

CAMPING & RV

FAMILY CAMPING & RECREATION IN AMERICA

Vol. 12 Number 2

March 1996 \$2.50
U.S. \$2.50 Canada \$3.00

DESTINATION—

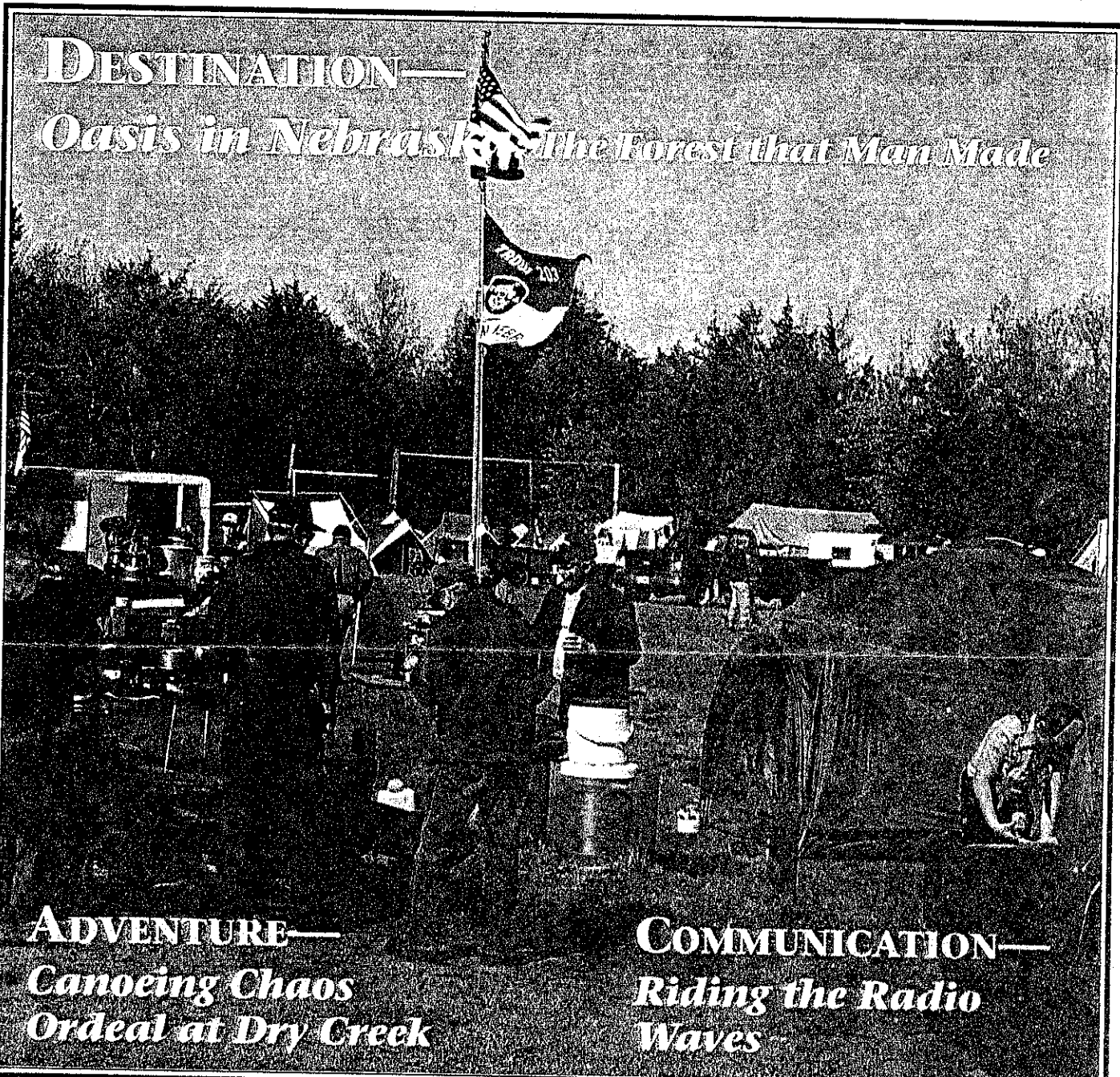
Oasis in Nebraska—The Forest that Man Made

ADVENTURE—

*Canoeing Chaos
Ordeal at Dry Creek*

COMMUNICATION—

*Riding the Radio
Waves*



Oasis in Nebraska: The Forest that Man Made

By Mark S. Cohen

The Nebraska Sandhills. Rugged country consisting of steep hills, dry grass, and plenty of sand. Long considered good for cattle and not much else, it remains one of the most sparsely populated regions in the United States. Viewing this barren section of the American outback more than one hundred years ago, only a fool or a dreamer could have envisioned a pine forest here. Charles Bessey, a University of Nebraska botanist, was no fool—but he was a dreamer. As a result of his vision, the Bessey division of the Nebraska National Forest is today the largest man-made forest in North America.

Located just west of Halsey, Nebraska, the forest is roughly five hours northeast of Denver, five hours northwest of Omaha, and five hours southeast of Mt. Rushmore. In other words, it is in the middle of nowhere. And that is why I love it. Perched atop the Scott Lookout Tower on a clear-summer night a few years back, I scanned the entire horizon without seeing a single artificial light. Such desolation gives me comfort, but it's becoming increasingly more difficult to find in our more popular national parks and forests.

I discovered the forest by accident. After graduating from law school in 1983, I joined the Air Force "to see the world." Being from Colorado, I was disappointed when Uncle Sam sent me to Nebraska—the state next door. Before long, I missed the pine trees and hiking trails I had taken for granted in my youth. When Spring came, I decided to meet a friend in Yellowstone. I headed west from Omaha, taking back roads whenever possible; you see more of the country that way. Within a few hours the fertile corn and soybean fields of eastern Nebraska gave way to the craggy rangeland of the Sandhills.

It was mid-afternoon—time to

start thinking about where to camp that night. My map showed a national forest an hour or two west of Broken Bow. A national forest in Nebraska? My friends wouldn't believe it. It was worth exploring, so I continued west on Highway 2 until I saw the trademark yellow on brown sign of the U.S. Forest Service welcoming me to the Nebraska National Forest. ***I knew the importance of proof, so I captured the sign on film.***



I then crossed the railroad tracks and Middle Loup river into the forest proper. Within a few minutes I knew I had discovered one of the best kept secrets in the United States. I have returned every year since.

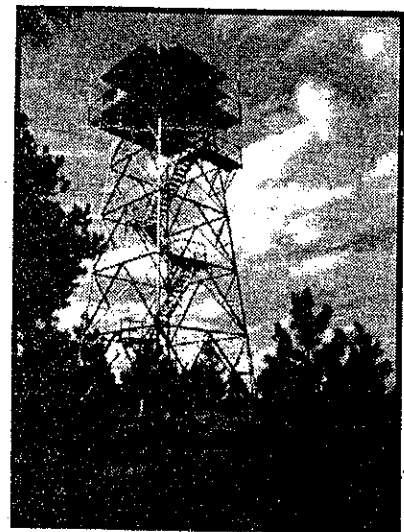
A pine forest in the Nebraska Sandhills? Though the area appears dry, it sits atop the greatest supply of underground water in the world—the Ogallala Aquifer. When Dr. Bessey became a professor of botany at the University of Nebraska in 1884, the Sandhills caught his attention. As he traveled the area gathering specimens of shrubs and grasses, he always found moisture at the roots. He became convinced that carefully selected species of coniferous trees would grow in the Sandhills. As a result of the urgings of Bessey and others, President Theodore Roosevelt proclaimed the establishment of the forest in 1902. The government placed Charles A. Scott in charge of the new forest in 1902 and the first

mass plantings began in 1903. Between 1903 and 1921, forestry crews planted more than 13,500,000 seedlings. The most successful species were Ponderosa pine, Eastern red cedar, and jack pine.

Two spring-fed rivers traverse the forest's 93,000 acres—the Dismal and the Middle Loup. The cool, clear waters of these rivers are perfect for canoeing, tubing, and just plain swimming. Beginning canoeists should stick with Middle Loup; more experienced paddlers may enjoy the frequent twists and turns of the Dismal. Floating down either river you are likely to see cattle grazing, but you may also spot deer, antelope, herons and cranes. If you don't own a canoe, a rental service in nearby Thedford offers full trips down both rivers.

If you enjoy hiking, be sure to walk the Scott Lookout National Recreation Trail. Approximately three miles long, the trail begins near the main campground and winds upward through the forest to ***the lookout tower.***

Those who want to learn more about the trees and vegetation



along the way should take advantage of the self-guided tour. The view from the tower is worth the hike; although

The Nebraska National Forest offers something for everyone. Canoeists, hikers, and naturalists will find plenty to do, and those who just want to "get away from it all" for a few days will be hard-pressed to name a more tranquil setting.

it was constructed to assist in the prevention of forest fires, it is open to the public from May 26th through Labor Day. The hours are from 2:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. on Monday and Tuesday and from 1:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. on Friday, Saturday, Sunday and holidays. If you want to tour the tower without making the hike, a paved road from the main campground will get you there.

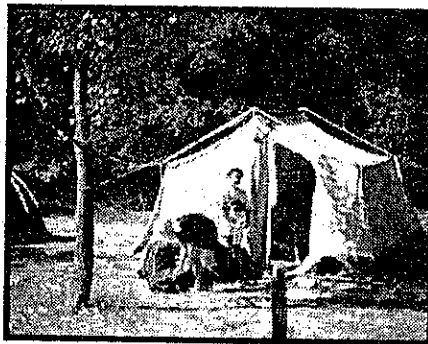
For those who want a longer hike, several dirt roads wind through and around the forest—some of them more than twenty miles long. Many of these "roads" are nothing more than two-track sand trails—more frequently used by cattle than humans. Cattle graze in several parts of the forest; scenic windmills mark the location of more than two hundred stock water tanks placed throughout the forest for these animals. In addition to livestock, patient hikers are likely to see antelope, mule deer, white-tailed deer, porcupine, skunk, grouse, prairie chicken, and wild turkey. The Forest Service estimates there may be as many as 235 species of birds within the forest, including hawks, owls, hummingbirds, woodpeckers, and even eagles. Canoeists and those hiking along the rivers may also glimpse swans, geese, ducks, herons, and cranes.

Whether you enjoy the RV lifestyle, tent camping, or primitive camping, the Nebraska National Forest has a place for you.

The main campground consists of 33 campsites; each offers a picnic table, fire grate, and water pump. The Forest Service provides firewood. The nightly fee is \$6.00. A few campsites have electricity for a nightly fee of \$9.00. Outdoor toilets are accessible from all campsites, but those in search of greater luxury will find indoor plumbing and hot showers available at the bathhouse. The main campground also boasts

tennis courts, a swimming pool, a softball diamond, and a trailer dump station with potable water refill service. The swimming pool is open every day but Wednesday from June 8th through August 11th. Campers in the main campground may hear the horn of a passing locomotive in the night; trains carrying coal from Wyoming rumble through the Sandhills at all hours.

There are two campsites accessible to people with disabilities; they



have large concrete pads, electrical hookups, fire rings and picnic tables. Reservations for these sites must be made at least ten days in advance. A group campground is also available; it will accommodate RV's, tent camping, or day use. Those partial to primitive camping should consider the Whitetail Campground—a primitive area located on the Dismal River in the Southeast corner of the forest. It offers an outhouse, water pump, and fire ring, but garbage containers are not available, so campers should take out what they bring in. If you liked the scenery in *Dances With Wolves*, you'll love the Whitetail Campground.

No matter where you camp, be sure to tour the Bessey Nursery. The oldest federal nursery in the United States, the Bessey nursery produces seedlings for national forests in Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, and South

Dakota. The Forest Service also distributes seedlings to farmers in mid-western states for windbreak and shelter belt plantings. The nursery produces more than three million seedlings each year. Located along the fertile beds of the Middle Loup river, the nursery's inventory has at times exceeded fifteen million seedlings.

Hunting is allowed on the forest, but is subject to regulation by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission. Because hunting is allowed only in the Fall, hunting will not affect those vacationing or traveling during the Spring and Summer.

The forest is a wonderful destination for campers and RV enthusiasts in search of something different, but is also a convenient stopping point for travelers headed to the Black Hills, the Badlands, Devil's Tower, or Yellowstone. If you have never visited Nebraska, or if your knowledge of the Cornhusker state is limited to what you saw while rolling through it on the Interstate, you will marvel at the beauty of the Sandhills and at the state's geological diversity. The Interstate is flat because it follows the Platte river; leave it and you discover a world of rugged hills and spring-fed rivers.

If you need supplies during your trip, the town of Halsey has a small grocery store, post office, gas station, motel, church, and restaurant. Thedford, a somewhat larger town fifteen miles west of the forest, offers several restaurants, churches and motels. The nearest regional city is North Platte, about seventy miles south of the forest.

For more information about the Nebraska National Forest: Write to Nebraska National Forest, Bessey Ranger District, P.O. Box 38, Halsey, NE 69142 or Phone the ranger's office at (308) 533-2257.