

Ranger School –Wanakena NY
Maritime College of Forest Technology – Fredericton NB

Their people, Their philosophy, Their challenge

by

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Reviewed by Dr. Michael Bridgen

West through the spruce fir forests of Maine, onward through the snow capped peaks of the White Mountains of New Hampshire, past the farmlands and sugaries of Vermont to the western shore of Lake Champlain. And yet, further west still into the Adirondack region that is familiar to me and yet somehow different. For many of the stores and taverns that I had known well such a short time ago were shuttered and weathered, a sign of these uncertain times, or perhaps nothing more than the unstoppable advancement of time.

My journey is long and one of exploration, curiously exhilarating and at the same time apprehensive, made more bearable by my traveling companion – my wife Linda.

Our destination is nothing less than the birthplace of the idea that in 1946 became the Maritime Forest Ranger School (MFRS) in Fredericton, New Brunswick - the parent; The Ranger School in Wanakena, New York.

On the western slopes of the weathered Adirondack Mountains in New York State, nestled on the shores where the Oswegatchie River empties into Cranberry Lake, lies the original Ranger School. As we leave Highway 3 and turn onto Road 61 rounding a final bend in the road we come upon an impressive structure, which at first glance reminds one of an old boarding school where parents might send their wayward offspring for a time.

The ESF Ranger School originated in 1912 as a series of tents pitched in clearings made by the first students. By 1914 the Ranger School had constructed a dining hall and residence. The dining hall was used until 1928 after which it was renovated and today serves as the Director's residence. During this same timeframe, the New York state legislature provided \$200,000 to construct a more permanent structure which itself was in 1961 enlarged again. It should be noted that the MFRS in Fredericton was constructed using the same design that existed at Wanakena in 1946. Not only was the building structure copied, but so to were the courses and even teaching methodologies. As a past Director of MFRS told me when he visited Wanakena, the pillar locations and even the paint colours were the same as those in the original MFRS buildings, which remained in use until 1986. Between 2001 and 2003 the Ranger School at Wanakena

underwent major renovation and construction projects that have resulted in the structure and teaching facilities that we see today.

As we entered the Ranger School it was obvious that many of the original details of the school have been maintained due to its historical significance while others have been lost in order to adhere to current building codes. Offices, classrooms, utility services, dining facilities and student residences are all located in one long imposing two-storied structure which faces east onto Cranberry Lake.

As well as the main campus building, there are six other housing units. Linda and I were given accommodation in the east half of a duplex constructed in the 1930's. The floors were original hardwood, the rooms magnificently large and an enormous period stone fireplace enhanced the living room..

The setting is idyllic at least at this time of year, with the morning sun rising over the lake silhouetted by an imposing forest of pines, spruce and many hardwood species that surrounds the school, leaving one with a sense of isolation. This isolation is further solidified by the lack of cell phone coverage. As one staff member mentioned – the first day of class students are running around campus with cell phones held high ... but to no avail. It is however, not until after the sun goes down that this isolation can be most felt. If ever silence can hurt this is the place, for once the sun sets, and particularly at this time of year, you find the silence deafening and will find yourself periodically tapping your fingers just to ensure that you have not gone deaf.

The first night, as we sat outside watching several deer pass by the duplex, the silence was suddenly shattered by the logger's axe far to the east. This continued until several trees were heard to come crashing down after which, save a couple of whoops and hollers, the eerie silence once again enveloped the school.

The effect of this isolation, I think was best expressed by the Director's wife when she half jokingly commented about the isolation saying "OH yah I've been known to drive to Lake Placid (over an hour and a half) for a cup of coffee".

If this doesn't paint a picture of isolation then consider this, a newspaper article from 1950 recounting a temperature of minus 62 Fahrenheit (without windchill) at the Ranger School, and recollections of a graduate from the 1930's who indicated that temperatures of minus 40-50 degrees were not that unusual, adding that 20' of snow was not without precedent.

The isolation of Wanakena can be a mixed blessing. It can be a time of contemplation, of solidifying bonds or a time of absolute boredom. For some, the weekend can be a time to escape if home is close by, for others there is always the temptation to liven things up and in such close quarters this can sometimes lead to disagreements and frustration that can boil over. But in this too there are lessons that will be learned and the faculty and staff are not ignorant of this fact. Extra curricular activities such as fishing, hunting and canoeing

as well as more structured activities such as the Ranger School hockey team and the Woodmen's team, help to alleviate some of these pressures.

When issues do arise the student is disciplined in a timely and appropriate manner. For others it may be a visit to the resident "confessor professor", and for still others, it is a sit-down with any number of the faculty and staff who are always open to helping the student work through some life crisis.

There are a total of 25 staff that are responsible for the Ranger school; 7 faculty members, 7 kitchen staff, 5 physical plant employees, two custodial staff, a financial clerk and the RS Alumni secretary and a program aide. During our stay I was able to meet and interact with all the faculty (with the exception of the visiting instructor) and many of the staff that work at the Ranger School.

The program of study at Wanakena is one year although students must have taken certain post secondary course before they can apply to Wanakena. For example, introductory math, English and biology among others, are not offered at Wanakena but must be attained at some other institution prior to applying. As a result of this, attrition rates at Wanakena are very low.

The Ranger school at Wanakena offers two streams of study, both of which result in a designation of Associate in Applied Science (AAS) either in Forest Technology or Land Surveying Technology. Students in both streams share a number of overlapping courses although most are specific to the program of study. The current student enrolment is 41 with 32 in Forestry and the remainder in Surveying. The male to female ratio is usually 4:1

The course material in the Forestry program at both the Ranger School and MCFT are very similar, being set more or less by the certification process of the SAF, and although fewer courses are offered at Wanakena, the content of each course encompassed two or more of the courses that MCFT offers

Both schools have an agreement to accept graduates into an advanced standing in a university degree program. This association is important to both schools and is a strong selling point to student recruitment.

Students hail from across the state. From Glen's Falls to the Southern Catskills to the Finger Lakes, each have chosen the Ranger School at Wanakena in part because of the challenge and hard charging reputation synonymous with this school. In addition to the reputation there are second and in some cases third generations of the same family that have attended the Ranger School, and this goes a long way toward solidifying that familial bond. Most of Wanakena's students come from New York State although a small portion are from others close by, and given the additional tuition costs for students from out of state, this is not unexpected.



The students are amazingly similar in character to those at MCFT. My wife suggested that perhaps all students regardless of the school share similar characteristics but I tend to not agree. It seems to me that students from our two schools are different from many other colleges. It was not until one of my past students heard me talking about what I perceived as the differences and she offered this simple commentary – “We’re not pretty”. While I know she wasn’t talking so much physical, the more I thought about it this made sense. Our students dress for practicality and fieldwork. They often times come back from the field drenched and mud caked. They frequently smell of chain oil and gas or are covered in pitch. Because of the workload and deadlines they appear haggard and tired. They feel uncomfortable in a suit or dress, although I think all instructors would agree that they clean up amazingly well at graduation.

I have noticed over the years some students will take full advantage of the challenges that we as instructors place in front of them and as a result they grow in character and confidence and it is evident at graduation; others choose not to, and find ways to simply slip by, never taking advantage of the opportunity that has been afforded them. I sense MCFT and the Ranger School share this in common.

The teaching methodologies and structure remain very similar between the two schools with mornings usually used for 50 minute lectures and the afternoons for labs mostly outdoors. Students at Wanakena are in class from 8 am – 5 pm five days a week breaking only for lunch unlike MCFT where “spares” occur on most days. Day- long labs are also worked into the schedule for various courses including the capstone forest management course. Transportation for labs is in school vans, and because of the closeness of the Dubuar forest, probably average less than 30 minutes driving time, allowing for more field training. Appropriate safety gear is required depending upon the activity. Pop quizzes and tests are frequent in order to keep the students motivated and not allow them to fall behind. As with MCFT some courses, because of scheduling, find themselves being offered at a time of year when the outdoor environment is not conducive to field training or limits it to a very narrow timeframe at the beginning or end of term.



When I look at the faculty at Wanakena I see reflections of our own staff. Each of the faculty have their own teaching styles and approach to the students; some integrate more technology into their teaching, others prefer to relate personal experiences and lessons learned, and still others integrate a fine balance of the two. I see the same passion, the same hope that this student can make it, the contained frustration at the idiosyncrasies of youth and the pride that comes when you reach that one floundering student and the bulb clicks.

I listened to stories that staff shared, reminding one of his first lab on snowshoes and unceremoniously falling backwards. I heard other commiserate about the inappropriate use of technology, the loss of their sugar bush and the same disdain for those dreaded weekly staff meetings (to which I recommended "floating doctor appointments"). When I look at Wanakena I see the same unwritten lessons being promoted that we have taken to writing down at MCFT - self discipline, accountability, teamwork and punctuality



When I asked one of the faculty what he felt was the difference between Wanakena and other schools, he answered by telling me a joke. He said there was student at one of the larger schools and he was to hand in an exam but then got distracted doing something else. When he looked up the teacher was at the front of the class and all the other students had handed in their exams. This student went forward and the teacher said, you're late I will not accept your exam, to which the student exclaimed, "Do you know who I am?" to which the instruction answered "not a clue". The student reached forward and lifted the exams and inserted his into the middle of the pack and simply said as he turned to leave, "I didn't think so".



There is an intimacy in the staff to student ratio enjoyed by both our schools that fosters a family like atmosphere. But it is beyond simple numbers; it is the interactions in the field where instructors demonstrate by doing. Instructors get as muddy, as cold, and in the spring as bloody, as the students and there is a strength of connection in that which few other schools attain. Share hardship with a person and you are bonded in a way that cannot be duplicated. If you think about it, this is the quintessential definition of sustainable competitive advantage - the secret to any successful venture.

The two most influential Directors at each of the schools – James F. Dubuar at Wanakena and Dr. Hank Blenis at MCFT, both hailed from New York State, both served in the military and each set the course and did more to define the respective schools than any other single Director. It is interesting to note that in both cases, their final act as Director forever connected them to future graduates of their respective schools.

But the similarities with respect to the Director persist even today, with Wanakena's Director (Class of 73) and his wife (Class of 83) both graduates of the Ranger School, as is MCFT's Director and his wife (both Class of 84) from MFRS.

Similar problems have faced both institutions over the years, although at differing times in their history, and each institution took actions based on the prevailing conditions at the time.

Whereas Wanakena started out in an isolated albeit prosperous area in 1912 (tourism, logging, mining), MCFT was established on the outskirts of the city of Fredericton in 1946.

The village of Wanakena and surrounding area was heavily reliant on resource based industries, and as those went through boom and bust cycles so did the prosperity of the area. MCFT on the other hand, was located within the capital city of the province of New Brunswick, which is the seat of government and the home to one of the largest universities in the province. As government grew (which seems inevitable) and the university enrolment increased, the population and prosperity of the city increased. For MCFT, this would prove a double-edged sword.



Both schools understand the importance of having a forest- land base to teach students the practical skills that technicians need. In the case of the Ranger School at Wanakena the students have the Dubuar forest, whose initial 1800 acres was originally given to the University of New York School of Forestry in 1912 and under which the Ranger School operates. MFRS had no land base, but rather had access to a number of forested areas owned by the University of New Brunswick, none of which have any guarantee of tenure. The interesting thing that I came to understand about the Dubuar forest is that the faculty of the Ranger school are involved with the management, via suggestions and professional advice, however the authority rests with the State University in Syracuse. As it was pointed out to me, the property is not intensively managed. That being said, students and faculty appear to have unfettered access for any number of practical field exercises.

For a number of years MFRS had access to, and held primary responsibility of actively managing the University of New Brunswick (UNB) woodlot that lies adjacent to the

school. After some issues a number of years ago, the university assumed management of the woodlot. In more recent years UNB has leased forested land for development as the city expands outward. Most recently, the construction of a large mall and a paved road, now physically separates MCFT from the UNB woodlot. There are long-term plans to further develop the UNB woodlot, eroding away an integral teaching component of MCFT.

The future of the Dubuar Forest for Wanakena would appear much more secure.

Perhaps the single largest difference that I noticed was the autonomy of MCFT verses that of Wanakena. The Ranger School falls under the State University of New York, Environment, Science and Forestry Department. The Physical plant, the forestland base and the Food Services are all administered separately through the State University in Syracuse. This would seem at the onset to be a very dysfunctional arrangement, however it seems to work well given the closeness of the school environment and the willingness of all to put the students well being foremost.

This administrative arrangement has probably done more to produce the diverging strategies and development of our two schools. For while we share a common beginning, each of these schools have traveled somewhat separate roads leading to where we are today.

A challenge for Wanakena is to navigate the academic and administrative complexities associated with operating under the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry in Syracuse. This is no small task and involves diplomacy, understanding and flexibility; something for which Wanakena faculty and staff are well suited.

Wanakena is at a crossroads today in part because of low enrolment. MFRS experienced the same dilemma a number of years ago. As a result of the decreasing enrolment and high attrition rates a number of new initiatives were tried in order to increase enrolment and decrease attrition including the “module program”. At Wanakena summer courses in subjects such as biology were offered in an attempt to attract more students. For MFRS none of the initiatives seemed to achieve the desired results – it seems similar for Wanakena

In response to the decreasing enrolment, the Maritime Forest Ranger School, in 2003, underwent a name change to the maritime College of Forest Technology and moved to a two- year curriculum. This of course was not without additional costs, only some of which were anticipated, and most importantly, extra workload for the existing faculty and staff. In actual fact, the number of courses offered was increased, as were the total teaching hours and the number of lead teaching staff was actually reduced. In addition, the name change was of concern to alumni, which viewed the name change as the end of the Old Ranger School and its almost mythical reputation. But as I tell my students, the Old Ranger School reputation is theirs to carry forward for it was as much the actions and conduct of the graduates as anything, that created it. For my part, I will continue to push

my students hard and try and instill a sense of self respect in each of them and the belief that they can get through anything that life puts before them.

As noted earlier, the Ranger School currently offers two streams of study. A third stream is being considered - a degree in Environmental and Resources Conservation which will focus on among other things recreation, wildlife and social studies. This third stream is being offered in an effort to address the issue of decreasing enrolment. Given the importance of tourism to the Adirondack region and the importance of wildlife management to the ecological health of a well functioning forest, the approach seems appropriate. Concerns with additional costs and logistics of how this will be managed with the existing staff will certainly bear watching, as will the response of the students both past, present and future. Let it be said however, that excellence never rests with the timid – change, after all, is Nature’s Mighty Law.



At MCFT we have already been in the position that Wanakena finds itself today only a few years earlier due to the urging of our Board of Governors, foresight of past Directors and the support of the Maritime Forest Industry. For us, one crisis has been dealt with but others already loom on the horizon.

While I was impressed by many things at Wanakena, the friendliness of the people we met, their willingness to openly respond to my incessant queries, perhaps the most poignant was opening a book that was in my “welcome package”. It was a copy of the annual Alumni publication and as I read through it, it was like reading a family tree. There were stories written by graduates and sometimes just little notes letting folks know how someone was doing. There were several that announced the untimely passing of someone and I found myself going down to the student lounge where the grad pictures hung looking for the faces of those that had been mentioned. For me, it brought back the memory of the recent, all-too-early loss of one of our own. I like to think that his wife, also a graduate of our school, and his darling daughter have been able to take some comfort in the bonds that both formed when at MCFT. For me this reinforces my belief that it is not what we teach, or where or perhaps even how, but rather people that define each of our schools. It reminds me as well just how fragile and fleeting life can be and that our plans in life seldom resemble the reality we live.

The ties between the Wanakena area and the Canadian Maritimes goes beyond the schools as became clear to me one night as my wife and I had dinner (and a Guinness or two) with the Director and his wife. During the course of the evening I had been hearing about the paper mill at Newton Falls being brought back to production after being shuttered for almost 6 years. What is most interesting is that the group that played such a key part in this resurrection was The Minas Basin Pulp and Power Company out of Hantsport, Nova Scotia. As it happened, that night I was introduced to Scott Travers (Chief Operating Officer) and his wife Debbie.

I would be remiss if I did not thank Dr Bridgen for having the courage to take me up on this exchange last fall, for without his belief in this exchange I would not have had the chance to visit Wanakena. Dr Bridgen and I not only share a number of similar courses, more importantly we share a passion for our respective institutions and an even greater one for the students we teach. I don't believe that it is that either of us expects our students to excel in forestry, but rather we want them to succeed in life.

In many ways I view Dr. Bridgen as a close friend that I had not met before but with whom I immediately formed a strong connection.

When I was 17 and left home for the first time, I remember feeling a sense of exhilaration at the new adventure that lay before me while at the same time a sense of apprehension at leaving family and not knowing when or if I would see them again – I had that same feeling on the day that I left Wanakena.

I see no differences between the faculty, staff and students of our respective schools ... we are family separated by nothing more than miles.

Below are several websites that will give a historical perspective of the Ranger school in Wanakena. The first site is a well-written article on James Dubuar, the second on the history of the Ranger School and the third (believe it or not from Popular Mechanics) on the Ranger School. The last two websites have some very good historical pictures.

<http://www.foresthistory.org/Publications/FHT/FHTSpringFall2001/coufal.pdf>

<http://cliftonfine.wikispaces.com/History+of+the+Wanakena+Ranger+School>

http://books.google.ca/books?id=b-EDAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA88&lpg=PA88&dq=James+Dubuar&source=bl&ots=Eu28kgEw2t&sig=XgogqUwtMdtzVvJW7yWph65IaDc&hl=en&ei=sJuVS8S1MomRI Ae53dn7AQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=10&ved=0CCIQ6AEwCQ#v=onepage&q=James%20Dubuar&f=false

Caricatures were drawn by Ian Smith (MFRS class 1979) based on ideas presented by the author. Any resemblance is purely coincidental.

DMcD.