Wisconsin Historical Society
PRESS

The Apostle Islands and the Lumbering Frontier
Author(s): Charles Twining
Source: *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*, Vol. 66, No. 3 (Spring, 1983), pp. 205-220
Published by: Wisconsin Historical Society
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/4635740
Accessed: 05-04-2023 19:38 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

JSTOR

*Wisconsin Historical Society* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*

This content downloaded from 158.68.232.35 on Wed, 05 Apr 2023 19:38:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

# The Apostle Islands and the Lumbering Frontier

*By Charles Twining*

THE passage of time is everywhere the same. The manner of its passage is everywhere different. The challenge for the historian is to attempt to understand the manner of its passage in a number of places over a period of time. One of the major problems of recent historiography has been that the focus of the effort has often been too small, too narrow, too limiting. As a result, the historian, who used to take pride in sharing ideas with non-historians, has found himself in exile, academic exile at best. The more he knew about less, the less others cared, and the smaller the audience became.

It is ironic that these particularized scholars have tended to be the very ones who belittled those involved in the study of local history, for each group commonly suffered from the same malady. Traditionally, local history has been too limiting, leading nowhere. Thus its appeal was restricted to those of the locale. Local history ought to be a logical first step in the direction of larger understandings. In other words, local history is only limiting if we stop there. In this, I am reminded of a statement made by William Best Hesseltine, a historian at the University of Wisconsin, something to the effect, "Since events must take place in some locale, I assume that most history is local history."

"Frontier" is a term of importance in the American experience. In Europe, it refers to the borders between countries. We have used it for the purpose of describing phases of our development. Sometimes we have used it, admittedly carelessly, to delineate the "civilized" from the "wilderness," the settled from the unsettled. We have also used it to describe a variety of early efforts, economic activities which depleted resources in the course of their passage. Thus, we have had a fur frontier, a mining frontier, a lumbering frontier, and various farming frontiers.

My subject involves local history in a frontier circumstance. The locale is the Apostle Islands and the Chequamegon Bay region. Today when we think about the Apostle Islands, we likely think of scenic beauty and tourism. It is well to be reminded that the area has not been slighted in the more mundane involvements of human activity. In this sense, the history of the Apostle Islands has been considerably more than a microcosm of the history of the region. As the waves of frontier invasions have rolled through and beyond, the islands have not been merely a part of the larger experience; they have often been a focal point of the effort, as well as providing variances to the more general activities. The island circumstance has made a difference.

One more observation should be made in a prefatory sense since we do assume, more or less, that one of the benefits of studying the past is to understand the present a bit more fully. In the case of the Apostle Islands, the shores of Lake Superior, and much of northern Wisconsin—what Henry David Thoreau included as part of that "immense, shaggy, but sincere country"—the frontier process has yet to be completed. The series of invasions, of activities, never culminated in the expected

*Copyright © 1983 by The State Historical Society of Wisconsin*
*All rights of reproduction in any form reserved*



This content downloaded from 158.68.232.35 on Wed, 05 Apr 2023 19:38:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms



*Some of the Apostle Islands were named for the timber that covered them in the early days. Hemlock (or Cat) Island, pictured here in about 1910, was one of them.* WHi(X3)39388

result, and if you wonder as to the expected result, take a look at southern Wisconsin or Illinois or Iowa. The forests were to have given way to fields, smiling, prolific fields, interrupted here and there by prosperous towns and occasional cities. That has yet to happen in the North Country, and some still wait for the promise to be fulfilled, or for the good old days to be somehow reborn.

Few have caught the scene and its sense better than Constance Fenimore Woolson, a nineteenth-century writer, whose novel *Anne* appeared in serialized form in the *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, beginning in December, 1880. We are never told of the exact setting of *Anne*, but it must have been Madeline Island. Listen as Constance Woolson describes the little village, the southern half of which was "clogged and overshadowed by the irregular old buildings of the once-powerful fur company." They now stood deserted, but they stood with a hint of pride, for if the present residents had any glory, it was of that very past, the days when those buildings were full of life.

> There was scarcely a family on the island that did not cherish its tradition of the merry fur-trading times, when "grandfather" was a factor, a superintendent, a clerk, a hunter; even a voyageur had his importance, now that there were no more voyageurs. Those were gay days, they said; they should never look upon their like again: unless, indeed, the past should come back—a possibility which did not seem so unlikely on the island as it does elsewhere, since the people were plainly retrograding, and who knows but that they might some time even catch up with the past?

ONE of the more fascinating aspects of the history of the Chequamegon Bay region has to do with the amazingly early date of the initial European involvement and the accompanying realization that much of what is history is only recently so. While it is difficult to be certain of the exact whereabouts, much less the doings



This content downloaded from 158.68.232.35 on Wed, 05 Apr 2023 19:38:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

of those early French wanderers, we do know that by the middle of the seventeenth-century they had muscled their paddles through the waters of the Bay. They were active here when the landing at Plymouth was easily remembered, when New York was still New Netherland, and the Carolinas were yet only a place of dreams. At the same time, this is no Pompeii. The streets we walk, the scenes we view, echo to sounds that are historical only in part. Traps still snap shut on fur-bearing animals. Nets are lifted as in the the old manner, containing fish of commercial value. And trees continue to be felled to provide logs for lumber and pulp. Although it is true that such echoes are relatively faint, it is also true that the peak periods of many of the frontier activities are not so distant as measured in years, extending as they did well into the present century.

As to the lumbering frontier, initially it is important to recognize that the experience of the Apostle Islands and Chequamegon shores was a very small piece of an incredibly large effort. What is of particular interest, however, has to do with the special but significant contribution of the island forests, as well as with the adaptation of mainland logging methods to the island circumstances.

There is no question that it was the presence of immense quantities of pine that attracted loggers to the forests of the Lake States in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Indeed, the forest was known as the "the pinery." Since the major effort centered on the pine, it became natural to assume that those operations involving hemlock and hardwoods were merely the result of an eventual and inevitable lack of choice, something of a cleaning up exercise for those second-rate operators who chose not to follow the real frontier on to the Pacific Northwest.

But as we look more closely—and there is no better vantage for such a view than that provided by the Apostle Islands and the neighboring Bayfield Peninsula—we find that coincident with the harvesting of pine were operations involving hemlock and hardwoods. Why? Clearly this was not simply the cleaning up of what had been left behind. Obviously there was a simultaneous demand for the products of the hemlock and hardwood species, there being no record of anyone logging for the pure pleasure of the thing. Thus it is insufficient to generalize that the region's major logging effort of the nineteenth century involved the pine. In order to understand better why this was so, it is of help to study why and where it was not so.

The loggers had started their invasion in the Michigan territorial days, but their activities in the Wisconsin pineries did not approach the significant until the decade of the Civil War. As with other American frontiers, the progress of the lumberman was generally westerly, although his bent encompassed a northerly bias in Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. Thus the forests of the Lake Superior country would be, again generally, the last in the line of exploitation. The fact is, however, that while there was a logical unfolding which corresponded to an exploitation of successive opportunities, the spatial sequence was modified by the realities of relative accessibility, the economic qualifications imposed by considerations which involved transportation and logistics. So, just as sections of less accessible pine were passed by—but not forgotten—areas of unusually accessible pine were exploited in advance of the normal progression. Such was the case with the pine of the Apostles, although in this instance it was not just the pine which attracted the logger's attention.

Even a cursory investigation of past relationships will indicate that areas which nature has bound together will become economic units unless some extreme difficulty interposes. Politics has seldom proved a sufficient obstacle, as the history of Canadian-American relations in forest products well illustrates. It is not to belittle human efforts that one approaches a study of the experience from the ground up, that is beginning with a consideration of geography. Indeed, it speaks to their wisdom that people early recognize the advantages and limitations which nature has imposed. With the exception of the most precious of minerals, distance and difficulty will govern the movement of things. Employing an equation involving bulk, weight, and value, people learn just what can be moved to advantage. They do, or they fail in the attempt.

THERE are few examples which express more clearly the problems involved, and the dictates of geography,



This content downloaded from 158.68.232.35 on Wed, 05 Apr 2023 19:38:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms



WHi(X3)39374

*Logs tugged on Lake Superior to Ashland in the summer of 1936.*

than the movement of logs and lumber.[1] When reduced to the lowest common denominator, considerations of friction and gravity are foremost. Winter skidding and sleighing and spring log drives on swollen streams are only the most obvious of man's adaptations. In this regard, nature proved the ultimate partner to Wisconsin operators by not only producing the forest but by also providing the means for its efficient harvest. Any inquiry into the engineering principles which govern the construction of logging railroads or truck roads will immediately indicate that the lay of the land determines the routes to be utilized. Loaded cars or trucks go downhill and the curves must be gradual. There are, of course, additional factors, but they matter only if the most basic are first recognized and resolved.

Inevitably the movement of logs and lumber for any distance has involved water-borne opportunities. Recognition of this fact was implicit in the early reference to the so-called logging districts in the Lake States pineries, which coincided with the great river systems that in Wisconsin and Minnesota flowed generally southward from their myriad sources—the Wisconsin River, the Chippewa, the St. Croix, and the Mississippi itself. It was along these rivers and their tributaries that logging was initially possible. On their waters the logs would be driven to sawmill sites downstream. And on their waters the lumber would continue its journey, bound tightly in huge rafts, from sawmills to transshipment points at the west bank railheads.

There were, however, other opportunities to use water, and these involved those areas to the northern and eastern side of the divide, where relatively shorter rivers and streams flowed swiftly into Lake Superior or Lake Michigan. The term "basin" has common usage in describing the area drained by a single river system, but it seems even more appropriate when used in defining the watershed of a bay such as Chequamegon. In terms of logging activities, the Chequamegon basin constituted an economic unit. If a pine was felled (or, as the loggers said, "falled") within the basin, it could be transported anywhere within the basin and for some distance along the lake shores in either direction. Thus, a log from the Sioux River might end up in the sawmill booms of Bayfield, Washburn, Ashland, or even Duluth. So too might a log from any of the Apostle Islands. The Bay served as a gigantic mill pond, the logs moving easily,

[1]This point is not original. One of the important studies to which the subject is central is William G. Rector's *Log Transportation in the Lake States Lumber Industry, 1840–1918* (Glendale, California, 1953).



This content downloaded from 158.68.232.35 on Wed, 05 Apr 2023 19:38:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

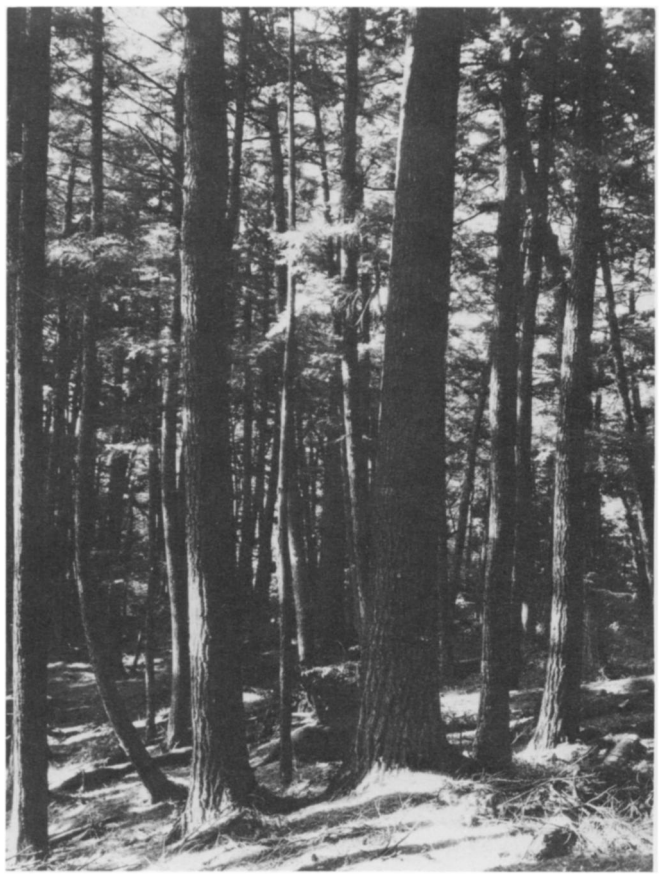
cheaply, and, for the most part, safely throughout.

It was because of the proximity of this northern forest to relatively secure waters that the loggers arrived on the scene earlier than they might otherwise have been expected. There is nothing surprising in this. One need only consider the age of river ports and coastal towns compared to communities but a few miles inland to appreciate the time lapses in the sequence of development. In addition to the time of occurrence, however, there were other basic considerations that affected the type and manner of logging on the islands. Again, it will encourage understanding to compare with the mainland operations.

Throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, the Wisconsin lumbermen's primary interest in harvesting white pine and, to a lesser extent, red or what was commonly called Norway pine reflected the preferences of the marketplace. Because of its qualities, it was the pine that was in large demand and that therefore maintained a price that warranted the expense of delivering boards to distant customers.

The fact is, however, that this connection could not have been managed in any practical sense had it not been that pine logs and lumber floated, and that the streams and rivers that drained the pineries flowed generally in the direction of the important markets. Even had there been a like demand for hardwood, considerations of geography and the laws of physics would not have permitted profitable delivery. While the economies of water transport applied to hardwood products as surely as they did to pine, hardwood could not itself float, at least not for very long. But as previously noted, there was a demand for hardwood, and on the Apostle Islands as well as in those mainland forests bordering Lake Superior, it was economical to harvest hardwoods simply because there was no need to float the logs or lumber. Rather they could be loaded directly onto barges or boats.

By way of comparison, it is interesting to note that the transportation possibilities for mainland hardwood had to await the construction of rail arteries before there was any thought of how to use it. Actually, such utilization first occurred in those sections of the pineries, ill-served by any natural network of waterways, through which the expensive but only alternative of logging railroads was introduced. Once again, a lack of bouyancy was of no importance. But this was much later, after the more readily accessible pine had been exhausted, and few of these latter-day operators would know of the earlier hardwood activities along the shores of Superior.



WHi(X3)39387

*A virgin hardwood forest in the Gordon vicinity.*

JUST what did those early loggers see as they viewed the forest of the Lake Superior region? Well, generally it had a very familiar appearance, only slightly different from the more southerly portions of that vast timber belt which covered most of the northern half of Wisconsin. The description by John C. Curtis is doubtless as accurate as can be recreated:

> The wet lands contained either conifer swamps, dominated by tamarack, black



This content downloaded from 158.68.232.35 on Wed, 05 Apr 2023 19:38:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

> spruce, and white cedar, or hardwood swamps with black ash and yellow birch. The dry lands were dominated by pine, with jack and red pine on the lighter sands and white pine on the sandy loams. The heavier soils were typically covered by mixed conifer-hardwoods, with white pine, hemlock, balsam fir, and white spruce as the conifers, and sugar maple, basswood, yellow birch, beech, American elm, red oak, and ironwood as the deciduous species. Some boreal forest stands of spruce and fir were found in the coldest localities, and combinations of hardwoods typical of the southern forests were present near the tension zone.[2]

In short, the distribution and mixture of varieties depended upon the local conditions of soil and moisture. Such variance is indicated by the names of two of the Apostles; the designations of Basswood and Oak seem unlikely to have been mere happenstance. But to the more casual observers, especially when viewing at a distance, the tallest of the forest trees, the white and red pines, dominated the scene just as they dominated the attention of the initial land-lookers. Thus most of the early descriptions tend to be repetitious, simply variations of an assessment made in the summer of 1887 by a reporter from the *Neilsville* (Wisconsin) *Republican* who described for his readers the scene while sailing "out through the pine clad Apostle Islands."[3] Passing through or around and about those "pine clad Apostle Islands" has long been a delight to tourists.

A few visitors, however, noted the scene with a more discerning eye. One such portrayed the island shores as being "lined with heavy and variegated timber, there being no less than seventeen varieties on Madeline Island alone."[4] An 1857 observer offered one of the earliest recorded views of the Bayfield peninsula and the lands beyond, noting that it was "heavily timbered with the White and Norway pine, White Birch, Balsam, Sugar Maple, Soft Maple, Basswood and Oak. Thence, the country spreads out into beautifully undulating Oak and Pine openings, of excellent soil, extending to the rich valleys of the St. Croix and Chippewa Rivers, and almost entirely free from swamps."[5] Admittedly this reporter had assumed responsibilities other than those having to do with geographic accuracy—one could, for example, safely bet on the presence of many and large swamps—but at least his listing of the forest species seems to have been likely. Three years later, a real estate merchant described a customer's property as being "heavily timbered, with maple, birch, oak and Pine," noting in the process that as yet "few or no depredations" had been committed, for reasons of "sufficient wood being found upon the [Bayfield] town plats, and Timber more accessible."[6]

It is, however, one thing to read a description of that old-growth forest and quite another to picture it in the mind's eye. Although today we can obtain an idea as to the variety of trees simply by taking a walk through the woods, we must remember that our forest, while beautiful, is relatively young. That which was viewed a hundred years ago may have differed only a little in kind, but it surely differed greatly in its character. One of those who had come northward with the construction crews of the Wisconsin Central Railroad in the 1870's noted the pine, hemlock, ash, maple, elm, spruce, and balsam, "all virgin timber," and in addition he recalled the scene. "It was certainly a nice open high trees timbered country [sic] . . . a person or hunter could see a deer from a distance of a mile as there was no underbrush, except alders along the creeks and rivers."[7]

Although Frederick Merk accurately observed that in 1860 "the invading loggers were yet thundering only at the outer gates of the vast forest solitudes of Wisconsin,"[8] in the Chequamegon Bay area there had been unusually early efforts, just as had been the case with the fur trade. Indeed, the first of these was in relation to the activities of the American Fur Company. Sometime in the 1840's that company constructed a little sawmill on Section 21 of Township 50 North, Range 4 West,

[2]John C. Curtis. *The Vegetation of Wisconsin* (Madison, 1959), 177.

[3]As quoted in the *Bayfield Press*, August 27, 1887.

[4]*Bayfield Press*, May 1, 1886.

[5]*Bayfield Mercury*, August 22, 1857.

[6]William Craiken to William D. Hale, January 15, 1860, in the William D. Hale Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, Minnesota.

[7]Reminiscences of William George Nohl, Archives Division, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin.

[8]Frederick Merk, *Economic History of Wisconsin During the Civil War Decade* (Madison, 1971 edition), 60.



This content downloaded from 158.68.232.35 on Wed, 05 Apr 2023 19:38:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms



Courtesy the author

*A Bayfield sawmill.*

doubtless at or near the mouth of what came to be known as Pike's Creek. But this was almost at the end of the fur company's involvement, so the sawmill operated only briefly, the site being purchased by one of the area's first important entrepreneurs, Julius Austrian.

In 1856 machinery for a new sawmill to be located at the same site was brought in by the Bayfield Land Company, an operation managed by John T. Caho. That such mills were constructed so far in advance of the lumbering frontier merely reflected the requirements of isolated community building efforts. Little in the way of such beginnings could occur in remote locations without benefit of the sawmiller's product. Thus, when fire destroyed the mill, it was rebuilt in 1858. This time Caho assumed the responsibilities of owner as well as manager. But those days in the wake of the Panic of 1857 proved more than Caho could endure, and he was forced to declare bankruptcy, the land company reassuming ownership. Subsequently the property was sold to the local postmaster, S. S. Vaughn, in partnership with General E. E. Webb.

Descriptions of this place are rare, but Reverend James Peet must have been referring to it in his diary. Peet was himself an interesting character, one given to bemoaning the circumstances of his calling, although on a good day he would allow that "somebody must be on the 'frontier' work and perhaps it may as well be me as any one." On the day of our interest, August 2, 1858, he was returning from Bay City (now east Ashland) to Bayfield in his little sailboat when a sudden storm forced him to shore. At the place he docked, he noted the presence of "4 or 5 families there including the half-breeds and foreigners," and "a steam saw mill . . . just put up."[9]

This sawmill reportedly was able to produce upwards of 8,000 feet of lumber a day, and for a time it was operated in connection with a small shingle mill. To give some idea as to the modest nature of the operation, since sixteen-foot sawlogs commonly averaged be-

[9]James Peet Diary, July 25 and August 2, 1858, in the James Peet Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin.



This content downloaded from 158.68.232.35 on Wed, 05 Apr 2023 19:38:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

tween 500 and 1000 board feet, not many logs would be consumed in the course of a day's work, a dozen or so normally sufficing. S. S. Vaughn later moved to Ashland, and about 1870 the sawmill was also removed to an Ashland location.

In 1860 the government built a sawmill at the Red Cliff (Chippewa) Reservation. The facility employed six men and on a good day its single circular saw could produce 6,000 feet with the profits, if any, being divided among the Red Cliff, Bad River, and Grand Portage bands of Chippewa. This sawmill was operated for twelve seasons, the machinery eventually being sold to some Duluth parties.[10] Although the output was unimpressive by later standards, the Red Cliff mill doubtless satisfied the very limited local demand of the period, delivering its product by boat to dealers such as Chapman and Company, Bayfield loggers who operated a small yard at the foot of Washington Avenue.[11]

Also in 1860, a shingle mill was constructed at the Pike Creek location by the partnership of Taff and Dunn. Following the war, they sold the property to R. D. Pike, son of a noted local pioneer farmer, Elisha Pike. The shingle mill was destroyed by fire some four years later, and Captain Pike decided to rebuild at La Pointe on Madeline Island. Certainly the assault on Madeline's timber began in earnest at that time, but tragedy again intervened when an explosion demolished the mill, killed three of the workers, and injured others. Steam power may have been romantic, but it was also dangerous. Captain Pike moved back to the mainland for his next effort, constructing in the spring of 1869 a shingle mill, to which he soon added a sawmill, probably at the time of the shutdown of the Red Cliff operation. The structure measured only 40 by 60 feet, had one circular saw and a small edger, and could produce upwards of 10,000 feet per day.

It was this effort that became the progenitor of the Bayfield sawmilling industry, which was of importance not only in what it produced for a growing community but also as a vital economic activity. Captain Pike was forever rebuilding and adding on. By 1880 the daily sawing capacity of his plant had reached 40,000 feet, and this amount was soon to be doubled. In 1892 the R. D. Pike Lumber Company would produce 18,000,000 feet of lumber and 2,000,000 shingles. Although far from being the largest operation on the Bay—the Bigelow mill at Washburn, for example, reported a cut in 1892 of nearly 47,000,000 feet—to an early Bayfield, the R. D. Pike Lumber Company was *the* industry.[12]

In 1871, the year that Captain Pike added a planing mill to his facility, he also constructed a small steamer which he named the *Mocking Bird.* Thus not only did he furnish finished lumber, he could deliver it to other lake ports; and he could also bring in the great rafts of logs to the relatively safe perimeters of his sawmill booms. One of the sources of the logs was the forested islands.

It is difficult to follow these early logging operations in any specific fashion. The loggers were only of local importance, and many only briefly so at that. Even were they given to recording their activities, hardly a likely possibility, there was little time and less energy for doing so. Plat maps and weekly news items might tell us their names, but little else. We do know, however, that they were there, and we also know why they were there.

Sawmill operators such as R. D. Pike might employ their own logging crews, but, more often than not, they purchased logs from independent loggers. Sometimes these were simply farmers, combining their need for cleared fields with a demand for what they had cut down. But there were others who made a speculation in lands and logging a cooperative venture. On the Apostle Islands and along the shores of Chequamegon Bay, these operators initially sought out the stands of timber that stood closest to the water's edge. The movement of logs over land was costly. It was only when the logs reached the water that difficulty and expense gave way to relative ease and economy.

IN the case of the islands, the distance between stump and shoreline was never very far. As a result, many of the considerations that had been important in

[10]*Bayfield Press,* November 9, 1889.
[11]*Bayfield Press,* October 13, 1870.
[12]George W. Hotchkiss, *History of the Lumber and Forest Industry of the Northwest* (Chicago, 1898), 469; *Bayfield Press,* November 9, 1889.



This content downloaded from 158.68.232.35 on Wed, 05 Apr 2023 19:38:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

other logging districts were here of less importance. For example, traditionally a single sawlog was skidded or dragged from the stump site to something of a staging area where a number of logs would be loaded onto a sleigh and transported to a landing on or beside a frozen lake or stream. On the islands, the skidding operation alone was often enough, there being no need for an intermediate step. This was true not only because of the short distances usually involved. Topography also contributed to the ease of log movement. Indeed, if one were to take topographic maps of each island, the arteries of the logging operations could be readily determined since, for the most part, they would coincide with the network of gullies and draws that fan outward and downward from height of land to shoreline. One element that has changed very little over the past one hundred years is the lay of the land. The gullies and draws are where they were, and a good deal can be presumed if not concluded simply by following these indentations inland.

There is additional evidence available. For example, the grooved trace that parallels one of the draws on Oak Island is obviously the result of recent human activity. Very likely this was a skidding trail, with log after log gradually wearing the pathway that has remained. But it may also have been the center of a roadway used by the big wheel teamsters. This seems likely for a number of reasons. Because of the relatively short distances and the downhill grades, summer logging was managed on the islands during a period when it was not even considered for mainland operations. The big wheels were the summer alternative to winter skidding on snow and ice. The sawlog was raised and attached to the axle of the big wheels, thereby allowing it to be moved over the bare ground more easily. Oftentimes, however, the log was attached off-center and the back end dragged on the ground when the downhill grades were at all worrisome. The other obvious reason for conducting summer logging on the islands had to do with those efforts which focused on hardwoods. Since they could not float the hardwood logs anyway, there was no reason to think in seasonal terms. Cut in winter, the piles would wait. Cut in summer, hardwood logs could be loaded directly onto barge or boat.

All of which serves to reintroduce the most basic difference between logging operations on the islands and those on the mainland—island operators were involved in a number of different efforts, each of which utilized a different species for special purposes. Their mainland contemporaries went from pine stump to pine tree, reasonably confident of market demand but also knowing that for the present there was little choice. The island logger enjoyed far greater freedom, which did not mean that he was the more profitable because of his freedom.

For example, he knew, or soon learned, that his operations were part of an economic opportunity which geography had put together and which politics had failed to separate. For many years, the Lake Superior district of Wisconsin was involved in the square timber trade of Canada, having replaced the prior contributions of Michigan forests. By and large, the square timber trade preceded the decade of the 1890's but even in those years Ashland, Washburn, and Bayfield mills had shipped significant amounts of timber to dealers bordering the St. Lawrence. Just how much of the local product went to England by way of Quebec is impossible to determine, but it is clear that large quantities of oak, elm, ash, birch, and tamarack were shipped in addition to the pine. The total has been estimated at upwards of ten billion board feet, not including some 165 million oak staves.[13] In any case, it was not a trifling connection.

As always in any account of regional development, people did what was profitable, and around the rim of Chequamegon Bay, including the Apostle Islands, circumstances permitted the exploitation of hardwood as well as pine. As stated previously, the demand for hardwood existed, but not at any price, and it was only in limited areas such as those facing the shores of Superior where the hardwood could be harvested to advantage. Indeed, nothing could have been more accurate or succinct than an announcement which appeared in the *Bayfield Press* of November 28, 1877. "Bayfield is settling down to its regular winter's business," the newspaper reported, explaining that "cord wood, pine logs, oak timber, steamboat wood and fish are the staple products, and the supply is unlimited." Al-

[13]Hotchkiss, *Lumber and Forest Industry of the Northwest*, 67.



This content downloaded from 158.68.232.35 on Wed, 05 Apr 2023 19:38:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms




WHi(X3)39484

*Big Wheels could be used during the summer months for log skidding.*

though the supply was hardly unlimited, it must have seemed so at the time.

In addition to cord wood, sawlogs, timbers and deals, staves, piling, posts, and poles, there were three additional lumbering involvements that were of more than passing importance. One had to do with the harvesting of hemlock bark, the source of tannic acid then demanded by the tanning industry. The other two had to do with providing the materials essential for construction in the railroad and mining industries. As to the latter, it is not difficult to appreciate the vast amounts of timber that went into the production of dimension stuff, the materials that supported and lined the mile upon mile of shafts and tunnels of the iron ore mines of northern Wisconsin and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. The imagery of entire forests being converted to be inverted is too obvious to ignore. But in this age of the open pit, it is natural enough to forget what was.

Just as poorly remembered was the effort that went into the expansion and maintenance of the nation's railroad network. Why this relationship should have received so little attention is impossible to explain, especially since it has been estimated that in the last three decades of the nineteenth century, American railroads consumed up to a quarter of the entire timber production of the country. In the early years, the fuel for the locomotives was more than likely wood and, of course, wood was used in the construction of bridges, tunnels, docks, and all the many buildings associated with the rail industry from maintenance shops to depots and warehouses. In addition, most of the rolling stock was largely of wood construction. And what respectable track would be without its parallel in telegraph poles?

But by far the greatest amount of wood went for crossties. An average of nearly 2,700 ties were required for each mile of track, and the ties in general use throughout the period measured seven by nine inches by nine feet, translating into more than 125,000 feet of lumber for each mile of new construction, with an annual renewal or replacement rate estimated at 15 per cent or some 400 ties per mile.

The method of making crossties was simple enough, at least simple enough in the telling. It involved hewing rather than sawing and, therefore, most tie makers preferred to utilize



This content downloaded from 158.68.232.35 on Wed, 05 Apr 2023 19:38:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

smaller, so-called "second growth" timber, or trees of a size from which single ties could be hewed. For many years railroad companies required that the ties be made during the winter months. Whatever the reasons for this insistence, by cutting in the winter the tie had seasoned, dried to some extent, and was better able to resist the decay encouraged by spring and summer moisture before it was normally used.

Because of the numbers required, railroad crossties had to be cheap. Accordingly, they tended to have a very local market, although since the railroads were also the consumers, shipping distances were often greater than would otherwise have been the case. The best ties were those which proved most resistant to rot and decay. In the northern states, white oak, black locust, and chestnut were the preferred species, while in the South, cypress, cedar, and long leaf pine were chosen. But in truth, cost was the determining factor and in most areas crossties were simply made of whatever trees were locally available.

Nonetheless, given the accessibility to inexpensive lake transportation, ties from the Chequamegon region began to be shipped into the Chicago market in the 1870's, and from there westward to support the construction of rail lines across the prairies and plains. Given the distribution opportunities afforded to the Chicago dealers, cedar, tamarack, and hemlock ties, poles, and posts found their way to surprisingly distant consumers, even to include the Mexican Central Railway.[14]

As to the amounts of crossties, it has been estimated that in 1870 a total of 39 million were used in new construction or as replacements, and it was further estimated that this would have required a depleting of nearly 200,000 acres of timber. The total had increased to some 89 million ties by 1890, 70 million of which were replacement, with a corresponding increase in timber consumption. In addition, by 1890 railroads were consuming over three billion feet of boards and timbers annually.[15]

HEMLOCK constituted a very different opportunity and one that has been even less noted, perhaps because it is no longer utilized for the same purposes. Eastern hemlock was not an especially attractive source for lumber, and certainly not when compared with the neighboring pines. Hemlock is fairly light in color, not particularly strong, about average in weight, fairly coarse in texture, and not resistant to decay. It was, however, the principal source of tanbark, which was, in turn, the principal source of tannin, a natural chemical that aided in transforming animal hides into soft but durable leather.

In the earlier years, it was only the hemlock bark in which the loggers were interested. But the price of the bark was usually sufficient to attract workers to the woods. Prices during the 1870's and 1880's varied considerably, although they generally ranged between three and five dollars a cord. In addition, there were other reasons for an interest in such operations. In at least two respects, the harvesting of hemlock bark was complementary to other activities. First, the time of prime collection was during May, June, and July, or those months when normal logging activities were at a standstill. Thus, for those who tried to be loggers on nearly a full-time basis, the barking operations helped to complete their calendar. In this connection, it should be noted that if winter held the disadvantage of extremely cold temperatures, there were many who greatly preferred that condition to the black flies and mosquitoes which drove man and beast to distraction during the hemlock harvest. Few loggers quit the woods on account of the cold, but the same was not true regarding the heat and humidity and the bugs. The second of the complementary considerations developed as hemlock became increasingly important to the pulp industry. For this utilization the logs had to be debarked anyway, and the fact that this could be accomplished to separate advantage made the total operation all the more profitable.

Large populations of hemlock grew on most of the Apostle Islands. Years later Henry J. Wachsmuth recalled that "better hemlock than anywhere else" grew on island loca-

[14]Sherry H. Olson, *The Depletion Myth: A History of Railroad Use of Timber* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1971), 24–25.

[15]"Consumption of Wood Preservatives and Quantity of Wood Treated in the United States in 1910," United States Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Circular No. 186 (Washington, 1911).



This content downloaded from 158.68.232.35 on Wed, 05 Apr 2023 19:38:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms



WHi(X3)39385

*Hauling forty-two tons of tanbark.*

tions.[16] In these operations, the methods varied but little from those followed on mainland sites. That it was done in the late spring and early summer had, of course, to do with the relative ease of peeling the bark during that season. Because about as much effort was involved in peeling larger trees with thick bark, these specimens were initially sought out. And since it was important that the bark be obtained in pieces that were regular in size and intact, the fallers often found it necessary to prepare a bed of boughs and smaller trees to cushion the fall of the hemlock, thereby avoiding any unnecessary damage. Once the branches had been removed, the bark of the trunk would be split lengthwise, and then removed by peeling it off in four foot sections, the peelers cutting around the circumference with a sharp knife.

There were different problems associated with the handling of hemlock bark as opposed to sawlogs. On the islands it was not uncommon to construct slides or chutes down the steeper gullies so the slabs of bark could be slid to a beach stacking area. These were not flumes in the sense that water furnished a portion of the power for movement. Rather these hemlock chutes simply depended upon gravity to move things along, and this was sufficient given the grades involved. The slabs of bark were then laid out to dry, inner side up, prior to stacking in the cord-sized piles.

The loading onto a boat was often accomplished by an intermediary step, from shore to ship via scow. These scows were usually propelled by man power, the crew simply pulling the scow out and back by means of a rope between the boat and the shoreline. Much of the local product went to Duluth, but tanneries near and far became customers for hemlock bark which had been harvested on the Apostle Islands.

THESE matter-of-fact descriptions of activities seem to sug-

[16]Taped interview with Henry J. Wachsmuth, September 20, 1955, in the Northland College Area Research Center, Ashland, Wisconsin.



This content downloaded from 158.68.232.35 on Wed, 05 Apr 2023 19:38:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

gest that those who were involved were akin to automatons. Such was anything but the case, and the mere mention of Duluth brings to mind another facet, a very human facet, of the experience. If this was an era of expansion and development, and it was, it was also an era of the liveliest competition between fledgling communities. Looking at the results from today's vantage, it may be impossible to recapture the spirited rivalries that existed between neighboring villages and towns, each of which aspired to become the regional center. And it wasn't simply local pride that was involved. People would invest not only their pocketbooks but their lives, knowing that their future and the future of their sons depended upon the outcome of the competition. In retrospect it all may seem rather silly, and even they normally tried to mask the seriousness of the contest. Decency required it. But decency could not prevent an aspiring Bayfield from worrying continually about Duluth and Ashland across the Bay, and about the routes of railroads.

As things turned out, Bayfield never did get rail service sufficient to make her competitive, and ever since she has looked to the lake just as she did before. But in 1870 the question had not been answered, and town boomers stalked the land to serious purpose.

One of the surest methods of bolstering local confidence and pride was to belittle a neighboring community. It was in this spirit that the editor of the *Bayfield Press* passed along a "rumor" on April 8, 1871, that "Duluth is to be moved 10 miles inland, so as to be just 4,000 miles from Paris." And on the following July 1, he noted Duluth's desire for a town clock and, assessing the advantages which his western neighbors enjoyed, suggested that Duluthians "ask Congress for an appropriation for an hour glass, as they have sand enough to run it themselves."[17]

There seemed to be no rules governing the nature of these exchanges, and occasionally they approached the macabre. Such was the case in January of 1887 when readers of the *Bayfield Press* learned that during the previous week, "Ashland recorded four deaths while. . . Bayfield recorded two births and no deaths." The editor continued without pause, "The Harbor City shows up good there."[18] Although subscribers might smile at such exchanges, they also appreciated that the contest was real, and it was not one likely to be won by words alone. It would take work, lots of hard work.

There was progress and there were rewards. By January, 1883, the diversification of local industry had become a source of pride, the editor of the *Bayfield Press* noting the difficulty of giving each activity "as complete an account . . . as its importance often demands." But if required to list them in order of importance, he would do so "in the order of Lumber, Brownstone and Fish."[19] A few years later he would look back on the growth of the business of quarrying and shipping brownstone with general satisfaction, observing that many were looking in that direction as the certain opportunity for long-term investment and employment. "Five years ago there was but one quarry," he wrote in the spring of 1889, and "now there are six large and fully equipped quarries on the main land, three at Houghton Point, one at Pike's Bay, and two near the

[17] *Bayfield Press*, July 1, 1871.

[18] *Bayfield Press*, January 29, 1887.

[19] *Bayfield Press*, January 21, 1883.

*The beauty of the Islands remains. Driftwood on Hermit Island, 1977.*

Courtesy Donald C. Albrecht



This content downloaded from 158.68.232.35 on Wed, 05 Apr 2023 19:38:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Siskowit River." In addition, there were the two on the islands. Given the increasing popularity of brownstone, it was happily presumed that it "will undoubtedly soon take the lead of all building stone in the western market," in the process becoming "a permanent enterprise."[20] As a matter of fact, few enterprises would prove to be less permanent.

The bursting of the brownstone bubble, however, came later. In the meantime, the decade of the 1880's was certainly one of ever-increasing activity, both in terms of the development of the northern communities and in terms of involvements which supported development elsewhere. In the latter category, none were more important than the lumbermen of the Chequamegon Bay region. But for all of the activity in the woods and the sawmills of the Ashland-Bayfield area, it should be remembered that this was a small contribution to a mighty effort. For example, the estimated capacity of the local mills in 1885 was as follows:[21]

| Mill | Location | Capacity in feet |
|---|---|---|
| Superior Lumber Company | Ashland | 20,000,000 |
| Union Mill Company | Ashland | 7,000,000 |
| Michigan Lumber Company | Ashland | 5,000,000 |
| Ritchie and Company | Ashland | 10,000,000 |
| Ashland Lumber Company | Ashland | 10,000,000 |
| S. G. Cook and Company | Washburn | 5,000,000 |
| R. D. Pike | Bayfield | 10,000,000 |

But even this 67,000,000 foot total may have been an exaggeration. In the following year George W. Hotchkiss published his *Lumberman's Directory* in which he estimated Bayfield's sawmilling capacity as being only 7,000,000 feet, while the reported capacity for all of Ashland's mills was 45,000,000 feet. For purposes of perspective, the total for Eau Claire was in excess of 225,000,000 feet.

The locals were, of course, aware of differences in the extent of operations. In recognition of the natural competiveness, the Bayfield editor would admit that his "side of this bay has but two saw-mills," while quickly adding that "what it lacks in numbers it makes up in quality. . . ."[22] In fact, there was even competition between those two west-side mills, at least in the fall of 1885. The *Press* reported on the contest, and of its own provocative role. "The account of the big day's cut of the Washburn mill published in the *Press* 2 weeks ago . . . aroused the pride of the boys in Bayfield's mill and last week Thursday they laid themselves out for a day's cut." The outcome favored those boys from Bayfield who, with but a single circular saw, "in a run of ten hours . . . turned out 94,603 feet of lumber, beating the Washburn mill [by] 8,216 ft."[23] There was, however, only so much that a single circular saw could manage, regardless of the skill and determination of its operators, and within two years, following the construction of the A. A. Bigelow and Company sawmill at Washburn, Bayfield would no longer indulge in such foolish games. The daily capacity of the new Bigelow plant was 250,000 feet.[24]

But as everyone knew, the key to the competitive advantage between nineteenth-century communities was the railroad connection. By this time, Bayfield had become a part of the rail world, and it was noted that during the month of July, 1885, some seventy-five carloads of lumber had been shipped from the Pike sawmill to distant customers along the Missouri River, allowing the editor to complain, "and yet there are those who think Bayfield's patronage of the railway amounts to very little."[25]

Important or not, Bayfield would fail in that competition, a failure foreseen by many, including a traveling reporter from the *Lancaster* (Wisconsin) *Teller*. In the course of an

[20] *Bayfield Press*, June 1, 1889.
[21] *Bayfield Press*, February 14, 1885.
[22] *Bayfield Press*, October 3, 1885.
[23] *Bayfield Press*, October 17, 1885.
[24] Hotchkiss, *Lumber and Forest Industry of the Northwest*, 470.
[25] *Bayfield Press*, August 8,1885.



This content downloaded from 158.68.232.35 on Wed, 05 Apr 2023 19:38:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

1885 visit, he observed that Bayfield was "a prettier place than Ashland, every way, and I think is destined to become the more important town." He immediately had second thoughts, however, acknowledging that Ashland had "the tremendous advantage in the four great railways terminating there—namely, the Omaha; the Northern Pacific (connecting the place with Superior City); the Wisconsin Central; and the Milwaukee, Lake Shore and Western."[26] At the time, only the Omaha, actually the Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis and Omaha, had reached Bayfield. It is interesting to note how obvious this difference, or its results, continue to impress. One cannot help but notice the number of tracks which still interrupt the streets of Ashland, and the harbor there seems a presence of no great importance. Bayfield, however, remains much as it was, a town oriented to its bayfront, essentially unchanged excepting for the degree of activity.

THERE were other competitions which occurred simultaneously. Today when our concerns seem to focus more on too many people than on too few, it may seem strange to imagine earlier periods when communities and regions not only welcomed new settlers, but sought them out. One of the concerns of northern Wisconsin in the decade of the 1880's had to do with the Dakota land boom, those prairie opportunities attracting farmers on the move away from northwoods clearings. Again, much of the battle was fought on the editorial pages. Naturally, the Bayfield editor joined in the fray, admitting that for those experiencing the bone labor of clearing forested land, there was great appeal in a treeless landscape. But he counseled caution.

> Emigrants to a prairie country should remember that for the first year or two they must live on the money they have with them. Wheat is the principal product, and all the necessaries, including fuel and lumber for building, must be imported at a high cost of freight. New land must be broken up one year before a wheat crop can be raised. Were it a question of prairie vs. scrub oak there might be ground for argument. Besides valuable lumber the settler in Bayfield county finds an immediate means of subsistence, being able to make a good living in cutting railroad ties if nothing else.[27]

One might wonder just how many railroad ties the editor had hewed. And somehow throughout these discourses, the question of soils seems to have been avoided.

But all was not labor, even in frontier Bayfield. The summer of 1887 witnessed the formal opening of a new resort hotel, the Island View. It was an occasion for celebration and for rhapsodizing, not just about the hotel, but about its setting.

> Let your imagination picture a handsome little town nestling 'neath romantic bluffs, its streets lined with lovely shade trees, sparkling fountains of pure spring water in many a grassy lawn, wide and well kept walks and at its feet the blue waters of that grandest of inland seas, while in the distance, 'like gems of living green,' the far famed Apostle Islands.[28]

The hotel, however favored by those who oversaw its location and construction, was an indulgence intended for visitors. If the local residents took pause in their activities to approve of the structure, their approval had a very practical bent having to do with jobs and opportunities rather than with comfort and leisure, with work rather than with vacations. For most, the whine of the saws at the Pike mill seemed to provide a more virtuous expression of progress.

Attitudes are always interesting, and they are particularly so when intervening years have so altered circumstances as to render them alien. Such is the case with so much having to do with the nineteenth-century lumber industry and, indeed, with nineteenth-century industry in general. It is nearly impossible to believe that there was a time, not so distant, when smoke, noise, commotion, and even some factory wastes were looked upon as evidence of promise and progress, the inevitable by-products of civilization. In this connection, a poem printed in the December 17, 1887 issue of the *Bayfield Press*, is worthy of note. En-

[26]As reprinted in the *Bayfield Press*, September 12, 1885.

[27]*Bayfield Press*, April 2, 1887.

[28]*Bayfield Press*, July 9, 1887.



This content downloaded from 158.68.232.35 on Wed, 05 Apr 2023 19:38:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

titled simply, "Sawdust," it recaptures much of that contemporary feeling and faith.

The mill saw with its teeth of steel
Bites through the log upon the tram
And drops the dust like golden meal
Into the stream below the dam.

It floats in long procession down
Puts golden fringe on water's edge
Or rests in nooklets green and brown,
And shines like sparks among the sedge.

Now swims a particle away
And minnows push it here and there
As boys at foot-ball love to play
On summer days in summer air.

The water shouts in cheering tones
As float the shining masses down
Around the curves, around the stones,
And past the busy trade-blind town.

And still the saw with teeth of steel
Bites through the log upon the tram
And drops the dust like golden meal
Into the stream below the dam.

For those not given to watching "golden meal" drop into streams, the activities could be curiously various. For example, in August, 1888, one could learn that "a large crew of men [were] at work on Michigan Island getting out hemlock for street work in Ashland," and at the same time be informed that the "Pike's sawmill shut down Tuesday to let the hands go to Ashland to see the elephant." The reporter added, "Most of them went."[29]

But for the most part it was work, and on a May day in 1890, the Bayfield editor cheerily observed, "Everybody is busy." And so they were. But panics would come. Resources would decline. Tastes would change. And whatever it was that progress had promised, that would prove something of a siren's call, for this was not a part of the expected progression. Perhaps there is no clearer admission of the difference than that which had been noted in the previous June. Matter-of-factly, it was mentioned that George Osborn, manager of the lath mill of the Pike Lumber Company, had gone to Pratt (now Grandview) "to make final proof on his homestead." The reporter casually attached a most important comment: "Mr. O. is one of the few Bayfield homesteaders who has lived on his land the full five years."[30]

Throughout, one thing had remained very much the same, and that was the natural beauty of the area. In all of the race to become a part of the modern state, it was perhaps inevitable that the only enduring resource would be overlooked. But the beauty could wait, and it did, and one day after the noise and the bustle had moved on, those who remained looked about them and announced, mostly for themselves, "You know, this isn't such a bad place after all." And a great many who lived and worked elsewhere have agreed.

[29]*Bayfield Press*, August 11, 18, 1888.
[30]*Bayfield Press*, June 8, 1889.

*Bayfield harbor.* Courtesy Donald C. Albrecht



This content downloaded from 158.68.232.35 on Wed, 05 Apr 2023 19:38:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms