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# Natural History Notes

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## WHITE PINE — THE TREE THAT BUILT AMERICA

For over 300 years, from the pioneer days to the early 1900's, the white pine was unrivaled as America's timber producing tree. In the early forests of the young country it was one of the most abundant species of tree. The virgin white pine would range up to 200 feet high with 80 or more feet of the trunk free from branches. No longer can we witness the sight of this majestic tree. In fact, there are only a handful of people alive today who actually witnessed a virgin white pine forest. There may be isolated virgin white pine, but most in the woods today are third, fourth and even fifth growth timber.

The white pine can be recognized by its cluster of five thin soft needles which average 3-5 inches long. The cones are drooping, usually 4-8 inches long. The bark on the young trees is smooth and green, turning darker — but still smooth — as it gets older, and finally deeply furrowed on the oldest trunks.

The white pine is easily recognized in the woods but the economic and political significance of the tree is not so obvious. The white pine was the first "gold" in this new country. It wasn't the needs of the early settlers that resulted in the senseless slaughter of this pine, but the exportation of it to England and other countries. At this time England with the great Royal Navy was the major power of the world. Unfortunately, England produced no timber of her own suitable for masts on the large sailing ships. So, Britain had imported this timber from Prussia, Russia and Sweden. An unsatisfactory arrangement at best, since Denmark could cut off the supply at will simply by closing the waterway which brought the logs. It was to Britain's great advantage to have another source of masts, especially from one of her colonies.

The monarchy reserved all white pine over 24 inches in diameter exclusively for masts for the Royal Navy. The trees were marked by the King's Broad Arrow. This was still another example of England's tyranny and was resented as much by the colonists as the Stamp Act. The first flag of the revolutionary forces carried an emblem of this significant tree. The war was won, independence followed, and the white pine was felled.

Fortune after fortune was gained by the ruthless exploitation of the white pine. The close-grained wood which was soft and very light in proportion to its strength, was used for countless purposes. Among these were paneling, toys, doors, windows, matchsticks, shingles, bridges and furniture. In 24 years Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin produced 85 billion handmade shingles. An expert chose a tree with the best splitting qualities. He tested a tree by chopping out a block of wood. If it didn't prove to be up to par he simply chose another tree. Meanwhile the sap ran from the cut in the tree and provided a convenient wick during the next forest fire. Once selected, only the choicest parts of a tree were used. The sapwood, knots and almost the whole trunk above 20 feet were left to rot. It was estimated that less than 8% of the tree was used.

Public opinion against the mercenary slaughter of the virgin white pine forests was too late to save them. However, it is questionable whether it would have made any difference if expressed earlier. Time and time again greedy, selfish human beings have eradicated nature for their own ends. The next time you see Wisconsin's majestic white pine, don't think of it as just another tree, but rather the tree that built America.

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