The Old Order Changeth; The Attitude of the Country Toward Its Timber Resources

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America is truly a new world. Four hundred years ago the Indian ruled the length and breadth of the land. From the Atlantic to the Pacific, from the frozen plains of the northland to the tropical seas, he roamed unmolested, his actions restricted only by stronger tribes with which he came in contact. The great region which he possessed contained the most varied, the most valuable and the most magnificent forests to be found in the world. The extent of the vast virgin forests in area and in volume of merchantable timber can only be approximated. The timbered portion of our country is thought to have comprised 850 million acres, and the stand upwards of 5,000 billion feet, board measure.

A century later people immigrated from the old world and the settlement of the country became an accomplished fact. Farms were carved out of the forest and villages sprang up along the coast through which the trade of the new colonies passed. The earliest exports were naturally those most easily obtainable and most readily converted into articles of commerce. Wood in various forms was shipped from America to all parts of the then civilized world. Since that day forest products have flowed ceaselessly into the great trade stream to supply those countries less fortunately situated in regard to wood supplies. These exports have never reached a high figure in value but because of their bulk they comprised a large per cent of the tonnage carried.

During the next hundred years local timber famines were experienced at many points along the coast, and many restrictions were imposed upon the cutting of timber by the colonists themselves and by the mother country. Transportation was as yet undeveloped and forests lying back some distance from the coast or from drivable or navigable streams were just as inaccessible to them as if they were located on the western frontier. Timbers of certain kinds and dimensions were reserved for specified purposes and heavy penalties were inflicted for trespassing.
Lumbering nevertheless flourished. The first sawmill of which we have authentic record was established in Maine in 1631. In the years immediately succeeding scores of mills were erected in New York and New England. These early mills consisted of one or more upright saws operated by wind or water power. The output of the individual plant was indeed small yet the large number of mills in a locality soon exhausted the local timber supply. Governors reported "mills with 12 saws" and stated that in a short time all of the timber in the province would be gone if lumbering continued at its present pace.

The attitude of the colonists generally, regarding the timber supply was one of apprehension due entirely, of course, to the fact that wood, a heavy, bulky product, plentiful but mostly inaccessible, could not readily be transported great distances to points where it was to be used. Yet standing timber in itself had no value. The measure of the value of improvements made by the early settlers was the amount of labor involved in working up the raw materials used in their construction, plus the cost of metal employed. Colonists, moving from one place to another, burned their buildings to get the hand wrought imported nails that they might use them again in the construction of their new homes.

Lumbering was only of local interest, except for the export trade enjoyed by those mills located upon navigable water. Its importance in a locality was measured almost solely by existing water transportation. Certain regions as central New York and Maine were highly favored in this regard and were the early centers of the lumber industry.

The destruction of our forests had its beginning about 100 years ago. It is safe to say that during colonial times and in the first years of our National existence the growth of timber equalled if not actually exceeded the amount destroyed in clearing farms and in lumbering operations. Indeed it is quite certain that as late as 1820 and possibly as late as 1850 the original stand of timber was still practically virgin. The great forests of the Pacific slope, the Rocky mountains, the South, the Lake States, and the Appalachians were intact. The east coast, New England and the Interior hardwood forests were the only ones being exploited or destroyed in those days to make way for farms.

The introduction of steam as motive power had a profound effect on our national life. It revolutionized transportation and industry. The forests of the country were the first of our natural resources to feel the effect of the new condition. As late as 1815 mills operating in New York were almost precisely identical.

Eighteen
to those first erected in Maine 200 years earlier. Practically the only change made during the two centuries was in the number of saws operating under one roof. It is recorded that as many as a dozen upright saws were often operated at one time in the lumber mills of the eighteenth century.

The first steam driven sawmills were erected about 1820. Steam locomotives came into use about 10 years later. This combination proved disastrous to early stands of magnificent timber and even now threatens the very existence of our present forests. Steam sawmills were more powerful and operated more rapidly than the earlier types, and could cut out a region in a much shorter time. The extension of railroads opened up new distant markets for the products of the forest. Then, too, railroads crossing the Appalachians and penetrating the timber areas of the Ohio, the Upper Mississippi and Great Lakes Regions opened up an almost limitless expanse of virgin forest land to a then comparatively small population. Realizing the vast extent of the forests, and relying upon a sure transportation the fear of even local timber famines vanished from the minds of the people, and all apprehension in regard to future timber supplies was dissipated.

The new epoch was one of expansion and the middle western states during this period developed rapidly. Forest conservation was lost sight of, and for 60 years the great wilderness yielded to the axe and the saw an immense volume of forest material most of which was destroyed by fire to make way for farming operations. Not until 1870 were the thoughts of the people again turned toward the conserving of the nation's timber resources.

Pioneering in any line is wasteful of natural resources, though ultimately the time and effort expended usually brings many-fold returns. Pioneering in the development of America was no exception to this rule. The question, were the early settlers justified in destroying a great resource, the forests over a large part of the United States, may be answered unqualifiedly, yes. "A forest unused is of no value to mankind" is well said. The pioneers used the forest to the fullest extent. It provided them with practically all of their needs—fuel, shelter, some clothing and sustenance and the areas upon which virgin timber stood a few years before now yielded abundant harvests of food crops.

The forests of America have played a larger part in the development of the country than any other one resource. It is true that in the future our forests will be less conspicuous than they have been in past generations, but they will continue to have an important part in the advancement of our civilization. Rail-
roads have penetrated every nook and corner of our country. The first rails were laid upon wooden cross ties. In almost a hundred years of constant improvement in railway construction and methods no substitute has been found for the wooden railway tie.

Towns and cities dotting the countryside are constructed chiefly of wood, and many regions prospered because of the vast quantities of surplus forest products they shipped to other regions where needed.

The acquisition of great tracts of forest lands and their subsequent conversion into farms or desolate wastes was made possible because of the generosity of a federal government overburdened with land. The land laws of the nation were admirably adapted to promote the rapid transfer of title of public timber lands to private parties. Congress was ever eager to make it easy for citizens to acquire public lands. What the country needed apparently was settlers to develop the great resources, and the ways and means of getting them were numerous and varied. Great tracts of land were given to states to be sold at low prices to those who would improve them and make them productive. States were also granted great quantities of land to be sold, the proceeds from which were to be used for educational purposes. Large quantities of land were donated to railroads and other organizations to aid in defraying the expense of constructing transportation systems in unsettled regions. The pre-emption law enacted in 1841, and the homestead law passed in 1862 were the two acts of congress most commonly employed by individuals to obtain title to government land in the earlier days.

The first law applying specifically to timber to be enacted, was the Timber and Stone Act of June 3, 1878. At this time was also passed the Free Timber Act allowing the free use of government timber for specified purposes. The first mentioned law permitted the purchase of government timberland at a price not less than $2.50 per acre. The lien selection law of 1897 enabled enterprising owners of private land within government reserves to exchange it for timber land outside the reserves of much greater value. These and other laws enabled private interests to acquire the bulk of the country’s commercially valuable forests in a reasonably short time.

As late as 1875 three-fourths of the timber then standing in the United States was still in the possession of the federal government. The timber it now owns comprises less than 20% of the total present stand. The 30 year period ending in 1905 was the golden era in the acquisition of federal timber lands.

**Twenty**
First the Lake States forest succumbed to the timber speculator, followed quickly during the eighties by the great southern forests of pine, cypress and hardwoods. The Pacific Coast forests were next invaded, and by 1905 practically all the available commercially valuable timber in this region was in private hands.

The wholesale acquisition of public timber lands was greatly slowed up by the rising wave of forest conservation sentiment which began to crystallize about 30 years ago. The pendulum which had for 50 years been swinging towards forest destruction now began to move slowly in the direction of forest perpetuation. The first great triumph for the conservation forces was the passage of the "Forest Reserve Act" of March 3, 1891, by which means upwards of 160 millions of acres of land, mostly timbered, has been saved to the public. The same year the "Pre-emption Law" was repealed, having outlived its usefulness, incidentally depriving the timber speculator of one means of acquiring forested land. The "Lieu Land Law" was repealed in 1905 thus cutting off another means of acquiring public timber. Secretary of the Interior Garfield put teeth in the "Timber and Stone Act" of June 3, 1878 and for a decade and a half this law has been decidedly out of fashion among timber speculators. The new homestead law enacted in 1912 is not at all suited to the public timber land, since it requires that one-eighth of the entry must be under cultivation before proof can be made.

Only one of the factors mentioned above really resulted in the saving of any considerable amount of timber to the American public. The "Forest Reserve Act" was passed at a time when there was yet great quantities of excellent virgin timber standing on the public domain. The creation of the numerous forest reserves during the early years of the law was a great achievement. In later years, the areas reserved were less valuable from a commercial viewpoint because of the fact that much of the most accessible timber had previously passed into private hands. The obnoxious land laws under which great areas of timber lands passed from federal ownership, were repealed, amended or modified at dates so late that it made practically no difference in actual results, since the available commercially valuable public timber had almost entirely been entered by private parties previous to the operation of the new or modified laws. This is amply evidenced by the fact that for a long time the forests on the public domain have comprised less than 2% of the total stand of government owned timber.

The public is realizing more and more that forest conditions in America are not what they formerly were. In the early days vast forests occupied valuable agricultural land. The timber
on these areas has long since been removed and where trees once stood are now great fields of ripening grain. The forest frontier has been pushed back and back until timber occupies areas largely unsuited to agriculture. The enlightened American public is beginning to realize the utter foolishness of forest destruction on lands which cannot be put to a higher use than the growing of trees. Opinion has so far crystallized that legislation has been proposed in congress having for its primary object the prevention of forest devastation on all land chiefly valuable for the production of timber crops. The enactment of such legislation will be a fitting climax to a hard fought battle to preserve and extend our remaining timber lands to the end that the people of American shall have a continuous supply of wood sufficient at all times to meet our national requirements.