

## METHODS OF ASSESSING TIMBERLANDS.

Although the law very clearly states that "real property shall be valued by the assessor \* \* \* at the full value which could ordinarily be obtained therefor at private sale," the assessment of timberlands in practically all of the northern counties is made in a most arbitrary manner and with apparent disregard of the requirement in the law just quoted. In only a few of the towns is there anything approaching true valuation in the assessment of this class of property. Timberland as a rule is not only greatly undervalued, but, moreover, the variability of the ratios of assessed to true values in many towns presents striking examples of inequality in assessment. While in a few towns there has been an apparent attempt to follow a given percentage or fraction of the true value, a close inspection shows a pronounced variation from such percentage or fraction.

The fixing of low values is not considered a violation of the law. Each assessor is likely to take the general figures of his predecessor. He knows also that other assessors adopt a uniform value per acre for all farm and cut-over land and apply it throughout the assessment district, regardless of the land's advantage or disadvantage of location. The assessor is elected to office by the people whose property he is to assess. Then again he may be in the employ of one of the largest property owners in the town, and in passing it should be said that the administration of many of the towns is virtually in the control of the principal property owner therein, and that the assessor is in the employ of such owner while not engaged in the performance of his official duties. All of these conditions tend to encourage undervaluation, and it is believed they are in no small measure responsible for it.

The law also requires that in determining the value of real estate the assessor shall consider, as to each piece, the quantity of standing timber. For an assessor to get a fair approximation of the true value of such standing timber, he must be able to estimate with some degree of accuracy and be familiar with timber values. Many of the assessors do not have these qualifications, and those who do are often prevented from exercising them, except in a limited way, for the reason that the time allowed for making up the assessment roll is not sufficient to enable an assessor to cover as he should more than a part of his assessment district. It should be said, however, that in a few towns they do attempt to see each timber descrip-

tion in at least one or two townships each year. The assessor is accompanied by a lineman to assist in locating the description, and the assessed value is determined at that time. In a strict sense no cruised estimate is made. Such assessments are made each year on lands not previously viewed by the assessor until the entire town has been covered. In other towns there is very little evidence of such systematic work being carried on, although occasionally it will be found that an effort is being made in that direction.

Cut-over land is usually valued at a fixed rate throughout a town, varying only with a very rough classification of the soil as swamp, hardwood, or pine land. As a rule no attention is given to such important factors governing value as proximity to railroads, highways and water. Cut-over pine lands are seldom assessed for more than \$2 per acre, while cut-over hardwood lands will rarely exceed \$6 per acre. In the extreme northern counties both cut-over pine and hardwood lands may be assessed as low as \$1 per acre. Cultivated land in some towns is assessed at the same values as cut-over land. Even in the more developed farming communities the assessed values of cultivated lands seldom exceed \$10 per acre, although the sale value in many cases is five times as great.

Instead of an actual examination of timbered land there is more often merely an interview with the owner. In most of the hardwood regions the land is not considered separately. However, when any estimate is made, the land and trees are treated separately. For example, in the one county, where practically all the timber is estimated, a value of \$2 per acre is always added to the assessed value of the timber. The county just referred to is the only one where it is known that cruises for estimating the timber for tax purposes have been made throughout the county. In some towns the cruised values of a considerable portion of the timbered area are, of course, known to the assessor, who is either an officer or employe of one of the companies having extensive holdings in the town, but such cruised values are evidently not used in making up the assessment roll. In such cases the assessor uniformly keeps the assessed value as low as possible, not only on the company's holdings but also on all others. In adjoining towns, where the assessor is not so connected with a large owner, it will generally be found that assessed values are higher.

Assessments are lowered when the owner reports that the timber has been removed, and it is, therefore, classed as cut-over land and assessed at the prevailing rate for such land in the town where

located. Generally, if not always, the assessor will accept such report as correct and make no investigation to determine whether or not the description has been entirely or only partly cut, with the result that, if only partly cut, it is undervalued year after year. No doubt in many instances descriptions are assessed without taking into account the standing timber thereon. At least a comparison of the assessed and estimated true value of many of the examples given herein would indicate that this is the case. So far as could be learned none of the assessors give any consideration to young growth in fixing values.

While the practice of undervaluation prevails throughout most of that part of the state now being considered, it should not be understood that this condition is universal. In many localities a conscientious and fairly systematic effort is being made by assessing officers to conform to the law. In a large measure the importunities of the county supervisor of assessment have influenced the assessor in raising the valuation of this class of property; and in many cases, independent of such solicitations from supervisors of assessment, the assessor has endeavored to faithfully comply with the tax laws regarding valuation.

#### VIEWS OF LUMBERMEN ON TAXATION.

In carrying on the investigation of timber taxation in northern Wisconsin it was manifestly of primary importance to obtain, as completely as possible, the views of lumbermen on this subject. A large part of the work, therefore was devoted to interviews with large operators, and in many instances where personal conferences were impossible, a great deal was brought out by correspondence with them.

The views expressed by these representative timber holders were by no means uniform. There was, however, very little difference of opinion on the question whether the present system of taxing forest lands is or is not satisfactory; and the one pointed criticism directed against this system that stands out clearly above all others, was that taxes at present absolutely forestall any attempt in northern Wisconsin to hold cut-over land for growing a second timber crop. While it may be true that occasionally a company plans, even under existing conditions, to cut over their holdings a second time, there were only two instances of this sort discovered. In neither case, moreover, was there any effort being made to provide for reproduction or to