



## *Part 2 of the Historical Snapshots Installments*

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### **The Forest Service's Turbulent Early Years in Indiana –**

The Forest Service was established in Indiana in February 1935 after the 73<sup>rd</sup> Indiana Congress passed an Enabling Act. Four Ranger Districts, each managing a purchase unit, were established and land purchases began. By mid-1936 the Forest Service had about 35,000 acres in Indiana approved for purchase. The four districts were: Pleasant Run, Lost River, Patoka, and Lafayette Ranger Districts.



*Tell City Ranger District Office – 05/07/1941 – At the time this was called the Lafayette Ranger District. The Office in foreground looking toward the Ohio River with Tell City in the background. The office was on the hill above where the current office stands.*

The Forest Service's first office may have been in the Citizens Bank, but at some point it was moved to the stone building on 7th Street where Stone City Products is now located.

Phil Brandner was appointed as the first Forest Service Supervisor in Indiana. When he arrived in Bedford to take charge of the agency's Indiana purchase units, reforestation was a new concept and considered by many a "make-work boondoggle." One of his first tasks was to enlist the support of public officials and business leaders. There were grave concerns that the government was going to take productive land away from farmers. Brandner had to convince the public that there was more than enough abandoned land and willing sellers.

In January 1936 it became evident that there were more demands on public moneys than originally anticipated and large land purchases were less likely. The National Forest Reservation Committee reluctantly adopted a rule, commonly called the 20 Percent Limitation Rule. The rule decreed that no additional land purchases would be made in units where the acreage under federal ownership was less than 20 percent of the total acreage in the purchase units. Since none of the Indiana purchase units approached the 20 percent level, the rule effectively shut down the land acquisition program in Indiana.

Nine hundred options to purchase additional lands in Indiana all came to halt.

On February 29, 1936, Phil Brandner received a wire telling him to “disorganize at once”. The day was known as Black Saturday for the young forest. The next 30 days were spent determining how to “disorganize” and cut funding, while still managing the newly acquired land on a custodial basis. Two employees were immediately laid off.

Although landowners still clamored to sell land to the Forest Service - the agency changed from an acquisition mode to one of developing improvements on the small land base they had already acquired. With the help of the Civilian Conservation Corps, six lookout towers, one dwelling, and other minor structures were constructed. District Ranger offices and warehouses were constructed for the Lafayette Ranger District at Tell City and the Pleasant Run Ranger District at Brownstown.



*Brownstown Ranger District Office – 08/07/1936 – In the early years this was the Pleasant Run Ranger District. The administrative office is under construction, grading in progress. (No longer standing).*



*Pleasant Run Ranger Station – This undated photo is of the completed building which was later known as the Brownstown Ranger District office and stood until the 1980s.*

It was evident that the Forest Service in many eastern states would never be able to meet its intended mission of protecting the flow of navigable streams and timber resources as long as the 20 percent limitation was in effect. After considerable discussion, on July 9, 1939, the Commission asked each state to relook at their individual units and report back.

The Commission approved the Indiana report on December 12, 1939. The report divided the four purchase units into priority zones and set a plan for making purchases in one zone until 40-50 percent of the land was approved for purchase, then move on to the next priority zone.

Unfortunately for land acquisition, the advent of World War II diverted public money for several more years. The other shortage during the war years was men, it was a time when the Forest Service was running short-staffed across the nation as many of their staff served in the military.