

Roadside Old Growth in Western Massachusetts

By Mary Hull

How did a grove of old growth pine and hemlock growing beside a road in western Massachusetts manage to escape farmers, loggers, timber barons, and the box trade, growing and growing and growing until they were over two hundred years old and eleven feet in circumference? Most old growth is located in rugged or inaccessible terrain that has helped ensure its longevity. But this three-acre grove of eastern white pine and hemlock, part of Hull Forestlands L.P.'s larger Sears Meadow Forest, is located by the roadside in Ashfield, Massachusetts.

According to eastern old growth forest expert Bob Leverett, these trees (which are as convenient to access as any old growth he knows of in New England) offer a glimpse of the forests of North America prior to European settlement. Tall and stately with deeply furrowed bark, they stand straight and solemn, their long trunks free of low branches, their canopy darkening the forest floor. Their longevity is remarkable. The history of these trees and the land in which they are rooted provides some clues to their survival. It is a tale of salutary neglect, estate squabbles, grand larceny, the economics of portable sawmills, and a single-minded obsession with steam.

Two hundred and fifty years ago, when our oldest tree got its start, the earliest settlers in Ashfield had been there not quite ten years. They gradually cleared the land for agricultural use, and they moved and piled one stone at a time, creating the stone walls that demarcate the property today. To process all the timber cut by the settlers, sawmills began operating on local brooks. By 1750 there were fifteen families and about 100

people living in Ashfield, though the population dipped in 1754 when many settlers abandoned their homes to fight in the French and Indian War. Wolves ran by the trunks of our trees, preying on livestock and avoiding bounty hunters. Bear still lived in the area, though their population was dwindling along with the forest. In neighboring Goshen the last bear was killed by 1785.

By 1800, the region was even more open, and a town history observed that wild turkeys were no longer seen. This is when the majority of our trees got their start, seeding in on land that had been cleared. In the early 1800s a sawmill began operating at the outlet of the Sears Meadow, just below our stand of trees. Over the next few decades, agriculture began to decline in this region, where as much as 60 to 80 percent of the land area had been cleared for grazing, the planting of crops, and orchards. Wool was a fairly strong business in the area, and much land was dedicated for sheep pasture. But our trees were allowed to grow. Whether this was because they provided shade in a pasture, or simply because they weren't worth bothering with, our trees persisted. By 1850, more of our Sears Meadow trees had sprouted up.

In 1870, when the land our trees are rooted in was purchased by Goshen farmer Rodney Hawks, the youngest trees were in the 50-year range and were probably not remarkable in size, while the oldest of the Sears Meadow trees were approaching 120 years. And they were desirable species. White pine is an easily worked, lightweight wood commonly used, then and now, in construction lumber and furniture making. Eastern hemlock, whose bark contains high concentrations of tannins, had long been sought after as a source of tanbark.

This land would remain with Hawks's ancestors for the next 125 years, which would prove to be a lucky break for the trees. Hawks owned a lot of timberland and by 1875 he was running a sawmill, one of several in Goshen, on the Mill River off of East Street. His daughter, Mary, married Howard Packard, whose family ran another of Goshen's sawmills. Rodney died in 1895, and his only child, Mary Hawks Packard, inherited his property and sawmill. Because her husband Howard Packard was tax collector in Goshen, he knew which properties were tax-delinquent and frequently purchased these at low cost, adding to the family's now considerable land holdings. After his father-in-law's death, Howard Packard dismantled Rodney Hawks's mill and erected it beside his home on Route 9 in Goshen. (This property is still in the Packard family. If you drive by the homestead, you can still see some old steam boilers by the side of the road—evidence of the family's long obsession with steam). The Packard sons—Waverly, Waldemar, and Ruthven—grew up working alongside their father at this mill, which ran on steam generated by the burning of sawdust, slabs, and shavings.

The survival of our old growth is intimately connected with the personalities of the three Packard brothers, who may have been named by their mother for characters in Scott's *Waverly* novels. Legendary in their hometown, they developed an early interest in steam and grew up working beside their father in the mill, which was at one time the most profitable business in Goshen. The Packard brothers also drove Stanley Steamers, cut hay with a homemade steam-powered mower, and delivered lumber on a steam wagon. The oldest, Waverly, born in 1883, studied for his steam engineer's license and had moved away by 1900, working as an engineer at the state hospital's power plant and later as an electrician for United Electric in Springfield. After Waverly left home, the

other two brothers never seemed to get along with him. Forester Howard Mason can recall Ruthven and Waldemar's oft-expressed disdain for the brother who "deserted the family business and went to work as a steam engineer in Springfield and smoked big black 'seegars.'" As electricity gradually outmoded the area's steam plants, the brothers accumulated a vast collection of steam boilers and engines. Apparently making money was never a primary interest for the Packards. According to Goshen town history, they kept accounts on the backs of old boards that had a habit of disappearing and often failed to cash checks that had been written to them.

During World War II, the Packards set up a portable mill in the woods on the north side of Sears Road, across the street from the Sears Meadow trees. You might wonder why, then, didn't they cut these large trees that were so close by? But portable mills, despite their name, were not all that portable. Skid distances were short, particularly as horses and oxen were still being used. Portable mill operators did not want to go into an area if there was not at least 100,000 board feet, preferably 200,000, available. If there was not enough desirable timber adjacent to our trees, it may not have been worth setting up a mill close enough to process them. The Packards had nearly 1,000 acres at their disposal, and there were probably more desirable places for a sawmill setting. Even if they did intend to one day harvest the trees, they never had a chance to get over there. At some point during the war, most likely before 1944, the Packard's portable mill was stolen and the thief attempted to peddle it for scrap. Prices for scrap metal were at a premium during the war. How they dismantled and moved the mill out from its remote location is interesting to think about. As the story goes, the Packards later found their mill (or parts of it), but they were unable to prove that it was theirs.

There was no name or serial number on it. As a result, they never recovered their mill—and this may have been another serendipitous event for our trees.

In early 1944 Mary Packard passed away without a will, and by state law, her estate passed in equal shares to her three sons. They each held a third interest, and Waverly, who had gone off to Springfield, wouldn't let the other brothers cut any timber on the family land. From our trees' perspective, this was another lucky break. At a time when this grove was old and large enough to attract attention, a family quarrel ensured their survival for another ten years. The Packard timber kept getting bigger and bigger, and loggers and sawmill men began to look longingly at it. Among them was Lumen Peck, a legendarily shrewd lumberman and founder of the Peck Lumber Company (PLC).

When Waverly Packard died in 1952, his 1/3 interest passed to his wife Bertha, and Lumen Peck approached her with the intent of purchasing her interest. The following year he sent his forester Howard Mason out to map and cruise all the Packard land holdings. The Packard land was almost 1,000 acres with several million board feet of timber, and it included a gravel bank located in the Packard Orchard lot off Goshen's East Street. It got so that "everyone in the country wanted to buy their timber," explained Mason. Lumen Peck was not about to miss out on the opportunity.

In 1955 Waverly's wife Bertha deeded her share in the Packard land to the PLC for \$100,000. That same year middle brother Waldemar Packard died, passing his interest to his wife Gertrude. Lumen Peck filed a petition to partition, which may have forced the hand of the other two parties, for the following year, Gertrude and Ruthven conveyed their 2/3 interest to PLC for \$100,000 each—a lot of money in those days.

When the Peck Lumber Company acquired the Packard forestland in 1955, their forester Howard Mason recognized that the Sears Meadow trees were significant, and he recommended that Peck not cut them. In addition, many of them were by this time already in a state of decay, and Howard Mason suggested they would serve as a good example of what happened when you let trees grow too big. Although Peck had two portable mill settings on the property at two different times not far apart, there was never any push to cut the pines. In 2000 when Hull Forestlands (HFLP) purchased many of the Peck woodlands, the Sears Meadow Forest was among them.

Intrigued by the possibility that this could be old growth, HFLP invited Bob Leverett to measure the pines in this stand, and he found circumferences ranging from 7.6 to 11.7 feet and heights ranging from 117- 131.9 feet, with an average of 260 square foot/acre basal area. One of the biggest pines was estimated to have 3,500 board feet of volume. Ring counts were conducted by David Orwig, Forest Ecologist at Harvard University, who estimated one of the hemlocks could be as old as 250, while the white pines ranged between 183-217 years in age. Orwig also found the pines had very good growth early on, averaging 5-8 rings per inch. His estimates are conservative, and Orwig felt the trees could be much older, but since many were rotten at the core, it was difficult to get an accurate core sample.

HFLP has pledged to protect the stand of old growth and has placed the property under conservation restriction with the state of Massachusetts's Division of Fisheries and Wildlife. This preserved area is open to the public for inspection on foot. From 116 in Ashfield turn west onto Sears Road and then look for the Hull Forestlands sign on the left.

The Sears Meadow stand of old growth pine and hemlock has survived to the present day through chance, serendipity, and stewardship. Each of the landowners connected with the property allowed the trees to continue their lifecycle without interruption. These stately elders of the forest are an example of the natural progression of the forest and a testament to the idea that wood is memory. They hold within them the tales of centuries.

The author gratefully acknowledges the following sources, which were consulted for this article:

Anne Sabo Warner, *A Bicentennial History: Goshen, Massachusetts 1781-1981*. (Publication of the Goshen Historical Commission) Bloomfield, Connecticut: Connecticut Printers, 1980.

Rev. John Lockwood, *Western Massachusetts: A History 1636-1925*, 2 Vols. New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, 1926.

Hampshire County Registry of Deeds

Edward Foster, "Sawmill Owner is Authority on Steam," *Northampton Gazette*, September 4, 1963.

Interviews with Howard Mason of Russell, MA, Peck Lumber Company forester from 1951-1982

Data gathered by Bob Leverett, eastern old growth forest expert, and David Orwig, Forest Ecologist at Harvard University

U.S. Forest Service web site www.usfs.gov