

11-28-1962

The Knothole, November 28, 1962

SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry Student Body

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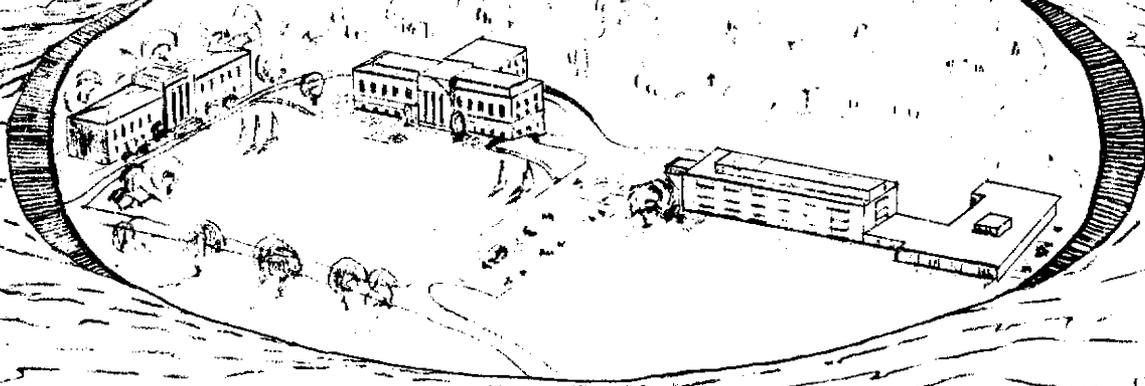
SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry Student Body, "The Knothole, November 28, 1962" (1962). *The Knothole*. Book 13.

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OUR CAMPUS - AS SEEN THROUGH THE

KNOTHOLE



Editors: H. Chaphe, T. D. Fitzgerald, J. Locke, D. Riordan, P. Sarver, H. Welm

November 28, 1962 Deadline for Entries: Monday 8:45 A.M. Published by Alpha Xi Sigma

LETTER TO THE EDITORS

For the last two weeks, the Knothole has had letters appear that commented about the grading system at our College. Mr. Riordan was in favor of refining the system, while Mr. Fisher was in favor of junking the present system and replacing it with one where only "satisfactory" and "unsatisfactory" record a student's ability. Mr. Fisher also suggested that we examine our values instead of our grading system. I would hate to have to do that, so I will confine myself to what I feel is a necessary task: clarification of some of the facts of the present situation. I do this because I think it impossible to do anything until we have made sure what we are going to change or preserve. In the realm of science, for example, no chemist in his right mind would attempt to cause a reaction to take place unless he knew what it was he was going to react, or at least was sure that no untoward circumstances would result.

The present system of grading, where A, B, C, D, F stand for excellent, good, fair, poor, and failure, respectively, makes use of these symbols to communicate, to the interested, that degree of ability a certain student exhibited in a given course. An "A", then, should represent that ability in a student that a given professor considers to be "excellent". A student who gets an A, or an employer who notes a student's marks, should both know something about the student's ability, at least in a given course.

As with any symbol, these letters are completely devoid of any meaning besides that which we attach to them. Like a map, they should indicate a certain terrain; a mark should represent a student's ability, should place that student somewhere on the "territory" we could call the "ability area", for purposes that will become clear. With the assumption that a map should be as accurate as possible made let us

investigate just how accurate a map can be, whether a map of a physical area, or of an "area of ability".

Now, it is obvious to most people that not every map plots the same territory, and that not every map made, even of the same territory, is the same, for human judgement and reasoning, two non-constant factors, enter in. (Students in surveying probably can appreciate this readily!) Not only are all maps different, no matter how slightly, but each person can and usually does interpret a maps "meaning" differently. Given the precisest instruments and the same map, two people would necessarily plot the same position on a certain territory differently; each judges differently what a position on a map represents, because each is human and therefore individual and therefore possessing differing interpretive ability. The essential things to note are that no two maps represent the same territory (provided they are not copies), that two maps of the same territory are different, and that no two people interpret a map the same way.

The present system of grading at the College of Forestry is liable to all the pitfalls and inadequacies that can occur when more than one person's judgement determine a certain position on a certain territory. The marks we receive are as accurate as the way they are arrived at; my mark in Zoology is as close to giving accurate meaning to my ability in that course as are the tests which determine it. What is more, our marks stand for various things; all students are aware of differing attitudes on the part of professors towards what deserves an A, B, etc. Finally, the meaning we attach to these marks and the meaning others attach to these symbols, is different from our actual ability in these courses. But all this is presuming that marks do measure ability in a course. I've chosen this assumption in my explanation because it is, I think, the most commonly held assumption. But it is by no means the only thing measured by a mark; we not only have to contend with various ways of constructing the maps (giving us marks), but we also are not even sure that the mark is the map of the territory we thought it to be; we are not sure whether the mark was intended to signify a position on the "ability area", or whether it was intended to locate the student on some other territory, as some professors give marks according to effort, or as many teachers do when they not only consider a student's ability, but also his class participation. The entire system is a very frail and innaccurate one; it is thrown out of balance easily; I wonder at its worth, when from personal experience I have come to feel the inequities of it.

I missed getting an A in chemistry 6a by .1 per cent; that put me in the same category with hundreds of other students, many of whom had appreciably lower totals than I. I know this, my professor knew it, but to any one else, I had the same ability as hundreds of others. I wasn't "near-excellent" but merely "good". Now, I don't say I'm the only one who has had this happen to him, and that is what makes me wonder, for it seems my case is not so exceptional or rare.

The question to be answered then, is not whether our present system is inadequate, but rather, just what we can expect of any system so tied up in abstract terms as "excellent", etc., or, more directly, if there is something wrong with the present system, what is it and is it a fault of the system or of the people who make use of it? I have tried to make clearer one conception of the system, so that perhaps those who dislike it can discover a root cause to its imperfections. This is the only step we should try to take at the present time.

Thomas Horbett '65

SUMMER EXPERIENCE

The Appalachians rang no particular bell before I spent a summer working for the Entomology Division of the Southeast Forest Experimental Station. One day you're in Buffalo watching the smoke contaminate the city, and the next day you're in Asheville, N. C. watching the clouds gather among the mountains. Quite a contrast - but I didn't really appreciate it until I was up in the mountains and looking down.

Azalea and rhododendron literally covered the ridges, and in places broke only where the Blue Ridge Highway wound through. From on top of Mt. Mitchell (the highest peak in the East) I had my first good look at the country. In every direction mountains broke into the sky, and clouds gave the appearance of a vast white sea filling the valleys. The clouds were matted into dense masses so that the sky above them was perfectly clear. It certainly didn't take much imagination to name the great Smokies. Among the countless other things visible from the top were the Frazer fir. Their red tops stuck up everywhere testifying to the presence of the Balsam woolly aphid. I saw a lot more of these during the summer for my work at the station revolved almost entirely around a Balsam woolly aphid control project.

Work, however, is only a small part of the summer and there was much more to do and see. If you happen to be interested in hillbilly music (more properly "blue-grass"), this is the place to be. Every night I would pull out my guitar and sit on the front porch of the boarding house. In no time at all somebody would come along and say "mind if I set a spell" -- and surer than not he'd have a harmonica in his back pocket. Shortly thereafter another would come along. Soon, we would have a whole group playing and singing and we wouldn't stop until the landlady chased us away.

Then there was the Asheville Folk Festival which brought everyone out of the hills. It was the most impromptu presentation I have ever seen, and more than once the ominous stage hook made its appearance. I particularly remember one middle-aged grandmother all decked out in an archaic black velvet rhinestone-studded dress stomping her foot and plucking away on her home-made banjo. The whole festival was filmed and documented to preserve the tradition of the region.

Blue grass, however, wasn't everything - there was always rock hounding. Towards the end of July we went up in the hills to see a man who was known for his collection of rocks and minerals. It was here that I got my first real look at the "mountain folk". We drove up to his house through his cornfield - there wasn't a road, just a path through the corn. When we emerged on the other side of the field we were faced by a homestead which seemed as appropriate here as a white wooden church does in New England. The building was made from very rough square-hewn logs, and had only one small window. On the porch a very old woman (about the oldest I have ever seen) was sitting in a rocking chair, chewing dippin snuff, and scanning the corn. A somewhat younger woman was working over the tall weeds around the house with a scythe. The old fellow was sleeping in the shade under the porch. We woke him and he took us in to see his minerals. The interior was no fancier than the exterior. The only furnishings were a table, three chairs, one bed, and a laundry stove. The floor was rough lumber. A very large glass case covered with dust occupied one corner. After blowing off the dust we could see that it was literally filled with precious and semi-precious gems ranging from rubies and star sapphires to perfect quartz crystals and chalcedony. He also had sacks of titanium lining the walls and flowing out onto the porch. Although he did mention that he was waiting for the assayer to come along, it was obvious that he would never part with any of his collection -- save a few rubies which he intended to trade for a new mine detector. Our visit ended rather abruptly when one of my buddies leaned too hard on the top of the case and broke the glass.

4.

My work at the station involved quite a lot of travel and I was able to see most of the Southeast during the summer. The main impression I received from the Virginia coast was that it was the hottest place in the world, and that its forests were the most virulent. I never saw as much poison ivy and poison oak in any one place; it was virtually impossible to walk into a stand and not come out with it hanging from your clothes. The agricultural economy of the coastal plain was particularly interesting. Along the main highway trucks were lined up for miles, and in the vast fields thousands of migrants, working under a tremendously hot sun, were gathering potatoes for shipment. Anyone familiar with the ballads of Woody Guthrie can appreciate the emotional impact of these people-land relationships.

Down in the South Carolina-Georgia area everything seemed to move slowly, but with the heat it was understandable. The hills of Kentucky and Tennessee were much cooler, but called for real skill when driving a near brakeless jeep over the roads. Twists and bends are so common to the rolling roads of the mountainous South that only the most treacherous are marked in advance. It takes some adjustment after becoming used to the "warning curve", "shift gear" markers that precede even the most moderate curves in the North.

Although, I never quite became acclimated to the South, I thoroughly enjoyed my stay, and found it very difficult to head back to the North. I left the South with the feeling that it was far richer in tradition than any other part of the country I had visited. I was also pretty sure that one would have to go a long way to find a more congenial people.

T. D. F.

ROBIN HOOD PHOTO CONTEST

This year the contest is divided into three categories: landscapes and miscellaneous in the color division and black and white photos on any subject. The contest will run from now until January 14, 1963. The winner and honorable mention in each category will have his photo enlarged and displayed in Marshall Hall. These photos will be the first in a new permanent file in the library for the use of future contestants in this contest. A prize of ten dollars will be given to the winner in each category.

Please leave all photos with the librarian at the main desk in the library along with a 25¢ entry fee per photo. All slides should be in an envelope with your name on it. All photos should be on a 8½" x 11" cardboard backing with your name. You will be able to claim all entries after the judging. A few words to the wise: in past years there haven't been many black and white entries making it quite easy to judge that part of the contest and don't forget that originality counts.

R. Sena - contest manager

CONTRIBUTIONS FROM MOOSEWOOD'S NOTEBOOK

10

From July 1960 "Scientific American".

In the 5th Century A.D. Tsu Chung-Chih, a Chinese astronomer, contemplated the series 1,1,3,3,5,5. Dividing the last three by the first three numbers he obtained Pi to six decimal places! This was only discovered in the Occident some 1,000 years later.