Canada's Forest History Societies

Canada's history is inextricably linked to our forests, which have been a part of the lives of the country's inhabitants as far back as one would care to look, an integral part of the sustenance, economy, culture, art and music of many native peoples. Early European settlers established resource trading based on furs, fish and later timber as staples of the economy. The timber industry opened up new areas for exploration and came with the building of roads, railways and new settlements. Stories from 19th century logging camps are fascinating accounts of logging and innovative survival techniques in remote areas during harsh winters.

Forestry is one of Canada's most economically important sectors. Forests are also significant in terms of their cultural influence. From the paintings of Tom Thompson to the maple leaf that adorns Canada's flag, forests are a part of Canada's national identity.

While the term forest history generally refers to the history of logging, it may also be broadly defined to include such diverse topics as ecological history, forest fire history, development of forest policy and legislation, key people and organizations, and the evolution of tools and equipment. Across the country there are presently four provincial forest history societies: the Forest History Association of British Columbia; the Forest History Association of Alberta; the Forest History Society of Ontario; and the Société d'histoire forestière du Québec. These organizations aim to celebrate, collect and preserve Canada's forest history.

An upcoming issue of The Forestry Chronicle (spring 2014) is dedicated to the work of the forest history societies. The issue will include articles that reflect the myriad roles that forests have played in shaping our country's present and future, ranging from the pre-contact era to today. A brief history of the provincial forest history societies is intended to promote the special theme issue.

The Forest History Association of British Columbia is the oldest such organization in Canada, established in March 1982. Before the arrival of Europeans in British Columbia, First Nations utilized forest resources for building canoes, homes and tools, for fuel and clothing. In the 1840s and '50s small logging companies were established along the BC coast. By the 1880s the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway significantly increased the demand for BC timber and by the late 1920s the province was producing about half of Canada's lumber annually. Concern for ecological sustainability began to grow throughout the 20th century, culminating in the famous protests and blockades of the Clayoquot Sound logging roads throughout 1993. The conflict resulted in more stringent regulations on harvesting and planting, including limits on the size of clearcuts, and better protection of streams and other habitats. Most recently, climate change, mountain pine beetle, and forest fires are significant challenges to the forest industry of British Columbia. The purpose of the Forest History Association of British Columbia is to increase understanding of the history of logging in British Columbia and its impact on the environment and society.
awareness, appreciation and preservation of this complex history. To fulfill this mandate, the Association encourages and assists in cataloging and archiving collections of historic materials. It supports the collection of oral history by interviewing individuals involved in the forest industry, and has sponsored oral history methods workshops. The Association also maintains an online database of publications relating to British Columbia's forest history. Its own publications include reports on the history of the BC Forest Service's research program, including the Cowichan Lake and Aleza Lake Research Stations. The Association has also published several biographies of important and influential people in BC forest history, including F.D. Mulholand, the father of sustained yield forestry in BC, and Alan Orr-Ewing, forest genetics specialist.

Inspired by its neighbour, the province of Alberta formed its own association, the Forest History Association of Alberta, in 2002. Alberta's forest industry shares a similar history to that of British Columbia. In addition, new settlers in Alberta used fire as a land-clearing tool. Often these would get out of control and become large wildfires. Sparks and cinders from train steam engines were also frequent sources of ignition along railway lines. Forest fires were such a major hazard that in 1905 the Dominion Forestry Branch started to build a forest fire control organization and began to hire fire rangers. Its campaign focused on education, including posters urging trappers, campers, and other forest users to prevent forest fires. In the 1920s the first aircraft were used for fire detection and in 1928 a fire permit system for land clearing was introduced. The objectives of the Forest History Association of Alberta are similar to those of its BC counterpart: to promote, foster, develop and enhance a recognition of, and appreciation for the importance of forests in the life of Albertans. The Association acts as a curator of photographs, documents, and other historical items. Some of these documents are available on their Web site www.albertaforesthistory.ca. The FHAA continues to scan and catalog photographs and images, and has also conducted and transcribed several oral interviews. The FHAA has contributed to the publication of several forest history books such as Don Hamilton: Bush Pilot and Entrepreneur, the story of Don Hamilton's aerial wildland firefighting business and Mountain Trails, the journals of an Alberta forest ranger from 1920 to 1945. Further projects include locating, describing, and inventorying old structures, trails, lookouts and camps. The FHAA also publishes a newsletter, Trails & Tales.

In Eastern Canada there are two forest history societies, the Société d'histoire forestière du Québec and the Forest History Society of Ontario formed in 2007 and 2010, respectively. European settlers began clearing forests as early as the 1700s. The timber industry began in the late 1700s and spread westward through the 1800s. Canadian timber was in high demand in emerging international markets, particularly by the British Royal Navy. This led to widespread highgrading of forests throughout Eastern Canada. A notable example was the intense harvesting of Ontario's provincial tree, the Eastern White Pine, which was used for ship masts. Large-scale forestry operations started in the 1830s. Joseph Cunard, William Price and J.R. Booth were important timber men in eastern Canada, owning and operating large, efficient sawmills and operating their own vessels and railways. While the government was initially slow to react to the growing forest industry, over time a regulatory system was developed whereby temporary licenses were issued to harvesters, with some revenue being returned to the government. In the 20th century, forest management and policy began to develop more sustainable practices based on scientific research, incorporating the goals of conserving ecosystems and improving the quality of timber in the forest to increase its value over time.

The Société d'histoire forestière du Québec aims to produce and disseminate cultural content for the general public and scientific content for specialists relating to Quebec's forestry history. Through its activities, it promotes an appreciation for the richness of this history and stimulates knowledge transfer and dialogue between different forest stakeholders. In this spirit, the SHFQ published a book on forestry research at the Université Laval from 1910 to today, titled L'enseignement et la recherche en forsterie a l'université Laval.

The Société also publishes Histoires forestières du Québec and runs a forest history blog covering a range of topical and historical subjects.

The Forest History Society of Ontario is dedicated to celebrating Ontario's rich forest history by discovering, preserving and making available documents, photographs and other artifacts relating to forest history. Identifying and archiving collections of materials is one way to achieve this goal. The Society recently coordinated the cataloguing and archiving of a collection of...
The contention that forestry as practiced in jurisdictions across Canada is threatening boreal forest ecosystems is false. Canadian interdisciplinary forestry, which includes excluding operations from areas of high conservation and cultural value and modifying operations in other areas, ensures that biodiversity, wildlife habitat, water quality, soils and cultural values are well integrated and proactively and effectively managed in policy, planning and practice, without exception. In fact, many species benefit from efforts to emulate the natural disturbances—upon which boreal forest ecosystems are based.

"Forest management and the sustainable harvesting of wood should not be implied to be a negative extraction activity, said Michel Vallée, President of the CIF/IFC. "We are concerned that this report is misleading the public in terms of the very high standards that Canadian forestry achieves."

Forest practitioners and professionals are highly trained and live and work in the boreal forest of Canada or regularly visit it to conduct forest management activity, to perform audits, to do research, or for a variety of other reasons. They are also involved in working with local residents and citizens from across their provinces to ensure Canadians have opportunities to influence forestry operations. These individuals are responsible for ensuring publically owned forests are managed sustainably as is required under provincial legislation, and a wide variety of science-based publicly-reviewed forest management guides and manuals that follow from this legislation.

"Our members, many of whom are registered professional foresters and forest technologists across Canada work well within the complex, comprehensive forest management planning, implementation, and auditing processes, in full support of sustainable forest management," said John Pineau, CEO of the CIF/IFC. "We take great pride in how well all of our forests are managed for all Canadians."

Provincial and federal governments in cooperation with forest industry also maintain a number of research programs to test the effectiveness and efficiency of forest management direction as applied through audited forest management plans that are approved for implementation on public land. An increasing number of First Nations communities and aboriginal Canadians are becoming directly involved in both forest management planning, and in managing operational forest businesses.

"All the forest management plans, the guides used to develop them, and information on how forest management planning, implementation, monitoring, and auditing are undertaken can be found on-line in the public domain," said Matt Meade, Executive Director of the CIF/IFC. "Input is on these plans are vigorously solicited, and it is an open and transparent process."

The CIF/IFC contends that the balance of available scientific information suggests that Canadian forest management is conserving the biological diversity of boreal forest ecosystems. There are many other sources of information, including research papers published by independent scientists that support this conclusion. The Institute believes that the message in the report, though well intentioned, misleads the public with respect to Canada's rigorous and interdisciplinary science-based forestry practices.

The Canadian Institute of Forestry (CIF/IFC) has over 2300 members and is the national voice of forest practitioners, promoting public awareness and a better understanding of good forest stewardship.

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