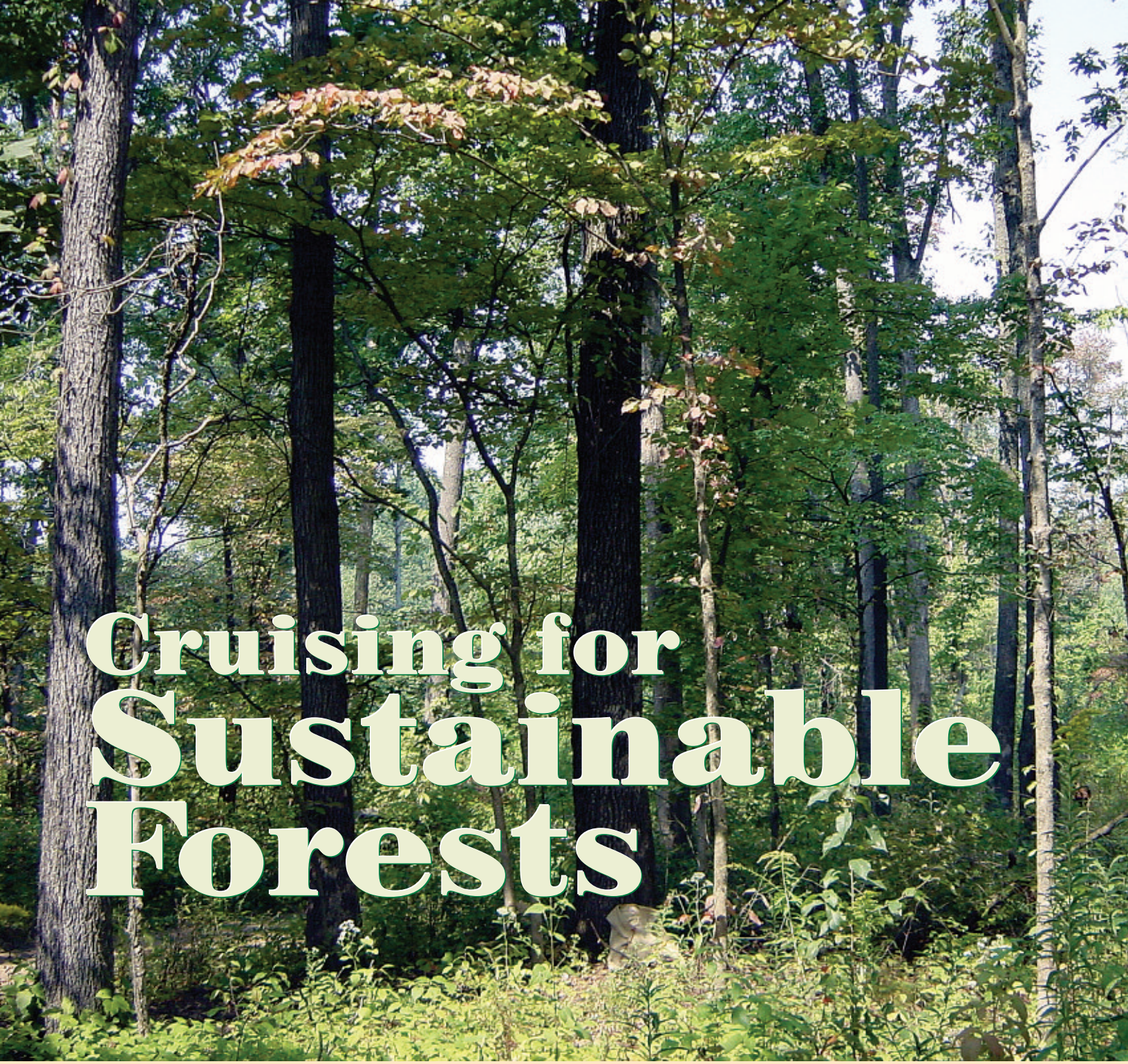

Cruising for Sustainable Forests

Discover your woodland and its potential.

Story and Photos
By Clint Patterson

"What's a tree worth?" the landowner asked me as we trudged through the dense sugar maple understory toward the mature white oaks, black oaks and hickories on his property.

"Well, it depends...," I started to reply, as he asked another question.

"Where do I find a good logger?" he queried, stopping this time as we stood next to a large white oak. "I don't want it to look like a tornado went through here...don't want to get ripped off either."

Waving away the mosquitos converging on us, I began my forestry pitch.

"It really has more to do with how you go about selling your trees than whom you sell to; that goes for both the price you get and the quality of the harvest," I explained. "There are good and bad timber buyers and loggers, just like with anything else. If you get some help from

Harvesting mature trees create openings in the woodland, allowing sunlight to penetrate to the ground level and encouraging growth of young trees and wildlife cover (left). The author, Clint Patterson, demonstrates measuring a white oak tree with a Biltmore stick. Standardized measurements are taken at breast height, or approximately 4.5 feet from the ground.

a state forester or a consulting forester, get educated on it and handle the process accordingly, it'll turn out. Think about it as managing the forest, not just liquidating it. Remember, you're in the driver's seat; it's your timber."

"A fella came by the other day and wanted to buy my timber...said he'd only cut everything over 18 inches," the landowner said, holding out his arms in a circle to indicate the size. "Said he'd pay me on shares. Then this other guy said he'll give me $10,000 for all of it...I didn't know what to do. I could use the money, but I don't want my woods tore up."

I held up my Biltmore stick to measure a nearby white oak, backed up several feet to estimate its merchantable log length and recorded the measurements on my tally sheet.

"This tree is 18 inches diameter at breast height and it has two 16-foot logs, or 164 board feet," I explained. "On these soils, it's probably growing at about nine rings per inch, so that's about a 2-inch diameter increase in 10 years. This tree is just now gaining value. I wouldn't cut it before it reaches 20 inches and 250 board feet. Harvest these knotty hickories that are competing with it and it will grow even faster."

"Yeah, I can see that," the landowner said, clearly interested in my Biltmore stick.

"Here you go," I said, handing him the stick. "This was put together by Gifford Pinchot, America's first forest chief, when he worked for the Vanderbilts on their Biltmore Estate. It measures tree diameter and height, and has a table on it where you can get the board foot volume.

"I'm glad I found out that the state had foresters to help with this... never even heard of it until I mentioned selling my trees at the coffee shop," he said, chuckling as he measured the tree.

We had begun our forestry "cruise."

Foresters cruise timber to collect information on trees—species, health, diameter, height, growth rate, board-foot volume and number per acre—and the forest as a whole—basal area, past fire impact, herbaceous species in the

During a timber cruise, professional foresters use a paint marking gun to identify trees recommended for harvest.

In the competition for sunlight, some trees win and others lose. Foresters identify crooked, broken, damaged or diseased trees during a timber cruise.

understory, soil type and past history of the site. When compiled, this information provides a quantitative and qualitative basis for making informed forest management decisions.

Having a landowner along when cruising their woods is important to provide for discussion and to reach a happy balance between their goals and accepted forest management practices.

As we returned to the truck a couple of hours later, pulling spider webs and "stick-tights" off our clothes, I pulled the sheets out of my tally book and put them in my briefcase.

"Here's your Biltmore stick," the old gentleman farmer stated, as he handed it across the hood.

"Didn't think I could keep up with you, did ya'?" he chuckled, getting into the truck and telling me his age.

"You're in pretty good shape, that's for sure," I commented, surprised that he's a few years older than my Grandpa.

On the drive to the office, I recalled the trip to the woods with my Grandpa, one that directed me towards pursuing a career in forestry.

My favorite times with Grandpa Patterson had been horseback riding down the winding roads to his hilly, mature stand of timber where we'd hunt squirrels and mushrooms, scope out ginseng or just talk. I learned tree identification and conservation principles there.

The day I went with Grandpa to the woods after a timber buyer had wrecked it, cutting everything merchantable and never paying him, I felt enraged. Grandpa just shook his head, mentioned that this sort of thing wasn't uncommon and said "He's the one that has to sleep at night, knowing what he's done."

That day left an impression on me in more ways than one. Sparked to do some investigating on the matter, I discovered foresters—people who help landowners manage their timber and properly sell trees.

"That would be so cool—maybe I could do that."

Tools of the forestry trade include a cruising vest, paint marking gun, Biltmore stick, increment borer, tally book, 10-factor prism and compass.

Timber Sale Tips

Landowners with forest resource concerns, or needing technical assistance for implementing timber stand improvement practices, should contact their DNR district forester and/or a private consulting forester. To locate your district forester, visit www.dnr.state.il.us/conservation/forestry/index.htm. Keep these tips in mind if you are considering selling your timber:

- Enlist assistance from a professional forester.
- Obtain a written forest management plan.
- Have the timber marked. Know the size, species and value of the timber you sell.
- Obtain several bids. A sealed bid process is best.
- Obtain a written timber sale contract.
- Sell only to Illinois licensed timber buyers. Call DNR at (217) 782-6431 to check the amount of bond the timber buyer has.
- Beware of the buyer who is "in a hurry."
- Receive full payment prior to allowing any cutting.
- Direct questions to your local DNR district forester.

—Adapted from Illinois Forestry Development Council.

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