

# A Depression-Era Relief Program on Bent Creek Experimental Forest Yielded Firewood and a New Study

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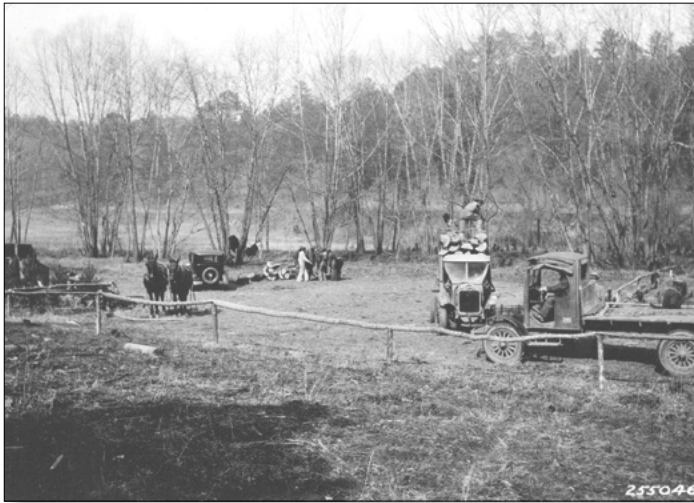
As effects of the Great Depression increased in western North Carolina, the Pisgah National Forest (PNF) and the Asheville Unemployment Council (AUC) had a tree problem in common. The PNF needed to sell some trees so that a researcher at the Bent Creek Experimental Forest (BCEF) could install a study—but there were no buyers. The AUC needed to buy trees for their innovative employment relief program—but they had no money. A series of newspaper articles appearing in the *Asheville Citizen* (1930a–1930d, 1931a–1931h) and *Asheville Citizen-Times* (1930; 1931a, 1931b) described how the two groups worked together for a common solution.

Jesse Buell had finished laying out the first large-scale forest restoration study in the recently established BCEF near Asheville, NC (Buell 1930). The 35-acre study area consisted of four tracts, or woodlots, which had been privately owned for 50 years before being purchased by the Biltmore Estate in 1900. The woodlots were eventually sold to the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service in 1914 when the PNF was formed (Nesbitt 1941). After many years of cutting timber for subsistence farming, these cutover woodlots were like many other areas in the Southern Appalachians with their limited potential for growing valuable, high quality sawtimber (Buell 1928). Following a master plan prepared earlier by Appalachian Forest Experiment Station (AFES), Director Earl Frothingham (Asheville Citizen 1921, Frothingham 1923), the objective of Buell's study was to

Left: Men from the Asheville community woodyard at work in the study area. (USDA Forest Service photo taken by J.H. Buell in March 1931)

Right: Mules provided by Buncombe County pulled logs from the woodlot to a processing area beside Bent Creek. (USDA Forest Service photo taken by J.H. Buell in February 1931)





Left: County trucks at the Asheville community woodyard on the bank of Bent Creek. (USDA Forest Service photo taken by J.H. Buell in February 1931)

Right: Loading firewood on a county truck for the Asheville community woodyard. (USDA Forest Service photo taken by J.H. Buell in February 1931)

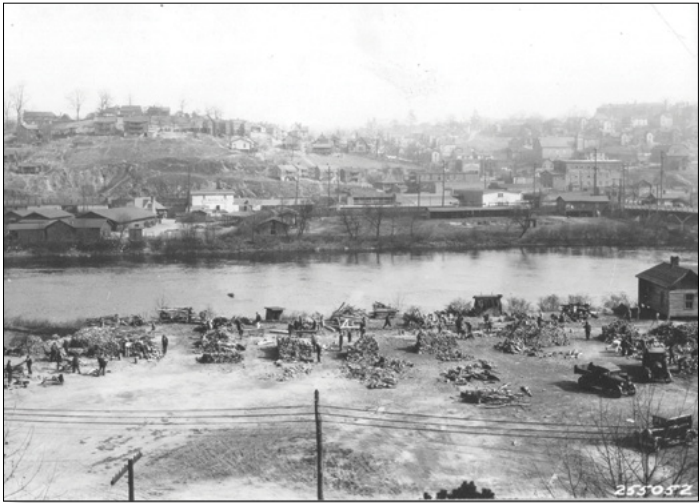


“... reveal a suitable method of preparing mountain hardwoods for continuous management” (Wahlenberg 1953: 874).

Improvement cutting was planned for three woodlots and one served as an uncut control area. In the woodlot where clearcutting was evaluated, the PNF arranged for a local farmer to cut the timber and take the harvested trees as payment for his work. Buell was evaluating other types of harvests on the other two woodlots. There, he kept the best trees as part of the next stand and marked all the others for cutting. The trees to be cut, however, were not large enough to be sawtimber but were suitable for firewood. When the PNF advertised timber for sale on the two woodlots, there were no buyers. Hence, Buell’s problem—he needed the marked trees on those two woodlots to be cut during the winter so that the age of vegetation on the three woodlots would be the same when growth began next spring.

The AUC also had a problem. With the onset of the Great Depression, unemployment had increased in Asheville, NC with many needy families facing food shortages during the coming winter. The AUC met with a group of concerned citizens and civic organizations and formed the Woodyard Committee. The goal of the Woodyard Committee was to provide meaningful employment for needy families and not be a cost for the city. Their plan was simple: sell firewood to city residents. In lieu of payment to workers for cutting firewood, the Asheville woodyard would employ needy workers and the funds from firewood sales would be used to buy food supplies from local merchants. The Woodyard Committee said that each cord of wood sold would feed a family for a week. But there was a problem with their plan—because the gasoline needed for county and city trucks to haul the wood and food cost was about the same as the \$5 per cord selling price of the firewood, there was no money left over to buy trees for cutting.

The *Asheville Citizen* newspaper did not report how the Forest Service and the Woodyard Committee solved their shared problems, but several scenarios are possible. PNF Supervisor, M.A. Mattoon was likely aware that timber on Buell’s study area had not sold and perhaps as a member of a civic organization in Asheville, NC, he was also aware of the Woodyard Committee’s need for firewood trees. Details of the agreement for transferring ownership of national forest timber on Buell’s study area to the woodyard are unknown, but several legal scenarios are possible. Mattoon could have accepted a bid of \$1 as



appropriate value for the unmerchantable timber and sold it to the Woodyard Committee. Mattoon could have issued a permit to each person working at the woodyard allowing them to cut a cord of firewood. On December 18, 1930, the *Asheville Citizen* reported that firewood from BCEF would soon be hauled to the community woodyard at the YMCA football field (Asheville Citizen 1930d). In a series of articles, the newspaper described the relief plan and encouraged the purchase of firewood (Asheville Citizen 1930a–1930d, Asheville Citizen-Times 1930), provided progress reports of activities at the woodyard (Asheville Citizen 1931b, 1931d, 1931g, 1931h) and BCEF (Asheville Citizen 1931c, 1931f; Asheville Citizen-Times 1931a), and evaluated the success of the project (Asheville Citizen-Times 1931b).

The woodyard employed about 50 men at BCEF, who worked—safely, apparently, as no accidents were reported—under the supervision of an experienced foreman. Over the coming weeks, Buell photographed woodyard-related activities at BCEF and the community woodyard. Small crews of men felled the marked trees, trimmed branches, and cut fallen trees into 8–10 foot logs. Mules pulled logs and large branches to a nearby processing site, where they were sorted by size and loaded onto county-owned trucks for hauling to the Asheville woodyard. At the woodyard, up to 50 men would cut and split the long wood into firewood lengths and use city-owned trucks for delivery. Buell describes more fully this early example of Forest Service and community cooperation in the *Forest Worker* (Buell 1931b) and *American Forests* (Buell 1931a)

By early March of 1931, when weather had warmed and firewood sales had declined, the AUC reported that 1,000 men had been employed and 300 cords of firewood had been cut and sold. A basket of food provided weekly to each employed person consisted of more than a dozen items (see the table to the right). Federal Government officials inspecting unemployment relief programs praised the cooperation between the Forest Service and local governments as an excellent example for others to follow. The original firewood program had worked so well that plans were made for a similar project the next winter—but the old problem of needing free trees to cut once again faced the Woodyard Committee.

Left: The community woodyard at Smith's Bridge in Asheville, NC. All the work of sawing the wood to stove length was done by hand. (USDA Forest Service photo taken by J.H. Buell in February 1931)

Right: Loading city trucks with firewood to be delivered to consumers from Asheville community woodyard. (USDA Forest Service photo taken by J. H. Buell in February 1931)

**Food provided to each family in return for working 3 days cutting trees at Bent Creek Experimental Forest or processing firewood at the Asheville community woodyard**

| Food item   | Amount    | Cost <sup>a</sup> |
|-------------|-----------|-------------------|
| Flour       | 12 pounds | 5¢ per pound      |
| Fatback     | 2 pounds  | 10¢ per pound     |
| Meal        | 10 pounds | –                 |
| Tomatoes    | 2 cans    | –                 |
| Pinto beans | 5 pounds  | 5¢ per pound      |
| Grits       | 5 pounds  | –                 |
| Syrup       | 1 can     | –                 |
| Oatmeal     | 2 pounds  | –                 |
| Potatoes    | 15 pounds | 3¢ per pound      |
| Onions      | 10 pounds | –                 |
| Cabbage     | 2 heads   | 5¢ per head       |
| Coffee      | 1 pound   | 25¢ per pound     |
| Sugar       | 2 pounds  | –                 |
| Lard        | 4 pounds  | 11¢ per pound     |
| Butter      | 2 pounds  | 33¢ per pound     |

– = Cost not listed in the advertisement.  
<sup>a</sup>Costs from a grocery store advertisement.  
Source: Asheville Citizen (1931e).

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