

**OF BASS AND FISHERMEN:  
A People and Forest Divided Around One Small Lake in Northwestern Wisconsin**

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## Introduction

Most forest land in the United States is privately owned. In Wisconsin, 61% of forest lands are in private ownership, and in some regions this proportion increases to 90% (Roberts et al. 1986). At one time, professional foresters considered these non-industrial private forest lands a principal source of the nation's long-term hardwood timber supply. They now recognize that this "wood basket" vision of forest ownership was not correct. The reasons people buy forest land are almost as numerous as the owners; timber harvesting is only one among many objectives (Clawson 1979, Healy and Short 1981, Roberts et al. 1986, Plantinga et al. 1989). In addition, researchers assumed that land ownership patterns in rural areas were stable, with farmers holding more private forest land than any other group (Marlin 1978, Birch et al. 1982). Under such circumstances, professional forest managers in the twentieth century have assumed that the long time periods needed for forest management to be economically (and ecologically) sustainable were possible (Force et al. 1993). However, farming communities in Wisconsin and elsewhere are witnessing a decline in population, capital, talent, and agricultural land base. In fact, neither rural populations nor their forests are stable today, but are actually in a constant state of transition.

Changing ownership patterns result in a new array of landowner investment and management decisions. Such changes in land use then affect wildlife populations, water quality, forest fragmentation and other natural resources (Schallau 1965, Carpenter 1985, Roberts et al. 1986, Young et al. 1987, Bruce and Fortmann 1988, Bliss et al. 1993). Increases in absentee ownership, recreation development, timber prices, land held for speculation, and expansion of state and Federal stewardship incentive programs are all affected by the goals and motivations of different owners/managers. For example, the local economic impact of whether or not to harvest timber may not be considered in individual recreation landowner decisions (Leatherman 1993), while ecotourism development, designation of "priority watersheds", esthetic zoning practices, or protection of endangered resources may place non-commodity values above resource extraction uses at the local and state levels (Bliss and Martin 1990).

In the lake country of rural Wisconsin many of these issues converge, and one visible result is a shift from local to absentee ownership of forest land around lakes, and a fragmentation of parcels as increasing numbers of urban residents seek vacation homes with lake frontage. Indeed, many of the lakes in northwest Wisconsin large enough to have names are now dotted around their edges with

summer homes. While broad regional trends provide a context or partial explanation for shifting patterns of land ownership and use, localized changes associated with unique ecosystems, communities, and land tenure systems must not be overlooked. This paper, then, will look at one small lake in Wisconsin, Bass Lake, and address the following questions: why has a shift from local to mostly absentee ownership of land around Bass Lake not led to a greater fragmentation of forests and property similar to other lakes in the area now characterized by numerous small recreational lots and vacation homes? What agents, socioeconomic or environmental, may further change the ownership and management patterns around Bass Lake, and by extension its forest ecology?

### **Bass Lake and surroundings**

Bass Lake is situated in Wisconsin's lake country approximately one hour north of Eau Claire. The local landscape is dominated by lakes, swamps, and forests in low-lying areas, and alternating fields and wooded "forties" on dryer uplands. Bass Lake is small, encompassing 49 acres on paper, but fluctuating in size depending on precipitation and the extent of beaver activity. The lake is known in the area for its clear water, 80 feet deep in some spots, as well as its numerous fish, including large and small mouth bass, perch, bullheads, and various sunfish. Two medium-sized northern pike were caught last year, most likely planted the year before (illegally) by a local fisherman. For the purposes of this paper, I will be exploring 400 acres of land surrounding Bass Lake once owned by various members of my family, the Loofboros. Landcover is dominated by a northern mixed conifer-hardwood forest (Curtis 1959), but varies with the topography, which is rolling as you move away from the lake, traverse the shoreline, climb up a low ridge, descend gradually into swampland, cross the swamp, and climb up another ridge. Despite the presence of extensive tamarack swamps, the area contains enough dry uplands and shoreline to give different landowners multiple land-use choices. A brief "windshield" tour will show the reader the variability within the forest that might indicate changing land management strategies, even though current species composition and soil conditions dictate similar forest classifications.

To reach Bass Lake, one turns east off Axhandle Road (County Road F), crossing a hay field via tracks made by numerous vehicles. For future reference, the reader should note the presence of an actual dirt road, presently gated and locked, running parallel to the path, and nearby a house. One passes into

the forest from the hay field on an old logging road that has been graded. After a short distance the road forks. The left fork leads down to a grassy clearing next to the lake. Local residents use the clearing as a boat landing. The right fork follows the circumference of the southern half of Bass Lake. As one moves south and then east two physical features become obvious. First, the road, though graded, is uneven and characterized by frequent short hills with steep inclines. This terrain makes four-wheel-drive vehicles essential for winter driving through the forest. Second, none of the trees in this part of the forest are larger than twelve inches in diameter. Of the numerous small trees, a significant number have blown over. The underbrush is quite dense. As the road moves from east to north, a gate blocks the way, sometimes open, sometimes shut. The road ends a short distance past the gate at a large cabin/house, the only structure on the lake (besides two small docks, one by the house and another on the north side). Off of the road, we see neatly stacked piles of wood. The land adjacent to the house is somewhat cleared, but not enough to call it a "lawn". Beyond the house, in the woods along the lake, the trees are not so young. Instead, there are many sizes within individual species (indicating multiple ages); a significant number have diameters greater than twelve inches. The underbrush is still quite dense and thorny. Continuing north and then back west to finish circling the lake, the land and forest change yet again. One can walk along a well maintained and labeled footpath. The forest appears "cleaner", containing less underbrush and a greater proportion of large trees than was seen on the land around the cabin.

People regularly observe a variety of mammals throughout the forest, including deer, beaver, red squirrel, raccoon, porcupine, and fox. One person spotted a black bear and her two cubs last year. A family of loons nests on the lake almost every year. More than two dozen additional species of birds can be found, occupying niches on or near the lake, in the woods, and in the edge area where road, field, and forest meet.

### **An oral history of Bass Lake: 1900-1955**

This narrative is based on many hours of conversation I have had with various members of the Loofboro clan - grandparents, great aunts and uncles, aunts and uncles, parents, cousins, and siblings. There is nothing so common at a Loofboro gathering as the ongoing discussion of our family history, often elaborated on by whichever wise elder is present.

Our story at Bass Lake begins soon after Ralph Loofboro moved to the area and bought a farm in the late 1800s. He and one of his sons, Leo, purchased most of the land around Bass Lake over a twenty-year period beginning in 1900. The land cover was primarily scrub timber, oak and pine, starting to regenerate after the extensive logging that occurred throughout the state in the 1800s. The Loofboros maintained some clearings for livestock grazing, and over time some they planted some of the swampland with species such as reed canary grass, also for grazing. Cattle grazed in the forest and clearings during the dry period of the Depression, but very rarely after. The entire area was completely wooded by the 1950s, although dense, thorny underbrush in some spots reminds us of the earlier land use. Ralph and another son, Eli (my grandfather), operated a small sawmill, logging some timber from Bass Lake for lumber for barns and other buildings. Eli purchased another forty acres on Bass Lake, which remain in the family to this day. He built a small cabin on his "forty" in the 1920s, a 10' x 14' structure overlooking the lake, with a wooden frame, a tar paper roof, and screened windows and door. Eli and his wife, Grace, spent their honeymoon at this cabin after their wedding on June 5, 1937. Their four children never forget this date because the family returned every year thereafter for a three to four day vacation. The childrens' memories of these vacations are still vivid. In the morning they would walk down to the barn (approximately one mile) to do their chores, returning as soon as possible. They would fish (with 10'-12' cane poles), swim, hike to other lakes, pick ripe berries, and hunt squirrels. Grace and Eli also fished, and Grace fried the fish up at night, using a kerosene burner.

Just as Bass Lake was central to the social and economic life of Eli's family, it was equally important to other Loofboros, and in some ways to the community at large. One reason was that Bass Lake was deep. The lake did not freeze out in the winter, as did other larger but shallow lakes in the area. The fishing was excellent, and as the Loofboros came to be established in the community, they gave their friends and neighbors open access to Bass Lake for fishing. In addition, they gave some residents permission to hunt deer, squirrels, and game birds on their land. In return, the Loofboros fished and hunted on the land of their friends and neighbors.

From 1900 to the 1950s the land around Bass Lake was managed as a single unit, although it came to be owned by several different people in the same family. As is so often the case in Wisconsin, however, transfers of rural land, whether they result from changing economic circumstances or intergenerational transitions, often serve to further fragment ownerships previously held by one family,

or to consolidate ownerships into a corporate entity where the corporate interests may remain outside of the local community. In the case of Bass Lake, its land was already fragmented within one family. Inevitably, the socio-economic interests of individual family members diverged. Early in the century, Ralph Loofboro's farm, and its subsequent additions of fields and forest, supported three sons, Leo, Eli, and Ralph. Their children, however, did not remain on the farm. Most went to college and left the community altogether. One of Eli's sons, Terry, remained in the area, but went to work at the Uniroyal plant in Eau Claire. Terry helped his father on the farm, but was unwilling to take up farming as a profession. Eli was partially responsible for Terry's choice. Shaped by the insecurities of the Great Depression, Eli refused to go into debt to purchase additional land, equipment, or chemical inputs. At the same time, U.S. agricultural policies, carried out by the Farmers Home Administration (FHA), encouraged farmers to accumulate land and capital. The FHA rarely gave out small loans, instead insisting on major expansions of the operations they financed. The agricultural sector responded to these policies, eventually squeezing out smaller mixed farms like Eli's, which relied on a few head of dairy cattle, an extensive garden, apple orchards, and limited fields with few chemical inputs. In the 1960s, the local dairy stopped picking up the milk Eli's cows produced. That action ended the farm's viability as far as Terry was concerned.

Since no one person or group had the means and interest to buy out the others, most of the land around Bass Lake came to be sold outside of the family. Terry and Richard (my father) purchased the forty on Bass Lake to keep it in the family and to reduce the tax burden on their parents. Just as the physical attributes of the land helped earlier owners meet their needs -- social, economic, and subsistence -- consequently reshaping Bass Lake's ecology, the current attributes would allow new owners to meet different objectives, thereby transforming the economy and ecology of Bass Lake once again.

### **The making of three forests: 1950 - 1994**

From a tenure standpoint, the land around Bass Lake can be divided into three ownership/management lineages, two of which passed out of Loofboro hands in the 1950s, and consist of (1) the land west and south of the lake, and (2) the land north of the lake. The third is the forty acres east of the lake belonging to the Loofboros. The Gausteds purchased the land north of the lake in 1950.

Although Mr. Gausted was a wealthy account executive for a multinational chemical company, he was always known locally as a salesman. They built a large estate in a clearing about 1/4 mile from the lake. They also built a caretaker's house, so that someone would always be on the grounds during their long absences. Mr. Gausted was originally from the area, and wished to use his new property as a home base between travels. The Gausteds never farmed or logged their property, although they did hunt and fish for recreation. In the early 1960s the Gausteds sold their Bass Lake property to the Grays. Mr. Gray was a Minneapolis businessman who wanted a vacation home for his family. He also employed local caretakers full time, usually a retired couple. With his caretakers' help, he began opening up the forest for recreation. They cleared out underbrush and fallen logs, and removed dead trees that were still standing. They laid many trails and marked them with signs. These paths were wide enough for the snowmobiles the family used during their winter trips to Bass Lake, and the all-terrain-vehicles they used in the summer. In addition, their boys enjoyed fishing and hunting at the lake. Today, the Grays' grandchildren are grown up. The family continues to come to Bass Lake for vacations and hunting trips.

The land west and south of the lake followed a different destiny after its sale in the 1960s. The Thompsons lived in Chicago, but were originally from the northwestern part of Wisconsin. They bought land on Bass Lake (including the house on Axhandle Road mentioned earlier) in order to retire there at some future time. The Thompsons visited occasionally, but as their children grew up, the children did not make trips to Bass Lake a custom in their own families, and eventually the Thompsons gave up their retirement plans and sold the property in the early 1980s.

The new owners were three Chicago businessmen, locally labeled "speculators" because they bought the property as an investment without knowing much about it. Two anecdotes about these people form the basis for local opinion. One day Terry heard a pistol shot across the lake. When he went to make sure that nothing was wrong he encountered one of the Chicagoans, who told him he had been target practicing by shooting at a duck on Bass Lake. "No", my uncle said, "you were shooting at a loon." Not only did this man reveal an almost stereotypical ignorance of nature, he violated what for us is a sacred aspect of Bass Lake -- the haunting presence of loons. The second story tells of a larger impact these owners made on the forest and lake. In the late 1980s they decided to recoup their investment by having the forest logged (stumpage prices seemed reasonable to them). They hired a company to do the work without taking competitive bids. They never inspected the work to be done

(e.g. marked trees, widening of existing roads, new roads), or the completed job (e.g. actual trees harvested, clean-up procedures, reseeding roads). The company took out every big tree in the tract, a practice most professional forest managers would heartily disapprove of if the land was not to be clear-cut. Moreover, the company left a mess; smaller trees strewn across the road and throughout the woods, and a road twice as wide as before and quite impassable from the muddy gouges made by heavy machinery. The owners received \$13,000 for their timber, one-fifth the amount locals think they could have gotten with competitive bidding. The resale value of their property went down by over \$20,000. The ecological impacts were even greater. During the first big storm after the logging many of the small trees left standing blew over. Soil erosion into the lake was accelerated from the muddy logging road, and also from the small gullies formed by the machinery. For several years afterward the underbrush was almost impenetrable. I might also speculate that the combination of soil compaction by the machinery and the thick underbrush considerably slowed regeneration of woody species. Deer and game birds were more plentiful after the logging, however. In 1990 the Chicagoans sold the property, having profited enough from their venture. The new owners also were from Chicago, a couple considering a retirement home overlooking Bass Lake. They have since reconsidered building a new home, and will move into the house by the road instead, for reasons we will explore later.

The final tract of land is the forty acres east of Bass Lake that remains in the Loofboro family. When Terry and Richard (sons of Grace and Eli) purchased the land in the 1980s, they legally divided it into two twenty-acre parcels, with the understanding that Terry would manage the forty together until circumstances dictated otherwise. Terry viewed the potential of Bass Lake and its forest differently than had his parents. He was a bachelor, firmly entrenched in the community and working in Eau Claire at the Uniroyal factory. In addition, he was the one child who stayed to take care of Grace and Eli as they grew old. He lived in their farmhouse, but wanted a place of his own. At the same time, Uniroyal's future was uncertain. It was finally sold to Michelin Tire, whose management promptly proceeded to close Uniroyal plants across the country. In 1988, Terry began building a "cabin", which he would move into permanently after Eli and Grace had died (in 1990 and 1993 respectively). By building the cabin he increased the value of his property, while staying out of debt. He bought materials as he could afford them, and numerous friends and family provided services, including laying the foundation, putting down the floors, building kitchen cabinets, and grading the deteriorating logging road leading

from the land south of the lake onto his property. He installed a state of the art wood burning furnace, thus relying on dead trees for firewood to heat his house. He continued to hunt and fish. He cleared a few trails and another old logging road for his niece (me), who began bringing friends up for cross-country ski excursions. In 1991 a freak windstorm ripped up all of the old oaks and pines standing on a ridge on Richard's twenty acres. Terry rented a bobcat front end loader to bring the trees out in order to sell them to a local sawmill (after taking bids). The family understood that Terry would receive all the profits for his labor.

Also in 1991, Michelin closed its Eau Claire plant. The closure shocked employees. Not only had Michelin invested heavily in new, technologically advanced equipment for the plant, but its productive output at Eau Claire was the second best in the country for both production per worker and total volume. The Rubberworkers' Union was convinced that the decision was made illegally, having been secretly based on the fact that almost half of the plant's employees were eligible for retirement in the next seven years, including Terry, who was eligible in three years. If all these people were to retire, the cost to Michelin in retirement benefits would be substantial. The case is still in court. In the meantime, employees were given three choices; work full time at a plant in Alabama as positions opened up; work the weekend shift at a plant in Fort Wayne, Indiana, starting immediately; or get laid off permanently. Terry chose Fort Wayne, along with many other employees with long-term ties to their respective communities around Eau Claire. Thus began a long weekly commute using carpool vans that moved large numbers of workers between Fort Wayne and Eau Claire. Although the commute was and is inconvenient, Terry owns his cabin outright, and views his remaining acreage as security in case of hard times; he could "always subdivide it and sell it off to city people who want their own piece of frontage", unless someone in the family wanted to buy it from him, of course.

### **The public crosses boundaries**

So far, I have given little indication of interactions among landowners, and between landowners and others in the community. And yet only by understanding these interactions can we answer the questions I posed earlier. This section will show a blurring of public and private property in and around Bass Lake, as well as the ways people deliberately maintain tenurial ambiguities in order to protect their own interests.

Among landowners, interactions take two primary forms: business discussions, and social or neighborly acts. Each new owner of Bass Lake property has offered to buy the forty acres now owned by Terry and Richard Loofboro. The reason seems to be a desire to monopolize as much of the lake frontage as possible, and by extension restrict the number of people with legal access to the lake. Along the same lines, each owner of the land south of Bass Lake has resisted giving Terry a formal access easement to the road leading to his property. In court, the owners would be forced to give the easement because there is no other route onto the property. For the time being, neither party is forcing the issue. Socially, the landowners interact in many ways. They keep an eye on each others' property. This is especially important to Terry, who is absent from his house much of the time. In addition, they tolerate friends and relatives who hunt, hike, and ski the extent of the forest with no thought to property boundaries.

Relations between landowners and the community are more complicated. Terry is in a unique position. While he has extremely close ties to the community, in some ways he is more vulnerable than the other landowners. In the 1970s, a group of local kids drinking at the original cabin accidentally burned it down. People know his schedule and habits, and it is not inconceivable that he should suffer theft or vandalism at some point. His friends regularly check up on his house in his absence to deter such an event. Like Terry, the Grays are respected in the community by virtue of their long tenure, and because they hire local families as caretakers. People frequently see members of the Gray family at restaurants and community events, such as auctions and the annual Corn Fest. Their ties to Bass Lake seem to increase with each generation.

More important is the tie of the community to Bass Lake itself, and this takes place via the property extending south and west from Bass Lake. Local residents have been fishing in Bass Lake for at least one hundred years. By long custom, people used the dirt road next to the house on Axhandle Road to get to the boat landing. The previous owners put up a gate to prevent access, but people began driving through the field. Enough cars have gone through the field that a track is clearly visible. The current owners tried to block access to the de facto route by putting up another gate and no trespassing signs, but the gate was torn down and the signs ignored. The law is clear in these cases; if customary access has continued unimpeded for twenty-five years or longer, then local officials can declare the road a public one. By the same token, they can declare the boat landing a public landing. Even the lake

could be declared public if a surveyor determined that it covers fifty acres or more, rather than the forty-nine acres currently listed. On the other hand, if the present owners continue their efforts to restrict access for the next twenty-five years, without anyone contesting their actions, then the road and the boat landing would become unambiguously private. Because of public interest in their private property the owners have decided not to build on Bass Lake. They do not want to provoke the theoretical fisherman who may wish to have his rights upheld in court once a building is established. Moreover, if a fisherman does act, the owners do not want to live near a public boat landing. By not acting, both local residents and private landowners maintain an ambiguous ideology of public and private property, thus maintaining the forest in its present state and within its current boundaries.

### **Future prospects**

The physical characteristics of Bass Lake and its forest, together with local, state and federal aspects of the tenure system, local customs, and historical ties, have maintained a separation of ownership and land uses that makes Bass Lake unique in the area. We have already witnessed a partial shift from local to absentee ownership of land around Bass Lake, along with a partial shift of emphasis from the forest's value for harvesting (i.e. forage for cattle, timber, fish) to the forest's value for recreation and retirement. Any number of social or environmental transitions could change the status quo in place on Bass Lake, resulting in a social and ecological landscape similar to other lakes in the area. Terry could subdivide his property if his financial situation deteriorates. The legal transfer of the Grays' property from one generation to the next might be uncertain. Fish populations might change. But most important are the changing interfaces between public and private interests, and between local and absentee perceptions of property. Local customs of access are currently competing with absentee landowners' beliefs in the rigid property boundaries normally adhered to in high density urban areas (local beliefs in rigid property boundaries during hunting season notwithstanding). If residents and landowners resolve the current standoff, a new configuration of political, economic, cultural, and ideological contexts may shape individual decisions in a way that again alters the ecology and economy of Bass Lake.

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