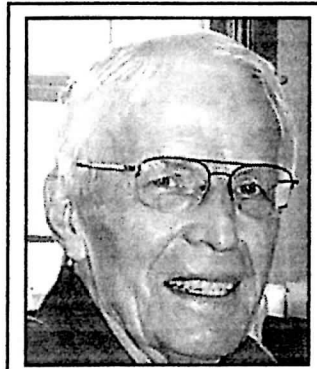


Washburn during the 20s: Farming The Cutover

During the war period from 1914 to 1919 American farmers enjoyed unprecedented prosperity, fueled by increased demand for food, both in the United States and from Europe. Agricultural prices and incomes rose, as did the value of agricultural land, although the costs of raw materials and equipment also increased. The large and rapid decrease in demand for food after the war triggered a long agricultural depression, however. Gross farm income declined as did the value of farm property, while, the prices received for farm products were less than the prices paid for goods and services. Many of the farms in Bayfield County were subsistence, or marginal operations, so the agriculture depression was worse in this county than in the state as a whole.

It would seem that the precipitous decline in agricultural income would have driven many of the farmers cultivating marginal land in the Bayfield County cutover out of business. But the number of farms and the acres of cropland actually increased from 1920 to 1925, during the depths of the agriculture depression. The small increase in the number of farms and acres of cropland, and the small decline in the population of the county during the decade suggest that there was not too much movement off the farms, however burden-



Lars Larson
Guest Columnist

some and unprofitable farming the cutover might have become with the post-war decline of the agricultural economy. Some people may have simply stopped farming, but remained on their farms, getting by as best they could because they had no where else to go or no money to move, while others may have made a success of cutover farming, at least at the subsistence level.

The increases in the number of farms and acres of cropland were due to the intensified efforts to colonize the cutover, particularly during the first half of the decade. As in earlier years, agricultural colonization of the cutover involved clearing the land of the debris, or slashings remaining from the timber cutting era, particularly stumps, to allow the expansion of existing farms and to open additional land for more farms. In 1915 a systematic program of land clearing was undertaken,

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spearheaded by the College of Agriculture. After the war the program was intensified as part of the renewed effort to settle the cutover. Explosives were apparently the "weapon of choice" for attacking the numerous large and deeply embedded stumps that carpeted the cutover. At first dynamite was used, an explosive that required expert handling that should not have been available to farmers. In 1919 Wisconsin obtained 200,000 pounds of war surplus TNT, a safer explosive, from the federal government but many farmers continued to use dynamite because of a shortage of TNT.

In 1921 the Bayfield County Land Clearing Association was organized to carry out educational and publicity work among farmers. A land clearing director was hired and "The mighty war on what is left of the former kings of the forest" was launched during a land clearing week in April. The week began with an enormous blast to uproot simultaneously 127 stumps on an acre of land, on a farm near Nash. After the great explosion "businessmen and farmers . . . flocked onto the field and in less than a half hour's time the roots and pieces of stump were piled up and made ready for burning. It is the fastest job of clearing ever done in this region." The Times estimated that two to three

thousand people from Bayfield and Ashland Counties attended the event, arriving by more than 700 automobiles, about 200 horse drawn vehicles, and by other forms of transportation. But it was the farmers who had to do the work and pay for the explosives to clear the land. Enthusiasm remained high and in December the 1,980 farms in the county had cleared an average of six and one half acres, for a total of almost 13,000 acres.

However, it soon became obvious that the campaign to clear the cutover and colonize it with farmers was failing, its advocates finally accepting what their critics had been trying to tell them for years, that most of the cutover land, particularly in far northern Wisconsin, was unsuited for agricultural purposes. Even Dean Russell of the College of Agriculture, for many years an enthusiastic advocate of agricultural settlement in the cutover, declared in 1928 that "The belief was long held that the plow would follow the woodsman's axe and that much of these timbered [cutover] areas would be ultimately in golden grain and rich green alfalfa and clover. Now we know there is time to grow one or more crops of pulp or lumber before these underdeveloped acres that are suitable for cropping will be needed for farm use."