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On the Altar of Industry: A History of the Kingston Plains

Donovan Murphy

Clearing a Place

In 1947 the *Escanaba Daily Press* reported on a strange phenomenon in nearby Manistique. Several logs brought up out of the harbor for use in the construction of a new hospital, weathered by their time underwater, seemed to bear strange markings unlike anything the residents had ever seen. Speculation ran wild as people across town came up with their own theories as to the origin of the symbols with the most popular being Egyptian hieroglyphics and, of course, the American Indians.¹

These explanations may seem ridiculous in hindsight, but the Upper Peninsula, even more so than it is today, was a mysterious place still searching for its complete identity. Despite many years of European settlement, by 1947 Americans had only owned the entirety of the U.P. for just over 100 years.² The imposing wilderness was an unfamiliar place to many and a creative few sought the comfort of the Old World in order to put their lives into perspective. These efforts were not always without real merit, such as the elevation of Christopher Columbus to national hero status by the Italians.³

Nearby Minnesota similarly struggled with its place in the world. The famous Kensington Runestone hoax of 1896 demonstrated the desire of Scandinavians to claim their place in the story of the Midwest and, among other things, served to cement them in the culture of the state.⁴

Michigan is somewhat tame in this regard, though certainly not free of controversy. One need only turn off US-41 at M-95 to be met with a proud sign declaring the “Leif Erikson Memorial Highway.” Both up in the Copper Country and to the east in Newberry, the myth of Phoenician Copper Miners was also able to capture the imagination of many (a possible explanation as to why the people in Manistique would accept the idea of hieroglyphics present on submerged logs).⁵

The rapid change in the Upper Peninsula’s landscape brought about by the Depression and massive shift in logging practices can realistically account for the ignorance surrounding the strange markings,⁶ but there were still those who watched in disbelief as the situation unfolded. William S. Crowe wrote several years later in his 1952 memoir *Lumberjack*:

It seemed incredible to me that there should be any mystery about the origin and purpose of these marks, as I supposed everyone was familiar with the system of log marking used in the old pine lumber days. I suddenly realized that a colorful era which seems only yesterday to me ended a half a century ago and that few of the present generation have ever seen a big sawmill, or even a really big pine tree.⁷

All this, to Crowe’s dismay, was true. The Pine Era of logging had long since ended, drastically reducing the number and size of pines in the Upper Peninsula. From 1883 to 1893 alone it was determined that the average size of logs sent to sawmills had decreased a staggering 41%.⁸ One notable exception to this elimination of the old-growth does exist: The Estivant Pines outside

of Copper Harbor on the Keweenaw Peninsula were able to narrowly avoid logging in the 1970s and continue to stand today, many of them 300 years old and over 125 feet tall. Ultimately, their status as possibly the last old-growth stand in the state proves the rule.⁹

Whether or not the people of the Upper Peninsula realized it, their contributions in the 19th and 20th centuries would do more to secure their place in history than fantastical stories ever could. If William S. Crowe were alive today he would see a place that shows great reverence to its rich economic history, with numerous shrines to men like Douglas Houghton and William Mather dotting the land. People come from across the country to gawk at places like the Quincy Mine and the 175 foot log slide on the Grand Sable Dunes, perhaps making a stop along the way to see the famous Soo Locks at the entrance to Lake Superior. This being said, not all reminders of the past are positive.

Along the Adams Trail, skirting the edge of the Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore just southwest of the log slide there is a small branch in the road. Continuing down the main stretch will direct drivers north towards the coast, but taking the turn and staying on the Adams Trail will lead to a sight unlike any other in the Upper Peninsula.

The Kingston Plains is a section of old logging land, just southeast of a lake that shares with it the name of a long forgotten timber baron.¹⁰ Whereas the latter is within the bounds of the National Lakeshore, the vast majority of the plains themselves are shut out as if to suggest they lack the beauty necessary to be included. Measuring roughly 5 miles across, its footprint seen via satellite photography is greater than that of neighboring Munising and Grand Marais.

As the name suggests, the Kingston Plains are devoid of trees, save for small clusters of conifers scattered thinly near the road. The distinction of the area as a “plain” is somewhat deceptive though, as any visitor will quickly realize that all is not as it should be. Hundreds of dark stumps dot the barren hills, decaying in the midst of the low vegetation and lichen that has managed to grow around them.

This lack of fertility can be blamed in part on the presence of Rubicon Sand in the area, a type of dry soil with a very low water capacity.¹¹ This, however, does little to explain the sea of dead trees. In truth, the story of the Kingston Plains is inseparably linked to the story of the Upper Peninsula as a whole.

Logging Days

When surveyor William Burt travelled to the North Country in 1844 he discovered rich deposits of iron ore in what would later become the Marquette Range. The mining communities that sprang up here define the region to this day and at one point accounted for 80% of the iron ore produced in the United States.¹² Fewer know of Burt’s surveys of the Central U.P. in 1841 which included notes and maps of the future Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore as well as the township that would bear his name. One piece of these surveys makes mention of “First-Rate W. Pine in Eastern Part of Township” directly above Nevins Lake, less than 1 mile southwest of what is now the Kingston Plains.¹³

An additional section covering the majority of the plains reads “Township Level and slightly rolling—soil 2nd and 3rd rate” and references the presence of both white and yellow pine

as potential sources of timber.¹⁴ Hemlock was also noted, its tannin being important in the production of leather. Following the establishment of witness trees in autumn, the future Kingston Plains were recorded as part of Township 48 North, Range 15 West.¹⁵

News of Michigan Pine could not have come at a better time. The 1840s saw the exhaustion of New England white pine and a rising demand for new domestic sources. Sawmills began growing, most often along rivers. Marinette/Menominee, situated at the mouth of the Menominee River, was an early choice and would soon claim the title of “White Pine Capital of the World” with 4,245,000 board feet produced in 1889.¹⁶

Whereas the Menominee sawmill was established in 1832, logging did not begin in Alger County until 1877 with Joseph Weller’s operations in the western area of Pictured Rocks. By 1879 he had moved his operation to Grand Island, squaring and shipping 150,000 cubic feet of lumber for export to Liverpool, England.¹⁷ Additional surveys of the Kingston timberlands were conducted in the early 1850s by George E. Adair to subdivide the area and provide interested parties with the information necessary to begin filing claims. Despite a late start compared to other timberlands in the Upper Peninsula, by 1875 the area was controlled by speculators.¹⁸

Around 1880, Thomas G. Sullivan established a presence in the area and officially began logging operations in the Kingston Plains (then also called the White Rat Plains for the team of small white horses used) and Hurricane River. He initially high-graded the plains for good quality pine, a practice that would not last. At the height of his activity the camp roster included two groups of 150 men, three yolks of oxen, and 20 teams of horses.

Sullivan did not arrive in the U.P. as an amateur. He had worked previously as a partner with the Prentiss Lumber Company in Sanilac and Alpena, a town from which he was able to gather gangs of workers for his Alger County camp.¹⁹ One such gang left Alpena on the 28th of May, 1884 aboard the steamer *City Of Mackinac*. Though no information is provided pertaining to the individual men who left port that day, the crowd was described as large and rowdy with two men putting on an “athletic exhibition” in which “One man stopped another man’s fist with his nose, and lost some claret thereby.”²⁰

Discipline may have been a reoccurring problem within Sullivan’s crews. According to an obituary put out on May 1st, 1936 by the *Munising News*, Sullivan’s team was “disgruntled and resentful” when, upon landing and unloading—mostly likely at what is now Sullivan’s Landing—they were ordered to haul supplies higher up the bank to guard against a coming storm.²¹ This being said, the mythical image of the lumberjack as a whiskey-drinking hell-raiser calls into the question the authenticity of such claims. Crowe dedicated a full chapter of *Lumberjack* to this stereotype, writing “Among a thousand lumberjacks there were perhaps twelve or fifteen pretty tough guys with whom it was just as well to be careful, but even these usually confined their fights and brawls to the saloons. I never had the slightest trouble settling up with any lumberjack; I never saw a street fight of any importance, and the story that women kept off the streets when the lumberjacks hit town is all poppycock.”²²

The town of Seney, located on the Duluth, South Shore & Atlantic Railroad between Munising and Newberry, had developed a bad reputation as gathering place for such unsavory

characters due to its numerous saloons and brothels and would have been well known to workers in the Kingston timberlands (though it is once again doubtful that such a reputation was entirely deserved).²³ This would become especially true after 1893 when the Manistique Railroad built a spur north to Grand Marais. This spur can be in part credited for saving Grand Marais by offsetting the closure of the town's pine mill in 1885 and the subsequent exodus of people.²⁴

Throughout the life of Sullivan's camp, Grand Marais was an important destination for logs along with Sault Ste. Marie and Alpena. The lack of suitable river routes for floating meant that logs had to be transported by railroad or by skidding towards points on the lake where they could be assembled into rafts in early spring. There were several log slides present in the area, though some experts like State Forester Bruce Veneberg believe that rail was the more practical option. It is not clear which companies specifically used which slides and evidence of Kingston timber being transported this way is inconclusive.²⁵ What *is* known is that Sullivan once rafted eight million feet to Alpena, though this record pales in comparison to the 30 million feet rafted by an unnamed source in 1887.²⁶

Despite the impact Sullivan left on the Kingston timberlands and Pictured Rocks, his operations would end with the closure of the aforementioned sawmill in 1885. He spent only three years in total on the plains, a short time but not unusually so. At least seven companies would take part in logging on the same ground, among them the Alger-Smith Company, the Manistique Lumber Company, and the Chicago Lumbering Company.²⁷ As this all occurred Sullivan busied himself with politics, quickly becoming the first mayor of Munising²⁸. Russell Alger himself made a fortune off of the area—a fortune used to propel himself to the office of governor.

The pines did not stand alone in the Kingston timberlands, but they alone were fetching the high prices. When clearcutting took hold of the plains all those trees deemed worthless were cut alongside the pines leading to massive amounts of waste. Still, the land was worked and worked again in order to extract as much as possible.²⁹

Timber in the Alger County camps was cut for a variety of different purposes. If the logs were not being rafted or railed out of the region as-is, they often would be made into lumber, shingles, or squares for use in construction out west.³⁰ Less desirable hardwood was frequently burned for charcoal in kilns to facilitate the production of iron or, in the worst cases, just left to rot. One man named Cameron was recorded as trespassing on the Munising property of a foreign investor and cutting roughly 1.25 million board feet. Because of his desire to process only the best pine he only ended up shipping about 200,000 board feet to the mills, squandering hundreds of thousands of additional board feet in the process.³¹ This careless attitude towards the sustainability of forests would transform many acres into empty lots; another money-making opportunity.

The Kingston Cloverland

The rebranding of the Upper Peninsula into a pastoral paradise was a difficult and ultimately unsuccessful undertaking. In most places the soil was poor and short growing seasons made many crops impractical outside of specific regions. The enthusiasm generated by the Upper Peninsula Development Bureau (an organization created to promote the economic growth of the

area) and the residents of the U.P. was simply not enough to overcome the challenges large-scale farming presented. Some farms continue to find modest success to this day, but Henry Ford spoke for many disappointed settlers when he said that “agriculture would never be as successful in the Upper Peninsula as it is elsewhere.”³²

If anyone could claim the dream of Cloverland as their reality, it certainly was not the farmers in the former Kingston timberlands. These first settlers on the Plains moved out during the 1890s as the last of the timber was being cut down. Logging in the area ended in completely by 1909 and one year later the last of the farmers had already given up.³³ Farmsteads can still be seen throughout the National Lakeshore, with apple trees and fields long since deserted by their owners acting as the last reminders of this failed experiment.³⁴

It was a bitter irony that, whereas logging had begun late in comparison to other timberlands, farming efforts in the Kingston Plains had begun and then subsequently ended before the term “Cloverland” was ever coined. Worse still was the fact that much of the cutover land sold grew little more than that clover. Teams of horses sent in to clear the forests, carrying the little seeds on their hooves, in some ways carried out more effective planting operations than the farmers themselves. Grazing animals on this little fodder plant would have been the obvious choice, at least until stumps could be cleared. Given a best case scenario, the sandy soil would have still limited the potential for profitable farmland.

The issues that settlers faced on the plains were all those present across the rest of the peninsula and more. Several years in the future (when the Cloverland campaign was in full swing) railroads would begin offering up properties with the hope that farmers would use nearby lines to ship agricultural products.³⁵ Farmers in the Kingston timberlands, being ahead of this curve, enjoyed no such luxury. Even if they had been offered this deal it would have been short-lived; the Manistique Railroad closed their spur to Grand Marais in 1910 after the Grand Marais Lumber Company shut down the year prior, an action that sent the entire town into a depression.³⁶ There was, however, an additional problem that further impeded development on the plains.

Fire and the Ecology of the Stump Prairie

Fire was (and continues to be) a looming possibility throughout the Michigan timberlands. By the turn of century a combination of drought, rampant waste, and lack of concern for conservation was wreaking havoc across both peninsulas. Whereas the Anishinaabe had used controlled burns for centuries as a way of improving the land and creating new hunting grounds, these new fires destroyed forests, homes, and profits wherever they went.

During the autumn fires of 1871 which claimed the lives of roughly 1,200 to 1,500 people in Wisconsin (and famously included the burning of Chicago), Holland, Lansing, and Port Huron were all set ablaze. These incidents were the result of high winds and extremely dry conditions, a bad combination made worse when introduced to irresponsible timbering practices.³⁷ Many potential sources of trouble presented themselves in Northern Michigan, as even logs sliding down to the lake sometimes caught fire due to friction.³⁸

From an ecological perspective, fire is a necessary part of many forests. The burning of vegetation can provide nutrients for other plants and heat will sometimes act as an important player in the lifecycle of trees.³⁹ Perhaps the most famous of these trees in the Upper Peninsula is the jack pine. This twisting, scaly conifer often grows in sandy soils and has become a symbol of the north woods, its likeness the subject of Canadian Tom Thomson's iconic 1917 painting simply entitled "The Jack Pine."⁴⁰

The relationship between the jack pine and fire primarily concerns reproduction. Pinecones on jack pines are serotinous: thick, hard, and held together with resin so that they only release seeds when temperatures rise to the point of melting this natural glue.⁴¹ Because of this friendly relationship with fire and sand the jack pine often appears in areas considered to be infertile.

While the Kingston Plains is often compared to visually similar jack pine plains (even containing a few jack pines of its own), there are important differences. Sandy, dune-like jack pine landscapes such as the Baraga and Yellow Dog Plains are naturally occurring. Focusing on the Baraga Plains as an example one finds an outwash created by prehistoric glaciers receding across the peninsula. Logging did occur in all three of these locations,⁴² but the damage done to the Kingston Plains exists on a level far above the extraction of timber.

Trouble with fire in the Kingston timberlands goes back to at least 1891 when teams from the Chicago Lumbering Company were unable to reach their camp due to a blaze. The irresponsible cut-and-run tactics used to acquire the best pine possible left the ground littered with slash, stumps, and even the discarded logs of unprofitable trees.⁴³ Such an environment as this is known as a "stump prairie;" the empty remnant of whatever forest was there before. In these conditions all that was required to turn the operation into a fireball was a wayward spark.

When comparing stump prairies to jack pine plains the discrepancies become clear. Whereas jack pines thrive in sandy environments prone to fires, the sturdiness of the white pines in the Kingston Plains was surprising given these same conditions. These trees, much larger and lacking the fire-activated seeds of the jack pine, were not prepared to withstand the blazes that repeatedly struck during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.⁴⁴ The addition of ample kindling all around the area in the form of the aforementioned slash decreased the likelihood of a controllable burn even further.

The exact dates of every fire to occur are not known and very well may not have been recorded. After all, before its transformation into the barren land seen today the Kingston Plains had been just another piece of land to be exploited and sold. Pine was harvested and the land was passed on, eventually ending up in the hands of ill-fated farmers in an attempt to extract each and every dollar possible from the property. What is known, however, is that between the 1890s and the 1930s there were repeated burnings. One likely candidate for a major fire is 1911, a year that saw multiple blazes around Munising as well as the complete destruction of Au Sable and Oscoda in the northern Lower Peninsula.⁴⁵

Years of poor conditions eventually culminated in a massive fire that broke out in August of 1936, just one of many across the U.P. that summer.⁴⁶ Luckily though, interest in conservation had risen dramatically by 1933 with the introduction of the aptly named Civilian Conservation

Corps. The CCC “Bucket Brigades” were instrumental in fighting fires across Alger County as their comrades cut firebreaks to contain further spread.⁴⁷

These men lived and worked together, exchanging stories and gossip both amongst themselves and the general public by way of news columns like “Barracks 2 Banter” which ran in the *Munising News*.⁴⁸ Camp Cusino in Melstrand was most likely responsible for much of the CCC activity on the plains and frequently made headlines.⁴⁹ Around this same time, numerous stories were printed to raise the public’s awareness of possible fire hazards. Some examples of the “fire conscious” (as a CCC worker described it) attitude in Munising include a smoking ban, multiple people held in relation to burn permits, and a 4th of July warning against the misuse of fireworks.⁵⁰ The sense of extreme caution in these pieces is understandable: the total fire losses in Michigan the year before had amounted to nearly eight million dollars.⁵¹

There was some debate on whether or not burns were intentionally being started by arsonists or “firebugs” as opposed to carelessness or lightning, but the sheer number made this unlikely. That brutal summer of 1936 saw periods in which as many as 100 forest fires would be raging at once, some much more intense than others.⁵²

Restoration Efforts and the Plains Today

Stump prairies would not have been an uncommon sight in Michigan during the 20th century. Widespread devastation to timberlands from Iron Mountain to Tawas City and beyond led the CCC to plant over 484 million seedlings—more than twice the amount planted in any other state.⁵³ The problem with the Kingston Plains was that very few things planted there ever survived. Multiple efforts were launched to bring life back to the area but they all ended, as a report from the Michigan Department of Conservation put it, in “complete failures.”⁵⁴

The hope had been to replant the Kingston Plains with trees that would support animal populations living in the vicinity of the new Cusino Wildlife Research Station.⁵⁵ Prairie chickens delighted in preying on the grasshoppers which flew through the plains, a convenient source of bait which at one point facilitated Hemingway’s fishing excursions on the Fox River. Deer had also been of concern to the planting effort as without ample cover very few larger animals ventured into the area.⁵⁶

Experimental plantings on the Kingston Plains in 1942 included large numbers of black cherry, box elder, and mountain ash among other trees. Early survival rates looked promising, but mortality increased steadily till 1949 when inspection indicated that most species had failed.⁵⁷ This experiment was divided between the current and future plantings for wood production, game production, and additional sections meant for quick harvest (possibly as Christmas trees).⁵⁸ Additional seeds were planted in the 1950s and mainly consisted of the more adapted red and jack pines, though even these hardier trees faced difficulties growing in the harsh conditions.⁵⁹

Through all this the question still remains: why exactly were the trees not growing? Geographer Linda Barrett offers the explanation that a combination of sandy soil and extremely hot fire fed by slash “literally cooked the land” and created the unique landscape seen today. This would account for the noticeable lack of vegetation on the plains over a hundred years after logging

ended, a point at which many other stump prairies would have been well on their way to revegetation.⁶⁰

All is not lost for the Kingston Plains however, as nature has still found a use for this barren tract of old timberland. The sharp-tailed grouse is a species that benefit enormously from the open plain environment, prompting the Michigan DNR to establish the Kingston Plains as a nature preserve and conduct their own, slightly more successful plantings and controlled burns.⁶¹ Photographers and snowmobile enthusiasts have likewise taken an interest in the area, its desolate hills making for a striking view with relatively clear ground. Others still come simply to reflect.⁶²

By Any Means Necessary

To live in the Upper Peninsula is to be surrounded by history both seen and unseen. The story of the North Country could be described as one of big ideas and big mistakes, though this would mistakenly imply that everyone involved was naïve to the consequences of their actions.

In many cases, the rich history of the U.P. continues to pay dividends. Several mines across the iron and copper ranges have been able to rebrand themselves as tourist attractions, offering insight into the lives of the men that worked there. The Soo Locks, still in operation after most of these mines went under, likewise invites visitors to experience its deeply industrial roots.

The history unseen is not so much invisible as it is hidden in plain sight. It may be difficult, for example, to go out and view the devastating effects of the fur trade on beaver populations as the evidence very much exists in the lack of data. Such is the case with much of the timberlands in the Upper Peninsula. Because of the efforts of the 1930s, the most one can usually find of the timbering days are the unsettlingly straight rows of pine so common along the highways.

For every mineshaft turned into an exciting experience for out-of-towners there sit two rotting away behind a “No Trespassing” sign, left to stand stubbornly and without purpose. A line from an old song called “The Soo Line” does well to summarize a sort of melancholic longing in the Upper Peninsula that teeters between nostalgia and grief:

Old men on the highway, their backs are bended down,
Blackbirds on the barbed-wire, all along the cave-in ground,
Headframes in the long fields, ghosts of better times,
Out along the south shore, down along the Soo Line.⁶³

The Kingston Plains similarly refuses to be forgotten. Most plants will not grow there and what will does little to cover up charred stumps. It has become a reminder not only of the ecological devastation of the past but of the people that shaped the wilderness. Like a wine stain on an expensive dress, the irresponsible outcome must be weighed against the short-term gain.

Was the destruction of the Kingston timberlands a net positive? Most likely not. More ecologically friendly practices like tree farming were well known in the 19th century and, had responsible forestry prevailed, the area may still have been a producer today. By 1929 Massachusetts, a state that had been continuously harvesting pines for over 300 years and had a productive forest area 1/6th the size of Michigan’s, was producing about double the lumber.⁶⁴

The rapid nature of the Upper Peninsula's ascent and decline can make one feel as if they are an archeologist picking through the remains of some long-vanished civilization. Who would fault a child or uninitiated visitor for mistaking the likes of the decaying stamp mill at Freda or the Egyptian Revival obelisks of the Cliff Shaft Mine in Ishpeming for some sort of ancient site? In a sense, they are.

There is a deep irony in the fact that the residents of the U.P. in the 19th and 20th century have become the ancients they imagined came before them. The Kingston Plains, so devoid of substance, sit today as a monument to their stories and struggles. As the long winters weather away the stone walls and the short summers claim the foundations, this sea of stumps endures. Though it is not a happy place, there may be no better candidate for the soul of the Upper Peninsula: a land once full of riches and opportunity, carelessly exploited to the point of destruction, now cautiously enjoyed by a small few who understand the inherent value it can offer to the world.

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