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The prairie grove revisited

Woodlands in the midwest have gone through a transitional period since the settlers first came through. At first they were of utility, then of nuisance in clearing the land for farming and finally of value created by aesthetic awareness and scarcity.

by George W. Thomson

Considering my origins as a farm boy preceded by four generations of ancestors who had lived on the same land and considering my professional career as a forester and teacher, it is not surprising that I see the theme of this symposium as a vehicle to support my ponderings of that heritage of the underprivileged—the farm woodlot or the prairie grove. I have been long intrigued by the transition of the midwestern woods from a position first of utility, then of nuisance and finally of value created by aesthetic awareness and scarcity. This short paper will focus on a wooded farm in the Midwest and portray some aspects of farm life where agricultural productivity and the intangible merits of the woodlot come together.

But once embarked on the task of putting my thoughts together, I faced several difficulties: (1) Hamlin Garland, describing his boyhood on the Middle Border in 1874 (60 years before my own equivalent stage of boyhood), saw his youth and the land not much differently than I and he wrote it down much better than I can. (2) I suffer from the one-case induction method in framing my thoughts, and generalizing from one’s own vivid experiences lacking scholarly technique. (3) Scanning the program, I find myself singularly alone in this gathering of humanists. If I am to play the role of the token rustic, we are all in a lot of trouble.

Among farmers I am considered a school teacher; among educators, I am a forester; among foresters, I am sometimes considered a philosopher, but among philosophers I shall be exposed for the hornbook epigram quoter that I am. I am properly ill at ease. As Lyly wrote: “—so the traveler that straggleth from his own country is in a short time transformed into so monstrous a shape that he is faine to alter his mansion with his manners, and to live where he can, not where he would.”

Washington Irving identified another worry to all of us who would portray a place or a time; “I fear I shall give equal disappointment with an unlucky landscape painter, who had travelled on the continent, but following the bent of his vagrant inclination, had sketched in nooks and corners and by-places. His sketch book was accordingly crowded with cottages and landscapes and obscure ruins; but he had neglected to paint St. Peters, or the Coliseum, the cascade of Terni, or the bay of Naples; and had not a single glacier or volcano in his whole collection.”

Assume, as a beginning, that we who pursue tillage, from which the other arts follow, are not completely insensitive to our surroundings. Observe, for example, that look of absolute contentment on the face of even a farm dog, when he sits on the front porch after breakfast, looking out over his domain. Recognize that income is derived from the productivity of the land. Recognize, further, that the quality of one’s life as a land manager-farmer is a function of:

- the intelligence and daring of the operator
- the level of technology available
- the capital and labor resources at hand
- the physical health of the on-site entrepreneur
- the random distribution of weather
- the owner’s internal aspiration for the attainable things
- a “spiritual” awareness of and appreciation of the physical world around him.

Since I am no longer directly of the land, I have to look back to my youth and try to see myself in my father. I realize now that I view him as a slightly mystic figure of a philosopher deprived of an education—an explorer confined first to narrow geographic limits imposed by the number of railroads that a young boomer telegraph operator could work on and later by the constraints imposed by just how far away one could get from home when cows had to be milked twice a day and where weekends differed by weekdays only in that one could go to town Saturday night and “watch haircuts”.

My youth as a third and last son can be defined as hard-working but sheltered. Those weren’t my banks that went broke in 1930—it wasn’t my herd of dairy cows that was wiped out by Bang’s Disease Inspectors—it wasn’t really all that serious to me to observe that our net income one year was negative $600—it didn’t really strike me that Franklin Roosevelt was destroying the self-sufficiency of farmers. I wasn’t the one who had to build the straw stack in front of the blast of a threshing machine where one breathed the concentrations of ragweed pollen and the smut of molding oats left too long in the field due to August rains. I didn’t have to cough black for two days after. The prehybrid tall corn that had to be lifted out of frozen-down shocks by a man that never weighed more than 160 pounds was not mine to lift. Yet, here was a man that maintained a mowed lawn a full acre in size, raised over 50 kinds of tea roses and wouldn’t sell living trees from our woodlot and subscribed to magazines other than the Farm Journal and Wallace’s Farmer. Saturday Evening Post may not have been the New Republic and Alexander Botts and the Earthworm Tractor Company may not have been War and Peace, but both were a cut above the norm.

If some awareness of the aesthetic segment and the humanistic values was so deeply rooted in my farmer-father that the debilitations of an ulcer, hemorrhoids (that plague of
the working man), and ultimate death by emphysema that 84 years of dust couldn't grub out, then it's fair to say that agriculture and esthetics can coexist in the most ordinary of people.

I find it challenging but difficult to collate my romanticized notion of my ancestors as they settled on farms in Illinois with my current ideas of agriculture and humanities. Did my ancestors really feel a spiritual kinship with the land or do I just transfer my latter day and cultivated awareness back to a time when it was felt that agriculture was the talking about but farming was the doing? More disconcerting still is the question: Would I, or you, with new-found prosperity and lives of considerable ease, be as tenderly concerned as I am now for the environment if I suffered from malaria, milk-sick, and mastoid infections while hand-milking twenty cows twice a day? When tillage begins the other arts fall—but generally at some distance back, out of the dust.

Among those of us with middle-class security has spread a cult that reverse primitive things, and despite a fair amount of artistic sophistica-
tion there seems to be a scenic naiveté that leads us to demand ever-
more vast panoramas of space set aside for our wonderment. In a short, we yearn for a wilderness experience that our predecessors dreaded.

A night flight over Iowa in a small plane gives the impression that the whole prairie is a city with porch lights burning, for at even 5,000 feet the yardlights at quarter-mile inter-
vals seem to illuminate the entire land. But I can easily remember the pre-REA days when one went to bed when the Delco batteries ran down, and I see again how devastatingly dark my upstairs bedroom was and hear how the windmill so eerily moaned on dark nights when the wind shifted. I shudder yet at the pir-
mal fear engendered by the dark and the uncanny effect of stair treads returning to position on a cold night in the exact sequence in which they were depressed as I went upstairs to bed. The effect of a huge and slow-
moving night walker that climbed the stairs and stood breathlessly outside my door was overwhelming. Ab-
solutely without external condition-
ing of any kind I was aware of primitive horror and knew then how great must have been the compul-
sion of early settlers to clear the dark and crowding forest from around their door yards. They said it was to clear hay land for the horse they had

to have in order to clear crop land, or they said it was to clear a field of fire to keep away marauders, but reread Conrad Richter:

"All she knew was the ever forest where the roads were dim paths coaxing youth to return, while the monster brown butts stood around still as death waiting for you to get lost. All her life she lived in the woods, yet still she wasn't of the woods and still the woods were against her. Oh, it had evil things in the woods that were older than the oldest man. The woods shut you in and fought you while you lived, and sucked up your flesh and blood with its roots after you died.—Not that she listened long. Everybody was talking to some other body. When they got through, they would talk to somebody else. And when they had no more talk they just stayed and listened to others talk, for it would be a long time till they had meeting again, and all were loath to leave each for the lonesome woods."

I've suspected for a long time that I am a domesticated version of my ancestors. I don't suppose that I real-
ly want wilderness on a 24-hour basis—down to about 10:30, maybe, but than lead me back to my stable for I am a daytime Druid. I'll leave it to other stags at eve to drink their fill where dances the moon on Monan's rill. I'm convinced that the call of the West would have been too weak for many of us. Most people seem to prefer Wilderness as a sort of nondenominational cathedral or a place to carry on an acceptable pur-
suit of hairy-chestedness until one's granola runs out. True wilderness can be visited but it's no place to stay—it simply can't be tolerated for long un-
til it is housebroken, gleded, and the wilderness driven out.

Yet the forests of the Midwest were much sought after and when my New Hampshire great-grandfather brought his wife and her parents to northern Illinois, they settled immedi-
ately on the roughest, woodiest, most New England-like farm they could find on the southern edge of the Twelve-Mile Grove in which I grew up. There wasn't a day that I didn't feel gratitude to my ancestors for picking such a boy-awarding site—and my Dad never forgave them for picking such a hard-to-farm. The latter day emigrees had nothing left when they arrived but rich, deep prairie soils. They prospered mightily and begat rich sons and grandsons whose children have populated the earth while the Thomsons have faded and retreated to become chemists, bankers, and school teachers.

But, afterall, the prairie groves sheltered one from the wind, and pro-
vided fuel, and if the site was good enough, and thus the trees tall enough, one's log cabin could be longer and wider than that of one's neighbors. The popple clumps—
towheaded, grew in the wet pastures and at the edges of woods, and its members were long and slim enough to provide rafters for the barns—and these, along with the walnut sills, can still be found in the 100-year-old barns near woodlots. And the groves had a corner to them and a shady look to them that was more homelike than the sameness of big bluestem—"To one unaccus-
tomized to it", wrote Washington Irving in A Buffalo Hunt, "there is something inexpressibly lonely in the solitude of a prairie. The loneliness of a forest seems nothing to it. There the view is shut in by trees, and the imagination is left free to picture some livelier scene beyond. But here we have an immense extent of land-
scape without a sign of human ex-
istence. We have the consciousness of being far, far beyond the bounds of human habitation: we feel as if mov-
ing in the midst of a desert world."

Except in the Garmanic commu-

nities no real attempt was made to save the forest for esthetic purposes, either for the citizens of a century ago or for us who choose to recreate in woodlands. The woods followed the streams and intermittent drain-
ages, and seldom ventured up from the slopes onto the level land where periodic prairie fires perpetuated the grassland and withered the invading forest. Thus, there was little desire to clear forest for cultivation when the prairie, while obdurate and at first brutal to plow, could be cultivated with so much more success. Yet the forest was cleared, partly for heating (a big farmhouse by 1880 or 1890 could gobble up 12 tons of coal or 24 tons of wood). In the north-to-south forties that made up the average farm one would seldom expect to find more than 20 or 30 acres of woodland and the 12 cords of wood would just about be the annual increment from such a woodlot. So the forest was continually losing its older and bigger trees to the furnace and cook-
stove and replacing them with their progeny or at least those trees that could invade the shade of their elders. So the forest was always there but always changing—not because of a desire to perpetuate it, but simply because, for awhile, de-
mand and supply were in balance.
But the balance didn't last long because the railroads were already to the Mississippi by the Civil War and were ready to create the cattle towns across Iowa, Missouri, and Kansas; and the oak forests fell by the thousands of acres to provide ties and fuel. Nowadays, a 12-inch oak tree is approximately 100 years old, and seldom could one get more than two ties per tree. Thus, with 200 trees per acre, or 400 ties per acre, it would take between 35 and 55 acres of woodland to build a mile of track.

It's odd that the diaries of the early settlers don't comment on this passing of the forests, for the evidence of the tree rings is there to see; but no one ever sees a tree grow and perhaps the activities of tie-hacks and wood cutters were so commonplace from the beginning and so widely distributed, and perhaps provided for so welcome an opportunity for field and pasture expansion that they simply weren't worth comment.

But the clearing to bare soil a hundred years ago gave us back the oak forests that are once again old—and just in time for us, with our newfound esthetic sense and leisure, to enjoy them and worry over them as they teeter on the brink of their second-growth senility.

But the Prairie Grove has attached itself to my memories as the focal point of my own early contemplations which led to wonderment and fulfillment that I found echoed in my one-room country school by earlier men: "My heart leaps up when I behold a rainbow in the sky"—and "I wandered lonely as a cloud that floats on high o'er hill and dale"—and "The cattle are grazing their heads never raising, there are forty feeding like one".

And this feeling must have been experienced by all farm people to some degree. My woods had been the location of Old Settlers' picnics from the beginning. One simply didn't picnic on the prairie if there were any alternatives.

To go to the woods was adventure and surcease from labor, not only for squirrel hunters and mushroom hunters but for the 20-year-old girl country school teachers who could take all eight grades at once, 20 of us, and go on bird and bee hunts, as this one-half day a year unit on nature appreciation was commonly called. Only getting off at 2 p.m. Friday to rake the schoolyard leaves could match bird and bee hunts as an occasion of rejoicing.

In the Great Depression, the country bought part of my Prairie Grove as a Forest Preserve to serve as a pleasing ground, as New Yorkers had set aside the Adirondack Preserve a half century earlier. Pincicking was the main venture and commanded crowds during the 30's and 40's that haven't been matched since. We country people were astonished at the vast number of toilets that were built.

A swimming-beach was made out of a bend in the creek and that little sluggish, cow-polluted, leech-infested pond swarmed with people for a few years until the forces of sedimentation reclaimed the channel and giant ragweed reclaimed the shore as the popularity of the park declined. People began to travel more widely and the dolomite bluffs were dwarfed by the Wisconsin Dells and then by the Black Hills and then by the Tetons and at last by the Alps as each in turn was made accessible. The hand-operated pump, the outdoor toilets, the absence of golf courses, the lack of trails through the no-longer grazed underbrush and surely the competition from new and better managed parks brought about an end to the popularity of that park right at the threshold of the environmental era.

I returned to that Forest Preserve last spring, and I was all alone except for a boy and a girl with a guitar. My woods was just about like it was 35 years before except for one thing: the fence was gone between the park and what had been "our" woods, and picnic tables were located right up to the back door of the old farm house. The pressure to acquire recreation sites and the growing reluctance of the owner to keep up the woods had conspired finally to do away with the old Thomson place—this time at $800 per acre. My New Hampshire grandfather's land judgement was apparently a good deal better than mine.

I hope the picnicking, frolicking public appreciates that one black maple tree, where Maud and Bess could always be caught stomping flies in the shade when it was time to get them up for corn plowing, I hope somebody points out the shallow ditch as being the old Stage Road. I even wish somebody could visualize the fox in that glacier rock along Hilton's fence by evening light and understand how it scared me as a five-year-old boy bringing in the cows.

Parks, woodlands, and set-aside lands can do us all a lot of good; and in the process of doing so the mobs are bad it pays us to remember how worthwhile they are. For a woodland needs to be worthy of its heritage by reminding people where they came from and maybe, like the primitives of Grandma Moses, make us nostalgic for times we never knew. Isn't there a sense of wonder that we need to catch more often than we do?

So I look with great interest to this symposium to see how other professionals equate the remorseless practicality of tillage with that wider view of Alexander Pope's that states: "All Nature is but Art unknown to thee."

REFERENCES
1. Lyly, John. Euphues, the Anatomy of Wit. 1579.