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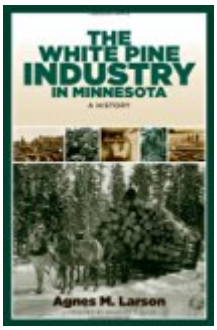
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Agnes M. Larson.** *The White Pine Industry in Minnesota: A History.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007. xix + 432 pp. Illustrations $17.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8166-5149-8.

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**Published on** H-SHGAPE (November, 2008)

**Commissioned by** James Ivy

The reprint of Agnes M. Larson's *The White Pine Industry in Minnesota*, initially published in 1949, is a welcome reminder of how previous generations wrote and thought about history. But this book is far more than a nostalgic journey into past scholarship. Rather, its sharp insights and suggestive passages brought a plethora of interesting research topics to my mind, and I recommend it to young scholars searching for thesis and dissertation material.

White American settlers started logging Minnesota's rich white pine forests immediately after arriving there in the 1830s. No later than 1837, entrepreneurs contracted with the Chippewa to cut timber on their land. By the middle of the 1850s, Minnesota had a small but growing timber industry, supplying local white settlements and markets farther down the Mississippi River as far away as Saint Louis. This industry remained small so long as the East had a consistent supply of timber, but after the Civil War, the timber industry began to log out the Maine forests that had fed its mills. The rapidly growing nation turned to the Great Lakes and the South to feed its insatiable appetite for wood. Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota turned into timber colonies for eastern capital almost overnight. The building of railroads to the region marked this transformation. By 1886, more than twenty-five thousand miles of railroad centered in Minneapolis, reaching out to the entire upper Midwest. The period between 1870 and 1890 saw a massive expansion of timbering in Minnesota. But the loggers cut deeper and deeper into the forests; increasingly, timber only remained in the state's remote northern reaches. Still, the lumber industry built Minneapolis, and between 1890 and 1905, logging dominated the city's industrial life. By the 1910s, Minnesota's timber industry experienced severe decline, though people still logged commercially there as late as 1932. Overcutting doomed the long-term prospects of logging in Minnesota. Between 1839 and 1932, Larson estimates that 67.5 billion board feet of timber came out of the forests. The Great Lakes timber boom ended as quickly as it began. Leading timbermen started investing in the Pacif-

ic Northwest, turning Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, and northern California into America's timber farm.

Larson did a great job placing the pine industry within the broader context of its time. She rightfully connected it to the rise of railroads, eastern industrial markers, and western settlers. She closed the book by musing on the importance of the timber industry for Minnesota's development. First, she showed that the timber industry completely logged out the entire state with a few exceptions in national forest tracts and on Indian reservations. Here, she bemoaned the economic fate of those lands, briefly noting the poverty of its residents and calling for "a new public domain," which she hoped would again make the land productive (p. 403). Second, she noted that the denuding of the forest had real positive benefits for Minnesota: the building of industry and housing of the state's people. Minnesota became an important industrial state. Timber capitalists built towns, donated to philanthropies, and invested in other economic ventures. Overall, then, Larson approved of the timber industry's impact on Minnesota, but wished that the industry had engaged in more sustainable cutting practices.

Naturally, a book published in 1949 does not always date well. Larson romanticized the lives of loggers, though not as badly as her contemporary Stewart Holbrook did with his books on loggers in the Pacific Northwest, including ***Stewart Holbrook, Holy Old Mackinaw: A Natural History of the American Lumberjack*** (1938). She rarely went into detail about the working-class loggers who lived and died in these forests. She provided a broad overview of their social lives, but often engaged in generalizations. A long description of loggers' characteristics includes this passage: "His manner is rough too, though most often there was a 'heart in him....' The man in the wood was usually strong and clear-eyed, with the vigorous, masculine charm characteristic of men who live 'free lives' in the energizing air of a northern winter" (p. 192). What does that even mean? She did not indicate anything here except for how people of her time stereotyped loggers. Yet, such generalizations were typical of writing in her time, and the modern reader can hardly hold them against her. She did not spend a great deal of time on the environmental catastrophe logging caused the region, though she did lament the lack of conservation in Minnesota before it was too late and the trees were gone. Nor did she explore the logged-off land movement that plunged farmers into poverty during the early twentieth century. Of course, one cannot expect a sixty-year-old book to answer today's historical questions.

Larson also referred to Native Americans as "Red Men." But this seemingly offensive nomenclature goes to my larger point of the surprising relevance of Larson's book for today's scholars. Although such a term is inappropriate in 2008, Larson used it in a chapter where she frankly discussed how Minnesota lumbermen stole Native American lands. She wrote with an honesty concerning controversial issues that many historians avoided at the time. We should overlook the unfortunate language to be impressed by Larson's progressive outlook on these matters in the years following World War II, not the high-water mark for Native American rights in the United States.

Perhaps the greatest value of reviewing an old book like ***The White Pine Industry in Minnesota*** is thinking about it within a historiographical context. The timber industry remains one of the most understudied U.S. industries by historians. We know a tremendous amount about cattle, mining, and the large industries of urban America.[1] Yet logging remains secondary to studies of labor and business history. As Bradley J. Gills writes in his foreword to the new edition, "Considering that the lumber industry of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries was one of the greatest social and economic influences of the development of the Great Lakes states, there is a surprising dearth of scholarship on the subject" (p. xi).

Indeed, and the dearth extends to logging history in the rest of the nation as well. William Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (1991) certainly builds on Larson's work and provides a deeper understanding of forest history in the region, but the subject only occupies one chapter of his book. There are several decent to good monographs covering aspects of the Great Lakes timber industry, but we lack books with more than a regional interest.

Historians of logging have written some excellent books on federal policy and the forests. Such historians as Paul Hirt (*A Conspiracy of Optimism: Management of the National Forests since World War Two* [1994]) and Nancy Langston (*Forest Dreams, Forest Nightmares: The Paradox of Old Growth in the Inland West* [1995]), as well as earlier scholars, like Harold Steen (*The U.S. Forest Service: A History* [1976]), have provided us with in-depth knowledge of how the U.S. Forest Service operated in its first century and how decisions made by the federal government concerning the forests created widespread social and environmental consequences. But we know significantly less about the operations of logging companies, the social history of loggers, and the larger roles the timber industry played in shaping the Pacific Northwest, Great Lakes states, and the South.

Larson's book can serve as a starting point for scholars to explore these questions. Not only is it essential reading for people interested in the history of Minnesota, but it is also a valuable reference work for modern historians of environmental, labor, and economic history. Again, I highly recommend it to graduate students looking for thesis and dissertation topics. Throughout the book, I wanted to know more about a number of interesting issues Larson touched on. This book would be a good starting point for someone writing an environmental history of lumbering in the Great Lakes. A history of the logged-off land movement would be valuable. I would love to see a new labor history of Minnesota's timber workers. How did loggers envision and deal with environmental change? What did they think as these transformations were taking place? A spatial analysis of Minneapolis would be intriguing; how did the timber industry create the city, and what happened to mill spaces and the people who worked in them after they shut down? What is the history of logging and Native Americans in the region? All of these questions could use Larson's work as a starting point. Answers to them would be fascinating, at least to this reviewer.

Gills provides a nice foreword for the book, placing Larson within the context of her time and usefully comparing her work to other books on logging in the Great Lakes published in recent decades. I praise the University of Minnesota Press for choosing to reprint this interesting volume of Minnesota history.

Note

[1]. Arguably the most understudied industry is fishing, which has received even less attention from scholars than logging, with some notable exceptions.

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**Citation:** Erik Loomis. Review of Larson, Agnes M. *The White Pine Industry in Minnesota: A History.* H-SHGAPE, H-Net Reviews. November, 2008.

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