

**EARLY FOREST RANGERS WERE PRETTY MUCH ON THEIR
OWN
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Dave Conkey was typical of the first members of the forest fire protective force. On May 15, 1885, the Forest Commission of New York State was formed under the administration of Governor David B. Hill.

It was formed to provide much needed protection for the Adirondack and Catskill Mountains from fire and other misuse. There were to be many more organizational changes before the present day Forest Ranger force was formulated.

From its inception in 1885 and up until 1958, a system of open competitive examinations was adopted to fill Ranger vacancies. I was one of the first groups of eight persons appointed under the present system.

Certain technical training and other requirements are necessary to be eligible for the periodic examinations. The New York State Ranger School and Paul Smith's Forestry College have from the beginning been excellent starting points for the technical training. They both open up many more outdoor career opportunities as well. I consider my Ranger School education to be the most positive influence in my working life.

When I started working with the state we did not have the benefit of today's training, equipment or communication facilities. The new employees received on-the-job training from the older more experienced members of the district. The neophytes in return shared much of their technical training with the old timers.

For the most part, the men in the field were pretty much on their own. District officers were miles away and radio communications were primitive by today's standards. It could be days before any communication might be forthcoming from the District office.

It's not hard to imagine how easy it was in Dave Conkey's time to go astray. Telephone systems were few and far between and radio was nonexistent. As late as 1958, all calls out of Old Forge were operator assisted. My phone number in those days was simply 339.

For the most part, the Rangers did their jobs well and many were legends in their own time. Two Rangers were an inspiration to me long before I was hired. Jim Lawrence of West Canada Lake and Fred Griffin of Oswegatchie both fit that description.

There was another old Ranger whose reputation I had heard of long before I ever met him. Shortly after I started work I was sent to work a large fire near Warrensburg and we finally met. It was dark when we started up the mountain to the fire line with a troop of high school fire fighters.

My hero looked the part with his backpack and ax; I anxiously awaited my chance to see a real pro in action. As we reached the fire line he barked out his first order:

“You boys rake this hollow full of leaves.”

He opened his pack, took out a sleeping bag and flipped it out on the pile of leaves and proceeded to climb into it. His last command was, “You boys stand guard here all night and don’t let the fire get any where near here.”