



Forest Products Industry

Throughout the history of the United States, wood has been one of the nation's most useful raw materials. The first settlers found wood to be abundant in most parts of North America and immediately made use of this material for construction of shelters, forts, and ships, and as firewood. For the pioneers, plenty of timber was available from nearby forest areas or from the clearing of land. However, with growth and expansion of population and improvements in transportation, a great lumber and timber products industry emerged.

During the 1800s, lumber operations expanded across the North American continent. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, men made lumber by hand-sawing it from logs. Normal production was about 100 board feet per day for one man. Technological developments improved production by the 1900s—water and steam power; the circular saw and band saw; and other new equipment with which to move logs and boards through a sawmill and to season and finish the lumber. Large sawmills could produce 100,000 board feet per day. Additionally, locomotives enabled lumbermen to bring trainloads of logs to their mills, and the extension of rail lines let them send finished lumber to markets almost anywhere. Sawmills could then locate wherever there were trees for the cutting.

The timber industry grew, and progressively tapped new sources of lumber. Before the Civil War, sawmillers largely exhausted the supply of timber along the New England coast and moved into western New York and Pennsylvania. After the war, they moved into the Great Lakes states, Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia. The concept of exhausting the timber supply at one location and then moving on came to be referred to as “cut out and get out.”

In the 1880s, as Great Lakes lumbermen began to look elsewhere for timber, they began to buy tracts of longleaf pine in Louisiana and Mississippi, and shortleaf pine in southeastern Missouri. Lumber companies moved to the South to set up new mills to cut the southern yellow pine. There were mills throughout the South's longleaf pine area and operators began to cut the loblolly and shortleaf pine of southern Arkansas.

Cutting trees and sawing the logs into lumber was an important local enterprise almost from the beginning of the settlement of Arkansas, but the market remained primarily local until after the 1870s. In some sections of the state in the 1880s, mills to produce lumber sprang up at central locations near the forests. While timber companies initially used small-scale, portable mills for sawing timber, larger companies invested in more centralized, less mobile mills. To get timber to these facilities, miles of temporary railroad track pierced the forests to facilitate removal of the logs.

River transportation made possible the exporting of timber in south and southeastern Arkansas to markets in Louisiana and Mississippi, but the lack of adequate transportation left much of the state's forests unexploited. Among the tracts that remained available to buyers were the hardwood portions of the Ozarks. There was also one important pine forest remaining—a very large area of virgin shortleaf in the Ouachita Mountains. Shortleaf pine was the most common type of vegetation in the Ouachitas at the turn of the 20th century, and given the region's size, the Ouachita Mountains contained what was easily the largest shortleaf pine forest in the world.

As timber country, the Ouachitas were less inviting than the level pinelands further south. The pine was generally smaller, and the rugged mountains seemed a major obstacle for building logging railroads. But, much of the area contained more than 5,000 board feet per acre, and at the time, it was believed that anything over 4,000 feet an acre could be profitable. A lumberman could go in with a railroad, remove the logs, and make some money. Railroads could travel the easy grades up the creek valleys and logs could be skidded by mules or hauled on wagons down the hills to the tracks. The availability of railroad transportation meant that for the first time, large-scale cutting and processing of timber promised profits. Products could be sold to a national market.

Entrepreneurs chose to take advantage of this opportunity. A number of companies set up operations by acquiring rights to timber land and constructing mills for processing their harvest. Many people came to be interested in the timber in southwest Arkansas, beginning an industry that continues to be of prime importance in the region's economy today.