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USFS Tusquitee Ranger District

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My experiences with the US Forest Service were an interesting mix of “Yeah, this is absolutely the way that life ought to be!” and “Dealbreaker – I'm out!” I learned that it is totally possible to have a job that puts you out on back roads in a 4x4, out before dawn, doing useful work to fund a greater good and to enjoy it, but it comes with a cost – one I'm not sure I could pay. I'll start with the good, move to the not-so-much, and end with thanks to all parties that let me have this experience, because that's exactly what this was: a way to get an experience, and one that paid off for me and my career – big time.

The first day I showed up on the job, I was put to work – not doing busywork or office intern stuff, but actual, important, decision-informing work. As my boss, Steverson Moffat, said “You just got out of Sewanee – we already know you can handle the useful stuff.” I spent the first week immersed in a world of politics greater and smaller, dealing with a controversial private land-use issue in the middle of a 17,000 acres Black Bear sanctuary. My first assignment was immediately challenging – read all of the 75+ comment/response letters that the USFS received in regards to this project, determine if their comment was substantive, and analyze the points raised in each letter. It wasn't 'getting my hands dirty' in a literal sense, but it certainly felt like it – suddenly I was positioned as a mediator between two parties, and both of them were tearing into us. One landowner called us needless bureaucrats interfering in private lives, while the next conservationist called us the lapdogs of big timber, business and the wealthy elite. Nobody was happy with us, and I was stuck in the middle of it. Needless to say, I was busy those first few days.

That never really stopped – from digging test pits with the archaeologist to checking up on loggers with the accountability specialist, I did it all. I went to meetings with rangers, mowed the yard, logged every archaeological survey ever conducted on the Forest into ARCMAP, and helped to set up a Fishing Derby. There wasn't a thing that I wanted to do that I didn't get to do, and everybody, even the office curmudgeon, saw me as a useful part of the team, not just somebody to boss around or (on the opposite side of the spectrum) to treat with kid gloves. That part worked great.

Probably the biggest single thing I did at the USFS was writing letters to the public. As a matter of course, the USFS keeps the public informed of its actions, by way of mass mailings and notices in the newspaper. Over the weeks I was there, I wrote and mailed letters for 16 different projects, from trail construction to updates to burn plans. I got very good at taking rough field-sketches of what specialists would like to do, and turning them into positively worded, action packed, but not restrictive notices that would garner just the right amount of approval without arousing enough interest to invite unnecessary interference from the well-meaning but ultimately unhelpful public.

The first few weeks I stayed in Jackrabbit campground, on Jackrabbit Lake. It's a USFS campground, so there was no cost, other than that I was the one to lock up the gate to the beach at closing time. It was very pleasant, well kept and beautifully situated – a real treat. It was, however, 45 minutes away and without a refrigerator, so three and a half weeks in I moved to a closer farm where the owner agreed to swap work for room/board. The location was much more convenient (10 minutes from the office), and the work was pleasant and light enough that I was more than happy to make the swap. My companions at the farm were very nice, but it was very difficult to transition from the practical world of the USFS to the incredibly idealistic world of this organic “natural herbal supplements” growing nirvana, where, for example, I was only able to treat the hemlocks lining the driveway for the HWA only after describing the chemical treatments as “Tree Medicine.” It's a nice place to be sure, but I don't know that I could, in good conscience, recommend that site as perfect for all future interns – for many it would be just fine, but I probably should have kept looking, the constant struggle to ignore the ever present pseudo-science was more than was worth dealing with. That being said, once committed, I stuck it out and managed to only very occasionally ask for peer-reviewed studies that showed 'Holy Basil' as being good for helping you travel with luck.

A brief mention of the work I did at the farm seems in order:

- Built Weir 14' dam with triangular notch to calculate streamflow (120+/-20 gal/min)
- Lifted cabin (The cabin I was staying in had had the pillars washed away in a couple places, so I used a hydraulic jack to lift it and reset them on concrete blocks)
- Plumbed back porch sink and cabin sink
- Changed fuel filter, plugs and wires on one farm car
- Changed battery cables on another
- Processed (picked, dried, processed and packed) herbs
- Fed/watered/cooped/decooped chickens

- Researched solar water power for the site
- Yard work
- Took down a couple trees

That was the good – now for the ugly. The big thing that I learned at the USFS is that I personally can never be successful in a career that requires me to navigate office politics. Day after day I came home drained from dealing with boxed in people without letting myself be boxed in as well. The office isn't tiny, and it's not packed, but there seemed to never be a moment when I wasn't being pestered by someone – and not for work, but for personal reasons. I don't mind chatting with a co-worker, and I don't mind being asked to do some work for a boss, but to be constantly part of the lives of the entire office is more than I can handle. Combining that with the incredible number of restrictive federal regulations that the USFS is required to follow leads me to know, without a doubt, that I could never work for the USFS as a career. Occasional contractor stints, sure. Internships, absolutely. 30 years to get that gold watch? Not on your life.

The interesting thing is that, because of the sentiment expressed in the paragraph above, this was the most successful, useful, and interesting internship I've ever had. I learned a tremendous amount. I learned skills, had experiences, networked and impressed people with my job performance, and at the end was sure that I knew enough about that job to rule it out. That's exactly what an internship is supposed to do. If I wanted to continue, I have no doubts that I'd be able to call up Ranger Wilkins and get a positive reference for the district I was applying for, and that my experiences in the Tusquitee office would put me at the top of the list. That being said, for me, it's just not a good fit at all – and there aren't words to say how glad I am I found that out in a two-month placement, and not after fighting through interviews to land a coveted position.

The overall idea is this: the USFS, and this office in particular, are ideally suited for a continuing Sewanee internship. The people are welcoming and they put me to work, the living conditions are great, and the returns on the intern's investment are tremendous – I'm just not cut out for a job like that. Am I glad I did it? Absolutely. Would I tell Nathan-from-four-months-ago to do it? Absolutely. Would I take a job there if it were offered to me? Nope; it's just not my thing. However, I'm sure that the next person to take advantage of the opportunity presented to me by the folks at the Tusquitee Ranger District will have the same rewarding, informative, educational and enjoyable experience that I had. Thanks to the Ranger, my immediate boss

Steverson Moffat (C'88), and the Department of Forestry and Geology, I had a great summer – and I hope future Sewanee students will too.

P.S. I've attached an appendix with a slightly more detailed, though in no way complete, list of my duties and activities this summer.

Appendix A

**Department**    *Action*

- **Recreation**     *Set up for Fishing Derby, Mowed Cherokee Lake and Tusquitee Ranger District Ranger Station*
- **Recreation**     *Helped out @ Fishing Derby Special Needs Day*
- **Archaeology**    *Dug test sites at timber sale location*
- **Archaeology**    *Cataloged and Filed Cultural Resources Surveys (1970-2005)*
- **NEPA**     *Wrote & Mailed Scoping letters and public notices for Fires Creek Trail Rehab and Eagle Branch Project*
- **NEPA**     *Content Analysis Laurel Creek Road Easement Project*
- **NEPA**     *Clay County Shooting Range edit: Dust Writeup*
- **NEPA**     *Clay County Shooting Range Edit: Dust Appendix*
- **Experience**    *Nantahala Ranger District Staff Meeting*
- **NEPA**     *Buckwheat EA planning meeting*
- **Timber**        *Timber Administrator Site Inspection (Skyline)*
- **Recreation**    *Coordinated BSA Service Project*
- **Science**     *Helped Grant Connolly with Salamander related Thesis*
- **NEPA**     *Wrote Scoping letters and public notices for Moss Knob Shooting Range and Wayehutta Projects*
- **NEPA**     *Researched literature on effects of timbering in the Southern Appalachians re: Dick Artley*
- **Archaeology**   *Created Shapefiles of Previously surveyed areas across the Nantahala Ranger District (i.e old Wayah and Highlands)*
- **NEPA**     *Frank's Creek EA, drafted introduction, statement of purpose and need*
- **Fisheries**     *Organized Fisheries Bibliography*
- **Fisheries**     *Collected Benthic Macroinvertebrates for Liming Study*
- **NEPA**     *Wrote Scoping letters and public notices for ECBI, BMT, Veach, Truett, Nantahala Fire Plan Additions 2013, Jackrabbit Bike Trails, MCNC easement, Cheoah Trails (Grassy Gap, Massey-Branch & BMT), Panthertown Trails*
- **NEPA**     *Made maps for most of the projects listed above*
- **Experience**    *Nantahala Ranger District Staff Meeting*
- **Fire**         *Marked burn plots at Flat Branch w/Mike*