even to benefit the conservation they were promoting.

Throughout *The Pine Tree Menace*, George counterposed agriculture and civilization with forests and savagery.

Any set of men who will sit idle and permit our country to be overrun by the timber interests are not worthy to be called husbands and fathers, and ought to don their Coon Skin caps and Bearhide jackets and get him a rifle and move out of civilization into the pine forest, where your children will grow up in ignorance and in time become savages. The pine tree forest proposition is repulsive to the finer sensibilities of an intelligent and enlightened people. The days of the Cave man are over and we

¹⁴W. K. Williams, "Address," in *Proceedings of the Fifth Southern Forestry Congress* (New Orleans: A. W. Hyatt, Ltd., 1923), 86-88; A. C. Millar, "Proposed Forestry Law for Arkansas," in *Proceedings of the Seventh Southern Forestry Congress*, ed. J. S. Holmes (Durham, NC: Seeman Printery, 1925), 46-50; American Forestry Association, "Hyde Urges Organized Forestry for Arkansas," *American Forests and Forest Life* 36 (October 1930): 658-659; Fred H. Lang, "Two Decades of State Forestry in Arkansas," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 24 (Autumn 1965): 208-219.



The cover of *The Pine Tree Menace*, from a copy owned by the University of Arkansas at Monticello. The handwritten notes on the cover were made by Albert Edward Wackerman, a former Crossett Lumber Company forester who also worked at the Crossett Experimental Forest of the U.S. Forest Service's Southern Forest Experiment Station. *Courtesy Don C. Bragg.*

are unwilling to be reduced to this intolerable and miserable condition in life, merely for the sake of allowing a few men to make money.¹⁵

Percy George even sought to exploit primal fears of the forested wilderness and the agents of destruction that purportedly accompanied this condition:

Out in the Bearhouse neighborhood, wild animals are becoming so numerous that it is almost impossible to raise hogs, goats, or calves. The other day Mr. A. L. Mitchell shot down and killed a large wolf near his home. This wolf was trying to catch his flock of geese. . . . Last week Mr. Allison on Beech Creek, killed a Rattle Snake very near his home that was over five feet long and carried enough poison in its fangs to kill the entire Allison family. . . . Out east of town the farmers are having considerable trouble keeping the deer from destroying their corn and pea crops, and in the Berlin neighborhood, coons and wild turkeys are doing much to damage the crops. . . . When Divine Providence created Ashley, Drew and Bradley counties, it was done for the accommodation of his people. God made Pine trees to serve humanity, but he did not make humanity to be pushed back and give Pine trees room to grow and flourish.¹⁶

George exaggerated the extent of the wildlife problem experienced by farmers. By the time *The Pine Tree Menace* appeared, overhunting and habitat loss had driven many animal species to the very brink of extinction. A 1930 survey of Arkansas animals estimated there were 500 white-tailed deer, a couple thousand wild turkeys, and a few dozen wolves *statewide* (compared to about 1 million deer and more than 150,000 turkeys today—wolves remain extirpated in Arkansas). Even the relatively common raccoon declined sharply, prompting the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission to actually stock dozens of this species in southeastern Arkansas during the 1930s and 1940s.¹⁷

George was not alone in his preference for farmlands over forest. Henry Hardtner recounted the story of a prominent landowner who sought to take advantage of Louisiana's program of property tax breaks for for-

¹⁵George, *Pine Tree Menace*, 42.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁷T. H. Holder, *A Survey of Arkansas Game* (Little Rock: Arkansas Game and Fish Commission, 1951), 67, 83, 97-99, 147-153.

ested lands, only to be “told very plainly that they [the assessor, police jury, and other officials] did not want forests—that they wanted farms and would raise his assessment on other properties if he persisted in growing timber.”¹⁸

In addition to identifying agriculture with civilization, George identified conservation efforts not only with the government but with the timber industry. He believed that forest conservation involved attempts by industry to unjustly manipulate the tax code. According to George, the timber companies were actively working the Arkansas legislature to exempt lands employed solely for timber culture from taxation, to secure \$12,000 per annum to hire government agents to prevent animals (and men) from trespassing on company properties, and to fund the construction of fire towers and take other protective actions on these lands. George proposed that these “wicked laws” be replaced by a “graduated land tax law that will place these lands within reach of our people for homes.”¹⁹

George insisted that forest conservation was a ploy by the timber industry and the federal government to deprive private landowners of their inherent right to property. Some of the federal government’s first conservation efforts in Arkansas had indeed been controversial. The formation of the Arkansas (now Ouachita) and Ozark National Forests from the public domain in 1907 and 1908, respectively, and the implementation of rules and regulations for them had not expropriated private land, but they had reined in free-for-all use of public lands, rubbing many Arkansans the wrong way.²⁰ Others resented the efforts by the U.S. Forest Service, industry, and other agencies to discourage their cherished practice of woods-burning to kill ticks and snakes and to improve livestock grazing.²¹ George worried that such regulations might force farmers off their own lands, allowing lumber companies to acquire them on the cheap.

George’s chief concern about forest conservation laws seemed to hinge on who would control cutover lands—the government, industry, or

¹⁸Hardtner, “Practical Example of Forest Management,” 73.

¹⁹George, *Pine Tree Menace*, 13. Undoubtedly, large industrial forest landowners ardently desired to lower their property taxes. Hardtner favored “a small tax on the land each year and a large [severance] tax when the tree crop is cut.” Henry E. Hardtner, “Forestry at Urania, Louisiana,” *Journal of Forestry* 30 (March 1932): 311.

²⁰Stephen Strausberg and Walter A. Hough, “The Ouachita and Ozark-St. Francis National Forests: A History of the Lands and USDA Forest Service Tenure,” *USDA Forest Service Southern Research Station General Technical Report SO-121* (Asheville, NC: USDA Forest Service, Southern Research Station, 1997): 8-17.

²¹Many southerners’ long-held tradition of setting fire to the woods during dry periods of the year so vexed the U.S. Forest Service that it employed a psychologist to study these poor rural residents and suggest new strategies to combat this practice; John P. Shea, “Our Pappies Burned the Woods,” *American Forests* 46 (April 1940): 159-162, 174.

farmers. Sustainable forestry meant companies would keep their cutover land rather than selling it off to individuals who would farm it. Percy George even denounced an outreach program initiated by Ashley County’s Crossett Lumber Company to encourage farmers and other citizens to protect their forested lands from fire. According to George:

There are prizes now being offered by the timber holding corporations to our school children to write pieces on “why the timber should be protected and a law of forest conservation passed.” We think this is an insult to our intelligence and the parents who know better should not allow their children to be made parties to this fraud. This matter is being handled through our schools and these very schools that the timber holding corporations are using to encourage timber protection, would all be destroyed if the forest conservation law was passed, allowing the timber interest to deed their lands to the United States and retain perpetually all timber, stone and mineral rights. This would relieve all these lands from all kinds of taxes and then where would our schools be[?]²²

A booklet published in March 1924 by the Crossett Lumber Company’s nascent forestry program included two such student essays, one by an eleventh-grade student named Mary Riley and the other by tenth-grader Grace Blakemore. Both students roundly condemned the destruction and wastefulness of forest fires while touting the benefits of a vibrant timber industry. Riley stated:

Timber has played a master part in the building of the South. It has done, is doing, and will do many constructive things. It will pay taxes, afford employment and furnish business to our railroads. The taxes will build and maintain our roads, schools and public utilities. The employment will make good citizens, create industries and uphold our social life. Take away the timber from the South and thousands of little towns will practically disappear with a consequent train of business depression.²³

Blakemore offered:

²²George, *Pine Tree Menace*, 2.

²³Mary Riley, “Preventing Forest Fires in Ashley County,” in *Timber Growing on Farm Woodlands and Forest Fire Prevention* (Crossett, AR: Crossett Lumber Company, Department of Forestry, 1924), 8-12. The booklet also promoted returning certain farmed areas to timber, especially those too poor, rugged, or erodible for the era’s agricultural practices, and discouraged farmers from burning their properties.

The zeal for ridding the land of forests to make room for agriculture has over-shot its mark. A very large aggregate of cut-over land, some of which has never been brought under the plow, is now non-productive. The community does not benefit, but suffers, when forests are destroyed and agriculture is introduced on land which it cannot permanently hold and this is unfortunately too little realized. Such a course is either an economic and social blunder or a social crime. . . . The wasteful [agricultural] methods employed by our forefathers are responsible for only two men out of every ten of this generation being able to own their homes.²⁴

Both of these essays stand in stark contrast to George's views on agriculture and forest conservation and may have prompted him to start the series of editorials in the *Ashley County Leader*. George may also have sought to counter the efforts of Dr. Alexander Copeland Millar, a prominent Methodist minister, educator, publisher, and prohibitionist. Millar was one of the initial appointees to the Honorary Arkansas Forestry Commission by Gov. Thomas McRae, who charged the group with "studying, formulating and submitting a plan for the protection, preservation and perpetuation of the forests of Arkansas." As secretary for the group, Millar played a pivotal role in drafting the initial proposed legislation for the Arkansas State Forestry Commission, which explicitly included the hiring of a state forester and other agents to enforce forest conservation laws, rules, and regulations, and promote fire control, tree planting, and the public acquisition of private lands. Starting in 1924, Millar had toured Arkansas promoting forest conservation at schools and other public organizations.²⁵ While holding Dr. Millar in the highest regard, George flatly stated:

Mr. Miller [*sic*] was selected for the position he holds because he is well known as a Christian, God-fearing man and is a man in whom the people have confidence, but Dr. Miller is wrong. We believe he is honestly wrong and would not attribute any but the purest motives to Dr. Miller, and we hope and believe that when he gets into the real selfish motives behind the Forest Conservation

²⁴Grace Blakemore, "Why It Is Necessary to Prevent Forest Fires in Ashley County," in *ibid.*, 14-15.

²⁵Thomas Rothrock, "Dr. Alexander Copeland Millar," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 22 (Fall 1963): 215-223; Lang, "Two Decades," 208-219; Michael Strickland, "Alexander Copeland Millar (1861-1940)," *Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*, encyclopediaofarkansas.net (accessed August 17, 2009); Millar, "Proposed Forestry," 46-50.

movement that he will spurn any further connection with it. We know Dr. Miller well and know he is a good man and when he takes time and considers this question in the quiet hours of his meditation that he will face about and get right and get on the side of the people.²⁶

Dr. Millar apparently never came to this revelation, as he continued his efforts to promote forest conservation, serving on the state forestry commission after its creation in 1931. Indeed, Millar may have been as responsible as any other single individual for the formation of the commission.²⁷

Considerable sectional animus also runs through George's critique of the timber industry and forest conservation:

Do you know and realize that about ninety per cent of the pine lumber manufactured in Arkansas is shipped north of the Mason and Dixon line? Do you realize and know that the timber holding corporations are owned by those of our northern kin, who have no interest whatever in the good and welfare of our people.²⁸

He later asserted:

In a vast majority of the counties of Southern Arkansas, a bunch of millionaires from the North are gradually acquiring our lands that are especially adapted to the growth of cotton, corn, potatoes, hay and all other crops . . . converting these fertile and productive lands into timber growing lands and pushing back further and further the people. These rich men are behind a propaganda of Forest Conservation.²⁹

He added:

The great majority of our legislature are good and honest men and when they learn and know the miserable condition being brought about by a few rich Yankees from the other side of the Mason and

²⁶George, *Pine Tree Menace*, 40-41. George, a fellow Methodist and Democrat, mentioned few other contemporaries in *The Pine Tree Menace* by name, perhaps concerned about slander, given his incendiary commentaries. Though he failed to spell Millar's name properly, he must have been familiar enough with Millar not to want to sully him with personal attacks.

²⁷Lang, "Two Decades," 208-219.

²⁸George, *Pine Tree Menace*, 14.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 34.

Dixie line, will be ready and eager to render our people a real service, by relieving us from our present intolerable condition that has been brought about by these self invited neighbors, who are trying to exploit and ruin our beautiful county for the sake of making money.³⁰

Taken in concert, George believed his positions presented such a compelling case against forest conservation that he found it incredible that more people were not as stridently opposed as he was:

Is there anything we can say to awaken you; is there anything we can do to awaken you; is it possible that you are to remain indifferent and stagnant and allow the timber holding corporations to overrun and own this county; what is the matter with the people; do you think I am trying to fool you and deceive you in trying to make you believe a condition exists that in reality does not exist; are you skeptical about the pine tree menace being only a delusion and not a reality?³¹

Percy George attributed his inability to convince people of the seriousness of this threat in part to his efforts "being criticized [*sic*] and belittled and slandered by the employees of the timber interest and mean and harsh things are being said about us, but are we any better than our Blessed Savior, who not only was slandered and maligned for trying to get men to do right."³²

George included such emphatic servings of religious fervor in virtually every argument he made, stressing "Divine Providence" and "God given liberty" as the ultimate authority upon which the people carved civilization from the wilderness. George viewed the timber interests as motivated solely by greed, a failing that he warned could ensnare his fellow Ashley County residents:

The love of money will destroy your soul, and in the future day to come—when awards and punishment are meted out to all humanity, your part will be eternal demnation [*sic*], and if I were [an] advocate of Forest Conservation, I would embrace the doctrine of evolution, which leads to the belief that this life is all the life we have. We drop these hints to those of the Forest Conservation per-

suasion that they may gather what relief they can from this untrue and rotten doctrine.³³

In invoking evolution, so prominent in the national consciousness due to the 1925 Scopes "Monkey Trial" and the 1927-1928 effort to pass an anti-evolution law in Arkansas, George attempted to exploit the animosity many Americans felt toward science as a threat to religion and local community values.³⁴

Elsewhere George invoked Moses, who:

placed his veto on this convenient theory of manifest destiny when he inspired men on tablets of stone, when he wrote this stern command, "Thou shalt not covet th[y] neighbors lands". . . a moral code not for the temporary and exclusive use of the disgruntled [*sic*] children of Israel . . . but is applicable to all persons in all countries and at all times, for the principles of right and wrong are eternal, and do not change with latitude and longitude or with lapsing of years.³⁵

George applied this argument only selectively, however. Later, again equating agriculture with civilization and forests with savagery, he wrote:

The Indians found in this country, when it was discovered along back about 1492, were people given to forest life, were savages, clothed in skins gotten from the wild animals that roamed these forest[s], but when the white man arrived, he pushed back the Indians and the forest, and cleared away the brush and killed off the wild animals and built homes, and school houses and churches and made this the most wonderful country in all the world. These old pioneers have passed away and left this rich heritage to you of the present day, and now we ask the question, "What are you going to do with the manifold blessings committed to your care by these old pioneers, who made it possible for you to be a free

³⁰Ibid., 53.

³¹Ibid., 2.

³²Ibid., 54.

³³Ibid., 41.

³⁴Cal Ledbetter, Jr., "The Anti-Evolution Law: Church and State in Arkansas," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 38 (Winter 1979): 299-327.

³⁵George, *Pine Tree Menace*, 1.

people, and who left this country and these lands free for you and your families?"³⁶

Coupled with other statements about race, it is clear that George was only concerned about the inalienable rights of certain Americans.

Percy George was not alone in his concerns about the timber industry. The authors of a farming-related report, published in 1916, also expressed concern that the large portion of Ashley County owned or controlled by the lumber companies would "retard the agricultural development of the county for years to come."³⁷ What the argument about the loss of possible agricultural lands to forests failed to acknowledge was that most lumber companies had tried for years with little success to sell their cutover lands to farmers, ranchers, and other settlers. Crossett Lumber Company founder Edward W. "Cap" Gates, a self-proclaimed agricultural hobbyist and entrepreneur, even used company funds to staff a farm bureau in Crossett to help ensure the financial success of farmers who might buy his company's cutover timberlands in the future.³⁸ These efforts were largely in vain. Although much of the region had at least some potential for farming, the relatively nutrient-poor and drought-prone soils of the uplands of southern Arkansas and northern Louisiana had witnessed agricultural failures for decades and were generally avoided.³⁹ From 1910 to 1920, the population of Arkansas increased 11 percent while at the same time the total farm area increased by only 40,000 acres, or 0.1 percent—this when lumbering was near its peak and vast acreages were being cut every year.⁴⁰ The Crossett Lumber Company alone cleared about thirty-five acres a day during this period, pro-

³⁶Ibid., 54.

³⁷E. S. Vanatta, B. D. Gilbert, E. B. Watson, and A. H. Meyer, "Soil Survey of Ashley County, Arkansas," *Field Operations of the* [U.S. Department of Agriculture] *Bureau of Soils, 1913* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1916), 1191.

³⁸The Crossett Lumber Company even established a demonstration cattle farm to encourage the expansion of ranching in the region; Russell R. Reynolds, "The Crossett Story: The Beginnings of Forestry in Southern Arkansas and Northern Louisiana," *USDA Forest Service General Technical Report SO-32* (New Orleans: Southern Forest Experiment Station, 1980), 2-3; George W. Gray, "The Forest Lives On, Part II," *Forest Echoes* 14 (May 1954): 13-15. This article was taken from an original interview published in 1927 by the trade magazine *Business* and reprinted in the Crossett Lumber Company's magazine.

³⁹Vanatta et al., "Soil Survey of Ashley County," 1185-1219; Herman H. Chapman, "Prolonging the Cut of Southern Pine: Part I. Possibilities of a Second Cut," *Yale Forest School Bulletin* 2 (April 1913): 9.

⁴⁰J. R. Hamlen, "What Practical Forestry Can Do For Arkansas," in *Proceedings of the Seventh Southern Forestry Congress*, 18-22.

ducing over 10,000 acres of cutover timberlands annually. Obviously, few farmers took advantage of these opportunities.

George would not concede that the soil and climate of much of southern Arkansas were perfect for loblolly and shortleaf pine but often ill-suited to agriculture. In fact, farmers struggled to hold the pine forests back. William L. Hall, an early consulting forester in Arkansas, once observed:

Pass along a road today, and there a field is in cotton. Come along tomorrow, or, to be exact, two or three years later, and that field is fully set with pine trees. . . . From the viewpoint of the farmer a most dismaying sight. He doesn't love those pine trees that so quickly steal in on his land. . . . After seventy-five years of active warfare against the pines, it transpired that the greatest value of many of the south Arkansas farms was in the remnants of pine stands that had not been destroyed or else in the second growth that had come up on abandoned fields and pasture.⁴¹

Proponents of forest conservation had long tried to convince farmers that the agricultural and forest industries did not necessarily compete with each other for a finite land base, but rather that these enterprises were complementary since "agriculture shall use the better soils and leave to forestry the rougher lands and poorer soils unsuited to permanent agricultural use."⁴² Proper management of their timber offered farmers a means to supplement their earnings and diversify their sources of income by selling that timber.⁴³ Farmers were sometimes even employed in fire prevention and suppression efforts and given numerous educational opportunities and working examples of how to practice forestry. It was clear to most proponents that farmers had much to gain from forest conservation.⁴⁴ Accordingly, J. R. Hamlen, chairman of the Honorary Arkansas Forestry Committee, wrote:

⁴¹Hall, "Arkansas' Romance Reforestation," 233.

⁴²Bruner, "Forestry and Forest Fires in Arkansas," 10-11 (quotation); J. Frank Keeley, "Crossett, Ark., A Sawmill Town of a Different Type," in *Arkansas and Her Resources: Facts and Figures from Every County in Arkansas* (Little Rock: Little Rock Publishing, 1915), 19.

⁴³W. K. Williams, "The Forestry Situation in Arkansas," *Southern Lumberman* 121 (December 19, 1925): 162. Without providing the source of his statistics, J. R. Hamlen claimed that farmers consumed approximately one-half of all lumber produced and that in 1919 around 26,000 Arkansas farms sold \$8 million of forest products, generating an average income of about \$300 per farm; Hamlen, "What Practical Forestry Can Do," 18-22.

⁴⁴Williams, "Forestry Situation in Arkansas," 160-162.

The farmers of Arkansas who naturally make the largest part of her population and who will surely suffer or prosper, in proportion to the degree of productivity of their lands, have failed so far, undoubtedly due to educational neglect, to understand the importance of the earning capacity of timber growth upon their lands. This is an alarming situation for them to be in. If our forests are to be cut without replenishment, what is to prevent a great industrial depression in sections of the State which now depend almost wholly upon timber operations? Is there any other comparable activity suitable for quick and successful substitution? I know of none.⁴⁵

To advocates such as Hamlen, the pine lands of southern Arkansas were far better suited to grow trees than traditional crops, and perpetuating the timber industry was the best way to ensure the future of farming in this region.⁴⁶

The coexistence of farming and forestry should have been something George embraced, as he professed to “favor Forest Conservation for lands unsuited for cultivation, but against Forest Conservation on lands especially adapted to cultivation.”⁴⁷ Given that the timber companies were not interested in reforesting the hardwood-dominated bottom lands (and best agricultural soils) of the Mississippi Alluvial Plain in eastern Ashley County but rather the piney woods of the Gulf Coastal Plain, George must have had a broad definition of what constituted good farmland.

So why would a prominent citizen, with, presumably, plenty of business and community interests in keeping the manufacturing economy of this poor region alive, so actively and passionately oppose forest conservation? Determining motivations so far from the period, without the benefit of personal interaction, is very difficult. However, what is known about

⁴⁵Hamlen, “What Practical Forestry Can Do,” 20.

⁴⁶Hamlen’s sentiments were echoed by John W. Watzek, Jr., vice president of the Crossett Lumber Company, in a booklet published by the U.S. Forest Service: “It is not pleasant for any lumber company to look ahead to the time when it will not be able to give employment to people living in the community, and also, if this should happen, to the time when the general community prosperity will disappear. . . . The [Crossett Lumber Company] does not believe that timber should be grown on land that can be more profitably used for farming. The farmer is playing an important part in the welfare of the community at the present time, and he is destined to play a greater part in the future.” Watzek, “Working for a Perpetual Cut,” in *Growing Pine Timber for Profit in the South: Some Examples, Estimates, and Opinions by Lumbermen and Others* (Washington: USDA Forest Service, 1928), 10-11.

⁴⁷George, *Pine Tree Menace*, 34.

George’s life and that of rural Arkansas can go a long way toward identifying what might have inspired him.

Percy George could cite ample precedent in distrusting the intentions of timber corporations. For instance, in 1924 the Gates Lumber Company closed its pine sawmill in Wilmar in neighboring Drew County. A comparative boomtown of 2500 souls dependent on Gates for their livelihood, Wilmar was devastated when the mill suddenly shut down in the middle of the very day the company cut out its timber holdings. Faced with instant unemployment, families scrambled to find new jobs. The community was nearly abandoned in the aftermath. The principal investors in the Gates Lumber Company were largely the same group that operated Ashley County’s Crossett Lumber Company. They had certainly founded Crossett with the same intent—to purchase a large tract of virgin timber, log until the wood runs out, and then move on.⁴⁸ By the late 1920s, the Crossett Lumber Company was on the verge of cutting out their virgin timberlands. With this track record, it probably should not be surprising that George distrusted lumber companies.

It is also likely that George’s upbringing strongly influenced his pro-agricultural perspective. His father had been born and raised on farms in southern Arkansas prior to the Civil War, and the elder George had taken up the family farm after his brief period of schooling in Tennessee.⁴⁹ As a youth, Percy George benefited from his parents’ successful farming and mercantile operations, which undoubtedly helped color his view of the superiority of agriculture over timber-related enterprises.

The sectional antagonism that animated George’s critique is also understandable. Once again, family experiences may have inspired it—his grandparents farmed thousands of acres prior to the Civil War, a scale of operation that necessitated large numbers of slaves. George’s father had volunteered for the Confederacy in the latter half of 1861, when he was only fourteen, seeing action in Kentucky and Tennessee

⁴⁸Investors included the Gates brothers—P. G., A. H., C. W., and E. W. (“Cap”)—and E. S. Crossett, all of Iowa. The Gates Lumber Company was started in 1888 with 4000 acres of land along the Missouri Pacific branch line between Dermott and Warren, Arkansas. The Crossett Lumber Company was founded over a decade later after rail lines were extended to the newly constructed Crossett mill site. Rebecca DeArmond, *Old Times Not Forgotten: A History of Drew County* (Little Rock: Rose Publishing, 1980), 78-79; Corliss C. Curry, “Early Timber Operations in Southeast Arkansas,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 19 (Summer 1960): 111-118; O. H. “Doogie” Darling and Don C. Bragg, “The Early Mills, Railroads, and Logging Camps of the Crossett Lumber Company,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 67 (Summer 2008): 108-140.

⁴⁹*Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Southern Arkansas* (Chicago: Goodspeed Publishing Company, 1890), 901-902.

(including at Shiloh) before he was discharged for being too young. He reenlisted within a year after his first discharge and then served in the cavalry.⁵⁰ Many of the lumbering operations that purchased southern lands from northern speculators were, as George suggested, at least partially funded by other northern capitalists, and some were operated by northerners who moved down into the region.⁵¹ This thrust large numbers of Yankees into a population still traumatized by defeat and what they saw as the indignities of Reconstruction. Federal land policy in the South had also long been a source of tension. In the decades following the Civil War, punitive then exploitative approaches to the disposition of millions of acres of the public domain continuously frustrated southerners barred from participating in the profitable land speculation that followed the repeal of the Southern Homestead Act in 1876.⁵²

Most early foresters probably did little to dispel the notion of northern ignorance of southern customs and traditions. For the first decades of the twentieth century, only a handful of the trained foresters in the South were born and raised there. Most were Yankees educated in northern institutions of higher learning. A certain degree of disdain for (or at least a lack of cultural understanding of) many rural southerners is clear in the writings of some influential industrialists, conservationists, and foresters from this period, including Gifford Pinchot, considered the "father" of American forestry.⁵³

⁵⁰Ibid., 901. According to the slave schedule in the 1850 federal census, Percy George's grandparents Hosea and Altana George owned eighty-four slaves in Lapile Township in Union County, Arkansas. The recently widowed Altana listed forty-three slaves at her residence in Ashley County's Union Township in the 1860 schedule; Bobbie Jones McLane and Desmond Walls Allen, *1850 Census of Southern Arkansas: Ashley, Bradley, Clark, Dallas, Drew, Hempstead, Lafayette, Ouachita, Pike, Polk, Sevier, and Union Counties* (Conway, AR: Arkansas Research, 1995), 102-109; 1860 federal census slave schedule, www.ancestry.com (accessed June 26, 2010). For most large-scale southern farmers, the Civil War and Reconstruction proved to be hard times, but many (including the George family) survived this period in much better shape than the average citizen. Carl H. Moneyhon, "The Impact of the Civil War in Arkansas: The Mississippi River Plantation Counties," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 51 (Summer 1992): 105-118.

⁵¹Inman F. Eldredge, "Southern Forests, Then and Now," *Journal of Forestry* 50 (March 1952): 182; Gray, *Arkansas Forest History*.

⁵²Gates, "Federal Land Policy," 303-330.

⁵³Fickle, "Early Forestry in the South," 11-18; Herman H. Chapman, "Forest Fires and Forestry in the Southern States," *American Forestry* 18 (1912): 510-517; Eldredge, "Southern Forests," 182; Don C. Bragg, "A Taste of Sowbelly and Saleratus Biscuit: Gifford Pinchot's Arkansas Adventure," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 65 (Autumn 2006): 280.

In addition to sectional resentments, the fact that the Crossett Lumber Company and the company-owned city that sprung up around this large operation soon overtook George's hometown—the older, more established Hamburg—in both size and wealth probably also contributed to his negative attitude:

Investigate the conditions in the saw mill towns of your own acquaintances. Do the people own their own homes or have any control over the amount of wages they receive for the service they perform, are they not entirely dependent upon the whims of the saw mill owners for everything, are they not at the mercy of their bosses, must they not move at the beck and call of their Masters? Now do you believe any people can be a happy and contented people under these conditions?⁵⁴

Apparently, any parallels between the timber company-controlled towns and the practice of sharecropping on large agricultural holdings did not merit a mention by George. George freely admitted to owning "several thousand" acres of land, and, given his other business and professional interests, it seems unlikely he worked them himself.⁵⁵

There may also have been an economic motivation behind George's opposition to industrial forestry. Perhaps he did not want to compete with industrial forest owners for lands made available via tax delinquency or other economic hardships. He and his close friend Samuel J. Wilson (a brother of George's wife, Abbie) amassed thousands of acres of land in Ashley County in this manner prior to George's death in 1941.⁵⁶

Whatever his motivations, George's efforts to fend off the widespread implementation of forestry in southern Arkansas were ultimately unsuccessful. A 1930 report by E. Murray Bruner on the forest fire problem in Arkansas helped convince many reluctant individuals and organizations to support forest conservation legislation.⁵⁷ Other industrial leaders, including those from powerful railroad interests, also weighed in on the side of forest conservation. Railroads consumed large portions of timber in ties, bridges, pilings, fuel, and railcars, and

⁵⁴George, *Pine Tree Menace*, 32.

⁵⁵Ibid., 22.

⁵⁶Robert Pugh, interview with author, August 12, 2009, Portland, AR.

⁵⁷Lang, "Two Decades," 208-219.

many depended heavily on the hauling of logs, finished wood products, wood-based chemicals, and related passenger traffic.⁵⁸ Gradually, the Arkansas legislature established and funded a state forestry program to fight forest fires, reforest many acres of cleared land, and help private landowners learn how to properly manage their timberlands. Within a decade of the publication of *The Pine Tree Menace*, the fledgling Arkansas State Forestry Commission was adequately funded and staffed, and the timber industry, with the assistance of the USDA Forest Service's research branch, had become capable of sustainable forestry.⁵⁹

As colorful and outspoken as Percy George was, the epitaph offered by his fellow lawyers upon his death was remarkably low-key: "He was an able and successful practitioner."⁶⁰ By the time of his passing in January 1941, the United States was moving inexorably toward war and the lackluster economy of the previous decade was slipping into history. From their inception in the 1920s, government-sponsored forestry programs increasingly targeted farmers as valuable contributors to timber production across the country, as they often controlled the majority of forest.⁶¹ This extension program, coupled with efforts by the local timber industry, became increasingly successful. By 1939, it was claimed that "pine-tree banking" (an early form of sustainable forestry) had 6000 adherents among south Arkansas farmers and had converted over 1 million acres back to forests.⁶² This kind of cooperative effort made the large-scale public acquisition of private timberland

⁵⁸P. T. Cole, "What Permanent Forests Mean to the Railroads of Arkansas," *Journal of Forestry* 29 (April 1931): 572-574.

⁵⁹Samuel Lubell and Al Pollard, "Pine-Tree Bankers," *American Forests* 45 (December 1939): 594-596, 622; Lang, "Two Decades," 208-219; Don C. Bragg, "Learning the Hard Way: The Beginnings of Forest Service Research in Arkansas," *Journal of Forestry* 103 (July/August 2005): 248-254.

⁶⁰*Proceedings of the Forty-Fourth Annual Meeting of the Bar Association of Arkansas*, 150.

⁶¹Few people realize the role farmers play in timber production, but collectively they are the largest type of private forest owner in the United States. Few farmers cultivate every single acre of their land, and harvested timber can be a vital supplement to farm incomes. In his 1930 report, E. Murray Bruner stated that farmers owned 5.33 million acres of Arkansas timberlands—more than one-quarter of the privately owned forest at that time. Hamlen, "What Practical Forestry Can Do," 18-22; Joseph Hyde Pratt, "To What Extent Does the Farmer Control the Country's Future Timber Supply," in *Proceedings of the Tenth Southern Forestry Congress* (Raleigh, NC: Edwards & Broughton Company, 1928) 80-88; D. E. Lauderburn, "The Importance of Forestry on the Farm," *ibid.*, 67-79; Bruner, "Forestry and Forest Fires in Arkansas," 11-12.

⁶²Lubell and Pollard, "Pine-Tree Bankers," 622.

called for by the Copeland Report of 1933 unnecessary.⁶³ Rather than stripping farmers of their homes and lands, by the late 1930s federal agencies were providing small loans to poor Arkansas farmers to use timber from their own farms to construct improved housing units. On a grander scale, the forests of the South soon played a substantial role in the American war effort, and the timber industry dominates the economy of southern Arkansas to this day.⁶⁴

⁶³In 1932, Sen. Royal S. Copeland of New York called for a report on the state of forestry in America, which was supervised by Earle H. Clapp, then in charge of the U.S. Forest Service's Branch of Research. A two-volume, 1677 page report entitled *A National Plan for American Forestry* was issued the next year, calling for the public acquisition of 224 million acres of private timberland to ensure "proper" management and to protect the natural resources found on those lands. Vocal opposition from many in the timber industry, private landowners, and foresters helped limit the implementation of this plan, but the Copeland Report did contribute to the evolution of public forest policy, especially during Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. Earle H. Clapp, "Major Proposals of the Copeland Report," *Journal of Forestry* 32 (February 1934): 174-195; Alfred Gaskill, "Whither Forestry?" *ibid.*, 196-201; Austin Cary, "A Defense of Private Forest Ownership," *Journal of Forestry* 33 (December 1935): 964-967; Albert Edward Wackerman, "Some Aspects of the Proposed Public Monopoly of Forestry," *ibid.*, 968-970; Harold K. Steen, *The U.S. Forest Service: A History* (1976; reprint, Durham, NC: Forest History Society, 2004).

⁶⁴Frank J. Hallauer, "New Farm Homes for the Building," *American Forests* 46 (March 1940): 115-117, 139; E. L. Demmon, "The South's Forest Frontier and the War," *Social Forces* 21 (May 1943): 397-405.