

Media Relations

New Book Chronicles N.H.'s Women's Sawmill Of WWII

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DURHAM, N.H. – In 1942, Turkey Pond, on the outskirts of Concord, was clogged with 12 million board-feet of white pine, downed in the devastating hurricane of 1938 and hauled to the pond for storage. With World War II in force and sawmill labor scarce, the U.S. Forest Service recruited an unlikely group to mill these logs into lumber for the war effort: a dozen or so women.

Although it attracted national media attention at the time, the story of the first-ever female-operated sawmill at Turkey Pond had nearly disappeared from local lore when Sarah Smith, a University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension forestry specialist, received a scrapbook of snapshots and newspaper clippings about the mill. Now, Smith has published “They Sawed Up a Storm,” a book that chronicles the women’s experiences in the sawmill within the context of the hurricane of ’38 and World War II.

The crew of the women's sawmill at Turkey Pond assemble for a picture on January 14, 1943. Left to right: Mary Plourde, Barbara Webber, Violet Story, Carmilla Wilson, Lucy DeGreenia, Ruth DeRoche, Daisy Perkins, Laura Willey, and Chimney the dog. Credit: Courtesy of John Willey.

England’s forests was extensive, with nearly a third of the region’s forests destroyed in the storm. In total, the hurricane blew down an estimated 2.6 billion board-feet of timber, enough lumber to frame more than 170,000 houses.

Convenient to some of the largest forest damage, Turkey Pond became a storage site -- one of many and by far the largest -- for downed timber. A sawmill, run by the Durant family, was set up on its southern shore to process the timber. When the U.S. Forest Service, which oversaw the salvage effort, realized the outbreak of World War II hampered their ability to attract and retain labor and thus finish processing the logs in the pond, they followed the lead of many male-dominated industries during wartime: they turned to a female workforce to staff a new sawmill on the northern end of Turkey Pond.

“They Sawed Up a Storm” weaves historical texts, archival materials and interviews with family members and the only known living women who worked at the sawmill to present a rich account of this slice of New Hampshire history. Photographs, both professional and snapshots saved by the families of the Turkey Pond women, bring their stories to life.

Smith interviewed Barbara Webber Ford, the only woman of the mill still alive, and met her sister Norma (now deceased). “When I first started interviewing her, Barbara said, ‘I don’t know why you’d be interested in that.’ She never told many people because she didn’t think they’d believe her,” says Smith. “But what emerged was a sense of pride. She contributed to what she saw as the war effort.”

“I knew how to make a good board,” Webber told Smith in an interview.

John Willey, who introduced Smith to the women of Turkey Pond with his mother’s scrapbook, recalls his mother Laura’s skill as the head saw-filer. “My mother was very determined and, at over six feet tall, people tended to get out of her way,” he said.



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Although the Forest Service hired a male sawyer, believing women could not be trained for that skilled position, the women proved themselves during the short life of the sawmill, which operated for just over a year. "It is most surprising and gratifying to see the way those gals take hold of the job," said a U.S. Forest Service article in the Washington Office Information Digest. "In addition to the jobs we anticipated women could handle we have found them capable of rolling logs on the deck, running the edger, and for 'show purposes' even running the head saw."

Mill manager Bob Evans was similarly impressed. "He just couldn't believe how loyal, hard-working and determined this group of women were," says Smith. And he backed up his claim with cash, paying the women comparable wages to men. "In 1942, that was pretty astounding," adds Smith.

On the advice of a colleague -- UNH associate professor of history Jeff Bolster -- Smith let nearly a decade lapse between receiving Laura Willey's scrapbook and finishing her book. Per Bolster's suggestion, Smith used her connections within the state's forestry industry to unearth more information and first-person accounts of the Turkey Pond sawmill. "He told me to go out, give talks about this, and people would come forward with information and leads," she says, noting that as recently as two years ago she met a son of one of the women who added stories and photos to the book. "This is a living history that keeps going."

"They Sawed Up a Storm," published by Jetty House/Peter E. Randall Publisher, is available to order at www.turkeypond.com and at <http://extension.unh.edu/Forestry/Forestry.htm>.

The University of New Hampshire, founded in 1866, is a world-class public research university with the feel of a New England liberal arts college. A land, sea, and space-grant university, UNH is the state's flagship public institution, enrolling 12,200 undergraduate and 2,300 graduate students.

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Photographs available to download:

http://unh.edu/news/cj_nr/2011/mar/bp21sawmill_03.jpg

Caption: The crew of the women's sawmill at Turkey Pond assemble for a picture on January 14, 1943. Left to right: Mary Plourde, Barbara Webber, Violet Story, Carmilla Wilson, Lucy DeGreenia, Ruth DeRoche, Daisy Perkins, Laura Willey, and Chimney the dog.
Credit: Courtesy of John Willey.

http://unh.edu/news/cj_nr/2011/mar/bp21sawmill_01.jpg

Caption: Barbara Webber edges the rough sides off a pine board.
Credit: John Collier Jr., Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection.

http://unh.edu/news/cj_nr/2011/mar/bp21sawmill_02.jpg

Caption: Dorothy DeGreenia spent much of her time shoveling old bark and debris out of the sawmill.
Credit: John Collier Jr., Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection.

http://unh.edu/news/cj_nr/2011/mar/bp21sawmill_04.jpg

Caption: Elizabeth Esty moves logs from the pond to the mill.
Credit: John Collier Jr., Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection.

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