

LANGLADE COUNTY FOREST – HISTORICAL BACKGROUND ON ITS ESTABLISHMENT

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Preface

The preparation of this historical background on the establishment of the Langlade County Forest relied primarily on the published proceedings of the Langlade County Board during the period of 1926-1930, and the Antigo Daily Journal during the same time frame.

Introduction

Before the arrival of the lumbering era, much of northern Wisconsin was covered with magnificent stands of pine, hemlock, and hardwoods in the highlands, and cedar, spruce, and balsam fir on its lowlands. These forests provided raw material for a thriving lumber industry from 1860 to about 1910. As a result of the clamor to conquer the wilderness and the need to supply lumber for housing and factories, the forests of Wisconsin were nearly destroyed. The logging slash was ideal for wildfires, highlighted by the Peshtigo fire in 1871. Fires continued into the 1930's. Immigrants rushed to these newly cleared lands hungry for a place to farm and build their lives. In just a few years, the soils gave out and these people left to seek their livelihood elsewhere, leaving the land barren and tax delinquent.

The Wisconsin State Legislature in 1927 passed the Forest Crop Law, which authorized counties to create county forests. An opinion of the Attorney General with reference to the Forest Crop Law stated that the counties would be exempt from the owner's share of the annual tax. The State Legislature of 1929 created the County Forest Reserve Law which specifically provided that the counties were exempt from paying the "acreage share" required of private owners. The State Legislature of 1931 amended the County Forest Reserve Law of 1929 and provided for the payment of a County Forest Aid of ten cents per acre annually on all land within the county forest entered under the Forest Crop Law program.

Today, Langlade County has a total of 130,003 acres of county forest. Statewide, twenty-nine counties now participate in this program, with 2,392,045 acres of county owned land entered under the County Forest Law.

First we must step back and think about the time period, 1927-1929. During this time period, Herbert Hoover was elected president, Charles Lindberg was flying around the country, and in Langlade County and many counties in northern Wisconsin were dealing with bad economy. The country was on the eve of the Great Depression. The situation in the counties of northern Wisconsin was horrible. The counties were faced with a huge land delinquency problem. The focus of this article will be primarily be on Langlade County and what led up the establishment of the Langlade County Forest during this same time period, 1927-1929.

Tax Delinquency Situation

In Langlade County on April 24, 1929, there was 45,000 acres of tax deeded lands that were owned by the county. At that time, in the Antigo Daily Journal, the county board sold a 40-acre parcel of land for \$200.00. The Antigo Daily Journal reported that the Lincoln County had 56,000 acres of tax deeded lands, of which only 6,000 acres had trees more than 6" in diameter.

In 1927 the Wisconsin State Legislature passed the Forest Crop Law, which authorized counties to create county forests. This legislation was the basis for the establishment of the county forest system in Wisconsin. At that same time, the Attorney General came out with an opinion that stated counties would be exempt from the owner's share of the annual tax, which at the time was \$.10/acre. At this time, it was reported that there were 4 ¼ million acres of tax delinquent land in 17 northern counties. Based on these numbers, the tax delinquent situation was very serious and was significant to many of the northern Wisconsin counties. In 1929, the State Legislature upheld the Attorney General's opinion and passed a law that specifically provided that Wisconsin counties were "now exempt from paying the acreage share" required of private owners, which was \$.10/acre.

These two legislative initiatives formed the basis for the present-day county forest program.

Langlade County's Response

What did Langlade County do regarding this dire situation? The purpose of this article is to focus primarily on Langlade County, and what led up to the decision to get involved in the county forest program, and in fact, be the first county forest established in Wisconsin. My research revealed that beginning in March of 1928 the county board began to take steps to address the tax delinquency situation. On March 6, 1928 the county board met. Two lengthy letters were addressed to the county board from landowners discussing the tax delinquent property situation. One letter of particular interest which lays the framework for what they were dealing with in Langlade County was a letter from a person named Joseph Poss. One paragraph of his letter put in in perspective.

Mr. Poss wrote "Langlade Count is now reaping the results of the reckless land policy of the Federal Government. Under this policy, the Federal Government gave away or sold for a nominal sum the bulk of the vast public domain without any restrictions or reservations whatsoever. As a consequence of this recklessness, lands once covered by fine forest, which, if logged under proper restrictions would have been an inexhaustible source of timber supply, were permitted to pass to private ownership and the owners finding it most profitable to do so, totally denuded these lands of timber and thus destroyed them as a source of public revenue."

Both letters asked the county board to revise their current land policy regarding the taking of land deeds. An article on the front page of the Antigo Daily Journal on March 6-7, 1928 stated

“County Board to Take Tax Titles”. Both letters asked the county board to change its policy regarding the taking of tax delinquent land, but the county board decided to keep their current policy.

State Legislative Committee Meeting in Antigo

The following month a meeting was held in Antigo by the Committee on Forestry and Public Lands of the State Legislature. This was the first public meeting of this committee and it was held in Antigo on Monday, April 23, 1928. The committee members at that time were Senator Blanchard of Edgerton, Senator Mueller of Wausau, Assemblyman Ries of Madison, Assemblyman Treambath of Hurley and Assemblyman Fronck of Antigo.

The Antigo Daily Journal reported the following day that the Legislative Committee met and said “Forestry Committee Takes Testimony of County Board Chairman”. The article reported that “The committee on Forestry and Public Lands of the State Legislature held its first hearing at the courthouse in this city yesterday afternoon and from the expressions of Chairman Blanchard and other members of the committee, the information obtained through examination and statements made by various citizens much valuable information was obtained, which will help the committee in making its recommendations to the next session of the legislature”.

The article went on that the courtroom was filled and there was an unusual showing of interest in the issue. The committee’s main intent was the gathering of information for the next legislative session and discussions centered on the tax delinquent problem. Mr. Palmer, who was on the county board at that time, said “in his town the cut overlands were being taxed from \$10 to \$12 per forty. He favored a severance tax, even while the timber was still on the land”. Chairman Blanchard stated, however, that “the present law would not permit land covered with commercial timber to be registered under the forest crop law”.

Chairman Blanchard stated that he believed that within five years there would be “county forests” and “town forests” as well. As the meeting closed, Fred Berner of the Antigo Daily Journal asked to make a statement for the record. He commended the committee for the sincere effort they were making to solve this very difficult problem, but he said he felt it would be solved. He referred to “towns in the East that now had town-owned forests that were bringing in actual revenue”. He went on to say “that with proper education of the public on the subject and the active work now being done, a similar situation would in time prevail in Wisconsin”. As the meeting ended Chairman Blanchard thanked those present.

Langlade County Board Establishes a Conservation Committee

The following day after the public meeting, the Langlade County Board held what turned out to be a three-day county board meeting. At this first day of the meeting a resolution was passed to establish a "Conservation Committee".

On the second day of the county board meeting, the Chairman of the County Board appointed three members of the board to serve on the newly established "Conservation Committee", in accordance with the county board resolution. The supervisors that served on this first Conservation Committee were: Supervisors Cavers, Village of White Lake, Morgan, Town of Rolling and Weissshahn of the Town of Vilas.

Fred G. Wilson Speaks to County Board

On that same day, April 25, 1928, in the afternoon, Mr. Fred G. Wilson, Extension Forester of the College of Agriculture of the University of Wisconsin, spoke to the county board on the subject of reforestation. In his discussions, Mr. Wilson addressed the board on the matter of establishing a county forest. He suggested that certain areas where there was considerable delinquent land be set apart as county forests.

County Resolution Passed to Plan for a County Forest

On the third day of the special county board meeting, April 26, 1928 two critical resolutions were passed by the Langlade County Board. The first resolution stated in part that "the Agriculture Committee of the County Board jointly working with the State Conservation Commission, and are hereby authorized and direct to prepare tentative plans for the selection, care and administration of county forests, and that they further directed to give publicity to such plans and also publicity to the law under which such proposed forests shall be operated".

County Resolution Passed to Hold a General Election to Establish a County Forest

The second, and historic resolution that was passed stated that "under the provision of Section 59.98 of the Revised Statutes of the State of Wisconsin for the year 1927, there shall be submitted to the electors of Langlade County at the general election to be held on November 6, 1928, a resolution authorizing the County Board to acquire and by tax deed or otherwise, for the purpose of establishing a county forest reserve". This resolution was critical because the proposal by the county board to establish a county forest was being sent to the electors for a vote.

"Unique Distinction"

The front page headlines the following day of the Antigo Daily Journal of April 27, 1928 read "Step Toward County Forest is Taken by County Board". The article went on to say "action

which gives Langlade County a unique distinction that of being the first county in Wisconsin, and perhaps in the country, to take steps toward the creation of a county forest reserve”.

That same day, an editorial appeared in the Antigo Daily Journal. The title was: “A Unique Distinction”. The editorial said:

“The Langlade County Board yesterday took action which gave to the county the unique distinction of being the first in Wisconsin, and possibly in the United States, to take step toward the establishment of a county forest. The Agricultural and Conservation Committees were authorized to draw up plans, and the questions of granting authority to the board to acquire the necessary lands will be submitted to the voters at the November election. The board is to be congratulated for its vision and for its enterprise; also on its desire to secure the endorsement of the electorate. This, we are sure, can be obtained if the voters are fully informed as to the proposal through a campaign of publicity which will clear up any doubts and misunderstandings. The county has some lands acquired under tax deeds, or which will be so acquired, which are suitable only for forestry. These lands will remain in the county’s possession because they are of no value to private individuals. The only way the county can ever hope to profit by these holdings is to grow trees on them, and if proper forestry practices are followed, in the course of a few years they will begin to be an asset. The Daily Journal has repeatedly called attention to what has been accomplished with town forests in the East, and with similar forests in Europe. It has also pointed out the possibilities of county forests, and it is pleased that the county board has shown itself open to conviction and prepared to take an advanced step”.

Antigo Daily Journal – Vote Yes

During the summer months leading up to the fall election, the county board took no official action. The next important event took place on November 3, 1928, which would be three days before election day. The Antigo Daily Journal came out with an editorial, which was entitled: “Vote ‘Yes’ on Referendum”. It stated:

On next Tuesday the voters of this county will be called upon to decide a number of important matters, but that we feel is most vital to the continued growth and prosperity of the people of this section is the forestry referendum. Langlade County is the first to vote on a county forest, and if the proposition is carried it will be the first to profit from it. It is a project that we can enter upon with practically no cost, and with the promise of returns that will continue as time goes. Langlade County can acquire hundreds of acres of land through tax title that are not now bringing in anything in the way of taxes. If these lands are taken out of the tax roll, it will be no loss to either the towns or the county. On the other hand, if the county can take the land over and enter it under the forest crop

law and start reforestation, in a few years it will be bringing in actual cash returns. In fact, if the proposition goes through next Tuesday, the Conservation Commission has given assurance that it will give the county special consideration in the way of fire protection, seedlings, plants and pay for labor to direct the work of reforestation. Thus employment will be given to people in the area taken over. It will, of course, not amount to much at first, but as time goes on it will increase. At the same time, the towns will receive eight dollars per forty in taxes from the state and county. The proposition has the enforcement of forestry men, who can more easily visualize the future possibilities, likewise businessmen, economists, financiers who have looked into the subject.

The one answer is that China lacked the foresight to reforest and protect its resources. Germany did. Langlade County is at the threshold. We must look fifty, one hundred, yes several hundred years into the future. If we decide to reforest as provided in the referendum, we will have taken a great stride forward. To us there seems only one side to the question. Vote "yes".

The above referendum focused on three primary areas: 1) that the county could profit from these lands, 2) that the county would receive state assistance (fire protection, reforestation and labor), and 3) the towns would receive financial assistance by receiving \$8.00 per forty in taxes from the state and county. The editorial was interesting in that it discussed China vs. Germany, and how they managed their forests and what resulted in those countries because of their different mode of action.

Full Page Ad in Support

On the same day as the editorial there was a full-page ad in the paper. In researching this paper, and viewing the newspaper during the period of 1927-1929, I very rarely found any full-page ads. At that time the Antigo Daily Journal was averaging 4-6 pages, so one can only imagine the cost of a full-page ad. The ad titled: "What of the Future of Langlade County?" The subheading said: "The Outcome of the Referendum on the County Forest Will Have Much to Do With It". In the middle of the ad was a large box with a big large arrow stating "Vote Yes". In the ad was a description of the county forest and the county and why the county should vote yes on the establishment of a county forest.

The ad was paid for by the following advertisers, some of which some will recognize:

- Antigo Building and Supply Company
- Antigo Loan & Investment Company
- Berner Bros. Publishing Company
- Yawkey-Bissell Lumber Company
- Antigo Telephone Corporation

- Association of Commerce
- Wisconsin Valley Power Company
- City Gas Company
- Frost Veneer Seating Company
- Dakin & Strong Company
- Mehne & Neilson
- Langlade National Bank
- Muttart & McGillian Company
- McDandless & Zobel
- Anton Molle
- First National Bank
- Fidelity Savings Bank

Milwaukee Journal Guest Editorial

On election day, which was November 6, 1928 a guest editorial appeared in the Antigo Daily Journal. The editorial was out of the Milwaukee Journal and the title of it was "The Langlade County Forest". Obviously by now this referendum question had gained statewide significance and this editorial stated:

"Among the interesting referendum questions on some of Wisconsin's ballots will be this one, in Langlade County:

'Shall the county board of Langlade County, Wisconsin, be authorized to acquire land by tax deed or otherwise, for the purpose of establishing a county forest reserve, as provided in Section 59.98 of the Wisconsin Statutes?'

Voters of Langlade County ought to say an emphatic 'yes' to that question.

Wisconsin's counties especially northern counties --- ought to be making county forests. Forests are investments. They will bring returns. The first return will come in the interest they will instill among individuals in tree growing.

As governmental units grow trees, private land owners will follow. Some landowners would take the lead if it were not that it is risky to plant young trees when there is no public interest. So long as the State or counties are not interested, there is too much likelihood that private plantings will be burned. Fires will start on unprotected public land; or on tax delinquent land, or on nay careless neighbor's land. In a day or two it can destroy the work of years.

So private owners hesitate. Until the counties get interested, until more people are interested, they are reluctant to spend much money and a long-time effort to grow trees that may be sacrificed to fire.

A county forest will mean public interest. It will mean encouragement to an industry from which every upper Wisconsin county can profit. New industries, or rehabilitated old one, can lift a county from the verge of bankruptcy to prosperity.

Meanwhile every forest--- county, state or private has its influence on agriculture, climate, the scenery, the recreational appeal of the county. Any every forest has its influence on children, who should grow up with an appreciation not only of the beauty of forests, but of their practical value as timber sources.

No better investment can be made by any county than to put unproductive acres to work.”

The above editorial was very interesting as it pointed out three main areas that people back in 1928 were beginning to look at. They were: the investments in the forest, and of unique significance that private landowners would follow good forestry if the governmental units started practicing good forestry, spoke about unique public interest and began to discuss the recreational appeal and its influence on those who live and grow up in these forested areas.

General Election Day – Time to Vote

On November 6, 1928 the general election was held where the referendum was on the ballot for a vote of the taxpayers of Langlade County. It took two days to get the final votes. The Antigo Daily Journal, on the day after the election, with seven precincts still unreported (five city and two rural), reported a headline that said “County Forest Plan Given Endorsement”. The article stated that the “proposal has received an excellent endorsement”.

The second day after the election, all the votes were now totaled, the vote was: Yes – 4,486 and the No – 2,382, for a majority of 2,104 voters. The headline in the Antigo Daily Journal stated “Majority of 2,104 for County Forests”. Only the rural towns of Evergreen, Polar, Rolling and Summit voted against the resolution for the establishment of a county forest.

Editorial – County Forest Won

In an editorial on November 7, 1928 the Journal wrote “County Forest Won”. The editorial stated:

“Langlade County has approved the county forest program in no uncertain terms, and although the vote is not quite complete it is virtually two to one in its favor. The Daily

Journal is particularly gratified at the outcome, having suggested county forests months before the proposal took definite form as a project in the county board, and having supported it throughout. But to the painstaking work and zeal of the board's Committee on Conservation must be credited the success of the campaign. Especially gratifying is the fact that the vote of the city was not needed to overcome opposition in the county, for the country had been won for the county forest idea. This means that the project will be launched under the most favorable auspices. Not to be overlooked, either, is the prestige Langlade County has won by being the first to approve creation of county forests. As such it should receive no little encouragement from the state".

Resolution Authorizing Examination of Land for County Forest by UW-Wisc

Two weeks after the general election the county board held its annual meeting and on November 22, 1928 approved a resolution that would authorize the Extension Forester, who at the time was F.G. Wilson of the College of Agriculture of the University of Wisconsin. The resolution stated that he was to "make careful examination of such areas of tax delinquent lands as may be suitable for reforestation purposes and report the board at the January meeting of the Board with recommendations for the establishment of County Forests". This resolution was submitted by the Conservation Committee and was approved unanimously by the county board.

This resolution was critical in the in the fact that the county board was asking the University of Wisconsin, and F. G. Wilson, to come up to Langlade County and actually look over the tax delinquent lands and pick out those lands that would be suitable for reforestation and eventually for establishment of a county forest.

State Forestry Committee Meeting in Madison

In January of 1929, Langlade County Board of Supervisors was invited to a meeting on Forestry and Forest Crop Act by the Interim Committee on Forestry to be held in Madison at the State Capital and stated that the purpose was to discuss the delinquent tax situation in northern Wisconsin counties and actually to propose legislation for further adoption.

F. G. Wilson Addresses the County Board

After the spring elections, the Langlade County Board reconvened on April 24, 1929 and elected Mr. L. Feiburger, from the City of Antigo 6th Ward, as Chairman of the Board. At that same meeting F. G. Wilson addressed the board on matters pertaining to delinquent lands and county forest. The headline and the article in the Antigo Daily Journal stated "Problem Delinquent Lands Again Comes Before the County Board". At this meeting the county board discussed at great lengths the problems of delinquent lands and what to do with them. Supervisor Guy Tillman from the Town of Parrish, said his township "has suffered more than

others from the evils of tax delinquency, thought that a committee should designate blocks of delinquent lands to be set aside for forestry, thereby forestalling the difficulties set forth”.

During the discussions in which a number of supervisors participated, County Clerk W. I. Strong offered the information that the county now has 45,000 acres it has taken on tax deeds. Soon after this discussion, Extension Forester F. G. Wilson, who was reported to be in town for two or three days, addressed the board briefly. He reported on his survey of tax delinquent lands in this county as far as it has been carried. His map shows the largest blocks in the Town of Parrish and in the eastern part of the west township Ackley. He pointed out sections suitable for forestry, including some lands in Upham that have a fine second growth requiring only protection to thrive. Mr. Wilson also discussed pending legislation that has an important bearing on county forest prospects. Soon after Mr. Wilson spoke, the county board accepted an offer from an individual of \$200 for a forty of tax delinquent land. In the article in the Antigo Daily Journal said that “testimony was to the effect that the land is too rough for cultivation and has no timber on it except a little firewood”. The charges against the land were slightly more than the price paid, amounting to \$232.39. There were no other offers for the property. So based on this one can just imagine that Langlade County had 45,000 acres of tax delinquent land of which they sold one forty for \$200, which was less than the taxes owed on the property itself.

Resolution Adopted to Designate Land as County Forest

On April 26, 1929, the fourth day of the County Board meeting, the board adopted the first resolution to establish a county forest. Resolution #9 designated 2,082 acres of land to be entered into the county forest program. The acreage listed in that original resolution amounted to approximately 1,300 acres in the Town of Upham, 240 acres in the Town of Summit and approximately 640 acres in the Town of Wolf River.

The Antigo Daily Journal reported in a front-page headline that “Two County Forest Tracts Set Aside by County Board”. The article stated there was considerable debate, pro and con on the resolution which ultimately passed on a vote of 15 to 8, with one member being absent.

Resolution Passed to Enter More Lands if State Pays Ten Cents/Acre

The county board at that same meeting also passed a second resolution, which would authorize the Conservation Committee of the board to submit for entry under the Forest Crop Law all lands delinquent in the Town of Parrish to which the county has title, (and this is the stickler) provided that the State Legislature passes an act now before it, paying to the town, ten cents per acre for each acre under the Forest Crop Law, but not requiring the county to pay that much into the state treasury.

The vote on this resolution was passed almost unanimously, 22 to 1. This second resolution is interesting because it was contingent on the legislation currently being discussed at the state level which would exempt counties from paying the “acreage share” of 10 cents per acre.

Based on the passage of these two resolutions, the establishment of the Langlade County Forest was in full gear.

State Passes the County Forest Reserve Law

Later in 1929 the State Legislature passed the County Forest Reserve Law which provided that the counties were exempt from paying the “acreage share” required of private landowners in the Forest Crop Law program.

State to Make Payments to Counties as County Forest Aids

Two years later in 1931, the State Legislature amended the County Forest Reserve Law and provided for payments of county forest aid of 10 cents per acre annually on entered county forest lands.

Today’s County Forests

Today, those payments are still being made on 2,392,045 acres of County Forest land in 29 Wisconsin counties.

Langlade County now has 130,003 acres designated as County Forest and ranks 7th in size. The largest county forest in Wisconsin is Douglas County with 280,046 acres. The success of the County Forest Program in Wisconsin since 1929 has been remarkable and has demonstrated the sustainability of Wisconsin’s forests.

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