



NORTH BY NORTHWEST

By Kelly Anderson Gregg

Heart of the Forest

To explore Penn's Woods in the 21st century is to enter a landscape shaped by humanity, its peaceful sylvan settings an artifact of human making on a massive scale. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Allegheny National Forest, stretched over Warren, McKean, Elk, and Forest counties. This massive second-growth forest full of oak and cherry would not have been possible without the removal of its predecessor eastern white pines during the 19th-century logging boom. Tucked away in secluded spots, however, a wanderer can still find those primeval trees.

Wheeler & Dusenbury Lumber Company in Endeavor, Forest County. Though logs were no longer floated down the Allegheny River to Pittsburgh on spring freshets by this period, the photograph demonstrates the immense effort (and potential for disaster) in moving timber via water.

Forest County Historical Society.

Hearts Content, a protected natural scenic area within the Allegheny National Forest, is one example, a living testament to the tension that exists between the landscape and the people living in it.

Forest and Warren counties remained remote even as the land around them was tamed by the pioneer's hand in the early 19th century. While the Allegheny River allowed Pittsburgh to be accessible in two- or three-days' journey, it took 10 to 12 days to return north.¹ Many factors pulled European settlers to the area, but the fact remained that merchandise took an inordinately long time to reach their isolated location and thus cost a great deal.² To later chroniclers, the decision to cut swathes of timber was one born out of survival, but the choice was not without cost: "The pine forests (never to be replaced), were the main reliance of the early settlers, and their destruction was brought about at first, more



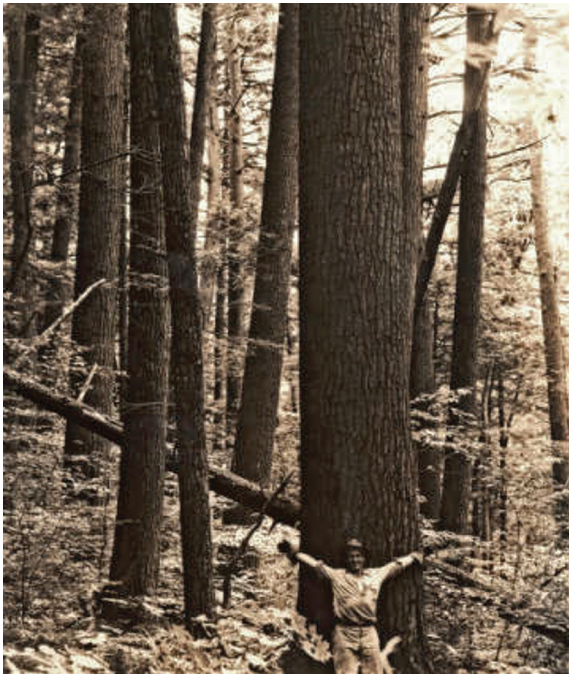
particularly for the purpose of supplying the imperative demands of the pioneer stomach."³

William Wheeler was a pioneering lumberman in the great Western Pennsylvania forests in the early 1800s. First purchasing acreage in Venango County in 1836, Wheeler declared, "To my eyes, pine trees were the most beautiful objects on earth, rafts were my delight, and saw-mills had a great attraction."⁴ Together with partner Henry Dusenbury, they invested around Tionesta.⁵ Costs were steep, and profit was scarce in the early days, plus the firm's unusual approach to workplace ethics made finding a crew difficult. When the partners insisted on building their store without alcohol for the workforce, they were met with laughter by the locals who mocked the idea of a "cold-water raising."⁶ Wheeler & Dusenbury had other unusual practices for the era, such as eliminating waste in its logging techniques and establishing



The Wheeler family at the California home of Nelson Platt Sr., circa 1912. Seated (left to right): Rachel Flora Wheeler Farley, Rachel Farley, Joseph Allen Farley, Rachel Anne Smith Wheeler, Nelson Platt Wheeler Sr., Nelson Platt Wheeler Jr. Standing (left to right): William Reginald Wheeler, Constance Hayes Wheeler, Alexander "Jimmy" Wheeler, Mary Elizabeth Fraul Ailingier, Eleanor Knox Cannon Wheeler.

Meriam Library Special Collections Department, California State University, Chico, sc22102.



Above: Hearts Content today.
U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service.

Left: Nelson Platt "Pete" Wheeler Jr., descendant of William Wheeler, at Hearts Content, date unknown.
Wheeler Family.

a logging town at Endeavor with a church and a kindergarten at its center, rather than ramshackle housing and a saloon.⁷ Where other companies sawed themselves out of business, Wheeler & Dusenbury established itself as one of a handful of stable firms in the area, owning 45,000 acres in the Commonwealth alone.⁸

A worldview of Christian service and the idea that pioneers were "advancing civilization" by bringing order out of chaos is woven through the reminiscences of later Wheelers; William Wheeler himself believed that the "Trees have been cut away, and so have the evil influences that existed when I came here."⁹ And yet, the few remaining pines that had originally called the family to the area were viewed as a sanctuary to the lumber barons. Buffered from the main lumbering area due to its distance from major waterways and later rail lines, the stand at Hearts Content spring came to be used as a retreat. During a traditional beehive hunt, Jimmy Wheeler praised the "big, clean timber" and mourned the group's felling of a 70-foot hemlock to retrieve the wild honey: "regret passed over us; we felt like so many marauders."¹⁰ The family's attitude toward Hearts Content was almost as religious in nature as their view of settling Forest County.

As the lumber industry and attitudes about the environment changed in the early 1900s, Hearts Content was opened to a larger audience of pilgrims. Ironically, Pittsburgh's demand for lumber had left it prey to catastrophic floods via the Allegheny River and its deforested banks. Calls grew from the city, state, and even Wheeler & Dusenbury to transform "a desert, treeless, stump-covered, fire-blackened" land into a national forest to aid conservation work and benefit the region.¹¹ The Allegheny National Forest was established in 1923. After much planning, Wheeler & Dusenbury gifted 20 acres of Hearts Content to the Forest, coyly remarking that it had been "forgetting to log this small parcel of excellent timber."¹² The primeval pine stand at the heart of a timber empire now memorializes both the men who changed the landscape and the trees that called them there in the first place.¹³ ☀

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¹ J.S. Schenk, ed., *History of Warren County, Pennsylvania* (Syracuse: D. Mason and Co., 1887), 302.

² Schenk, *History of Warren County*, 156.

³ Schenk, 304-305.

⁴ William Reginald Wheeler, *Pine Knots and Bark Peelers: The Story of Five Generations of American Lumbermen*, (New York: Ganis and Harris, 1960), 23. The area of Venango County in which he bought land was later broken off and formed into Forest County.

⁵ Now part of Forest County.

⁶ Wheeler, *Pine Knots and Bark Peelers*, 27-28.

⁷ "Timber Firm's Conservation Policy Shown As Profitable," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 1 July 1922, 5.

⁸ "May Acquire White Pines," *Perry County Democrat* (Bloomfield, PA), 16 November 1927, 2.

⁹ *Pine Knots and Bark Peelers*, 35. Wheeler witnessed a man buried without the offices of a minister or burial rite, and keenly felt the lack of stable culture as a result (see page 109).

¹⁰ *Pine Knots and Bark Peelers*, 98, 102 (originally written for *Yale Literary Magazine*).

¹¹ "The Allegheny National Forest," *Pittsburgh Daily Post*, 24 June 1922, 6. For an example of Wheeler & Dusenbury's support, see its advertisement in the *Pittsburgh Daily Post*, 13 August 1922, 60.

¹² N.P. Wheeler Jr., letter to partners of Wheeler & Dusenbury, 16 January 1928, 1, Wheeler & Dusenbury Collection, Forest County Historical Society. The firm sold a further 100 acres to the federal government at market value.

¹³ For more on today's 122-acre Hearts Content Recreation Area, see <https://www.fs.usda.gov/recarea/allegheny/recreation/recarea?recid=6108&actid=29/>.