

# Carl A. Schenck and the Biltmore Forestry School, Asheville, NC

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Carl A. Schenck was hired by George Vanderbilt to restore and manage the degraded forests and soils on his large Biltmore Estate near Asheville, NC. Schenck was born in Germany and graduated in 1894 with a Ph.D. degree in forestry. In addition to managing the Estate's forest lands, Schenck established the Biltmore Forest School in 1898. He served as the school's director and teacher until the school closed in 1913. Dr. Schenck was the first scientifically trained forester employed in the United States and the Biltmore Forest School became the nation's first forestry school.

The Biltmore Forest School exposed its students not only to classroom lectures, but also practical work experience in the outdoor laboratory of the 120,000 acre Pisgah Forest. Students were instructed in a field-based course of study that included "hands on" learning. Students devoted an intensive 12 months to forestry in the field, first on a site at the Biltmore Estate, later in active logging areas across the United States and Europe. Following course work, Schenck's "Biltmore boys" were allowed to graduate only after completing an internship on the Biltmore Estate or elsewhere in the timber industry. One of the school's alumni was V.L. Sonderegger who served as Louisiana's State Forester in two different administrations.

The School's students initially were sons of wealthy lumber and timber barons, but over the 15 years of the school's existence nearly 400 forestry students were introduced to scientific forestry methods throughout North America. By the time the school closed in 1913, it had produced more than 70 percent of all forestry graduates in the nation. Schenck's school provided momentum for established universities such as Cornell, Minnesota, and Yale to develop forestry schools of their own.

Graduates of the school described Dr. Schenck as autocratic. He had been raised in a military atmosphere in Germany and did not get along well with the mountain folks on the estate. His discipline was pretty harsh, but the students liked him because he was fair. Schenck was tall, slender, and with a large mustache. He wore a uniform from one of the German forest services he had been in before coming to the United States. He owned two horses which he always rode at full gallop. In fact, students were required to have a horse to ride for their practical training.

Dr. Schenck was held in high esteem by his students. He was an excellent teacher and developed a close relationship with the students--they worked together six days a week. The students were considered a lusty group, and their exploits in the local bars were loud and long. After repeatedly bailing out students that were thrown in jail, Schenck started --Sangerfests----singing and drinking sessions. His thought was "If you're going to do your drinking, let's all do it together." Schenck would provide two kegs of beer and they would sing the school's alma mater, "Down under the Hill," and other drinking songs in school spaces. These words to "Down under the Hill" were written by a student in 1902:

Down under the hill there is a little still,  
 And the smoke goes curling to the sky,  
 You can easily tell by the snuffle and smell,  
 There's good liquor in the air close by,  
 For it fills the air with a perfume so rare;  
 That' only known to a few,  
 So wrinkle up your lip and take a little sip,  
 Of good old mountain dew.

The Biltmore Forest School closed in 1913 due to declining interest in the program and due to Dr. Schenck's quick temper that resulted in conflict with the George Vanderbilt. However, Schenck's influence continued to shape forestry in America.

Schenck retained his German citizenship and was recalled in 1914 to serve as an officer in the German army on the Russian front during WWI. He returned to forestry after the war and traveled in the United States and Europe promoting forest management. He was forced to return to his home again in 1939 with the onslaught of WWII. He resumed his work in the 1940s and was appointed by the U.S. military government as chief forester of the German state of Hessen.

In 1968, the U.S. Congress established the Cradle of Forestry in America national historic site to commemorate the Biltmore Forest School. At the site, rehabilitated and reconstructed buildings form part of a living history exhibit dedicated to the school and its programs.

Dr. Schenck was one of the foremost pioneers of forestry in the United States and Europe. At the end of his farewell message to the graduates of the Biltmore Forest School, he would say "Good bye! God bless you, and the United States, and all the workers in her forests."

(Elwood R. Maunder's oral interview with Inman F. (Cap) Eldridge on February 3, 1959 was used as a resource for this article)



Carl Schenck (left) with Henry Hardtner of Urania Lumber Company

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