



Land, Wood & Water

By Senator Robert S. Kerr of Oklahoma

The late Senator Robert S. Kerr, '16, was a man with many impossible dreams—and he made most of them come true.

He was the log cabin success story in modern day; he reared his family, made his fortune, achieved recognition and power in public life. Flamboyance, quick wit and a biting tongue earned him headlines, but perhaps history will remember him most favorably for the battle he never abandoned—conservation.

It was Bob Kerr at his best. His own words on this subject, taken from the closing chapter of his book, are presented here as the most eloquent commentary available on a man who seized life and made the most of it.

ONE autumn almost two decades ago, a lone traveler stopped his car on a gravel mountain road. He heard the deep yet strangely soothing rush of wind through thousands of pine boughs. This was the only sound.

As far as the eye could see were billowing folds of the Winding Stair Mountains. Close by, they were splashed with the magnificent colors of fall—the yellow, gold and red of sweetgum and oaks and maples against the matchless green of pines. The sun sparkled on clear streams dropping step by step into the valleys. In the distance, the mountains were a deep purple and full of the mystery and awe man always finds in the far horizons. The straw-tinted colors of autumn stretched endlessly in the valley with almost no sign of human habitation. There were sun-touched glimpses of rivers. One was named the Poteau, another was called the Kiamichi.

The traveler walked along the rocky ledge breathing deeply of the crisp mountain air. He stopped and knelt down. There, growing boldly in a patch of pebbly soil, was a pine seedling. It was little more

than two inches tall. A stray gust of wind blowing across the mountains of southeast Oklahoma had dropped the seed gently on the slope. Rain and snow and the glowing warmth of the sun pushed open the seed and renewed the mysterious cycle of life.

The kneeling man looked out over the mountains and said to himself, "How can anyone be lonely or discontented where there are trees, valleys, streams, and mountains?"

This traveler was your author. This moment was the end of a quest begun many years before. The search started when I was a child of ten working with my father in a cotton field. That great and wise man said, "Bob, I want you to help refurbish the land that men have stripped, and clear the streams they have muddied."

Here could be the workshop—the mountain slopes, the streams, the lowlands of a hidden wonderland in the Poteau River Valley. The history, the rainfall, and the resources fit exactly into the pattern I had so long sought.

When the Crusaders were tramping

Continued

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"here was my chance to put into practice what I had been saying"

across southern Europe, light-footed Indians were hunting deer in this forest wonderland of America. Many miles to the west, herds of buffalo grazed on the prairies. The Indians left little besides their traditions, their conical burial mounds, their tracings, and as it were, their footprints on mountain slopes. Too little of their way of life is known to history. We can guess they found their way, as the French did centuries later, by following the Arkansas River to the Poteau River and up its course.

Early explorers and traders built a trading post about twenty miles up the stream. They called it "Poteau," French for the word "post." The early explorers remained only to bargain with the Indians. They did not settle or cultivate the land.

Then, the first transcontinental stage coach route, the Butterfield, swung south from St. Louis down through the Ozarks, across northwest Arkansas, climbed the foothills on the southwestern path across the Arkansas River, then plunged through the mountain country of southeast Oklahoma and into Texas. The southern terminal was El Paso. From there it ran to California. Just a few miles west of the trading post of Poteau, the splendid, sweating horses pulled the swaying coaches along the Butterfield route. Here, too, moved broad-wheeled covered wagons carrying the pioneers and their hopes and worldly goods. As an eighteen-year-old lad, my father came down the stage coach trail on his way from Missouri to Texas to seek his fortune. As a girl, my mother, with her family, came up the Butterfield trail to the Valley of the Arkansas, spent three years in eastern Oklahoma and western Arkansas, then returned to Texas over the same route.

THE first modern commerce in the Poteau Valley and the nearby mountain slopes was timber. At one time, there were 105 sawmills in the area, and the air was filled with the sound of axes biting into wood. Whole slopes were stripped. Small pines were neither saved nor replaced. This thwarted the age-old pattern of nature. The spring thaws and rains, instead of soaking deep into the soil and emerging as springs, rushed unretarded into the small streams. They, in turn, raced down the mountains and flooded the low-

lands. Much of the bottomland in this valley was under six feet of water twice a year. This angry flush of water washed out much of the fertile soil and depleted it of valuable minerals.

After the feast of the axes and whine of the sawmill, the pioneer farmers had a rugged battle. They cleared the land and planted cotton and corn and small patches of sorghum cane. In some areas, orchards were put out and vegetables were grown. Pigs ran wild eating what they could find. Cattle were numerous but too often reflected the extent to which the soil had been depleted of its minerals. Continued flooding drove the farmers out of the bottoms. Brush and undergrowth took over.

An old man who had lived there all his life gave me this description of the area: "Back in the Indian Territory days, that ground was black with thickets, and it was worth your life to scratch through it to the river for fishin'. Down there, rootin' around in the mud, you'd likely run into a bear or a panther or snakes. Old Jake had some steers he'd let loose in there, and ever so often one would get stuck in the mud and beller so's you could hear it up on the mountain."

But investigation showed several advantages.

The average annual rainfall was forty-six inches, as compared to twenty-two inches farther west. This abundance would insure animals and plants from deadly drought.

Here was the greatest source of clear, uncommitted water close to an abundance of low-cost energy fuel of any region in the United States. Seventy-eight mountain streams tumble millions of gallons of unpolluted water every day into the Poteau River.

—Floods could be controlled, water stored for land use, municipal and industrial purposes in reservoirs on the main streams. (The first of these, the Wister Reservoir, had already been constructed.)

—Thousands of visitors would be pouring in to enjoy the natural loveliness of Poteau, Kiamichi and Winding Stair Mountains. They could fish, swim, and boat on the reservoirs once good roads penetrated this vastness.

—Billions of tons of high quality coal are hidden under the slopes. (Geologists

estimate more than 50 billion tons are in eastern Oklahoma and western Arkansas. The outcroppings, traces of black rock, are visible on many lonely hillsides.)

—Oil, natural gas, bauxite, and nineteen of the twenty-three basic resources used by the chemical industry are available in or near the area.

—The variety of wood and stone is almost unlimited. (In my own house, I have used native ash, oak, maple, pine, and stone from the area.)

—The town of Poteau is only twenty miles from the Arkansas River, which one day would be reopened to navigation. This low-cost transportation would lure new industry. It would be a Godsend to farmers.

—The people in the Valley are industrious, intelligent, looking for a better life.

Too, I felt a good deal like the storied blacksmith of the days when the first horde of settlers rushed west for gold. A new town sprang up but had no bank. He thought he might go into the banking business in the front end of the shop. His wife tidied up the place, made a curtain, sewed herself a new apron, and put up her hair. The blacksmith washed his hands and bought himself a vest. The money poured in; crinkled paper hidden in shoes and pockets, little sacks of gold dug up from the underground caches, and silver dollars.

When they counted up and found that their neighbors had \$40,000 in the bank, the blacksmith told his wife, "Sara, get out the shovel. We're goin' to dig up our own money and put it in this bank. It looks like it's going to make it."

I had spent years persuading others to believe in the future and to conserve our "land, wood, and water." Here was my chance to put into practice what I had been saying.

Too, I was shocked to find out from the school superintendent of my home town, Ada, that only twelve percent of his high school graduates remained in the town where they graduated. After they were educated they left home, lured to industrial jobs far from their native soil. I wanted my children and grandchildren to live in Oklahoma. This was a way to prove that the state had a rich, unfolding future. So, with the help of my old friend, Elbert Costner, who had lived long in Poteau, I began buying land for my own experiment and demonstration in conservation.

This was about sixty years later and 120 miles east of where my father originally pioneered with 160 acres and a one-room log cabin. I felt that I was following in his footsteps. While he had set about to tame

and harness the frontier, I was resolved to restore and develop its great natural resources. My incentive was both practical and sentimental.

On the slopes of Poteau Mountain, we followed my father's advice. He planted an orchard when I was eleven and told me the story of Johnny Appleseed, so named because in his wandering path across the country he planted apple seeds. My father commented when the story was done, "There is a way for man to win immortality right here on earth. He can do it by planting trees. Each tree will give shelter, beauty, and often food; it will protect the soil, and recreate itself many times."

Early in the year, before a new spring had brought its green cover to the hillsides, we drove up on the mountain and planted half a million pine seedlings. This is a dramatic pageant, and used to be the inspiration for Indian dances. Each worker has a canvas bag filled with seedlings dangling at his left wrist, and he has a small spade in his right hand. He digs the hole, plants the seedling, and stamps the earth in his next step forward to the new spot.

I cannot describe the joy of planting under the sun and the quickly moving clouds. It gives a new faith in tomorrow; the sorrows and disappointments of yesterday are forgotten. Each plant or seed is a new reason to live and look forward. I could visualize these slopes in fifteen or twenty years—fragrant with the scent of pine needles, unnumbered millions of deep green trees whose boughs would sing in the winds. Properly cut and replenished, this beginning could give work for many hands, lumber for new homes, pulp for paper. If the planting was a success, others would follow us in planting the mountain slopes. These were the kinds of dreams we dreamed.

NATURE has a way of her own in growing forests if man will cooperate. Pine trees produce some seed each year and a great abundance some years. The forester must wait for two years until he finds what kind of a "catch" a pine seedlings he has. There was a tremendous seed crop in 1957. Throughout 1958, we scanned the skies for rain clouds and counted the inches of rain caught in tin cups mounted on fence posts. The end of that year was a joyful time. There was the largest "catch" ever noted in our part of the

country. The rains had come at the right time in the right amounts. Hundreds of millions of pines, from windblown seed, nurtured by water and sun, stood one or two inches high in the mountains of southeast Oklahoma and west Arkansas. On Poteau Mountain, these miniature trees spread across the slopes and were an omen of the future. In time, their roots would dig deep into the needle-strewn ground. Thus, again, the snows, and rains would sink into the soil. Much of it would be kept where it fell. Less of it would swell the flood waters below.

After this trilling experience with reforestation, I can fully understand why Franklin D. Roosevelt loved to drive through his ancestral woodlands and why it was that the last two times he registered to vote at Hyde Park, he proudly listed his occupation as "tree grower."

The long fingers of memory prompted me to launch another project. This was an orchard of three hundred acres. It recalled my father's peach and pear orchard. Too, in tracing the history of the Poteau Valley, I found that once many orchards had flourished there, and their fruit was famous throughout the Southwest. My dream was to establish the high valleys and hillsides as a symbol of delicious fruit. This could be done, I believed, by making use of the scientific advances in the ancient art of growing fruit.

My most ambitious venture was to convert the brush-covered river bottoms into pasture for prize cattle. At first glance, it seemed a most difficult task. Large sloughs, filled with mud and sluggish water, covered much of the lowlands. Every rain carried more soil down the river, and water stood in the fields. Tests of the soil disclosed both the tough job to be done and the reward that could be gained.

Many of the cattle in the area were described by the Oklahoma City *Times* as "Choctaw cattle . . . scrub cattle, penalized at the market place." Early cattle buyers had called them "holler-tailed" because the deficiency of lime and phosphorus made them seem to be just that.

So my first job was to convince the men I wanted to help me in this great adventure that I was not, as one old-timer said bluntly, "a dum fool, and eccentric, too."

After checking the records of scores of possible ranch managers, I found one who looked good. The trouble was, he did not

think champion cattle could be raised in the Poteau Valley. His name was Paul Kee-see. He was a lean, wiry rancher who had made cattle breeding and raising an exciting science. He was managing a great cattle ranch in Texas.

He listened to my proposal, whittling thoughtfully on a stick with a sharp knife, and gave his verdict in a calm drawl, "Mr. Kerr, you just can't raise prize cattle there. You've got too much rain. It washes out of the soil all the rich minerals you must have for good pasture."

ALL cattlemen gamble on rain, grass, and prices; they enjoy staking their talent and energy and labor on a dare with a high prize, if the odds are not piled too high against them. So I made Kee-see a gambler's proposition—he would come to the Poteau Valley to manage the herd of Black Angus, and if the trial failed in three years, we would relocate and he could name the place. It was a deal. His amazing knowledge became one of our best assets.

The next step was to convert the flooded lowlands and duck ponds into pasture. We went to the Soil Conservation engineers of the Department of Agriculture and asked for their recommendations. The fields were cleared. Heavy earth-moving equipment lumbered in. Drainage ditches were dug. The land was shaped to slope gently into the outlets to the river. Contour lines were plowed. Thousands of tons of lime fertilizer and chemicals were worked into the soil. The seed was planted.

The test came late in the fall. All day huge black clouds had been piling up over the Winding Stair Mountains. By late afternoon, angry flashes of lightning streaked across the sullen sky, and thunder echoed through the valleys. Then came the down-pour. Before we went to bed, we threw on rain gear and walked out in the storm and wind to look at the rain cup. An inch already. The next morning the sky was clearing. A few clouds drizzled and hurried on. The rain cup showed almost four inches of rain.

Paul drove down the muddy roads into the lowlands. Would there be anything left of our adventure? The first sign was ominous. The heavy rains had washed out the side of a culvert and caved in one side of the road.

I did not know whether we should go on. "Sure," said Paul impatiently, "we can make it."

There, finally, was the pasture. There was no water standing on the fields. Brome, alfalfa, and clover were growing safe and

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"there is a way for man to win immortality right here on earth"

Bob Kerr's "Land, Wood & Water"

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firm in the damp soil. This was a time for celebration. We slapped each other on the back and shook hands.

Paul said, "A man sure learns a lot."

Today, those river bottomlands are green with rich pastures. Hundreds of fine cattle graze and grow fat where before were old briar patches and sloughs. The bulls and steers produced in southeast Oklahoma are winning prizes in livestock shows all over

the Southwest and bringing top prices.

Most important, this progress is encouraging a contagious new spirit of pride and confidence; and I am working with my neighbors to improve and develop the entire area. Sharing this enthusiasm, my family often gathers here. This community has become our general headquarters. On a beautiful cliff overlooking the valley, we have built our permanent home, large enough for the entire clan, including (currently) 10 grandchildren. Standing there on the front deck, with its inspiring vista, we can peer into the distant haze of mountain peaks.

Last spring, a party of tourists came to the Valley, drawn from far away by the word-of-mouth stories of this little known wonderland. They marveled at the splendor of dogwood, redbud, wild azaleas, and roses strewn across the slopes. They drove slowly up the grandeur of the Winding Stair Mountains and beyond to a windy lookout on Mount Kiamichi. The crests of the mountains were like giant waves on a sunlit sea. Here and there, the sun gleamed on mountain waterfalls, and down below in green valleys, streams wandered lazily. The distant mountains were gradually lost in a haze. The wind was fresh and full of the wonderful scents of spring.

They noticed an unusual and striking monument. Native stones were the base, and from them three weathered timbers reached up to the heavens like men at

prayer. A metal plate riveted on the stones attracted the tourists, and they gathered 'round to read:

"In Appreciation of the Leadership in the Rapid Development of Our State

Roads

Water

Recreation

Forests

"LAND - WOOD - WATER"

We, the Grateful Citizens of
McCurtain and LeFlore Counties
Contribute and Dedicate This
Monument to the Following:
SENATOR ROBERT S. KERR
SENATOR MIKE MONRONEY
CONGRESSMAN CARL ALBERT
GOVERNOR RAYMOND GARY
R. C. MILLER"

What more could a man ask from life?

Only that the lessons learned in this patch of Oklahoma mountains be transmitted to the nation. Here is what can be done. On a small scale here is an example of "Land, Wood, and Water" for the United States, for a continent.

It takes money, but not spendthrifts. Conservation pays for itself many times over.

It takes cooperation, but not a fourth level of government. A unified approach is all that is required.

It takes faith, but not blind faith. The future is plain for all to see,—at Poteau, at Sandstone Creek, at Lake Texoma!

A Nation preserved as God gave it to us, what more indeed can a man ask from life?

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Dr. Andree—A Man with Many Missions

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activities as Dr. Andree has antagonized some of his less aggressive colleagues.

"He bugs people," is the way one faculty member puts it. "However, he is usually reasonable in his demands and while he is fairly convinced that he is right, he is not dogmatic. Actually he has a great deal of humility."

Dr. William E. Livezey, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, characterizes Dr. Andree as a "type who is found too seldom on our campus."

"Dick is a man of many ideas and tremendous energy who is interested in mathematics at all levels—high school, college and graduate—and is dedicated to his field and to the University," Dean Livezey says. "He has a concept of public relations unusual among University faculty members."

Because most of his time is taken up by indoor, academic matters, Dr. Andree's hobbies have an outdoor, athletic cast. Last

winter he and Mrs. Andree got their exercise by taking SCUBA diving lessons in the O.U. Men's Pool. Another mutual interest, gem collecting and polishing, just naturally goes along with the camping trips shared with the Andree children, David, 12, Peter, 9; Suzanne, 5, and Jeanne, 1½.

This year Dr. Andree's activities are supposedly curtailed by an attack of hepatitis which has put him on a half-time basis officially. He insists he is resting and that his colleagues have relieved him of a great deal of his work. However, Mrs. Andree recently clocked him with an office work week of 67 hours, so his interpretation of "resting" is open to debate.

Questioned about his health, Andree admits:

"Well, I'm up and down. When I'm up, I try to do too much. But how can a person help working when there is so much to be done?"