**THE GALLITZIN STATE FOREST**

**Original Forest Type of the Gallitzin State Forest**

According to E. Lucy Braun’s Deciduous Forests of Eastern North America, this area lies at the juncture of the mixed mesophytic region and the hemlock-white pine-northern hardwoods region. The term mixed mesophytic region is applied to a climax in which dominance is shared by a number of species. It is the most complex and oldest association of the deciduous forest formation. The forest vegetation of the area has been so modified by fire and lumbering, however, that it bears little resemblance to the original cover.

As would be expected in such transition areas, there was a mingling of species from both forest regions. This mixed forest was made up of sugar maple, beech, yellow birch, tuliptree, red oak, basswood, red maple, red elm, ash, cherry, shellbark hickory, sweet birch, chestnut, chestnut oak, walnut, and occasional white pine and hemlock, in varying degrees.

**Biotic and Abiotic Influences on the Gallitzin State Forest**

Forestry practices within the Gallitzin State Forest have been affected by many factors over the years. Fire, logging, mining, and gypsy moth are some of the more dramatic occurrences.

Gypsy moth was first noticed in heavy concentrations on the forest in 1983. Because of these high populations, the defoliation in the oak stands ranged from moderate to heavy, with the heaviest occurring along the face of the Allegheny front. Mortality due to this defoliation was light. Since then the gypsy moth population has declined to the point where spraying, having been done in 1983, has not been needed. Future spraying of these oak stands will probably be done when and if the egg mass counts warrant such a treatment.

The type of land ownership is a more subtle influence. Since most of the forest land within the district is owned by individuals who do not advertise timber sales, timber stumpage prices have been kept low due to a lack of competitive bidding.

**Early Harvesting**

The first sawmill in Somerset County was built sometime between 1772 and 1796, and by 1820; at least seventeen mills had been constructed. This was the pioneer era of logging, when sawmills were mostly small, family-owned, and operated by water power.

The first attempts toward developing the lumber industry on a commercial scale in Somerset County was made in 1848 by George D. Wolf, William J. Baer and D. B. Ernst, who had large interests in timber lands in eastern Paint Township. Wolf, Baer, and Ernst erected their mills at Ashtola. This area of the county had been largely untouched by the settlers before that time. The Wolf, Baer, and Ernst mills operated for eight or ten years, but the company was greatly hampered by lack of transportation facilities. Rafting was then the primary method of transporting logs from the woods to the mills, and the Ashtola locality was far removed from any river large enough to support rafting. The railroad era of Pennsylvania lumbering was still to be born. About forty years later, these old Ashtola mills passed into the hands of the E. V. Babcock Lumber Company.

The Latrobe Boom Company operated extensively in the same general area for a number of years after 1884, with mills at Mostollar Station, and later, near Ferndale, Cambria County. After this company ceased operations, some of the members of the company built and operated a large sawmill at the present site of Seanor, Somerset County. Some of their logs were floated down Shade Creek, but most were hauled to their mill over a narrow gauge railroad. Later, the Seanor mill and associated timberlands were bought by E. V. Babcock and Company.

In the meantime, in 1886, Ogle Township was formed from the eastern part of Paint Township. The great majority of the Babcock Division of the Gallitzin State Forest is located in what is now Ogle Township.

Another early company in the Ashtola area, also eventually bought out by Babcock, was the James Curry and Sons Lumber Company, with a band mill at Arrow, near Ashtola. This mill was built in 1898. Curry and Sons owned five thousand acres of land in the upper watersheds of Clear Shade Creek and Pine Run. Babcock purchased the Curry holdings in 1903 or 1904.

The early history of the E. V. Babcock Lumber Company goes back to the Cambria Lumber Company, which was headquartered at Johnstown until 1889. At that time, Cambria Lumber moved to Butler County, and Babcock purchased their Somerset and Cambria County holdings. These included a mill at Holsopple, where Babcock supposedly began the Somerset County operations.

The E. V. Babcock Lumber Company began lumbering operations in Somerset County in 1897 or 1898, and continued until 1914. The company cut more than 20,000-acres of timber in Ogle, Paint, and Shade Townships. Originally, Babcock operated three large mill complexes, one each at Seanor, Arrow and Ashtola. The Seanor mill was equipped with a circular saw and gang saws, the Arrow mills with a double band saw, and the Ashtola mills with a single band. The Seanor mill was abandoned about 1900. The Arrow mills were shut down in 1910 and moved to Davis, West Virginia, where the company had other extensive operations under the name of Babcock Boom and Lumber Company. Two years later, the Ashtola mills were closed and moved to Kentucky. Operation of the planning mill at Ashtola was continued for another 18-months; finally it closed in 1914.

During its prosperity, E. V. Babcock was one of the state’s biggest lumber companies. The American Lumberman reported Babcock’s production for 1906 as 52.2 million board feet, which would place it in fourth place in Pennsylvania that year. Only the Goodyear Lumber Company, the Central Pennsylania Lumber Company, and the Lackawanna Lumber Company cut more timber than Babcock, and all three of these operated in the big woods country of north central Pennsylvania.

The E. V. Babcock Lumber Company had cut the virgin timber on practically all the land that was later to become the Babcock Division of the Gallitzin State Forest. The company retained ownership of this land for nearly forty years after they closed their mills at Arrow and Ashtola, and finally sold a large portion of it to the Commonwealth in 1949 and 1950.

The original timber was mostly removed by 1912. About this time, the chestnut bark disease invaded the area, and by the early 1920’s this species was reduced from a timber-sized tree to clusters of short-lived recurrent root sprouts.

Numerous fires accompanied and followed the logging. The worst such fire lasted for several weeks, and destroyed much of the organic matter and dormant seed in the ground.

The removal of the timber caused a drastic reduction in evapotranspiration, which in turn resulted in a rise in the water table over extensive portions of the Babcock lands. Large swampy areas developed which were too wet for seedlings of the former site occupants to take root and grow, except during the drier years. Some of these swampy areas dried out and burned in the drier years. Since then, hundreds of acres of soggy, burned-over, and sterile flatlands have supported little more than under stocked aspen scrub.

**Early Mining**

Coal mining on the Babcock lands has been going on since at least the early 1900’s. In some cases, different mining companies worked in the same areas in different years. Many abandoned deep-mine tunnels have been ripped open and obliterated by subsequent strip mining operations. The result has been a sketchy and unclear picture of the history of coal mining on the Babcock Division of the Gallitzin State Forest.

When the Commonwealth purchased the property of the Babcock Division in 1949, there were reservations of certain coal rights on two warrants in the northern end of the division. The area of the two warrants involved 862-acres. Deep mining had taken place in the area long before Commonwealth ownership and surface mining occurred even after initial Commonwealth ownership.

A dispute developed between the Commonwealth and the owners of the coal reservation as to the extent of the property rights of each party. In early 1973, meetings were held between the legal staff of the department and all parties involved in the coal dispute. The main issues to be considered were: the large reserves of recoverable coal still remaining on the property; the extent of ownership of the various coal seams involved; the surface support rights of the Commonwealth; the existence of approximately 140-acres of previously strip mined land in need of modern reclamation; and the existence of several mine acid discharges resulting from old deep mine workings.

In October of 1973 a legal agreement was reached between the Department of Environmental Resources, the owners of the coal reservation and the coal operator under contract with the coal owners. In this agreement all issues were addressed to resolve both financial and environmental concerns for the area. The agreement allows removal of the remaining coal in the two warrants involved, establishing royalty and timber damages to be paid to the Commonwealth in consideration of their right as surface owners and their claim to ownership of certain coal seams. Royalty rates paid to the Commonwealth are as follows: Brookville Coal 25¢ per ton, Clarion Coal 40¢ per ton, Lower and Upper Kittanning Coal 50¢ per ton. The agreement established that all previously strip mined areas would be properly reclaimed and planted and in the process of mining, deep mine acid discharges in the affected area would be eliminated to the best extent possible. Finally, the agreement provides that as of July 1, 1988 title to all mineral rights within the two warrants involved will be conveyed to the Commonwealth.

In 1974 after mining was underway, a new coal bed was discovered below the Brookville Coal. The new seam was determined to be Mercer Coal and the Commonwealth claimed total ownership of the new discovery. To permit removal of this Mercer Coal, an addendum was made to the original agreement. This addendum provides that the Commonwealth receives a minimum $1.00 per ton royalty for the Mercer Coal with a provision for increasing royalty based on the wholesale price index for bituminous coal.

The area of the two warrants is now being actively mined and reclaimed. Reclamation plantings are done according to specifications of the Bureau of Forestry. One of the forest areas reclaimed and planted in 1976 and 1977 was very successful. Seed production orchards are now being established in this planting area for the European alder and red pine growing on the site.

At the southern end of the division a reservation of certain coal and mineral rights exists on three warrants totaling 1,294-acres. Within these three warrants only one small area of coal is presently known to exist. This area, locally known as "Briar Knob", contains two seams, the Clarion and Brookville Coals. The total surface area over these coals is approximately 100-acres. Approximately 16-acres of Briar Knob was affected by strip mining during the 1950’s. Since that time applications for permits to mine the remaining coal have been applied for, but no permits have been issued. The Bureau of Forestry has been pursuing acquisition of the coal and mineral rights in this area.

Source:

PA Department of Conservation and Natural Resources

Bureau of Forestry

Gallitzin State Forest

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