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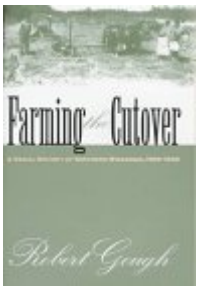

Robert Gough. *Farming the Cutover: A Social History of Northern Wisconsin, 1900-1940.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997. viii + 295 pp. $40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-0850-8.

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Published on H-SHGAPE (February, 2000)

Revisiting the Wisconsin Cutover

At the close of the nineteenth century, the last vestiges of the vast primeval forests that once covered northern Wisconsin were disappearing at a staggering rate. The environmental transformation that took place would be condemned today, but in the late nineteenth century there was widespread optimism that a new, prosperous era was ahead. In 1895, William Henry, Dean of the College of Agriculture at the University of Wisconsin, echoed this popular sentiment when he stated that "with farms supplanting the forest, northern Wisconsin will not revert to a wilderness with the passing of the lumber industry, but will be occupied by a thrifty class of farmers whose well directed, intelligent efforts bring substantial, satisfactory returns from fields, flocks and herds."[1] Despite zealous promotion and a lot of hard work, it was obvious a generation later that it was not going to happen, at least at the scale that many had hoped. Why not?

Farming the Cutover, by Historian Robert Gough, is the story of the men and women who toiled to settle the marginal stump lands of northern Wisconsin in the early decades of the twentieth century, the paternalistic efforts of the so-called experts and promoters from the outside who wanted to improve the image and economic vitality of the region, and the eventual land policies which discouraged new settlement and encouraged reforestation and recreation. It is a story that has been told before. Vernon Carstensen's *Farms or Forests: Evolution of a State Land Policy for Northern Wisconsin 1850-1932* and Arlan Helgeson's *Farms in the Cutover: Agricultural Settlement in Northern Wisconsin* were published in 1958 and 1962, respectively. Both are classics on the topic. However, Gough breaks new ground by adding a real, human dimension to the saga. There are new voices; he gets into the lives of the so-called experts who were promoting agriculture, and more importantly, the ordinary people who struggled to make a go of it.

Gough confesses his sympathy for the cutover farm families early on. The opening chapter describes the physical, financial, social, and political environment the settlers were entering. It was *terra incognitae* to most of them and that was the biggest challenge. The government would not sell cheap land or even classify it as to its quality, and many land companies had shady tactics for luring potential settlers. Yet people came to start new lives.

The second chapter highlights many of the positive aspects that were evident in the first two decades of

the twentieth century as people built their communities: farmers formed cooperatives, schools and churches were built, people came together to socialize, and everyone was willing to lend each other a hand with major farm related projects. The people were poorer than anywhere else in the state but they "were confident that they could replicate the style of yeoman farming and the rural communities associated with it which had characterized nineteenth century America, and which they saw in the early twentieth century in the fully developed areas of southern Wisconsin"(pp. 92). The obstacles they faced, however, were far greater than those faced by people who established themselves in the southern part of the state a generation or two earlier. That is where the so-called experts, or technocrats, come into the story. Scientists, economists, and social reformers from the University of Wisconsin lead the charge to assist cutover farmers. However, as time went on, the nature of their involvement, and their attitudes toward the people, changed. "In the minds of professors and other experts, cutover settlers were changing from clients to be assisted, to victims to be protected, to waste products to be feared"(pp. 113). Gough reveals the nativism, social prejudices and questionable economic interests among some of the faculty involved. Economist Richard T. Ely and his students, in particular, take a beating.

The development of commercial agriculture in the cutover was particularly hurt by the drop in agricultural prices in the 1920s, and later the Great Depression. Northern Wisconsin took on an image of lawlessness, poverty, and vice, being referred to in a national newspaper article as the "Wilderness Slums" of Wisconsin. Public policy which once was directed at attracting settlers, reversed course and was designed to curtail in-migration. "Social scientists in the 1930s embraced a different vision for the cutover, and therefore encouraged alternative public policies which would eventually undermine yeoman farming in the cutover"(pp. 174). Precedent setting forestry legislation and rural zoning policies resulted in reforestation and the relocation of existing settlers who occupied land not zoned for agriculture. For the most part, farming the cutover failed. But Gough challenges this notion. He claims that many people achieved what they had set out to do. For some it was independence and for others it was privacy. They developed a sense of place and attachment to the communities they had made, in spite of economic difficulties.

Gough argues that it was not simply an incompatible environment or the burden that the scattered settlers had on local tax bases that brought further settlement to a halt. He believes that it was the result of "limited social, economic, and political resources available to the settlers as a group"(pp. 231). The reason for this, according to Gough, was that the region never achieved a critical mass, or population density, necessary to support the activities and institutions of more successful yeoman farming communities. This argument, that agricultural settlement was not successful because not enough people were settling, is problematic. Why weren't they settling? There are many reasons that Gough cites, but the environment must still be regarded as a major factor. The average growing season in parts of the north is less than three months with the possibility of frost in every single month. Those aren't good odds, even for a yeoman farmer.

Furthermore, Gough downplays the larger context that farming the cutover in the early decades of the twentieth century was occurring in the wake of national recreation and conservation movements, coupled with the growing consumer habits of the burgeoning urban, middle class. In 1900 the cutover attracted thousands of upper middle class sportsmen from Chicago and other major urban areas to scores of resorts throughout the north. By the 1920s it was attracting tens of thousands, and eventually hundreds of thousands, of middle class families every year to hundreds of lakeside resorts. What would have been different if the so-called experts and land promoters who lured settlers north had the foresight to see this coming?

The circularity of the final argument does not take away from the overall effectiveness of this book. *Farming the Cutover* revisits a sad chapter in American agricultural history, and this time puts a human face on it. The strength is in the narrative which weaves together the lives of many people who struggled against the environment – physical, financial, social, and political – to start new lives in the cutover. It treats them with much more dignity than the university officials or land promoters did in the early part of the century.

Note

[1]. This was part of the introduction to William A. Henry, *Northern Wisconsin: A Handbook for the Homeseeker* (Madison, 1895):6. Henry was the Dean of the College of Agriculture at the University of Wisconsin and was mandated by the state legislature to prepare this manual to inform potential settlers about the agricultural possibilities of northern Wisconsin. Incidently, the wording of the mandate practically predetermined that the manual would be used to "promote" agriculture. Al-

though Henry discussed some of the realities and limitations of the land with charts, maps and text, the photographs that were included gave an overly rosy picture of the area.

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Citation: Timothy Bawden. Review of Gough, Robert, *Farming the Cutover: A Social History of Northern Wisconsin, 1900-1940*. H-SHGAPE, H-Net Reviews. February, 2000.

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