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Lyda Belthuis

University of Minnesota, Duluth

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Some Interpretations of a Map on Minnesota Sawmilling

LYDA BELTHUIS¹

University of Minnesota, Duluth

ABSTRACT—Sawmilling in Minnesota started about the time of settlement and, until 1870, mainly consisted of small mills located in the southern half of the state. Mills along the Mississippi River were mainly in urban centers while the remainder were scattered and associated with the clearing of the land and the meeting of the needs of local communities. After 1870, mills became larger. Many were constructed in northern Minnesota. All used forests in the northern part of the state and reduced them so greatly that, by 1920, the mills closed and were replaced by portable sawmills.

Patterns of Forest Cutting

The following map of Minnesota sawmilling includes the period of earliest milling through the large scale original cutting in the northeast dating to the 1920's. It does not include the few large plants using Minnesota raw materials which have come in since nor the many portable sawmills dating from that time and continuing to the present.

Symbols were used to differentiate between the early period (to 1870) and the larger mills of more recent times (see map). An examination indicates that the largest number of small symbols used for the early period are in the southern half of the state while the greater number of mills after 1870, outside of the Twin Cities, were in the northern half of the state. Since there were so many mills in the Twin Cities area, Duluth and some centers along the St. Croix and the Mississippi Rivers, numbers were used with county names near the outside edge of the map. Although these do not show the real importance of the activity in these centers, closely packed overlapping dots on a center would be less informative.

The first period included a very large number of small mills that cut less than one million board feet a season. Many were a combination of saw and grist operating for brief periods, i.e., a few months to a few years, and were, at least in part, associated with the clearing and settling of the land in the southeast and south central parts of the state. Since 1870, mills have been fewer but larger, cutting from one to over 60 million board feet in a single season. Many of these later mills were in the Twin Cities, along the Mississippi and in the Duluth area or other parts of the forested north. In many cases they did more than cut logs to lumber, frequently they included facilities for sash, door and window making and other types of manufacturing.

A closer look at the early period, 1821 through the 1860's, reveals certain characteristics that were common to early mills regardless of their purpose. One was the use of water power and the harnessing of small streams

¹ Professor of Geography and head of Department of Geography, University of Minnesota, Duluth.

² Since the map is based on at least 400 books, manuscripts, atlases and plat books as well as interviews, it is not feasible to use footnotes in this paper. A detailed copy of data used in preparing the map along with a larger map is available in the Manuscript Section, State Historical Society Library, St. Paul and the St. Louis County Historical Society, Duluth.

that may have had adequate flow only part of the year but, during periods of flood, washed away the dam, or dam and mill, because of poor construction or choice of site. Streams were chosen, such as, in Blue Earth county, small streams that flowed northward to the Minnesota River, which today would not be considered adequate. At least 15 water-driven mills were located on such streams in Blue Earth County alone. Washed away dams and mills were commonly replaced, some of them several times. Another condition made many early mills short lived; they caught fire from machinery or smokers and could not be saved. They, too, were usually replaced. The third reason for the short life of early mills was that many were built in an area of scattered or open forest that, once cleared, provided no further raw material for the mill and it was not feasible to bring logs from any distance.

Early mills were constructed for three purposes. The first sawmill in the Minnesota of today was constructed in 1821 at Fort Snelling for the cutting of lumber to build the government post. This operated only a short time but some years later became a commercial mill. The next mills were commercial; they were tied to the cutting along the St. Croix which started the moment land was opened legally to settlement, and along the Mississippi and its tributaries to the north of the Twin Cities. These logs were cut and manufactured in southeastern Minnesota or rafted farther downstream to other processors. At about the same time as the commercial milling came the building of small mills in tiny settlements and rural areas, by farmers or business people, to help supply lumber for farmsteads and townsites and, incidentally, to clear the land for farming. Many of these mills became saw-grist combinations and, after the land had been cleared, continued to supply the farm areas with feed and/or flour.

By 1870 the forests had been cut in the southern part of the state and substantial cutting had taken place also in the central parts and to the north. Large mills, all commercial in nature, continued to operate in the Twin Cities and Mississippi River towns depending solely on logs rafted from farther north, in the Duluth area they were supplied from nearby forests. Many of these companies had several mills, some in the forests of northern and northeastern Minnesota, and many had extensive forest holdings of their own. Some companies

cut their own trees, transported them to their plants and processed them into lumber or other manufactured products. Some cut logs into lumber for others who then sold the lumber or manufactured their own products.

These large companies were the last to close their plants, mainly after 1900. By that time, in many cases they had purchased and developed forest interests in either the southern states or the Pacific Northwest.

Comparison with Agricultural Settlement and Railroad Building

After looking at the patterns of sawmilling one naturally wonders whether comparisons can be made with other activities at the same time in the same parts of the state. A comparison of agricultural settlement and railroad building with forest cutting was made using the maps and materials of Meeks (1959). A rough distribution map was made for each decade showing mills opened in that period and affording interesting comparisons with the maps drawn by Meeks. Prior to 1860, or the coming of railroads, sawmills were located in the same part of the state as agricultural settlement. In the decade 1860-1869 sawmilling, agricultural settlement and railroad construction still seemed to be concentrated in the east and south central part of the state. In some cases, sawmills were built to the west of the existing railroad lines where agriculture was established. In other cases, all seemed to move westward and northward at about the same time. The decade 1870-1879 and succeeding ones showed a marked contrast between agricultural develop-

ment and forest activities; in that decade, agriculture moved westward and northwestward beyond the forests in the state, while forest activities branched to the north and northeast. Some railroad building took place in the north and the northeast in the 1870-1879 period. During 1880-1889 agriculture intensified toward the southwest and northwest as elsewhere in the southern part while forest cutting increased toward the northeast. The additional railroads built in that decade in the northeast seem to have had some relation to forestry although mining was involved also by that time. From 1890 on, this trend continued with more farming toward the southwest and northwest and more forest cutting and railroad building in the north and northeast. The number of new sawmills starting in the northeast was probably greatest in the 1880-1889 period with substantial increases in the 1890's and in the first decade of this century also, particularly in St. Louis and Itasca counties. Only a few mills started after 1910 in some of the northern counties. By that time almost all had closed in centers farther south and portable mills had come in that remain to this day.

So ended the era of the cutting of the original growth, followed by a period of low production and, finally, an almost completely different use of the forest that, however, is not within the scope of this paper.

References

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