The trees tell the story

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There are very few Americans who know what an untouched landscape looks like. There are trips to the mountains, the north woods, or the national parks and wilderness areas that display some form of that hard-to-find reality, but even these prized American landscapes are for the most part relicts from a past time. What we really see when taking in the view from the trails we are on are landscapes with tumultuous human histories. Rewinding from the present to the past we see sweeping changes happen over short periods of time, creating chapter upon chapter of complicated stories for every square mile of our country. Although very few places are exceptions to this rule, until we learn differently many of us still feel that places we know well and love must be those exceptions: they must be true wildernesses.

My family owns a cabin in northern Michigan inside a place called Canada Creek Ranch. When I was little, I imagined it a wilderness, with Chippewa tribesmen stalking quietly through the hummocky cedar swamps in the snow, following ancestors of the deer I watched through the same white-trimmed branches. In the Canada Creek Ranch of my childhood, the trees and woods were ancient and sacred and wild. Sadly, despite the power of my naïve imagination, they are no exception to the rule that our "wildernesses" often have hidden human histories. The Ranch, a 13,000 acre member-owned parcel of land between the towns of Atlanta and Onaway in northern Michigan, has a nineteenth-century history similar to the rest of the north woods in the Great Lakes Region because of the natural distribution of the species *Pinus strobus*, or Eastern White Pine. The expansion of the American white pine industry into Michigan in the nineteenth-century changed the face of the landscape dramatically in a short period of time. All over northern Michigan, towns were born that functioned as processing areas. Some of these towns still exist, but many of

them now survive for different reasons than logging. Northern Michigan (the northern half of the Lower Peninsula as well as all of the Upper Peninsula) is now relatively thinly populated and covered in state parks and national forests. The acres within Canada Creek Ranch have borne witness to these general economic and social shifts of the state, as well as experiencing some unique events of their own.

A simple walk in the Ranch today displays its whole history only to the astute observer. The early European influence on the landscape is fairly masked by the land uses now present on the property. Today, you can walk through three types of places, more distinct than ever before the creation of the Ranch: the trails, wilderness areas, and the cabin area. Only a small part of the total acreage in the Ranch is open to cabin building by members, while the trails area is managed by foresters, and the wilderness areas are purposely left unmanaged. These divisions did not exist in the logging era. They are the result of very different ideas about how to use the land that were applied close to a century after logging began. To read the history of the Ranch, you have to turn to the trees.

Out on the trails on the Ranch in mid-October, the forest is brilliant with the bronzes and golds of autumn. The landscape is beautiful, but the naïve observer cannot see the whole truth of its history. The trees on the Montague Road (Stop 1, Figure 1) are the wrong sizes. The oaks and red and sugar maples (Figures 2a and 2b) are too small. They should be at least twice their current circumferences to be relicts from pre-European settlement, but few of them look like they could be over 100 years old. White pines are invading the understory in several places on the trails, but they are likely only a few years old.[1] Large white pines exist in very few places on the Ranch. Large jack pines and

[1] White pine is one of the fastest growing trees in the United States.

towering red pines abound in some areas, but no majestic *Pinus strobus*. Along the Montague Road, the only spots where white pine grow over eight feet high are just uphill of the Montague Swamp (Figure 1, Stop 2), on a steep slope under the cover of large red pines and maples. Immediately downslope of this mixed forest is a spruce, tamarack, and cedar lowland (Figure 3).

In the nineteenth-century, the nexus of white pine logging had shifted west to Michigan due to depletion of the resource in the northeastern states.[2] As the frontier moved westward, Michigan lumber became included in the ever expanding rings of commerce of the United States.[3] Surveyors brought good news when they reported that the giant trees still in high demand in the New York markets were abundant in another place (Figure 4 and Figure 5). The lumber industry was huge throughout Michigan, drawing workers in from the east with the promise of its profits, and for good reason. Lumber companies in Michigan pulled in more money in the nineteenth-century than those who went west in the California gold rush. Michigan produced 5.5 billion board feet in the year 1889 alone.[4] During this industry boom, most of the ancestors of each of the trees visible on the Canada Creek property were cut.[5] The huge pines went first, followed by the hardwoods, spruces, and cedars. Harvest took place in the winter so that sleds drawn by horses could carry the heavy loads more easily. Logs were floated down the rivers during

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Wayne K. Clatterbuck and Leslie Ganus, "Tree Crops for Marginal Farmland: White Pine with Financial Analysis", Agricultural Extension Service, The University of Tennessee, PB 1462, http://www.utextension.utk.edu/publications/pbfiles/PB1462.pdf.

[2] Maria Quinlan, Michigan History, Arts and Libraries, "Lumbering in Michigan," Michigan Historical Center, Department of History, Arts and Libraries, http://www.michigan.gov/hal/0,1607,7-160-17451_18670_18793-53133--,00.html.

[3] See Von Thunen's Isolated State: An English Edition of Der Isolierte Staat by Johann Heinrich von Thunen. Von Thunen argues that cities are centers of commerce, surrounded by rings of ever more transportable goods. Agriculture, for instance, lies in a ring close to cities, while timber harvesting lies much further out.

[4] Maria Quinlan, "Lumbering in Michigan"

[5] Constance Crossman, *Canada Creek Ranch: Its History* (Private printing, 1969), np.

the spring melt. Railroads that no longer exist (Figure 6) took the bounty to sawmills, where they were processed.[6] This intense logging left Canada Creek Ranch with no white pine trees anywhere near as tall as the one in Figure 4. The forest along Montague Road developed in the absence of these giant pines, and has become a very different ecosystem.

The aftermath of intense logging has its effects on the history of a place as well. Though the logging industry in Michigan wound down during the turn of the 20th century, the damage was done. Stump lands and cleared forests created ideal conditions for fires to start and spread, knocking back any fire-intolerant species that might try to re-establish themselves. Landowners found it difficult to sell these ragged plots of land. They tried to promote land as ideal for agriculture, but interested settlers soon found the soils of the region to be incredibly sandy and the growing season only reliably extended from May to August.[7] The result was that land in Montmorency County in 1903 was divided into dozens of plots with different land owners, many of whom eventually abandoned or sold them (Figure 7).

Walking along the South Gate road, there are no visible traces of these old plot lines, and the only remnant homestead on the ranch is far to the southwest of Stop 3 (Figure 8). The developing ecosystems within the Ranch have masked the lot lines and developed into an amalgamated whole under the influence of more recent human intentions. The stands of even-aged aspen and maple and the state of the roads are hints of what the Ranch has undergone since the land changed hands in the early part of the 20th century.

Various changing fortunes allowed a few men to buy up thousands of acres around and including CCR in the 1910s, with the intention to:

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[6] Montmorency County History, Montmorency County Office, Michigan, http://www.montmorencycountymichigan.us/HISTORY.html

[7] Constance Crossman, *Canada Creek Ranch: Its History*, 1969, np.

> …purchase hold and develop the land, to reforest and farm the same, to breed, graze, and raise livestock, to stock lakes and streams on the property, and to protect birds and wild animals and encourage their [propagation], and to do any and all things necessary for incidental thereto, or connected therewith.[8]

The conservation language found within this mission statement likely reflects the changing times and political themes of the day, when conservation meant efficient use of natural resources and national progress.[9] Also a reflection of the political mood, shortly after these men acquired over 20,000 acres among themselves the Michigan Legislature ruled that no single person or corporation should own more than 15,000 acres at one time.[10] Quickly, the property that was to become the Canada Creek Ranch was carved from those 20,000 acres and designated as owned by a separate corporation's shareholders – the Canada Creek Corporation.

Due to the slow downturn of the United States economy through the twenties, the land these men bought became a heavy financial burden. Even before the stock market crash of 1929, the owners had decided to sell. In 1934, after years of losing money on land from which they could not gain a profit, a man named A.C. Monteith made them an offer. Monteith had just set up a "club" in Alpena County to the east of the Canada Creek property. His Lost Lake Club was a success and he wanted to try to do it again. After deliberations, a payment plan was set up, and Monteith began preparing the property.[11]

Monteith structured the Ranch like a middle-class resort, a place for the working man's family to come to relax. In Monteith's own words, he wanted to:

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[8] Constance Crossman, *Canada Creek Ranch: Its History,* 1969, np.
[9] David Stradling, ed., *Conservation in the Progressive Era: Classic Texts* (Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2004), 8-10.
[10]The Michigan Legislature Act 207 of 1923 LIMITATION ON ACREAGE FOR PROPAGATION OR SPORTING PURPOSES (317.261 - 317.263) was repealed in 1995. The Michigan Legislature online, http://legislature.mi.gov/(S(kxrj3xe0myzchpyql1syzs55))/mileg.aspx?page=print&objectname=mcl-Act-207-of-1923
[11] Constance Crossman, *Canada Creek Ranch: Its History,* 1969, np.

> give to all the John Joneses and Bill Smiths a chance to enjoy the same sort of private playground that the wealthy Detroit men had secured for themselves 5 years ago[12]...in fact, for all the average goodfellows who enjoy recreation and insist upon reserving it for a generous portion of their time.[13]

In a 1937 promotional film for the Ranch, cars drive around on the sandy roads, members play shuffleboard, and Monteith proudly stands behind two fishermen holding their impressive catch.[14] In the film, the Ranch is being promoted as a playground for working-class families – exactly what Monteith wanted it to be. In reality the first years of the Ranch were a little quieter, as the members were predominantly Michigan men looking for a place to hunt and fish. Early members included the likes of Howard and Eldon Ferguson, small business owners from Capac, Michigan, who were looking for a place to hunt away from the city. Men like the Fergusons did not have a lot of extra money, especially in the middle of the 1930s, but they traveled to places like CCR to hunt because game (especially deer) was sparse near their homes.[15] Monteith also kept the dues and lot prices low, to allow membership growth during the Great Depression.

Monteith's master plan was to eventually remove himself and his company (the Monteith Land Company) from the Ranch, while maintaining some of the mineral rights to the land.[16] The Ranch was to be run by the Canada Creek Ranch Association, made up of members. The slowly growing membership took more responsibility into their hands as time went on and more cabins were built. That 1937 film's ideal became more of a reality

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[12] Monteith is likely referring here to the Black River Ranch, a property to the west of CCR which has had upper class members for a significant period of time. Ferguson, Daniel. Interview by author. Canada Creek Ranch, MI, October 20, 2007.
[13] Constance Crossman, *Canada Creek Ranch: Its History*, 1969, np.
[14] The film is found on a DVD published by the Ranch in 2004, entitled *Canada Creek Ranch: Then and Now*. The 1937 footage was shot by member Dennis Glenn Cooper.
[15] Ferguson, Daniel. Interview by author. October 20, 2007.
[16] Oil and natural gas reserves were discovered on the Ranch early in its history. Constance Crossman, *Canada Creek Ranch: Its History*, 1969, np.

with each year, as rental cabins were replaced by permanent ones. At Stop 4, a traveler is confronted by the full-fledged cabin area. While a city dweller may not think the cabins here are densely packed, compared to the open forest just down the road, the cabin area is like the Chicago Loop.

While the cabin and member population grew on the Ranch, the ecosystems continued their recovery from the logging era. Early on there were guest cabins built on the shores of Lake Geneva and roads constructed throughout the whole property, but they were built within rather than on top of these logging-altered ecosystems. The most intriguing shots in the 1937 film that relate to this development in the ecology of the Ranch alongside the human development come from two places: hilltops and roads. From the hilltops, past the new members and through the slightly blurred and grainy texture of the film, smaller trees and more open hillsides pop out of the images. The "Stately Pines" section of the film shows 70 foot red pines down the slope from the club house - not white pines. Only a quarter century had passed since logging operations slowed down, and the forests were still growing back.

The roadsides on the ranch present an interesting ecological story of their own. In the film, cars drive on roads with piles of sand built up on each side. Today, the heavily used roads from the trails to the cabin area show miniature road cuts, clear pictures of the soil profiles around the ranch (Figure 9 from the South Gate Road). The "road cuts" are probably from compaction of the road surface and erosion during the first decades of the Ranch's existence when the substrate was more loosely packed. The real gem of this whole process is being able to see the well developed soil horizons of the Spodosol and Alfisol soil orders in the roadsides today. The well developed dark A horizon and light

grey E horizon below it in Figure 9 suggest that during the logging era relatively little topsoil was lost to erosion.[17] Regardless of why there may have been less erosion on the Ranch, the fact remains that the soils today are hospitable to a number of different species of trees, grasses, and forbs, even though membership has grown significantly since the 1930s.

Walking from Stop 4 to Stop 5, red maples, oaks, pines, birch and aspen surround the cabins along Lake Geneva, the most developed of the 5 lakes on the Canada Creek Ranch property (Figure 10). The development of the cabin area has done little to directly affect the distribution of different tree species. No more than 3000 member-owned lots exist on the Ranch today, and although the cabins are much larger and cost much more than they did 70 years ago, few trees have been sacrificed to make way for foundations.[18] Better maintenance on the roads means less erosion of soil, and the fact that the roads are still sandy likely helps infiltration of water, benefiting the lakes and the trees through groundwater replenishment.

The simple ideas Monteith and the early founding members of the Ranch had for the construction of a common man's playground had a profound effect on the ecology of the Ranch property. The separations of space created by these men are clearly visible on the ranch today, from the Wilson Bridge (Figure 14), where cabins sit uphill to one side of the valley and the trails on the other, to the cedar swamp south of Lake Geneva (Stop 6, Figure 15), where at the end of the cabin road you walk into a small piece of wilderness that you can lose yourself in. Also, the forestry plan on the Ranch today is of the type that

[17] Soil horizons, or layers within a soil with distinct characteristics, take a long time to form. The presence of a distinct E horizon here especially highlights the length of time this soil has been developing.
[18] Constance Crossman, *Canada Creek Ranch: Its History*, 1969, np.

allows for the misinterpretation of much of the trails area as a wilderness, even while only a small percentage of the Ranch is officially designated as such.

The reason so much of the Ranch seems to be a wilderness is due to the intelligent management of the Ranch's resources. The forestry plan images (Figure 16a and 16b) show the current land cover for the Ranch.[19] The cabin area is excluded from any forest management plans, because the individual lots technically belong to each individual member that bought them. This means that most of the Ranch property is managed very differently than the small northeastern corner. The designated "wilderness areas" are the cedar lowlands along with some aging maple forests near the entrance to the trails.[20] The genius of the forestry plan is shown in Figure 16a, where the property is divided into six different blocks. Each year, cuttings on the Ranch move from areas in one block to another to allow brush and trees to grow back. This relatively hands-off approach to logging lets the area naturally rebound for long periods of time.

The whole of Canada Creek Ranch is not a relict wilderness. The evidence from the trees abounds to support this statement. However, I would argue that even while surrounded by convincing information, perhaps in the end the facts do not matter. Perhaps what matters instead is that some 70 years ago, someone decided to preserve the Ranch lands in such a way that a wilderness of some type might still exist. Stepping into the soggy soils of the cedar swamp surrounding the Canada Creek it is hard not to believe that somehow the landscape remembers those Chippewa tribesmen and the hunts they may have had here so many years ago.

[19] Canada Creek Ranch 2006 Annual State of the Forest Report.
[20] Jim Treadaway, Interview by author, October 20, 2007.

Figures Referenced within Text

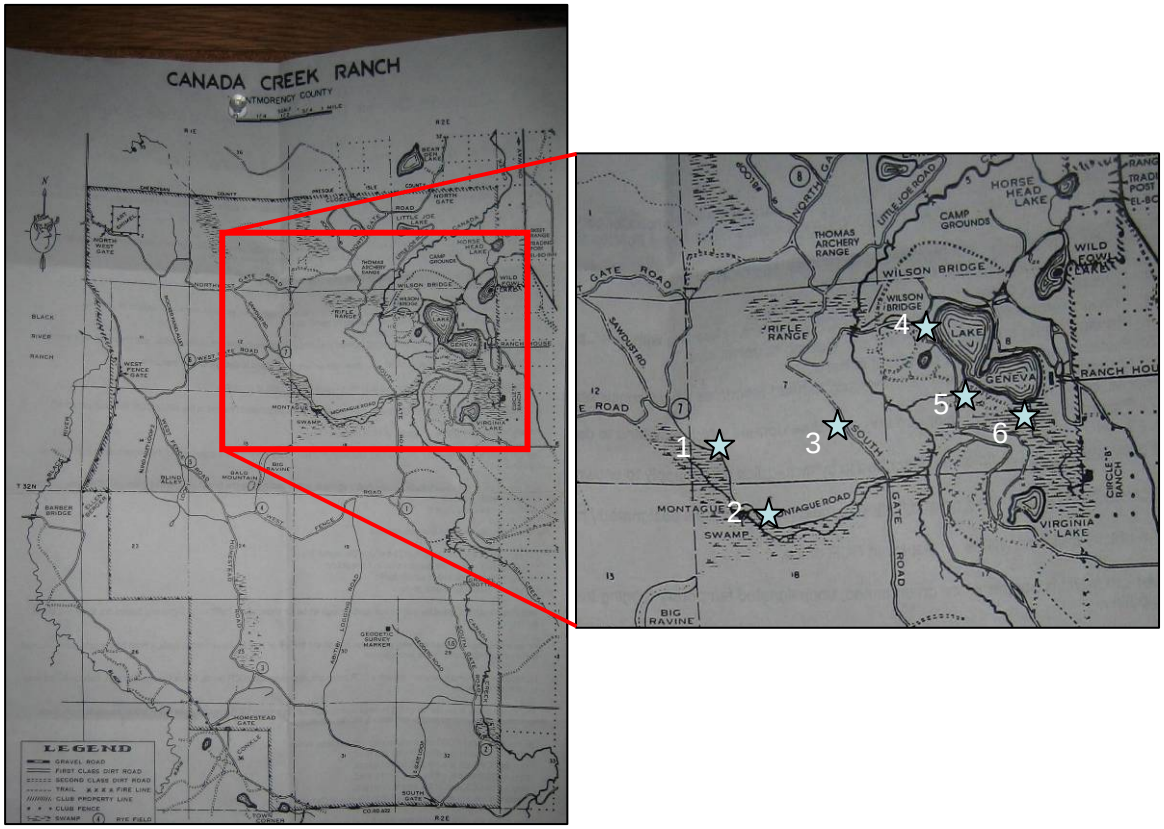

Figure 1. Map of Canada Creek Ranch. On the left is the informal map published by the Ranch, showing the entire property, trails, and cabin area. The area discussed in the text is outlined in red, and each Stop mentioned is marked on the figure to the right. Follow the Montague Road, turn left on to the South Gate Road, right towards the Wilson Bridge, right once you hit Lake Geneva.

Figure 2a (left) and 2b (right). Oaks and maples along the Montague Road, near Stop 1. A large red pine is in the foreground of 2b. Also notice the larger white pine to the right of the red. This pine is upslope of the Montague Swamp. Photograph by author, October, 2007.

Figure 3. The Montague Swamp. A spruce, tamarack, cedar lowland. Photograph by author, December, 2006.

Figure 4. *Logging, felling the tree, Michigan.* Photograph taken between 1880 and 1899. Note the size of the pine, compared to Figure 2b. Library of Congress Prints and Photograph Division.

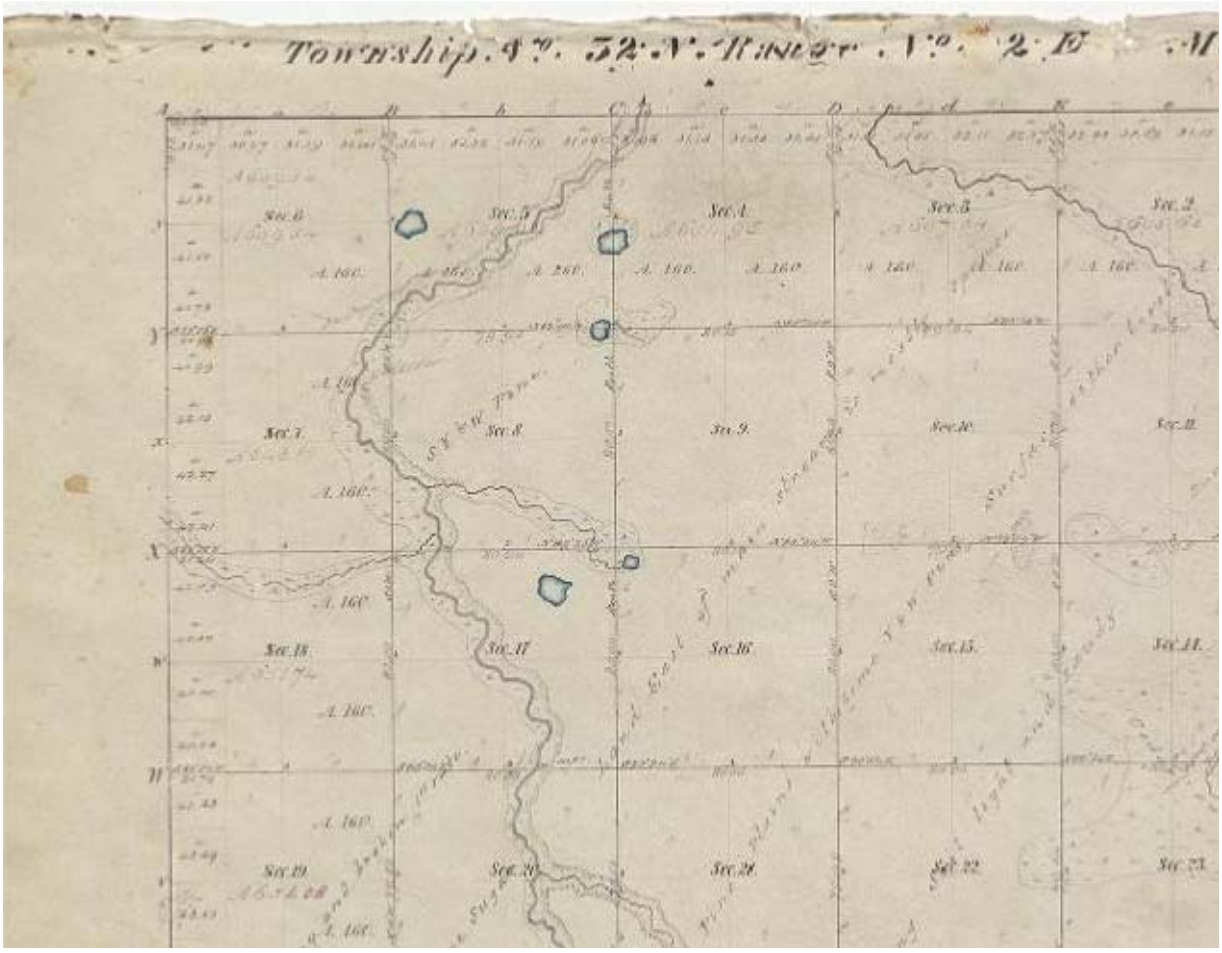

Figure 5. Section of the original survey of the Township and Range that contains the Ranch property discussed within the text (Sections 7, 8, 18, and 17). The notes written across the page are mostly about lumber. Notice in Section 8, Lake Geneva is missing. This is likely because surveyors ran transects from corner to corner of the sections, which means they could easily have missed this large lake walking amongst the trees. The survey was approved by Surveyor General Charles Noble, on March 28, 1851. (Accessed through the Bureau of Land Management General Land Office Records website)

Figure 6. Trains carting away timber (left). A pine forest after a cut (right). Photographs from the Montmorency County History website, courtesy of The Montmorency County Tribune.

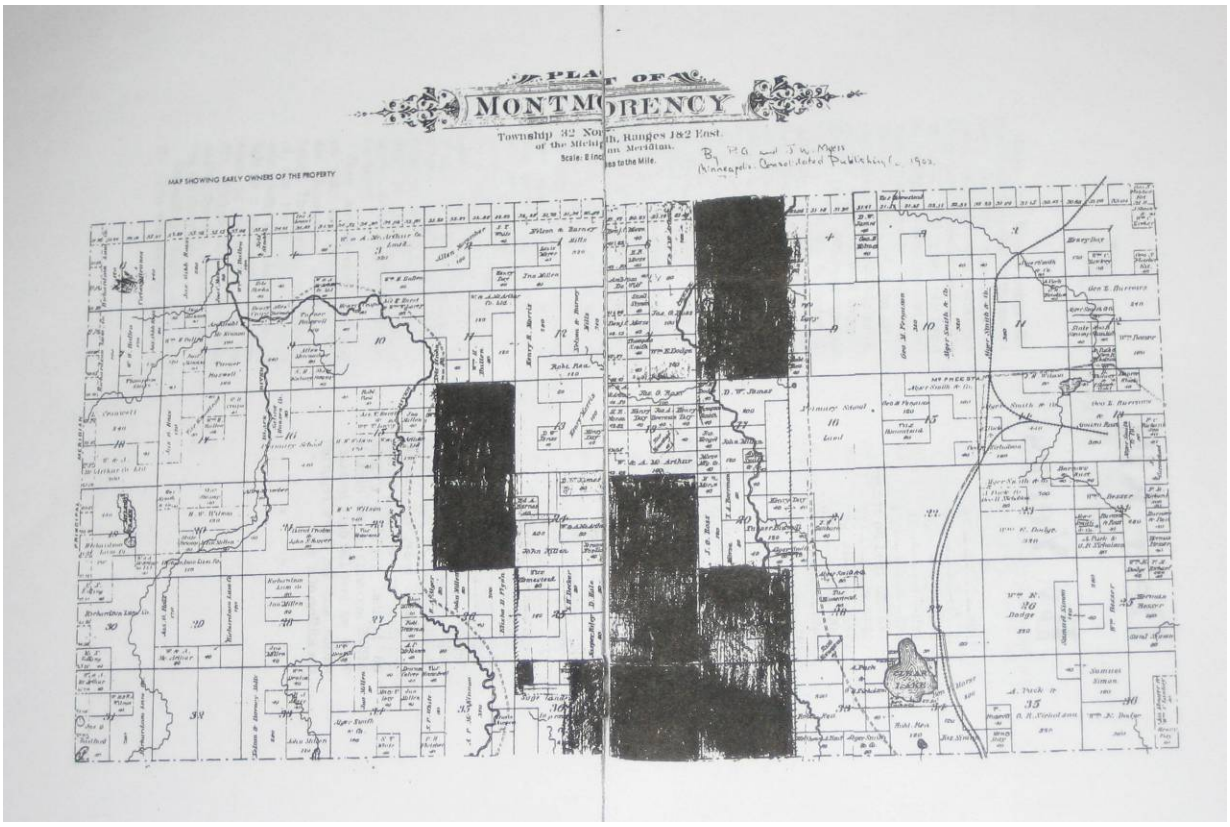

Figure 7. 1903 Plat map of the Canada Creek Ranch Area. Many of the blacked out sections are a part of the Ranch today, although it is unknown why this record has been obscured. From *Canada Creek Ranch: Its History* by Constance Crossman.

Figure 8. Stop 3 along the South Gate Road. Note the even ages of the pines, aspens, and oaks. The current forestry plan involves managing aspen for profit. Photograph by the author, October 20, 2007.

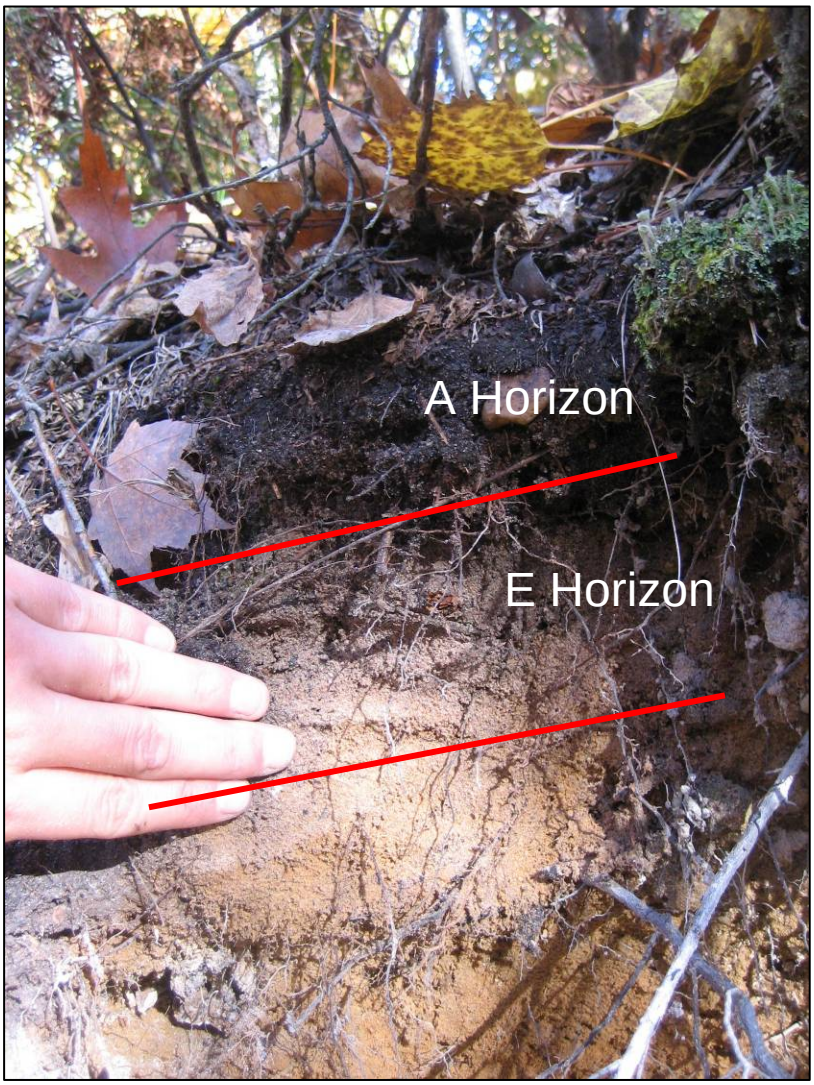

Figure 9. Soil Profile from the South Gate Road. Photograph by the author, October 20, 2007.

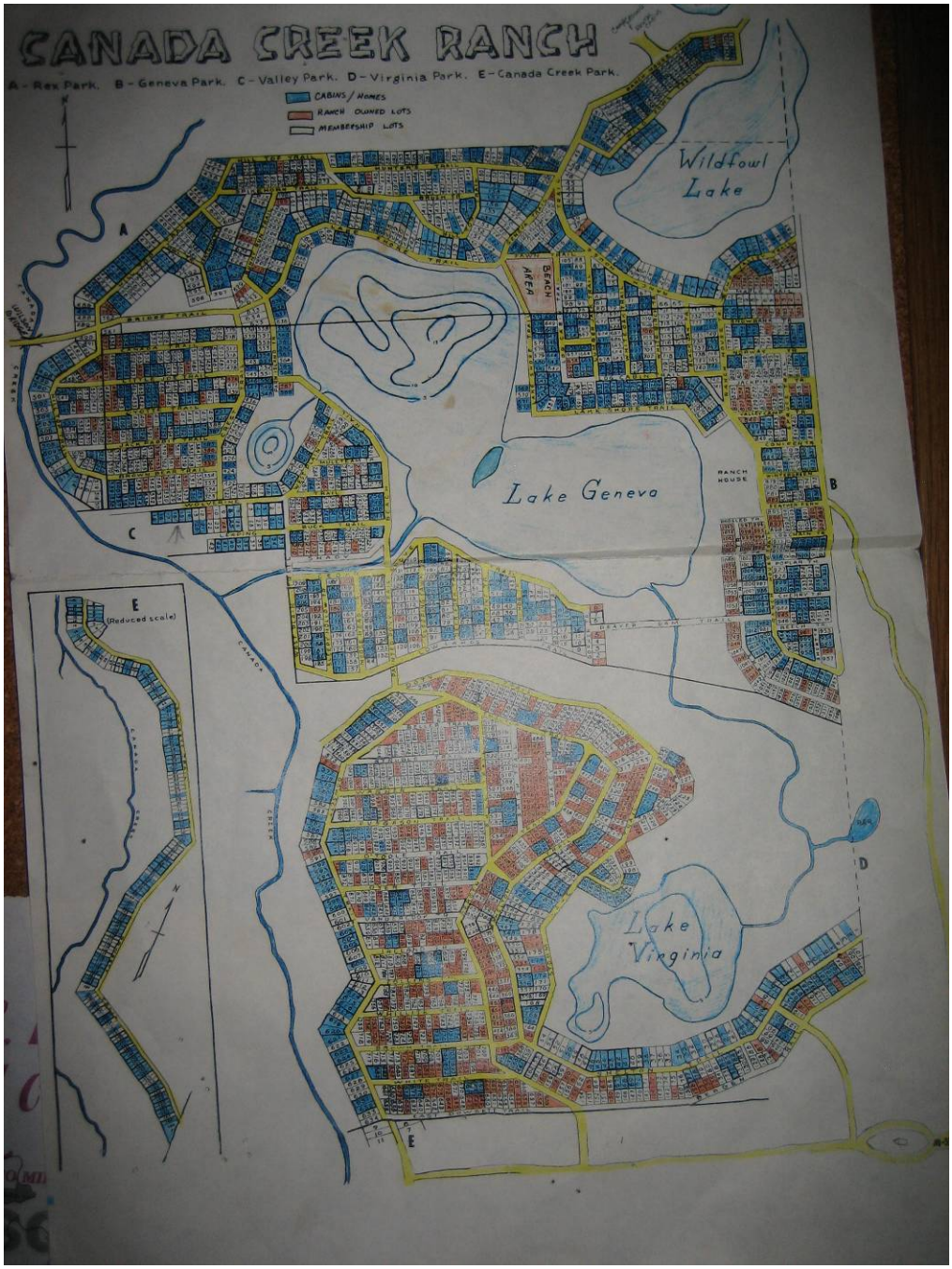

Figure 10. The lots around Lake Geneva, Lake Virginia, and Wildfowl Lake. Members must own 2 conjoining lots before they can build a cabin. Map by Canada Creek Ranch Association. Photograph by author, October 19, 2007.

Figure 14. The Wilson Bridge, the gateway to the trails on the Ranch. The sign states that all vehicles entering the trails must have member stickers. Up the hill behind this location there are cabins. Photograph by the author, October 19, 2007.

Figure 15. The cedar swamp south of Lake Geneva. Spruce and pine are also found in this area. Photograph by the author, December, 2006.

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Logging, felling the tree, Michigan. Photograph taken between 1880 and 1899. Detroit Publishing Company Photograph Collection. Library of Congress Prints and Photograph Division, det 4a03924 http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/det.4a03924 (Accessed October 2007)

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