The North Woods of our nation’s imagination at the start of the 19th century was demonstrably centered on the St. Croix River region, a storied latticework of rivers and lakes, abundant wildlife, and vast stands of native pine as far as the eye could see. But things were about to change. Ojibwe and Dakota peoples who had lived here for centuries, and even recent settlers could not have envisioned that the region was about to undergo a transformation by clear-cutting the pine forests, that would forever alter a traditional way of life and the nature of the landscape itself. Looking back, the story actually begins in the 17th century and recalls a place rich in fur and pine, so valuable in fact that extraction of natural resources over the next 200 years would inevitably become a dominant focus of an expanding American economy. Our region’s contributions to the rise in wealth of our nation came, however, at a substantial cost to the natural environment and to traditional ways of life. These natural and cultural costs also came with lessons attached, about the consequences of unwisely use of resources.

The first historical inhabitants of the St. Croix River region were the Dakota. Their vast homeland stretched throughout the upper Mississippi valley into the St. Croix valley, and represented one of the largest natural resource rich regions of the North American interior. In the early 17th century Ojibwe peoples began a migration from the Lake Superior area into the northern part of the Dakota homeland, and over the next few centuries the relationship between Dakota, Ojibwe, 17th century French fur traders and, later, English fur traders, created the North Woods story of the heartland’s first business—furs. During the period between 1670 and 1865 river transport of furs on interconnected waterways between Lake Superior and the Mississippi River was the heart of the regional economy. These waterway transportation corridors are still intact throughout the St. Croix region, and experiencing fur trade heritage is not just reserved to museums. It is available to anyone who wants to explore the historic landscapes, paddle the Snake, Kettle, or St. Croix Rivers, or visit the North West Company Fur Post just west of Pine City (a little over 2 miles west of the Byway at Mile Post 92E). The Fur Post is reconstructed on the site of an 1804-1805 fur post. It is operated by the Minnesota Historical Society, and recreates the life of the people who lived and worked on the Snake River during the winter of 1804. The exhibits are built by trappers and traders also connected towns in the region from headwaters to the mouths of rivers, and were essential for transporting logs to market. The economic practices of the fur trade eventually exhausted the supply of fur bearing animals in the region but the physical landscape and natural habitats had been largely intact after more than 200 years. Left alone, the beaver and other animals could have made a comeback. When it came to cutting down the pine forests during the second half of the 19th century, however, few people perceived that this celebrated landscape and its natural resources could not last at such a rapid rate of extraction—not the pine, not the beaver pelts, not the Ojibwe and Dakota hunting and fishing lands, and not even a vast wilderness if pitted against the allure and potential for wealth from an onrushing wave of European settlement that laid claim to this edge of the American frontier. In the 1860’s a generation, pine resources that once seemed inexhaustible had disappeared.

By 1860 the boom was over—the Phinneys of the St. Croix River region, and extending into the upstream reaches of the Upper Midwest, had produced more money and created more millionaires from logging and lumber production than in the California Gold Rush. Stillwater, Minnesota, was the world’s largest pine producer. With the huge logs and the massive amount of sawmill and logging operations, the lumber and timber industry slowly moved on as new opportunities for exploitation of natural resources opened up in the West, leaving behind a nearly devastated North Woods river and lake environment. There were also devastating consequences for people who lived in the northern regions on either side of the White Pine segment of the St. Croix Scenic Byway.

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What had been the largest forest resource in the Upper Midwest, nearly four million acres of St. Croix valley pine forest 200-300 years old, was simply gone in 80s more than 50 years. More than 15 billion feet of logs had been floated down tributaries and into the St. Croix River—enough logs to fill 2.2 million railroad cars—enough rail cars...to have reached around all of North America 6 times—just from the St. Croix valley. More pine logs had been floated down the St. Croix than in any other river in America. It is small wonder that the St. Croix has been called the River of Pines. Part and parcel of this pine-cut frenzy and rapid exploitation of the pine forests, it should come as no surprise that plenty of operators, lured by quick cash, employed irresponsible logging practices that left deadened crowns of old growth pines lying on the ground—slash piles, brush, stumps, and tree branches as far as the eye could see—drying in the sun and getting ready to ignite.

During the years 1891 through 1894 the Weather Bureau in St. Paul reported a steady loss of moisture in central Minnesota. The summer of 1894 averaged 4.2 degrees below normal, and hardly 2 inches of rain fell in Hinckley and the surrounding areas from May through September 1. All through the late spring and summer of 1894 a haze of wood smoke hung over the town of Hinckley. Some days in late August were unusually still with smoke, at times making the sun as pale as the moon, even for residents of Minneapolis and St. Paul 75 miles to the south. Small fires burned unchecked in the cutover timberlands throughout Pine County and throughout the whole eastern part of the state. This curiously negligent attitude toward the danger of fire had long been instilled in the settlers of the Pine County forests. For nearly a quarter of a century they had been clearing their lands from burning it by burning them over—a quick, easy, hazardous method. Drifting spicots would settle here and there, starting life fires that smoldered and crept through the slash throughout the summer. Every onea in a white a barn would go up, but prior to 1894 nothing really terrible had ever happened in Pine County.

Top photo: Moving the north woods out by rail, Bill Neuman private collection
Middle photo: Log Pile at Hinckley ready to ship to Stillwater, photographer John Reuck, Minnesota Historical Society
Bottom photo: White Pine logs and over-river Hinckley in 1895, Minnesota Historical Society

On Saturday, September 1, 1894 the worst forest fire in Minnesota history swept across 480 square miles and burned 350,000 acres—in five hours—burning entire towns and claiming over 400 lives. That morning started out with an unusually clear sky in Hinckley. Later a “gray white” or “blue-gray” smoke filled the area over the town. Soon the sky darkened and a pale yellowish glow illuminated the countryside. By late morning citizens noticed dense blackness to the south and the light wind blew in hot smoke. By 1:30 p.m. the southerly wind had increased noticeably in speed. At about 2:00 p.m. the fire chief summoned his department members to the southwest corner of town. Nobody thought there was much danger, even though the fire was burning again in the mill yard. They soon had a bigger job on their hands because the fires were growing and threatening to cross the St. Paul & Duluth tracks into the town. Men began to show up with wagons loaded with barrels of water. The telegrapher at the Depot received a message that Piskopants, a town 9 miles to the south, was in flames.

Bottom photo: Tracks of logging railroad, Bill Neuman private collection
Top photo: Shows 2nd from the right, John Blair, porter on this rescue train who reached Hinckley. He is credited with helping to save 150 lives by getting them off the burning train. He lived in St. Croix Lake where they Fabbed for four hours until the fire passed, Minnesota Historical Society