

1-1-2013

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Char Miller
Pomona College

Recommended Citation

Miller, Char, "Uncle Sam's Badge: Identity and Representation in the USDA Forest Service, 1905–2013" (2013). *Pomona Faculty Publications and Research*. 387.
http://scholarship.claremont.edu/pomona_fac_pub/387

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Uncle Sam's Badge: Identity and Representation in the USDA Forest Service, 1905–2013

AQ:A **Char Miller**

Howard Abbey could recall the exact moment when he learned that he had passed the forest ranger's examination for the newly established USDA Forest Service (USFS). In the early morning of Aug. 1, 1905, while he was managing a team of horses pulling a mowing machine on the McIntosh Ranch in the northern Sierra Nevada Mountains, Allen Ray Powers, a Forest Assistant on the Plumas Forest Reserve, rode up and "informed me that I was wanted at the Forest Supervisor's office in Quincy." Abbey handed over the reins to his boss and walked the 2 miles to town where he met with Supervisor Louis A. Barrett, who congratulated the young ranch hand on having passed the exam. After accepting the offer of a job as a Forest Guard on the Plumas, and "taking the Oath of Office," Abbey was "given a bronze badge—insignia of office" (Abbey 1940, p. 5).

Although he had to purchase a lot of gear for his new position, including a "strong pair of high top shoes," and was required to "personally equip himself with one or more saddles and pack animals," it was the badge—a gift from Uncle Sam—that Abbey most treasured. And it was the object he most remembered. In a memoir written 35 years after he joined the Forest Service, and 20 after he left its employ, he took pains to detail the badge's outline: it was in the "shape of a shield inscribed, Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture with a facsimile of a pine tree separating the two large letters U.S." He was as particular about its size, too, noting that it was "quite large compared to one worn nowadays," estimating that the mid-20th-century version was "less than one half the size of the first original badge" that he had pinned on his suspenders. Clearly Abbey was proud that he had not lost it during his 15 years of service, proud that on his retirement "a number of Forest Service officers" asked him to give it to them as a much-sought after "souvenir," and even more proud that over time he had *become* the badge: "after I was known to the general public and later as a Forest Ranger I had no occasion to display [it]" (Abbey 1940).

Abbey was not alone in his intense relationship with this emblem of his profession, and the role it played in identifying the public service he routinely performed on behalf of the national forests and the communities they enveloped and sustained (Figure 1). Other F1 members of the first generation of forest rangers similarly recalled the electrifying moment when they learned they had passed the exam, took the oath of office, and donned the new service's official regalia (Riis 1937, Rothman 1994, Koch 1998). Succeeding cohorts were just as devoted to this shiny symbol of their contributions to the

land, the agency, and the larger society, leading Herbert Kaufman to argue in the early 1960s that the "Forest Service insignie" had become "a familiar and respected one the country over" (Kaufman 1960, p. 185). Another 40 years on, the self-respect felt by those who have worn the badge was reflected in the choice that Jack Ward Thomas, the 13th Chief of the Forest Service, made about the book jacket for his memoir. He selected a photographic portrait of himself in his official uniform in which he is turned in such a way as to display the USFS pine-tree patch emblazoned on his leading shoulder (Thomas 2004) (Figure 2). This emblem has retained its popularity and to- F2 temic force well into the second decade of the 21st century, as Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack would discover in the late winter of 2013, after news leaked out that that US Department of Agriculture (USDA) had embarked on a top-to-bottom rebranding of all 20 agencies within the department; this would have meant the erasure of the Forest Service's by-now legendary pine-tree shield, but a public uproar forced the department to back down (Miller 2013a, 2013b, 2013c).

How is it that such a relatively small object as the official emblem of a federal land management agency could generate such a sustained, and often fierce, level of loyalty, respect, and devotion? What role did its origins play in developing this century-long attachment, this knitting together of disparate individuals across time? And how can one explain the badge's continual cultural cache? An answer to these and related queries requires an analysis of the insignia's creation story and an examination of its ongoing legacy—its strikingly strong hold over present day belief and behavior.

Uniform Thinking

Gifford Pinchot, the agency's first chief, could never have predicted that the pine-tree logo would have had such an enduring impact. But he certainly hoped that it would claim and proclaim its wearer's fidelity. Even before the US Forest Service was established in 1905, even before Pinchot made the transition from serving as the fourth head of the Bureau of Forestry to the new agency's first chief, he and his small staff had been thinking about how to build and nurture an agencywide esprit d'corps. Generating this dynamic sensibility, Pinchot reasoned, was especially important because the fledgling Forest Service would be hiring a good many new employees to manage millions of acres of new national forests. Forest guards such as Howard Abbey and forest rangers such as Jim Sizer (Figure 3) F3 would be assigned to protect and regulate these far-flung landscapes, often without direct contact with their immediate supervisors, and because these individuals would be living and working on their own, they would need some set of symbols to remind them, and the public with whom they came into contact, of their connection to the agency's mission, goals, and objectives. "I am assured that the great fundamental difference between men, the reason why some fail and some succeed, is not a difference in ability or opportunity," Pinchot argued in *The Fight for Conservation*, "but a difference in vision and

Received July 1, 2013; accepted July 2, 2013; published online Month XX, 2013.

Affiliation: Char Miller (*char.miller@pomona.edu*), Pomona College, Environmental Analysis Program, Claremont, CA.

in relentless loyalty to ideals—vision to see the great object...and unwavering, uninterrupted loyalty in its service.” Wearing Uncle Sam’s badge, and a uniform on which to pin it, would become an important demonstration of this full-hearted, idealistic commitment to the commonweal (Pinchot 1910, p. 99).

To determine what this insignia would look like and ensure that this new emblem would “supplant the circular nickled badge that previously showed the authority of for-

est service officers,” the agency’s leadership announced a design contest in the spring of 1905; all employees of the Forest Service’s Washington office were eligible to participate. Yet because the judging committee, which consisted of Pinchot, Associate Forester Overton Price, and key staffer Edward T. Allen, offered no guidelines, the initial submissions were more fanciful than forceful. “A highly varied collection of tree-related designs resulted, including scrolls, leaves, and maple seeds.” None apparently embodied what the committee believed were the requisite and “recognized symbols of authority” (Harmon 1980, p. 188). Allen was particularly “insistent on a conventionalized shield of some kind to assure quick public recognition of authority and also [to] suggest public defense as a forestry object.” He had a template in mind, too: the logo of the Union Pacific Railroad. The story goes that Allen and a colleague, William C. Hodge, were kicking around ideas about how to adapt the corporation’s heraldic-like image for the Forest Service’s badge, when Allen traced the contour of the Union Pacific shield off a handy timetable and then centered the letters “U. S.” into the artwork. Hodge then sketched a fir tree silhouette on thin cigarette paper and “laid it in between the two letters to complete the symbolism.” Actually, there was one final step to complete the design. The two foresters inserted, in block letters, the name of the agency



Figure 3. Recent US Forest Service staff wearing uniform. (Courtesy of Society of American Foresters archives.)

above and the department below the central imagery (“The Shield and the Tree” 1930, p. 392, Harmon 1980, p. 188). They showed their rough draft to Pinchot and Price, who reportedly recognized its impactful possibilities and declared that the contest was over. By July 1905, enough shields had been manufactured that the agency was able to issue one to each of its forest guards, rangers, and other officers. (Allen is said to have received the first one, and in 1923 he donated it to the agency where it remains on display in the chief’s office.) Among those who would become one of the proud bearers of the new, large, and evocative badge was Howard Abbey.

Symbolic Power

That this early generation of foresters took considerable pride in donning the shield makes sense. After all, theirs was not an easy lot (Riis 1937, Roberts 1965, Rothman 1994, Koch 1998). They encountered physical challenges, public controversy, and administrative headaches while laboring to establish the national forests on the ground and to gain social acceptance for their individual efforts and the agency that employed them. Arguing that the forest ranger “was a comparatively new figure in the people’s service, and that his pine tree badge is the latest symbol of Government’s helpfulness to its citizens,” the agency’s second chief, Harry S. Graves, stressed that this bronze shield-wearing individual “is often the only representative of vested authority for many miles around, so he is likely to be called on for any and all sorts of help when the conditions are still primitive” (Graves 1916, p. 184). That these rangers undertook such an all-encom-



Figure 1. Jack Ward Thomas, 13th Chief of the Forest Service. (Courtesy of Jack Ward Thomas.)



Figure 2. Jim Sizer, Apache National Forest, circa 1910. (Courtesy of the Forest History Society.)



Figure 4. This is reported to be the first Forest Service badge, and which E.T. Allen donated to the agency. (Courtesy of Gerald Williams.)

passing range of work on the “remote peripheries” of the American West further underscored the value and virtue of wearing “Uncle’s badge” (Rothman 1994, p. 63).

But it was not the rangers alone for whom the shield conveyed a strong sense of worth. It was also true for their loved ones, for whom it had an attractive authority, a magnetic pull. Indeed, the badge’s magnetism was a favorite trope of novelists who wrote fictional accounts of the agency’s pioneering era. Consider an early scene in Hamlin Garland’s *Cavanagh, Forest Ranger: A Romance of the Mountain West*, in which an eastern-educated young woman, Lee Virginia, ventured into a frontier hotel dining room and “glanced round her neighbors with shrinking eyes.” They widened when her gaze fell on two men at a neighboring table, whose “greetings were frank and manly, and whose table manners betrayed a higher form of life.” The most intriguing of the pair was a young man “of a compact, athletic figure,” with a “handsome head” and “eyes so brown, so quietly humorous, and so keen.” But what really caught her attention was his outfit: “On the breast of his olive green coat hung a silver badge which bore a pine-tree in the center.... He looked like a young officer in the undress uniform of the regular army.” Lee Virginia was hooked (Garland 1910, p. 21).

Snagged too was the unnamed young woman who narrates Elizabeth Canfield Flint’s *Pine-Tree Shield*, a fictionalized version of the life of forester Howard Flint (whose pseudonym is Hugh Kent) and his wife (a stand-in for the author). The young

Mrs. Kent shared her husband’s unwavering commitment to the agency’s idealistic ambitions and the life of sacrifice its rangers (and spouses) endured. Her response to his offer of marriage was properly plainspoken: “I had promised to take the trail with him into his woods to fight with the Service to preserve the forests.” She knew the monetary rewards would be slim to none, for her husband’s previous employer at US Steel had bluntly sketched out their fiscal future: “Stay with U. S. Steel,” he advised his protégée, and “we’ll make a name for you. Go to the Forest Service and you’ll starve to death” (Flint 1943, p. 9). The narrator’s staunch support of her husband’s prospects, however impecunious, is underscored by her disappointment not to have been present when her beloved took the oath of office. Days later, while her husband dressed, she spotted his badge lying on a table. “It was a bronze shield with a pine tree up the center flanked by a U. and an S. I pinned it on the pocket flap of his khaki shirt, regretful that I could not have put it there the first time he wore it.” His shield was hers (Flint 1943, p. 27).

To be worthy of these dedicated women’s love and the emblematic livery that these rangers daily wore on the job—the two elements are parts of a whole, these novelists imply—also required a formal declaration of faith. One of the most suggestive of these is delivered by Bob Orde, the central character in Stewart Edward White’s *The Rules of the Game*, a novel that one reviewer praised as “preeminently a presentation, sane and fair, on the conservation problem as it appears to both sides on the field” (ALA Booklist 1911, p. 211). No sooner had Orde decided to eschew the dazzling monetary rewards that might have come his way working in the lumber business and instead took a vow of poverty by throwing his lot in with the Forest Service, than he delivered a stirring soliloquy. The “far country of new things was to be the field of his enterprise,” he mused, a life that would be as rewarding as it would be difficult—and rewarding because of its manifold difficulties: he would be “living hard, dwelling lowly in poverty, accomplishing with small means, striving mightily, combating the great elemental nature and the powers of darkness in men,” all so that the “inheritance of the people yet to come might be assured.” With this shimmering vision, Orde’s “old life receded swiftly. A new glory and uplift of soul swept him from his old moorings” (White 1910, p. 387).

Gifford Pinchot could have not have written a better script. Indeed, he was a charismatic figure in each of these novels, wrote a foreword to Garland’s, and was honored with a dedication from Flint (“to Gifford Pinchot whose dynamic leadership galvanized the groping forces of conservation into a vehicle that made possible their privilege of serving an ideal”). Curiously enough, these three writers also may have cribbed from the chief’s spellbinding farewell address to his troops, delivered just days after President William Howard Taft had fired him for insubordination in 1910. In his impromptu speech to the Washington office, Pinchot urged his colleagues to stay to course. “I do not want any of you to do anything whatever that will let this Service fall, or even droop, from the high standard that we have built up for it together,” he thundered. “Never forget that the fight in which you are engaged for the safe and decent handling of our timberlands is infinitely larger than any man’s personal presence or personal fortunes. We have had here together the kind of association that I do not believe any set of men in the Government service ever had before” (Pinchot 1998, p. 454).

Sartorial Signals

The very uniqueness that Pinchot identified, however, raises questions about why and how subsequent generations of Forest Service employees have remained so attached to the most immediately identifiable symbol of the agency—the pine-tree badge—and the persistent cohesiveness that it seems to embody (Figure 4). Some answers come from anthropologists, sociologists, and cultural critics who have probed the social meaning of uniforms and related regalia. Bonami et al. (2000), Fussell (2002), and Lurie (2000) make the case that uniforms signal an individual’s acceptance of a particular social reality established by and for this group. Because a uniform and its trappings signify agreement with certain “codes of behavior,” wearing them helps “transform behavior into conduct.” When people who are similarly dressed conduct themselves in similar ways it builds “mutual trust attributed by one individual to another regarding the very possibility of collective coexistence,” which in turn reinforces and becomes “concrete evidence of a mutually

declared social morality” (Bonami et al. 2000, p. 145). The uniform is an identifier, marking off common beliefs and shared values; in the process, it helps to build an internal esprit. This is precisely what Pinchot and the Forest Service leadership had in mind when they drew up plans for the new agency’s regulation uniform and badge (Kaufman 1960, Joseph 1986, Bonami et al. 2000, Fussell 2002).

Yet if clothing such as the Forest Service’s functions as a sign system (Lurie 2000), a language understood by those who wear this apparel, it also can be interpreted by those outside the system (Joseph 1986, Craik 2005). In fact, it must be, for the exterior in part defines the interior. “The whole purpose of uniforms and badges is to identify members of organizations,” argues Kaufman and “to differentiate the wearers from everyone else and to link them with each other. The livery and insignia show at a glance who is ‘in’ an agency and who is not” (Kaufman 1960, p. 184), a critical set of distinctions between the included and excluded. Lurie (2000) stresses that this uniformity of clothing is a reflection of a singularity of mind and purpose: “to put on such livery is give up one’s right to act as an individual—in terms of speech, to be partially or wholly censored” (p. 17–18). Fussell counters that uniforms do not enslave, but rather can communicate “a great deal that you don’t have to say yourself” (Fussell 2002, p. 198), a flexibility in communication that Kaufman also notices in his classic study of the Forest Service. Allowing that the agency’s official apparel “fosters a group spirit and unity, a ‘we’ feeling, a common bond,” he observes that Forest Service personnel demonstrated a healthy variation in response to wearing it: “some men prefer to wear work clothes most of the time—particularly when dealing with loggers and grazers, before whom they prefer to appear as individuals doing business than authoritative agents of a government bureau—and are regularly admonished by their superiors to get into their ‘greens’” (Kaufman 1960, p. 184). Intriguingly, these variances may further aid the coalescing process. Although their reactions to regulation attire “are mixed, and the observation of the rules somewhat spotty, it is significant that a majority of officers in the Forest Service expressed a preference for retaining the uniform” (Kaufman 1960, p. 184).

Such formal clothing, like the ubiquitous pine-tree shield that is replicated on all agency vehicles, site signage, and formal letterhead, inculcates the “will and capacity to conform.” These symbols, “even when they are not enthusiastically supported, keep the members aware of their membership, and encourage them to think in terms of the agency” (Kaufman 1960, p. 185). What Kaufman does not say, but which is true as well, is that the maintenance of these signifiers over the past century has engaged each new employee cohort with this most visible of the agency’s norms. Even as these standards—behavioral, cultural, and social—have evolved in response to critical changes in the broader society, and despite a sense among some older employees that their younger counterparts do not always adopt the same set of perceptions about the agency’s “cultural DNA,” the badge and uniform continue to demarcate common ground (Miller 2012, p. 151).

Backfire

It was in defense of this shared space and collective history that led Forest Service retirees to raise a ruckus in February 2013 after learning that the USDA was in the process of deleting the pine-tree badge as the agency’s official symbol. It was to be replaced with the USDA’s generic logo, the announced purpose of which was to “give consistent identity to the Department, increase public recognition of the value and wide range of USDA’s products and services, and bring economy of scale to the production of visual information materials” (USDA 2013). In their rebuttals, retirees challenged the department’s quest for lock-step uniformity and its willingness to casually erase the Forest Service’s past. Argued Jim Golden, chair of the National Association of Forest Service Retirees: “People are in disbelief that anyone would suggest discarding one of the best known logos in the American West” (Lewiston Tribune 2013). They also took umbrage with what they perceived to be the expunging of their years of service to the agency, the national forests and grasslands, and the nation (Miller 2013c). Their protests, which involved a letter-writing campaign, and the use of print, electronic, and social media to convey their dismay, had a significant impact; in early April the USDA announced that the Forest Service’s symbol was exempted from the secretary’s order (The Lookout 2013). By their successful activism, these men and women affirmed

that even though they no longer wore the pine-tree shield, it retains a profound hold on their affections and remains an indelible mark of their public service, a life-long badge of honor.

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