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Lumbering file

Oconto's 'Mr. Trees'

# Jim McCurdie Had a Part in Slashing Of Forests, Helps Them Grow Again

By NELL SHELLMAN  
Special to Press-Gazette  
OCONTO FALLS, Wis. —

The history of the forests in Oconto County and the life story of James McCurdie of Oconto Falls run a close parallel. Without doubt, McCurdie is one of the best authorities on forests alive today, for he spent his entire life working in them.

He was born in the Town of Oconto, not too far from the then very thriving lumber mill town of Stiles. His first job was that of "cookee," or first assistant to the cool for the Eldred Lumber Co. at the lumber camp on Boot Lake. He made the trip up there on the supply sled run by the late John Johnson.

### Three-Day Trip

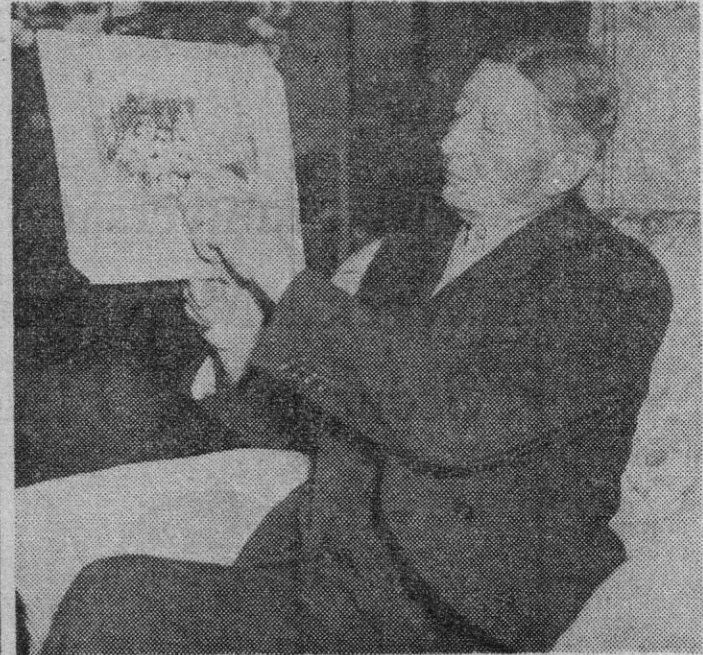
The trip took three days and was a rugged experience for the 16-year-old lad. The first night found them at Arveson's south of Suring. It would be difficult today to trace that trail from Stiles, through Oconto Falls, and over the rough trails north.

By the end of the second day they had gotten to a point near the highway crossing of the Oconto River above Mountain, and the third evening found them in camp.

Other men from this area at the camp that winter were the late James Hoar, Levi Lane, Barney Flatley and Sandy Patterson.

McCurdie told of the trading post at Boot Lake, which was daily visited by the Indians of this northern area. From 20 to 30 would come in each day over the ice of the lakes with their rabbits, furs and other articles to sell, piled on a "drag" fashioned with two birch poles.

McCurdie received \$20 per month for his work. He peeled potatoes, washed dishes and set the table. It was also his job to call the lumberjacks and get them to the table on time. Teamsters and other workers received as high as a dollar to a dollar and a quarter a day, plus lodgings and food, of course.



**Forest's Friend**—James McCurdie, Oconto Falls, displays a faded photograph of a load of logs harvested during the days lumbering was a booming industry in Oconto County. Once a participant in the tremendous tree harvest, McCurdie has become an enthusiast and ardent conservationist.

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**MC CURDIE WORKED** for the Eldred, Holt, Jones, and Oconto companies, and his entire life was spent in the woods. Perhaps few people have realized more graphically what might be termed the "evolution" of our forests. His work made him a participant in the ruthless waste of our trees, and then an ardent helper in the reforestation of areas which once grew trees and could be made to do so again.

It was during the early days of the depression that conservation came into its own, and McCurdie was one who supervised tree planting at the CCC Camp at Mountain.

When large acreages of cut-over land reverted to Oconto County for delinquent taxes, this tree planting project was broadened and he was the logical man to take over. The first planting is a stand of jack pines in Machickanee Forest just south of Stiles, a "pet" area of McCurdie's. for these

The 5,980 acres in the South Branch Forest lie in the Town of Breed. Peshtigo Brook Forest is in the Towns of Bagley and Brazeau and boasts 22,120 acres. The 2,720 acres in the Oconto Forest of Pensaukee and Oconto Townships brings the project to a total of nearly 42,000 acres.

**Given a few more years of growth and plantings, Oconto County again may become the tree crowned tract it was before Lumber was King.**

Although he cannot take an active part in the conservation program now, it is a certainty that Jim McCurdie will never lose his interest in trees, what they mean to our country's economy, and last but not least, its natural beauty.

His career in the woods has given Jim McCurdie very interesting and happy memories. He is fairly active and he and his wife are enjoying life. They look forward to the letters and visits from their son and two daughters. Both drive, and nice weather and good roads often find them

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**AT THIS PERIOD** when lumbering was the chief occupation and source of income, the companies were taking only the white pine. If a large tree was felled and discovered to have a hole in the center, it was left to rot.

The logs would be cut only to the first branches. The three to four foot stump and all the top was left waste, and often became bone dry to spread forest fires during drought.

**McCurdie well recalls the old Indian burying ground that lay between the camp and the trading post, now entirely disappeared.**

McCurdie was married to Miss Mabel Colburn in October 1902, the year he "graduated" to the job of camp foreman of the George Temple Lumber Co. This entailed the job of hiring crews.

#### **Wanted Free Rides**

He made many trips to various cities and would start back with quite a group. However, he would feel lucky if he lost only about 20 per cent on the way. Men would take advantage of the free transportation to get to other places than the lumber camp.

One of the big jobs was to combat liquor problems, for drink sent many a well educated man to the woods. These men would often accumulate several hundred dollars in pay and then go to the saloons and not return until it was all spent. During the war, draft

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When large acreages of cut-over land reverted to Oconto County for delinquent taxes, this tree planting project was broadened and he was the logical man to take over. The first planting is a stand of jack pines in Machickanee Forest just south of Stiles, a "pet" area of McCurdie's, for these trees have grown to a height of 20 to 30 feet in 20 years or so.

McCurdie broke a hip and underwent surgery about a year ago, and has had to quit planting trees, but his favorite drive is out to Machickanee or one of the county-planted forests in the northern section of Oconto County.

#### **Mother for Forests**

He was one of the first to realize that one tree left to an acre would have mothered a reforestation plan in Nature's way. Utilization of second grade lumber would have done much for our national resources.

A tree is something pretty wonderful, and a forest of beautiful trees is a real treasure on earth.

And with this writer, McCurdie shares a still more wonderful dream — a wild game refuge called Machickanee Forest. To those who really value what game means to this section of Wisconsin, that is not just sentiment but calls for a crusade to make it a fact.

**IT IS A SOURCE** of great satisfaction to Jim McCurdie that there are trees growing again on acres which were burned and cutover to the point of utter desolation.

Machickanee Forest has 8,840 acres in the towns of Abrams and Morgan. The Bay Shore Forest in the Town of Little River is 2,240 acres.

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