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"'All That Country Will Be Taken Up by the Thrifty Settler': Migration, Environment, and the Cutover Lands of Minnesota, USA from the 1890s to the 1930s"

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During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the lumber industry in northern Minnesota transformed vast swaths of forested land into lumber products for burgeoning capitalist markets across the United States, a process entailing not only the destruction of old growth pine forests, but the creation of a new (albeit severely degraded) space: the cutover. These lands – marshy, rocky, and now riddled with tree stumps and debris – presented serious economic problems for lumber companies themselves, in the form of tax burdens and the risk of spreading fires to still valuable timbered lands. Lumber companies and boosters promoted the climate and ecology of this region as ideal for agricultural development by migrants of "modest means." This understanding of the cutover reflected a mix of ideas about nature, climate, and migration as much as it did the ecology of the region itself. By the late 1920s, the dream of these cutover boosters resulted in a landscape of impoverished migrants and abandoned farms across the former lumber regions of both states. When, during the 1930s, New Deal planners examined the cutover and evaluated its climate and ecology they saw its future in radically different terms than boosters had. These spaces, they argued, should be removed from agricultural development and reforested under public control. This case study demonstrates that the ways institutions and individuals think about climate and ecology matters when examining the connection between migration and climate.

— Text from The White Horse Press website

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