

Merton as Forester – The Results

By Paschal Phillips, OCSO

It is well known that Thomas Merton was a lover of the outdoors, aware of the looming ecological crisis, and interested in doing something about it. This took a practical turn in his earnest efforts to remedy the neglected state of the Gethsemani Abbey forests, then suffering from decades of random harvesting. Merton took advantage of his position as Master of Students to organize tree planting crews which – among other advantages – provided cheerful outings for the somewhat over-cloistered novices and junior monks. The old timers still smile as they recall some of those afternoons.

In an era when ecological awareness was just dawning, Merton's enthusiasm and dedication rubbed off on many of his junior monks and it was no passing impression. Forty years later several still trace their heightened awareness of the beautiful Gethsemani forest to his intervention, and that awareness continues to have its effect in many positive ways. This very successful – if informal – training of future leaders in ecology must stand as the most positive result of Merton's extensive forestry activity.

On the other hand, as monk-forester of Gethsemani, I have often been asked what measurable impact such efforts had on the forest. I am sorry to report that the net effect was virtually zero. Forty years ago the art of forest rehabilitation was in its floundering infancy. Apparently some well-meaning State officials were intent on substituting the economically valuable Southern loblolly pine for the common Virginia Scrub, a species which grows naturally in Central Kentucky but is a rather poor excuse for a pine tree. The State provided Merton and his crews with thousands of loblolly seedlings, which they planted in all sorts of improbable places. And all of



Loblolly Pine

them died after a few years – this especially since the loblolly is not ordinarily cold-resistant. The first hard winter finished off the project.

Oddly, every so often a few loblolly will turn up that are actually cold resistant – perhaps a genetic throwback to some distant past when the species occupied a larger range. In one instance Merton and crews all unknowingly planted a small patch, less than an half acre, of cold weather trees. This little grove has matured into an



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impressive stand which is now seeding into a brush patch downwind from the larger pines.

Beyond that I can find no trace of Merton's tree-planting work. From time to time someone points out an odd-ball tree which doesn't seem to belong there, but in every case it has eventually turned out that some zealous monk planted it after his Aunt Suzie gave him a seedling and he didn't know what else to do with it. Thus the grove of lovely Northern Whites to the east of Merton's hermitage got started in something of that fashion.

A picnic area is now graced with some unusually healthy white oaks and several recall that Merton's crews had thinned that area. It is quite probable that this unusually attractive area is at least in part the result of his dedication. At one time the same crews created a network of walking trails. Now, some forty years later, we can only conjecture what parts of the present network owe their origins to the 1950s. Apparently these faint traces are all that remain on the practical, observable level of Thomas Merton's extensive efforts.

But Providence has provided something like a monument to Merton's work. There is still much interest in establishing the loblolly in Kentucky, and during the '80s Westvaco Company – a large forest products concern – genetically developed a strain of cold weather loblolly pines and selected Gethsemani as one of the first experimental plantings. The trees have flourished and are very evident along the roadside as the Abbey property is approached from the North. Merton would be proud of them, although no doubt somewhat disappointed that the object of all his own care and solicitude met an untimely end.



Loblolly Pine Grove