

# **“The Wisconsin Logging Industry: Growth and Setback”**

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The logging industry of Wisconsin was, and still, is an extremely profitable trade, however, the unstable practices of the 1800's and early 1900's lead to companies exhausting forests and forcing them to look to tribal land for timber. Countless environmental and Native American conflicts were raised. As time went on many treaties were signed and environmental concerns began to be addressed.

### **Wisconsin's Primary Industry**

During the main logging industry, Wisconsin saw a huge economic growth. Countless treaties and so called "compromises" were signed into existence. Beginning in the 1800s, the logging industry supported the economy for many decades until the forests of Wisconsin were destroyed due to over cutting. Logging was the leading industry in Wisconsin until the 1940s when tourism took over after forests began to grow back<sup>1</sup>. Most lumberers of the time were immigrants<sup>2</sup> specifically from Scandinavia. In about 1890 when logging was booming, around a quarter of the people living in Wisconsin at the time were working in the logging and lumbering industry. Over 23,000 men were working in the camps, 32,000 in the sawmills, and approximately 450 logging camps were in operation every winter. Although there was no official tally taken, over 20 countries had logging camps operating in them.

Before logging boomed, the forests of Wisconsin were "seemingly endless"<sup>3</sup>. Many logging companies truly believed this, which for the most part, was the reason that they had clear cut all the forests so quickly. It was once stated that "The amount of pine harvested from the Black River Valley alone could have built a boardwalk nine feet wide and four inches thick around the entire world."<sup>4</sup> For many people the true amount of timber harvested in Wisconsin at the time is hard to believe, however before the industry boomed, Wisconsin was covered with valuable forests. The country needed the wood

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<sup>1</sup> Wisconsin Historical Society, *Logging: The Industry that Changed the State*.

<sup>2</sup> Wisconsin Historical Society, *Logging: The Industry that Changed the State*. Paragraph one.

<sup>3</sup> Wisconsin Historical Society, *Logging: The Industry that Changed the State*.

<sup>4</sup> Wisconsin Historical Society, *Logging: The Industry that Changed the State*. Paragraph five.

to build its rapidly expanding cities, and Wisconsin's forests had everything a logging company would need to make money.

## **Native American Logging**

The opinions on logging practices of the companies and tribes conflicted hugely. Native Americans had very different views on logging, due mainly to their level of respect for nature that the logging companies didn't have<sup>5</sup>. Where the companies were cutting everything they had access to, tribes used sustainable logging as a way to get the wood that they needed without exhausting the forests<sup>6</sup>. Sustainable logging only included the cutting of fully matured trees, trees that were sick, and already fallen trees<sup>7</sup>; tribes always made sure to only take what they needed and nothing more. Logging was still extremely important for Native Americans, seeing as trees were used for transportation and shelter, along with clothing, weapons, and art<sup>8</sup>. Where the logging companies would leave total forests cleared, the tribes would leave "ecologically healthy"<sup>9</sup> forests. The practice of sustainable logging ensured a steady supply of trees for years to come<sup>10</sup>.

One of the most important and influential tribes that played a part in the industry was the Menominee<sup>11</sup>. The initial start of the logging industry would not have been possible if it weren't for the Menominee tribe of Wisconsin. In 1836 the U.S. government came into possession of a large portion of land in eastern and central Wisconsin. The land had been ceded by force from the Menominee Nation<sup>12</sup>. For most this would be seen as a compromise because of the fact that it ended in a treaty, however we must remember that the tribe had been forced. On several occasions throughout history, the Menominee (and other tribes) have had to fight both the state and federal governments to stay in possession of their

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<sup>5</sup> Christopher and Barbara Johnson, *Menominee Forest Keepers*, American Forests. Paragraph four.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher and Barbara Johnson, paragraph three.

<sup>7</sup> Christopher and Barbara Johnson, paragraph four.

<sup>8</sup> Black Diamond Now, *Northwest Native Americans: The art and Science of Logging*. Paragraph one.

<sup>9</sup> Christopher and Barbara Johnson, paragraph two.

<sup>10</sup> Christopher and Barbara Johnson, paragraph four.

<sup>11</sup> Patty Loew, *Indian Nations of Wisconsin: Histories of Endurance and renewal*. Pages 29 through 34.

<sup>12</sup> Patty Loew, page twenty nine.

forests and tribal land. In 1854, a small sawmill was bought by the Menominee so that they could cut the lumber that they had harvested on their land<sup>13</sup>. In order to do this they had to actually fight the government to have the rights to their own reservation.

During the process of becoming more self relying<sup>14</sup> in the late 1800s and early 1900s, the tribe was forced to fight numerous policies and government agencies. For example, after a large blowdown in 1905, a request was made to erect another sawmill so they could cut the logs that had been salvaged<sup>15</sup>. In 1908 a law was passed that gave them the right to build the new mill. This would not have been possible without Senator LaFollette<sup>16</sup> who aided them when trying to convince congress members to pass the law. Eventually, in 1973, Congress passed the Menominee Restoration Act, which “restored Menominee lands to reservation status”<sup>17</sup>.

The public generally supported the logging companies for very obvious reasons. It was cheap and profitable, and while there were some dangers to logging, it was a relatively easy way to get money. Most people knew close to nothing about any of the tribes, which is still an issue today. At the time Native American tribes had close to no voice when trying to resolve conflicts. For example, the Potawatomi were once described as being unsuccessful in trying to “develop toward a golden age in their primitive culture.”

<sup>18</sup> One of the reasons that our logging practices were so unstable was that most people were very ignorant of how the tribes were doing things differently and why it was working. While the major logging companies were starting to exhaust the forests of Wisconsin, Native American tribes had huge amounts timber on their land, which as you can see in the map located in appendix A, was located all over the state in many major lumbering regions. Most companies saw this as an opportunity to get money fast.

### **W.A. Rust, Senator Timothy O. Howe, and H.C. Putnam**

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<sup>13</sup> Christopher and Barbara Johnson, paragraph seven.

<sup>14</sup> Christopher and Barbara Johnson, paragraph eight.

<sup>15</sup> Christopher and Barbara Johnson, paragraph eight.

<sup>16</sup> The Biography.com, *Robert M. LaFollette Biography*.

<sup>17</sup> Christopher and Barbara Johnson, paragraph nine.

<sup>18</sup> F.V.V., *Wisconsin Indian Tribes, Potawatomi Village Life*. Milwaukee Journal, January 23, 1926.

During the peak of the logging industry there were countless cases of company versus Native American conflicts. Some very notable names were W.A. Rust, a lumberman operating near Eau Claire, Senator Timothy O. Howe, who represented Wisconsin in the Senate, and H.C. Putnam, another lumberman of the time<sup>19</sup>. As with the men, there were a few main tribes involved, the Menominee, and multiple bands of Ojibwe<sup>20</sup>.

In October of 1872, there was a contract approved between the Lac Courte Oreilles and W.A. Rust's (the owner of a logging company near Eau Claire) logging company<sup>21</sup> housed near the reservation. His intention was to get access to large amounts of timber at a very low price. The contract stated that Rust was allowed to cut and sell all pine located within within three miles of all streams and lakes on the reservation in ten years, provided that he pay a total of \$50,000 in annual payments of \$10,000.

Officials located in Washington decided against the termination of Rust's contract for an offer of \$10,000 for timber on the reservation from the Laird Norton and Company firm<sup>22</sup>. The deal was refused because the firm wasn't specific enough when describing the payment, where timber was located, and cutting time. A new contract was then approved by the Department of the Interior<sup>23</sup>, which added ten years to the time for cutting, and required payments of \$5,000 to be made annually adding up to \$75,000 starting in 1877. Before the logging season of 1874-1875 the decision was made that Native Americans could no longer sell timber on reservations and the Rust contract was terminated.

“The work of W.A. Rust in securing a contract in 1872 for stampage on the Lac Courte Oreilles Indian Reservation represented a bold stroke... at the time of the exhaustion of government pineland... Rust's effort was not the

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<sup>19</sup> D. Peterson, 1970, *Lumbering on the Chippewa: The Eau Claire Area 1845-1885*, part two. Pages 374, and 385.

<sup>20</sup> Patty Loew, pages twenty nine, and seventy.

<sup>21</sup> D. Peterson, page 378.

<sup>22</sup> D. Peterson, page 379.

<sup>23</sup> A department of the United States Government responsible for protecting, managing, and conserving the natural resources and federal land of the U.S.

first of its kind in Wisconsin.”<sup>24</sup>

The Senator Timothy O. Howe<sup>25</sup> conflict with the Menominee started when a contract between the Menominee tribe and an unknown white man believed to be the senator dated August 1854 was sent from the senator to the Department of the Interior. It was stated that the logger would have unrestricted access to cut pine on the reservation in return for 100 barrels of flour paid annually. The Department of the Interior refused to approve the contract after they proved that there had been illegal logging done and that the promised payment was inadequate. There are multiple cases where it is only now being proven that logging had been done illegally after government officials have begun to investigate it further.

In the logging season of 1870, H.C. Putnam<sup>26</sup>, a lumberman at the time, was communicating with other men that expressed interest in purchasing timber located on the Bad River reservation which was located close to Ashland<sup>27</sup>. Multiple Native American agents and lumbermen advised Putnam to go to Washington D.C.<sup>28</sup>, so he spent a large part of the 1871-1872 winter in Washington<sup>29</sup>. A law was then passed by congress on May 29, 1872, stating reservation land of the Lac Courte Oreilles, Lac du Flambeau, and Fond du Lac (located in Minnesota) reservations, could be auctioned off to members of the public. If they gave consent, the Native Americans would receive all proceeds. To do this all tribe members living on the reservations would be relocated to the Bad River reservation. This was a very conflicting law, because tribes did not have a voice in the government.

### **Downfall of the Industry**

The downfall of the logging industry was brought on mainly by the unstable lumbering techniques that were used by many of the companies. Multiple forest fires and floods also contributed to

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<sup>24</sup> D. Peterson, 1970, page 377.

<sup>25</sup> D. Peterson, page 379.

<sup>26</sup> D. Peterson, page 378.

<sup>27</sup> D. Peterson, page 378, paragraph two.

<sup>28</sup> D. Peterson, page 379, paragraph one.

<sup>29</sup> D. Peterson, page 379.

the destruction of Wisconsin's forests. While companies were able to produce huge amounts of timber in very little time while only leaving a small amount of waste, they left areas that had once been dense forests to being forests once described as "decimated"<sup>30</sup>. In the photograph located in appendix B, you can see the barren landscape of what had once been a forest as a field covered with stumps.

Many of the northern logging towns shrank during The Great Depression<sup>31</sup>, and during World Wars I and II most of the men that had been working in the camps and sawmills, as well as many Native Americans<sup>32</sup>, had been enlisted in the army and sent overseas to fight. These factors combined very abruptly brought down the industry that had supported Wisconsin's economy for years.

"In the late 1800s, the logging began in Red Cliff, including the Red Cliff Lumbering Company which hired many tribal members. Unfortunately, the logging practices were unsustainable, and the timber was gone within ten years, leaving stump-covered land unfit for farming. The economy was very depressed for many decades..."<sup>33</sup>

The downfall of the industry also impacted many tribes hugely, in both positive and negative ways. For some tribes it was that they were finally getting their land back and having treaties signed, for others such as the Red Cliff, they might have faced a huge fall in economy. This was extremely difficult for many of them to work through because while the main logging companies still had farming and paper making as a compromise to fall back on, most tribes had nothing.

Like stated before, towards the end of the logging boom many companies began manufacturing paper from the wood pulp to sell rather than shipping out the full logs and boards. During the boom, mostly hardwoods and pine were being cut<sup>34</sup>, however, after most pine forests had been cut over many

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<sup>30</sup> Diana L. Peterson and Carrie M. Ronnander, *Logging in Wisconsin: The Cutover and Conservation Efforts*. Page 115, paragraph one.

<sup>31</sup> Wisconsin Historical Society, *Logging: The Industry that Changed the State: Northwoods Returns*.

<sup>32</sup> Patty Loew, page seventy eight.

<sup>33</sup> Wisconsin Historical Society, *Lake Superior Chippewa Bands (Ojibwe): A Brief Introduction to Ojibwe Bands of Lake Superior Chippewa. Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa*. Paragraph three.

<sup>34</sup> Wisconsin Historical Society, *Logging: The Industry that Changed the State*. Paragraph three.

companies switched to softer woods used to make paper. By the 1940's papermaking was the third biggest industry in the state. Another conflicting idea that the fall of the industry brought on was the attempt at the rise of farming and agriculture. Success was very rare. The cleared areas filled with stumps that had once been forests were not ideal for farms<sup>35</sup>. This started bringing back minor conflicts with Native Tribes. After many of the forests started to regrow, forestry did slowly come back, however not in the magnitude of the boom that had come before<sup>36</sup>.

### **The Legacy of the Industry**

The logging boom of the 18 and 1900's shaped the forestry industry of today in many ways. Multiple cities in Wisconsin were originally built around logging camps, sawmills, and on the rivers that were used to transport logs<sup>37</sup>. Modern logging is still a huge part of Wisconsin's economy, however it has seen had many significant changes throughout the years. As of 2012 in Forest, Iron, Rusk, Lincoln, Price, Taylor, and Trempealeau counties forestry is still the number one employer<sup>38</sup>. While seven counties are still a lot, the number has drastically dropped since the 1800 and 1900's when most of northern Wisconsin was occupied by camps. Though the logging industry has gone down since the 1800 and 1900s, Wisconsin does still produce large amounts of timber every year and still continues to be one of the largest producers of paper in the country<sup>39</sup>.

“Wisconsin has about 64,298 employees in the forest products industry (including logging and forest support activities). About half of these jobs are in pulp and paper mills and paper manufacturing. Forest products jobs make up about 14% of all manufacturing jobs.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Wisconsin Historical Society, *Logging: The Industry that Changed the State: Decline*. Paragraph eleven.

<sup>36</sup> Wisconsin DNR, *Wisconsin Forestry Facts: Economic Impact*.

<sup>37</sup> Wisconsin Historical Society, *Logging: The Industry that Changed the State*.

<sup>38</sup> Wisconsin DNR, *Wisconsin Forestry Facts: Economic Impact*.

<sup>39</sup> Wisconsin DNR, *Wisconsin's Forest Products Industry*, page two.

<sup>40</sup> Wisconsin DNR, *Wisconsin's Forest Products Industry*.



We now have new technology and tools that make the harvesting of trees even more efficient. “Economists now agree with ecologists: Forests are worth more standing than logged.”<sup>41</sup>. Nowadays, the total acres of forest in Wisconsin is over 2.2 million<sup>42</sup> and even more are being replanted. Although our practices have also become substantially more stable and environmentally friendly we still have a very long way to go before it is truly sustainable. Nowadays, the Menominee tribe manages about a quarter million acres of forest<sup>43</sup>. Native American tribes have grown, the number of tribes in Wisconsin that are recognized by the federal government is now eleven<sup>44</sup>, rather than the six that we saw in the 1800 and 1900’s. Our relationship with Native Americans both in Wisconsin and in the country as a whole has been an ongoing problem. We are beginning to give them the respect and compromises that are due and we are trying to honor their rights in ways that we haven’t in the past<sup>45</sup>. We are currently still seeing huge conflicts in our country such as the violence at the Dakota Access Pipeline and Standing Rock. We are beginning to let their voices be heard, while at the same time denying their basic human rights. In instances like this we realize that we have a long way to go before we are really living in harmony with both the tribes and nature.

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<sup>41</sup> Bill McKibben, *What Good is a Forest?*

<sup>42</sup> Diana L. Peterson and Carrie M. Ronnander. Page 115.

<sup>43</sup> Bill McKibben, paragraph twenty six.

<sup>44</sup> Wisconsin Historical Society, *American Indians in Modern Wisconsin: The Changing Status of Native Americans*. Paragraph one.

<sup>45</sup> Wisconsin Historical Society, *American Indians in Modern Wisconsin: The Changing Status of Native Americans*. Paragraph six.

## Appendix A



“American Indians in Wisconsin.” *Native American Tribes of Wisconsin*,  
[www.native-languages.org/wisconsin.htm](http://www.native-languages.org/wisconsin.htm)

**Mostly the Menominee, Dakota Sioux, Ojibwe and Potawatomi were involved in logging conflicts. You can see in this map the area where most Menominee are located, there amount of land had gone down drastically after the forced cede of 1836. The Ho Chunk for the most part were not involved, mainly because there wasn’t as much logging actually going on in their region of the state.**

## Appendix B



“Employees at Wisconsin Land and Lumber.” *On the Water*, Wisconsin Historical Society, [americanhistory.si.edu/onthewater/exhibition/4\\_2.html](http://americanhistory.si.edu/onthewater/exhibition/4_2.html)

**This is photograph is rather sad because it shows the lengths to which the companies were willing to go to get timber. You can see here the true devastation that the industry left in its wake. Captured here is a team of loggers at the Wisconsin Land and Lumber company and a sawmill in the background. There is also a railroad shown behind the team and what looks like a town being built. It is important to note how big the load is and the fact that many were many even bigger than this one. The complete absence of any trees even far off in the distance shows how truly destroyed the forests were.**

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