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SMALL PRIVATE FOREST LANDOWNERSHIP IN THE UNITED STATES—INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIAL PERCEPTION

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Public policy is the most controversial phase of forestry. We may be wholly realistic about silviculture or forest economics or the utilization of timber. But the perennial discussion of what the people should do about their woods and other natural resources related to them draws deeply upon human interest and emotion. Often it starts a crusade.¹

This statement by the late Colonel William B. Greeley, former Chief of the Forest Service (1920-1928) and later a prominent leader of the forest industry, stresses the role of policy controversy in forestry. Over the past four decades few issues have figured so prominently and have been so durable in forestry or conservation policy than that concerning the productivity and management of small private forest lands.

The future of our timber resources and the needed actions to insure continued timber supplies have been the source of much heated argument. In an attempt to evaluate the situation with respect to the Nation's forest resources and to provide a basis for policy recommendations, the United States Forest Service, by itself or in cooperation with others, has made over the years a number of detailed comprehensive analyses of the situation in regard to ownership distribution, timber volumes, annual growth, and annual drain. These studies have included the Capper Report covering the period from 1909 to 1918, the Copeland Report covering 1925 to 1929, the Joint Congressional Committee on Forestry Report of 1938, the Reappraisal of the Forest Situation in the United States covering 1945 to 1948, and most recently the Timber Resource Review of 1958. With advances in techniques of forest inventory, more accurate utilization data, and more intensive analysis, each report has been an improvement over its predecessor.

As would be expected in studies dealing with our entire forest economy, there have been differences of opinion as to conclusions and recommendations on most of these reports. For each individual concluding "timber famine," there has been another replying "nonsense." For some who saw a dark future for the nation's forest resources and advocated some form of governmental control or

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regulation of privately owned lands, there have been others who decried such actions as both unnecessary and contrary to traditions of private ownership and individual freedom of action. This controversy dominated conservation policy discussions throughout the late 1920's, 1930's, and early 1940's. During this period several bills were introduced in Congress providing for federal control of cutting practices on private forest lands. None was enacted into law.

Accompanying this debate over public regulation of private forest lands were a number of developments. In the 1920's and 1930's federal laws were passed which provided for public programs of educational, advisory, and financial aid to private forest landowners. These included: the Extension Forestry Program of the United States Agricultural Extension Service carried on in cooperation with the various states; the Cooperative Forest Management Program of on-the-ground assistance to landowners operated by the states and financed by federal funds; assistance to private forest owners by the Soil Con-

2. A leading proponent of regulation was the former Chief Forester, Gifford Pinchot. In the Foreword to Ahern, Forest Bankruptcy in America (1934), Pinchot said:

The most urgent need of the forests of America is similar control. Voluntary cooperation as a means of ending forest devastation has broken down. Almost every civilized country has, to some extent, public control of lumbering on private forest lands. In America we must have such public control as will stop forest devastation. This is the key to our future in forestry.

3. The protagonists in this controversy were varied; in general, verbal and written expressions on this issue among members of the forestry profession divided as might be expected—publicly employed foresters stressed the need for regulation, and those representing private interests took an opposite stand. However, there were many exceptions. During the late 1930's Dr. Austin Carey, a retired member of the United States Forest Service, was one of the outspoken critics of regulation proposals and wrote several articles in the Journal of Forestry expressing his viewpoint.

4. Although several bills concerning public control of cutting on privately owned forest lands were presented to Congress, the one that probably attracted the most attention was introduced in November, 1941, by Senator Bankhead of Alabama, S. 2043, 77th Cong., 1st Sess. In essence this bill provided for state administered control over forest practices. Interstate commerce of forest products produced contrary to the provisions of the respective state plans was prohibited. States failing to provide a satisfactory plan of regulation could be denied cooperative forestry funds under the Clarke-McNary Act, 43 Stat. 653 (1924), as amended, 16 U.S.C. §§ 564-72 (1958).

5. The Weeks Act, 36 Stat. 961 (1911), established the principle of federal-state cooperation in forestry, providing cooperative federal funds to any state which had established a system of forest fire protection. This cooperation was enlarged in 1924; the Clarke-McNary Act, 43 Stat. 653 (1924), broadened the scope of federal aid in fire protection and also authorized federal funds for the production and distribution from state nurseries of tree seedlings for farm woodlot, shelterbelt, and windbreak plantings. In 1937, the Cooperative Farm Forestry Act, 50 Stat. 188, further extended cooperation by providing federal funds for state-operated programs of technical aid to farm owners in the management of the woodlots. Later, in 1950, the Cooperative Forest Management Act, 64 Stat. 473, broadened these technical services to include processors of primary forest products as well as woodland owners.

6. Insofar as practical, the initial program was administered through state agencies such as departments of forestry, extension services, and local soil conservation districts.
Small Private Forest Landownership

In 1963 most Americans look to the future with a combination of awe, optimism, and uncertainty. Economists, business leaders, and public officials...

7. The USDA, Soil Conservation Service, created by the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act, 49 Stat. 163 (1935), has provided aid to farm woodlot owners chiefly through the device of including recommendations for woodlot management in the overall plan—stressing as it did that each part of the farm be devoted to that purpose for which it is best suited.

8. These incentive or benefit payments originated under the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act, 49 Stat. 1148 (1936). The first use of these payments for forestry was in a special naval stores conservation program which was designed to encourage better fire protection, turpentining, and cutting activities on the longleaf and slash pine turpentine farms of the South. Later these payments were extended to include tree plantings, stand improvement and thinnings, pruning, construction of firebreaks, and fencing for the protection of forest stands against grazing. Administered under the guidance of local farmer committees, the forestry practices that are approved for payment often vary with the committee's judgment of local conservation needs.


10. As a result of the controversy over federal regulation, eleven states, since 1941, have passed legislation establishing varying degrees of regulatory control over cutting practices on private forest land. Among these states are Maryland (Md. Code Ann. art. 66C, § 396 (1957)); Massachusetts (Mass. Laws 1943, ch. 539; see Mass. Ann. Laws ch. 132, §§ 41-42 (1957)); Minnesota (Minn. Laws 1943, ch. 60, § 1; see Minn. Stat. Ann. § 84.025 (1946)); and Nevada (Nev. Laws 1955, ch. 355; see Nev. Rev. Stat. Ann. §§ 528.010-.110 (1957)). These laws usually prescribe either minimum tree size cutting limits or specified numbers of seed trees per acre to be left after logging.
predict new challenges of national growth, prosperity, and opportunity. Basic to these predictions has been the spectacular growth in our national population. The pre-war 1940 population of 132 million surged to 180 million by 1960, and now is predicted to reach anywhere from 268 to 433 million by the year 2000.11 These people will be consumers of goods and services at a scale unprecedented in history. Their impact is tersely summarized in a recently published 1,000-page, five-year study by Resources for the Future, Inc., as follows: “Our main conclusion can be summed up briefly: Natural resources are of basic and continuing importance to national economic growth and individual well-being, and vastly greater quantities of them will be required in the future.” 12

Important among our natural resources are our forest lands and timber resources. It is very probable that over the next forty years we shall have to accelerate the intensity of forest land use if we are going to provide the output of products required by the year 2000.

A common thesis of those who would scoff at an expression of concern over the future supply of timber products is that substitutes will be found, and new and more efficient uses for wood will be discovered. This may be true to some extent, but while certain uses of wood, such as lumber, have declined on a per capita basis, other uses have vastly increased. Today it is estimated that for every man, woman, and child in the United States there is consumed some 450 pounds of paper and paper products annually. One need only glance at the daily content of the wastebaskets in any home, with its load of discarded newspapers, magazines, food packages and wrappings, clothing boxes, and facial tissue, to realize where part of this consumption arises. To what extent substitutes of other origin can replace wood cellulose as a raw material for many of these essentials of modern living is a problem outside the scope of this article, but the premise can be stated that if such substitutes must be used because of a lack of economically available wood cellulose, and if these substitutes entail a greater social cost to produce, then a social inefficiency has been permitted to take place. An extreme example of such a situation occurs in India where a teeming population consumes only three pounds per capita of paper and paper products annually, and fuelwood is so scarce that animal excreta, badly needed as a fertilizer, is used for household cooking fuel.13

What can we expect of our forest resources in the future—how far can they be extended?

Two things are readily apparent. First, our land base for forest production

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12. Id. at 4.
is unlikely to be expanded; on the contrary, it may be expected to decline somewhat. Another 100 million people or more will require more food—the food problem which American agriculture currently faces is likely to reverse itself within the next three to four decades. Increasing urbanization, particularly in the Northeast and Lake States, already is sprawling out over agricultural lands including farm woodlots. New super-highways and other service facilities are taking land out of farm or forest production every day.

Second, it is doubtful if imports of timber and timber products can be increased to any considerable extent. Canada, which is our main supplier of the timber products and raw materials that we now import, can be expected also to undergo increases in population with attendant increased pressures on its own forest resource base. Long term and significant expansions of imports from Canada could be expected to be only moderate at best. The timber-producing countries of Western Europe, with few exceptions, already experience levels of pressure on their timber base far exceeding that of this country, and few increases can be expected from this area. Some authorities even predict that Western Europe will experience a shortage of wood by 1970. Also, with the current world situation, future imports of timber products and raw materials from the countries of the non-free world are very questionable.

The conclusion is that we must be prepared to supply our future forest products needs from our own land resource base, and that it will decline to some extent.

It is within this context that the most recent comprehensive analysis of the nation's timber resources—the Timber Resource Review—found in on-the-ground sampling of all classes of owners (public and private) that cutting practices were poorest on the small private forest landownerships. As a consequence, one of the major conclusions of the Timber Resource Review was: "A Key to the future timber situation of the United States lies with farmers and other nonforest industry private owners. These ownerships are in greatest need of improvement."16

Who are these owners, and how significant are they in the national forest resource picture? Of the 489 million acres of commercial forest land in the United States, 27 per cent is publicly owned and 73 per cent is privately owned. Notwithstanding the large tracts of national, state, and industrial forest lands, more than half of our commercial forest land is owned by a host of diverse

small owners totaling some 4.5 million individuals or groups. Thus, in terms of forest area these owners certainly constitute a significant part of our timber resource.

II

FORESTRY PROGRAMS AND THEIR ORIENTATION

Although earlier concern over productivity on private forest lands often stressed the need for formal social controls, the emphasis in recent years has been on less stringent methods. Thus, recent public programs have consisted of (1) educational and technical assistance; (2) efforts to reduce the risk and uncertainty in regard to taxes, credit, fire, insects, and disease; (3) cost-sharing or incentive payments and free or low-cost seedlings for reforestation; and (4) promotion of group institutional arrangements such as co-operatives and management associations. Stoddard has interpreted the apparent philosophy behind these approaches as follows:

Programs appear to have been based on the belief that all forest land owners are owner-operators who, because of ignorance of proper forestry methods, fear of loss from fire, insects, disease, pressure of high taxes and the need for liquid funds, have had no choice but to exploit their woodlands. It followed that if owners were ignorant of proper forestry methods, they must be brought ‘education’ by technical foresters in the field. To remove the burden of heavy property taxes each year when no income was forthcoming from the forest, state property

17. In Timber Resources for America's Future (USDA, Forest Resource Rep. No. 14, 1958), small owners include all private owners of less than 5,000 acres of land. In actuality, the bulk of the owners have far less than the maximum 5,000 acres cited as the upper limit of the class.

18. Under most forms of government, the use of some form of social control over the actions of individuals, whether in a personal sense or in respect to their use of a resource, is widely recognized. Our form is no exception. Formal social control over land in the form of police power, eminent domain, or taxation has many precedents in the United States. Zoning ordinances are important means of utilizing the police power. Here, in spite of the ugly connotation of the term “police power,” few residential owners would complain if a zoning ordinance prohibited a disagreeable commercial venture from locating next door. Similarly, the use of eminent domain to claim private property for state use, as exemplified by new highways, urban renewals, public parks, and military reservations, is common and accepted. Severance taxes on minerals and licenses for certain types of commercial establishments are examples of the third major form of formalized social control over land resources or use—that of taxation. Thus, there are many precedents for social control over private resources in our country. The individual, however (and logically so), usually zealously guards against new impositions of controls which would affect him personally. The critical questions (which most often are answered in the political arena) are (1) whether the control is necessary, and (2) whether the form of recommended control will achieve the desired end.

tax laws should be modified and taxes collected on a deferred yield basis. To reduce the chance of heavy losses from fire, more intensive forest protection programs were called for. Similarly, greater effort was required to reduce insect and disease losses. Insurance programs were proposed for further spreading of risk and to compensate for such losses as would still take place. To improve the liquidity of the frozen forest investment, special credit programs were proposed. In addition, it was thought that some direct technical service and subsidy might provide enough added incentive to bring wide-scale results.20

In effect, these owners are assumed to be the possessors of an economic resource—land and timber—who through a combination of ignorance, economic or physical risks, and capital shortages are thwarted from “practicing forestry.” Stoddard continues:

Under perfectly free market conditions of an idealized economic model, it should be expected that sustained yield management would result. In some situations, long-term forestry programs have been adopted by individual forest owners with favorable growing stock, sites and markets. The fact that forest management is not up to acceptable standards on the large majority of small properties, however, is indicative that programs have not fulfilled expectations.21

It is not the purpose of this article to attempt to refute or validate the above contention. Rather, it is to emphasize the differences which can exist between society’s opinion (as represented by some public forestry programs) of the small private forest landownership resource and that as perceived by the owners themselves.

III

SMALL FOREST LANDOWNERSHIP STUDIES

Beginning in the early 1940’s and continuing to the present, a number of studies have been made which examined forest landownership in terms of the owner himself.22 These studies, and subsequent ones not listed, were made in

20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
different sections of the country at different times and used varied techniques of sampling and study emphasis.

From the plethora of findings and conclusions in these various ownership studies (whose number prohibits a review of detailed findings), two conclusions were apparent. First, each study must be analyzed fully in its context—context in the locale of the study and in terms of the time when it was made. Economic, sociological, and physical factors vary considerably from place to place and over time. Generalizations drawn from a 1942 sample of Mississippi landowners who were primarily farmers may ill fit 1963 conditions in rural areas adjacent to growing urban populations.23

Second, the historical pattern of viewing the small private forest landowner in terms of the economics of the firm—that is, assuming him to be primarily motivated by the desire for profit and that profit to be forthcoming from the growing and harvesting of trees—is misleading. Study after study has shown this view to be erroneous; with few exceptions, many other objectives of ownership take precedence over growing timber for sale. Because many owners do not place timber growing for profit high among their objectives of ownership, the lack of reasonably priced credit, the burden of taxes, and the lack of insurance on timber growing stock have been of little concern for most small forest landowners. That these factors are paramount in the economics of a firm or industry is obvious, but from the responses of owners in most of these studies, few regarded these factors as problems in the ownership of forest lands.

IV

THE UPPER MICHIGAN STUDY

A study made in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan in 1959 and 1960 provides a good opportunity to examine in more detail the small owner's perception of his role as a forest landowner.24 The study used a list sample (taken from county tax rolls) to provide both the basis for the estimate of population and the sub-sample for personal interviews. A list of eligible owners (individual or multiple owners of non-platted rural lands totaling between five and 5,000

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23. A recent study of two Appalachian counties in Virginia, fifty miles from Washington, D.C., emphasizes this point. A section, which was formerly a community of general farms, increasingly is becoming a recreation site for metropolitan dwellers. This study, made in 1962, disclosed that resident ownership is now the exception rather than the rule, and that one out of every three landowners lives in Washington, D.C., or its suburban areas in Maryland and Virginia. See Johnson, Carpenter & Dill, Exurban Development in Selected Areas of the Appalachian Mountains (USDA, 1963).

acres) was assembled from public records. A three per cent random sample was taken from this population, and each owner selected was classified as to occupation or type of ownership, place of residency, and total forest land owned. Samples selected as outlined above were grouped into occupation or use (for joint or multiple owners) classes, and a sub-sample was made for personal interview purposes.

To better interpret the study findings, a brief mention should be made of the physical and economic environment. The northern lake states form a belt extending from the Upper Peninsula of Michigan across northern Wisconsin and northern Minnesota. Although differing somewhat in physical aspects and local institutions, these three state areas possess a common heritage of a boom during the late 1800's and early 1900's in mineral and timber exploitation, followed by a long period of static or regressive economic conditions. The resident population has grown very little over the last four decades and many young people migrate elsewhere in search of better economic opportunities.

Upper Michigan itself is largely forested land, with approximately eighty-nine per cent of the land area so classified. Of the more than 9 million acres of forest land, forty per cent is publicly owned (mostly included in National and State Forests), twenty-eight per cent is in large private ownership, and thirty-two per cent (more than 3 1/4 million acres) is in small private ownership.

The upper Michigan economy is based on forestry, recreation, mining, and agriculture. Both mining and agriculture have declined in the last several decades. For mining, these declines have been a consequence of competition with mining in other parts of the country and overseas where ore deposits are richer and mining costs lower. In agriculture the declines have been part of a longer term pattern. Relatively short growing seasons (especially in the interior of the peninsula) and limited high-quality agricultural soils, together with long distances to large centers of population and markets, have combined to limit agricultural development. The number of operating farms dropped from 13,087 to 8,381 between 1930 and 1954, and then further declined to 5,446 in 1960. The area in farmland declined by slightly more than one-fifth during this thirty-year period.

The forestry situation in upper Michigan has changed and is still changing. The past three decades have seen the problems encountered in shifting from timber use based on old-growth, large sawtimber to utilization of products from second-growth timber stands. Many towns and villages have experienced economic hardships with the closing of a large sawmill built to operate on old-growth timber. Conversely, the increase in pulp and paper manufacture and pulpwood production has created new jobs both in the mills and woods. While seven pulp mills or fibreboard mills operate in upper Michigan, much of the pulpwood harvested is shipped across the state line to Wisconsin mills.
The long coastline, numerous lakes and rivers, abundant forest lands (including vast tracts of publicly owned forests), a pleasant summer climate, wild game, and a relatively small local population compared with land resources make the Upper Peninsula a very attractive vacation land. Economic benefits to the local economy from recreation are significant and appear to be growing.

Census figures for 1960 showed a resident population of 305,622—approximately evenly divided between urban and rural. Actually, many of those listed as rural live in towns and villages too small to qualify in the urban category. Seasonally the population is increased by recreational visitors from lower Michigan, Wisconsin, and the central states. As mentioned earlier, with minor differences the physical, economic, and social factors found in upper Michigan prevail across much of the northern lake states—northern Wisconsin and northern Minnesota as well.

One of the salient findings in the upper Michigan study was the extent of the change in category of small ownership. In the Upper Peninsula it no longer is true that farmers are the dominant component of the small private forest owner population. Farmer owners represented only 17 per cent of the total number of owners and held 13 per cent of the small-ownership acreage. Who were the others? They were business and professional people who reside in the country, retired people, wage earners working off the farm but still living on the land, hunting clubs, recreation groups, undivided estates, and others.

What of ownership objectives? Again, the stereotyped concept of attributing timber values as the main reason why most small forest owners own forest land appears suspect. In order to sort out the primary reason for ownership, the owner was asked if he would retain ownership if the values or utilities provided by a particular use were removed. To illustrate this technique, one owner interviewed was a retired person who made his residence on a small wooded tract from which he occasionally sold cedar poles and cut fuelwood for home use. While subdivisions of land can be and often are made, in many instances property has its highest value as a unit. Also, in areas of marginal economic activity where land markets are slack, such subdivision usually is neither practical nor possible. This was the case with this owner who considered residency as his primary reason for ownership. Although he realized incomes and utilities from the cedar posts and fuelwood uses, neither was important enough to cause him to retain ownership if the residence utility was eliminated.

Using this technique, it was found that ownership objectives varied considerably (Table I). Prominent ones cited included: ownership to provide a residence, hunting or fishing use, general farm use, as a site for a summer home or weekend cottage, and inactive (no tangible reason at the present time).
Primary reasons for ownership by specific ownership categories fell into a quite logical pattern. Farmers mainly were motivated by general farm use, pasture, and timber values. Most of the retired, housewife-widow, and business-professional groups showed residence as their primary reason for ownership. Recreational aspects—hunting, fishing, or a summer-cottage site—was the number-one reason for ownership among wage earners.

Interestingly, 14 per cent of the owners representing 10 per cent of the small-owner acreage could not give any concrete reason for holding their property. This is the category labeled “inactive.” Often these were group ownerships where the property had been inherited, a typical response from such owners being: “The taxes are low, and we probably wouldn’t receive much if we did sell.” In a sense this might be categorized as an “investment” objective, but if so, the action is passive and involuntary. Some of these situations apparently owed their continued existence to joint ownership, as in several instances members of such joint ownerships indicated that some of their number did and some did not want to sell. These situations, as well as those of individual owners who were unable to cite any definite reason for continuing ownership, could be classified as instances of “ownership inertia”—the disutility of ownership in the form of payments of annual property taxes (or other ownership expenses) apparently is insufficient to overcome or outweigh the utilities of ownership, however subtle and abstract, and cause the owner to break the status quo by disposing of the property. In some instances, individuals had purposefully acquired a piece of property but at present could indicate no concrete reason for retaining ownership. Here, many owners indicated that time or personal circumstances had thwarted earlier plans, and present ownership was a passive state. A very attractive offer to sell, a personal hardship, or the prospect of declining income with approaching retirement often was the factor that changed a piece of property’s status from “inactive” to “for sale.”

Table I shows that when the reasons for retaining ownership were grouped,
the combined categories of "investment," "inactive," and "for sale" accounted for 28 per cent of the owners and 41 per cent of the area. The basis for aggregating these segments of the population was their common attribute of uncertain future tenure; owners in this grouping either have their lands for sale now or indicated that they would readily sell if the price was right. The size of this group presents unfavorable implications to forestry programs and practices, which require a reasonable amount of stability and length of planning horizon among potential participants in order to be successful.

The breadth of this article does not permit a complete listing of other statistics from the upper Michigan study on length of past tenure, expectations as to future tenure, frequency of timber harvesting or sale, forest management practices, impact of taxation, credit needs, response to public forestry programs, and indicated attitudes toward proposed new programs. But, in general, on all of these aspects the small owner did not seem to react in the classic manner—he did not appear to fit the pattern of Adam Smith's classic "economic man" when it comes to his forest ownership.

V

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SOCIAL AND INDIVIDUAL PERCEPTION OF RESOURCE USE AND VALUE

This article is not intended to suggest that there are not many small private forest landowners who are economically motivated. Obviously there are. Also, it seems logical that the response to forestry programs or economic opportunities in forest management will vary depending on the productivity of an area's forest stands as well as the owner's personal financial circumstances and alternative opportunities. But from the upper Michigan study, as well as from studies in other sections of the country, it seems that there are some striking differences between a stereotype social viewpoint of the small forest owner and the owner's actual identity and own perception of his role. Also, with contemporary trends this gap in identity is widening. Society's concept of the small owner seems to have been as follows: (1) he most frequently is a farmer or owner-operator; (2) his primary reason for holding forest land is as a "producer good" or source of revenue; and (3) economic obstacles (taxation, lack of operating or investment credit, and physical risks) are holding him back from practicing better forest management and raising the level of productivity on his forest lands.

The decline in the number of farms and farmers in the United States over the last two decades is so well known that citations hardly are necessary. Similarly, the increase in specialization both on and off the farm is well known. Both of these factors have contributed to the "fading" of the image of the small forest owner as a purposeful timber grower and producer. There are
many doctors and lawyers who own “Tree Farms,” but how many of these can or will cut or supervise the sale of ten cords of pulpwood during their winter “slack season”? Owners of this type may be less inclined to liquidate prematurely their timber growing stock because of financial exigencies; on the other hand, they also may be less inclined to sell timber when it is ready for harvest, especially if aesthetics or other non-economic values are conflicting.

Similarly, these changes in rural landownership composition have produced changes in emphasis on reasons for ownership. Many small forest landowners now are absentee owners, holding their lands for recreational purposes. In the upper Michigan study more than half of the small owners did not reside on their properties, and one-fourth were from lower Michigan, Wisconsin, or elsewhere. Twenty-seven per cent of all small owners in upper Michigan cited recreational aspects as their primary ownership objective.

Tied in closely with the above is the questionable practice of assuming that most owners basically are economically motivated and respond accordingly to economic stimuli or pressures. It is true that there are few who enjoy the luxury of making decisions without regard to cost or incomes. But again it is a matter of degree. It would appear that the recreationally motivated owner most often views his forest land not as a producer good contributing tangible dollar incomes, but rather as a consumer good—whose consumption is the psychic values entailed in relaxation, outdoor sports, or simply respite from the pressures of urban living. Within limits these values are difficult to measure, and often economic cost is secondary. For instance, in the upper Michigan study the property tax did not appear to be a major factor affecting the majority of small owners even though in many cases property taxes on unimproved properties seemed very high. Annual taxes of $0.50 per acre on second-growth forest land may not seem excessive to an owner with one forty-acre tract held for hunting, fishing, or summer home purposes. But the same tax burden on an owner with 1,000 acres might be confiscatory.

VI

REASONS FOR DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SOCIAL AND INDIVIDUAL PERCEPTION

The reason for differences between society’s concept and the actual nature of many of the small forest owners are not hard to explain. American forest policy had its roots in Germany, France, and the northern European countries. The period and environment during which forestry “flowered” in Europe and many of the classic silviculture and forest management texts were written were quite unlike those in the United States during the past three or four decades. European forestry of the 18th and 19th centuries grew and prospered in an economy of shortage. Labor was the abundant resource, and land was the
scarce resource. Alternative opportunities for investment were limited, and scarcity made timber growing an attractive investment. Pride in landownership (engendered partly by the scarcity of land) and intensive land husbandry prevailed. Turnover in private landownership was rare, and family tenure of many generations was common.

But in the United States things have been different, and to some extent, waste and profligate use of our forest resources have been synonymous with a dynamic economy. Today, after several hundred years of settlement and shifting landownership, the situation is far from static. Whereas the pioneer in his westward odyssey “wore out” one farm and moved westward to another, the contemporary pattern of migration frequently is from farm to city for the farmer’s sons and daughters, and from city to a country estate for the retired doctor or lawyer. Social, occupational, and geographic mobility is probably higher in the United States today than at any other time or in any other part of the world. In addition to these patterns of social and economic change, there are a host of individual reasons for buying or selling property. Personal situations change, emergencies develop, and plans for the future are thwarted. Landownership by individuals in the United States has been and continues to be a dynamic institution.

Closely coupled with these economic and social changes is the difference in the contemporary American economy and the economy of Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries. Alternative opportunity, patterns of social legislation, consumer credit, and abundance of consumer goods all produce a much different regard for land and timber as a source of income than prevailed in Germany, France, and northern Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries (and which to a lesser extent still prevail today). Whether for good or bad, the characteristics of frugality, forbearance of consumption, and patriarchal regard for posterity can hardly be called strong traits of 1963-vintage Americans. And yet it appears that these and other similar “virtues” often are still attributed to present-day owners of small tracts of forest lands.

CONCLUSION

And what of the future? Both individual and public planners frequently have been led widely astray by dogmatic faith in a contemporary trend. Predictions on future population growth made in the 1930's show how wrong even the experts can be sometimes. Over the past two decades a relatively high level

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25. In 1951, I was privileged to participate in an informal seminar with the late Dr. C. S. Schenck (the distinguished German forester who founded the first American forestry school at Biltmore, N.C., in 1898) during his last visit to the United States. In response to a student’s question as to measures which might help to improve the productivity of American farm woodlots, the octogenarian replied that he would recommend “burying faggots” in each woodlot.
of national and individual prosperity, increasing educational and social opportunities, and institutions which have created a greater sense of personal security have made the average American highly mobile. Coupled with this mobility has been a striking turnover in landownership, including tracts containing forest land. It cannot be ruled out that a vastly larger national population in the future accompanied by a greatly increased competition for landownership could create a stronger reservation demand for land on the part of owners or their heirs. If and when landownership becomes a much sought-after privilege, owners may become much more reluctant to relinquish their position. Similarly, if the economic position of standing timber as a commodity becomes greater because of changing supply and demand factors, its importance to individual small owners should rise accordingly. In any event, the goal of increasing productivity on a significant share of the small private ownerships in the United States would seem to be a formidable challenge. But if this goal is achieved, it will have to be the result of efforts which recognize the small forest owner for what he is—his varied reasons for ownership, his often short length of tenure, and his alternative investment opportunities. Public and private planners must view him realistically, and not as a classic model from the "Schwarzwald"!