



Lesson 5 - Farming the Cutover and Wisconsin Ghost Towns



In a Nutshell

Following the sound of the axe and the saw was the aftermath of the forests' removal. The great forests of the northwoods had been reduced to slash and bare soil. In this lesson students will learn about attempts made to farm the cutover land and the ghost towns that resulted from loss of resources. They will learn about the trials of farming through a "reader's theater" piece, write letters from the perspective of an inhabitant of the cutover land, and read about three of Wisconsin's ghost towns.

Concepts

- Farming the cutover land was often not successful.
- Many people lost money in their attempt to own land in Wisconsin after logging.
- Ghost towns resulted in Wisconsin from boom-and-bust company milling towns.

Objectives

After completing this lesson, students will be able to:

- Define "cutover area."
- Describe why farming on the cutover area was difficult.
- Give examples of how land was advertised.
- Define ghost town and explain how they arose in Wisconsin.

State Standards

ELA SS EE
A.4.1 A.4.4 A.4.4
B.4.1 A.4.8 B.4.3
C.4.3 B.4.4

D.4.1

Total Estimated Time

2 hours and 15 minutes

Vocabulary

Company town – a town in which all of the businesses and buildings are owned and run by a single company

Cutover – what northern Wisconsin was referred to as after all of the trees had been cut

Desolate - empty

Ghost town – a town that used to be successful but has since been abandoned

Land speculator – someone who buys land and then sells it for a higher price

Natural resource – a source of money or needed material that comes from nature

Quarry – an open area in the ground from which a kind of rock or stone is gotten

Saloon – a bar

Sawmill – a mill that has sawing machines for lumber or rock

Slash – leftover parts of trees that have been cut down

Timeline – a visual description of a sequence of events

Materials

Drawing paper

Drawing materials

Photo of advertisement (Insert 5.1)

Butcher paper

Reader's theater piece (Insert 5.2)

Living On the Cutover (Insert 5.3)

Ghost town information (Insert 5.4)



Teacher Preparation

Copy the readers' theater piece (Insert 5.2) for those who will be reading it. Also, make copies of "Living On the Cutover" (Insert 5.3) and the ghost town information (Insert 5.4) for your students.

Background Information

By the early 1900's, logging was slowing down in Wisconsin and moving west and south. The owners of the logged over land, the cutover, were eager to sell it. Much of this land was owned by railroad companies, land dealers, and lumber companies. These groups were not invested in the land itself, and so were not in the frame of mind to work cooperatively. They were in it to make money. Railroad companies were especially eager to have the land settled. Not only would they make money on the land, but they would also prosper by having new farm goods to transport.

Immigrants were eager to come to the United States. In fact, many areas in northern Wisconsin had clusters of certain nationalities. The greatest influx of settlers in northern Wisconsin came between 1890 and 1910. There were many reasons why the area seemed appealing. Many had the dream of owning their own land.

Many railroad companies advertised to prospective immigrants. Brochures and pamphlets were prepared by companies and the state government advertising the great quality of northern Wisconsin land. Pictures of farmers with huge crops were staged and used in these advertisements. One of the most convincing of these was Northern Wisconsin: a Handbook for the Homeseeker, created by the University

of Wisconsin College of Agriculture for the State of Wisconsin in 1895 (See picture provided in Insert 5.1).

The advertisements were indeed convincing and the settlers did come, but what they arrived to find was not what had been promised. The land needed a lot of work before crops could even be planted. The soils in northern Wisconsin did not lend themselves to agriculture as those of southern Wisconsin had, and the growing season was short. The land was rocky and covered with brush, limbs, treetops, and unwanted logs left over from lumbering. Worst of all were the stumps left behind. People used mechanical stump pullers and bought dynamite to remove the stumps. In the end it took a decade to put into farms the amount of land deforested in one year.

Due to post WWI factors, the Depression, and the physical limitations of the land, by the late 1920's northern Wisconsin was in poor shape. In fact, in 1929, the state immigration agency stated that its main function was to prevent settlers from entering the northern lands unsuited for farming. Much of the land was abandoned by those who could not pay their taxes.

Another major consequence of logging in northern Wisconsin is the presence of ghost towns. Most of us think of the west when we hear the term ghost town, but Wisconsin actually has quite a few. Most of these ghost towns were company towns, meaning that the entire town and everything in it was owned by a milling company (refer to Lesson 2). The life of these towns followed a boom-and-bust cycle. Some of them seem to have been created overnight, but



when the lumber was gone in the area upstream from the mill, they were abandoned.

Introduction

Give students paper, drawing materials, and these very simple instructions: “The logging company has come and gone. All lumberjacks have moved on. What buildings existed have been removed. The trees have been cut. And there you stand... What do you see? Take a minute to visualize this view in all directions. When you’re ready, begin drawing what you see.”

Activity 5.1 - Farming the Cutover (20 min)

The text in Insert 5.2 is written to be used in “readers’ theater” style in which a group of four students read the information to the class. It is critical that these four students have time to rehearse together. For maximum benefit, your guidance and coaching will be necessary during some rehearsal time to enhance the meaning of the script with gestures, expression, etc. You could, instead, divide your class into groups of four in which each person in a group can take the role of each of the students listed in the script.

Activity 5.2 - Just Speculating (20 min)

Tell your students “You are all land speculators! You each have purchased 30,000 acres of cutover land with the intention of selling it and making a generous profit for yourself. You paid \$1.25 per acre for this land, and you hope to sell it for \$5.00 per acre. (These are realistic prices for Wisconsin in the early 1900s.) Use your persuasive

creativity to develop an advertising poem or jingle which will entice prospective buyers to move north and farm the cutover!”

Allow the students to create advertising “jingles” much like those mentioned in the student text material. Students may wish to include pictures like the photographs shown in Insert 5.1. Encourage students to use strong, persuasive, positive language. Unlike today’s abbreviated language used in advertising, you may wish to encourage students to use the style authentic to the time period that tended to use more complete thoughts and sentences.

Activity 5.3 - What To Do? (30 min)

Read the following information to your students:

Many advertisements, like the ones you just created, were successful in drawing people to the northern Wisconsin cutover region. Unfortunately, once the farmer was on his land, the trouble really began. Before he could produce anything, he had to clear land. Land clearing was expensive and very difficult. Horses strained as they tugged on various stump-pulling devices. The University of Wisconsin spent many hours and much money creating new methods for removing stumps. Special trains traveled through the north teaching farmers how to remove stumps. After World War I, explosives became a popular (but dangerous) method for removing stumps. Again, the University of Wisconsin sent trains and trucks north with explosives and lessons. They were determined to turn cutover land into productive farmland.



Many land companies offered plans to ensure the success of the farmers. The Wisconsin Colonization Company, organized in 1917, bought 50,000 acres of cutover land in southern Sawyer County. They built a model town called Ojibwa. It provided houses, barns, and telephone lines. They also began community clubs and sponsored crop contests and stump pulling festivals. The company officials kept a close watch, visiting farms, writing letters, and giving advice. One letter said, “Keep up the good work; we’re with you.” Another encouraged the farmer by stating, “You have only 30 days left to blow stumps and break land. Your success depends upon the plowed acre and every new farmer should use every hour of the day to stump and plow!” Most new farmers were putting in very long hours. The company would write to its farmers, “Brush, stump, and plow, and LIVE OFF THE LAND. Nothing can stop you from succeeding.” Some companies promised too much, like a big house built by the company and land which was ready to be plowed.

In the end, however, it was very difficult. Many settlers failed in their attempt to make a living from cutover lands. Some became bitter with land companies breaking their promises for assistance, homes, roads, and schools. Some began questioning the accuracy of the photos that had appeared in the advertisements and books they had seen.

Using your new knowledge of the dilemma (what to do with the cutover land), you are now going to choose one of the options listed on the “Living On the Cutover” table (Insert 5.3). ROLE explains the viewpoint that you should

take. AUDIENCE explains to whom you are addressing your thoughts. FORMAT indicates the style of writing. TASK is rather self-explanatory!

Activity 5.4 - Ghost Towns (45 min)

Ask your students what image pops into their head when they hear the word ghost town. You can do this in your regular classroom setup, or with your students sitting in a circle. Go around and get everyone’s ideas.

Explain that a ghost town is a town that was once busy and successful, but has since been deserted by everyone who lived there. This usually happens when a natural resource that was important to the town runs out. Make sure your students understand the concept of a ghost town. You want to be sure they know it does not really have to do with ghosts. You might want to discuss why the term “ghost” is used.

Did you know that we have ghost towns in Wisconsin? What do you think the natural resource was that many of them depended on? Wood! Let’s take a look at three Wisconsin ghost town histories to discover how these towns went from being so successful to quickly fading away (Insert 5.4).

You may choose to divide the class up into three groups so each group can concentrate on its own ghost town. Or you may choose to study one or all of them together as a class. Students should read through the condensed history for a general overview. It is suggested that students read the history a second time, searching for key



developments and the approximate dates of each one. When students have comprehended the information, they can organize these key developments on a timeline. You might suggest to your students that they highlight dates as they read that should be included on the timeline. By comparing the timelines, students will be able to compare and contrast the similarities and differences between these communities. Timelines can be constructed on a large piece of butcher paper.

Conclusion

Marketing was alive and strong in the early periods of our statehood! Unbelievable amounts of time, money, and effort were devoted to turning the cutover land into successful farmland. In the end, however, the lessons from the land prevail. Soil types, growing seasons, and climate lend themselves to specific crops. In many of the cutover areas, especially in the northern portion of Wisconsin, these factors are best suited for growing trees. Also, many towns quickly grew up around the lumber industry, but many of them disappeared when the trees disappeared, leaving deserted areas scattered around the state.

Extensions

- If it's possible, students could experience the difficulty in pulling stumps! One possible comparison would be to pull dandelions, with the goal of removing the entire taproot from the ground. Once students realize the difficulty in that task, they could compare it to stump removal.
- Students could collect photos of stump pulling devices used at the turn of the century or now. Or students could

create their own stump-pulling inventions or models of those used.

- Students could grow carrots to examine taproots which are similar to the taproot of trees.
- Students could research a nearby ghost town. Contact the Area Research Center or a UW near you for assistance.

Evaluation

- The following questions can be used to guide an evaluative discussion with your students:
 - This dedicated attempt to turn cutover land into productive agricultural land
 - occurred during what time period?
 - What was left behind after clear-cutting?
 - Do you think the advertising used to promote agricultural use of cutover land
 - was honest?
 - Most purchases were made without seeing the land, but purchasers did
 - understand the land was cutover. With this in mind, how do you think you
 - would have felt seeing your land for the first time? How do you think you
 - would have felt after a month of attempting to clear stumps?
 - Today in the northern highlands you will find little farming. Why?
 - What happens when we over harvest?
 - Can clear-cut land always be developed into farmland?
 - What advice would you give to a logging company before they begin cutting to



- avoid over-harvesting the timber stand?
- What patterns or similarities exist in the development of the three ghost towns
- you read about?
- What caused the towns to prosper?
- What caused the towns to fail?
- How would you feel as the nine or ten-year-old child of a lumber mill worker
- moving into one of these new towns?
- How would you feel as you watched your town decline?

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Insert 5.1



Wisconsin State Historical Society Whi(H44)94



Insert 5.2

Farming the Cutover

A Reader's Theater Script for Four Readers

Student 1: Look at our Wisconsin map and think about this: at the time Wisconsin became a state in 1848, about $\frac{3}{4}$ of the state was covered with forests. Seventy years later (around 1920) just about all the forests in the state had been cut!

Student 2: Wow! That's a lot of trees!! Remember when we drew our pictures of what we thought the land would look like after logging? Here's a photo of one site which had been logged. After a tree was cut down, its branches and bark were removed, and this slash, or tree leftovers, was left lying on the ground. But you also have to remember that sawyers cut at chest-height. Stumps were left in the ground because they're extremely difficult to remove.

Student 3: It's a pretty sad, desolate sight, isn't it. At this same time, as the 1800s came to an end, many people were moving into Wisconsin. People dreamed of owning their own land! And they had heard about Wisconsin's rich land. However, much of the good farmland in the southern part of the state had already been taken.

Student 4: But in the northern part of the state were 10 million acres of cutover land!!

Student 2: People who owned this cutover land had a few choices to make. They could allow the land to set idle, which means not doing anything with it. Since they owned the land, they would still have to pay the taxes on it, though, so that option wasn't very pleasing.

Student 3: Or, they could let the county take the land. Then they wouldn't have to pay the taxes. Unfortunately, it's like simply giving the land away and getting nothing for it. That did happen in many places, but there was another option.

Student 1: Yeah. Owners of cutover land were willing to sell their land pretty cheaply, so land speculators bought it!!

Student 4: What are land speculators?

Student 1: Good question! A land speculator is someone who purchased the land, hoping to sell it at a higher price so he could make lots of money!

Student 2: One speculator was Mr. Caleb Cushing. In 1869, he bought about 43,000 acres of land in Polk County and created the Great European-American Emigration Land Company! He had an office in New York where he enticed people to buy an 80-acre Wisconsin farm for \$1000. That was a good price back then.



Student 3: He had problems keeping his promises, however, so his speculating didn't go too well! Lots of people were disappointed with their land.

Student 1: I heard about another interesting experiment. In 1870 John Welch bought 80 acres of timber. He cut, logged, and burned it off. Then he planted potatoes. He wanted to prove that cutover land would be good farmland. He grew 756 bushels of potatoes in 2 ½ acres and made a profit of \$270. That was a pretty good profit in the late 1800s!!

Student 4: What about the railroads that had been built for the logging companies?

Student 3: Good point! The railroad companies didn't really want to leave the land sitting idle, either. If no one was trying to get to northern Wisconsin, they'd have to go out of business. So the railroads were pretty involved in helping to sell the cutover lands in northern Wisconsin, too.

Student 1: Remember Mr. Welch's potato experiment? Photos of his crop were posted in railroad stations! Railroad companies like the Soo Line and the Wisconsin Central Rail Road employed people to go to Europe and talk people into settling in Wisconsin.

Student 2: The railroad companies even bought cutover land to sell. In fact, in 1890, the Wisconsin Central Railroad had 838,628 acres of land they were trying to sell! That's like 838,000 football fields of cutover land!

Student 4: How else did they advertise this land?

Student 3: You have to remember that the idea of owning your own land, not renting it from someone else, was something very desirable. So advertising really tried to get people excited about owning land.

Student 2: One pamphlet printed by the Soo Line Railroad said:
"He who owns a home of his own, If only a cottage with vines overgrown, Of all the pleasures of life, gets a greater percentage, than his haughtiest neighbor who has to pay rent." (*Take the Easy Way to the Soo Line Farm Home in Wisconsin* in the American Immigration Company Papers.)

Student 4: Wow... makes you feel like you're nothing if you *rent* your land!

Student 2: Here's another ad that appeared in a railroad station: "Come to Sunny Southern Sawyer! There's a future here for you. Mother Nature's always smiling. And the skies are always blue. Where the crops are always "bumper" And the taxes always paid. Where you've got a dollar waiting, When you've got a dollar made." (Two stanzas of a poem entitled "An Invitation," printed on the back of an undated mimeographed form letter in the Wisconsin Colonization Company Papers)

Student 4: Hmm... the advertisement is like a poem... and it sure makes farming in Sawyer County seem pretty easy!

Student 3: Yup.



Student 1: Experiments like John Welch's...

Student 2: ...and the advertisements that were written...

Student 3: ... and the books that were printed...

Student 4: ...and the photographs which were posted...

All students: ...all made farming the cutover look very pleasant!



Insert 5.3

Living On the Cutover

ROLE	Land owner	Farmer	Farmer	Kid	Tree
AUDIENCE	Prospective buyer	Land company	Family/self	Friend/self	People
FORMAT	Advertisement	Letter	Letter/diary	Letter/diary	Editorial piece in print or other media (radio/TV?)
TASK	Sell land!	Share frustrations about stump removal or poor crops	Share experiences with other family members or reflect in diary	Share experiences with friend or reflect in diary	Teach people about quality land management



Insert 5.4

The Story of Dunnville

Dunnville was located southeast of Menominee along the waters of the Red Cedar River. While there was some logging done in this area as early as the 1820's, it was almost forty years later that any heavy tree cutting went on there.

In the spring of 1846, a man named Mr. Wilson from Iowa was coming up the Mississippi River by steamboat. He was told of a great stand of white pine along the Chippewa River. He decided to see if this was true. He walked to the Red Cedar River and found a small sawmill. Mr. Wilson, with a Native American as his guide, used a canoe to paddle fifty miles upriver to examine the timber. He was amazed by how much he saw. He then returned to Iowa, raised money, and purchased the sawmill with a man named Mr. Knapp.

Dunville became a "company town," which means that most businesses there were operated by the lumber company. It included a creamery, a quarry for cutting stone, and a sawmill. It was 1840 and the settlement had still not been named. A few years later, a man by the name of Amos Colburn put up the first hotel called the "Colburn House." He built homes and other buildings for those who were coming to the village to live. In his honor, the settlement was named Colburn. When the postal service was established a few years later, however, the village was officially named Dunville in honor of Charles Dunn who was the first Chief Justice of the Wisconsin Territory.

In 1852, a man named Mr. Stout from Dubuque bought into the company. The company became known as Knapp, Stout, and Company. It dominated this region of the Wisconsin pineries for almost fifty years, controlling 480,000 acres of land and employing as many as 2,500 people.

In 1854, on the east bank of the river, the lumber company built a large store. The second story was a dance hall. Four years later, in 1858, the company built a huge wooden hotel next to the store. At the same time a warehouse was built at the boat landing and Dunville became a bustling river port. The village had grown as far up the Red Cedar River as the paddle-wheeled steamboats from the Mississippi River and Chippewa River could travel.

Knapp, Stout, and Company operated steamboats which carried passengers, supplies, and farm produce. Goods were unloaded at Dunnville and carried by horse-drawn wagons to various company stores in the pineries. The company also kept a four-horse stage coach which ran daily between Menominee and Dunnville. Dunnville reached its peak in the 1850's. At this time it was a bustling village with a population of several hundred.

In 1858, the courthouse burned to the ground. From that time on, Dunville began to fade. In 1888, railroads began pushing northward, and Dunnville lost its importance as a river



port. By this time, the last of the great white pines were being cut from the northern reaches of the Red Cedar River valley. The lumber rafts that floated past Dunnville for markets south became fewer and fewer.

On a sunny Sunday, August 11, 1901, a raft tied up at the port. Two of the raftmen's families lived in the village. They told the locals on shore that they were looking a what would be the last lumber raft to float the Red Cedar River, and added that anyone who wished to ride down the river was welcome to come aboard. About a dozen people, mostly kids, took the raftsmen at their word and rode the raft south. A few hours later they were returned to Dunville on a hay wagon.

Despite the raftsmen's prediction, the village continued to function for several decades, but with each year one or more buildings burned or was vacated. The Dunnville School closed. Eventually, trees and tall grass covered what once had been a bustling community.

Today there is still much to see and imagine at this site on the Red Cedar River. It is here that Caddie Woodlawn lived from 1857-1867. You can read her tales in the book Caddie Woodlawn written by her grand-daughter, Carol Ryrie Brink. Several other buildings from the Dunville days are still standing. One is the old Colburn House. Standing on the wooden bridge over the dark, moving waters of the Red Cedar River, it is difficult to imagine that one-hundred years ago this was a thriving town!



The Story of Heineman

The history of Heinemen begins with a story in the May 29, 1900 Merrill newspaper. The story reported that a man named Mr. Thomas (who was a Merrill logging contractor and timber owner) proposed to build a saw mill, store, blacksmith shop, houses, and other structures needed for the residents of a village at a place where his logging camps were recently built. Mr. Thomas also promised to put in telephone lines and build good roads!

His plan began with the construction of the sawmill in the middle of a timber stand which he believed would support his business for more than twenty years. The settlement began to grow with already 100 men working. In July of 1900, it acquired the name Trout City because Mr. Thomas caught more trout there than anyone else. The mill was constructed and running by October 1 of that year.

By January 1901, there were twenty-two houses, a boarding house, a rooming house, a blacksmith shop, and other structures. Horse teams would haul lumber to nearby Merrill, and they would haul hay, grain, and other supplies back to Trout City. Fifty to seventy-five farmers visited Trout City daily to sell their produce. By February, a two-story building with a basement was built. In it there was a store, apartments, and a storehouse where people could get anything to eat, drink, or wear. Keep in mind that just ten months ago this had been a thickly forested area.

Mr. Thomas continually tried to improve life in the village. There was talk of building a railroad into town. Plans for a schoolhouse were organized for the fifty children who lived in town, too. A drug store opened in mid-March of 1901 and plans were created for a new hotel.

The growing population at Trout City soon expected regular mail service. A petition with two hundred signatures was sent to Washington, D.C. requesting a post office. In the spring, the government did establish a post office at Trout City in the general store. It was about this time that the name of the town changed to Earling to avoid confusion with other towns also called Trout City. The name honored the superintendent of the Saint Paul Railroad Company.

By fall, the railroad company had begun building a line into Earling. The town was described as the “busiest burg in the country” and there were still new houses being built! In December of 1901, it was announced that Mr. Heineman had purchased the lumber mill and all the buildings at Earling. In 1902, a petition was sent to Washington requesting that the post office name be changed from Earling to Heineman and that daily mail service to the town be established. These requests were granted in June.

1902 was a very successful year for the lumber company that produced lath (narrow strips of wood), shingles, cedar poles, and railroad ties. By 1903, Heineman had a railroad depot and daily passenger train service. A large, modern store, a new dance hall,



two hotels, and a large barn to replace the horse stables were soon built. By 1905, the population of Heineman reached 300 and growth continued. An amusement hall, an opera house, and a meat market were added by 1910.

Just when operations at Heineman seemed to be reaching a peak, disaster struck. As the Merrill newspaper wrote, “Last Monday, during the noon hour, fire was discovered in the Heineman sawmill at Heineman, and although the local fire department and all the residents turned out promptly, the building was burned to the ground.” The company swiftly rebuilt, but disaster soon struck again. The Merrill newspaper wrote, “The village of Heineman was totally destroyed by forest fires Wednesday evening. There were about twenty-five families living there, and all men, women, and children were driven from their homes by the flames, leaving behind everything they possessed to be devoured by the fire-head.”

Since the company still had timber which had not been destroyed by the fire, it moved its operations to Merrill and continued in the lumber business for approximately twenty years. Today, little remains at Heineman. One of the company houses still stands, and the road that passes through the site is known as Heineman Road. It is hard to imagine, though, that just 100 years ago it was a busy mill town with 400 people living there.



The Story of Star Lake

In late 1893, two lumbermen named Mr. Williams and Mr. Salisch were looking for additional timber land to purchase northeast of Minocqua. They bought this land from the Starr brothers, Bob and Harry, and began to construct a mill.

By August of 1894, a railroad began extending northward to Star Lake. Trains did not begin running regularly until the spring, but as soon as the steel was laid, supplies were hauled to the logging camp which consisted of a bunkhouse, cook shanty, office, and barn.

In early 1895, Star Lake began to look like a town. Several families had already moved there. A store and a saloon were opened. Thirty-five houses were finished and sixty-five more were to be built as quickly as possible. By summer, weekly train service began, telegraph communications began, and attempts were made to establish a post office. A full line of groceries, dry goods, and hardware could be found in the store. The town now contained a boarding house, barber shop, doctor's office, and hotel. The hotel served residents of Star Lake as well as many tourists who came to hunt or fish in the area. Construction of a school for the fifty students soon began. On August 28, 1895, a special train arrived carrying the majority of the mill employees, their families, and household goods.

By November of 1895, there were seventy homes, some of which were supplied with electricity. A post office had been established in the general store. Star Lake was a bustling mill town. Regular church services were held. There was no church, so services were held in whatever building was available. There were ice cream socials, fairs, auctions, and dances. Star Lake continued to boom into the new century. By 1904, 700 men were employed in the mill which operated twenty-four hours a day!

Shortly after this time, however, the town began to decline quickly as the pine forests were cut over. The last log was cut in 1906. By 1908, the population of Star Lake was down to 250. The company tore down houses and shipped them to Columbus, Ohio, where they were reassembled and sold. The school was torn down by 1920, and the railroad line was abandoned by 1940. Now, an open field is almost all that can be seen where the town of Star Lake was once thriving.