

Mark Twain National Forest

The Texas Eagle passes through several districts of the Mark Twain National Forest in southeastern Missouri, where second-growth woodlands hint at the splendor of earlier virgin forests.

The first Europeans to tour the territory that would become Missouri found vast herds of elk and buffalo, and a forest that covered 70 percent of the area. Settlers arrived by the rivers, and cut wood for houses, fuel, and to sell. Timber was cut and floated downstream to mills in larger settlements, where it was used for lumber or as cordwood to fuel the boilers of steam-powered riverboats.

After the Civil War, the logging industry boomed. Wood was in huge demand as the nation rebuilt its economy. Lumbermen purchased vast acreages of forestland, sometimes for a few cents an acre, and built narrow-gauge rail lines to move wood out of steep hills and wilderness hollows. Rivers, streams and railroads carried logs to mills. The sawmill at Grandin alone consumed seventy acres of woodland a day. By 1920, the pine forests, mills, and jobs were gone. Some who had come to work the woods tried to stay and eke out a living from the thin soils of the deforested hills. But their efforts produced meager crops and more erosion, and by 1928, large areas of the once rich timberland had become wasteland.

By the 1930s, Missouri forest and wildlife resources were at an all-time low. The Missouri National Forest Association lobbied the federal government to purchase land for a national forest. In 1939, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Mark Twain National Forest into existence, and he would soon thereafter send hundreds of young men of the Civilian Conservation Corps to work in the region to build roads, fire towers and ranger stations, and plant hundreds of acres of pine trees.

Today you can hike to spring-fed rivers, rocky bluffs and pastoral views on trails made by the men of the CCC. Nearly 150 farmsteads, fire towers, ranger stations and other historic structures, in various stages of disrepair, still stand in the 1.5 million acre National Forest. The National Forest Service lacks the funds needed to restore these buildings, but innovative partnerships have formed to save as many as possible. One successful endeavor involved 16 separate volunteer teams led by skilled construction professionals. The teams restored the 1930 Fuchs Farmhouse at no cost to the National Forest, in exchange for use of the property for two weeks each year. During the remaining weeks, the 5-bedroom stone house is available to the public as a family getaway vacation rental.

Consider a visit to the beautiful Ozarks to enjoy the spring blooms or vibrant fall colors, and the rejuvenation of Missouri's natural heritage.

Source(s):

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