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12/31/2020 7:28:00 AM Rhinelanders Revisited: Economic and environmental implications of the Northwoods logging industry

Stephanie Kuski River News Features reporter



Photo courtesy of the Pioneer Park Historical Complex. Hundred-year-old white pines, such as those pictured above, stretched skyward for miles across the Northwoods landscape long before European settlers arrived in the area.

Logging has a long, rich history in Northern Wisconsin. Many cities in the northern third of the state, including Rhinelanders, can trace their founding back to the early logging days and the forest products industry continues to hold an important place in today's economy.

Logging started on the east coast of the United States and moved westward, with European settlers arriving in Wisconsin by the mid to late 1800s. The vast and seemingly endless pinery of Wisconsin's Northwoods is what originally drew settlers to this area, and since then, logging has become inextricably tied to the livelihood of Northwoods residents.

Before Europeans arrived in the Northwoods, old-growth white and red pine stretched as far as the eye could see. A single tree could reach 50 inches in diameter and some more than 100 feet tall.

When Rhinelanders was settled in the 1880s, the thinking of the time was that one could cut forever without depleting or polluting these forestry resources. As such, there was no universally-practiced forest management at the time. As a result, the Northwoods pinery was largely exhausted by the turn of the century.

Red and white pine were the most sought-after species because they were highly valuable to the forest products industry. After those species were depleted, loggers moved to hardwoods, taking the biggest and best trees before moving on to the next stand. After the hardwoods were gone, eyes turned to the softwoods until several species were quickly exhausted.

Although the logging boom only lasted a few decades, it had a lasting environmental impact. After the initial boom, dead tops and tree limbs littered the ground for hundreds of miles, providing fuel for fires that swept across the state. Significant erosion followed these fires since there were no roots, grasses, bushes or trees to hold the soil in place.

In the lifetime of a lumberjack, burned and barren landscapes replaced a once undisturbed wilderness, whittled away by the negligence of mankind.

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Wildlife populations also changed dramatically following the great cut-over. Although wildlife in the northern tier generally adapted to change, the rate at which that change occurred was dramatic. Wildlife populations which prefer old-growth forests, like the American marten, for example, were largely extirpated while wildlife that prefer young forests, like sharp-tailed grouse, exploded in population.

Many of these logging companies practiced "cut-and-run logging" in which they took what they wanted and allowed the land to go tax delinquent once all of the timber resources were exhausted. When tens of thousands of acres of these cut-over, burned forests went tax delinquent, ownership reverted back to the state.

In an effort to make a profit off the tax delinquent public lands, the Northwoods of Wisconsin was promoted as the new frontier for agriculture. Immigrants, homesteaders and other settlers were encouraged to turn the Northwoods into the next Grain Belt. As a result, thousands of acres of public land were intentionally burned to make room for agriculture.

In doing so, these intense fires charred the nutrient-dense layer of an already sandy topsoil. Coupled with an abbreviated growing season, the promise of agriculture as a budding industry in the Northwoods quickly flopped. At this point there were thousands of acres of tax delinquent land that couldn't be put to use, so the state had to come up with a way to make a profit. And that's when the paradigm shifted, this time to sustainable forest management.

Once land ownership again reverted back to the state, the government deeded large tracts of land to create national, state and county forests. These public lands make up the beautiful county forest system we enjoy today - approximately 83,000 acres in Oneida County alone - the majority of which was previously burned-over, cut-over land nobody wanted to buy.

Simultaneously, the Great Depression presented a double whammy in the late '20s and early '30s: at the same time this conservation crisis was going on across the country, young, able-bodied individuals were out of work at unprecedented rates. In response, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal spearheaded the Civilian Conservation Corps, or CCC, to put citizens back to work replanting trees and fixing erosion by planting vegetation to hold the soil in place.

In considering the big picture, however, the amount of trees the CCC planted were just a small fraction of what we see today. The biggest factor which regenerated the forests of the great Northwoods was the resilience of Mother Nature herself - with proper forest fire prevention, the forests simply grew back over time. Pioneer species, like aspen and birch, were the first to regenerate, followed by pine and hardwoods later on.

As the forests grew back, wildlife populations once again changed. The extensive populations of sharp-tailed grouse that were once found in the cut-over region slowly declined as wildlife that prefer mature forests increased over time.

Even so, it took many years for the forest to become productive again following the initial logging boom. In Oneida County, harvesting on public forests did not start up again until the late '50s and early '60s.

When the forests were harvested again, it was done so in a sustainable manner. Modern silviculture practices are the result of many decades of trial and error, and the present forest management system strives to maintain a never-ending cycle of harvestable timber.

Today, the Northwoods features a healthy mix of young, middle-aged and mature forests which support a diverse range of wildlife populations and allow for continual timber harvests.

The forestry industry also has major economic implications for our region, considering it's one of the top industries in the state. The timber sale program on the Oneida County Forest has averaged about \$1.5 million in the last 10 years, and those funds offset other costs of county government such as social services, highway and sheriff's departments, in addition to other essential programs funded by the county. Of that grand total, 12 percent is distributed back to the five towns which house the county forest.

The present livelihood of Northwoods residents depends on the proper management of public forests. Hundreds of local employees working at sawmills, pulp mills and paper mills in addition to those involved in the logging and trucking of those forestry products provide income for their families as a result of sustained forest management.

It's clear financial incentives cannot be divorced from this equation: so long as the forestry products industry remains profitable, money will be invested back into properly managing and preserving these resources which drive many of us to live, work and recreate in the Northwoods. Without the forestry industry, outdoor recreation on public lands would also not be possible to the extent we currently know. Oneida County alone has 400 miles of county-administered silent sports trails. Many of these trails were originally logging roads or former railroad lines, including several area trails used for biking, hiking, snowshoeing, snowmobiling and ATV/UTV use. Coupled with the consistent tourism game hunting provides, the outdoor recreation industry is a major economic driver in our community that simply wouldn't be possible without the financial incentive the logging industry provides.

The hard work of thousands of resource management professionals over the past century has sculpted the Northwoods landscape we know today, one which allows residents and tourists to enjoy multiple recreational pursuits, abundant wildlife and clean water - all of which are a direct result of properly managed forests.

Mother Nature is a complex, interconnected web: as the forests regenerated, fisheries recovered, wildlife came back and humans benefited too. This web extends far beyond the scope of our lifetimes, however, and the

action we take today will undoubtedly have effects long into the future.

The international climate crisis we currently find ourselves in draws many parallels to the environmental degradation which resulted from early logging efforts. In time, however, the industry changed their ways and became better for it, paving the way for its current reign and sustaining the logging industry for generations to come.

It's optimistic to look back and consider that positive progress has been made through the concerted effort of government, industry, landowners and individuals. As students of history, I'm confident we are armed with the resources to apply the lessons of the past to combat the problems we face now and in the future.

This installment was written with the help and guidance of local historians and foresters. Special thanks to Pioneer Park Historical director Kerry Bloedorn, Oneida County Forestry director Paul Fiene and retired DNR wildlife biologist Ron Eckstein for sharing their expertise. Stay tuned for the next installment of this continuing series. Visit [www.rivernewsonline.com](http://www.rivernewsonline.com) to read previous installments.

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