**HISTORY ON THE ROAD**

**WAYS OF THE WOODS:**
**PEOPLE AND THE LAND IN THE NORTHERN FOREST**

Spanning 30 million acres across northern Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, and New York, the Northern Forest is the largest intact forest ecosystem east of the Mississippi. It encompasses vital forestland, critical wildlife habitat, and the headwaters of all the Northeast’s major rivers. But the Northern Forest is more than an ecological resource. It is also home to 1.5 million people whose livelihoods, families, histories, and dreams are tied to the forest landscape.

In 1997, the nonprofit Northern Forest Center formed to mobilize Northern Forest residents to build a sustainable economy, revitalize communities, and conserve the landscape of the Northern Forest region. In August 2006, the Center took the region’s history and culture on the road—literally—with a mobile museum mounted in an 18-wheel tractor trailer. Supported by a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the mobile museum, *Ways of the Woods: People and the Land in the Northern Forest*, offers an interactive exhibit, community-based programming, and traditional arts—connecting people, communities, culture, and the land in one of America’s most important and rapidly changing forest regions.

The story of people and the land in the Northern Forest began with Native Americans who populated the region as the last ice age’s glaciers receded. Scattered French and English settlements developed in the seventeenth century as Europe’s demand for furs and then timber grew. The next two centuries saw English and other European settlers move into the region, farming and logging as they went, gradually building communities along major travel routes and in places with abundant resources. Yet even as areas to the south and north became more populated, the Northern Forest remained largely a wilderness frontier.

The Northern Forest’s powerful rivers and extensive forests—combined with innovation, technology, vision, and investment—made the Northern Forest an industrial powerhouse in the mid-1800s. Between 1825 and 1850, Burlington, Vermont, and Bangor, Maine, alternated claiming the title of lumber capital of the world. Jobs working in the forest, as well as in sawmills, turning mills, paper mills, and in other industrial operations, attracted workers from around the world. Communities which grew up around the mills became commercial and cultural centers.

Even as industry flourished, artists and intellectuals such as Thomas Cole, Frederic Church, James Russell Lowell, and Henry David Thoreau created works that portrayed the Northern Forest as a place where people could escape the congestion and pressures of city life, find...
spiritual renewal, and reconnect with God.

By the early twentieth century, land ownership and the economy in the Northern Forest was dominated by large, regional paper companies—establishing a pattern that remained in place for a century. The experience and innovations of these companies—the Brown Company in Berlin, New Hampshire; Great Northern Paper in Millinocket, Maine; and International Paper in New York—made possible a modern paper industry that would spread across the country and throughout the world.

Today, the Northern Forest is at a crossroads in its history. In the past fifteen years, more than 20 million acres of forest land have changed hands as industrial land owners respond to global economic forces. Job opportunities have declined for loggers and lumber and paper mill workers. And some areas are under intense pressure from second-home development.

This is the context for Ways of the Woods as it travels to fairs, festivals, schools, and community events across the Northern Forest.

Mike Wilson, senior program director at the Northern Forest Center, was a driving force behind creating the exhibit—figuratively and literally—from developing the original vision to writing exhibit content. He even got a commercial driver’s license so he can operate the vehicle. He notes that “Ways of the Woods was designed to convey the idea that the changing relationships between people and the land—past, present, and future—define the character and culture of the Northern Forest region. When people come to Ways of the Woods they have a great time learning about the history of the region, but they’re also prompted to think about life in the region today and how people can work together for a more prosperous and sustainable future.”

In order to reach people in underserved
rural communities across the region, the Center has transformed an ordinary semi-trailer into a fully interactive museum with exhibits both inside and outside. At the “Welcome Wall,” a ten-foot wide map puts the Northern Forest in context geographically. Visitors often begin their Ways of the Woods experience by locating where they are in the region, where they’ve been, and the places they’d still like to visit.

Floor-to-ceiling photographs and interactive media exhibits engage visitors inside the truck. The “Rings of Time” exhibit combines historic and contemporary photos and film with traditional music and spoken word—all projected onto the cross-section of giant white pine tree several feet in diameter, and activated with infra-red sensors. Flat-screen video stations play profiles of people who live and work in the Northern Forest, and exhibit cases display materials created by Northern Forest students and community groups.

Even the youngest visitors to Ways of the Woods have fun and learn while deepening their relationship to the region. Identifying Northern Forest smells and matching native fish with their favorite insect meals are just two of the interactive exhibits designed for elementary school-aged children. Older visitors find it equally engaging. Noted one visitor, “Thanks for helping me better appreciate a place I’ve lived in for forty years!”

At most stops, the mobile museum is further complemented by local artists and craftspeople that perform traditional music and demonstrate handcrafts ranging from wooden canoe making, basketweaving, and wool spinning.

After touring Ways of the Woods, visitors are invited to share thoughts and reflections about the future of the Northern Forest by posting comments on the magnetic “Hopes for the Future” wall. From start to finish, the entire experience is designed to strengthen the bond of understanding and appreciation visitors have to the region.

In its inaugural season of 2006, nearly 8,000 people visited Ways of the Woods, while thousands more saw it exhibited at major fairs and festivals. The 2007 Ways of the Woods schedule is complete, but plans are in the works for 2008 and beyond. If your organization or community is interested in hosting Ways of the Woods, please contact Tour Manager Carolyn Graney at 207-824-8263 or by email at: cgraney@northernforest.org. More information about Ways of the Woods and the Northern Forest Center is available at www.northernforest.org.

—Shelly Angers