

From Chapter 10: Reforested Fields

Author's note: I wanted western Pennsylvania to be a character in the story and so there are many descriptive passages of the fields, forests, hills, and ridges. This short bit about Pennsylvania forests also features a very real Weakland family friend, Mr. Jim Mayer.

...I knew Jerry was right about the pasture. The trees here were a lot smaller than the ones near the top of hill. This meant they were young, so this section of hillside had probably been a cleared field not too long ago.

Reforested fields were all over western PA. That's because in the past there were lots of clearings. Mr. Mayer, who teaches me all kinds of interesting facts whenever my dad and I go hiking with him, told me that people created clearings when they cut down trees to make fields for crops and pastures for cattle, to make railroad ties for the tracks built after the Civil War, to gather wood to make the charcoal that was used in the whisky stills and old iron furnaces, and to make ceiling and wall props for the deep mine shafts, just to name a few.

Mr. Mayer also said that at one time or another almost every mountain in Pennsylvania had been clear-cut, and that in the late 1800s over 60% of the forests had been leveled. Back at the turn of the century, when much of the state was a barren landscape of old stumps and brown eroded hillsides, people called the clearings "The Great Pennsylvania Desert." But my dad says that if you let nature alone, she'll bounce back. I think that's true. I mean, all you had to do was look around. We were hiking down a hill that was once a field but

was now a forest of young locust, maple, and black walnut.

A bit beyond the old fence posts we came to a new landmark, a big rocky outcropping of tilted limestone that rose into the air like the prow of the sinking Titanic. “Awesome!” we said together...