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Article Summary: Bessey's dedication and perseverance led to dramatic changes in the nation's forest conservation policies. His efforts culminated in the creation of the Nebraska National Forest, the preservation of the Calaveras Big Trees and the establishment of the Appalachian forest reserve to protect eastern watersheds.

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Photographs / Images: Charles E Bessey; the Reverend Charles S Harrison; Ezra F Stephens; President Theodore Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot on a Mississippi River voyage; Big Trees, Calaveras, California, saved from loggers by Bessey and his colleagues

THE AMERICAN GREEN OF CHARLES BESSEY

By THOMAS R. WALSH

THEN GOD SAID, 'Let us make man in our image and likeness to rule the fish in the sea, the birds of the heaven, the cattle, all wild animals on earth, and all reptiles that crawl upon the earth.' So God created man in his own image; in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase, fill the earth and subdue it, rule over the fish in the sea, the birds of heaven, and every living thing that moves upon the earth.' God also said, 'I give you all plants that bear seed everywhere on earth, and every tree bearing fruit which yields seed: they shall be yours for food. All green plants I give for food to the wild animals, to all the birds of heaven and to all reptiles on earth, every living creature.' So it was; and God saw all that he had made, and it was good.

— Genesis 1:26-31¹

The story of the creation of man is pivotal in understanding Western man. Created in the image and likeness of God, given absolute power over all living creatures and plants, Western man has tended to view himself situated only one notch below the angels in the Almighty's scheme of creation. Is it any wonder that Western man, and Americans in particular, feel little compulsion to conserve and use wisely the gifts of nature? The tale of conquest and the blatant rape of nature is a depressing but redundant chapter in the history of the United States. Long before today's doomsday prophets arrived on the scene, however, a few enlightened individuals viewed the prostrate hulk of nature with horror. Determined to put the "green" back into the cheeks of mother nature, the early conservationists were men of vision and great persistence. Theirs is a story to inspire the hearts of Americans in the life and death struggle for

survival today. More importantly, the lessons to be learned from their labors must not be wasted as we begin anew in the effort to ensure a quality life for every citizen.

The giants of the conservation movement were colorful men like Theodore Roosevelt, who captured the hearts and imaginations of Americans as he stood up to the monstrous trusts in defense of the principles of conservation, and Gifford Pinchot of Pennsylvania, who will always be remembered for his unending fight to protect America's forest lands. Nebraskans take special pride in honoring the memory of J. Sterling Morton, a former chief executive of the territory, Secretary of Agriculture to President Grover Cleveland, and the founder of Arbor Day. Perhaps a name that is not so well known is that of Charles E. Bessey, long-time professor of botany at the University of Nebraska, and the "father" of the Nebraska National Forest.

THE NEBRASKA NATIONAL FOREST

Charles Bessey was an Ohioan by birth. He was raised on a farm in Milton Township, Wayne County, Ohio. It was on his father's farm that Bessey became intimately acquainted with nature. Bessey's love for nature did not border on the maudlin but was rooted in a deep appreciation of the complexities and the beauties of nature. He was a true Jeffersonian in the sense that he believed man possessed a moral character that was sharpened by a close and continuous contact with nature. "What boy breathing the pure air of the country," he once asked, "is not fired by the ambition to be best in something?"² He loved the study of botany, not because of its commercial usefulness but because it allowed students to see plants as a great diverse group of living things with gradations from the simplest to the most complex. "Such a knowledge of the plants of the world makes the pupil a broader and more intelligent man, for to him Nature is not a chaos of unrelated forms, but a most orderly arrangement of related organisms."³ Bessey dismissed as "cheap sentimentalism" the unscientific approach to nature study.⁴

Upon coming to the University of Nebraska in 1884, Professor Bessey found himself in a virgin natural laboratory.

*Charles E. Bessey (1845-1915)
carried the gospel of conservation
and reforestation to all sections
of the United States.*



Within a few years Professor Bessey's botany students were scouring the state gathering data relating to the flora of Nebraska. Dr. Bessey and his "boys" turned out publication after publication describing and cataloguing Nebraska flora. The most ambitious of these projects was the Botanical Survey of Nebraska undertaken in 1892 by the Botanical Seminar of the University under the gentle guidance of Dr. Bessey. During those early excursions, Professor Bessey became enchanted with the Sandhill region of Nebraska. He was convinced that the moist soil of the Sandhills would support forest growth. In 1887, Bessey was named to a joint committee consisting of members from the State Horticultural Society and the State Board of Agriculture, to petition the state legislature to set aside tracts of land for tree planting in the Sandhills.⁵ The petition fell upon deaf ears, but the idea was firmly fixed in Bessey's mind.

In January, 1891, Dr. B. E. Fernow, Director of the Division of Forestry of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, gave a series of lectures at the University of Nebraska. Excited about the future work in forestry that Fernow described, Professor Bessey

took Dr. Fernow aside and convinced him that a forestry experiment in the Sandhills was desirable. Upon his return to Washington, Dr. Fernow wrote Bessey that he should like to start an experiment in the Sandhills using ponderosa pine. Fernow explained that he had an offer of pine seedlings from a grower named Harrison of Franklin, Nebraska, but that due to a lack of funds he needed some land and free labor to begin the experiment. Bessey was asked to locate a tract of Sandhill land and to solicit free labor.⁶ Frantically, Professor Bessey paced the corridors of old Nebraska Hall wondering how he could possibly meet Fernow's request. Finally, he consulted with his colleague Lawrence Bruner, professor of entomology and a native Nebraskan. Much to Bessey's amazement, Professor Bruner told him that he and his brother owned some land in southwestern Holt County, on the edge, of the Sandhill country.⁷ Soon the arrangements were made, and a contract was drawn up between the Division of Forestry and Hudson Bruner of Swan Lake, Nebraska. The division agreed to furnish the plant material and Bruner agreed to furnish the land and labor. The management of the forestry plantation was to remain under the control of the Division of Forestry for five years.⁸

The experiment began in the spring of 1891 and was expanded to test the adaptability of various conifers in the Sandhills. Plants were shipped to Nebraska from different locations and placed in four 100 x 24 yard lots laid out on a hill of medium slope. Each of the plots was treated differently, and by October, 1892, 13,500 plants had been handled in the experiment.⁹ By the end of 1892, the planting was concluded and the plantation was considered secure. Dr. Fernow was able to report to the secretary of agriculture "that in the sand-hill region of Nebraska coniferous growth, especially of pines planted closely, is the proper method and material."¹⁰ Unfortunately the Division of Forestry lacked sufficient funds to pursue the forest-planting experiment any further, and the matter was dropped.

For Charles Bessey the issue was simple. Nebraska needed trees for shade, for protection, for wood, for conservation of moisture, and for beauty.¹¹ The need for trees was not a luxury in Bessey's view. His task became one of educating Nebraskans to the necessity of foresting the Sandhills. Perhaps no person

was better suited to perform that job than Bessey, for he was indefatigable once his mind was set to the task. In addressing a football rally in 1899 while serving as acting chancellor, Bessey told the student body that it took courage and endurance to bring about victory: "A young man often starts out in life with the idea that if he could only stand on a stage high enough and prominent enough he would sway the world. But the world is a most conservative thing," he admonished, "and it is not easily swayed."¹² On another occasion Bessey stated that he was inspired by the life of General Ulysses S. Grant because "he taught us that the man who never gives up cannot be beaten."¹³ Students of Bessey received heavy doses of the Bessey formula for success. "You can bring about any change in time," he told D. E. Alton Saunders, "but if you try to do too much at once you are likely to fail."¹⁴ So it was that the gentle and patient botany professor set out to accomplish the impossible.

In the "Seventh Annual Report of the Botanist" to the State Board of Agriculture, Dr. Bessey included "A Suggestion As to State Forests." In his suggestions Bessey enclosed a proposal to forest large tracts of land in the Sandhills as a profitable venture for the state. The soil of Nebraska, he said, was a source of great wealth. Forests in Nebraska would bring from the depths of the soil more hidden treasure.¹⁵ The following year, 1893, Bessey reported on the "Reforestation of the Sand Hills." He described the success of the experiment in Holt County and stated that he believed that western pine was endemic to the Sandhill region. Prodding the state board, he asserted that it would be appropriate "if the same body which gave to America the idea of Arbor Day—a day dedicated to the planting of trees—a day set aside as sacred to trees and tree planting—should also start the great project of again covering the central plains with a protective mantle of forests."¹⁶

In 1894 in the "Ninth Annual Report of the Botanist," Bessey attacked the notion that the Sandhill region was a desert. Pointing out that the Sandhills give rise to many streams and to all branches and tributaries of the Loup River, he offered evidence to show that the area was once covered by a pine forest that was destroyed by prairie fires. Professor Bessey concluded his report by expressing his faith that the people of

Nebraska would accomplish the task of reforestation. At this juncture the nature of Bessey's proposal took on a new dimension. Since much of the Sandhills was public domain, he recommended that the federal government reserve huge tracts of land for forests. He further proposed that the forest reserves be enclosed to keep out cattle and better prevent forest fires and that hearty trees be planted and closely supervised by competent men.¹⁷ Bessey's plan to create national forest reserves was truly an advanced concept for the time. The federal government had set aside a few forest reserves, but they were under the control of the Department of Interior and were not attended to in any way. It was not until 1897, when President Cleveland set aside 21,000,000 acres of forested land, that a use and protection policy began to evolve.¹⁸ The idea of the federal government reserving huge areas of nonforested public domain and then converting it into forest reserves was completely novel.

As the years went by, Charles Bessey watched the attack of lumbermen on American forests with great agony. "We have been so accustomed in this country to cutting away forests, that we are yet scarcely able to seriously think of growing forests," he told members of the State Horticultural Society in 1897. Issuing a poignant plea for the reforestation of the Sandhills, Bessey beseeched the membership of the society to start "to think of the ease with which we may make a forest."¹⁹ Again in the "Report of the Botanist" for 1899, Bessey called for the creation of national forest reserves in the Sandhills.²⁰

Suddenly the years of Bessey's importuning showed signs of promise. A few residents of the Sandhills began to exhibit an interest in the possibilities of foresting the region. In December, 1900, T. C. Jackson, of Purdum, Nebraska, wrote to the Department of Agriculture suggesting a plan for tree growing in the Sandhills. William L. Hall, the assistant superintendent for tree planting in the department, responded by saying that he had been interested for some time in testing the tree growing potential of the Sandhill vicinity. Hall asked if Jackson thought it feasible to establish a reservation to conduct such an experiment. Jackson immediately informed Bessey of his correspondence with Hall, and asked for Bessey's assistance.²¹ Armed with the Jackson-Hall correspondence, Professor Bessey wasted little time in presenting a resolution before the State

Park and Forestry Association expressing support for a reforestation project in the Sandhills.²² Two months later Assistant Superintendent Hall informed Dr. Bessey that the Division of Forestry would make a study of timber growing conditions in Nebraska with special attention being given to the Sandhill region.²³

Professor Bessey was ecstatic over the decision to survey the state for timber-growth capability. He arranged for a botanist from the University to accompany the government party. In his enthusiasm he wrote to George W. Holdrege, general manager of the Burlington and Missouri Railroad, requesting a pass for Hall to travel the state freely in his business. He explained to Holdrege that "if we can have the general Government inaugurate several forest plantations of considerable extent in this state it will be of the greatest value ultimately."²⁴ Working diligently, Bessey helped push through a resolution at the summer meeting of the State Horticultural Society, urging the establishment of government reserves in the Sandhills.²⁵ In September, 1901, Bessey requested Governor Ezra P. Savage of Nebraska to use his influence with the Nebraska congressional delegation to advocate the creation of a Sandhills forest reservation.²⁶ The governor replied that he would do all he could to advance the idea.²⁷

When the Bureau of Forestry reported favorably upon the forest growing capabilities of the Sandhills, Professor Bessey pressed his attack with greater fervor. The State Horticultural Society, the State Board of Agriculture, the State Park and Forestry Association, and the Nebraska Academy of Sciences all approved Bessey resolutions calling for the creation of Sandhill reserves, and exhorted the Nebraska congressional delegation to do all in its power to bring this about. As the plans were hammered out in Washington, the Bureau of Forestry finally selected three areas for reserves in Cherry, in Thomas, and in Grant and Arthur counties. In a letter to Gifford Pinchot, Bessey expressed his hearty approval of the three sites. With the rapid disappearance of natural forests, he wrote Pinchot, it was imperative for the government to establish reserves in various localities to protect the future timber supply:

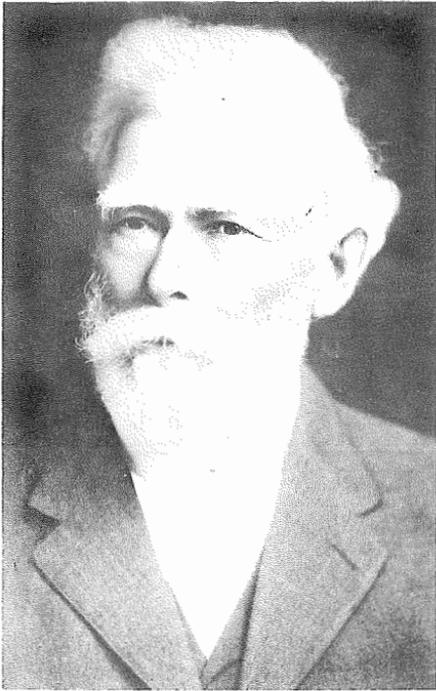
It is manifestly impossible to secure without too great expense any considerable tracts in the settled portions of the prairies, or the regions eastward. In the Sandhills

we have a region which has been shown to be adapted to the growth of coniferous forest trees, and here we can now secure large tracts which are not yet owned by private parties. For these reasons it seems imperative that the reserves be made at once, in order that the control of the land may not forever pass away from the Government.²⁸

Bessey explained the situation in a similar manner to President Theodore Roosevelt. The national government would have to take steps to provide for the nation's future timber needs, Bessey wrote. The Rocky Mountain reserves alone were not enough, he stated, and reserves must be created in the interior. Bessey concluded his letter by cautioning the President not to delay since the lands could pass into private hands.²⁹ Gifford Pinchot was delighted with Bessey's letter to the President. "You have put the matter with such great force," Pinchot wrote, "that I believe your letter will have very decided influence in obtaining the reserves."³⁰

Realizing that his long-held dream was close to reality, Professor Bessey pushed relentlessly. He conferred with Governor Savage on January 27, 1902, and received the governor's enthusiastic pledge to support the movement for the Sandhill reserves. In Bessey's presence the governor even dictated a letter concerning the matter to President Roosevelt.³¹ On February 10, Bessey wrote letters to Ezra F. Stephens, a prominent Crete nursery operator, to the Rev. Charles S. Harrison, president of the State Park and Forestry Association, and to C. H. Barnard, secretary of the State Horticultural Society. He asked each of these men to write to Gifford Pinchot stating why the people of Nebraska wanted the establishment of forest reserves in the Sandhills. Make the letter as strong as you can, he advised them, and 'write it in such a way that he (Pinchot) can show it to people who have influence in Washington.'³²

The struggle was over by early spring 1902. President Theodore Roosevelt set aside two reserves totaling 206,028 acres on April 16.³³ The Dismal River Reserve in Thomas County, later to be named the Bessey Division of Nebraska National Forest in honor of Dr. Bessey, and the Niobrara Reserve in Cherry County were established by Presidential proclamation authorized under Section 24 of a Congressional Act of March 3, 1891.³⁴ This was the first and only instance in which the federal government removed non-forested public domain from settlement to create a man-made forest reserve.



The Rev. Charles S. Harrison of York (left) and Ezra F. Stephens of Crete were allies of Charles Bessey in working for a National Forest in the Sandhills.

The Nebraska National Forest is an anomaly in the busy complex world of the twentieth century. How odd it seems that near the geographic center of our materialistic culture men have built a sanctuary for the things of nature! Paradoxically, while Americans were experiencing an era of phenomenal economic growth and ravaging the fruits of nature, a handful of men led by a kindly botany professor were able to stake out a small claim for nature. It was not the intention of Professor Bessey to lock up nature's bounties forever. Like Gifford Pinchot, he believed in "the use of natural resources for the greatest good of the greatest number for the longest time."³⁵ Bessey also wanted to demonstrate that man could build a technological society without permanently scarring the delicate tissues of nature. As a scientist Bessey realized that man was a part of the intricate web of nature. In nature he saw the workings of a cosmic force far greater than the powers of man. For as he explored the mysteries of nature, Bessey came to understand

that he could never answer *why*, only *how*, and this left him with a sense of reverence that is so desperately needed today.

THE CALAVERAS BIG TREES

Professor Bessey's mission to spread the gospel of conservation did not begin or end with the Nebraska National Forest movement. His fight to prevent the 'mutilation of nature was a lifelong venture. He despised the money makers who abused nature for profit. When special interest groups tried to have Congress suspend President Cleveland's order to reserve 21,000,000 acres of western forest lands in 1898, Bessey wrote letters to both the Nebraska and Iowa congressional delegations. He warned that if the forests were laid waste streams would be destroyed and the Great Plains would have floods in the spring and droughts in the summer.³⁶ Senator John Thurston of Nebraska scoffed at Bessey's fears, and told him that the reservations contained large sections of non-timbered land and needed to be reopened for settlement.³⁷ In a tone nearing anger Bessey replied to Thurston that the few areas suitable for settlement in the reservation were not worth risking the possibility of forested land falling into the hands of speculators. Dr. Bessey wrote to the Senator:

We have been unwise, as you well know, in throwing open practically everything to settlement. This country has retained very little for itself, and when a reservation of land is made with the intention of protecting forests we ought not look to the little tracts which may be used for other purposes, and, because of these little tracts, wish to expose the forests to destruction. Such a policy is really an instance of the old adage 'Penny wise, and pound foolish'.³⁸

A partial victory was achieved in this case when the lands were kept in reserves but opened to licensed cutting under the control of the Department of Interior.³⁹

In April, 1902, Bessey was elected to the board of managers of the newly formed Wild Flower Preservation Society of America. In accepting the office Bessey stated that he had witnessed the wanton destruction of beautiful wild flowers near Pike's Peak, Colorado, for many summers and that he welcomed the formation of a wild flower preservation group.⁴⁰ Exhibiting the same patience that he showed in the fight to reforest the Sandhills, Bessey did not enter into ostentatious campaigns to save wild flowers. Instead, the earnest professor tried to keep

the name of the organization before the public so that society might realize that a group did exist to preserve wild flowers. It means something to an abusive teamster that there is a humane society to prevent cruelty to animals, he explained to Professor Stanley Coulter; likewise, he felt the vandal tourist needed to be aware of the Wild Flower Society for the protection of wild plants.⁴¹ Coulter and the Wild Flower Preservation Society received their first lesson in the Bessey doctrine that patience and perseverance can move mountains.

While trying to prevent the vandal tourist from destroying wild flowers, Dr. Bessey was inevitably drawn into the struggle to save the *sequoia gigantea* of the California Sierras. "The Big Trees," first cousins of the coastal redwoods, were located in only ten isolated groves on the west slopes of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. In 1900 only one of the ten groves was completely protected; the other groves were owned wholly or partially by private owners, usually lumbermen. Forty logging mills were at work solely on the Big Trees in 1900. The logging methods used by these companies were so crude that one-half of the volume of lumber of each tree was wasted by the time of final processing.⁴² The destruction was appalling as the groves were laid waste. Two of the most beautiful groves of Big Trees are located in Calaveras County and Tuolumne County, California. They were called the Mammoth Tree Grove and the South Park Grove of Big Trees. The Calaveras groves were privately owned and, with the exception of one giant tree that was felled in 1853, the majestic groves remained untouched. On March 8, 1900, a resolution was approved by Congress calling for the secretary of interior to enter into negotiations for the procurement of the Calaveras groves. The secretary found the owner willing to sell, but at an exorbitant profit. Secretary of Interior E. A. Hitchcock recommended that the Congress take the groves through the power of eminent domain.⁴³ The Congress chose not to act, and there the matter rested.

The Outdoor Art League of California became one of the principal lobbyists on behalf of the Calaveras Big Trees, and endeavored to have legislation passed by the federal government to buy and protect the groves. In 1903, Mrs. Lovell White, chairman of the Calaveras Big Tree Committee of the Outdoor Art League, contacted Dr. Bessey and asked for his support to

secure the desired legislation. Bessey had visited the Calaveras groves while he was a visiting lecturer in botany at the University of California in the 1870's. He assured Mrs. White that he was "keenly alive" to the dangers of destruction to the groves, and he promised to aid in the efforts to petition President Roosevelt for their protection.⁴⁴ Three weeks later Bessey informed Mrs. White that the matter of the Calaveras Big Trees had come before the annual meeting of the botany section of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and that it was referred to a committee of which he was chairman. The committee recommended, he said, that all botanists use their influence with their congressional delegations to save the trees.⁴⁵

The fight was on, the lumber interests *versus* the conservationists, and Professor Bessey entered the ring with the same gusto that he had shown in the Sandhill struggle. His strategy was to punch away steadily at his adversary, never showing any signs of tiring or weakening. On January 21, 1904, Bessey introduced a resolution to the State Horticultural Society calling for the preservation of the Calaveras Big Trees whose "destruction would be a great loss to the world of science as well as to all men and women who have regard for the wonders of Nature."⁴⁶ The resolution passed, and one week later Bessey sent a copy of it to each member of the Nebraska congressional delegation, reminding them that "the President himself has realized the great desirability of saving these remnants of an all but extinct group of great trees."⁴⁷ When Nebraska Congressman John J. McCarthy of Ponca informed Bessey that the bill to save the trees had little chance of passing,⁴⁸ Bessey reacted with predictable chagrin. "It will be to the lasting shame of this generation," he wrote McCarthy, "if through neglect we permit these giants of the forest to be destroyed."⁴⁹ To Mrs. Lovell White he could only offer more encouragement: "If the bill fails at this time," he stated, "we must certainly take the matter up and have it pushed at the earliest possible opportunity next fall. We must not drop this good work."⁵⁰

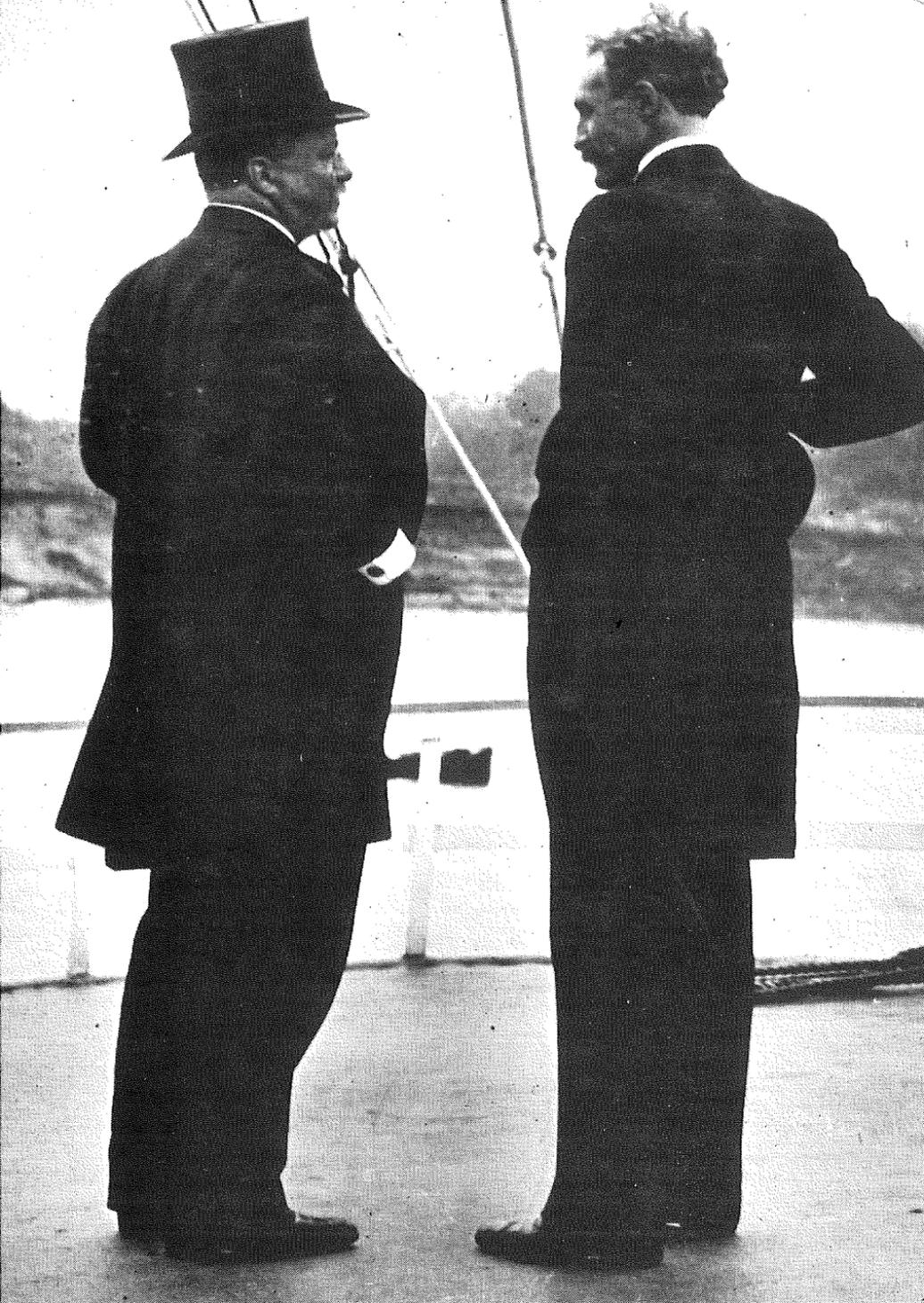
The fight to save the Calaveras groves lasted five decades. In 1931 the State of California with the use of public and private monies purchased the North Grove, or the Mammoth Tree Grove of Big Trees, in Calaveras County. Professor Bessey's

“good work” became a reality in 1954, when the South Grove, or South Park Grove of Big Trees, in Tuolumne County was purchased, essentially completing the land acquisition for Calaveras Big Trees State Park. Calaveras Big Trees Park is located in Stanislaus National Forest, and contains 5,437 acres administered by the California Department of Parks and Recreation.⁵¹ The Big Trees of Calaveras State Park can be seen and enjoyed in all their splendor today because of the efforts initiated many years ago by a few farsighted conservationists. Bessey was dead long before Calaveras State Park was established, but it is to the lasting credit of the great botanist that he involved himself early in the fight, and that he offered constant words of encouragement to those who continued the struggle.

THE APPALACHIAN RESERVES

Perhaps the greatest achievement of the conservationists during the Progressive Era was the passage of the Weeks Law in 1911. It authorized the purchase of lands to be placed under the national forest system for the protection of forested watersheds.⁵² The significance of the Weeks Law can be seen in the Appalachians, where the U. S. Forest Service now administers twelve areas with a gross acreage in excess of 10,000,000 acres from Maine to Georgia.⁵³ Gifford Pinchot attributed the idea for the Weeks Law to Professor Joseph A. Holmes of North Carolina,⁵⁴ but many people, including Bessey, played a part in shaping the legislation that helped to restore the forests of the East.

In 1900, Congress appropriated \$5,000 and authorized Secretary of Agriculture James Wilson to conduct an investigation as to the feasibility of creating a national forest reserve in the southern Appalachians. Secretary Wilson reported that the Appalachian area in North Carolina, Tennessee, and adjacent states contained an excellent stand of hardwoods, and he recommended the purchase of land for the creation of a national forest reserve in the region. President William McKinley recommended favorable action upon the secretary's report.⁵⁵ This was followed by a more detailed report to Congress by Secretary Wilson, with the recommendation of President Roosevelt that a Southern Appalachian Forest Reserve be created.⁵⁶ The advocates of a reserve argued that the southern Appala-



President Theodore Roosevelt (left) and Gifford Pinchot, chief of the federal Division of Forestry between 1898 and 1910, led a nation-wide conservation movement. They are shown here on a Mississippi River voyage in the interests of inland waterways. Courtesy of the U.S. Forestry Service.

chian area was an important watershed and that great waterways like the Potomac, the Tennessee, and the Ohio needed to be protected. They pointed to the region's heavy rainfall, 50-100 inches annually, saying that forest cover was needed to hold the soil on the mountain slopes. The destruction of forests, the proponents affirmed, helped cause devastating floods. They showed that a six-state region in southern Appalachia suffered \$10,000,000 in flood damage in the year 1901.⁵⁷ They also argued that the washing of soil would eventually silt-in the navigable rivers. Finally, the friends of the proposed reserve stated that sound hardwood management techniques could be developed in such a forest.⁵⁸

The merits of the proposed Appalachian forest reserve were ignored by Congress as bill after bill died in one house or the other. In 1906 friends of the southern Appalachian forest proposal joined forces with the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests led by Philip Ayres. Starting with the first session of the Fifty-ninth Congress, bills were introduced to create an Appalachian reserve, setting aside approximately 800,000 acres in the White Mountain area of New Hampshire, and 4,000,000 acres in the southern Appalachians.⁵⁹ Once again the Appalachian legislation met with bitter defeat.

As a collaborator for the U. S. Forest Service,⁶⁰ Professor Bessey had followed the efforts to create the Appalachian forest reserves from the beginning. Disgusted with political procrastination, Bessey threw himself into the fray by 1907. The issue was one of national importance, as Bessey viewed it, and he could no longer stand idly by while the politicians beat a straw man. In writing to Senator Elmer J. Burkett of Nebraska, Professor Bessey stated the issue clearly:

I have studied the problem of the forests of this country for many years, and have had my attention very forcibly called to this fact that in the management of natural forest lands of the country we have squandered what should have been a rich heritage to be transmitted to our children and children's children . . . The cutting away and total destruction of the forests is a crime against the community as a whole.⁶¹

To strip a forest for its lumber, he told Senator Burkett, makes no more sense than to destroy an orchard for its fruit. He urged the Senator to support the Appalachian legislation.⁶²

In January, 1908, the Nebraska Park and Forestry Association and the State Horticultural Society approved Bessey-

sponsored resolutions calling for the creation of Appalachian and White Mountain Forest Reserves. Bessey promptly sent a copy of the resolutions to each member of the Nebraska congressional delegation. It was with special interest that Dr. Bessey watched the actions of Representative Ernest M. Pollard of Nehawka, Nebraska. Congressman Pollard was a member of the House Agricultural Committee, the committee which had to approve House bills dealing with the proposed Appalachian and White Mountain forests before they could get to the House floor. Representative Pollard was a former student of Dr. Bessey's, having been graduated from the University of Nebraska in 1893. When H. R. 10457, the bill to establish the reserves, came before the House Agriculture Committee, it was referred to the House Judiciary Committee, where it was killed on the ruling that the proposed legislation was unconstitutional. The Judiciary Committee held that the federal government had no constitutional authority to purchase lands solely for forest purposes.⁶³ The action of the two committees and the role played by Congressman Pollard in the death of the bill precipitated a rare explosion in the botany office at Nebraska Hall. A furious Dr. Bessey expressed his disgust with House Speaker Joseph G. (Uncle Joe) Cannon of Illinois and with the House members who blocked the passage of H. R. 10457:

It does seem as though we had the most stupid and blinded lot of men in charge of our affairs that has ever cursed any country. There is not a civilized country on the face of the earth but that takes more advanced ground than our Congressmen in regard to the preservation of our forest wealth. When I look over the devastated forest areas beginning with the Atlantic Coast and extending westward to the great plateaus and plains it fills me with great indignation that at one time and another the efforts on the part of farseeing men to preserve from destruction these forests have been thwarted, just as Mr. Cannon and those who go with him are now thwarting the wishes of the great majority of the thinking people of the country. I wish to enter a most emphatic protest and to say that I cannot excuse any one who is so blinded to the needs of the future generations in this country as to aid in the destruction of our remaining forests.⁶⁴

Congressman Pollard tried to reassure the skeptical professor by telling him that purchase of large tracts of land in the Appalachians would cost billions of dollars and that much of the land was already stripped of its valuable timber. He explained to Dr. Bessey that he was going to submit a bill to protect watershed areas and that the government would be able to buy an ample supply of land to protect timber.⁶⁵ Bessey was not to be placated by halfway measures, however, and he



The Calaveras, California, grove of Big Trees was saved from the logger by the intervention of Bessey and his colleagues. This 1935 photo is used through the courtesy of the U.S. Forestry Service.

warmed the young congressman's ears with another scathing rebuke. He told Pollard that he viewed the treatment of this matter by Congress as one of evasion and subterfuge. He assured the congressman that he would reserve judgment on his new bill until he could see a copy of it, but even if it were a good bill, he stated, it had little chance of passing this late in the session. It would have been easier to modify the original bill, Bessey said:

But of course you do not care to listen to my whining and complaining and yet two years ago you felt quite as I did I am sure. That is why we sent you to Congress. We knew that you did not like the way that Congress puts off doing the right thing. I hope you will 'stir up the animals' and let them know at any rate that there is one man who will not stand by and allow the present policy of procrastination of the important measures continue without protest.⁶⁶

If Pollard thought that he had earned a respite from the pressure put on him by his old professor, he was badly mistaken. When Congress reconvened in the winter of 1908-1909, Bessey wasted little time in applying a heavy grip. Pollard finally supported an amended bill to provide for the Appalachian forests, but the bill was defeated in the Senate through the opposition of senior Western senators. Philip Ayres dejectedly reported the defeat of the bill to Bessey with the comment that the "denudation in the White Mountains goes rapidly forward."⁶⁷ Reflecting eternal optimism, Bessey tried to bolster Ayre's sagging spirits by pointing out that they had brought Pollard around to support the bill. "It is quite too bad that some of those old fossils in the Senate were able to kill the bill," he told Ayres, "but we have to be patient although it is hard to do so when the forests are being destroyed as rapidly as they are now."⁶⁸

For the next two years Professor Bessey worked closely with Ayres, Pinchot, John H. Finney, and others to bring about legislation to expand the national forest system. As early as 1909, Bessey was advocating legislation broader than the creation of an Appalachian forest. He told Congressman Pollard in January, 1909, that he supported legislation that would allow government purchase of timbered watersheds across the nation.⁶⁹ The movement, which had begun simply as an attempt to create a forest reserve in the Southern Appalachians and the White Mountain Forest of New Hampshire, ended up producing a law with far wider ramifications. The Weeks Law placed no

geographic limitations upon the government in establishing watershed reserves. The movement towards the Weeks Law was an evolutionary thing, but Bessey was instrumental in shaping and guiding the ideas of the Weeks bill into law.

Dr. Bessey was active in other work in conservation. In 1912 he was named chairman of the Committee on Education of the National Conservation Congress. Bessey wrote the report for the committee which recommended sweeping programs in conservation education within schools and local communities.⁷⁰ He was also involved at the state level, having participated in all of the Nebraska Conservation Congresses. But, it was in the area of forest conservation that Bessey made his most important contributions. As a nationally known scientist with an impeccable reputation, Bessey allied himself with the forces of conservation to halt the plunder of American forests by special interest groups. He accomplished this task without show or fanfare. He worked in a quiet, resolute fashion for the common good, and it brought him neither fame nor fortune.

In the boisterous world of today, where Americans are accustomed to witnessing vociferous demonstrations for an infinite number of causes, one is compelled to ask how an unassuming botany professor from a Midwestern university could help bring about dramatic changes in the nation's forest conservation policies. Dr. Bessey had faith in the democratic process. Bessey did hold most politicians in disdain, being suspicious of their motives, but he had the utmost faith in the simple goodness of the American people. Bessey believed that once the merits of a cause were placed before the public, change would eventually occur. He was a man of great patience. Bessey recognized that change seldom comes without some bitterness and disappointment. This is a lesson that many zealous reformers need to learn. The righteousness of a cause will not always bring about change. The metamorphic process is evolutionary. Idealism can *move* crusaders, but only perseverance in pursuit of the ideal can make change possible, and Professor Bessey was a man of total commitment. His love for nature thrust him into many difficult fights, but he never wavered once he had determined his goals. It may be that the greatest lesson to be learned from Dr. Bessey's experiences is that there is hope for those willing to persevere. There were

plenty of doubters when Bessey called for the creation of forests in the Nebraska Sandhills. An apathetic citizenry gave little help to Bessey as he stood with a handful of men and women in defense of the Big Trees. Skeptics abounded when Bessey and his colleagues clashed head-on with vested interest groups in the Appalachians. In each case the mighty forces of materialism fell before a band of visionaries dedicated to the principle that every American is entitled to a quality existence.

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