

## **Guided by the “Bare Spot:” Trees and the Logging Industry of Union County**

**By  
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Growing up in Swengel the 1950s, I often ran out our back door and looked up at the north side of Penns Creek Mountain. My eyes always landed on a patch of rocks nearly at the top of the mountain, totally devoid of any trees. The whole mountain was covered in lush blue-green foliage so that the light brown rocky patch stood out and became, for me, a landmark. No matter where I was in the “West End”, I could usually eye the “bare spot” and know where I was in relation to my home. For 20 years that treeless area helped me orienteer to adventures around the county and faithfully guided me back again.

It is the stark treelessness in comparison to the rest of the mountain that makes the “spot” so visible for miles around. Had there been no trees on the mountain, the rocky pile would have gone unnoticed. In my lifetime I have never experienced the mountains that border Union County without trees. But recently, while doing research for a summer exhibit on logging in Union County, I discovered that about 120 years ago most of our mountain trees, as well as forests throughout the state, were starkly clear cut.

### **Pioneer Era (1680 – about 1870)**

Logging in Union County began with the arrival of the first German, Scotch-Irish and English settlers. The trees of Pennsylvania were a primary natural resource. They were used to fashion everything from baskets, household furniture, hand tools and farm implements to structures for shelter. In addition, trees were harvested so that charcoal could be created for the smelting of iron ore, and tannin extracted from bark for preserving animal skins.

The first homes of settlers were log structures, for which our forests provided abundantly. Axes and froes were the tools used to harvest local trees and

fashion them into simple structures: round logs laid horizontally, notched at the corners and roofing made with long slices of log split by the froe.

The Samuel Dale family moved into a log cabin whose foundation lies under the Ell of the Dale/Engle/Walker house. The limestone main structure of the home was built onto the east side of the cabin around 1793. The cabin was replaced with the Ell about 40 years later.



Dale/Engle/Walker House showing the Ell extending to the left behind the Main structure. *Photo: Jim Walter*

The first permanent structures in Union County were grist mills for the processing of grains into flour and chop for domestic animal feed. Preceding the construction of the first grist mills was the setup of water-powered sawmills. Locally harvested timber was cut at the sawmill, and provided the necessary beams and boards by which the grist mills were constructed. Following completion of a grist mill, the sawmill could continue to be used on site for production of lumber for other uses, such as better homes and barns for livestock. Or, often, the sawmill was moved to another, more convenient site near other construction.



Few photos exist of water powered sawmills. This one was taken circa 1890 in Potter County of the remains of a typical early, family-operated small mill. Photo: Public Domain.

### **Water Transportation Era (1800 - about 1910)**

Soon the industrious settlers were harvesting lumber for saleable products. The grist mills provided opportunities for early residents to turn their excess grain into marketable flour; alternatively, homemade whisky was another saleable way to utilize extra grain. These products were packed into sturdy wooden barrels, and loaded onto rafts or arks, all made from local wood. The rafts and arks were floated downstream during the “Spring Freshet” when creeks and rivers were flowing fast and full. Not only were the flour and spirits floated downstream to markets; the rafts and arks used to carry them were dismantled and sold for lumber as well. Only the people returned back upstream.

Small, local sawmills continued to operate through the early half of the Nineteenth Century, supplying lumber to build towns and industries within the county, with enough excess to continue the Spring flotilla of arks to Columbia, Lancaster Co. (and then overland to Philadelphia) or downstream to Baltimore. Baltimore, a shipbuilding center since the Revolutionary War, continued to need supplies of lumber. So each Spring, until 1909, Union County arks and logs, floating down White Deer, Buffalo and Penns Creeks, would join and mingle with thousands of other logs and numerous vessels on the Susquehanna from Williamsport and beyond, all heading to large sawmills downstream.



Three Arks for a log drive on Pine Creek, in Lycoming or Tioga County, Pennsylvania, USA. The left ark was for cooking and dining, the middle ark was the sleeping quarters, and the right ark was for the horses. The arks were built for just one log drive and then sold for their lumber. The line of the Jersey Shore, Pine Creek and Buffalo Railway can be seen on the eastern shore, and the mountainside behind it is nearly bare of trees from clearcutting. Photo: UCHS

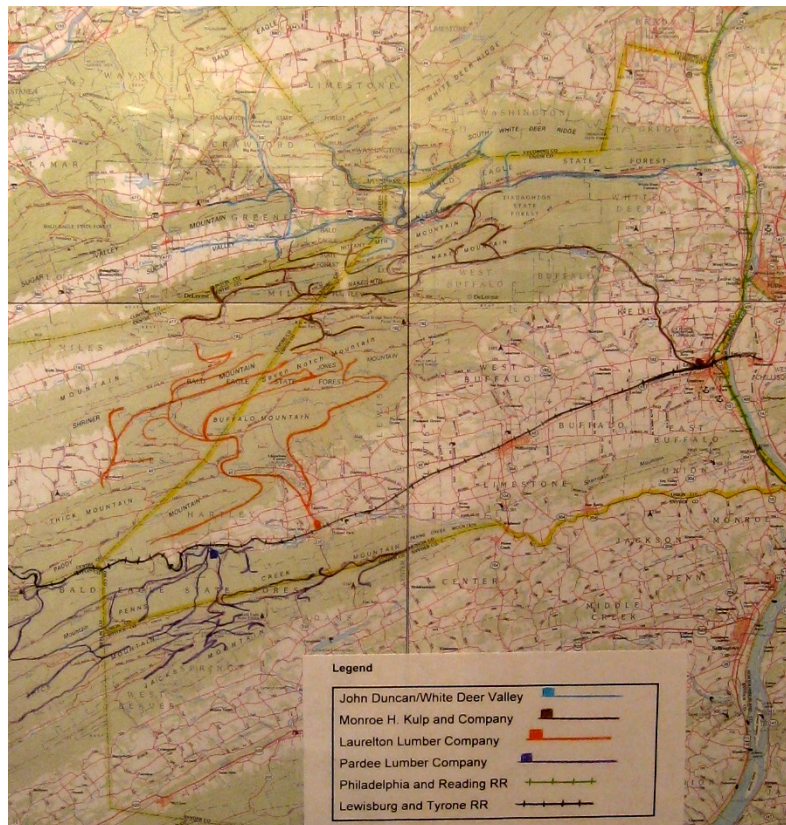


This undated view of a log “spar” raft on the Susquehanna River was taken from either the Market Street or Camelback Bridge. The raft is more than 100 feet long with at least eight distinct sections visible. A half-dozen men maneuver it downstream with huge sweeps. The logs likely originated from the robust logging industry in North Central Pennsylvania. Photo: Public Domain.

### **Railroad Era (1864 - about 1948)**

With the coming of rail roads to Union County in 1864, the pace of logging picked up. Pennsylvania logging continued strong and grew to a peak in 1900. This was the era of logging railroads, which supplied timbers to sawmills that were no longer tied to waterways. The supply was year-round, no longer dependent on the swollen streams and rivers of spring time.

The floor of Buffalo Valley had been cleared in previous years and was being actively farmed. Most of the remaining timber was on the mountains forming the northern and southern borders of the county. Tracts of northern timberland were purchased by John Duncan and the Kulp family, and the southern mountain land was purchased by Arlo Pardee. Both the Kuls and Pardee needed props for their coal mining operations elsewhere. During this period, lumbering and lumbering-related jobs were a mainstay of the local economy and were closely tied to the coal mining industry.



Logging tram roads of the four major logging companies are contrasted against Union County's border which is shown in yellow.  
Author's Map and Photo

Duncan's mill was located at White Deer and connected via the White Deer and Loganton line to the Philadelphia and Reading Rail Road. His woodland tracts were directly west of White Deer on Nittany Mountain and extended north into Lycoming County and west into Sugar Valley and as far north as current Ravensburg State Park in Clinton County.



The Kulp family built a mill on the west edge of Lewisburg and constructed spurs to both the P&R and the Lewisburg and Tyrone Rail Roads. They cut wood from tracts on Nittany Mountain from the Spruce Run Reservoir westward well into Center County.

Another very active sawmill was built just south of Laurelton. Timber was cut on Paddy, Buffalo and Jones Mountains, then crossed south over the western tip of Buffalo Valley to the mill at Laurel Park. It was said that a log truck could coast from the “Hook” (Natural Area, on Jones Mountain) down tram roads to the mill.

Pardee constructed his mill about a mile east of Weikert and cut from Penns Creek and Jack’s Mountains to the south and west, into Snyder and Mifflin Counties. Both the Pardee and Laurelton mills were serviced by the Lewisburg and Tyrone Rail Road.



Laurelton Mill at Laurel Park. Logs were delivered by narrow gauge rail (left and right) to the mill pond to await sawing. They were individually pulled up the ramp (center) into the mill. Sawn lumber was collected in huge stacks to the right of the mill; the Lewisburg and Tyrone Rail Road hauled the lumber to destinations beyond. Photo: Public Domain

These sawmills, for the most part, were far away from the standing timber, and lumbering jobs became specialized.

“Wood hicks” worked in the forest cutting trees with double bit axes and

with the assistance of a mule, and loaded them on a narrow gauge log truck. Teamsters or, later, “wildcats” controlled the narrow-gauge trucks as they coasted downhill from the cutting site on a mountain to a station in the valley where logs were either unloaded into a mill pond to await sawing, or directly onto standard gauge cars for transport to their final destination. A crew consisting of the engineer, fireman and switchman was needed to drive each of the trains.



The entire camp crew of the Walker Tract of the Laurelton Lumber Company posed for documentation. Although some accidents happened, and they did practice “wild catting”, Laurelton did not share the high-risk reputation of the Pardee Company. Photo: Public Domain

Then of course there were the very necessary track crews, which laid the narrow gauge track further and further up the mountains as the lumbering progressed. Cooks were needed to keep everyone fed at mountain logging camps built to house the crews near their work. Blacksmiths found fulltime work near the logging operations, constantly making repairs as well as forming new spikes, bracing and mule shoes. In addition, a crew was needed to run the local saw mill. All these people worked for their “company” and logging was subsidiary to coal mining.



Intrepid wood hicks and their sharp double-bitted axes. Photo UCHS

Union County trees became props and ceilings for coal mines in other parts of the state. Two wood hicks could cut, trim and load 15 tons of prop logs per day



Taken in 1900 at the Lackawanna Colliery in Lackawanna, PA, this photo shows the use of props to hold up the rock ceiling as miners work to remove the narrow vein of coal. Photo: Public Domain

(one car load). Prop timber was sold to coal mines for \$1.50 to \$2.25 per ton, or \$22.50 to \$33.25 per carload. Thick-cut slab wood was used to line mine ceilings. Wood was needed for ties under the standard gauge rails that ran between the



landing and the mine (example: 75 miles from Laurelton to Hazelton). Coal cars were fashioned from lumber and miscellaneous buildings were needed to shelter equipment, bosses and miners.

In 1905 the Pennsylvania coal mining industry required 52+ million cubic feet of prop timber and 100+ million board feet of sawn timber, mostly hemlock and yellow pine plus some hardwood. Supplying the demands of the coal industry and a rapidly growing nation stripped our mountains, and eventually mountains throughout the state, of their trees. The smaller-diameter logs were sold as mine props and everything larger went to sawmills for dimension wood.

The beauty of our county and our state, to large extent, is in our forests. Remembering that Tall Timbers in the Snyder Middleswarth Natural Area, south of Weikert, is one of the few pockets of virgin timber untouched by the logging industry in Pennsylvania is a sobering thought.



Cutting virgin timber.

Photo: UCHS

120 years ago, a trip in any direction from Union County would have been a totally different experience than it is today. A recent drive north on Route 15 to New York State, on four smooth lanes gliding along near the tops of mountains, provided vast vistas of green forest in every direction. The industry that stripped our county eventually clearcut the rest of the state, as well.



Five men working in difficult terrain. Photo: UCHS

Realizing that it was all done log-by-log in difficult terrain with hand tools is a tribute to the grit and tenacity of our logging forebears. Daily they performed unimaginably hard work with incomprehensible thoroughness.

### **Community Era (1910 - Present)**

Most of the land now comprising Pennsylvania State Forests and the Allegheny National Forest were formerly owned by “lumber barons” of the Railroad Era. Once all the trees had been cut from their lands, it was no longer useful to them, so they sold hundreds of thousands of acres of cut-over mountain land to the state and national governments, (often in exchange for unpaid taxes). The lumbering industry moved on to other, uncut areas further west in Pennsylvania and then to states even further west.

With the aid of the Pennsylvania Forestry Department, notably forester Raymond B. Winter, and after 1933, Civilian Conservation Camp workers, many Union County acres of overcut mountain land were replanted; the rest gradually grew back into forests naturally.

For a short time, the abandoned lumber grounds were rich in huckleberry bushes, and train excursions brought berry pickers to the mountains for outings. Eventually trees overtook the bushes and the mountains bordering Union County were once again forested.



Berry Excursion.

Photo: UCHS

Logging continues to this day within the county, much on the scale that it began more than 250 years ago, during the Pioneer Era. Most sawmills are small and family owned. The exception is Log Cabin Homes, formerly Kuhns Brothers Lumber Company.

The family mills cut, in part, from local forests for local markets. The energy source nowadays is electricity. The work is less labor intensive and much safer. Today, 5% of industry in Union County is related to wood products.

My bare spot is made a landmark because of the surrounding lush greenery of the mountain forest. Our forest is not eternal, but it is renewable. Most valley residents have had the bare spot as part of their normal view for most of their lives. But there were some residents, around the turn of the Twentieth Century, who could not find their way using the bare spot for their homing marker; the entire mountain was treeless.



The “Bare Spot” on the north side of Penns Creek Mt., south of Swengel. Photo: the author.

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