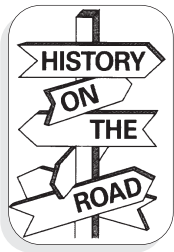


# HISTORY ON THE ROAD

## WAYS OF THE WOODS: PEOPLE AND THE LAND IN THE NORTHERN FOREST



Spanning 30 million acres across northern Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, and New York, the Northern Forest is the largest intact forest ecosystem east of the Mississippi. It encompasses vital forestland, critical wildlife habitat, and the headwaters of all the Northeast's major rivers. But the Northern Forest is more than an ecological resource. It is also home to 1.5 million people whose livelihoods, families, histories, and dreams are tied to the forest landscape.

In 1997, the nonprofit Northern Forest Center formed to mobilize Northern Forest residents to build a sustainable economy, revitalize communities, and conserve the landscape of the Northern Forest region. In August 2006, the Center took the region's history and culture on the road—literally—with a mobile museum

mounted in an 18-wheel tractor trailer.

Supported by a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the mobile museum, *Ways of the Woods: People and the Land in the Northern Forest*, offers an interactive exhibit, community-based programming, and traditional arts—connecting people, communities, culture, and the land in one of America's most important and rapidly changing forest regions.

The story of people and the land in the Northern Forest began with Native Americans who populated the region as the last ice age's glaciers receded. Scattered French and English settlements developed in the seventeenth century as Europe's demand for furs and then timber grew. The next two centuries saw English and other European settlers move into the region, farming and logging as they went, gradually building communities along major travel routes and in places with abundant resources. Yet even as areas to

the south and north became more populated, the Northern Forest remained largely a wilderness frontier.

The Northern Forest's powerful rivers and extensive forests—combined with innovation, technology, vision, and investment—made the Northern Forest an industrial powerhouse in the mid-1800s. Between 1825 and 1850, Burlington, Vermont, and Bangor, Maine, alternated claiming the title of lumber capital of the world. Jobs working in the forest, as well as in sawmills, turning mills, paper mills, and in other industrial operations, attracted workers from around the world. Communities which grew up around the mills became commercial and cultural centers.

Even as industry flourished, artists and intellectuals such as Thomas Cole, Frederic Church, James Russell Lowell, and Henry David Thoreau created works that portrayed the Northern Forest as a place where people could escape the congestion and pressures of city life, find



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*Ways of the Woods: People and the Land in the Northern Forest, the Northern Forest Center's "museum on wheels," is an exhibition and education program housed in an 18-wheel truck. The museum explores culture and heritage across the Northern Forest region of Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, and New York through interactive exhibits, community-based programs, and traditional craftwork and performance arts.*

spiritual renewal, and reconnect with God.

By the early twentieth century, land ownership and the economy in the Northern Forest was dominated by large, regional paper companies—establishing a pattern that remained in place for a century. The experience and innovations of these companies—the Brown Company in Berlin, New Hampshire; Great Northern Paper in Millinocket, Maine; and International Paper in New York—made possible a modern paper industry that would spread across the country and throughout the world.

Today, the Northern Forest is at a crossroads in its history. In the past fifteen years, more than 20 million acres of forest land have changed hands as industrial land owners respond to global economic forces. Job opportunities have declined for loggers and lumber and paper mill workers. And some areas are under intense pressure from second-home development.

This is the context for *Ways of the Woods* as it travels to fairs, festivals, schools, and community events across the Northern Forest.

Mike Wilson, senior program director at the Northern Forest Center, was a driving force behind creating the exhibit—figuratively and literally—from developing the original vision to writing exhibit content. He even got a commercial driver's



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Visitors use the latest technology to play interviews with people who live, work, and play in the Northern Forest. Their stories inspire conversations that cross generations.

license so he can operate the vehicle. He notes that “*Ways of the Woods* was designed to convey the idea that the changing relationships between people and the land—past, present, and future—define the character and culture of the Northern Forest region. When people

come to *Ways of the Woods* they have a great time learning about the history of the region, but they’re also prompted to think about life in the region today and how people can work together for a more prosperous and sustainable future.”

In order to reach people in underserved



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*Ways of the Woods* transforms a 30' x 80' space into an indoor/outdoor interactive museum that brings to life centuries of Northern Forest history. Exhibit pieces include contemporary interviews available via high-tech equipment and museum quality exhibits that showcase historical artifacts.



A school group from Mexico, Maine, uses infrared sensors on the “Rings of Time” exhibit to activate video and music montages that explain different facets of Northern Forest history.

rural communities across the region, the Center has transformed an ordinary semi-trailer into a fully interactive museum with exhibits both inside and outside. At the “Welcome Wall,” a ten-foot wide map puts the Northern Forest in context geographically. Visitors often begin their *Ways of the Woods* experience by locating where they are in the region, where they’ve been, and the places they’d still like to visit.

Floor-to-ceiling photographs and interactive media exhibits engage visitors inside the truck. The “Rings of Time” exhibit combines historic and contemporary photos and film with traditional music and spoken word—all projected onto the cross-section of giant white pine tree several feet in diameter, and activated with infra-red sensors. Flat-screen video stations play profiles of people who live and work in the Northern Forest, and exhibit cases display items handmade in the region using native Northern Forest materials.

Outside, a canopy extends from the trailer to shelter additional exhibits that

explore themes from Northern Forest history, including industry, adventure, conservation, and recreation. These kiosks include historical artifacts such as a logger’s spiked boots, vintage ski equipment, and 3,000-year-old stone tools. Kiosks also display materials created by Northern Forest students and community groups.

Even the youngest visitors to *Ways of the Woods* have fun and learn while deepening their relationship to the region. Identifying Northern Forest smells and matching native fish with their favorite insect meals are just two of the interactive exhibits designed for elementary school-aged children. Older visitors find it equally engaging. Noted one visitor, “Thanks for helping me better appreciate a place I’ve lived in for forty years!”

At most stops, the mobile museum is further complemented by local artists and craftspeople that perform traditional music and demonstrate handcrafts ranging from wooden canoe making, basketweaving, and wool spinning.

After touring *Ways of the Woods*, visitors are invited to share thoughts and reflections about the future of the Northern Forest by posting comments on the magnetic “Hopes for the Future” wall. From start to finish, the entire experience is designed to strengthen the bond of understanding and appreciation visitors have to the region.

In its inaugural season of 2006, nearly 8,000 people visited *Ways of the Woods*, while thousands more saw it exhibited at major fairs and festivals. The 2007 *Ways of the Woods* schedule is complete, but plans are in the works for 2008 and beyond. If your organization or community is interested in hosting *Ways of the Woods*, please contact Tour Manager Carolyn Graney at 207-824-8263 or by email at: [cgraney@northernforest.org](mailto:cgraney@northernforest.org). More information about *Ways of the Woods* and the Northern Forest Center is available at [www.northernforest.org](http://www.northernforest.org). □

—Shelly Angers