

Closure Crises for the Crossett Experimental Forest

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Much to the chagrin of its long-time (founding) Project Leader and first scientist Russell R. Reynolds, the Southern Forest Experiment Station (SOFES) began planning to close the Crossett Experimental Forest (CEF) in the late 1960s. The Station's leadership had decided that the work on uneven-aged southern pine silviculture conducted at Crossett since the 1930s was no longer vital to their research portfolio, and other projects in tree improvement and genetics could be done elsewhere. The isolated, aging facility in southeastern Arkansas was also remote from the rest of the agency and thus was logistically challenging—and relatively expensive—to support.

As a long-standing and renowned researcher, Reynolds still had enough clout to keep the CEF from closing while he remained on payroll, but almost immediately after his retirement in 1969, the SOFES started winding down the work at the facility. Many studies were permanently closed, most staff were given directed reassignments to other locations, and some retired to avoid forced moves. After decades of operation, in a few short years the facility was vacated by Forest Service, although a few studies were maintained by faculty (primarily Dr. Timothy Ku) from the University of Arkansas-Monticello.

As the CEF was closing down, just before 3 a.m. on March 10, 1973, a small tornado touched down inside the headquarters compound. Some of the toppled trees struck buildings, producing significant roof damage.

According to an unpublished report, written for the CEF's files by Research Forester James D. Burton, no one was injured in this storm and while power was

Left: Pine blown down across Crossett Experimental Forest office building, leaving a hole in the roof that led to ceiling and floor damage in the conference room. Notice the child's swing set; the Gammel family lived in the residence next to the office building. (USDA Forest Service photo by James D. Burton)

Center: Hole in the roof of the equipment depot building caused by a pine felled by the 1973 tornado. (USDA Forest Service photo by James D. Burton)

Right: Worker delimbing and bucking some of the large pines toppled by the 1973 tornado. (USDA Forest Service photo by James D. Burton)

lost, the phone lines did not go down. This is remarkable, given the damage to the facility—and most fortunate for CEF Forest Superintendent Don Gammel, who lived on the headquarters compound and had trees down all around his residence! Burton arrived after the cleanup had begun; Gammel was supervising the “emergency work” efforts of Howard Holler, Joe T. Rhodes, Wayne Gullledge, and I.V. Childress to clear the debris and temporarily patch the large holes in the buildings.

In addition to the wind, a “brief, heavy fall” of hail accompanied the tornado, leading to extensive breakage of the south-facing windows in various buildings. While the storm brought an inch of rain that compounded the damage to some of the exposed conference room ceiling, the men were able to get the downed trees removed and the building perforations closed up quickly enough to keep a 2-inch rainfall later that same day from further damaging the main office building.

The 1973 tornado was not the only major natural disaster to crop up during the 1970s CEF closure. A widespread southern pine beetle (*Dendroctonus frontalis*) outbreak affected much of the region and did not spare the forests at Crossett. In the summer of 1974, aerial inspection flights had detected a number of beetle “spots” (areas with multiple tree deaths from the beetle) and on-the-ground surveys confirmed this threat to the CEF’s mature, well-stocked forests (Overgaard and Denniston 1974). Two locations were of particular concern: one spot just up Arkansas Highway 133 from the headquarters and another in the middle of the Reynolds Research Natural Area. While no major outbreak ended up happening, the crisis was averted in part by a quick salvage of scores of dead and dying trees. As an aside, the resin-rich stumps of some of these salvaged pines (*Pinus* spp.) can still be found in the Reynolds Research Natural Area.

Pitch-soaked “rich pine” stump in the Reynolds Research Natural Area (2011) from a pine felled in the mid-1970s to help quell a southern pine beetle outbreak. (USDA Forest Service photo by the author)



By May of 1974, all SOFES staff who once reported to the CEF had left and Crossett was officially closed on July 1, 1974. As word got out that the facility had closed, a number of local residents wrote the agency to see if they could purchase the now-vacated buildings. Most sought to move these structures elsewhere; initially, these inquiries were politely but firmly rebuffed.¹ During this period there were also several episodes of vandalism, breaking and entering, and property theft on the vacant CEF. SOFES Research Forest Geneticist Hoy Grigsby, who had spent most of his career working at Crossett but had been transferred to the Alexandria Forestry Center in Pineville, LA, after the CEF had been closed, periodically checked on the facility when he returned to Crossett on the weekends (where he still had a home). During this closure period, Grigsby reported several instances of unexplained damage to the Ashley County Sheriff's office, but no major destruction ever occurred.

More curious than any of those damaging events, however, is the strange tale of James Rice. On April 18, 1975, a local Georgia-Pacific forester, Jim McGriff, contacted Gammel to report a "homesteader" had occupied one of the small storage buildings in the CEF headquarters compound. Gammel asked Ashley County Deputy Sheriff Houston Davidson and Grigsby to investigate. Grigsby reported to Gammel that he did indeed find a non-Forest Service padlock on the door to one of the storage buildings during his April 21 inspection of the CEF but could not locate the person who put the lock on that door. Deputy Davidson visited later that week and, after failing to find anyone on the site, removed the lock.

A couple weeks later on May 1, Gammel visited the CEF in person and found a new lock on the door. This time, however, Gammel was able to find the man responsible—James Rice. Rice was a local who claimed to have a document giving him title to the CEF property. When Gammel asked to see it, this document proved to be a certified copy of the patent for one of the parcels that eventually became the CEF. Rice had gone to the Ashley County Courthouse on March 26, 1975, and filed this copy to "register" his claim (which, of course, gave him nothing of the sort!). Gammel checked with the Ashley County Clerk and Abstract offices, and they both confirmed that such a recording gave Rice no rights to the CEF property. Gammel then returned to confront Rice with these new facts, and Rice agreed to remove his lock and himself from the CEF headquarters area. But that did not stop Rice's efforts altogether!

In a hand written letter sent to the U.S. Department of Agriculture on June 30, 1975, Rice stated that he sought this parcel of what he saw as unused Federal land through a "second homestead entry according to the laws of State." Rice also petitioned the Department to "...[stop] the Forest man of Louisiana of looking after [the property] since it has been deeded to the United States of America."

Rice wanted Gammel to cease his efforts to keep Rice from the property, but on July 15, 1975, Gerald W. Van Gilst, Director of the Lands office for the Forest Service, wrote for John R. McGuire (Chief of the Forest Service) to Rice explaining that his petition for the property was not valid because homesteading of national forest land was no longer possible. Van Gilst did suggest in his letter

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¹ Editor's note: I have heard unconfirmed reports that at least one of the buildings—the log home Reynolds and his family lived in—was sold or given away during this period. The story goes that it was moved elsewhere in Ashley County, Arkansas, and turned into a hunting camp, and then burned to the ground at a later date. I have yet to find solid evidence that this happened.

Scanned letter from James Rice to the U.S. Department of Agriculture seeking to claim part of the Crossett Experimental Forest property.

Jun. 2 30 1975

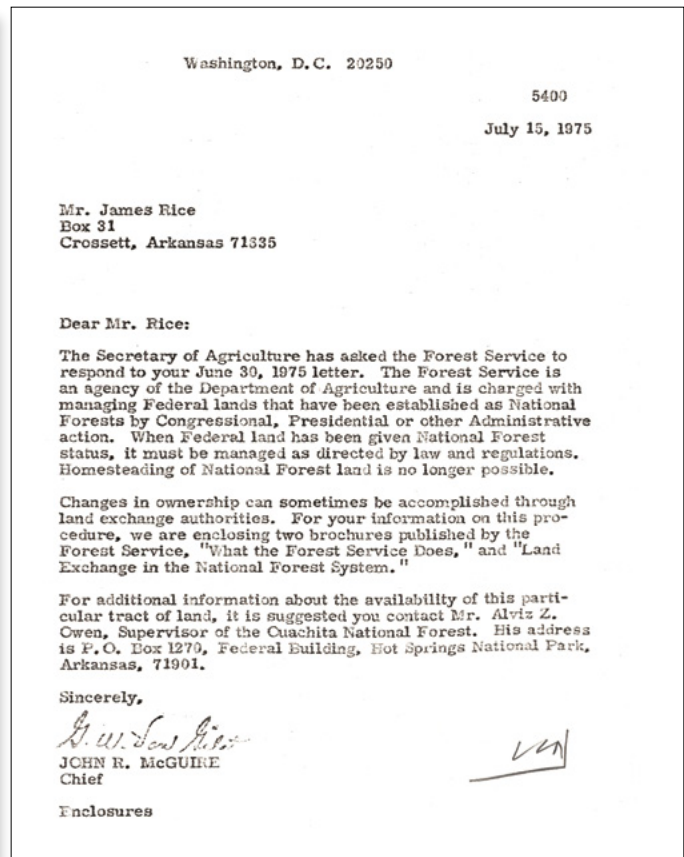
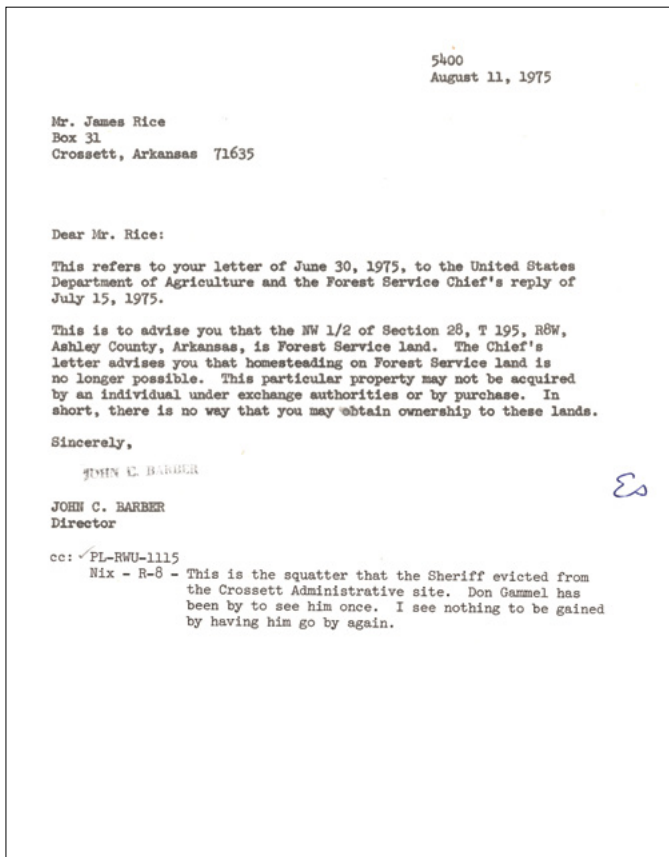
United States Department of Agriculture
 Dear Sir: I have had the abstract made to the Northwest 1/4 of Section 23, Twp. 19 South Range 8 West in Ashley County Arkansas contain 160 acres of land and according to the abstract the land was sold by the Crossett Lumber Co. by a Deed to the United States of America and recorded on Book 23 at Page 135 of the records of Ashley County Arkansas and another thing is the Forest Service has been looking out for Agriculture purpose and I want a chance to the place now for the second Homestead entry according to the Laws of the State a Forest man from Louisiana has been looking after it for some time and now it is United States Land after being deeded from the Crossett Lumber Co. conveyed 1937. or if anyway that you can help me of getting it now I would be please by you stopping the Forest man of Louisiana of looking after it since it has been deeded to the United States of America will be all this time
 yours Truly
 James Rice
 Crossett, Ark.
 Box 31

Control 03 - 03441
 Referred to FS
 Date: JUN 15 1975

that sometimes changes in ownership occur via land exchange.² John C. Barber, Director of the Southern Forest Experiment Station, also wrote Rice on August 11, 1975, to reiterate the point that Rice had no valid claim to homestead the property and that there was no possible way for him to acquire the CEF parcel via exchange.

Indeed, the only other party with a legitimate claim to the land of CEF was Georgia-Pacific Corporation (GP), the successor to the Crossett Lumber Company, which had originally offered the property to the Forest Service for an experimental forest. GP

² Larry Nix, who headed the Forest Service Southern Region's Program and Land Use Planning Office, in a note to Project Leader Gene Shoulders, ruled the mention of land exchange in this letter, as it was not legally possible to do that in this case.



threatened to reclaim the land and timber and had opposed the closing of the CEF from the moment it became aware of this plan in early 1974. In a curtly worded May 28, 1974, letter to SOFES Director Barber, GP Crossett Division Forestry Manager John E. Wishart informed the Forest Service that

... I [Wishart] find this to be a failure to use the lands given by the Crossett Lumber Company for the purpose for which these lands were granted to The United States of America and therefore in proper time these lands will revert to Georgia-Pacific.

Wishart would go on to explain that what GP really wanted was for the SOFES to continue their research program in southern Arkansas, including at the CEF, even if most of the staff were moved to the nearby University of Arkansas-Monticello campus to be colocated with the only forestry school in the State (Bragg 2018). While the Forest Service did not plan to restart forestry research at Crossett or elsewhere in southern Arkansas, they did get a legal opinion on GP's claim on the CEF from the USDA's Office of General Counsel. Each of the two deeds that had originally transferred the property to the agency's control in the 1930s contained a reversionary clause that stipulated if the Federal government had quit using the lands for research purposes for a period of five consecutive years prior to January 1, 1984, that the lands and buildings would indeed revert to GP (as the legal successor to the Crossett Lumber Company).

Over the next several years, as the Forest Service debated over what to do with the CEF, they engaged with GP and other constituents over their options. By early

Left: Scanned letter from Gerald W. Van Gilst, Director of the Lands office for the Forest Service, written for John R. McGuire (Chief of the Forest Service), mentioning that James Rice's petition to the U.S. Department of Agriculture could not be granted because homesteading on national forest lands was no longer allowed.

Right: Scanned letter from John C. Barber, Director of the Southern Forest Experiment Station, to James Rice informing Rice of his inability to acquire the Crossett Experimental Forest property he sought.

Crossett Project Leader Russell R. Reynolds receiving an award from Larry E. Lassen, Director of the Southern Forest Experiment Station, at the February 14, 1979, reopening of the Crossett Experimental Forest. Also pictured, from left to right: Robert Buckman, Deputy Chief for Research and Development, Forest Service; U.S. Senator Dale Bumpers; Lassen; Reynolds; Reverend Herman Reese, St. John's Lutheran Church in Crossett (behind flowers); John Wishart, Georgia-Pacific; and B.G. Gresham, Arkansas State Forester.



1977, the Forest Service decided to restart an active research program based out of the CEF, with a budget allocated to support the work at CEF and add staff—starting with Gammel, who was from the Crossett area. On February 27, 1978, SOFES scientist Jim Baker was named the new project leader for the CEF and on February 14, 1979, a rededication ceremony was held on the grounds of the headquarters, ending years of closure crises at Crossett.

REFERENCES

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- Overgaard, N.A.; Denniston, J.F. 1974. Evaluation of the southern pine beetle infestations on the Crossett Experimental Forest, Arkansas. Rep. 75-2-5. Pineville, LA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, State and Private Forestry, Southeastern Area, Forest Pest Management Group. 4 p.