

CHAPTER 14

ARKANSAS FORESTRY

FROM SETTLEMENT DAYS TO THE 1900'S

When early settlement began, approximately 80 percent of Arkansas was covered by forests. That percentage was only a little less by the early twentieth century. Trees of many kinds abounded. Valuable species included oak, ash, hickory, walnut, elm, maple, cypress, and pine.

Before the Civil War, there were very few lumber mills. Most of these were run by water power. Water wheels turned other wheels that turned the saws. Loggers used an upright saw called a "sash saw." These worked like crosscut saws. A large amount of timber cutting took place in Arkansas in the mid-nineteenth century. Most timber was cut in areas where it could be easily transported. Vast areas in the interior of the state remained untouched. There was no way to transport the timber to the sawmill or to market.

Railroads came to the rescue. As railroads were built in the 1800's, logging quickly followed. As rails were laid in the forests, construction camps became logging camps. Sawmills were built at many of these camps.

Many mills and factories were built to make products from the cut timber. Such mills produced railroad crossties, shingles, boxes, barrel staves, doors, and even furniture.

Logging and producing lumber have never been easy jobs, but they were much harder in the early days. During the late 1800's, men cut down trees with crosscut saws. The logs were loaded on eight-wheeled wagons pulled by teams of four mules. Most lumber companies used narrow-gauge trains to haul lumber to market. Small communities of loggers and their families grew up at the end of the log trams. They lived in crude shacks or in tents. For this reason, these communities were often called "ragtowns."

These workers did not make much money. Sawmill workers made about ten or twelve dollars a week. They usually worked at least fifty to fifty-five hours per week. The work was backbreaking and dangerous, and accidents were common. There were no modern emergency medical services. A few larger companies employed doctors. Others sometimes had doctors on call. All too often, injured workers died before help could be given. We should count our blessings for modern medical facilities.

Operating the saw and feeding timber into the saw were very dangerous jobs. Those who survived accidents many times carried scars the rest of their lives. Few mill workers or saw operators managed to retire without injury. Many lost one or more fingers to the mill saw. Others lost arms or were killed.

Since transportation was difficult, most workers lived near the mills. For this reason, lumber companies usually ran a commissary where workers could buy food, clothing, and other items. This was handy, but it was much more expensive. Some companies paid their employees in tokens or scrip, which could only be used at the commissary.

Even with all these problems, there were benefits to forest work. During the Great Depression of the 1930's, the lumber companies provided jobs for many Arkansans. Some lumber company owners kept their mills open even when they were losing money. This provided jobs for the people who worked for them. It also kept the "groundhog" mills in business. These mills cut rough lumber for sale to the larger companies. Without these mills, the Depression might have been even worse for Arkansas.

The early timber industry did not consider the damage being done to the landscape. Until the 1920's, lumbering was a "cut-and-run" business. Loggers cut out the best timber in an area; then they moved out. They gave no thought to the future. Arkansas's timber resources were so vast that no one thought they would ever run out.

The period between 1880 and 1920 marked Arkansas's "timber boom." America was expanding and needed lumber. During this time, most of the state's virgin forests were cut over. Many of the trees from these forests were huge. Some were so big that the lumber mill saws could not cut them. These trees sometimes had to be dynamited apart before they could go through the mill.

Although these cut-and-run practices were bad, they did not totally destroy the forests. Early loggers did not practice clear-cutting. Enough "scrub" timber would be left so that the forests could grow back naturally. These are called "second-growth forests."

These second-growth forests supported many small mills, often known as "groundhog" or "peckerwood" mills. Their owners would buy small tracts of second-growth timber. Sometimes they would buy parcels of leftover virgin lands. These had been too small or distant for the big mills to cut. Small mill owners would move their mills to the site and begin harvesting timber.

In the 1920's, lumbermen began to realize that Arkansas's timber was limited. Conservation practices, like selective cutting, were adopted. They were also careful to replant cutover areas (reforestation). Arkansas's lumbermen began to manage their lands for sustained yield. Following these practices resulted in Arkansas's forest heritage. Wisdom often comes after we have made foolish mistakes.

The good management practices begun in Arkansas and all over the South in the 1920's kept the southern forests producing. The South became the country's largest lumber-producing region, and has continued to be a major source of timber.

ARKANSAS FORESTRY IN THE 1900'S

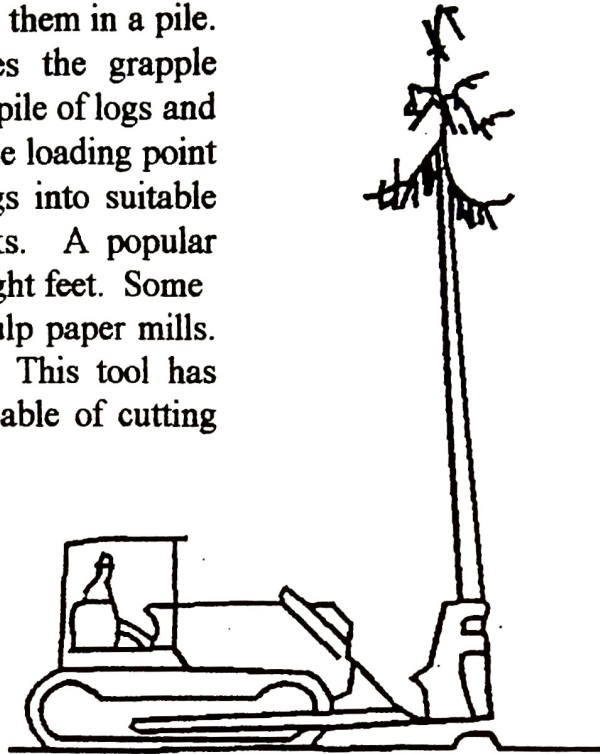
Just as all ways of making a living have made drastic changes, so has the forest industry. There are no longer ragtown logging camps. There are, however, many skilled loggers. In the 1990's, one logger can harvest as much timber as an entire camp of eighty men could harvest in the early 1900's.

As late as the mid-1900's, loggers cut wood during the winter and farmed during the summer and fall. This all changed when new tools became available.

The chain saw replaced the ax and crosscut saw during the mid-1900's. The late 1900's witnessed the invention of the feller-buncher. This new device is a vehicle that cuts trees off just above ground level. It also

bunches the logs together and places them in a pile. Following the feller-buncher comes the grapple skidder. This machine picks up the pile of logs and hauls them to a loading point. At the loading point is a loader-slasher that cuts the logs into suitable lengths and loads them onto trucks. A popular length for the paper factory is eight feet. Some of the trees are cut into chips for pulp paper mills. This machine is called a chipper. This tool has huge, powerful knives that are capable of cutting wood into small pieces.

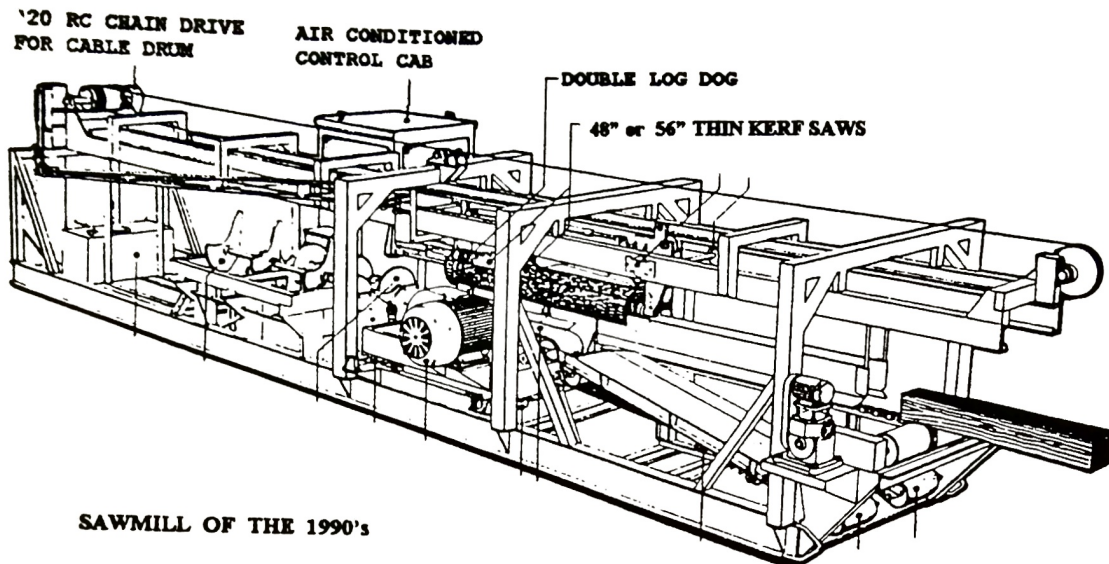
The new machines actually help preserve the environment. They reduce the number of vehicles needed to harvest trees. Reducing traffic protects the forest floor from severe damage.



Logging is only the beginning of a chain of people working in the forest industry. Logs are hauled to sawmills which convert the trees into boards. Some of the logs are hauled to pulp paper plants.

Today's loggers must be hard workers just as in early days. They must also be good businessmen. The typical independent logger has about one half to one million dollars invested in his equipment. These businessmen need to understand math, forest science, mechanics, and communications. Many of these people have forestry degrees. Love of the great outdoors is often the quality that causes people to enter the logging business.

In the late 1960's and early 1970's, many of the older lumber companies sold their lands to larger companies. These companies do not use selective cutting for sustained yields. Instead, they practice clear-cutting and replanting with only one kind of tree, usually pine.



In southern Arkansas, pine is estimated to grow one board foot per acre per day. The State Forestry Commission tree farm at Bluff City is working to produce a better kind of southern pine. Today, more timber is being grown than is being cut.

Arkansas's timber provides many kinds of products. Lumber is cut into boards for use in construction. Plywood, made by bonding several thin sheets of wood together "cross grain" for strength, is also an important building product. Flake board, made of wood chips glued together under high pressure, is also produced. Timber companies try to use as many lumber by-products as possible. Paper mills are important users of wood products. Wood is the basic raw material for paper production. There are many paper mills in the state.

Thousands of Arkansans are employed by large corporations such as International Paper Company, Weyerhaeuser, Georgia-Pacific, and others. Most timber company lands are open to sportsmen for hunting and other recreational uses.

Timber remains one of Arkansas's most important industries, but it can be destroyed if not managed wisely. God expects us to be good stewards of all the gifts He has given us. Nowhere is good stewardship more important than with this vital resource.