

THE DISTRICT FOREST RANGERS HELD THEIR OWN AS CHARACTERS

7/16/96

When I introduced readers to the history of the start of the Forest Ranger force, I mentioned that many of the early Rangers were colorful characters who became legends in their own time.

The District Forest Rangers, for the most part, possessed more formal education and training than did their subordinates. The fact, however, did little to diminish their ability to become any less characters than the Rangers.

Solon Hyde was one such man who went on to become Superintendent of Fire Control. In the Depression era he was directing a district in the southern Catskills that was short on income or prospects for same. The miserly wage paid for forest fire fighting was, at times, incentive enough to cause a rash of fires.

Rumor had it that some relief was obtained when some of the perpetrators were kept busy fighting fires on their own property. Solon never took credit for the remedy, but he never denied it either.

The early Ranger force was short on equipment and money for same and they were forced to provide much of it from their limited salaries.

One old Adirondacker constantly harangued Dolon for snowshoes every time they met. Solon's retort was always the same: "When you fight fire on snowshoes, we'll buy them for you."

Finally they crossed paths at a training session and when he didn't bring up the subject, Solon did. "Did you ever get your snowshoes?" he asked. The old boy replied, "Sure did and you paid for them; you just didn't see the tracks."

Ernie Blue was an early riser and expected his Rangers to be as well. It was nothing to be awakened at 6 a.m. by a phone call or pebbles thrown against an upstairs bedroom window.

The Poughkeepsie district was at times a hotbed of heavy forest fire activity with various degrees of stress and confusion. In the heat of battle, one lady's inquiry as to what to do about squirrels in her attic was answered by Humphrey Hedgecock with "Shoot the bastards!" as he hung up on the phone.

Vic “Two Gun” Schrader was the most famous in my time. A more public-spirited citizen you could never find. He was an active fireman, accomplished EMT and special deputy sheriff. He did it all from delivering babies to capturing an escaped convict who, by the way, was glad to be turned over to the State Police!

The career of a suspected flasher was ended by Vic when he was caught in the act, on film in living color.

His State vehicle was one of the most impressive sights; siren, four radios and as many antennas, it commanded respect. The interior was filled with everything – bull horns, leg irons, safety equipment and the latest in first aid equipment.

The ban on any vehicles, State or otherwise, entering the front gate at the State Fair when we pulled duty there was no problem for Vic. He was waved through with a flourish. The public and the State of New York got more than its money’s worth with Vic.

Characters all and as good as they were, the District Rangers paled in comparison to their Rangers.

To be continued...as Reg Villiere used to say.