




# *Beyond*

The New Identity of the Vast Forests  
of Northcentral Pennsylvania

Pine Creek Gorge, also called the Grand Canyon of the East, is the Lumber Heritage Region's iconic visitor attraction. Aside from dramatic vistas on both sides, the Gorge was the route of a famous Indian path, then a railroad, and now a heavily-used rails to trail project.

# d LUMBER

and the People Who Live There



Although the region is famous for its forests, it also has some well-known agricultural lands, such as those surrounding Penn State University, the first university in the country to grant agricultural degrees, in the south of the Lumber Heritage Region.

It is one thing when elk roam into the tiny Pennsylvania township of Benezette (population 230) and eat the heads off corn crops; it is entirely different when thousands of tourists follow those elk, clogging roads, cutting through driveways to photograph them, and rapping on peoples' doors asking to use the bathroom. In the late 1990s both the corn cropping and the tourist intrusion precipitated a flood of resident complaints, mobilizing the state police, the Bureau of Forestry, town supervisors, and State Representative Dan Surra, who asked the Northcentral Pennsylvania Regional Planning and Development Commission to do something about Benezette.

The commission did do something; it sponsored a study of the elk situation. But what was intended simply to solve the elk-tourist-Benezette wrangle ended up triggering a soul-searching for 12,500 square miles of forested northcentral Pennsylvania. In only a few years, this region—practically unknown beyond its borders—would be reborn.

***Jon Kohl & Shomer Zwelling***



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A 20-minute drive north of Benezette, Bob Imhof feels the damp forest soil outside his hometown of Ridgway. His finger traces out a half-foot-wide by six-foot-long curvature in the leaf-covered ground and then another one just like it a few feet away. Other indentations follow in line, marching off under low-hanging oaks, sloping down toward Maple Run. "My interest in railroad grades began when I was around 10 after my grandfather described his work on the Pittsburgh, Shawmut, and Northern rail system," Bob says, wiping moisture onto his pants. "We used the removed grade to get to the area I hunted with my grandfather."

Bob was born in 1947 and raised in Ridgway, a town that once had more millionaires per capita than anywhere else in the U.S. Late 19th-century lumber barons built their mansions there with money that flowed from the forests via rivers, horse-drawn sleds, or narrow-gauge railroads. Ridgway earned special fame for its homegrown Hyde-Murphy Company that mastered the art of interior woodworking, having decorated buildings such as the Library of Congress, U.S. Supreme Court, and the Smithsonian Institution. But by 1961, the company went bankrupt lying alongside the railroad grades, tanneries, sawmills, and ghost towns—all swallowed up by the forest.

As post-lumber boom trees reach skyward, many people in Ridgway do not see what the forest has overgrown. Bob does what he can to unearth that history. "Over the last 30 years, I have documented 325 miles of narrow-gauge railroad," he said. He gets excited when he talks about local history, saying, "The density of industry that used to be here and what's here now is like night and day." His tie and button-down dress shirt belie his penchant to romp in the woods. "At one point it was just one big huge industrial arm. It was driving the economy of this area. These were the resources that helped build the U.S.—at least the eastern U.S. Many people think it always

looked like this. Not even close.”

By the time Bob got in to the Penn State Forestry Program at State College, about an hour and a half drive south, he had still not left his region. Fearing a lack of jobs after graduation and also a soldier-hungry draft that plucked young men from universities like a kingfisher hunting breakfast, he enlisted in the Air Force.

There Bob found a welcoming environment for his passion for details, punctuality, and precision. To-do lists controlled his daily productivity like a ball and chain locked to his desk. “I am anal retentive,” he says plainly. This isn’t the kind of man you send into battle. From an Air Force base in Thailand Bob became the operations manager keeping fighters and reconnaissance planes in the sky over Vietnam.

After his service he worked at Bank One Corporation in Ohio where he managed corporate reorganizations. But the call of the wild brought Bob



The *Punxsutawney Spirit* documented how Johnny Damon, using bats made from area lumber, helped Boston win the 2004 World Series.

home to Ridgway in 1988. His years away trained his eye not only on the history beneath the detritus-capped soil but also on the rich cultural heritage stretching across the vast northcentral Pennsylvania that few

people who lived there—or away from there—appreciated. This perspective, his self-effacing work ethic, and his operations and accounting background would lay the tracks for northcentral Pennsylvania’s designation as the second largest heritage area in the United States.

#### Wilderness Undone

Howard Zahniser lived in Forest County, an hour’s drive west of Ridgway, still in northcentral Pennsylvania. Author of the U.S. Wilderness Act of 1964, he defined wilderness as “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.” Perhaps unwittingly he described northcentral Pennsylvania 400 years ago. Because the area was so rugged and the towering white pine trees and hemlocks shaded out browse needed by game animals like deer and elk, even Seneca Indians passed through and did not remain.

The advertisement for Split Rock Studios Museum Outfitters features a collage of images. At the top left is a stylized compass rose. To its right, the text "Split Rock Studios MUSEUM OUTFITTERS" is displayed. Below the compass rose are images of a museum exhibit titled "Bermuda Islands AD 1500", a green lizard sculpture, and a dinosaur sculpture. A red box in the center contains the text "We create. We connect. We teach. We inspire." Below this, a list of services is provided: "EXHIBIT DESIGN • FABRICATION • CURATORIAL SUPPORT • DIORAMAS • GRAPHIC DESIGN • SCULPTURE" and "HAND-PAINTED MURALS • INTERACTIVES • FIBERGLASS MODELING • CUSTOM EXHIBIT FURNITURE • INSTALLATION". At the bottom left, the contact information is listed: "2071 Gateway Boulevard St. Paul, MN 55112 • 1-800-433-9599 x16" and "www.splitrockstudios.com". The background of the advertisement is a mix of orange, blue, and green.

But the pioneers didn't see Zahniser's wilderness when they moved in—and remained. Through their eyes, virgin forests and unworked, ripe land awaited them like an overstuffed Wal-Mart on opening day. They didn't even see white pines, but ship masts; they didn't see hemlocks, but tannin factories for tanning leather and for creating formaldehyde and wood alcohol. In 1681, Penn's Woods stretched nearly unbroken across the state. But by the beginning of the 1900s, the forests had been transformed into briar patches. The resulting tangle of dried and broken branches, dead bark, splintered snags, and rotting stumps fed conflagrations that burned for years.

Up from the ashes, nevertheless, a reborn forest has been fighting back. This forest has a new face painted with maple, ash, red oak, and black cherry—perhaps the most valuable hardwood forest in the world. These northcentral woods today blanket 5



The Lumber Heritage Region includes more than 2.5 million acres—an area larger than Delaware—open to hunting.

million acres, comprising the 512,000-acre Allegheny National Forest, 34 state parks, 1.4 million acres of state forests, 450,000 acres of gamelands, and many private properties.

What distinguishes this forest

most from its grand poles are its 700,000 residents scattered across 15 counties. Frontier historian Frederick Jackson Turner wrote that many immigrants coming to the United States “gained an energy, an independence, and a creativity that were the sources of American democracy and national character.” And so the people of northcentral Pennsylvania have retained their independence, stubbornness, and pride in their land. The rural and rugged lifestyle needed to dominate the erstwhile forests and build logging towns and tanneries rooted deeply long after the lumber barons moved on to other things.

At the turn of the century people like Joseph Trimbel Rothrock (father of Pennsylvania forestry) and Gifford Pinchot (America's first trained forester, first to use the term “conservationist,” and governor of Pennsylvania) bought for the Commonwealth smoldering acres on the dollar. They had a forested

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vision they themselves would never hike during their lifetimes. Later Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps constructed more than 60 camps in northcentral Pennsylvania—stomping out fires, planting millions of trees, and building infrastructure that would become Pennsylvania's state park system. Later, the state reintroduced deer, otter, fisher, and elk. Bald eagles flourish again and great blue herons are back. Eighty years later, clearly the fathers and mothers (Rachel Carson was from Springdale, Pennsylvania) of conservation have done their job.

Wilderness scholar Roderick Nash said that wilderness—or any wilds—is a human creation imbued mostly with meaning by urbanites. While the region's physical character recovers, the spiritual character has yet to blossom. Few people know the region is one of the largest chunks of public land on the East Coast. Fewer still know its rich heritage. What would it take then to build northcentral Pennsylvania's character again?

#### Lumber Heritage Region

In the early 1990s, four county commissioners asked the Northcentral Pennsylvania Regional Planning and Development Commission to help them apply for state heritage status. Since the commission's job is to promote local economic development among its six counties, it agreed. In 1995 the commission turned to the best person for the job. Because of his genetic fondness for detail and love of the outdoors, Bob Imhof, who has been working with the commission since 1989 as a procurement manager, sighed, "So now I'm holding two positions at the same time."

Over the next six years, Bob led the application for the feasibility study in 1995, the feasibility study in 1997, the management action plan in 1998, the early implementation projects in 2000, and finally the heritage designation in late 2001. The 15-county Lumber Heritage Region became the 11th of 12 state heritage regions.

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office in Ridgway, Dale Lauricella manages the Towers Victorian Inn, a lumber baron Italianate mansion built in 1865 and restored to its youthful splendor. The inn is a must-stop on the downtown historic walking tour, especially in October 2004, when Governor Edward Rendell himself chose to spend the night.

The Philadelphia Democrat had just returned to the region since first being introduced to it during his 2003 Route 6 campaign, which cut across the entire northern length of Pennsylvania. The governor had hopes of picking up votes from the largely Republican rural populace and got more than he planned on.

"He fell in love with the place," said Dale, who expressed the mood in the inn when the governor's entourage arrived. It was a historic moment for rural folks of northcentral Pennsylvania when a flatlander (as the locals call people from Philadelphia, Harrisburg, and Pittsburgh) not only takes interest in their neck of the

### Lumber Heritage Plan Over-Arching Theme

Historically, the Lumber Heritage Region is an area rich in natural resources and mineral deposits: forests, wildlife, coal, gas, and oil have been abundant. Over the centuries the region's immense natural resources and astounding geological formations have provided the people of the area and the nation with a wealth of opportunities and challenges.

In different eras residents viewed these natural resources in different ways: as an impediment, as raw material, as an inheritance, as inexhaustible, as depleted, as a blessing, and as an opportunity for leisure time pursuits.

The inhabitants of the region are also a diverse group: Native Americans, Western Europeans, Canadians, Slavic peoples, and Asians, among others, have settled in this region over the generations. With their rich and heterogeneous cultural and social backgrounds these versatile peoples have contributed, adapted, endured, migrated, and reinvented themselves to meet the ever-changing challenges presented by living in a rugged area. Like the region itself, the people too have long been—and continue to be—resourceful and resilient.

woods, but declares to make economic development there a high priority. The governor wanted to take advantage of the region's vast resources—not as early pioneers had—to promote locally based

tourism, protecting natural and cultural resources and the way of life of the stump jumpers (as flatlanders sometimes call the sylvan folks).

Dale came to this conclusion after the governor's visit: "Local commu-



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nities are slaving away at the grass-roots level to save the cultural, natural, and heritage resources that we love and are passionate about. But the governor and folks at [different agencies] grasped and supported a bigger vision about our inherent possibilities than those of us working on more local and limited levels had ever conceived.”

Part of that vision came when the governor got back to his office in Harrisburg after his first trip and read the 163-page “Plan for Elk Watching and Nature Tourism in Northcentral Pennsylvania” developed by Fermata, Inc., a nature- and culture-based tourism planning company. Bob Imhof and the commission funded the elk study with early implementation Lumber Heritage Region grant money. The governor convened a meeting of top aides and Ted Eubanks, president of Fermata, to figure out what to do with the tourists. They decided the opportunity to promote sensible tourism with the elk in Benazette actually might work for the whole region. So Fermata was asked to assist the state by creating a recreation plan and an interpretive plan for the northcentral region.

The state tourism folks had already begun marketing the region. Back in Ridgway, Dale and other area hoteliers enjoyed a dramatic jump in business volume. But not everyone was ready for the new identity, or was even sure what it meant to be part of a heritage region.

Fermata’s task was to develop naturally and culturally sensitive tourism that does not necessarily increase visitor volume but rather increases the time and money spent by those who came. But that would take time. Fermata was just beginning work on both the recreation plan and the interpretive plan for northcentral Pennsylvania.

Some locals worried that their small town way of life could be overrun with pesky tourists. Jim Zoschg, a watershed specialist in Cameron County and local writer, lamented, “It’s exciting to think of

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many people enjoying the wild places and wildlife of Cameron County. However, there is still a part of me that feels Cameron County will lose a piece of herself .... Solitude and ruralness will disappear."

Others were concerned about opening up the region before it had the capacity to handle more tourists. They worried that there won't be enough bathrooms, hotel rooms, park infrastructure, or parking spaces in small downtowns, and that the state park budget wouldn't hold up under the stomping strain of tourists.

For many it simply came down to quality of life, wild or not. People in this region are naturally suspicious, home-bred, and fiercely loyal to their land and lifestyle. While they welcome economic improvement, they wonder the price. One Amish furniture maker stood in his yard on a hill in Smicksburg. Barns drift on rolling green fields behind him. "I would like the extra business," he said, scratching his bushy beard, "but I don't want tourists coming out with their buses!"

**A New Character Experience**  
Even though the Lumber Heritage Region received its nonprofit status last October and now dedicates itself to creating natural and cultural products for locals and visitors, Bob is still involved in several older projects. He participates in Fermata's recreation plan for state parks and forests and coordinates the interpretive plan, which aims to bring both public agencies and private commercial service providers under one interpretive roof.

Despite the identity crisis of northcentral Pennsylvania reaching back 400 years, Fermata's interpretive plan aims to take this crisis head on. It is defining a visitor experience, nourished by both the wilderness soul (no people) and the rural soul, rooted to the pioneers and loggers. Thus when visitors cross the region, they have one consistent experience rather than smaller conflicting ones promoted by different local tourism promotion agencies, state land managers, landholders, and tourism companies. They will encounter a cohesive and integrated message whether they visit

the ghost towns in Smethport, the Zippo Visitor Center in Bradford, Penn's Cave in Centre County, the Little League Baseball Hall of Fame in Williamsport, dark skies in Potter County, Heart's Content virgin forest in the Allegheny National Forest, or Gobbler's Notch in Punxsutawney.

This approach heartens Bob. "I think the interpretive plan and new tourism emphasis can benefit local people. We want people to be proud of their heritage; it's not all positive, I would never tell anyone that. But it was a reality and it's important to educate people."

Once politicians, interpretive planners, hoteliers, state park managers, tourism promotion agencies, nature guides, and even the elk get on the same page, Bob looks forward to spending more time documenting his railroad grades. "Deep down I am a hill person. I love the mountains, the out-of-doors, and peace and quiet. That's my therapy. If I didn't have this, I would go crazy."

#### Resources

Elk Study, [www.fermatainc.com/pennelk](http://www.fermatainc.com/pennelk)

Interpretive Plan,  
[www.fermatainc.com/penn/lumber\\_heritage.html](http://www.fermatainc.com/penn/lumber_heritage.html)

Lumber Heritage Region,  
[www.lumberheritage.org](http://www.lumberheritage.org)

*Jon Kohl, interpretive planner consulting with Fermata, Inc. and a writer specializing in heritage interpretation. To contact him or see his published articles on interpretation, visit [www.jonkohl.com/publications/categories/interp.htm](http://www.jonkohl.com/publications/categories/interp.htm)*

*Shomer Zwelling, a senior interpretive planner with Fermata, Inc. develops cohesive and integrated frameworks for heritage areas, national parks and museums. His interpretive plans have laid the foundations for core exhibitions at the U.S. Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston, Massachusetts, the Boott Cotton Mills in Lowell, Massachusetts, and the Public Hospital in Williamsburg, Virginia.*

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