



MANITOWISH WATERS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

June 2025

The Northern Highland-American Legion State Forest Turns 100!



Wisconsin state headquarters for field instruction
of forest ranger students in 1912

By Jim Bokern

Rooted in Wisconsin's early journey of settlement, commerce and environmental stewardship, the Northern Highland-American Legion State Forest (NHAL) celebrates its centennial this year and continues to evolve and serve the public. Its natural resources have been prized by many generations, and its creation in 1925 was a turning point in the history of Wisconsin's public lands.

For centuries, abundant natural resources from the region nourished Ojibwe communities of Trout Lake, Lac Vieux Desert, the Wisconsin River, the Turtle Portage and Lac du Flambeau. Even though land cessions from 19th century treaties limited the formal footprint of these Ojibwe communities to reservations, tribal sovereignty and treaty rights ensure continued Ojibwe access to hunt, fish and gather within the state forest.

As former Indigenous lands and resources were sold by the government to miners, loggers, land speculators and farmers, the Wisconsin legislature in 1878 set aside 50,000 acres in the Northwoods with the intention of creating a large Wisconsin state park. Although these lands were subsequently sold, the legislative action revealed an interest in preserving unique natural resources.

The Wisconsin Department of Forestry Is Created

The profession of forestry was established in Wisconsin with the creation of the Wisconsin Department of Forestry in 1903 and the hiring of E. M. Griffith as Wisconsin's first Chief State Forester in 1904. Griffith's intellect, determination and scientific methods led to quick and dynamic actions. He envisioned a Wisconsin forest reserve with two million acres of managed forest in Vilas, Oneida, Iron and Forest counties, safeguarding river headwaters and supporting the timber and paper industries while offering recreational opportunities to the public. In 1911, Griffith established the forest headquarters and tree nursery at Trout Lake and hired the first professional forest rangers to model how to restore the cut-over region. Private forest landowners and counties could learn from the state model, creating more well-managed forests for the future.

By 1910, Theodore Roosevelt's plans of managed forestry based on conservation ethics were being challenged nationally. In Wisconsin, Griffith and his forest reserve plans also met political opposition. Farmers, newspapers, politicians, land speculators and UW county agriculture agents launched political challenges while promoting "boosterism" of the "amazingly productive farmland" available throughout the cutover of northern Wisconsin. Ignoring Griffith's land quality analysis and a positive legislative review of practices in the forest reserve, the Wisconsin State Supreme Court declared Wisconsin's state forest reserve unconstitutional in 1915. In response, Griffith resigned, his 1913-1914 state forestry report was shelved, and the Department of Forestry was absorbed by the new State Conservation Commission. For a decade, the state forestry limited expansion, focused on fire control, and decentralized a diminished forest ranger force.

Introducing the Northern Highland-American Legion State Forest

The Wisconsin Constitution was amended in 1924 to clearly allow state forest funding, creating a new pathway for state public lands. The 1878 vision of state legislators would

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Join Us for Leaders of Historical Preservation, 5 pm, June 3rd, Discovery Center



A Word From Our President

Frank DiLeonardi

Dear Members and Friends,

We are pleased to use this issue of our newsletter to help celebrate the centennial of the Northern Highland-American Legion State Forest. Congratulations to all who have helped develop, maintain and improve this wonderland that we all enjoy! The official celebration is from **9 am-3 pm, Saturday, June 7th at Crystal Lake Campground.**

We are also pleased to provide an update on the Northwoods Forest History Experience: More Than A Museum! This massive historical preservation project by the MWHS and the North Lakeland Discovery Center started about four years ago. We have raised more than \$500,000, and the project took a major step forward when we moved the building to its final resting spot on April 29th. Since then, the foundation has been laid, initial shoring up of the 90+-year-old building has begun, and the build out has started. Captains for the six exhibits are researching and pulling together artifacts, photos, images and more, including historic CLIO tours for hiking, biking and paddling that will allow you to **"Explore Our Evolving Forests."** We are aiming to open "The Experience" in May, 2026.



The future home of "The Experience"

There is still time for you to get involved as we are raising funds for curriculum development, artifact acquisition, the unknowns that come with an old building, and ongoing operations. You can learn more about naming opportunities and our brick program that allows you to honor family, friends and locations in the forest that are special to you [click here](#).

Finally, make sure you check out and sign up for our sought-after summer programs that you can find on page eight.

Happy summer,

MWHS Board of Directors

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Any questions or comments on our newsletter can be directed to **Jean Bettenhausen** at jmcbett@gmail.com or **Frank DiLeonardi** at fdileonardi@icloud.com.

Join in the fun...

**Northern Highland-American Legion
State Forest Centennial
Celebration!**



Saturday, June 7th

9 am-3 pm

Crystal Lake Campground

For a list of the event's activities, [click here](#).

State Forest Turns 100

(Continued from page 1)

be realized in 1925 when 92,000 acres of Griffith's forest reserve properties became the Northern Forest Park. In 1937, the property was renamed the Northern Highland Forest.

The Wisconsin's Veterans Bureau, on behalf of the American Legion, received authorization to purchase Camp Minne-Wawa in 1924, located on a beautiful isthmus between Lake Tomahawk and Big Carr Lake in Oneida County. Camp American Legion opened in May of 1925, providing a wilderness location for veterans to receive important services through outdoor recreation. In 1929, despite Oneida County objections, the Wisconsin Legislature added 36,000 acres to state public lands, creating the American Legion Memorial State Park and Forest Preserve. By 1931, the property became known as the American Legion Forest. In 1968, the two forests were combined, creating the Northern Highland-American Legion State Forest.

Northwoods agricultural "boosterism" was challenged in 1925 by Wisconsin Secretary of Agriculture Jardine at a speech in Sayner, Wisconsin, "... northern Wisconsin could accomplish more for itself and for the nation by reforestation than by agriculture!" Even before the Great Depression, environmental and economic realities left many northern Wisconsin farmers with foreclosed land and no buyers. State properties like Northern Forest Park and American Legion Memorial State Park marked a political shift toward reforestation and the scientific management of forest resources. Consequently, Wisconsin authorized its counties and the national government to also create new forests to help transition more northern cutover lands into multiuse forests. In 1928, the first Wisconsin county and national forests were established, and today the public enjoys 2.3 million acres of county forests and 1.5 million acres of national forests in Wisconsin.



Wisconsin's first Chief State Forester E.M. Griffith (right) sitting high in the saddle with head forest ranger Weaver, circa 1911.

The Work of the CCC

In the depths of the Great Depression, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) brought armies of men dedicated to environmental reclamation of United States forests. In 1933, the CCC empowered NHAL forest rangers with hundreds of workers stationed at Camp Mercer, Camp Crystal Lake, Camp Blue Lake and Camp Star Lake. For nine years, the efforts of CCC enrollees proved transformative to forestry, fishery and wildlife management. Ninety years later, the collaborative results of the CCC and state forest rangers are showcased throughout NHAL forest.

In 1942, CCC camps closed as part of the national movement to redirect labor and resources to winning World War II. Wisconsin forest products proved vital to the war efforts and evidenced how managed forests delivered positive outcomes. Post-war demand for forest products and recreational destinations spiked, ushering in the modern era of the Northern Highland-American Legion State Forest.

A Centennial Celebration of NHAL State Forest

The 2025 celebration of the centen-

nial of the Northern Highland-American Legion State Forest marks the attainment of many 1878 state park and forest reserve stewardship goals. The property is a model for sustainable forestry with its 236,000 acres, earning forest certification by independent, third-party auditors. Protecting the headwaters of the Wisconsin, Flambeau and Manitowish rivers was a driving factor for establishing the state property, and protecting the water quality of the rivers, streams and the 900+ lakes throughout the forest continues to be a high priority. Today, the NHAL supports local economies in Vilas, Oneida and Iron counties through tourism and the forest industry.

Balancing the shifting demands for forest products, forest recreation and environmental best practices continues to be a subject of spirited public debate, revealing how much folks love Wisconsin's unique natural resources and public lands. Throughout its history, the Northern Highland-American Legion State Forest has demonstrated a strong commitment to maintaining Wisconsin's forest heritage while ensuring a vital resource for future generations.

CCC Camp Mercer Cares for the Forest

Editor's Note: Jim Bokern has researched and preserved much history on Civilian Conservation Corps Camp Mercer, 660th Company, including this excerpt and the full report, which can be found on our website [here](#).



The day begins for the enrollees as they board trucks ready to set off for a day of work.

By Jim Bokern

Locally, 660th Company utilized the rail depot at Manitowish to logistically support the development and maintenance of the CCC camp one mile west of the Iron and Vilas County line. Camp Mercer stands out as a larger regional administrative CCC camp, making railroads critical in moving both men and materials.

In Wisconsin, under FDR's New Deal, 182 CCC camps operated until World War II, which reallocated men and resources to battle the Axis Powers. 660th Company was one of 14 state forestry camps in Wisconsin and was designated "S-79." Wisconsin CCC camps were tasked with one of four different missions:

- 1) Soil Erosion Service
- 2) State Parks
- 3) Federal Forestry
- 4) State Forestry

For nine years, thousands of Wisconsin's young men delivered impressive environmental and infrastructure results in a wide array of venues. In the Northwoods, tree planting, fire protection, construction, and stream or lake improvement by the CCC helped maintain the natural resources of the region.

The participation of Wisconsin minorities in CCC camps has a unique legacy. Wisconsin and Minnesota were among a few states where African Americans were integrated into CCC camps and not segregated. The closest CCC camp to Camp 660th was the Lac du Flambeau CCC Indian Division Camp on Pokegama Lake. Wisconsin had six Ojibwa and one Ho Chunk Indian Division CCC camps during the New Deal. Indian Division camps operated differently than traditional CCC camps, expanding the age range of participants, the duration of participation, and

allowing tribal direction of projects. Importantly, the Lac du Flambeau Indian Division CCC Camp was also an administrative camp and was featured in a 1930s Office of Indian Affairs film as an exemplary camp.

Company 660's legacy illustrates a strong focus on fire: prevention, suppression and restoration. "This camp has completed the following work during the period June 20, 1933 to May 14, 1937: Forty-six miles of fire lane construction; five fire lookout towers constructed; one million trees planted (Norway, White Pine and Jack Pine); lake improvement of twenty-one lakes; transplanting of fish; fire pre-suppression and fire prevention all season."



The CCC boys fight a fire in 1936.

Wisconsin's Youth Conservation Corps Adding to Our Forests



The enrollees assemble for the daily flag ceremony at the Statehouse Lake YCC.

Editor's Note: This is an excerpt from a detailed accounting of the YCC by Kay Krans, which you can read in its entirety on our website [here](#). The YCC completed several projects in the Northern Highland-American Legion State Forest, including projects at the Crystal Lake Campground, the Escanaba Trail and Copper Falls State Park.

By Kay Krans

The late 1950s and early 1960s saw an America with a renewed focus on the environment. The Great Depression era's Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) had been a remarkable success story, and there were several attempts to bring back camps modeled after that program on state and national levels. In Wisconsin, Governor Gaylord Nelson led the charge.

Under Nelson's leadership, Wisconsin passed into law in 1961 the Outdoor Recreation Action Program, establishing parks, wilderness areas and the Youth Conservation Corps (YCC), which was modeled after the CCC. The youth for the YCC were selected by high school principals, who chose students with strong work ethics and an interest in careers in natural resources. The program strived to enroll students from each county, providing constructive conservation employment during the summer for high school boys (with girls added in 1973).

The goals of the YCC were:

- 1) To give summer work experience in conservation
- 2) To develop constructive work habits
- 3) To offer the opportunity of living with others, both socially and democratically
- 4) To develop an understanding and appreciation of the state's natural resources
- 5) To become self-reliant
- 6) To develop leadership

Statehouse Lake was the first YCC camp and became the model for the other camps. The first three camps, their directors and locations were:

- Statehouse Lake YCC led by Robert Brismaster in Manitowish Waters
- Nancy Lake (Ernie Swift) YCC led by Fred Lengfeld in Minong
- Mekan River YCC led by Allison McCain in Montello.

Eventually, a fourth camp was added, Kettle Moraine YCC in Campbellsport.

The Wisconsin departments of Conservation and Public Welfare were in charge of the camps and their work. The Wisconsin Conservation Department (today the Department of Natural Resources, or DNR) was given the call of supervising and planning work for the campers. The mission of the Public Welfare Department was to help with the administration of the camp like the kitchen and food supplies. The State of Wisconsin had millions of acres of land for which to care for economic profit, conservation of the land, and recreational use by the citizens of the state. The work for the youth was to assist with projects created by Wisconsin Conservation Department professionals. The placement of the program partially under the Department of Welfare led, in part, to the false perception that the camps were set up for delinquent or under-privileged youth. In fact, the purpose was to recruit young men interested in pursuing a career in the natural resources. Eventually, the camps came under the sole jurisdiction of the Department of Natural Resources.

The first camp sessions were six weeks long. Then camps ran two, five-week sessions that initially included 100 boys for each session. Through the years, that changed to 50 boys and 50 girls each time. In the early 1990s, camp sessions were shortened to four-week sessions because of school calendars in the state. The early campers made \$18 a week plus room and board, working a 40-hour week. In 1991, the campers were working 32 hours per week (with eight hours focused on education) and were paid \$4.25 an hour with \$40 a week deducted from pay for room and board. Each camp had the following staff: the director, assistant director, environmental education coordinator, 10 counselors, and two cooks.



Enrollees are working hard to channel the Manitowish River.

Wisconsin's Early Forest Rangers

Editor's Note: This is an excerpt from a comprehensive article by Jim Bokern that you can find in its entirety on our website [here](#).

These rangers have been protecting our forests for more than 100 years.



The Rest Lake Ranger Station in 1912 at what is today Meggie's (formerly Angler's). If you walk up the hill on the other side of the bike trail, you'll find the base of the old ranger tower.



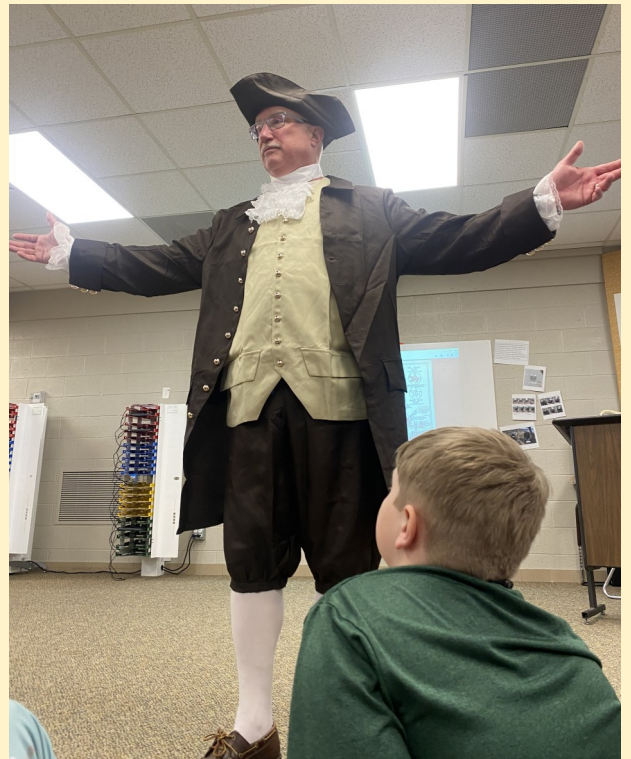
Forest rangers making their rounds by horseback at the Trout Lake Ranger Station in 1912.

By Jim Bokern

In 1911, E.M. Griffith's multi-faceted approach to forestry and ambitious goals required a new kind of state employee who could advance the mission of forestry on the ground while overcoming the rugged challenges of Wisconsin's Northwoods. Griffith immediately rejected creating a school for forestry, because several Midwest universities already had programs. Griffith envisioned a specialized school for forest rangers:

"These rangers will be appointed after Civil Service examinations so practical in character that there should be no trouble in selecting men well equipped for the work and who can be taught the rudiments of forestry that it is essential that each ranger should know. The men must have tact, as they will come in contact in their work with settlers, lumbermen, resort and cottage owners, campers, hunters, fishermen, etc., and must know how to treat them pleasantly and respectfully, and still strictly enforce the laws and regulations governing the forest reserves. They must be good woodsmen and good axe men, with a natural liking for the woods and the life of the pioneer. The men will be paid \$50.00 to \$90.00 per month and their promotion should depend absolutely upon their ability, energy and general fitness and not in the least upon their age or length of service."

The need for a comprehensive forest management plan with a focus on fire suppression created a true sense of urgency for Griffith. The historic practice of using regional and community fire wardens continued to be important, but in 1908 and 1910 over 2 million acres of Wisconsin forests burned at a cost of \$14 million. During this period, communities like Buswell in western Vilas County were burned to the ground, displacing over 200 people. The costs in human suffering and dollars led to a call for new action.



On April 15th, Jim Bokern donned his colonial costume to play the role of Paul Revere for students at North Lakeland Elementary. April 18-19th marked the 250th anniversary of Revere's midnight ride to warn colonists that the British were coming. The United States of America will celebrate its 250th birthday on July 4, 2026. You'll be hearing more about America250.

Camp American Legion Centennial Celebration



The Northern Highland-American Legion State Forest isn't the only one celebrating its centennial. Camp American Legion, a place where our veterans can go to enjoy the Northwoods and recuperate from their physical and mental challenges, will celebrate its 100th year, starting at 11 am, Saturday, June 14th in Lake Tomahawk (click [here](#) for more information on the celebration). You can learn more about the interesting history of Camp American Legion by watching this 30-minute video [here](#).

Announcing a \$ 1 for a \$ 1 Match of your donation to the
Northwoods Forest History Experience:
More Than a Museum!

Our Goals:

Transform a 1930s Civilian Conservation Corps building into an immersive, interactive forest history museum and experience

Create 6 exhibits with artifacts, photos and digital content, depicting our Northwoods forests

Encourage visitors to **Explore our evolving forest** the many historical sites in our area, using an interactive geo-based phone application called CLIO

Educate visitors, making them better-informed stewards of our forests

To learn more and to make a donation or buy a personalized brick, visit:

<https://discoverycenter.net/foresthistorylexperience/> Thank You!



Manitowish Waters
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MW Historical Society 2025 Calendar

For more information
go to: [https://
www.mwhistory.org/events/](https://www.mwhistory.org/events/)

JUNE Leaders of Historical Preservation 6/3, 5 to 7 pm Discovery Center Mysteries of Alder & Wild Rice Lakes by Pontoon 6/5, 9 to 11:30 am, 12 to 2:30 pm Jim Bokern's house Dillinger Pontoon Tour Including Lunch at noon 6/13, 9:30 am to noon or 1:15 to 3:45 pm Little Bohemia Lodge Mysteries of Stone, Fawn, & Clear Lakes by Pontoon 6/20, 9 to 11:30 am, Clear Lake Boat Landing Manitowish & Little Star Lakes by Pontoon 6/20, 12 to 2:30 pm Blue Bayou	MW Historic Hike and Pub Crawl 6/26 3 to 7 pm Koller Park JULY Legends of Manitou Island Mystery by Pontoon 7/8, 6:30 to 8:30 pm Blue Bayou Manitowish Waters Crime Tour by Pontoon 7/11, 9 to 11:30 am 12:30 to 3 pm Rest Lake Boat Landing Spider & Island Lake by Pontoon 7/15, 8:30 to 11 am, 11:30 am to 2 pm, Blue Bayou Dillinger Pontoon Tour Including Lunch at noon 7/18, 9:30 am to noon or 1:15 to 3:45 pm Little Bohemia Lodge	Turtle Flambeau Flowage by Pontoon 7/23, 5:30 to 9 pm Springstead Landing Rest Lake's Amazing History by Pontoon with Shore Lunch 7/25, 9 am to 12:30 pm Rest Lake Boat Landing Camp Mercer Interpretive Trail Hike 7/31, 1 to 4:30 pm River's Edge AUGUST Manitowish Waters Crime by Pontoon 8/14, 9 to 11:30 am 12:30 to 3 pm Rest Lake Boat Landing Big Lake Investigation Pontoon 8/19, 9 am to 12:00 Big Lake Landing	Dillinger Pontoon Tour Including Lunch at noon 8/22, 9:30 am to noon or 1:15 to 3:45 pm Little Bohemia Lodge Travel the Trails Thru Time Bike Ride 8/ 27 Noon to 5 pm Rivers Edge SEPTEMBER Dillinger Pontoon Tour Including Lunch at noon 9/9, 9:30 am to noon or 1:15 to 3:45 pm Little Bohemia Lodge Forest History Driving Tour and Short Hikes 9/30, 10:30 am to 5 pm Discovery Center
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The first forest rangers pose for a picture at the Trout Lake Ranger Station in 1912.

Don't Forget to RENEW your 2025 dues! Membership & Donations

Those interested in joining the MWHS should complete the form below and send in your form with \$20 to:

Manitowish Waters Historical Society
P.O. Box 100
Manitowish Waters WI 54545

Those considering joining the Manitowish Waters Historical Society are encouraged to explore our web page, attend MWHS events and reach out to board members.

Student Memberships are available for \$2, renewing each May.

Name: _____

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City: _____ State: ____ Zip: _____

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Donations

Donations can be sent to:
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MW Historical Society is an approved 501c3 charitable organization, and contributions may be tax deductible. Please contact us for additional information.