

Forestry^{The} Source

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Life, Love, and Forestry: Travels in Germany as a Tribute to Carl Alwin Schenck

By Chris Bolgiano

It's the trip of a lifetime!" everyone said during the SAF-sponsored German Study Tour in August—and the two-week excursion was barely half-over. The group had seen Munich and the forests of Bavaria. But the heart of the trip was a remembrance of Dr. Carl Alwin Schenck (CAS), the legendary forester who left his Hessen homeland and opened the first school of forestry in the United States (the Biltmore School) in 1898. He also wrote the first textbooks, established science as a guiding principle, and planted the seeds of "conservative forestry."

"Carl Schenck has always been my hero," said Mike Thompson, a forestry instructor at Montgomery Community College in Troy, North Carolina. "I bring all my classes to the Cradle of Forestry," the National Historic Site in western North Carolina where Biltmore School buildings are preserved.

"Gifford Pinchot gets most of the attention," said Cindy Carpenter, a curator at the Cradle. "But Dr. Schenck was just as influential."

Roughly half of our group of 40 was foresters, both active and retired. Among the rest were spouses, private forestland owners (including myself), several members of the International Dendrology Society, two forestry/botany experts, and one intrepid leader whose pledge to CAS's family launched him on a decade of tour planning: John Palmer.

An SAF Fellow now retired from teaching forestry, Palmer served on the board of the Cradle during the 1980s. After a fire destroyed valuable materials, he asked where CAS was from. No one knew. CAS had maintained contact with many of his 300 graduates until his death in 1955, but then his trail faded.

After a year of searching, John uncovered a single name and address in the small town of Lindenfels, where CAS had lived. Without knowing a word of German, John wrote to Frau Olga von Rhöneck and knocked on her door in the late 1980s.

"It's about time!" she said in perfect English, then plied him with strawberries. Frau von Rhöneck was the daughter of CAS's youngest sister and became his legal ward after her father died young (CAS married twice but had no children). No Americans had visited in many years, and she feared that memory of CAS would be lost. John returned several times, bringing back museum items such as CAS's "hunting chair"



Courtesy of Chris Bolgiano

SAF past-president Joann Cox (center) and others measure a sequoia (60.2 inches dbh) in the Weinheim Exotenwald (exotic forest), one of several special forests visited during a recent SAF tour in Germany. The sequoia was planted during a period when it was the fashion among the aristocracy of the 19th century to establish forests of tree species from around the world.

as well as many stories about him, until Frau von Rhöneck's death in 2007.

And now, to fulfill his promise of renewing American appreciation for CAS, he was taking us there. We trekked up the cobblestone road to the home where her son, retired professor of physics Dr. Christoph von Rhöneck, and his wife Claire welcomed us with champagne. Beneath the walls of twelfth-century Schloss (castle) Lindenfels, in the flowery yard of a house built from its fallen stones, the von Rhönecks served us a festive dinner. To the west lay the dark, rolling hills of the Odenwald, the primeval wood where Siegfried, hero of the *Nibelungen* saga, slew a dragon.

For the three days that our group stayed near Lindenfels, Christoph regaled us with glimpses of the man he knew as Uncali, a contraction of Uncle and Alwin, the family nickname for CAS. "He was tall and imposing," Christoph said, "forever active, and very direct in his conversation. He had very high standards and did not tolerate less."

Ownership

CAS's favorite tree, the tuliptree, and a German oak had just been planted at the edge of the Lindenfels City Forest when we gathered for a dedication ceremony with Hessen forestry officials. SAF immediate past-president Joann Cox spoke for our group, inviting Hessen foresters to visit the United States. "Forestry first developed in Germany, and German contributions are vital to our profession," she added. "We learn from each other." Later, as the group headed for the bus, she said, "My family came from Germany. Both personally and professionally, this trip is a dream come true. I've got goose bumps!"

It wasn't from the weather. The forest walk that followed provided welcome shade from a hot sun. It also highlighted a key difference between German and American forestry: ownership. We hiked well-established roads winding through the 300-hectare Lindenfels City Forest, stopping for explanations in English from gracious state foresters. German forests cover approximately one-third of the country (11 million hectares), and fully half of them are public, owned by municipalities or states. Private land owners hold 44 percent, and the federal government manages 6 percent. Most private forest owners are farmers with less than 10 hectares. Forest industries do not own land. In the eastern US, by comparison, 82 percent of forestland is privately owned, much of it by wood products companies.

"Management of course differs in public and private forests," said Dr. Marcel Robischon, forestry professor at Humboldt University (Berlin), who was our assistant tour leader and emergency translator. He clarified the statistics on Hessen, pointing out that it was one of the most densely populated states, with 6 million people, yet was also the most forested, at 42 percent.

"Clean water for so many people is a major forest product," said Carsten Wilke, head forester for Hessen, which has a forestry staff of 25. "Also recreation is a big demand. Germans believe forests belong to everyone." He laughed ruefully as he explained the contemporary expression of the ancient, storied relationship of Germans with their forests: "By federal law, pedestrians are allowed in all forests regardless of ownership." Pedestrian access would be mentioned, again ruefully, when we later met with private landowners.

In Lindenfels City Forest we passed many mature stands of red beech and pedunculate, northern red, and sessile oaks, with scattered Scots pines, maples, ashes, sycamore maples, larches, Norway spruces, cherry trees, and Douglas-firs. Although nearly 60 percent of German forests are coniferous, which brings in the largest share of income, Hessen has the highest proportion of native hardwoods in Germany. "Nearly two-thirds of our woods are dominated by beech," Herr Wilke said. "Siegfried's forest may have been quite similar to what we see today, though with many transformations in between."

His foresters, Herrs Schepp and Dins, fielded many questions, ranging from lack of understory (due to beech shade,



Courtesy of Chris Bolgiano

Mike Thompson, a forestry instructor at Montgomery Community College in Troy, North Carolina, measures one of many large trees in the Herrnstein forest. Thompson was among a handful of SAF members who toured Germany this summer.

plus low diversity from glaciers exterminating many species against the insurmountable east-west axis of the Alps); to firewood cutting by residents (allowed depending on site); to professional education (two tracks, academic and field-work, which the proud generalist CAS combined at the Biltmore School); to the European Union's role in conservation (defining special areas and species to be left undisturbed); to the role of the state in helping municipal and private owners (advice and grants). Because many municipalities are deeply in debt and want more income from their forests, there is considerable controversy over how much harvesting should be allowed.

Clearcuts larger than a hectare are prohibited everywhere. In the Lindenfels City Forest, selective harvests of mixed hardwoods yield from 50 to 140 cubic meters per hectare per decade, depending on site productivity and according to required 10-year plans that are based on growth assessments. Techniques are similar to crop tree/worst-first management, but rotations tend to be much longer, at 120–250 years. "We try to be *naturnähe*, close to nature," said District Forester Schepp. Regeneration is natural, supplemented by plantings if it fails. Deer (three species, but mainly roe deer, plus wild swine) are overabundant, and fencing is often required. "Where the wolf hunts, forests grow," said Herr Wilke, recalling an old saying. There are no wolves

here, although some may roam eastern Germany.

The normally warm, dry summers are expected to become even more so in the future.

“Diversity of tree species is the best insurance against climate change,” said Herr Wilke. “Douglas-fir, for example, does well in such conditions, although it’s controversial because it is not native. But we feel it’s wise to spread the risk.”

“Best walk so far,” I heard several of our foresters murmur. “A beautiful forest with highly sophisticated uneven-aged management, appropriate for climate, soils, and public opinion,” said Bill Branham, a wildlife manager from Utah. “Very impressive.”

Other memorials to CAS included a graveside recitation of the Lord’s prayer in English and German, meetings with town officials, and music. We were also treated to champagne by Carlo Schenck, a great nephew of CAS, who had six siblings. “I remember as a boy peering up at him,” he said. “He was ‘a *Persönlichkeit*’ (a character), with an inborn sense of authority.”

Otto Schneider, deputy mayor of Lindenfels, also remembered CAS as an aged but still stalwart figure. “He was one of the most remarkable and outstanding persons produced by this area,” he said. “Our citizens are extremely interested in your visit, and this will help maintain his memory.”

Herr Schneider also recalled school meals sent by American Quakers and sponsored by CAS’s American relatives, the Merck family, founders of the pharmaceutical company by the same name, after WWII, when hunger was extreme. The war still resonates through German life. In his own speech, Carsten Wilke noted that his position of head forester for Hessen was created by the American military command in 1945 and was first held by CAS, who had never joined the Nazi Party. “However,” Herr Wilke pointed out, CAS did not last long because “he simply disobeyed [American] orders and opposed the increase of timber cutting, because it contradicted his opinion of sustainable yield.”

Since WWII, German forests have increased by a million hectares and the percentage of over 80-year-old stands has risen from one-quarter to one-third. But in 1947, CAS wrote in despair that excessive logging under Hitler and then for war reparations was “destroying the age classes [and] the soil.”

A Victorian Gentleman

It was not CAS’s first contretemps over principles. “He was a man of the 19th century, a Victorian gentleman,” said Christoph of his great uncle.

And he was not averse to fisticuffs when he felt his honor was impugned. Certainly a strong sense of duty drove CAS’s indefatigable energy, but there was also something deeper. With a guitar supplied by our hosts, Cindy Carpenter sang a haunting original tune, “Dr. Schenck’s Last Lesson,” with lyrics drawn from a 1954 letter: “Every tree is a manifestation of the divine. The fellow who tries to find God in the



Courtesy of Chris Bolgiano

Carl Alwin Schenck’s great nephew Christoph von Rhöneck (right), his sister Olly, and Carlo Schenck, another great nephew.

woods is on the right track.”

We walked by CAS’s church and his house on our way to dinner at his favorite restaurant, where his trophy red deer rack dominated one wall. Forestry originated in Germany more than a millennium ago to insure habitat for game, so a hunting horn concert, with a song for every species, was a natural part of the celebration. In speeches over dessert, Carsten Wilke revealed himself as equivalent to SAF’s own Joann Cox: He was in his fifth year of a four-year term as president of the *Deutscher Forstverein*, the German Forestry Society. The two traded observations, invitations, jokes, and a hug on our final night in Lindenfels.

Our itinerary included stops in Bonn, Heidelberg, and Cologne, plus a Rhine River cruise. But we were soon back in the woods with three of the largest private forestland owners in Germany, a group that totals less than 1,500 people. The Baron Harald Waitz von Eschen is another great nephew of CAS. Before we were treated to lunch outdoors beside the lake at Emmerichshofen, his 18th-century estate, we drove through Baron Waitz’ woods. These were composed mostly of Scots pines of all ages, with beeches, maples, cherries, and oaks in the understory to avoid monoculture. “No light falls on the ground,” he said. “We catch it all on tree leaves.”

Much of the Waitz production goes to boards such as you find at Lowe's. We also passed piles of roadside beech logs destined for China. Germany is the world's largest exporter of paper and fourth in combined pulp, paper, and sawn timber, but, said Baron Waitz, "More and more pulp that we once sold for paper is going for biofuel."

Our bus driver deftly maneuvered on narrow but mostly paved, permanent forest roads characteristic of German forestry. "If I don't keep up my roads, someone will complain to me at church that his shoes got muddy walking through my forest," said the Baron.

At our next stop, Count Raimund von Erbach-Fürstenau described how his family had avoided "pedestrian access" through an unusual dispensation granted some 50 years ago. We strolled through the private tree park next to his castle as he explained that his working forests, which his family has managed since the 13th century, produce income mainly from Norway spruce, Douglas-fir, and Scots pine. We marveled at some very large old oaks, but he pointed out their poor form due to coppicing for tanbark, a widespread earlier practice. A forester by training, as is his son Louis, he has been active in the Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification, the world's largest such organization with members in 37 countries. "I am just a link in a long chain," he said, "It is my duty to make a good forest."

Duty embraced with passion highlighted the conclusion of our extraordinary tour. Countess Dr. Christina Nesselrode welcomed us to Schloss Herrnstein as her son, Count Maximilian, dealt with a stranger who wanted to photograph the castle.

"Homes are not included in 'pedestrian access,'" Count Nesselrode said.

Young, handsome, eloquent in English, and utterly devoted to maintaining a 700-year tradition of sustainable forestry (not to mention the centuries-old buildings), he presided over a dinner of home-grown venison in the great hall. With a handout of facts and figures, punctuated with anecdotes and experiences, he gave an inspiring overview of his forestry. The next day, our last, we saw how he applied it in the woods.

More than 3,000 hectares of oaks and beeches, mixed with spruce and pine, provide an annual harvest of some 15,000 *festmeters* (cubic meters of roundwood without gaps). The shortest rotation is 100 years, for Douglas-fir. Like some other large German forest owners, Count Nesselrode had recently purchased 7,000 acres of loblolly pine in the southeastern United States. "That is quite different forestry," he said, "with clearcutting, burning, and

replanting every 40 years."

"The principal silvicultural technique here is thinning," said his forest chief, Eberhard Kreysern. "We use equipment in conifer stands, but here we use mostly manual cutting." We were in a stand of large beeches and oaks, none of which showed residual scars from former fellings. "Your loggers are masters of directional felling," said Joann Cox, and in fact they undergo rigorous training.

The Count pointed out several beeches to be cut soon, because they had fulfilled their function of forcing nearby oaks to grow straight, but were now about to overtop them. "It's tempting to cut the oaks before 250 years," he said, "but then they don't have as much value. I can do this because my family started in 1404. I've inherited 250-year-old oaks, and I'll make sure my son and grandson have some, too."

I saw North Carolina forest owner Sarah Sutton shake her head in amazement.

"I'm very impressed with the value of long-term planning," she said. "My daddy timbered twice during his lifetime, and I guess it was high-grading, because I've got mostly trash trees left."

"I feel vindicated," said forest owner Peter Williams. "This kind of single-tree harvest is just what our forester is doing on our 1,000 acres in Vermont to improve the woods in the future."

I think CAS would feel vindicated as well. In his memoirs, which he dedicated "to the young foresters of the world" with hopes for "life, love, and forestry," he wrote that "Verily, a good forester, working for the future as all foresters do, must look ahead." As we traveled the beautiful and bountiful woods of Carl Alwin Schenck's homeland more than half a century later, I could almost hear his firm yet warm voice extolling the values of "conservative forestry," known today as "*Nachhaltigkeit*," or sustainability.

See the Source Extras page, www.safnet.org/members/archive/source_extras.cfm, for additional material provided by the author, such as speeches, song lyrics, and videos.

*Chris Bolgiano is a German-born American nature writer whose maiden name of "Walder" is the German plural for forests (without the umlaut). She has published many articles and written or edited six books; her book *Living in the Appalachian Forest: True Tales of Sustainable Forestry* won the 2003 Reed Memorial Prize from the Southern Environmental Law Center. Read her essay about forestry in former East Germany, "In the Fatherland of Forestry: Time Travels in the German Wild," at www.chrisbolgiano.com.*