

Verne Rhoades Tribute for Founders Day — Oct. 5, 2001

This Founders Day the university is honoring the late Verne Rhoades Sr., for whom the UNC Asheville science building is named. Completed in 1961, one of the first two buildings on campus, it was named in honor of Mr. Rhoades in October 1967 by action of the Board of Trustees, a year and a half before his death in early 1969 at age 87.

Mr. Rhoades was a pioneer forester, visionary leader, and builder of Asheville and Western North Carolina in the first 60 years of the 20th century. He was involved in many vital activities of the time that have, quite literally, shaped this region and the city as we know it today.

One of the first scientific foresters in Western North Carolina and a graduate of the Biltmore Forest School, the first school of forestry in the United States, he played an important role in the formation and administration of the Pisgah National Forest and later in the creation of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. An Asheville business and civic leader after his marriage in 1926 to prominent Ashevillean Dorothea Johnston Weaver, he was a member of the boards of Wachovia Bank and Trust Co., Asheville Savings and Loan Association, and Carolina Power and Light Co.

Mr. Rhoades' coming to Asheville in 1906 was serendipitous, by his own account. A native of Missouri and 1903 graduate of William Jewell College, he came to Asheville with the direct purpose of attending Dr. Carl Schenck's Biltmore Forest School. Dr. Schenck at the time was in charge of forestry operations for the Biltmore Estate, succeeding Gifford Pinchot (who became chief of the U.S. Forest Service under President Theodore Roosevelt). According to Mr. Rhoades' autobiography in the wonderful 1957 publication

by the School's alumni, *The Biltmore Immortals (volume II)*, he was convalescing from typhoid when his brother sent him Dr. Schenck's catalog of the Biltmore Forest School. "I read it from cover to cover, not once but many times," he wrote. "I had not heard of forestry before, but this outline of the life of a forester and the possibilities of a career in a pioneer profession fired my imagination as nothing else had ever done to that moment. Then and there I decided that when I regained my strength I should study at Biltmore."

Verne Rhoades arrived at Biltmore on New Year's Day, 1906. He tells a funny story in the book about his first encounter with the brilliant and inspiring forestry teacher, Dr. Schenck, who mistook him for a Yale professor. Mr. Rhoades also describes the one-year curriculum as rigorous. "There were few dull hours in the day — lectures in the morning, field work in the afternoon, no holidays. Anyone who came to the school with a serious purpose went out with it intact, buttressed with a knowledge of forestry techniques."

He graduated in 1906 with a degree as forest engineer, and worked at various jobs — as purchasing agent for an Alabama lumber company, timber estimator for C.A. Schenck Company, technical assistant in New Mexico's Alamo National Forest — returning when the federal government began the work of establishing national forests in the East. As a U.S. Forest Service examiner, he was in charge of the first field party in the Southern Appalachians. He valued timber lands in the Pisgah Purchase Area and made the reconnaissance of the Boone Purchase Area around Grandfather Mountain and Blowing Rock. He also worked all over North Georgia, the upstate of South Carolina, southwestern Virginia and East Tennessee.

Because of his familiarity with the forest, his training at Biltmore and his knowledge of the people, Mr. Rhoades was named the first supervisor of Pisgah National Forest in 1915, out of 1,500 applicants for the job, and held that position for 10 years. He oversaw timber

cutting contracts and was charged with the difficult job of establishing wildlife management practices and enforcing game laws after the area became Pisgah National Forest and Game Preserve by presidential proclamation in 1916.

Mr. Rhoades left the Forest Service and opened an office as consulting forester in 1925. He was engaged in this work when in 1927 he was appointed executive secretary of the North Carolina Park Commission, established by the General Assembly to oversee the acquisition of land in North Carolina for the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Mr. Rhoades spent the next five years at this task of supervising surveys, estimating the value of timber tracts and farmlands, and purchasing or condemning hundreds of small tracts. He said of this assignment, "With most owners, large and small, we had little difficulty reaching an agreement. In some instances we were compelled to resort to condemnation suits. But after five years of continuous, persistent effort, fully 95 percent of the required acreage had been bought." As if knowing what was ahead, he wrote 50 years ago: "The Great Smoky Mountains National Park has proved to be widely popular. Millions of hikers, campers and motorists have visited since then. It has not begun to reach the peak of its usefulness as one of the greatest attractions in our Southern Appalachian scenic wonderland. When the road system is completed, still grander numbers of visitors will flow through its borders to view the hardwoods of infinite variety, to see the finest stand of virgin red spruce in the East, and to acclaim the majesty of the panoramas unfolding before the eyes...I believe this park holds more different species of trees of the largest dimensions than any other area of similar extent." And, of course, he was right.

After completing his work with the Park Commission in 1931, Mr. Rhoades held short-term government positions — with the Public Works Administration in Washington as examining engineer for reforestation projects, and with the Tennessee Valley Authority in Knoxville as chief of lands in the forest division.

A dedicated public servant and visionary civic and business leader in Asheville, he made many valuable contributions to the region and the state, including the following: service on the boards of Wachovia, Asheville Savings and Loan, and CP&L; two gubernatorial appointments, to the State Classification Commission and the Veterans Committee; chair of the Asheville Housing Authority and county Selective Service Board (1942–47); and membership on the Board of Financial Control for Buncombe County. He was treasurer of the board of trustees of Daniel Boone Council of the Boy Scouts of America and recipient of the Silver Beaver Award (the council's highest volunteer award); life member of the Carolina Mountain Club and one of its organizers; member of the board and founder of Asheville Country Day School; and charter member of the Biltmore Forest Country Club, the Downtown Club and the Mountain City Club. A member of the Society of American Foresters beginning in 1915, he was two-term chairman of its Southern Appalachian Section and a member of the Appalachian Forest Research Council, appointed by the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture.

Verne Rhoades' mark is everywhere around us. He and his wife donated the land for W.T. Weaver Park in memory of her father, the late Capt. William T. Weaver, who developed the first hydroelectric power plants on the French Broad River. In 1961 when our campus at this location was new, Mr. and Mrs. Rhoades generously granted the right-of-way for the city to build W.T. Weaver Boulevard, providing the university with its main access from Merrimon Avenue, connecting with Broadway. The Dorothea Weaver Rhoades Scholarship Fund, which his widow established in memory of her husband, father and grandfather, has benefited UNCA students seeking an excellent liberal arts education. And next door in the Botanical Gardens, which the Rhoadeses strongly supported, are quiet symbols of Verne Rhoades' legacy: two Carolina hemlocks planted in his memory by the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, whose headquarters sit on land donated by him and his wife;

two red spruce trees, planted as a memorial to him by the timber cruisers who worked for Mr. Rhoades on the Great Smoky Mountains National Park project; and the Verne Rhoades Memorial Bridge over Glenn Creek, dedicated in 1971 and recently refurbished.

Perhaps one of Mr. Rhoades' most personally satisfying legacies is the Cradle of Forestry in America Museum and Visitors Center at the Pink Beds in Pisgah National Forest. He worked tirelessly in his later years to see this project through, on the site of his own introduction to the profession of forestry and to Western North Carolina — the Biltmore Forest School. Mr. Rhoades and the Biltmore Forest School alumni were instrumental in working with the Forest Service in the 1960s to establish this wonderful museum that displays the rich history of our region. Practically single-handedly, he raised the funds to restore Dr. Schenck's original schoolhouse, which is now open to the public.

Verne and Dorothea Rhoades were both tireless leaders who demonstrated their commitment to their community, their beliefs, their work and their fellow man. When Mr. Rhoades died in 1969, the *Asheville Citizen-Times* carried an editorial that said, "He had a quality of gentleness that belied his strength of purpose, and a quiet generosity that masked his essential firmness. His good works were recognized by a wide circle of friends — rich and poor, high and low — who revered him. Here truly was a Christian gentleman, always courteous, always kind, always thoughtful of others. He was one of the most beloved men who has lived in Asheville."

The book, *The Biltmore Immortals*, which contains autobiographies of every student who graduated from Dr. Schenck's Biltmore Forest School during its 15 years of operation, was held up in publication until Mr. Rhoades made his contribution. Edwin Conger, class of 1917, wrote in a postscript to Mr. Rhoades' personal account: "Our companies probably cut more chestnut poles than any other concern operating in the National Forests, and I met

many a fine forester. But when I met and did business with Supervisor Rhoades, I encountered a gentleman of wisdom, intelligence and fairness, one of God's noblemen. Forestry happenings of importance taking place in North Carolina have usually shown that Verne Rhoades had been consulted."

Verne Rhoades was a pioneer whose life was a testament to the building and advancement of Western North Carolina. At the University of North Carolina at Asheville, we are proud to have one of our buildings named for this mountain of a man, Verne Rhoades, whose giant legacy is visible across the region and continues in his three children and their families. They are Verne Rhoades Jr. of Asheville and his wife, Sally; William Weaver Rhoades and his wife, Elizabeth, and daughter, Mary; and Anne Johnston Rhoades Farquharson of Toronto and her husband, Dr. Robert H. Farquharson, and their children, Robert Rhoades, Laura Bond and Elizabeth Anne; and five great-grandchildren.

Sources: Asheville *Citizen-Times* library; *The Biltmore Immortals, vol.II* (library at the Cradle of Forestry); *Birth of Forestry in America* by Carl A. Schenck.

Karen Anderson
Publications
10/2/01