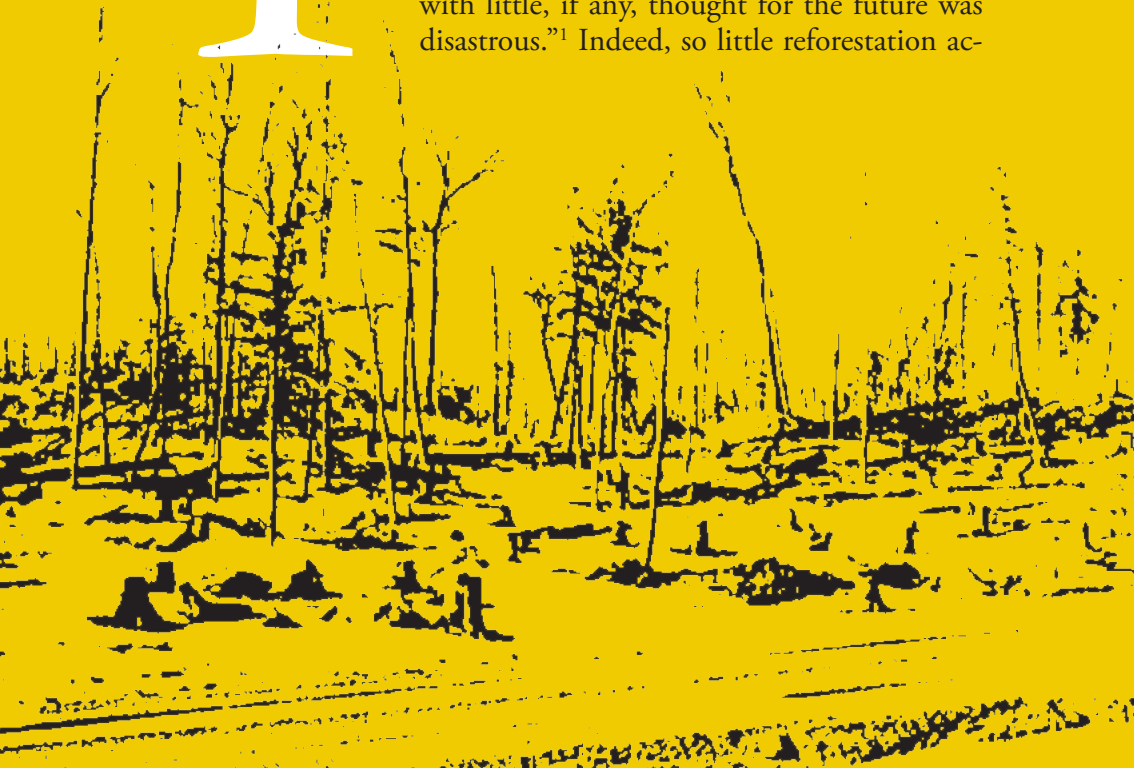


# **“All That Country Will Be Taken Up by the Thrifty Settler”: Migration, Environment, and the Cutover Lands of Minnesota, USA from the 1890s to the 1930s**

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In 1945, reviewing the American lumber industry for his book, *Lumber and Labor*, Vernon Jensen, a scholar of industrial relations, captured – almost in passing – two troubling environmental and social consequences of the industry’s recent history. He wrote, “The rapidity with which the forests were cut out with little, if any, thought for the future was disastrous.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, so little reforestation ac-



companied lumbering in the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, that Gifford Pinchot, the first Chief of the United States Forest Service, wrote in 1919 that “[a]s it exists in the United States, lumbering is timber mining.”<sup>2</sup>

Jensen, though, also recognized a second, related legacy of logging in the United States: “[T]he encouragement of people by the land promoters, representing railroad and logging companies and other large landholders ... to settle on the cutover lands,” he wrote, “heaped tragedy on tragedy.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the hasty removal of lumber from American forests certainly represented a story of short-sighted destruction of old growth forests, but this “timber mining” also created a new, albeit severely degraded, ecological and social space: the cutover. Cleared of tree cover, littered with stumps and branches, and prone to firestorms, the cutover was not much to look at, but it was to such environments across the country that migrants were drawn. Examining the cutover “tragedy” can tell us much about the relationship between migration, climate, and rapid environmental change. As importantly, though, a focus on the cutover also shows how the circulation and propagation of particular *ideas* about migration, climate, and environmental change – about what could be expected from the cutover – played a critical role in shaping this space’s history.

Efforts to settle cutover lands in the United States occurred virtually everywhere that industrial lumbering took place during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, especially in the South, the Pacific Northwest, and the Upper Midwest. Northern Minnesota – an area at the heart of the post-Civil War lumber boom that fed the rapidly industrializing Midwest during this period – was typical (fig. 1). When lumber capitalists there looked out onto the state’s growing “unproductive” cutover land they did not see Jensen’s “tragedy,” but twin social and environmental problems begging for a solution.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> V. Jensen, *Lumber and Labor*, Farrar & Rinehart, New York 1945, p. 64.

<sup>2</sup> G. Pinchot, “Forest Devastation: A National Danger and a Plan to Meet It,” in *Journal of Forestry*, 17, 1919, p. 921.

<sup>3</sup> Jensen, *Lumber and Labor* cit., p. 64.

<sup>4</sup> In 1869, Minnesota produced only 242 million board feet (b.f.) of lumber, but 30 years later, in 1899, it yielded over 2.3 billion b.f., ranking it third among lumber-gen-

**Figure 1. Map of Minnesota, with Cutover Region emphasized**



Source: Map in public domain, modified by author.

First, fire represented a serious threat to these landowners, in that the value of the remaining forested land could be easily destroyed by the cutover tinderbox. Wildfires also threatened existing settlements and human life, most famously in the Great Hinkley Fire of 1894

erating states. Shortly thereafter, production began a steady decline as lumber capitalists moved on to fresher fields in the Pacific Northwest and the South. On the Minnesota industry, see A. Larson, *The White Pine Industry of Minnesota: A History*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2007 (reprint of 1949 edition). On the mobility of the American lumber industry, see M. Williams, *Americans and Their Forests: A Historical Geography*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1989.

and the Cloquet Fire of 1918, each of which killed over 400 people.<sup>5</sup> A second, if less dramatic, problem firms faced was property tax obligations on their cutover lands. Unlike in some European lumber-producing regions (like Sweden) where tax structures encouraged intensive forest management, the state of Minnesota assessed an annual millage (ad valorem) tax on timber and cutover lands at rates similar to agricultural lands throughout the first decades of the twentieth century. To retain this land thus meant that a landowner would have to pay taxes annually and at rates similar to “productive” land despite the fact that timber could be only feasibly harvested once every 50 to 100 years.

Migration to the cutover lands for the purpose of farming promised to solve these two problems for lumber firms. Farmers would clear the land and till the soil, alleviating lumber companies’ onus to pay the property taxes on the land, while lumber firms would also see a reduced risk of fire and even earn a profit through the sale. Selling such plots, meanwhile, fits well within larger, established cultural and political understandings of “progress” and egalitarian social relations in American life. Most farmland and urban regions in the United States, could, of course, have been considered cutover at one time or another. Additionally, a “back-to-the-land movement” in the early twentieth century gave lumber companies a ready market for their lands. Drawing on both the legacy of a Jeffersonian agrarian republican tradition and the real and perceived social ills of an industrializing and urbanizing society (complete with slums, poverty, and assorted radicalisms), this loose movement emphasized the independence and social worth of farm life.<sup>6</sup> From both the “supply” and “demand” sides, then, encouraging

<sup>5</sup> The Weeks Act of 1911, and the Clarke-McNary Act of 1924 both gave significant and increasing aid to states for forest fire protection. See W.G. Robbins, *Lumberjacks and Legislators: Political Economy of the U.S. Lumber Industry, 1890-1941*, Texas A&M University Press, College Station 1982; and S.J. Pyne, *Fire in America: A Cultural History of Wildland and Rural Fire*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1982, esp. pp. 346-57.

<sup>6</sup> On the back-to-the-land movement, see R. White, “Poor Men on Poor Lands: The Back-to-the-Land Movement of the Early Twentieth Century,” in *Experiences in a Promised Land: Essays in Pacific Northwest History*, G.T. Edwards and C.A. Schwantes (eds), University of Washington Press, Seattle 1986, pp. 287-303;

migration to cutover lands seemed a progressive, market-based solution for the problems created by “timber mining.” What could go wrong?

Of course, as Jensen’s ominous conclusion suggests, by nearly any measure – environmental, social, or political – the effort to settle the cutover was a disastrous failure. By the 1920s and 1930s, the evidence for such a conclusion could be read in the extreme poverty of cutover migrants still in the region, high rates of tax delinquency and abandoned farms, and even the state’s reexamination of land use in the cutover region and renewed commitment to the reforestation. Though the Great Depression added urgency to the crisis in the cutover, these problems had roots in the very solution of agricultural colonization adopted by the lumber companies and boosters decades earlier.

Explaining the failure of smallholder agriculture in northern Minnesota during the early twentieth century requires going beyond an understanding of just the particular climate and environmental conditions of the cutover. It also necessitates incorporating the ways the environment of the cutover was understood, marketed, and shaped by local individuals and institutions, and was connected to the larger political and economic forces of early twentieth-century industrial capitalism. In this case study of the process of migration into a newly produced environmental space, then, it matters how the cutover was *represented* in culture. Only by linking the environmental conditions of the cutover with broader *narratives* about climate, development, and environmental change do we see fully how companies, boosters, migrants, and the state understood – and why they thought it was a good idea to farm – this ecological space and how they could be so wrong about its future and possibilities.

To be sure, material environmental conditions mattered. The legacy of extensive glaciation in the state during the Pleistocene left northern Minnesota with an extensive network of lakes, but also with alternatively swampy, sandy, and rocky land.<sup>7</sup> Frigid winters

and R. Gough, *Farming the Cutover: A Social History of Northern Wisconsin, 1900-1940*, University of Kansas Press, Lawrence 1997.

<sup>7</sup> W.A. Hartman and J.D. Black, “Economic Aspects of Land Settlement in the Cut-Over Region of the Great Lakes States,” in *US Department of Agriculture, Circular No. 160*, GPO, Washington, DC 1931, p. 72.

characterized northern Minnesota (a fact that actually facilitated the development of the lumber industry through the use of ice roads and sleds to transport lumber), but short, cool summers meant as few as 100 frost-free days in parts of the cutover, compared to as many as 150 in the southern part of the state. Around Bemidji, in Beltrami County, for example, the average day of the last killing frost of the season was not until the last week of May, and the average first killing frost of the fall was in the second week of September.<sup>8</sup>

What follows suggests that, however necessary such data is for understanding why migration into such an environment might be fraught with problems, it is insufficient without capturing the meaning individuals and institutions attributed to that same information. The first part of this article explores the vision of the cutover and of migrants propagated by boosters and lumber companies through the press of the region, while the second part addresses why that vision of migration and environment failed.

## **Lumber Companies, Boosters and the Market Solution**

As lumber companies “cut out” their stocks of timber in northern Minnesota, they employed a range of practices to market these lands to migrants as farmlands. One firm, the Pine Tree Manufacturing Company, with its sawmill based on the Mississippi River in Little Falls, Minnesota (about 100 miles upriver of Minneapolis), established a wholly-owned subsidiary firm called the Immigration Land Company (ILC) to manage the sale of its cutover acreage to settlers in north-central Minnesota. Believing that the value of the cutover lands would continue to rise, ILC “never made a systematic effort to sell [its] ... cutover lands” and in 1912 they felt “confident that within a very few years these lands will be in good demand at increased prices.”<sup>9</sup> Still, ILC did sell lands. The firm marketed its

<sup>8</sup> Hartman and Black, “Economic Aspects of Land Settlement” cit., pp. 10-12.

<sup>9</sup> Immigration Land Company, letter to W.D. Washburn, 28 February 1912, Box 1, Immigration Land Company Papers (P940), Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, Minnesota, USA (hereafter ILC Papers).

lands through independent land agents who received a commission of around \$0.50 on every acre bought by settlers. A letter from one agent who had sold ILC lands, F. C. Jeus, suggests that at least some of the time these firms and land agents knew they were taking advantage of potential settlers who had not laid eyes on the land they were being sold. In one letter to ILC, Jeus asked the firm for its price on 42 acres in Hubbard county, telling the firm that “I have purchaser for it now,” and then reminded them that “the land is worthless for farming or for timber.”<sup>10</sup>

Other firms marketed their lands more forcefully than ILC, who rarely advertised in newspapers or other public forums. Some land and lumber firms maintained offices in larger cities, organized trips to view land, advertised in American and European newspapers, and even operated “model farms” to show prospective buyers the bounty that could be extracted from the land (though without mentioning that the farms employed large amounts of fertilizer and labor, and operated at a loss).<sup>11</sup> Even when potential settlers had visited the land they eventually purchased, the possibility for fraud could not be ruled out. As one migrant, Patrick Naughton, successfully argued before the Itasca County District Court in 1916, the Old Colony Land Company misrepresented the land they sold him: the plot was swampy when it had been advertised as good land for farming and grazing.<sup>12</sup> While savvy migrants (tenant farmers from the Midwest, for example) might purchase quality farmland in the region, land companies pushed land regardless of its features. As one historian has remarked, “although deliberate misrepresentation” – like the kind Naughton faced – “may have been rare, the companies were in the business of selling land, not enlightening the ill-informed or protecting the foolish.”<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> F. J. Jeus to Immigration Land Company, 6 August 1913, Box 3, ILC Papers.

<sup>11</sup> O. W. Miller, *The Frontier in Alaska and the Matanuska Colony*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1975, p. 52.

<sup>12</sup> Civil Complaint, Patrick and Anna Naughton v. Old Colony Land Company (Itasca County District Court, Case #5893), Old Colony Land Company Papers (P1798), Minnesota Historical Society.

<sup>13</sup> Miller, *The Frontier in Alaska* cit., p. 52. Wisconsin cutover landowners formed the American Immigration Company in 1906 to cooperatively market

Beyond the instrumental and sometimes legally questionable efforts of lumber and land companies to realize a profit from the sale of cutover acreage, migration to this region was encouraged by a set of institutions promoting a social and economic ideology that imagined the progress of the region linearly and optimistically. This boosterism can be viewed most vividly through the newspapers of the region, which served not only to collect and report on economic development and political news, but also to promote further development and migration itself. One newspaper, the *Bemidji Pioneer* (after 1903, the *Daily Pioneer*) even acknowledged that some found the paper's persistent boosterism problematic, and they defended their support to the region with further hyperbole. They wrote, "We have been an unsmiling recipient of the sobriquet of 'hot-air' artist, because our claim that Beltrami County lands (though somewhat sandy) are unsurpassed."<sup>14</sup> Newspapers like the *Pioneer* made an argument for migration to the cutover in two ways. First, and most frequently, they simply pointed to the potential or real agricultural productivity of the land (the quality of the soil and climate), providing a glimpse at how the ecological space of the cutover was interpreted. Second, boosters made a social argument about opportunity in the United States, arguing that the cutover was an ideal place for people "of modest means" to settle.

The *Pioneer* argued that those who considered the cutover a vast wasteland were dead wrong. In an early editorial from the paper, the editors wrote, with spurious reasoning, that "the prejudice [...] against the north on account of the alleged rigor of the winters there, is gradually wearing away. [...] While the thermometer has been as low here as farther south, and perhaps a trifle lower, the dryness of the atmosphere makes the cold felt less than where the air is laden with moisture such as prevails farther south."<sup>15</sup>

and sell almost a half million acres to settlers. No such organization I am aware of existed in Minnesota. See L. Kane, "Selling Cut-Over Lands in Wisconsin," in *Business History Review* 28, 3, 1954, pp. 236-41.

<sup>14</sup> "Beltrami County Coming into Her Own," *Bemidji Daily Pioneer*, 20 September 1909.

<sup>15</sup> "Beltrami Growing: And the Prospects Are Good for a Bigger Increase This Year," *Bemidji Pioneer*, 9 January 1902.



In addition to statements on the climate, the paper also published testimonials to the quality of the soil of farms in Beltrami County by running stories of individual successes. One article in 1906, for example, told of a farmer who “pulled a stalk from his field and exhibited it in the city [Bemidji]. The stalk was nine feet, ten inches high [2.9 meters]. [...] The excellence of the crop attests to the value of Beltrami County cut-over lands for agricultural purposes.”<sup>16</sup> Another article from the same month reminded readers, “Each succeeding season’s raising of grains and cereals in Beltrami County is forcibly demonstrating that the cut-over lands of northern Minnesota are as good as the best for agricultural purposes. [...] From a field of ten acres of oats [one farmer] [...] harvested and threshed an average of 101 bushels and 15 pounds, actual weight.”<sup>17</sup>

In December of 1902, the *Princeton Union*, a daily newspaper published in Mille Lacs County, gave visual evidence to the bountiful agricultural future waiting for the region, graphically summarizing the tenor of many an article over the next 20 years in the northern Minnesota press. The “Pyramid of Prosperity” showed logs reading “original industry, logging and lumbering,” with corn, potatoes, pumpkins, oats, wheat, rye, beans, flax, and buckwheat layered on top (see figure 2). As immigration increased and crops grew, the paper argued this unproductive land would come to resemble a more familiar rural society. One editor wrote, “Land that you and I wouldn’t look at ten years ago [...] is in demand to-day, and in only a few years it will boast of near farm houses, big barns and all that goes towards making a desirable home. [...] Only a few years must slip by and all that country will be taken up by the thrifty settler.”<sup>18</sup>

The second claim about the cutover put forward by boosters was that the region was well suited for the “thrifty settler” identified in the *Princeton Union*. Writing in the decade immediately following Frederick Jackson Turner’s observation that 1890 marked the closing of the frontier, boosters of the cutover regarded their region as a frontier and

<sup>16</sup> “Giant Beltrami Corn,” *Bemidji Daily Pioneer*, 18 September 1906.

<sup>17</sup> “Record Breaking Yields on Cut-Over Farm Lands,” *Bemidji Daily Pioneer*, 6 September 1906.

<sup>18</sup> “The Cut-Over Lands,” *Princeton Union*, 21 April 1904.

**Figure 2. “Pyramid of Prosperity”**



Source: *Princeton Union*, 18 December 1902.

an antidote to the social ills of urban life. In 1893, at the Columbia Exhibition in Chicago, Turner had argued famously for the centrality of the “frontier” as the major force in propelling and maintaining American democracy. As Turner explained, “American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society furnish the forces dominating the American character.”<sup>19</sup> One letter to the editor of the *Minneapolis Journal*

<sup>19</sup> F.J. Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” in *The Frontier in American History*, Henry Holt and Company, New York 1921, pp. 2-3.

in 1902 captured the connection between independence and opportunity so central to Turner's formulation: "Contrasted with a prairie region these cut-over lands furnish encouraging opportunities for the man of small means." The writer continued, "The true philanthropist can find no better employment than in aiding the hundreds of homeless poor in the great cities to locate on these lands and become self-sustaining, useful producers, independent, clear-headed, strong-bodied citizens."<sup>20</sup> The *Bemidji Daily Pioneer*, unsurprisingly, echoed this sentiment in its editorials and articles, by arguing, "No state in the Union offers better inducements to actual settlers, men of moderate or small means such as renters and laboring men who have saved up a few dollars, than Minnesota. And no part of the state offers greater opportunities than the Northern portion. [...] At this time this new country is sadly in need of more farmers."<sup>21</sup>

Even as boosters were making their claims about the present and future development of the cutover lands, they were also contending with the development of the forestry movement in the United States. In fact, by the first decade of the twentieth century two national forests had been established in Minnesota (Minnesota National Forest in 1908, later renamed Chippewa, and Superior National Forest in 1909) as well as several small state forests and parks. The tension between visions of land use rooted in reforestation and forestry or in agricultural development was not lost on cutover boosters. Still, in 1901, the *Bemidji Daily Pioneer* critiqued another northern Minnesota newspaper, the *Duluth News-Tribune*, for opposing the creation of a state park in the region, writing, "We understand that it is not the intention of the park promoters to include agricultural land in the deal. There are enough lakes, swamps and barrens in this upper country to make up the required acreage. There is no reason for this howl of 'shutting out would be settlers.'"<sup>22</sup> However, in 1907 the

<sup>20</sup> "Praise of the Woodlands," letter to the editor, *Minneapolis Journal*, 26 August 1902.

<sup>21</sup> "Great Opportunities for the Poor Man: Nowhere Can the Man of Moderate Means Do as Well," *Bemidji Daily Pioneer*, 9 July 1907.

<sup>22</sup> "Preserving the Pines," *Bemidji Pioneer*, 11 April 1901.

*Daily Pioneer* seemed to ridicule the notion that large-scale reforestation would be a good solution for the cutover: “These misguided enthusiasts who would reforest Northern Minnesota will need to hurry or face eternal failure. It is impossible to graft the pine tree on the cow, and equally difficult to cross the pine cone and the potato vine.”<sup>23</sup> By 1909, the year Superior National Forest was established, the paper already argued that this fight was in the past and had been won by agriculturalists. They wrote, “Time was, not so many years ago, when certain misguided individuals were wont to ridicule the idea that cut-over pine lands were fit for anything but reforestation of pine trees. We were stubborn in our contention that this section of the state would yet rival any part of Minnesota for productiveness of its fertile acres, and this prediction is being borne out by actual results, more forcibly every year.”<sup>24</sup>

Though the hyperbole of the cutover press cannot help but seem both a bit naïve and even darkly humorous with the benefit of hindsight, in many ways the boosters did have reason to be optimistic. To a keen observer, population growth in northern Minnesota suggested that migration could confound reforestation efforts. Beltrami County’s population, to take a “typical” cutover county, nearly tripled between 1900 and 1930, to 27,079, and while Cass and Hubbard counties each had smaller total populations, their populations also roughly doubled during the first two decades of the twentieth century. St. Louis County, home to the Mesabi Iron Range and the important port city of Duluth (on Lake Superior), had the highest population in the cutover region by a wide margin, though the vast majority of the residents lived in Duluth or in the mining towns to the north (Hibbing, in particular). Nevertheless, its agricultural hinterland also experienced population growth.

It is not easy to determine where these migrants came from as they settled the cutover counties, but US Census data does reveal the large number of Scandinavian immigrants who settled in the northern

<sup>23</sup> “Northern Minnesota Is Soon Coming into its Own,” *Bemidji Daily Pioneer*, 12 July 1907.

<sup>24</sup> “Boosting a ‘Good Thing,’” *Bemidji Daily Pioneer*, 11 November 1909.

counties. In Beltrami County, for example, in 1910 and 1920 the Census showed that over one-quarter of the population was foreign-born. Moreover, over 60 percent of all foreign-born persons living in the county during both of those censuses were from Norway or Sweden. While some likely moved to the region to work in the lumber industry and later settled on farms, others came directly to the region as a result of advertising in the foreign and American urban press.

If lumber companies and booster newspapers were able to paint a vision of the cutover climate and environment that drew migrants toward the region during the first decades of the twentieth century, they also increasingly had to wrestle with forces – both social and environmental – that confounded such an image. If vision mattered, so too did stumps.

### **Cracks in the Market Solution: Stumps and Capital**

As migrants headed toward the cutover and newspapers like the *Bemidji Daily Pioneer* pointed to the abundance of the region, problems with the market solution materialized. Like the boosters' own claims about the potential of the region, these problems fall into two interrelated categories: the physical conditions of the cutover, and the social group that boosters hoped to attract (“men of modest means”). An excellent example of the first type were stumps, a central feature of this environment and a prominent obstacle to agriculture in the cutover.

Left behind by lumber companies, tree stumps were costly and time-consuming to remove for farmers, who often had little capital. A humorous and apocryphal 1909 *Princeton Union* article told of a local man's decision to sell his “mechanical mule” – his automobile – because of its impracticability. In the story, the man's brakes fail as he is taking a drive with his father-in-law and he is forced to swerve into a meadow in an attempt to slow the car. After crashing into a stump and pulling up its roots, which threw the men into the field and ended their harrowing ride, the driver's father-in-law turned to him and remarked, “Erick, my boy, there is no reason whatever in

your going so far from home to do stump pulling. You would do me a favor by clearing that piece of cut-over land that I own.”<sup>25</sup>

The joke, of course, turned on the fact that removing stumps was a costly and labor-intensive process. Even with a crew of workers, tools, and a horse, pulling only a few stumps in a day could be a difficult task (made even harder in the winter when the ground was frozen). As one cutover farmer from Minnesota later recalled in an oral history interview, “Well, you do well, you know, a couple of men do well to pull a couple of stumps a day.”<sup>26</sup>

In 1908, a resident of Hines, Minnesota, a small town in Beltrami County about twenty miles northeast of Bemidji, made a proposition for speeding the clearing of stump lands. Simply put, he said, “We want the State of Minnesota to furnish, at the lowest possible cost, to actual settlers, dynamite enough to transform this country, in five years, from a wilderness of stumps and slashings into one of the richest farming and dairy countries on earth.”<sup>27</sup> Quickly given the nickname “Dynamite” Charles Carter by the *Daily Pioneer*, he went on to explain in a “characteristic ‘boom’ interview” that “[b]y the passage of this law I am firmly of the belief that the one bane of the farmer on the cut-over lands (removing stumps) will be removed to a larger degree, and the country in Beltrami and adjoining counties will be the Mecca for all kinds of people desiring good homes on agricultural lands.”<sup>28</sup>

Carter was hardly a neutral observer, or even a small landowner in the region. In fact, the *Daily Pioneer* reported that he owned over 20,000 acres of cutover land in Beltrami County, making the dynamite bill important if he hoped to get settlers to buy his land. Even after the state legislature decided not to fund the program, the newspaper did not drop the issue of using dynamite to remove stumps.<sup>29</sup> A

<sup>25</sup> “Sells His Mechanical Mule,” *Princeton Union*, 11 November 1909.

<sup>26</sup> F. Werthner, interview by J. Esse with W. Rajala, 10 May 1977, transcript, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, p. 6.

<sup>27</sup> “State Should Aid in Giving Cheap Dynamite,” *Bemidji Daily Pioneer*, 10 December 1908.

<sup>28</sup> “Charles S. Carter Talks of Cheap Dynamite Bill,” *Bemidji Daily Pioneer*, 23 February 1909.

<sup>29</sup> “‘Dynamite Bill’ Killed,” *Bemidji Daily Pioneer*, 17 April 1909.

year after the “dynamite bill” failed to pass the legislature, it penned an editorial titled, “Why Not?” In the article they argued, “Why not [...] divert all the money usually spent for explosives to the purchase of dynamite, and use all the dynamite to blow out stumps on cutover lands, thus making them available for agriculture? [...] Supposing the entire north country would celebrate by blowing stumps out of the ground on each and every Fourth of July for the next ten years how many acres could be cleared in this manner!”<sup>30</sup>

Though dynamite might have aided the process of stump clearing, Carter and the newspaper clearly idealized this process. One migrant who cleared land remembered that even after the use of dynamite, a stump was left in three or four large pieces and roots remained in the ground, and removing them required more work. At the end, he recalled, “I had just as many piles of roots” to dispose of.<sup>31</sup>

The difficulty in clearing land in the cutover was reflected in the low percentage of “farm land” that had been “improved” relative to the rest of Minnesota. In fact, in Beltrami County (home to Bemidji and *The Daily Pioneer*), just 12.7 percent of farmlands in 1900 were improved, according to US Census data. Though the total acreage in farms more than doubled in Beltrami County over the next 20 years, the percentage of improved farmland only increased to 19.3 percent of the total. For Minnesota as a whole, in contrast, during the first three censuses of the twentieth century the percentage of improved land was never below 70 percent. Dismal figures of improved land could be even worse in parts of the cutover, and census figures themselves could be exaggerated. A township in Lake County visited by government investigators in 1926 and 1931 revealed, for example, that “[t]he census for 1930 shows 2,043 acres in farms in the town-

<sup>30</sup> “Why Not?” *Bemidji Daily Pioneer*, 3 May 1910. In addition to their efforts to improve the cutover through state aid in the form of dynamite, cutover counties succeeded in securing funding for drainage ditches to improve swampy land. By the 1930s, the main legacy of these projects was their contribution to the indebtedness of cutover counties.

<sup>31</sup> W. Kaukola, interview by R. Wheeler, 17 February 1977, transcript, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, pp. 37-38.



ship, but interviews with settlers revealed that only 892 acres were owned by operating farmers and only 138 acres were cleared.”<sup>32</sup>

Compounding the physical problems with stumps in the cutover was many settlers’ limited amount of capital. Simply put, many were too poor to make the costly improvements that might have made farming the cutover work. One 1916 US Department of Agriculture report written with prospective settlers of the cutover region in mind took up this issue of land clearing and capital scarcity. The authors reported, “Ordinarily the cost of clearing land ranges from \$20 to \$60 per acre, depending mainly on the kind, condition, number, and size of stumps; the acreage to be cleared; the amount of wood and brush that must be removed or burned; and the quality and condition of the soil.” In 1917, the Immigration Land Company reported its average selling price for land in northern Minnesota at \$12.95 per acre, meaning that clearing the land could cost as much as four-and-a-half times as much as the purchase price of the land itself.<sup>33</sup> The report pointed out that these “initial capital requirements to develop a cut-over farm are often overlooked by the inexperienced settler or are purposely discounted by the land agent who wants to make a sale.”<sup>34</sup> They continued by recommending the use of a stump puller or dynamite to clear land and argued that it was a bad idea to settle on land without sufficient capital. Though the easiest way for a farm to secure more income (and more working capital for stump removal) was to cultivate more acreage, the high costs of clearing that very farmland made for a difficult conundrum for settlers. In this context, boosters’ claims about the ideal nature of the land likely seem a cruel joke to poor migrants. The *Minneapolis Journal* paraphrased a letter they received pointing to this very tension:

The *Journal* is in receipt of an interesting letter from a man who took the advice so freely proffered to the poor of the city to get out on the farms, to get back the land. [...] After one year’s experience he is like the man who said: ‘When I came to this country twenty years ago I hadn’t a rag on my back; now

<sup>32</sup> R.G. Blakey, *Taxation in Minnesota*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1932, pp. 130-31.

<sup>33</sup> “Logged Off Land Sales, 1917-1919,” Box 6, ILC Papers.

<sup>34</sup> Hartman and Black, “Economic Aspects of Land Settlement” cit., p. 45.



it's all rags.' His trouble is, of course, lack of capital. Not having horses or machinery he was able to cultivate this year only an acre-and-a-half of land, and an unusually early frost ruined most of the crop on that small patch.<sup>35</sup>

The physical properties of the cutover combined with the social composition of migrants made the transition to a landscape of prosperous family farms almost impossible. In addition to farmers' lack of capital and the high costs of land improvement, broader changes in American agriculture increasingly made it difficult for small farms – whether in the cutover or in the broader Midwest – to turn a profit. The depressed prices of agricultural staples throughout the 1920s and the transition to large corporately organized farms relying on wage labor, what Carey McWilliams described as a system of “factories in the field,” signaled the economic difficulties facing small farmers on marginal lands.<sup>36</sup> Additionally, the decline of the lumber industry (and mechanization in the iron ore mining industry) reduced the size of a potential local market for cutover agriculture. Thus, when the *Bemidji Daily Pioneer* or other institutions promoting cutover agriculture pointed to the bounty that *could* be grown in the region, they missed the point. By suggesting that farming was technically feasible they did not capture the way that the environment interacted with increasingly integrated capitalist markets.

## **Conclusion: A New Deal for the Cutover**

By the late 1920s the social and ecological contradictions in cutover farm development had culminated in persistent rural poverty, stagnant or declining populations, abandoned lands, and massive tax delinquency. These conditions became politicized in the 1930s in the context of the New Deal, as the Great Depression ignited investigations into the sources of depressed agricultural conditions and rural poverty across the United States. When government social scientists, economists, agronomists, and foresters looked north at

<sup>35</sup> “No Help for Him,” *Minneapolis Journal*, 6 September 1902.

<sup>36</sup> C. McWilliams, *Factories in the Field: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California*, Little, Brown, Boston 1939.

the cutover region in the Great Lakes states they found two problems especially troubling: tax delinquency and rural poverty.

As we have seen, though lumber firms and land companies were able to sell some of their holdings to migrants during the first two decades of the twentieth century, collectively they still controlled vast acreage, but increasingly chose to let this land turn tax delinquent instead of paying the taxes owed on the land. At the start of 1931, about 44 percent of the total taxable area in the cutover region of Minnesota was delinquent (about 9 million acres). In Beltrami County, conditions were even worse, with over 66 percent of the total taxable land area delinquent.<sup>37</sup> In addition to attesting to the inability or unwillingness of lumber companies and settlers to pay taxes, the high rates of delinquency meant that those who did pay taxes contributed at very high rates on the assessed value of their land in order to pay for county services. Even with higher rates of taxation, during the late 1920s and 1930s cutover counties required state aid to meet financial obligations. The distribution of abandoned lands, meanwhile, fell across cutover counties unevenly, leaving some rural families highly isolated but the county still responsible for maintaining roads, schools, and other services. In one study completed during the depression, 13 “isolated” families in St. Louis County each had an average of 1.54 miles of roads maintained and snow plowed for their use by the county at an average cost of \$90.88. Most of these families were unable to pay their taxes and the average tax collection for this sample in 1932 was only \$7.03. The combination of land abandonment and tax delinquency combined to create a massive shortfall in revenue for St. Louis County.<sup>38</sup> That many of these families were unable to meet

<sup>37</sup> Blakey, *Taxation in Minnesota* cit., p. 12, p. 117.

<sup>38</sup> O.B. Jesness and R.I. Nowell, *A Program for Land Use in Northern Minnesota: A Type Study in Land Utilization*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1935, p. 141. One irony of the lumber companies’ strategy of selling the cutover lands to prospective farmers is that this may have led to or increased their desire to abandon the land and let it revert to the state. As migrants did move north and plant themselves on former lumber lands, the resulting population increases required a larger tax base to provide for roads and schools, a fact which may have hastened their decision to abandoned the land. This, in turn, increased the tax burden on migrants.

their obligations to the county government is not surprising; a study of farm families in 10 cutover counties in Minnesota, Michigan, and Wisconsin revealed, for example, that in 1930 only 18.9 percent had telephones, 3.4 percent had indoor plumbing, and 14.4 percent had electricity.<sup>39</sup> Cash incomes, literacy rates, radio ownership, and other measures of economic well-being also confirmed that the cutover counties lagged behind the rest of Minnesota.

The high rates of tax delinquency meant that under Minnesota law the state would resume ownership of millions of acres of cutover lands during the 1930s. By the mid-1930s, in fact, Minnesota would own an additional nine million acres of land, in excess of the four million already in public ownership. This shift made the state government the region's largest landowner for the first time since it began disposing of northern lands during the mid-nineteenth century and this situation provided a clear opportunity to reshape land use in the region. In 1932, the governor of Minnesota, Floyd B. Olson, appointed a Committee on Land Utilization to investigate and propose solutions to the social and environmental problems of the cutover. The Committee laid out recommendations for the cutover in a final report produced in early 1934, titled *Land Utilization in Minnesota: A State Program for the Cut-Over Lands*. The document suggested a major shift in attitude toward the potential uses of cutover lands: away from market agriculture and toward state-owned and managed forests. Governor Olson forcefully captured this shift in the foreword to the report. He wrote: "[T]he *laissez-faire* policy of the past, which permitted unchecked exploitation of the natural wealth of northern Minnesota and unguided, haphazard settlement, has resulted in the almost complete exhaustion of once rich resources, and that with exhaustion of these resources many communities in the region have been left economically stranded." In response to this crisis, the governor argued, "The state must assume a more di-

<sup>39</sup> C.P. Loomis, J.J. Lister, and D.M. Davidson, Jr., "Standards of Living in the Great Lakes Cut-Over Area," US Department of Agriculture, Farm Security Administration, and Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Social Research Report no. 13, Washington, DC, September 1938, p. 5.

rect responsibility in rehabilitating the financial, political and social life of the communities in the cut-over region.”<sup>40</sup> The Committee’s text worded the situation slightly differently, but agreed with the governor who appointed them, writing, “The whole problem comes down to one of careful public planning and control.”<sup>41</sup>

Ultimately, the Committee argued, the principal and most beneficial uses of the public domain in the northern portions of Minnesota were reforestation, recreation, and water conservation. Though recreation was becoming important in the region during the 1910s and 1920s, it had formed only an ancillary part of the economy; however, as car ownership increased, urban Minnesotans headed in larger numbers to the North for their leisure time. Agriculture still had a place in this new reconfiguration of the cutover, but a severely constricted one. As the Committee pointed out, “The surpluses of farm products [...] and other produce suggest that there is very little need to open up more land for farming anywhere in the United States at the present time.” Continuing, they explained that if farming more land became socially necessary, “there may be a small justification for a small controlled annual increase in the number of farms.” In that case, they proposed that the state would (again) “be justified in selling some of its better agricultural land to experienced farmers at suitable price.” Crucially, however, the Committee predicted:

If, when that time comes, agricultural settlement can be confined to areas of good soil and favorable location with respect to roads, schools, and markets, there will be a better opportunity for the individual farmer to succeed and more likelihood that public expenses will be kept low than there has generally been in the past. The public will also be the gainer if unwise settlement is avoided.<sup>42</sup>

In other words, state planning would remain an important part of any future use of the land, even if agriculture were to eventually resume its significance. The Committee’s report served as a first

<sup>40</sup> F.B. Olson, foreword to *Land Utilization in Minnesota: A State Program for the Cut-Over Lands*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1934, p. v, p. vi.

<sup>41</sup> *Land Utilization in Minnesota* cit., p. 25.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

step in the reorientation of public policy in northern Minnesota and demonstrated that the era when unplanned settler-agriculture dominated the cutover (and society's understanding of the cutover) had come to an end.

Boosters interpreted the cutover as a potentially bountiful ecological space and a social refuge or panacea for the urban poor. The vision of lumber companies and the cutover press, though, foundered on their very assumptions about the environment, the migrants they attracted, and American political economy. During the Great Depression, the state began to understand economy, environment and migration in new ways, undermining the agricultural project in favor of one resting on reforestation, recreation, and state ownership and management of land use. In other words, during the early twentieth century a chasm yawned between the wild dreams and self-interested enthusiasm of boosters and land sellers on the one hand, and the realities of cutover agriculture on the other. Still, for a time at least, the agricultural vision of the cutover helped determine what migrants and policy makers saw when they looked at northern Minnesota. They "marketed" the cutover.

