

The Repository Corner

By Ed Heilman, Originally appearing in the 1992 and 1993 NMFSH Newsletter

Tree Marking Nails

In the 1910s and until the late 1930s, the Rocky Mountain Region (Region 2) of the Forest Service used a short, heavy nail with US letters on a flat, round head to indicate a tree marked for cutting. The forest officer would drive the nail a short distance into the trunk of the tree to be cut. After the logger felled the tree he would drive the same nail, removed from the fallen tree, into the stump to indicate that it was a designated tree.

These marking nails were inspired by somewhat similar nails known as "date nails" used by US railroads to indicate the year of installation of a given railroad tie. The two digits on the nailhead indicate the year of installation of that particular tie. The date nails provided information as to durability of an individual tie. These date nails were driven into the end or sometimes the upper surface of the tie.

Apparently these US nails were used mostly to designate trees to be cut for railroad ties by the loggers, known as "Tie hacks". Some nails may have been used to designate sawlogs or other products, but it appears the most common use was for ties.

Unfortunately, some imaginative loggers abused this system. Once removed from a standing tree, the nail could be driven into any stump, not necessarily the one selected by the forest officer. Some choice trees undoubtedly were thus removed by this "logger's choice" selection system. The Forest Service phased in other tree marking methods and the tree nails apparently were no longer used at the beginning of World War II. Some of these tree nails can still be found in old stumps, often in Lodgepole pine stands.

One of our Museum members has provided us with what must be one of the very early Forest Service tree marking nails, which includes the year of use, which in this case is 1909. Our member recalls seeing other dated marking nails from 1910 and 1911. Apparently there were both dated and undated marking nails in use.

This 1909 nail extends the known period of use from 1909 to the late 1930s, and the area of use from the Shoshone and Medicine Bow National Forests in Wyoming to the White River NF in Colorado. So far, reported use has all been within the Rocky Mountain Region of the Forest Service. They were probably used to designate trees for saw timber as well as for railroad ties, but this is not clearly established.

Nail lengths: US nail 2.45"; 30 Nail 2.6"; US 90 Nail 2.1" Nails are from Collections 1991.7 and 2006.20.