

# **CLOSING THE WOODS CREATES AN ENFORCEMENT NIGHTMARE**

**8/20/96**

It's been 32 years since we had a woods closure in the Old Forge area.

A woods closure is an action taken by the Governor to close all of the forestlands of the state to public access. It is an emergency proclamation to protect open lands under extreme fire conditions.

The impact on local businesses is devastating and the Governor is under great pressure from two sides on whether to act or not.

There were three such closures during my tenure as a Ranger in the area.

The first one that I had to deal with was in 1963, from October 13, to October 31. A rash of fires and the danger of more forced the action. The situation in this area was compounded when we began to suspect that someone was deliberately setting fires. An emergency meeting was held and the community and local officials came up with a plan.

A road block was set up on the McKeever Bridge and all vehicles not having business in the area were turned back. People with camps were not allowed to occupy them.

The area was divided into units and two-man patrols were on the job 24 hours a day. Everyone was questioned and a log was kept of licenses and times anyone was in a particular area, in the event a fire should occur later. The whole community worked together and we had no more problems with our suspected arsonist.

It was, however, a trying time for Jim Axtell, resident game protector. The new road from McKeever to Old Forge had just been completed a short time before. The shoulders had been seeded and fertilized to the extent they drew the deer out of the woods and to the grazing bonanza.

It was hard to imagine the number of large racked bucks in the area. Add several two-man crews of dedicated deer hunters on 24-hour patrol and you come up with one big headache for the local warden.

I like to think a truce was declared for the duration of the emergency, but will bet someone out there will get a big laugh out of that statement. I am sure some could not

pass up the opportunity to prime venison in the freezer! To sum it all up, I know it was a nightmare for Jim Axtell.

One person in particular I know well remembers the period and for good reason. Dick Cohen owned the property upon which one of the many fires occurred, but that is not the only reason.

On his way home one afternoon, Dick came upon a fire along the South Shore Road, which had evidently been set. Having no tools at hand to fight the fire, he did the next best thing. He whipped off a very expensive sport coat and waded into the fire using the coat as a flail, containing the flames as best he could until help arrived.

There is nothing like an emergency situation to bring out the best in people and that woods closure in 1963 proved it. The cooperation and camaraderie that emerged as a result will remain in my memory forever.