

The People's Forest

By [SEAN HURLEY](#) · JUL 15, 2013

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Image from the Film
DAVID HUNTLEY

“The People’s Forest” a new film about the White Mountain National Forest by filmmaker David Huntley premieres next Tuesday. The 48 minute documentary examines a dramatic period in the life of New Hampshire’s great woods from 1860 to 1910 and shows how the human forces that conspired to nearly destroy the land came together again to save it. Sean Hurley spoke with the filmmaker and has this story.

If it’s true as Robert Frost pointed out in Mending Wall that “Good fences make good neighbors” then forests must be the best of neighbors. Naturally hiding their world from ours, every forest is a kind of fence.

Which makes this particular neighbor a daunting subject for a filmmaker. How do you tell the story of 800,000 thousand acres of secluded

trees and massive mountains? If you had to make a film about the White Mountain National Forest, where would you train your lens?

There's a few ways of telling the story of the forest. And the way that I chose was very much from the human experience in the mountains.

Filmmaker David Huntley has been filming difficult things for the last 25 years--from exotic jungles in Central America to the frozen tundras of the Arctic. Often a writer or filmmaker for hire, with "The People's Forest" Huntley finds himself following a much deeper path.

I've spent a lot of my time in the White Mountains and my family comes from the North Country. From that standpoint, I think it's a film I was always meant to make.

Today, it's hard to imagine that just over 100 years ago, the White Mountains were on the brink of utter ruin. It had been cut over, burned over. Vast fields of smoldering stumps. Streambeds that were collapsing in on themselves. People were calling it the lands that nobody wanted.

The People's Forest is the result of a 2 year collaboration between Huntley, the Center for Rural Partnerships at Plymouth State University and the Museum of the White Mountains. In an unusual twist of history, in the 1970s Museum of the White Mountains Director Catherine Amidon and Huntley worked together at the Lakes of the Clouds Hut.

We were that first generation of educating people about the White Mountains. Prior to that hut personnel were more carry the food in, you know - mules. And we were really that first generation, we were both 16, there committed to teaching people about the White Mountains and now to have the opportunity to take that message to a much larger scale is amazing.

Entire valleys and mountainsides were stripped clean. What was left was a pile of branches and tops of trees that were quite flammable. In 1903, over five hundred fires raged spreading fear among inhabitants. Berlin and Gorham surrounded on 4 sides by fire. Whitefield, New Hampshire surrounded on three sides. Between 1880 and 1910, hundreds of thousands of acres went up in smoke.

My favorite and sort of most chilling image is a photograph that was taken in 1907 from a logging camp in the Pemigewasset Valley looking out toward Owl's Head with just massive mushroom clouds of smoke from a giant forest fire rising on the horizon that looks so apocalyptic.

For the last 25 years, out of personal interest, Huntley has been studying archival images of the White Mountains. A hobby put to full use here as The People's Forest is a treasury of rarely seen vintage stills and juttering horse-drawn cinema as well as Huntley's own breathtaking shots of the mountains and forest as they stand today.

It tells a story that I think not a lot of people who even visit the White Mountains are aware of which is the incredibly dramatic story of what this place went through and how close it was to being brought to its knees by intensive logging, forest fires - and this was a national - one of America's first - environmental disasters.

A disaster created by thousands and averted by thousands. The story of the White Mountain National Forest isn't just a chronicle of trees, but a reminder that if a forest is a fence, that we're standing inside its borders.

For NHPR, I'm SH "The People's Forest" premieres July 16th at 7:00 PM in the Boyd Auditorium at Plymouth State University.

<https://www.nhpr.org/post/peoples-forest#stream/0>