

Forests to Farms and Back Again

* For many thousands of years, the land we now call Wisconsin was covered with forests.

* Indian tribes lived in the forest and with the forest. Birch trees gave bark for canoes and cooking pots. Maple trees gave sweet sap for maple sugar. Spruce tree roots were used for sewing and ash wood for baskets. Bark and wood was used for houses or burned to cook food and keep families warm. Many trees had many different uses. All were important.

* In the 1600s - 400 years ago - white people came from Europe. At first, a few fur traders came looking for adventure and riches. Missionaries came to tell about their religion.

By the 1800s, millions of people from Europe had come to America to live.

* Towns grew. Cities got bigger and bigger. People came by wagon, train, boat and on foot. Thousands and thousands of people came to Wisconsin. Many settlers thought forests were dangerous and scary. They wanted to get rid of forests so the land could be farmed.

* Many governments, scientists and farming experts thought forest land was wasted land. They dreamed of filling Wisconsin with tidy farms and happy farm families.

* In about 50 years, most of the great forests of Wisconsin had been cut. In some places, only brush and stumps were left. Folks called this land "the cutover."

* The state sent brochures advertising “good, rich farmland.” Brochures were sent to big cities. They were printed in other languages and sent to Europe. *Come to Wisconsin*, the brochures said. *Good, cheap farm land*.

* The University of Wisconsin printed books about farming in northern Wisconsin. Farming experts listed ideas for growing good crops where the soil was sandy and the growing season was short. The farming experts didn’t try growing crops themselves. They assumed land good for growing trees would be good for vegetables. But they were wrong. Much of the cutover land wasn’t good for crops.

* People believed the brochures and advertisements. Thousands of families traveled to Wisconsin and spent their life savings to buy the land.

* In some places, the soil was good and families made a good living on their farms. Sadly, most didn’t make it. Even with hard work and determination, many people just couldn’t make enough money to feed their families and pay taxes.

* As years passed, families gave up and left. Other families lost their farms when they couldn’t pay taxes. As more years passed, whole towns in northern Wisconsin were deserted. When farmers left, their land became the property of the county government. Wisconsin counties and the State of Wisconsin began to plant trees on the abandoned land. They planted and planned until some of the cutover land became the county forests we enjoy today.

Stories From the Cutover

* These are the stories of real people who lived during the hard times on the cutover forest land. When you see words in “quotation marks”, you’re reading the actual words of these people.

* I’m Meridell Le Seuer. We came to America from Finland where a few rich men owned most of the land – and the mountains and rocks owned the rest!

* "All I can hear is...land, land, land ... land to divide ... for a sawmill, to raise crops, cattle, chickens, pigs, children..."

* So poor city folks and immigrants from Europe came to Wisconsin with the dream of land. Somebody even wrote a poem! Imagine reading this in a crowded Chicago apartment on a hot day. Wouldn't you want to move to Sawyer?

“Come to Sunny...Sawyer
There’s a future here for you
Mother Nature’s always smiling
And the skies are rarest blue
Where the crops are always ‘bumper’
And the taxes always paid
And you’ve got a dollar waiting
When you’ve got a dollar made.”

* Folks came. By wagon and train. Later, in rickety trucks and cars. People came hoping to make a life for themselves and their children.

* I’m Herb Jolly. “I went there to be a lumberjack. But the big timber companies had cut everything....I just settled on forty acres in the sticks and grubbed along raising pigs, chickens, cows, kids, and taters.”

* Some families were lucky to buy land with a house. Other people camped or slept in their wagons while they raced to build any kind of shelter before winter started.

* I'm Jolie Paylin. I remember the first time Mama, Pa, Della, Max and I saw our house. "Liddy turned the knob and we entered a low-ceilinged, square, keeping room... 'This part of the house and the ...kitchen are the original log building,' she explained.... 'They're cold as a shack in the Dakotas in wintertime!'"

* When families arrived on their land, they saw stumps, stumps and more stumps. Stumps and brush had to be cleared away. Land had to be plowed. Seeds had to be planted. Meanwhile, the family still had to eat!

* "Blueberries, fish and venison. That's what we lived on," said Charlie Carlson, up in Washburn County.

* Advertisements for the land said it was "easy to clear." The children didn't think so! Here's what they had to say:

"Oh, what a back-breaking job we had picking rocks off the farm."

"...two of us picked 21 to 22 loads of rocks a day."

"That land was just solid rocks!"

* "One can hardly imagine the [job] of clearing the stumps...It's like asking a man to transform a [battlefield]...into a farm," according to a visitor to Price County, Wisconsin.

* Jolie Paylin again. I was ten years old when my Pa took me to Land Clearing Day. That day was bigger than the Fourth of July! Mr. Farley's big stallion, Ranger, demonstrated stump-pulling. One stump was so big it took Mr. Farley's dynamite and all of Ranger's muscle to pull it!

* Here's what happened: "Charges were set around the huge stump by the...blasting men...Suddenly, the earth quivered and the air was ripped...the [stump was blown to pieces]....Now came Mr. Farley with his...big, black horse dragging a log chain.... Mr. Farley hooked Ranger's chain to the last, heavy piece of stump. 'Now, Boy!' he cried..."

* "The horse adjusted himself like a weight-lifter...He pulled with every muscle...while the crowd held its breath... one of one of the biggest [stumps] ever to grow in pine country rolled out of the blast crater."

* Farming was an unbelievable amount of work. Those farmers didn't have tractors or milking machines. They didn't have hired workers. Instead, they had children!

* I'm Albert Stouffer. "I was about 12 years old. It was my job to ride the left hand horse of the lead team. And many the hot day I rode that horse until I was so sore I could hardly sit down."

* I'm Larry Garneau. Let me tell you about work. "We had to do all the chores while dad was in the logging camp...before we headed off to school..."

* Then dad died in an accident at the lumber camp. What would the family do? Larry hired out to other farmers for money. Everybody worked. “We all worked like tigers....Mother would come in from the fields and collapse for an hour while the rest of the family ate dinner. [But] we done better than they that sat there and waited.”

* In Jolie’s family, everyone had to work. With Mama expecting a baby, Papa, Jolie, and even little Max worked in the fields from sunrise ‘til night. Jolie had never worked so hard. The crop wasn’t good, but they needed every penny they could get. And worse, rain was coming!

* “We worked...scarcely leaving time to eat or remember whether I’d washed my face or combed my hair. Over Mama’s protests, I’d been kept home from school...to drive a flat wagon in the fields....As fast as [pitch]forks could be wielded and machinery pulled, the last alfalfa had [to be] cut and hauled.”

* Jolie’s neighbors, the Craniak family, had traveled the long miles from Czechoslovakia to Wisconsin. They were even poorer than Jolie’s family. At harvest, Mr. Craniak and their big boys worked his own fields. Mrs. Craniak and the younger kids hired out to work for Jolie’s Pa.

* “The potato vines had been frosted brown for two weeks....A couple of mornings, the ground had a crust of frost until the sun came up....Our whole school was having Potato Vacation. Mrs. Craniak and the four children came to pick up potatoes....Dressed in her husband’s clothes, Mrs. Craniak was giving her fourteen year old son a run for his money.”

* “I soon found that picking a crop of heavy potatoes was not a child’s work....I felt sorry for the little boys....Victoria Craniak was filling crates like a man, picking up two wire baskets of spuds to my one....”

* “Picking up potatoes was a picnic compared to pulling up two four or five pound sugar beets...Mrs. Craniak...sat at the piles on overturned crates and [cut the tops off] the ice-cold vegetables...with meat cleavers. It looked like an easier job. But it wasn’t.”

* Life was hard. People had little money for “treats.” Store-bought clothes, soap, or even coffee were too expensive for most people. Children ran barefoot until winter so their shoes would last.

* I’m Albert Haas. We lived in the little town of Wilson up in Rusk County.

“We raised all our own food except sugar, flour, coffee, and tobacco...Taxes could be [earned by] working on the town roads...and eggs and butter [were traded] with the stores in town to buy cloth and tools.”

* Farming just didn’t pay enough. The soil was too sandy to grow good crops. Many fathers worked on their farms until winter. Then, they packed up their long underwear, woolen mittens, and boots and headed for the lumber camps.

* I’m Lillian King. Born in 1892 in the village of Springbrook. “Dad made good money in the woods every winter but...still, all of us [fourteen] kids lived hand to mouth.”

* In the little town of Grant, in Rusk County, Ann Johnson was desperate to go to school. She walked four miles to school and four miles home again.

“...getting up at four in the morning, helping my father milk the cows, feed and water them. Then, at night when I came home, [I] helped clean the barn and other...chores.”

* Crops weren't good. Times were hard. Then the Great Depression happened.

I'm Sarah Martin. The Depression was the hardest time for us. “It was a terrible time, the depression....It seemed like John worked all the time and no money was coming in.”

* I'm Esther Gibbs in Spooner: “the corn prices fell until it was cheaper to burn the cobs for fuel than to haul it to town....We could have electricity and a radio for just \$12 a year. But who had twelve dollars?”

* I'm Anna Erickson. I farm with my husband near Athens, in Marathon County. I save every penny. We disconnected the phone. I make my own soap. I sew our clothes out of flour and sugar sacks.

* Esther and Jim “made do.” Esther sewed and made her own soap. They ate beans and potatoes. Jim hunted for food. One day, Esther saw a deer fall into a deep hole. Before the deer could jump out, Esther had pulled off her apron, grabbed her little boy under one arm and the shotgun under the other. She raced into the field and shot the deer. Neighbors helped her haul the big buck out of the hole. Everyone had meat for weeks!

* Jim worked winters in the woods, cutting lumber. At first, Esther stayed home with little Jimmy. Then, the camp cook quit. Esther took one look at the cook's pay and decided she would get that job one way or another. She had never cooked for more than her little family and a few friends. How would she cook for 100 men?

* Esther pulled out all her recipes. She multiplied the amounts until she knew how much to make for 100 men. She marched into the boss' office and asked for the cook's job. The next thing she knew, Esther was the only woman in a logging camp, cooking for 100 lumberjacks.

* Hard times got harder. With no money, poor crops, and taxes and loan payments, people just couldn't make it. Listen to their stories:

* "It will take time for me to do anything on the interest [for the farm loan]. The boy ran into the mower. Cost a lot of money...I broke my finger but worked anyway until I was layed off."

* "If you want to foreclose on that pile of rocks, you can anytime you want to. I will deed you the place and throw in my seven years of labor."

* As those children who spent their childhood picking rocks and milking cows grew up, many left the cutover area. They moved to the cities. Some went to school and got an education. Some stayed and tried to keep the family farm.

* I'm Knute Anderson. In Bayfield, folks "grubbed and toiled and they slaved and they got 60 acres all cleared...[with] an old ramshackle house all falling down...The young ones said there's got to be a better way to make a living."

* We're Conrad and Mabel Leafbled. Finally we knew we'd made a big mistake putting our life savings into this farm on the Cutover. "We sat on the steps with tears on our cheeks...with one old horse, seven heifers, and no milk cows."

* What happened to those abandoned farms? The land had changed from forest to farm. Now it would return to forest again.

* The land wasn't good farm land. But it was good forest land so the county, state and federal governments began to plant trees. Today you can enjoy a forest where farmers once tried to make a life.

* And sometimes children and grandchildren of those farmers hike back into the forest. They want to stand on the land that was once the old family farm. It's their way of remembering the land that went from forest to farm ... and back to forest again.