

Farming the Cutover—Part 1

While the great lumbering boom declined and finally died, its legacy of a ravaged and stump strewn landscape, which became known as the cutover, endured. In 1910 the state forester estimated that over two-thirds of the 6.5 million acres in the ten most northern counties were cutover land. There were two proposals about how to return these cutover lands to productive uses—reforestation and agriculture settlement. Efforts to establish a program of forest management and state forest reserves encountered legal and political obstacles along with great resistance from the people of the region. Agricultural settlement, on the other hand, was advocated by the University of Wisconsin agricultural experts, strongly supported by the lumber and land companies, as well as by the governments, community leaders, and people in the region. Here were vast stretches of land just waiting for the industrious farmer, with the help of university experts, to create an agricultural paradise. Settlers would flock to the region, tax revenues would increase, businesses would prosper, and life would improve for everyone, or so they believed.

By 1900 the movement for agricultural settlement of the cutover lands had achieved considerable momentum, energized by a favorable agriculture economy, increased immigration to the region, and the public advocacy, and the research and educational resources of the University's College of Agriculture. The dean of the college published a "handbook," packed with practical information about the north country and the prospects for farming there, which generated great enthu-

siasm for agricultural settlement of the region. The farmers organized to promote the development and settlement of the north country. One of their organizations, the North Wisconsin Farmers Associa-

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tion, sponsored the railroad car "Grassland," as a roving advertiser. The inside of the car was packed from floor to ceiling with agricultural displays, pictures, and information from the northern counties, while the exterior was fitted with glass display cases that were illuminated at night. From 1904 to 1906 the "Grassland" toured Wisconsin, northern Illinois, and Iowa, attracting large crowds wherever it stopped.

In the campaign to bring more land under cultivation quickly and economically, clearing the land of the debris remaining from timber harvesting, particularly the stumps, became even more important. In contrast to hardwood stumps, pine stumps did not rot, so they had to be pulled or blasted out, their long, radiating roots making the task extremely difficult. In 1915 a land clearing branch was organized in the College of Agriculture with money to support its work appropriated by the legislature. With the cooperation of the railroads and equipment and explosive manufacturers, the college sponsored a demonstration train called the "Land Clearing Special,"

which toured the northern counties. In June 1916 the train came to Bayfield for a two-day demonstration program on a local farm, while in September 1917 it visited Washburn for a week-long program on a farm east of the city. The Times reported that in less than two days three acres of stumps had been cleared, using the two methods (there were often 25 or more large pine stumps per acre). The sale of stump extracting equipment, whether explosives or machinery, became a lucrative business, so companies competed with each other for the farmers' attention. It was unfortunate that the university experts and businesses encouraged farmers to use explosives to clear their land. They were ill-prepared to handle this dangerous material, resulting in many injuries and deaths from accidental explosions.

Between 1900 and 1910 the number of farms in Bayfield County increased from 465 to 1,096, or by 621, many of them in the vicinity of Washburn.

The editor of the Washburn Times reported enthusiastically on the numerous prosperous farms he had seen during trips through the countryside. With the rail connections and many thriving businesses, Washburn would be the market center for farmers in the region and would host agricultural fairs and farmers' institutes. Among the first such events was a two-day Farmers' Institute and Cooking School in December 1913, sponsored by the College of Agriculture. There were lectures on cow testing, silos and silage, and other topics of interest to farmers, while their wives attended sessions on how to prepare pork chops with potatoes, hamburger steak with sauce, and other rare delicacies. It was expected that agricultural settlement would become an important component of Washburn's reconstructed economy. How that expectation was at first fulfilled but was ultimately betrayed will be the subject of future articles on farming the cutover.