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Around the Campfire

with Uncle Dave Foreman



Clearing the Forest

What did they see?

And what did they think about what they saw?

I tussle with these questions as I shuffle through the fallen leaves of my family tree. I wonder about them as I look out over a gray Chesapeake Bay from Maryland's Calvert Cliffs State Park southeast of Washington. Fall flocks of ducks fly in from the north. I tease at them as I seek scattered plots of big woods along Virginia's Rappahannock River south of Washington.

My father's first forefather in the raw English settlements of the New World was Robert Tyler, who died in 1674 in Calvert County, Maryland. I wonder how he saw this fresh new world. What did he think about the wealth of the Bay—the foot-long oysters stretching in beds for miles, the fish so thick they could be scooped out in baskets, the ducks blotting out a fall sun?

First in my mother's line in the New World was Charles Dodson. Born in Scotland in 1649, he came to the tidewater of Virginia sometime before 1670 and farmed along the western bank of the Rappahannock River—only thirty or forty miles away from Tyler. What did he think about the big woods? The trees that rose and rose before their first branches? Trees greater than any he believed could be as a boy in Scotland? Trees so big that it took the linked arms of three or four men to reach about the trunks?

What did they think about a Nature so big, so far beyond their mind's eye on the other

side of the Atlantic?

Their thoughts have not come down the kinship line with their names. And so I wonder. My forebears came to a world far from the cutover woodlots of the British Isles, far from the sheep-packed fields, far from wolfless and bearless hills and bergs.

As for the forests, in 1632, Thomas Morton wrote of spruce trees in northern New England that were twenty feet about. William Cronon writes of the white pine: "The average height of a mature grove might be well over a hundred feet, with a few trees as much as five feet in diameter and 250 feet in height."

Scattered between early settlements (often found on cleared Indian fields left after epidemic disease brought by the earliest European seafarers to set foot on dry land in the Americas) and stretching west seemingly forever, my forebears found a temperate deciduous forest beyond their dreams and without a match in all the world. More species of trees grew in Virginia and Maryland than in Europe from Ireland to the Urals. And what trees! There were ents in those days. The tulip poplar grew over 200 feet tall and more than twenty feet about. The American chestnut spread its great limbs over a quarter of an acre (think of four trees shading a whole football field). Sycamores were thick-trunked and rose high along rivers, mighty oaks climbed the Piedmont to the Blue Ridge where tall white pines, spruce, and fir came down the heights from the north. No wonder the tale grew of how a squirrel could run from the Chesapeake west 750 miles to the Mississippi River without ever meeting the ground.

But where is that forest today?

The Frontier Century runs from 1785 when Congress passed the Northwest Ordinance to govern western territories in the United States to 1890 when the Census Bureau declared that the frontier had closed. Throughout the Frontier Century, the squirrel's endless forest from the Atlantic to the Mississippi was hewn down. The Great Eastern Forest came under a two-axed whack—from settlers hacking farms out of the wilderness and from timber companies skinning the land for fast pay dirt.

Quick shearing of the forest came first in New England. William Cronon writes, "New England lumbering used forests as if they would last forever." As early as 1682, twenty-four sawmills were cutting boards in Maine. Grasping as logging was, though, Cronon warns us that "the lumberer was not the chief agent in destroying New England's forests; the farmer was." By the time of the Louisiana Purchase, New England but for Maine was mostly stripped. New Hampshire was 95 percent forested in the 1600s. By 1880, tree cover was down to 47 percent, and most of this was ecologically poor—spindly second or third growth and scrub, not the lordly old growth once darkening the hills and dells. Much the same holds for Vermont and southern Maine. Steve Trombulak and Chris Klyza of Middlebury College write that "the percentage of Vermont that is forested went from an estimated 95 percent in 1620, to 25 to 35 percent around 1850 to 1870...."

As settlers spread over the ridges throughout the trans-Appalachian frontier, they, too, hacked down the forest for farms. French wayfarer Alexis de Tocqueville witnessed their feelings about the big woods on the Michigan settlement edge in 1831:

[The pioneer] living in the wilds...only prizes the works of man. He will gladly send you off to see a road, a bridge, or a fine village. But that one should appreciate great trees and the beauties of solitude, that possibility completely passes him by. [Americans are] insensible to the wonders of inanimate nature, and they may be said not to perceive the mighty forests that surround them till they fall beneath the hatchet. Their eyes are fixed on another sight...peopling solitudes and subduing nature.

The most straightforward utterance of the settlers' thoughts about the Great Eastern Forest came from the matchless American frontiersman and Indian killer, Andrew Jackson, at his presidential inauguration in 1828:

[W]hat good man would prefer a country covered with forests and ranged by a few thousand savages to our extensive Republic, studded with cities, towns, and prosperous farms, embellished with all the improvements which art can devise or industry execute.

Historian Michael Williams believes that over 100 million acres of the Great Eastern Forest were chopped down before 1850. Between 1850 and 1859, however, another forty million acres were cut, "equivalent to roughly one-third of all clearing carried out during the

previous two centuries. It was a decade of maximum impact on the forest.”

After the easily reachable timber of New England and southern New York was cut in the 1700s, logging companies worked into the far backcountry of Maine and the Adirondacks. Their more swashbuckling brethren shoved the timber edge west. After the Civil War, big logging businesses took over the North Woods of Wisconsin, Michigan, and Minnesota, which gave the timber industry its age of heroic legend. From the 1870s on, the ransacking of the virgin White Pine forests in the North Woods set a new yardstick for land lust, and a mighty folk hero—Paul Bunyan—had to be crafted to match the deed. Never before had so much forest fallen so swiftly. Even some within the timber industry spooked. The owners of the Black River Falls sawmill told the Minnesota legislature, “In a few years, the wealthiest portion of the pineries will present nothing but a vast and gloomy wilderness of pine stumps.” They had good reason for their worry: Logs passing Beef Slough, a Chippewa River channel above the Mississippi River, went from “12 million feet in 1868 to 274,367,000 feet in 1873. On the neighboring Black River the traffic rose from 6 million feet in 1864 to 195,398,830 feet in 1873,” wrote Frederic Merk. These are jumps of 23-fold in five years and 32.5-fold in nine years, respectively.

Paul and the Blue Ox did their work well for the timber kings. The Northern Hardwoods and Great Lakes Pine Forests were chopped to smithereens in a few short years. Lumbermen had run after the American forest from the Atlantic to the Great Plains over the millrace of the Frontier Century, scalping it in New England, stripping it bare in Pennsylvania, New York, and Michigan, and plundering it in Wisconsin and Minnesota. All the while they told Americans not to worry—the trees were without end.

And Americans, true children of the frontier, believed as frontiersmen always believe that the trees are—and forever will be—without end.

Dave Foreman
Three Gun Spring Canyon



©Nancy Morton, taken in the Hoh rainforest of Olympic National Park

Adapted from my forthcoming book Conservation vs. Conservation: The Fight for America’s Last Wild Things, the fourth in the For the Wild Things series.



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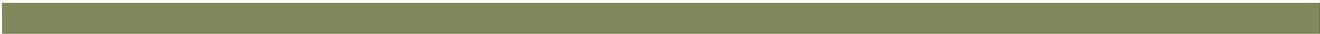
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