

WOOD AND FIBER SCIENCE

JOURNAL OF THE SOCIETY OF WOOD SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

VOLUME 38

OCTOBER 2006

NUMBER 4

THE GOLDEN AGE

*Excerpted remarks accompanying receipt of the
2006 SWST Distinguished Service Award*

The light shines thru to every one

The best is pathology

The fungi belong to every one

We know they're for you and me

The spores in spring

The mushrooms they bring

The conks on the pine

They're yours, they're mine

We see more fungi all the time

Its all mighty fine, mighty fine!

Dow V. Baxter taught Forest Pathology at the University of Michigan and had a long-lasting influence on me. Dr. Baxter excelled at interacting with his students. He was also noted for ending every conversation with the expression "mighty fine, mighty fine." Every May, he would entertain current and former students at an event called the Pathology in Forest Practice May Musicale. This event was attended by many former students, and featured an orchestra with Dr. Baxter at the piano. He wrote all the music. Above is one verse of his lyrics from the 34th Musicale held in 1961, which I attended. These lyrics were sung to the tune of "The best things in life are free."

Now I will devote some of my follow-up thoughts to an article entitled, "The Crisis in Wood Science and Technology Education," written by Frank Beall, Bill Galligan, and me that was published in the *Forest Products Journal* 12 years ago. The basic premise of that article was that change is inevitable, and in order to favorably react to these changes, the industry

must rely on research. The dilemma posed in the article was that both graduate and undergraduate university teaching programs and their closely related research programs were in a crisis mode. To give just one of many possible examples: in 1991, the total graduate enrollment in 13 WS&T programs was 143, with approximately two thirds from foreign countries. At the same time, there was a total of 104 faculty at these same universities. This represented a graduate student/faculty ratio of 1.38, overall, or about 0.5 for the U.S. born students. It is no wonder that programs were in decline. How could anyone justify, from an economic standpoint, continuing the status quo? More recent studies show a record of holding steady at best, and gradual continued decline at worst.

So, I ask the question: Did the golden age of our profession and our Professional Society occur in the 1970s, when research efforts, student enrollments, and society membership peaked, or is the golden age still ahead of us? The answer partially depends on all of us.

First, we must be able to change. I refer you to the excellent editorial by Bob Youngs in the April 2006 (Vol. 38, No. 2) issue of *Wood and Fiber Science*: "The Times They Are A-Changin." I assume some of you have read this editorial by now, so will not review it here. I will only comment that not only are the times a-changin, they always have been. We tend to think that change is a slow process with lots of inertia. But, this is simply not so. I give you one example that involves the instant obsolescence of a wood product. On March 8, 1862, a funny-looking ironclad vessel awkwardly steamed up the Elizabeth River to attack the blockading fleet

of "state-of-the-art" wooden warships, and in a matter of minutes, turned the world's fleet of tall ships into mere tourist attractions.

Why are we always so slow to react to change? Why do we tend to resist change in favor of the seemingly more secure status quo? Why don't we become more proactive to change? I thought this was the whole point of research.

The second thing we have to do is believe in ourselves and in our industry. We have to believe that we are part of the solution rather than part of the problem. Not only that, but we have to be able to effectively tell our story to others in such a way that they also understand.

The third item on our agenda is to develop good communication within our industry that will help it to move forward proactively. To me, one of the most important linkages in this communication chain is between producers and educators. Industry should not just assume that the technical skills will always be present, and universities should not behave like "Ivory Towers." Personally, I would like our industry to support endowed chairs at universities. I can think of no better way to assure the health of a university program, while at the same time helping the industry to be proactive to the "times that are a-changin'."

And speaking of technical skills, we need to make sure we continue to have the knowledge so that our observed phenomena can be explained

not empirically, but rather by what Bill Nearn called "First Principles." For example, the behavior of a wood member under load can be explained by an understanding of the chemistry, physics, micro- and macro-anatomy, and by the environment. This is what our profession can uniquely do. Curricula should not be watered down to the point where this ability is lost to our graduates.

I want to end with an observation about student enrollments in university Wood Science programs. Much has been written about the declining enrollments in a dwindling number of programs. The need to recruit bright students in sufficient numbers to support the industry is understood by all. Many recruiting approaches have been suggested. Several have been tried, often with good success. Frankly, I think recruiting students is simple. You have to allocate resources (time and money) to successfully recruit students, and industry has to partner in this effort. Where this has been done, success has followed, and the degree of success has been positively correlated to the magnitude of the allocated resources. Making the decision to allocate resources to recruiting when resources are already limited can be difficult. However, there is no other way. It must be done.

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