

1-1-1980

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Recommended Citation

Gibson, Lawrence M. (1980) "The Ghosts on my Tree Farm," *Ames Forester*: Vol. 66 , Article 5.
Available at: <https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/amesforester/vol66/iss1/5>

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The Ghosts on my Tree Farm

by Lawrence M. Gibson

Back in the ages birchbark canoes slid up and down the South Fork of the Flambeau River. They came to a little meeting of a small spring fed creek. On both sides of the creek stood towering white pine. On the south side was a narrow high point up a steep twenty foot bank. The other side dropped as steeply to the swamp. On this point, one hundred by two hundred feet, stood at least forty huge pines. Canoes were parked on the shore and moccasin clad feet padded up the short trail to the fire spot. Oh, if only pine stumps could talk! Wood was gathered and a fire was built on the old fire spot. The soil is black with charcoal three inches deep on a fifty foot circle. The ground was bare under most of those huge pines except for a pine needle bed outside the fire spot. There was venison jerkie, wild rice and dried berries to eat.

A raven flew over the tree tops. An eagle soared down the river looking for fish. Wild ducks quacked up the creek in the swamp. Perhaps a deer came to drink. It may have been a hunting party, a food gathering group or a group going visiting. They all used this convenient and beautiful, sheltered spot to rest. In those times there was not a very large population of people in this area. There were not many deer in the virgin forest and food was scattered, and took a lot of time to collect.

We see our ghost party load their canoes and depart. Now all is quiet and the birds, gray jays, blue jays, chickadees come to pick the bones, and a skunk wanders past. A family of otters comes down the river and stops to investigate the creek. A muskrat carries a cattail stock down the creek from the swamp to his home on the river bank, then a fish jumps in the river. I look up through the branches of the one huge pine now standing and think how all things change for better or worse.

The ghosts have watched the land be denuded and the timber build houses out on the prairie. But even of more interest they watched it recover. The same animals are here, the same trees are here as they were 150 years ago. The main difference is that the people who use it all are different. The land will always be here, will always produce for mankind, if we just remember to tread softly when we enter the world of nature.

For how long those ghosts used the camp on my Tree Farm will never be known. How many times in history had those huge pines lived their two hundred years, disappeared, and new ones taken their place?

Before 1700 A.D. white man had penetrated this area, so late one afternoon a large canoe floats to a landing and two white men come up the trail. They were dressed in buckskin like the other party. The main difference was that most of their white skin was covered. I assume they spoke French. It would be hard to tell because they were as quiet as the previous visitors. They did have a different smell.

Their canoe was much more heavily loaded and they brought much more to the camp site. Maybe they intend to stay a few days. They had guns and traps. They cooked supper including a pot of tea, then rolled up in blankets under the pines. At daylight they were up, had a pot of tea, then went off on a faint trail around the swamp. Furs were their objective. They were gone till late afternoon then returned tired and spent, and empty handed. A storm brewed and they sat close to a pine tree as shelter from the rain. Sunrise was bright and clear. The trappers left early with their wet blankets spread out to dry on the canoe. Nature then returned to normal. So it went at the camp site for another one hundred and fifty years.

By 1840 there was more traffic on the river. The sound of the saw and the axe were forever creeping closer. A large party of white men came up the river one summer day. They were timber scouts and surveyors. They walked the shallow rapids at the bend of the river a quarter mile south of the old campground. It was late afternoon and they were tired so they pulled into the bank and camped just past the river's curve. There I found a pre 1860 bitters bottle that they left. There was another but it had been broken. The original people very

seldom paid a visit now but the stillness was more often disturbed.

Then one day there was the sound of axes and saws and a crew snaked a wagon road up from the south. The impression is still there across the field. Travel by the new people changed from the river to the land. The creaking of wagons and the shouting of drivers were frequent new sounds.

One spring as the river ice rose and broke there was an unusual roar that came closer and closer. Soon a wall of ice, water and huge logs swept past the old campground for hours. The new citizens rode the logs and some used the camp site. When it was over the river was swept clean except for a log hung up here and there.

Now there are new construction sounds coming closer each day until from southeast could be heard a steam train whistle. Up through the timber came a new railroad track. Now the inhabitants of the woods had a new sound to get used to. In a few short years the entire sound picture was changed as the new inhabitant's villages and sawmills appeared along the new tracks.

It was about 1890 when the timber cutter appeared on this land. Rapidly the huge pine and hemlock were cut and hauled out by sled in the winter. The camp ground was bare and unused. Slashing lay thick across the land and a fire ran through. Sprout growth of brush and pine cherry, choke cherry, poplar and birch sprang up. The deer herd ballooned on the new fresh shoots. In time the loggers appeared again to cut the swamp cedar and tamarack and then the maple and birch. Now the land stood naked and fires ran again taking nature's new seeding for a new forest.

The trains roared. The wagon road had been moved a hundred feet east to the section line. A man appeared on the hill north across the creek from the old campground. He built a

wagon road in from the main road then built a house on the hill. A trail led to the creek where he got water. He labored hard. He was neat I guess because he left at least three garbage and trash pits that were deep. He must have had chickens, at least rusty chicken wire remains in the pits. He must have had a car, at least there is a rusty Model T fender half buried. Back in the years the little house burned. Now there is a small grass covered flat spot, some brick and part of a concrete step, the trail and three old garbage pits. He did not clear any land. His steep trail is now a snowmobile chute.

Back on the roadside one day a crew appeared and built a four room house, two rooms down and two rooms up. Later some outbuilding of board and logs were built. To the south of the house the slave labor job of clearing the huge pine stumps began. Digging in the sandy, rocky soil with a shovel, hand sawing and pulling with a block and tackle with a four horse team, one by one, some this year and some next, the stumps were pulled and piled in a row around two sides of the field to make a fence. They are still there now, rotted and covered with beautiful moss under the brush. Breaking plows cut through the roots and brush fires burned almost constantly. From fire scars in the timber the fire also ran through the timber. Fences and stock appeared.

The timber was pastured, but still Mother Nature reproduced the timber. Here and there white pine made it through and now stand 75 to 100 years old, and up to 30 inches in diameter. There must have been a period some forty years ago when there were not many deer because there are scattered cedar and hemlock that made it through. The spruce, balsam, poplar and birch were persistent and have replaced themselves many times.

So now a family made most of their living from the cleared field and woodland pasture. Cow trails and horse logging trails appeared where once only deer trails were. Firewood off this place kept the people warm for 80 years and still does. The big barn is gone and a new home stands in it's place. The last of the old buidlings, some twelve in number, was removed last year. It stood for 80 years. built on eight by eight timbers set on rocks around a hole in the ground, the old house sheltered many families, and had been a recreational shelter for the last ten years. It showed it's age, sitting there

snuggled under four huge pines and one spruce, and almost invisible from the air. It's weathered siding was gray and made of basswood. The eight by eights were completely decomposed, the old wood shingles were deep in moss and pine needles. The pine squirrels and flying squirrels with which it was infested, had practically insulated it with pine cones. They protested greatly as their house came down board by board. Did the ghosts of time protest? I don't know but many friends who had enjoyed many happy hours in that old house did. I expect the ghosts have both happy and sad memories. Life was not easy in their time.

Now the twenty acre field is still cleared grassland kept that way because the animals of the forest need some openings. The barb wire fences are gone. Some of the old pine stump fence now borders the lawn. Roads lead down into a beautifully regenerated forest and to the old campground which is still used as a camp site. There are two spring fed trout ponds and a wild pond in the creek by the campground. Trails and roads lead into every corner of the 250 acre Tree Farm. Our home now stands on the site of the old basement barn. Our basement door leads out onto the lawn where years ago cows and horses went in and out of the barn. The land is beautiful, conveniently useful and productive.

As I read the history from the charcoal covered camp, the bitters bottle, the stumps of various ages, the fire scarred trees and stumps, the old fence lines, the old roads, the old home site by the river, I find myself living with the ghosts of 150 years and more. I have added a five acre spruce plantation on one side of the field, six and one half miles of car roads, seven miles of trails, improved the campground and built a new home. Wherever I make an improvement I find ghosts and memories of the past. A two or three foot moss grown pine log, stumps of all kinds and ages from past logging, old upturned stumps in the forest from storms in the yesterdays. The forest floor is spotted with hummocks that are hard to walk over that

were caused by upturned stumps through the ages. The old horse drawn farm equipment stands at the edge of the lawn to remind me of the hard work to make a living in the yesterdays, and also progress. A rotted out logging sleigh stands down in the brush. If I move it, it will fall apart.

I purchased this land and it's ghosts in 1963. At that time I logged out 15,000 board feet of pine saw logs and all the merchantable spruce, balsam, poplar and birch pulp wood. Out of the pine tops we got two carloads of pine pulpwood. Mother nature has fully restocked the stand. There is still 30,000 board feet of pine. I left many for the aesthetic value. Here and there blister rust takes the top out of one and it should be logged out. Little by little a few pine got by the rabbits, spruce bud worm and blister rust. By logging I am gradually changing the stand toward all evergreen. The next selective logging will be in 1981. I estimate this will be the eighth time that logging has been done since 1900.

The above may sound like a profitable operation. The sorry fact is that it isn't because of the tax situation. The average gain in stumpage value will hardly pay the taxes. Land valuations are set, not by what the forest land will produce but by the value somebody paid for a forest home, a hunting camp or recreation area. Huge areas in our township are County, State or Federally owned and not on the tax rolls. Other large areas are company owned and under the Forest Crop Law. The remaining 18,000 acres pays the taxes. The Forest Crop Law does not suit the small land owner because it complicates land sale or transfer.

So the pretty picture of the Ghosts boils down to aesthetic value or the plain desire to own some forest land. Dollar wise the compound interest and taxes eat more than the timber can produce. This is a registered Tree Farm and also a registered ASCS farm. Under the many government programs available, field regeneration, wild life planting, tree

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Lawrence M. Gibson was born in March 1909. He obtained his B.S. in forestry in 1933. He then became employed by the U.S. Forest Service for the next eight years. Gibson then worked for The Flambeau Paper Company as a forester and became a chemist in charge of the chemical laboratory. He served in WW II and then went back to the Flambeau Paper Company. Gibson retired in 1974 and now manages his own small woodlot.