



END OF hard-working day in woods finds three woodcutters ready to leave. At right is tree farmer Robert H. Lawton and his two choppers, J. Anselme Brouillet and Harry F. Briggs, all of Athol. The ages of these men total over 219 years, but retirement, they say is for the birds.

ATHOL TREE FARMER

*Robert H. Lawton raises trees
in scientific manner in woodland
that has been in family 200 years*

By Ivan Sandrof

ROBERT H. LAWTON of Athol, a retired telephone company executive of 68, is a tree farmer.

Some men raise cows. Others go for sheep, or chickens, turkeys or eggs, as the case may be. But Lawton raises trees in a scientific manner in 770 acres of woods that has been in the family for 200 years.

Lawton retired in June, 1954 after nearly 49 years with telephones. He spent six years in Worcester while the system was changed to dial and had been in Springfield for 25 years as division plant supervisor.

An anti-lightning device perfected by Lawton was adopted by the telephone system throughout the nation and saved the companies

hundreds of thousands of dollars a year, a telephone official revealed at a testimonial banquet given to Lawton on his retirement.

He is a brother of Maj. Gen. Kirk P. Lawton, who until his retirement a few years ago was commanding general of Fort Monmouth, N. J. and very big in the news during the McCarthy hearings when he praised the Wisconsin senator.

Lawton, and his wife, Eva, live in a large white rambling house of 11 rooms in a distant corner of Athol. The house was built by Lawton's father, who was a dairy farmer and did occasional lumbering on the side, from trees on the property.

The telephone man was brought up on the farm with all the hard work and schedule of up with the birds and to bed with the sun. "I hated farms," he recalled. "I said when I'm 21 I'm going to leave this place. But I changed my mind. A man has to put down his roots."

How does a man become a tree farmer?

IN LAWTON'S CASE it was the result of his son, Richard, becoming active in Boy Scouts. About 1932, the boy approached Lawton and asked for 50 cents. He wanted to buy tree seeds to help make some money for his troop.

Lawton came across and forgot the whole thing. Richard bought

the seeds, planted them somewhere in the back yard. The sun shone and the rains soaked the earth. The seeds sprouted and became seedlings—tiny green things with a hunger for growth.

That gave Lawton the idea. The old family farm was an ideal place for tree farming. Its a high tract, with some rolling areas, up hill and down dale. White pine should do well there, and spruce; this level tract would grow straight hickory.

The Athol man went into the thing with his eyes open. "It's a long pull proposition," he said, looking back on his swelling acres. "You've got to like it. If I didn't do this, I'd probably die in five years. It's the right thing for me; I like it."

Lawton tapped the knowledge, all of it free, from the district forester of the Department of Natural Resources and the County Extension services working out of the University of Massachusetts.

During his first nine years he planted 200,000 seedlings. Weeding and thinning were carefully planned. Old logging roads where oxen had once yarded out the big first-growth trees, sometimes known as the forest primeval, were made passable again and improved to take four wheels and the pounding of a light truck.

FOR FIRE PREVENTION, two ponds and a waterhole were added. Thinning and weeding—

essentials in raising trees as much as in the vegetable patch—were planned in the best New England tradition. The fuel wood, much of it good snapping hardwood like elm and hickory that would make as fine a hearth burn as any homeowner could desire, was given free to anyone who would cut it according to the owner's plan.

Most of the planting was for saw logs and Christmas trees. Lawton learned as he went along. He asked questions, read deeply on forestry practice, sought advice.

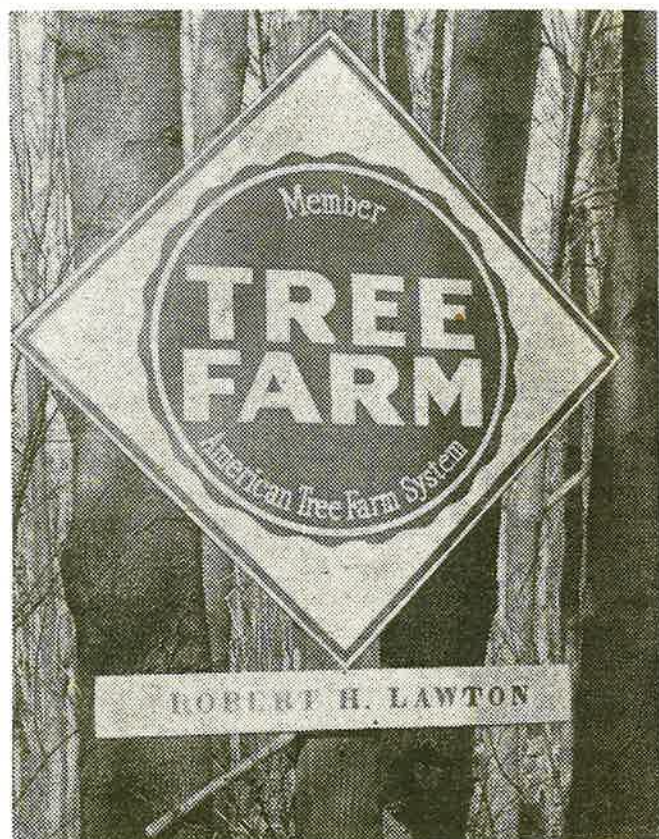
By 1948 he was going strong. American Forest Products Industries, Inc., awarded him the first certification for a tree farm in Massachusetts. This award is made only after careful inspection by experts and reflects the best forestry practice.

Lawton's interest has made him a member of the Massachusetts Tree Farm Committee, a member of Worcester County Forestry Committee and the University of Massachusetts Forestry Committee. "I attend all the meetings," he said.

"There's only one fellow doing more than I am," he recalled, "and he's in Winchendon. He's got more money than I have."

Wearing a wool shirt, bleached sun-tan pants tucked in heavy boots and a wool cap, Lawton visits his woods five days a week,

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TREE-FARM sign at beginning of Lawton's Athol acres.

TREE FARMER

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where he works six hours a day. He shortens it to four in summer. "I don't need the money," he is quick to point out. "I feel what I'm doing is the right thing for America."

PRESERVATION OF our resources has a strong ally in the Athol forester.

The theory behind growing suitable trees for lumber, explains Lawton, is thinning and weeding. It gives the healthy trees a chance to flex their trunks and grow. Periodic visits are made to lop off the side shoots, to check on diseases, to girdle and kill off unwanted stuff.

Girdling is a simple method of killing trees. All that is necessary is to slash a complete circle on the trunk, slap in a solution of a chemical, 245-T mixed with oil (crankcase or kerosene). In a few months or sometimes a year, the tree is dead.

Oddly enough, maple is hard to kill, oak easy. The more stubborn trees take two to three years. The process also, "debarks" the tree—causing it to split its hide and fall off.

Wherever possible, Lawton leaves his trees die where they stand. As they rot, grubs and termites and all the bugs that dine on cellulose begin to stake out a claim. This brings the birds to eat them and help preserve the balance of the forests.

By systematic pruning, Lawton can make a tree that will yield perfect, high-quality, clear, number one white pine ranging up to 16 feet long. That represents 50 per cent of the tree available in the tree. "There's no wood that's any better in Massachusetts," said Lawton.

FOR BY FOLLOWING recommended weeding procedures, which helps natural resources, Lawton has shared in a windfall from the Government. In 1956 and 1957, he revealed, the Worcester office of the U.S. Department of Agriculture in Federal Building had mailed him a check for \$50. This represented \$12.50 an acre for weeding 40 acres.

How does he begin?

Seeds come first. He plants a seed bed in a fertile area, close to the road so he can get to it easily. In one bed, placed in a separate sections, was Norway pine, Douglas fir, white pine and Ponderosa pine.

It takes two years for the seeds to turn into seedlings, a few inches high. They require half sun and half shade. Lawton has some wire and board netting which he uses as cover when the sun boils up a bit.

After two years the seedlings are transplanted a few feet away. This takes another two years. The purpose is to develop a strong root system, as Lawton explains it,

"to take the grief when you put them in the field."

There's four years shot to blazes and the trees—what? Four inches, five inches high? At the end of the fourth year they are dug out and put in their permanent location.

Using this method, Lawton plants 1200 trees per acre.

HE KNELT AT the seed bed and plucked a seedling that had turned brown. "The roots are fine," he said, brushing away a layer of damp humus clinging to the fine veins and rootlets that branched off branches, that would grow and suck sustenance from the good earth and grow mightily under the sun to serve all manner of living things.

Most beautiful of the seedlings are Ponderosa pines. They grow when young in delicate lavender and blue-green needles. The tree is a Western coast pine in its natural habitat.

Once a telephone man—always a telephone man. Lawton is a loyal guy. He even plants a measure of red pine because it makes such excellent telephone poles! Most of the hemlock and pine will end up as house frames and finish, paneling and odd jobs by the do-it-yourself brigade. Most oak goes into flooring, or cordwood. The spruce fares prettily as Christmas trees.

Lawton sells his trees when he and his trees are ready. Some trees are relatively mature in 10 to 15 years. Others take 50 to 75 years. Time, you see, is relative and if you expect to plant one day and harvest the next, you'd better go grow radishes in space.

Pushing through the woods as he has regularly for the past 26 years, has made him tuned to the environment, season's change, growth and decay, the tracks of small animals, the chirping of a lark, the ever green evergreen against a snow bank.

The strangest thing he ever found?

A few years ago, while in the woods, he smelled the odor of death. He followed his nose and about 50 feet away found a dead calf. He guessed it was about a year old.

Two weeks later Lawton went back to the same spot. He found some "bundles of hair," but that was all. "No bones, or anything else," he said. "Some animal must have taken the bones and buried them the way a dog would."

The incident made Lawton recall the mystery of pretty Paula Welden and what might have happened to her.

On Sunday afternoon of Dec. 1, 1946 five-foot five, blue-eyed blonde Paula Welden took a walk from the campus of Bennington (Vt.) Junior College. At last reports she was headed up the Long Trail toward rugged Glastenbury Mountain. Despite rewards of over



ONCE UPON a time, this man at left, Harry Briggs, found blueberry blossoms in October. With him is fellow woodcutter, B. Bouillet, who swings mean axe.

\$5,000 and the combined searching of hundreds of persons and the screening of 500 tons of gravel, the girl has vanished from the face of the earth.

"If a dead calf could disappear like that inside of two weeks," said Lawton, "couldn't the same thing happen to a human being?"

LAWTON HAS another son, Roger, who has a summer home on Rust Island in Gloucester. The lumber came from the Athol tree farm. Similar lumber built a home for his other son in Agawam.

Fire?
Always the big fear in forests. "I've been quite lucky," Lawton says. "But last May during the drought, a railroad spark started a fire and I lost 65 acres—that's about 100,000 board feet."

On his way to the woods, Lawton picks up two woodsmen, who spend their time cutting down excess trees and chopping it into wood for fireplaces and stoves.

The men are J. Anselme Brouillet and Harry F. Briggs, both retired Athol Highway Department workers. Both are quiet, unobtrusive types who have absorbed some of the vast silences of the woodlands.

Where they work, deep in hemlock groves, surrounded by spruce and the yielding earth floor where billions of leaves have gently composed themselves into compost, the air is redolent with fresh sawdust—a resin-rich aroma unlike anything else.

Briggs rested against a split pile of oak, shored up to weather

and dry out for better burning. "I saw a hawk chase a partridge right down to the woods," he said. "You don't see that very often. There's something for everything to feed on and be enemies."

About 10 years ago he kneeled before a blueberry bush deep in the woods and found blossoms. This was in October. Blueberries never blossom in October. But there it was—and Briggs isn't the lying kind.

Lawton's tree farm is one of 100 in Massachusetts. He looks at his sons—the sixth generation—and a grandson—the seventh—and feels a measure of satisfaction. All are interested in trees, and Lawton knows that his heritage for the future lies secure.

DID YOU KNOW?

Nearly half the families in the U.S. use installment credit.

Filter-type cigarettes contain a smaller quantity of tobacco than ordinary cigarettes.

The albacore, source of choice white-meat tuna, is never found in water colder than 57 degrees Fahrenheit.

Discoveries in Africa have led scientists toward the belief that that continent may have been the cradle of mankind.

The U.S., which has the world's largest known molybdenum deposit located in Colorado, supplies over 90 per cent of the free world's production.

The spotted alfalfa aphid, fastest-spreading foreign insect pest ever to invade this country, crossed the Mississippi River eastward and was found in 16 states where it was not previously known.

Newly developed tuna fish products include "loaf" and "sausage" and other luncheon meats.

Despite advances in the transistor art, the electron tube remains the heart of present electronic systems.

The Air Force reports that it does not know of a single case of total deafness attributable solely to jet noise.

Using hearing-aid parts, the Bureau of Mines has developed a portable telephone system that can be used safely during rescue operations in gassy coal mines.

Carbon-14 has dated the time of the last great glaciation, which reached as far south as the site of Milwaukee, Wis., at 10,700 years ago instead of the 25,000 years which had long been accepted.

The first fresh strawberries that come in markets after New Year's Day are from Florida.

High-speed flight means thousands of pounds of fuel consumed every minute and temperatures in the order of thousands of degrees.