



Missouri Department of Conservation & Top of the Ozarks RC&D Forestry Committee

The history of Missouri's forests:

The era of exploitation

By Bruce Palmer

Early explorers of the Missouri territory found a blend of landscapes rich with the essentials of frontier life – wood, water and wildlife. Forests covered 70 percent of the state with an astonishing variety of tree species. Explorers wrote of the dark swamps of the Bootheel, the park-like pine forests of the Ozarks, the balds of Southwest Missouri and the mix of prairie and forest in north and west Missouri.

Settlers moved up the major rivers first. They cut the timber and floated it downstream to larger towns. Cords of fuel wood supplied steam-driven riverboats. By the mid-1800s, settlers had cut the forests in the Osage and Gasconade river valleys. In the eastern Ozarks, the forests around Potosi and St. James had been logged and made into charcoal to fire the local iron and lead smelters.

In the post-Civil War years, a war-torn nation needed lumber to rebuild. Railroad ties were in demand to complete the transcontinental railroad. Until then the great pine forests of the Ozarks were largely untouched because of their remoteness and lack of access. But eastern businessmen saw a valuable resource waiting for exploitation.

The lumbermen bought up large tracts of forest land. In 1887, the Missouri Lumber and Mining Company shipped a sawmill by rail to the end of the line in Williamsville. It was then hauled by wagon to Grandin in Carter County. This mill

would eventually become one of the largest sawmills in the nation. Other large sawmills operated in Winona, West Eminence, Bunker, Leeper, Greenville, Poplar Bluff, Doniphan and Birch Tree. The far reaches of the hollows sheltered hundreds of other small sawmills. At the turn of the 20th century, the Ozarks was one of the largest timber-producing regions in the nation.

J.B. White was one of the principals of the Missouri Lumber and Mining Company in Grandin. Although White made a fortune from logging, he was also a conservation-minded individual. In April 1910, he, along with other early forest conservationists, invited U.S. Forest Service Chief Gifford Pinchot to Missouri. They hosted Pinchot on a tour of the cut-over forests in the Ozarks. White urged Pinchot to set up a national forest in Missouri in the interest of forest conservation.

By 1920, the forests that no one thought would run out did. The huge mills shut down and the mill workers were left to eke out a living in the rocky, barren hills. They cleared the ridge tops, trying to grow a few crops. Free-ranging livestock roamed the woods to forage on acorns and sprouts. Settlers burned the cut-over woods each spring with the mistaken belief that fire killed the ticks and snakes and made the grass grow. Missouri's resources were at an all time low.

Submitted by Peter Maki, Forestry Communication Specialist, Top of the Ozarks RC&D

