

FACT SHEET

No. 1

Timber & Timber Harvesting in West Virginia

Summer, 2001

A Brief History Of Early Lumbering: Did Lumber Barons Clearcut The State?

In our highly urbanized society, it is hard to accept that the greatest single activity in creating the rural landscape of the United States has been the removal of the original forest. This is also true for West Virginia. Forests were so common that no one bothered to write about them, let alone collect statistics; so the extent of the forest and the amount of clearing went unrecorded until census reports after 1850. Standing timber was an overabundant pollutant. Cleared land was worth much more than land with trees.

However, it is also fair to say that from the early 17th to the early 20th century, trees produced the most valuable raw material in American life – wood. Proof is also recorded in the census figures where the nation's lumber industry, between 1850 and 1920, was the largest manufacturing industry except for 1)meat-packing, 2) iron and steel and 3) flour and gristmills. In 1850, in the U. S. as a whole, lumber was the second largest industry in the U. S. after flour manufacturing. Cotton dropped lumber to 3rd in 1860, but in 1870 lumber was again 2nd. Wood was used for fuel, it was the principal ingredient in the developing transportation system and in household, industrial and agricultural implements and machines. Although we now have abundant substitutes, wood still accounts for one-fourth of the industrial raw material used in our country.

Roadways were initially scarce; so transporting the logs and resultant lumber for other than short distances was at first impossible. The only way to move such bulky materials was by water and waterways were scarce in West Virginia. A highway development program did not begin in West Virginia until the mid-1920's. As a result, a lot of the early clearing was by hacking. In this technique, the farmer hacked or girdled every tree in the stand. In a few years, after the trees had died, the area was set on fire. The dead and dry vegetation burned and if it happened to be on a limestone soil, bluegrass soon appeared. If the land was needed sooner, the trees were cut, piled and burned.

The first sawmills were water powered, cutting only 300 to 500 board feet a day. However, the demand for lumber was relatively small through the 18th century and most logs were cut within sight of the

mill. They were felled with an ax, wedges and a maul. The crosscut saw was known, but was not in common use until about 1870. The chain saw was not in common use in the state until the mid 1950's.

In 1879, approximately 180 million board feet of lumber were manufactured in West Virginia. The amount gradually increased until it approached one billion board feet in 1906. The production exceeded one billion board feet each of the next 10 years. This statistic apparently led to the clear-cutting myth. The peak year is usually accepted as being 1909, but it is probable that the nearly 1 ½ billion board foot production of that year has been surpassed more than once in the 1990's. The 50-year production, from 1870 to 1920, exceeded 30 billion board feet. At times, the sawmills numbered more than 1,500.

(Over)

This publication is distributed free by the Timber Committee, West Virginia Forestry Association, P. O. Box 718, Ripley, WV 25271. Please call (304-372-1955) or write for additional copies, topics or for a list of speakers and their availability.

If the land was not clear-cut for timber, what did happen? Quite frankly, clearing for agriculture has been the dominant cause of reduction in forest cover in the eastern half of the nation and in West Virginia. Since there was no improvement in crop yields per acre until well into the 20th Century, farm clearing increased at a rate commensurate with population growth. Between 1850 and 1900, the U. S. population tripled. During this time, the area of cropland increased four times and pasture and hayland even more. To put it in different terms, farmers in our nation cleared forest at an average rate of 13.5 square miles per day each and every day for 60 years. The federal census of 1850 introduced the categories of improved and unimproved land for the first time. According to census statistics, the amount of land cleared before 1850 in western Virginia was 1.8 million acres or about 12% of the current state total. Another 600, 000 acres were cleared by 1859, 400,000 acres between 1860-1969 (WV was formed as a State in 1863), 1.3 million acres between 1870-1879, 800,000 acres between 1880-1889, 900,000 acres between 1890-1899 and 200,000 acres between 1900-1909. By the end of the 19th century, West Virginia was overwhelmingly a state of largely self-sufficient farms. It was never clear-cut from border to border by lumber barons as is often stated. Perhaps as much as half the state was in farms before the advent of the lumber barons.

An interesting 4-page article on West Virginia forests in the 1880 census document reported that "the forests have been largely removed from the counties bordering the Ohio River, and the most valuable hardwood timber adjacent to the principal streams, especially black walnut, cherry and yellow poplar, has been culled in nearly every part of the state. But slight inroads, however, have yet been made into the magnificent body of hard-wood timber covering the extreme southern counties, which still contain vast quantities of oak, cherry and poplar." These acres were the inaccessible ones that railroads made it possible to log. And, "During the census year 476,775 acres of woods were reported destroyed by fire, with a loss of \$155,280. Of these fires, the

largest number was traced to the careless clearing of land for agricultural purposes, although many had their origin in sparks from locomotives."

In discussing the Elk River basin, the author commented "About the upper settlements on this river miles of fence constructed with boards of black cherry and farms fenced with black walnut rails may be seen."

Farm woodlots were not an insignificant part of the total forest across the nation. A 1910 report showed that farm woodlots made up from 40 to 69 percent of the farms in the eastern three-fifths of West Virginia and from 20 to 39 percent in the western two-fifths.

As the economy increasingly industrialized after 1850 and as the frontier moved ever westward, urban areas began to grow rapidly. To meet the needs of these growing population centers, lumber production increased dramatically. Shortly, increasing numbers of motor vehicles and farm tractors made it unnecessary to continue to raise large numbers of draft animals. In 1910, 27% of all farmland was devoted to growing food for draft animals. By 1950, the number of these animals had dropped so dramatically in the nation that the equivalent of nearly 70 million acres of cropland was released for other purposes. West Virginia was part of the trend. Hybrid seeds and mineral fertilizers released even more acreage. Forests have reoccupied millions of acres of past crop and pasture land.

Forest ownership has not changed greatly since the early 1940's. Nationwide, about 42-45 percent is owned by government, about 45% by private landowners and about 13% by private forest and timber companies. In West Virginia about 15% of the total forestland is government-owned, a figure that rises to nearly 20% of the commercial forestland. Only New York, Pennsylvania, Minnesota, Michigan, Missouri and Wisconsin, in the 20-state northeastern area have more publicly owned acres than West Virginia and these are all much larger states. In this regard, it's important for the public to also know that no other nation in the world has set aside as large a proportion of its forestland as has the United States for the general enjoyment of its citizens.

(Prepared by William H. Gillespie)