
Swift Berry

“A Man to Match Our Mountains”

by Phil Berry

In the history of logging in the Sierra Nevada mountains perhaps no one stands taller than Swift Berry. We share with you here part of the history of this giant of a man.

This article is about my grandfather, Swift Berry. He was a very significant leader and innovator in lumbering and forestry in California. It is good to pause and remember him because it is hundred and one years since the publication in 1917 of his pioneering book *Lumbering in the Sugar and Yellow Pine Region of California*. This book transformed the lumber industry in California.

Swift came from a very humble beginning. He was born in 1887 in a sod house on a homestead in Nebraska. His parents were homesteaders. Homesteaders could become the owner of government property if they lived on the Homestead and farmed it for seven years. It was a very hard, uncomfortable and lonely life for his parents. Sod houses were very damp and unhealthy in the harsh Nebraska winters. While Swift was still a young boy both of his parents died. Because he was then an orphan, he and his younger brother had to live with his grandmother.

When he was in high school he got a job skidding logs with horses to a sawmill in Deadwood, South Dakota.

In 1905 the United States Forest Service was created by the federal government. Prior to 1905, federal forest holdings had been called forest reserves and managed by the General Land Office. February 1, 1905 was the date of the transfer and it can be said to be the date of the start of the Forest Service. When the formation of the Forest Service was announced Swift applied for a job. He was the best applicant and got the job, even though he was only 18 years old. Swift's employment began on the first day the Forest

Service came into existence. Swift was soon promoted to Assistant Forest Ranger. He was given his own Ranger District, about 200 square miles in size, the Little Spearfish District.

In September he took an examination and was appointed a permanent District Ranger. Shortly after that the Forest Service got around to adopting regulations governing Forest Service employment. The regulations prohibited employing anyone under age 21. So, Swift was out of a job. But this turned out to be a fortunate event which changed his whole life.

Apparently, Seth Bullock, the Forest supervisor of the Black Hills National Forest, felt sorry for him because he had been their best employee. Bullock had been a Captain in President Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders. He was a close friend of the president.

Bullock appealed to Teddy Roosevelt to see if he could get a scholarship for Swift at the Biltmore School of Forestry in North Carolina. This was a college level school. It was the first college teaching forestry in the United States and even proceeded the forestry schools at Yale and Cornell. Bullock's efforts worked, Swift got the scholarship.

Upon his graduation, now being 21, Swift was hired by the Forest Service in Washington DC. In 1908 the forest service administration was decentralized and a regional headquarters was established in San Francisco. He was transferred to the newly established District 5 headquarters in San Francisco. District 5 administers all the national forests in California. The staff was very small in those days. Each person had many different duties. Among his duties was traveling throughout California to visit sawmills and logging operations to make Logging Time Studies and Mill-Scale Studies.

The Forest Service asked Swift to write a book to assist persons in establishing and operating sawmills in California. As the Forest Service requested, he put the knowledge he had gained into his book.

The book is an amazing 99 page document. It covered every aspect that a person would need to know to start a logging and sawmill operation in the Sierras. It covered everything from what size timber to cut to how to go about cutting it. It went into detail about the number of employees which would be required and how much to pay them. It even got down to such minor details as to how many pints of kerosene a day a log faller would need to lubricate a saw when falling trees. The book was very popular and was used to establish many sawmills in the Sierras. It is considered such an important historical document, that in 2006, a forest historian, John Nichols, decided to republish it in its original format. The republication sold out rapidly. Nichols made arrangements for the book to continue to be available from a print on demand publisher, Red Tail Publishing, telephone (530) 378-0722. The cost is reasonable.

In 1924 Swift went to work as a Forester for the Michigan California Lumber Company in Camino, California. It was a major lumber company owning more than 85,000 acres of timber with a large sawmill and railroad operation. He immediately put Michigan Cal onto a sustained yield policy. At the time this was a radical idea—only harvesting as much timber in a year as you could grow in your forests in a year. That way the lumber company would be able to continue indefinitely. He also set up various strategies to increase timber production.

In 1930 he became the general manager of Michigan Cal. During his tenure Michigan Cal was known as a leader in practicing and encouraging the most advanced methods of forest management. The company thrived during the depression of the 1930s, a time when a great many sawmills went bankrupt.

In 1933, at Swift's suggestion, Michigan Cal donated 4400 acres to the University of California to serve as a field laboratory for its forestry school. This resulted in the formation of the Blodgett Research Forest. Even today, the Blodgett Forest remains a key foundation for research into a wide spectrum of forest and environmental issues.

Swift worked tirelessly to encourage other lumber operations to adopt his ideas. One of the things he did was to found the Amador El Dorado Forest Forum in 1941. The organization held monthly meetings where foresters, loggers, lumber company executives, state and federal foresters and anyone else interested could get together and exchange ideas. The Forest Forum was such a successful organization that it continues today, 76 years after its founding.

Swift continued his efforts to improve forestry and lumbering as president of the Western Pine Association for two years in 1939 and 1940. He was president of the Pacific Division of the National Association of Wooden Box Shook Makers in 1947, 1948 and 1949. He was a member of the executive committee of the National Lumber Manufacturers Association in 1948 and 1949. He served seven years on the California State Board of Forestry.

Swift retired from Michigan Cal in 1949. However, he was not through with his efforts to improve forestry. In 1952 he was elected a State Senator to the California legislature from Amador and El Dorado counties. He was selected as chairman of the Natural Resources Committee of the Senate. There he strove to accomplish legislation improving forest practices. He retired from the Senate in 1960.

A stone monument has been erected on Broadway Street in Placerville honoring Swift. The inscription on the monument describes him as "A Man to Match Our Mountains".

An Added Bonus to Giving

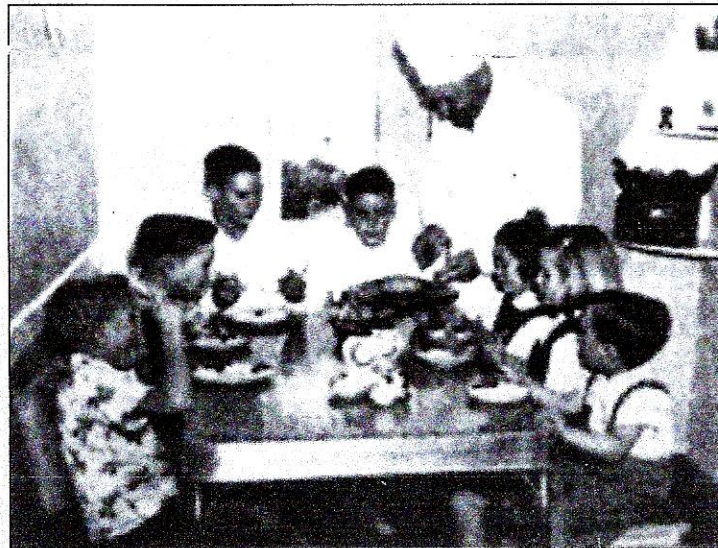
For those of you who had supported the museum financially by being sponsors, and or donors, we gratefully thank you. For those who help sponsor or donate to the museum at \$100.00 or more, they will receive a Sponsor window sticker and recognition at the Jamboree. For those who sponsor the museum at the \$500.00, level will receive a Silver Sponsor Window Sticker, recognition at the Jamboree, as well as in our next newsletter, and ad space (business card size). Those who sponsor the museum at \$1000.00 or more will receive a Gold Sponsor Window Sticker, recognition at our Jamboree, recognition in the

next newsletter as well as larger ad space for your business.

Volunteer Search

We are continually looking for those people who could afford two or more hours a month to volunteer with a great crew at the museum. We are looking for those to participate in light work like blowing parking lot and displays, and grounds work as needed. If you like to welcome and meet people, we offer training to be a docent, but even if you are just looking to join a fun group with a worthwhile cause, please contact us. We would love to have you join our team.

Grandpa Swift Berry Host, Cook, Headwaiter



Grandpa Swift Berry acts as host, as cook and as headwaiter for his seven grandchildren at their Christmas turkey in 1952. The names of the seven grandchildren are, from left to right: Joe K. Berry, John R. Berry, Phil Berry, Billy Swift Berry, sons of consulting forester Wm. B. Berry and his wife Barbara Bingamon

Berry in Placerville, CA; Sarah Cannon Dickinson, daughter of Betty Louise Berry and her husband Professor Roland Dickinson in Gainesville, FL; Printha Berry, Roger Swift Berry, daughter and son of lumbersalesman Jack Berry and his wife Georgia Wales Berry in Sacramento, CA.