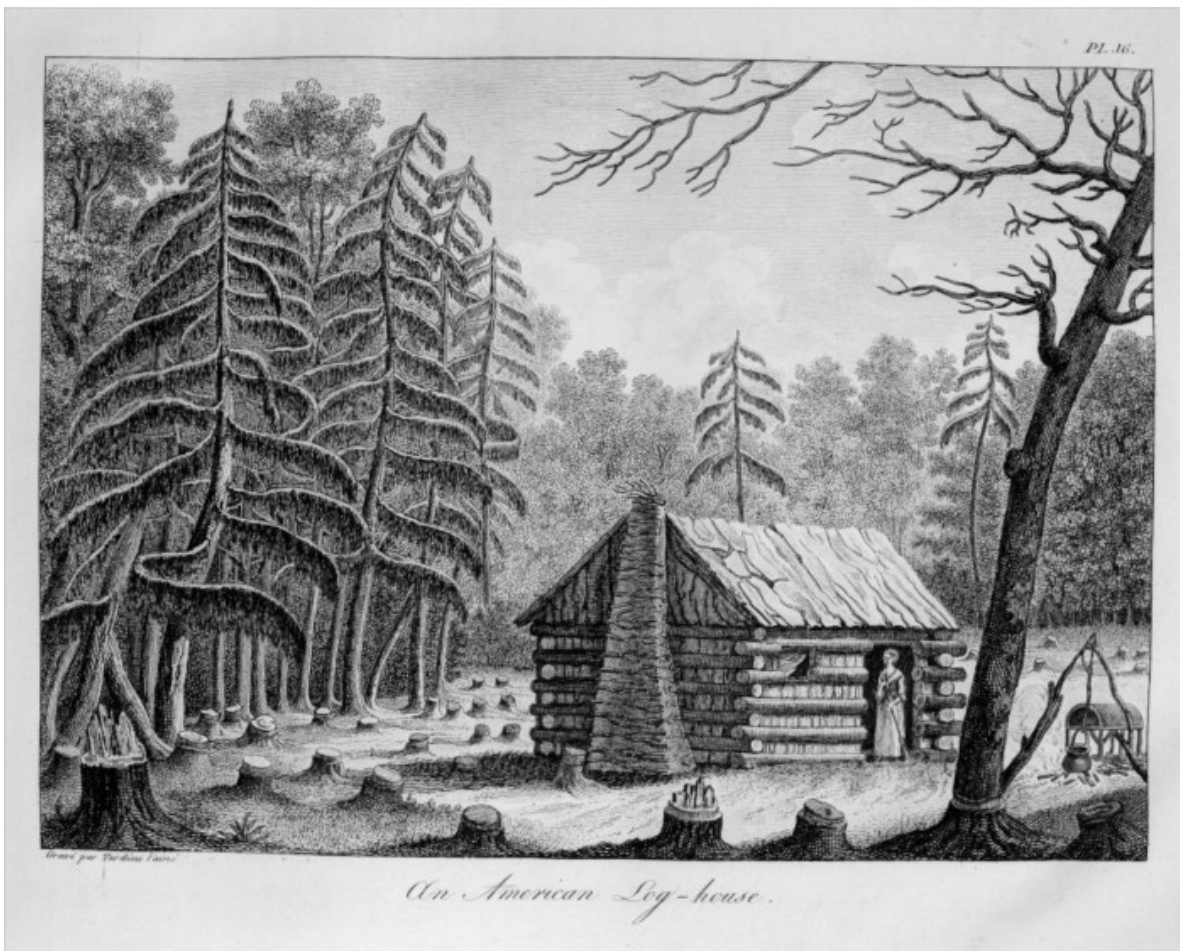


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Trees, Poles, and Progress — Jared Farmer

7-9 minutes

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In the early national period of the United States, progress more often than not meant cutting down wild trees. The settler nation celebrated woodsmen and loggers for their role in making room for cultivation. In practice, clearing the eastern forest for log houses also meant destroying indigenous landscapes and habitats. Creation and ruination went hand in hand.



Forest clearance reached its apotheosis during the Civil War, when the Blue and the Gray cut down millions of trees for firewood and construction material, and killed untold more with wayward bullets and cannons. A poignant photograph (below) from wartime Virginia shows how trees were both desired and ruined by Americans. Here troops have cut down all the big trees except one, under which their tents cluster in a hasty approximation of a domestic bower. In the foreground, a telegraph pole—a dead tree enlisted in service of modernity—carries the news of the day.



In the post-Civil War period, the United States tried to forget the North-

South conflict by incorporating the Great Plains and the Far West. In this time and space, the main arboreal effect of American progress shifted from clearing trees to planting trees. Arbor Day, which started in Nebraska in 1872, represented a desire to conquer semi-arid lands through afforestation.

There was a second and equally important kind of Great Plains tree-planting—or, more precisely, planted infrastructure: pine trunks fashioned into railroad ties and telegraph poles. As seen in John Gast’s “American Progress” (1872), the angel Columbia uses telegraph wire to pull civilization westward over the prairie as savages and beasts slink off the stage of history.



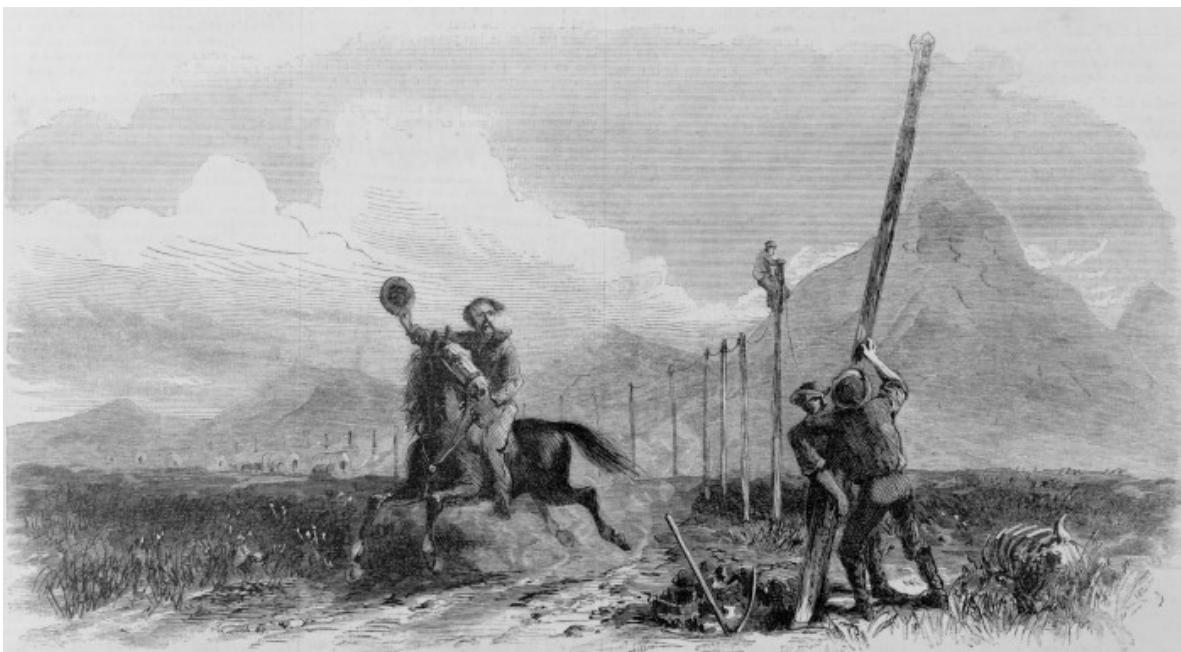
Gast’s painting became iconic—reproduced endlessly in lithographs—but Americans before and after produced many more iterations on the theme. Consider this detail from the frontispiece of an 1870 transcontinental guide:



This fanciful illustration ca. 1860 shows a four-pole funeral scaffold (and a Pony Express rider escaping “pursuit” by a Native warrior):



By the end of the 1860s, planted trees and implanted poles vastly outnumbered Native frameworks in the American West. The joining of the transcontinental rails at Promontory Summit, Utah, in 1869, followed the equally momentous completion of the first transcontinental telegraph in 1861 (at Salt Lake City, Utah).



THE OVERLAND PONY EXPRESS.—[PHOTOGRAPHED BY SAVAGE, SALT LAKE CITY, FROM A PAINTING BY GEORGE M. OTTINGER.]



Telegraph lines and railroad lines paralleled each other, and the construction of each required a small forest of trees. Nevertheless, rail tourists mainly remarked on the absence of trees between Nebraska and California.

Travelers on the western Grand Tour marked the passage of time and space at the “One Thousand Mile Tree” in the canyon of Utah’s Weber River. Here a pine tree grew in relative solitude approximately 1,000 miles west of the beginning of the transcontinental line. Purportedly the pine was the sole tree on the route between Omaha and Salt Lake City.





A large swinging signboard (“1,000 Mile Tree”) hung from one of the lower branches. Passenger trains would stop here and let tourists picnic and pose for photographs. Great regional photographers A. J. Russell and Eadweard Muybridge captured the scene on wet glass plates. Their resulting images were deeply enigmatic.





The original tourist guide for the first transcontinental was far less subtle in its depiction: this “living mile-stone of nature’s planting” had “stood a lonely sentinel, when all around was desolation; when the lurking savage and wild beast claimed supremacy, and each in turn reposed in the shade of its waving arms.” In this post-Civil War moment, the lone tree was no longer a “guide to the gloomy past, but an index of the coming greatness of a regenerated country.”

The living milestone was always photographed with telegraph poles. Side by side, the arboreal landmark and the wooden land-markings could represent natural time and mechanical time, Nature’s Nation and American futurity.



One wonders how many Americans interpreted telegraph poles as crosses. Polish Catholics, for their part, saw crosses everywhere, and the famous novelist Henryk Sienkiewicz, speaking of America, wrote, “It was well known that wherever a railway ran through the forests and plains, its telegraph poles rising like crosses, these crosses might stand as funeral monuments to the Indians.”

Today, utility poles are so commonplace that we hardly notice them, but for earlier generations of Americans they signified disruptive technology. Nostalgic post-frontier western painters liked to imagine that Native Americans were incapable of understanding the magic of “talking wires.” In a visual form of romantic racism, the utilitarian tree trunks became symbols of the “Vanishing American,” as in Henry F. Farny’s “The Song of the Talking Wire” (1904):



American Indians did destroy telegraph poles from time to time during moments of conflicts with settlers and the U.S. Army, but this guerrilla tactic was exaggerated and sensationalized (as technophobic violence) in westerns such as *Western Union* (the 1941 Fritz Lang film adapted from the 1939 Zane Grey novel) and *Telegraph Trail* (1933), starring a young John Wayne.





Simultaneously, all over the semi-arid U.S. West, settlers made new homes on dispossessed Indian land, and planted trees to express their hopes and ambitions. Where the American log house gave way to the American sod house (as seen in this 1886 Solomon Butcher photograph from Custer County, Nebraska), trees signified civilization, not wildness—or, from today's perspective, the savage progression of settlement.



The farthest Far West of U.S. expansion was neither California, nor

Alaska, nor even Hawai'i. Rather, it was the Philippines. Americans at the time of the nation's first imperialist war drew easy connections between sites of conquest and technologies of conquest. In 1899 *Judge* magazine published a cartoon, complete with teepees and thatched huts, that telegraphed racism and cynicism. The caption read, "Speaking from experience. (Through Professor Macaroni's wireless telegraphy): American Indian (to Filipino), 'Be good, or you will be dead!'"



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