WIREGRASS: THE TRANSFORMATION OF

SOUTHEAST ALABAMA, 1880-1930

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WIREGRASS: THE TRANSFORMATION OF SOUTHEAST ALABAMA, 1880-1930

William N. Byrd, Jr.

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WIREGRASS: THE TRANSFORMATION OF

SOUTHEAST ALABAMA, 1880-1930

William N. Byrd, Jr.

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William N. (Billy) Byrd, Jr. was born in Burlington, North Carolina. His parents are William and Karen Byrd. Most of his childhood was spent in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. He earned his bachelor's degree in history in 1994 and master's degree in history in 1996 both from Auburn University. Billy taught American history, world history, and geography at Chattahoochee Valley Community College in Phenix City for nine years as well as teaching American and world history as an adjunct at Columbus State University from 2002. He currently teaches history and geography at Brookstone School in Columbus Georgia. Billy is married to Laura Walters Byrd. They have two children, Redding and Will. They live in Columbus, Georgia.

DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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SOUTHEAST ALABAMA, 1880-1930

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The southeast corner of Alabama is popularly known as the Wiregrass. The name was originally inspired by the native grass that pioneers found growing abundantly in the region's longleaf pine forests. However, by the mid twentieth century the original forest and the region's namesake wiregrass was all but gone from the region. What happened to the wiregrass? The vast forest that confronted the first settlers had been replaced by a new landscape of farms and small towns interspersed by a few remnant patches of forest on hillsides and in river bottoms.

Settlers moved into the Alabama Wiregrass at the dawn of the nineteenth century, and Native Americans had hunted in region's forests for centuries. However, the period of time stretching roughly from 1880 to 1930 marked an era of almost unimaginable change. The region's landscape was utterly transformed. The great longleaf forests were

steadily cleared by loggers. The first lumber operations were small, limited by seasonal labor and slow flowing rivers for transportation. Beginning in the late 1880s railroads replaced rivers as the region's avenues of commerce and the lumber business expanded to an industrial scale. The big sawmills cleared the forests and eventually shut down their operations, leaving only stumps.

Along with the loggers came legions of farmers. Many were poor families looking for homesteads in the piney woods or among the stumps of the ever-expanding cutover. The farmers faced all of the struggles inherent to agriculture in the late nineteenth century South. Despite sincere difficulties, the small farms of the Wiregrass persisted. Forced from cotton monoculture by the boll weevil infestation, these farmers adopted more viable farming practices. The perseverance of the Wiregrass farmers ensured that the longleaf forests and their wiregrass would not return even though the region's biggest sawmills had closed. Industrial lumber and modern agriculture worked in tandem to shape both the landscape and the society of the twentieth-century Alabama Wiregrass.

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INTRODUCTION

The southeast corner of Alabama is called the Wiregrass. It is a popular and frequently used name for the region. Radio and television stations mention serving the Wiregrass. In advertisements businesses claim to be the best or cheapest deal in the Wiregrass. Even the mall in the area's biggest city, Dothan, is called Wiregrass Commons. This relatively distinct name originated in the region's earliest days of settlement. It refers to the spindly wiry grass the region's first pioneers found growing plentifully under the tall longleaf pines[1] that dominated the landscape. As with other geographic regions the boundaries of this area can vary depending on who defines it. For the purpose of this study the region will include modern Coffee, Covington, Dale, Geneva, Henry, and Houston counties of Alabama.

Bill Byrd grew up on a farm in the rural Alabama Wiregrass in the 1950s and 1960s. Like many of his neighbors and friends, my father can not recall ever seeing any actual wiregrass. This is not to say he is unfamiliar with the landscape. Quite to the contrary, his youth was spent in close proximity to the land in almost every sense. He spent long hours working alongside his parents and siblings in fields of cotton, corn, or peanuts. As a small child he was sent to round up stray livestock in the woods. In the summer he swam and fished in the creeks and rivers. In the fall he combed the forests

[1] The longleaf pine is the official state tree of Alabama. For a comprehensive look at America's longleaf forests see Lawrence S. Early, *Looking for Longleaf: The Fall and Rise of an American Forest* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

Figure 1. Alabama Counties

hunting squirrel, raccoon, and whitetail deer. My father spent almost his entire childhood outdoors. How then is it possible that he and many others of his generation who were so intimate with the landscape had not encountered the very plant for which the region is named?

What happened to the wiregrass in the Alabama Wiregrass? Answering this relatively simple question reveals a rather complex story of environmental, economic, and social transformation. This dissertation has evolved out of that original question. At the core it is a history of people and the landscape, both shaped in their own way by strong economic and social forces.

In many ways the transformation of southeast Alabama follows the "New South" mold; small farmers, rural enterprise, improvements in transportation, a growing urban presence in a previously wilderness area. Mark Wetherington takes on the idea of the New South in his 1994 book *The New South Comes to Wiregrass Georgia*. In it he outlines the transformations that occurred in the Georgia Wiregrass region after the Civil War. The Georgia Wiregrass, like its namesake in Alabama, was originally a region of longleaf pine forests and wiregrass. According to Wetherington, the growth of railroads and cities, and the arrival of big timber companies were manifestations of the New South as defined by boosters like Henry Grady. He contends that the New South failed to deliver the prosperity promised by its many boosters. Instead, the opening of the previously isolated region of southern Georgia led to the devastation of the region's forests by callous outsider capitalists and the end of the independent and self-sufficient lifestyle of the region's antebellum inhabitants. The coup de grace in this tragedy was the arrival of King Cotton. The expansion of cotton cultivation into cutover forest lands

purportedly reduced the once proud yeomen of the Georgia Wiregrass to an indebted, politically impotent, class of cotton sharecroppers. According to Wetherington, the idyllic agrarian peace of the antebellum Georgia Wiregrass was shattered, not by the Civil War, but by the two-pronged invasion that followed: northern timber capitalists and cotton obsessed southern farmers fleeing soil exhaustion and erosion in the piedmont. [2]

This study of the Alabama Wiregrass follows a different course. The direction for this dissertation comes largely from environmental history. Social, political and economic variables are evident, but in concert with these the landscape plays a key role in the region's transformative process. There are a number of impressive works of environmental history that provide appropriate models for studies of regional transformation. Some of the earliest remain the most important. In 1979 Richard White published a brilliant book with a dull title. *Land Use, Environment, and Social Change: The Shaping of Island County Washington* tracks the course of environmental change and the subsequent social change in a single county of Washington state. He begins his study with Native Americans, brings in settlers, loggers, and even software billionaires from Seattle. The central character in his story is the landscape. People come and go, but the land, however altered, remains. White essentially provided the model for the overwhelming majority of current environmental history.[3] A few short years after the publication of White's book, William Cronon published his 1983 *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England.* This highly acclaimed work

[2] Mark Wetherington, *The New South Comes to Wiregrass Georgia (*Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1994).

[3] Richard White, *Land Use, Environment, and Social Change: The Shaping of Island County Washington* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1980).

examined the varying environmental impacts of Native American and colonial English cultures in seventeenth century New England. Cronon shows that different cultures approach nature from different perspectives. Each group altered the landscape according their own preconceived cultural ideal. In much the same way subsequent waves of settlers altered the landscape of the Wiregrass according to their culture or economic drive.[4]

In his 1991 book *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* William Cronon truly broke new ground. His thesis for Chicago's success ties urban growth to the development of the rural hinterland. Cronon argues that without the natural resources of the Great West, there could have been no metropolis at Chicago. He also points out that without the markets or infrastructure of Chicago the resources of the Great West could never have been fully developed. The prairie farms needed Chicago and Chicago needed the prairie farms. The growth of America's agrarian landscape of farms and fields was concurrent with the growth of Chicago's rail yards, warehouses, slaughterhouses, lumberyards, and markets. A complex economic symbiosis developed in the center of the continent. *Nature's Metropolis* provides an excellent model for understanding regional growth, integrating both rural and urban factors. As such, it has particularly useful implications for the analysis of the rural economy of the Alabama Wiregrass. The city of Dothan was to the Wiregrass what Cronon's Chicago was to the Great West, a central hub whose growth fed on and enabled growth in the hinterland.[5]

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[4] William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983).

[5] William Cronon. *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (*New* York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991).

This dissertation examines the concurrent social, economic, and environmental changes that transformed the Alabama Wiregrass from an isolated frontier of pine forests to a densely populated farm region with numerous small towns. As dramatic as this process may seem in the scope of this work, it is important to note that these changes were not necessarily unique to the Wiregrass. Quite often they were local manifestations of broader transformations occurring across the country. Forests were cleared in Alabama just as they had been in Maine and would be in Oregon. Rails were laid across the Wiregrass and connected to larger networks as they were in Illinois or Montana. Farmers rushed in to till virgin soil, much as they did in the piedmont or across the Great Plains. New cities grew in places where once there had been only trees, a central theme in American growth since the colonial era. Taken in the larger context, the story of growth and change in the Alabama Wiregrass is the story of a growing and changing nation, the complex process of American modernization in microcosm.[6]

This dissertation is organized thematically to effectively address the various forces that shaped the Wiregrass. The first chapter will set the context of the story, looking at the Wiregrass forest landscape as it existed for Native Americans and the first American pioneers. It was not, as some might claim, a natural landscape, but one that had

[6] Several environmental histories have been written for specific sub-regions of the South. Timothy Silver followed the lead of Cronon's *Changes in the Land* with his book *A New Face on the Countryside: Indians, Colonist , and Slaves in the South Atlantic Forests, 1500-1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990). A pair of strong works have addressed the unique challenges people faced living on the coastal landscape. Jack Temple Kirby looked at life in the swamps and pine forests of the Virginia-North Carolina coastal borderlands in his book *Poquosin: A Study of Rural Landscape and Society*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995). The Georgia low-country is the subject of Mart Stewart's book *What Nature Suffers to Groe: Life, Labor, and Landscape on the Georgia Coast, 1680-1920* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996). Ronald Lewis took on the impact of industrial lumber on the society and landscape of rural West Virginia in his book *Transforming the Appalachian Countryside: Railroads, Deforestation, and Social Change in West Virginia, 1880-1920* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998). All of these works address the issues of culture, economic development, labor, and landscape.

evolved through specific human use, namely periodic burning, hunting, and livestock herding. Chapter two examines the earliest efforts to profit from logging the Wiregrass longleaf forests. This first lumber business was tied largely to the rivers and limited by basic transportation and processing technology. Chapters three and four both examine changes that coincide with the construction of the region's first railroads. Although commercial agriculture and lumber were not brought to the Wiregrass on the rails they both grew dramatically once railroads entered the region. Commercial cotton cultivation introduced Wiregrass farmers, as it did with farmers across the South, to the rollercoaster of the market. Forest industries, specifically lumber and turpentine, brought legions of workers including African-Americans and foreign immigrants to a previously isolated and relatively homogeneous region. The industrial lumber mills also consumed the region's forest at an unprecedented rate. In tandem industrial lumber and commercial cotton farming had a profound impact on the society and the environment. Chapter five provides a closer look at the Jackson Lumber Company of Lockhart, Alabama, one of the largest and longest lived industrial lumber companies in the Wiregrass. Big sawmills like Jackson consumed vast amounts of timber. The issue of cutover forests is addressed in chapter six.

For the Alabama Wiregrass the decline of the lumber industry and the clearing of the forests led to a deepened commitment to commercial agriculture. The success of farming efforts after the lumber companies cut their timber and shut down marks a key difference between the Wiregrass and cutover sections elsewhere in the country. Chapter seven looks more deeply at Wiregrass agriculture, focusing on the rise of modern diverse

farming in the Wiregrass as a response to the boll weevil crisis and the Great War. Viable farms were essential to the transformation of the Wiregrass landscape.

The Wiregrass landscape was not transformed by a single event, but by waves of human activity. When settlers first arrived in the Wiregrass they found open grassy pine forests, ideal for free ranging herds of cattle and hogs. Soon loggers starting cutting the pines using rivers then railroads to move lumber to market. Industrialization sped the process of deforestation. In a relatively short time the region's big sawmills undermined their own resource base and the industry declined in the Wiregrass. As the forests retreated land-hungry commercial cotton farmers moved rapidly into the cutover. Not only did these farmers face the usual challenges of nineteenth-century cotton farming, they had to deal with the challenge of farming the thin soil of pine cutover. Despite the difficulties, they persisted and as such ensured that the land would be remain deforested. Without the farmers a new, albeit different, forest would likely have grown in the place of the old one. The ability of farmers to survive, and even prosper in the Wiregrass meant that it would largely become a region of agriculture. Farmhouses, barns, hog pens, pastures of nonnative grass, and a patchwork of cotton, corn, and peanut fields eventually replaced the longleaf pines and wiregrass throughout most of the region. This dissertation will address the various social, economic, and environmental factors that enabled this drastic change from forests to farms.

CHAPTER 1

THE ALABAMA WIREGRASS

Before the Civil War the Wiregrass was sparsely settled frontier country. With the exception of a few planters along the Chattahoochee River, most antebellum Wiregrass inhabitants were yeoman subsistence farmers or herders who ranged their stock through the vast open forests. The region's longleaf pine savannas and unproductive sandy soil generally discouraged the establishment of plantation agriculture and its associated slave culture. There was no iron, coal or mineral wealth beneath the sandy soil and red clay to draw heavy industry. There was no Birmingham in the Wiregrass. The region's rivers meandered slowly across the coastal plain providing few opportunities for the development of waterpower. Long isolated from the state's primary river and rail networks the region showed neither the agricultural productivity of the Black Belt nor the industrial promise of the hill country or piedmont. For the most part the Wiregrass was a poor frontier country.

Things would change however. The Wiregrass region would awaken and boom. Railroads would transect the region. They would bring in tons of fertilizer to boost the productivity of poor soils. Baptized in guano and born again as commercial farmers, the sons of the antebellum yeomen would finally gain clear access to outside markets for their produce through the railroads. These same farmers would react to the economic and

social pressure of commercial agriculture by organizing, first socially, but later in commercial enterprises and then rather dramatically in politics. To complement agriculture, industry would develop. Vast stands of ancient longleaf pine would be tapped for their valuable resin to make turpentine. The mineral wealth, previously so conspicuously absent, was found to be abundant in the living trees of the endless forests. Even more trees would be cut and milled for lumber to build the booming new market towns that would rise from the wiregrass. The rails would bring in labor, African-American and immigrant, to work on the growing network of rails and in the region's labor-intensive forest industries. Farmers would rapidly colonize the vast stretches of cut-over forest left in the wake of the timber operations. Cotton fields would stretch out where once there had only been pines. Capitalist businessmen and entrepreneurs would also come, drawn by the boom and the promise of a quick profit. The region's new towns would become a part of the larger network of towns and cities that was growing throughout the South and the nation in the late nineteenth-century.

Of course all of this growth had a price. The region's trademark pine forests receded as an increasingly orderly patchwork of farms and towns was stamped onto the landscape. In time even the wiregrass that grew under the pines disappeared, replaced by crops or more desirable varieties of pasture grass. Wiregrass is generally found with longleaf pines. While it can survive grazing and fire, wiregrass will not regenerate if it is plowed. In this era of transformation the forests were cut and every available inch of the region was plowed. Nearly every aspect of life in this once isolated region was shaped by a complex web of interrelated transformations and by the 1920s the old Wiregrass was unrecognizable, transformed from an isolated interior frontier of longleaf pine forests into

a densely populated region of commercial agriculture, industry, and bustling towns, all connected inextricably to the nation at large.

Possibly the greatest irony of the modern Wiregrass region of south Alabama is the rarity of wiregrass within the region. The region was so thoroughly altered that it no longer even lives up to its name. Wiregrass, the plant, is a part of a forest ecology complex that once covered thousands of square miles. Its scientific name is *Aristida stricta* and it is most commonly associated with longleaf pine forests. Sadly, today this forest system has disappeared from most parts of its original range, including the southeast corner of Alabama. The landscape of the Wiregrass region today is radically different from the landscape first encountered by the region's original settlers. As early as 1928, longleaf pines within Alabama had been reduced to one tenth of their original stand.[1] A United States Forest Service publication from 1949 described the Wiregrass region as largely cultivated. At that time the area was only ten to thirty-five percent forested and that forest cover was "confined mostly to stream bottoms and steep slopes."[2] The Wiregrass region had been stripped of much of its original longleaf pines and, most ironically, their associated wiregrass. As a result, the original defining characteristics of the region have become rare within its confines. These dramatic ecological changes occurred over many years of use, abuse and elimination of the forests. The consistent result of these environmental changes has been that time and again people must find new ways to live on the land: from hunting to herding, to naval stores and lumber, to farming,

[1] Roland Harper, *The Economic Botany of Alabama: Catalogue of the Trees, Shrubs and Vines of Alabama, with their Economic Properties and Local Distribution* (University, Alabama: Geological Survey of Alabama, 1928), 45.

[2] J. J. Brasington, *Forest Grazing in South Alabama and West Florida* (New Orleans: Southern Forest Experiment Station, 1949), 9.

to commerce and military service. The landscape has been changed by each major economic shift and the region's inhabitants have been forced to adjust their lives to the consequences of their own actions.

The original forests of the Wiregrass were part of a larger belt of pine forests that stretched in a crescent one hundred to two hundred miles wide from the Chesapeake to the southeastern edge of the Great Plains. These forests were the dominant natural features of the Atlantic and Gulf coastal plains. They began in Virginia and swept south around the southern end of the Appalachians and onto the sandy coastal flatlands along the Gulf of Mexico. These forests stretched across nine states before finally petering out near the Trinity River in eastern Texas, where rain becomes too scarce to support even the hardy pines. The most common trees in this forest belt were the longleaf, shortleaf, slash, and loblolly pines. These four species of pines have been known by numerous other names and were often lumped together as yellow pine. The pine belt can be divided into two ecological complexes. To the north were forests of loblolly and shortleaf pine mixed with some hardwoods like oak, hickory and sweet gum. These forests gradually faded into the hardwood uplands of the Appalachians. To the south were the longleaf and slash pine forests. The longleaf is the largest of the southern yellow pines and can grow to over 100 feet tall. In the well-established forests of the southern pine belt the longleaf was unquestionably the dominant tree. So dominant, in fact, that the longleaf pine was once the most abundant tree in Alabama.[3]

[3] Ellwood Harrar and George Harrar, *Guide to Southern Trees* (New York: Dover Publications, 1946), 51; Harper, 45; F.V. Emerson, "The Southern Long-Leaf Pine Belt," *The Geographical Review* 7, No.2 (February 1919): 81.

The ecology of the longleaf forest is unique. A mature forest has a distinctly open look. The massive pines are well spaced and there are few other tree species present. The forest floor is covered with bunches of wiry grass. The presence of the grass and the wide spacing of the trees give the forest an open savanna like feel. Before the settlement of the region, only the numerous rivers, creeks and bayous that slowly cut the coastal plain, interrupted the seemingly endless stands of longleaf pines. In the wetlands along the banks of these sluggish streams thick forests of cypress, tupelo, oak and gum replaced the normally dominant pines. Some of these alluvial basins, like the Alabama/Mobile river basin or the Mississippi River basin, are quite wide. Most, however, represent only a brief tangled interlude between the open and grassy stands of pines. When William Bartram traveled through south Alabama in the 1770s he noted the open nature of the longleaf forest. He described "one vast grassy savanna and cane meadow intersected or variously scrolled over with narrow forests and groves, on the banks of the creeks and rivulets, or hummocks and swamps at their sources; with long leaved pines, scatteringly planted amongst the grass."[4]

Longleaf forests are found in generally less fertile soil. They grow well in both the sand and clay that are common in the soil of the coastal plain. A longleaf forest is a fire sub-climax forest, which means that without the regular occurrence of fire the longleaf will eventually be replaced by other species of tree. The region's climax forest is composed of a mixture of more aggressive and shade tolerant species of tree, either broad-leafed hardwoods or other pines, like the loblolly. As they are dependent upon it for their continued existence, longleaf pines have a remarkable tolerance for fire. Their

[4] Mark Van Doren, ed., *Travels of William Bartram* (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), 322.

Figure 2. Longleaf pines on Jackson Lumber Company property in Covington County, Alabama. (Louisiana State University Libraries)

dependence on fire manifests itself in a number of ways. First of all, their seeds will only germinate in bare soil. If they land on leaf litter, undergrowth, or are covered by organic matter they will fail to germinate. The bare ground of a recently burned forest floor is the ideal place to find longleaf seedlings. To compound the difficulties of regeneration, the tree only produces a viable seed crop approximately once every five years. The seedlings themselves are also unique. Longleaf seedlings spend several years in a grass stage. In this stage the young tree resembles a bunch of grass or a clump of needles sticking out of the ground. During the grass stage the tree produces a large taproot. Rather than spend its energy growing skyward like most trees, the young longleaf grows down to establish the deep root system that will be essential for surviving in dry or sterile soil. Even in the

grass stage the tree is very fire tolerant. In the event of a fire the needles will curl back and protect the terminal bud. Without burning the grassy seedling would soon be shaded out by faster growing hardwoods or other pines. Fire also reduces the effect of the tree's most notable disease, the Brown-spot Needle Blight. At different times, people have inadvertently affected the fate of the longleaf forests by either encouraging or suppressing forest fires. The extent of the relationship between the forests and repeated fires was poorly understood until the later part of the twentieth century.[5]

While some early observers characterized the longleaf forests as barren, they actually represent a rather rich ecological complex. The mature pines and dead snags are home to numerous species of birds, including the rare Red Cockaded Woodpecker. Numerous species of thin leafed herbaceous plants thrive under the open canopy of the pines, providing ample forage for white-tailed deer. In places the floor of the forest is covered with various species of grass collectively and commonly called wiregrass. The wiregrass grows in bunches and does not form a turf. In the southeast corner of Alabama, the abundant grass so impressed early settlers that the region came to be called the Wiregrass. There are also Wiregrass districts in Georgia and Florida. The Florida and Alabama Wiregrass regions are contiguous, separated only by state boundaries. The Georgia Wiregrass, however, is in the center of the state and is not historically associated with the others. All of these regions are within the range of the longleaf pine and are named for the tree's associated flora.

[5] Laurence C. Walker and Brian P. Oswald, *The Southern Forest: Geography, Ecology, and Silvaculture* (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2000), 55; W. G. Walenberg, *Longleaf Pine: Its Use, Ecology, Regeneration, Protection, Growth and Management* (Washington, D.C.: Charles Larthrop Pack Forestry Foundation, 1946).

Like the rest of the pine belt, the Alabama Wiregrass region has at different times and to different observers represented both the entrenched poverty as well as the wealth of natural potential embodied in the American South. It has been home to poor white "crackers" and wealthy timber barons, virtually enslaved turpentine laborers and independent yeoman farmers. The region presents rich opportunities for the study of irony within human history, but the dramatic change of the landscape is every bit as noteworthy as the complex human history of the region. In the Wiregrass, people were presented with a unique set of natural circumstances. The way people lived off of this ecological complex often left it inexorably changed and they in turn were forced to alter their way of life. The people were often forced to adjust to a shifting ecological reality that was their own inadvertent creation. The dynamic relationship between people and the landscape is one of the major defining factors in this region's rich history.

The first people to encounter the pines and wiregrass were Native Americans. In the South during the historic and proto-historic periods, the indigenous peoples rarely settled among the pines. The slash-and-burn agriculture practiced by the Native Americans was not well suited to the sandy infertile soil of the pine belt. They generally lived along the numerous creeks and river valleys and farmed the rich soil of the alluvial hardwood bottoms. The soil in these places could produce crops longer before becoming exhausted and forcing the cultivators to move to new fields. To create fields the Indians killed the trees by girdling them with stone axes and then burned the trunks. Corn, beans, squash and other crops were planted in small hills created with hoes. A field cleared in

this manner would be farmed until its fertility waned at which time it was left fallow and new fields would be cleared.[6]

There were few, if any, permanent Native American villages in the piney woods between the Choctawhatchee and Chattahoochee rivers. However, the forests were not deserted. The Native Americans relied heavily on white-tailed deer as a source of food and clothing. The longleaf forests of the Wiregrass would have been dotted with temporary or seasonal hunting camps. Native Americans lived in these camps in the late fall and winter while hunting huge herds of deer that thrived by browsing the wiregrass and other thin leaved herbaceous plants that grew under the pines. They came from permanent farming villages along the Chattahoochee-Flint-Apalachicola river system to the east or the Alabama-Coosa-Tallapoosa river system to the north and west to hunt deer and in the process may have burned the forests. At home they certainly used fire to clear fields for agriculture. However, whether they used fire to eliminate underbrush and facilitate hunting is a matter of conjecture. There are some accounts of hunters using fire to drive deer into a trap and it is possible that the hunters recognized the value of fire in promoting new herbaceous growth upon which the browsing deer could feed.[7] Such fires would have inadvertently promoted or maintained the sub-climax longleaf forest. Regardless, aside from the possibility of occasionally reinforcing the natural burn cycle and depleting the deer herds, Native Americans made only a minimal impact on the pine forests of the Wiregrass. The forest would have to wait for major changes.

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[6] Charles Hudson, *The Southeastern Indians* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1976), 291-295.

[7] Ibid., 276.

As the first Europeans colonists settled along the coasts and made their way up various rivers they generally avoided settling in the piney woods. To these newcomers the woods were sterile barrens with poor soil and little promise. Like Bartram they marveled at the giant longleaf, but they generally regarded the presence of the pines to be an indicator of soil infertility. It was a precedent that was followed by the planters of the antebellum cotton kingdom who sought the rich alluvial soil of the South's many river bottoms and natural prairies, but they generally avoided the piney woods. Over time the pine forests came to be seen as a backwater, or more appropriately backwoods, region within the South.

Sometime before the last stages of Indian removal American settlers began to slowly make their way into the piney woods. Unlike more traditional settlers of the American frontier these Wiregrass pioneers were not generally farmers. They were cattle herders. They grazed their cattle herds under the pines and burned the forest floor yearly to promote new growth of wiregrass.[8] These earliest settlers took full advantage of one the region's most obvious natural resources, namely its plentiful forage. One early traveler through the region, N.A. Agee, described the Wiregrass region of Coffee County in an account of his 1850 journey through the region:

> I departed for Elba, the county seat of Coffee County and journeyed perhaps fourteen miles over level sparsely settled country with unbroken forests of yellow pines and tall waving grass-the herds of cattle lazily grazing amid this luxurious

[8] Stephen J. Pyne has produced a number of works that look at the cultural use of fire to shape the landscape. For more details on fire as an element of rural culture see Stephen J. Pyne *Fire in America: A Cultural History of Wildland and Rural Fire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982) and *Fire: A Brief History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001).

natural pasture, or laying down surfeiting this free cheap, but nourishing supply of food.[9]

Agee's description of the Wiregrass region differs from Bartram's earlier description only through the addition of the cattle.

According to one account, the first settler in the Wiregrass was William W. Cawthon a Universalist preacher who arrived sometime in the 1820s and built a home and a pine log cattle coral near the site that would later become Dothan. He and other early settlers grazed their cattle in a range between the Chattahoochee and the Choctawhatchee rivers that stretched from St. Andrews Bay on the Gulf of Mexico to the Barbour County plantations in the north. This is a rather large range. It encompasses the entire wiregrass area of Alabama and the ecologically similar region of Florida. On such an ample free range of mainly public domain, men like Cawthon eventually produced substantial herds of cattle and became cattle barons to rival the cotton kings in other parts of the state. [10]

Such free-ranging of livestock was common throughout the pine belt. The herds were allowed to roam freely and fend largely for themselves on the vast stretches of public domain that made up the majority of the southern pine belt. The region's abundant grass offered ample forage and the pines and creek-side hardwood thickets sheltered the cattle from the most severe weather. Even Alabama's Native Americans became involved in raising livestock. In the years before removal, the Creek and Choctaw, having hunted

[9] N. A. Agee, "The Wiregrass as I saw it in 1850," *Montgomery Advertiser,* July 18, 1909.

[10] Oscar L. Thomkins, "Wiregrass Sagas," *The Alabama Lawyer* July 1942, 260; Brooks Blevins, *Cattle In the Cotton Fields: A History of Cattle Raising in Alabama* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1998), 17.

the white-tailed deer into near extinction in the southeast, were forced to supplement the declining return of deer hunts by raising beef and pork. The Indians owned sizable herds, but were sadly subject to much rustling and theft of livestock from the occasionally unscrupulous white settlers.[11] Before the Civil War there was little other economic activity in the Wiregrass besides livestock herding. Dispersed, and often hidden, throughout the forests the herds multiplied naturally and the piney woods cowboys only had to round them up and drive them to markets in Mobile or Pensacola. To outsiders, the region seemed to be inhabited by lazy "crackers" who raised little corn or cotton and rarely seemed to work.[12] However, in the poor soil of the piney woods cotton yields diminished by as much as fifty percent in three years.[13] With such poor returns from the soil, it is little wonder that the region's first settlers chose to raise livestock over farming. Herding was simply the most efficient use of the region's natural resource endowment.

Cattle were not the only livestock animals that early settlers brought into the piney woods. They also brought hogs. These were not the fat well-bred species of Northern or Midwestern farms, but hardy omnivorous razorbacks, also called piney woods rooters. Like the cattle, the hogs thrived and multiplied wildly in the pines. When the settlers needed meat, they could simply track down one of their semi-feral hogs and kill it. However, unlike the cattle, once released into the woods the hogs were often able

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[11] James Taylor Carson, *Searching for the Bright Path: The Mississippi Choctaw from Prehistory to Removal* (Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 75.

[12] Frank Lawrence Owsley, *Plain Folk of the Old South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1949), 36; Grady McWhiney, *Cracker Culture: Celtic Ways in the Old South* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1988), 51.

[13] Rupert B. Vance, *Human Geography of the South: A Study of Regional Resources and Human Adequacy* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1935), 112.

to avoid recapture. The feral hog became a fixture in the piney woods. While the cattle grazed on the grass that grew on the forest floor, the hogs found an abundant and nutritious food source in the longleaf seeds and seedlings. Longleaf seedlings that are still in the grass stage have a large starchy taproot. Similar to a carrot, the root has more nutritional value than corn and is something of a delicacy for the hogs, which root for them aggressively. A razorback boar can eat as many as eighty longleaf seedlings in an hour. Because of their taste for these seedlings, feral and free-ranging domesticated hogs had a devastating effect on the ability of longleaf pines to reproduce. They have long been considered a major factor in the failure of the longleaf to reestablish itself in many cutover areas or abandoned agricultural fields.[14] In one season hogs consumed two thirds of the seedlings in a Forest Service experimental forest near Brewton, Alabama. The concise and pointed conclusion drawn by the Forest Service was that," Hogs should be kept out of longleaf woods!"[15]

The pioneer period left a more lasting imprint on the forests than the Native American presence ever had. While their periodic burning may have helped to perpetuate the pine's natural cycle of regeneration, the settlers' livestock would eventually cause substantial damage to the forests. By bringing alien species into the woods the early settlers upset the ecology and possibly laid the foundations for the longleaf's decline. Cattle were essentially a neutral species, whose grazing was similar to that of the recently depleted deer populations. On the eve of the Civil War the importance of cattle for the piney woods economy declined as the industry moved west onto the extensive open

[14] Laurence Walker, *The Southern Forest: A Chronicle* (Austin: University Press of Texas, 1991), 192-193.

[15] Brasington, 13.

ranges of Texas. However, pork remained a staple of the region's economy and diet. The introduction and continued presence of large numbers of hogs severely limited the ability of the forest to regenerate and allowed other species of trees to make headway in forests that had once been almost purely longleaf pine. The free range grazing traditions established in these early days died hard. The timber companies and professional foresters of the twentieth century had to work with or against the local farmers who had always used the region's public forestland for grazing.

CHAPTER 2

OXEN AND RAFTS: PIONEERS OF THE LUMBER BUSINESS

Before the arrival of large scale industrial logging, pioneer farmers clearing land for cultivation were responsible for the largest part of deforestation in the Wiregrass counties. However, this is not to say that there was no logging for lumber production. The Wiregrass, like the much of the country, was dotted with small-scale sawmills and primitive lumber camps. Most of these mills cut lumber for the region's growing population of agricultural settlers and compared to the industrial lumber mills of the boom-era they were quite small. In addition to the small local operations a significant amount of lumber was floated down river to larger mills or ports on the Gulf Coast of Mexico. The down-river lumber trade gained momentum as the larger mills in Florida began to deplete their own easily accessible timber resources.

The pioneers of the wiregrass lumber business faced two seasonal limiting factors; a largely agricultural labor force and river transportation. The region was still only sparsely settled and the few settlers were subsistence farmers or herders. As such, most regional labor was still tied to seasonal rhythms of agriculture, tending their fields and herds before they could cut timber or transport logs.[1] The other and perhaps more

[1] Seasonal employment was common in the lumber business in other parts of the country as well. In Minnesota laborers worked the Red River Valley wheat farms at harvest time and the logging camps through the winter. In the case of Minnesota even draft horses were traded seasonally between wheat and

daunting limiting factor was transportation. Considering the available technology, the enormous virgin longleaf logs could not be effectively moved very far over land. Early Wiregrass lumbermen therefore relied largely on the region's meandering waterways to bring logs to their mills or markets. Because of this dependence on water transport the most extensive early logging occurred within a short distance of the various creeks and rivers of the Wiregrass. Mills located along the biggest waterways processed timber for shipment downstream to ports along the Florida Gulf Coast for export. Even the biggest of these streams could only be used for part of the year.

Sawmills located in the upland parts of the Wiregrass away from the navigable rivers would have been unable to ship their products out of the region. Landlocked, they relied solely on local demand for their lumber products, but were no less important to the development of the Wiregrass than the export oriented operations on the rivers. Sawmills, by necessity, were some of the first businesses to develop in a frontier region. In southeast Alabama there were plentiful forests and the steady influx of settlers created a demand for sawn lumber. In 1850, when much of the Wiregrass region was still considered wilderness, there were already five sawmills in Coffee County. In 1860 there were seven sawmills in Henry County and four in Coffee County that collectively employed forty people.[2] These upland mills played a key role in regional development.

Before 1880 most sawmills in the Wiregrass were relatively small, water-powered saws that employed on average only two or three hands at a time. In 1880 the average

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lumber. Frank Tobias Higbie, *Indispensable Outcasts: Hobo Workers and Community in the American Midwest, 1880-1930* (Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 42.

[2] U.S. Manuscript Census, Manufacturing, 1850, Coffee County; U.S. Manuscript Census, Manufacturing, 1860, Henry County; U.S. Manuscript Census, Manufacturing, 1860, Coffee County; Eighth Census of the U.S., 1860: Vol. 3 Manufactures (Washington: Gov. Printing Office, 1865), 2.

yearly cut for mills in Coffee, Dale and Geneva Counties was 640,500 feet compared to the state average of 712,000. [3] In 1870 there were eight sawmills operating in Dale County. Seven of these mills used water power and one used a forty horsepower steam engine. These mills almost certainly worked to supply local lumber demand in Dale County, which as of yet had no rails and for the most part lacked access to adequate rivers for the import or export of lumber. [4]

Small scale sawmill operators, like those in the Wiregrass, were not usually fulltime lumbermen. Far from being specialists in any one field, they could more appropriately be described as local entrepreneurs; rural businessmen who provided a variety of essential services to nearby farmers and small towns. In 1850, for example, the five sawmills in Coffee County were all also gristmills, grinding corn as well as sawing lumber. The largest of these mills sawed 200,000 feet of lumber and ground 500 bushels of corn a year. Six of the Dale County sawmillers also ran grist mills, probably splitting their efforts between corn meal and lumber as the season dictated. W. B. Whaley, who owned one of the water-powered saw and grist mills, was the only one of Dale County's sawmill owners to actually report his occupation as "mill wright" in the 1870 census. Most of them, like J. A. Speller, who also owned a water-powered saw and grist mill, described themselves as either farmers or merchants. It is noteworthy, however, that within Speller's household there was a twenty-one year old man who reported his occupation as "works in mill." Based on occupations listed in the 1870 Federal Census,

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[3] U.S. Manuscript Census, Manufacturing, 1880, Coffee County; U.S. Manuscript Census, Manufacturing, 1880, Dale County; U.S. Manuscript Census, Manufacturing, 1880, Geneva County.

[4] U.S. Manuscript Census, Manufacturing, 1870, Dale County.

neither logging nor lumber manufacture were fulltime professions for the residents of Dale County.[5]

This trend of diverse services lasted into the early part of the twentieth century. In 1892 J. C. Blackmon built a mill on the East fork of the Choctawhatchee River in Dale County. At his mill Blackmon sawed and planed lumber. He also ground corn and ginned cotton. This multi-use mill remained in use into the twentieth century providing a variety of services to the surrounding farmers. Many of these rural businessmen were either unwilling or unable to specialize and commit fulltime to lumber production. [6]

In 1880 not a single person in Dale County reported their occupation to the census as logger or any other related profession. Yet, that same year Dowling and Martin's steam-powered sawmill in Ozark cut 500,000 feet of lumber. The firm reportedly procured all of its lumber from Dale County and did not do its own logging. [7] If there were no fulltime professional loggers in Dale County and the firm did not cut its own lumber, who was logging in Dale County? Dowling and Martin probably bought their logs from various nearby farmers who, while not considered to be fulltime loggers, spent some time between agricultural tasks cutting timber. Farmers throughout the southern pine belt cut timber on a seasonal or periodic basis to supplement their income. A farmer could cut lumber during the laying-by season when there was less farm work. These part-

[5] U.S. Manuscript Census, Manufacturing, 1850, Coffee County; U.S. Manuscript Census, Population, 1870, Dale County.

[6] Blackman v. Maudlin, 164 Ala. 337 (Supreme Court of Alabama, November 23, 1909).

[7] U.S. Manuscript Census, Manufacturing, 1880, Dale County; U.S. Manuscript Census, Population, 1880, Dale County. In 1910 the Jackson Lumber Company sawmill would cut this much lumber in less than five days. Edward, C. Gates, Jackson Lumber Company, Annual Reports, Volume 2, 1910.

time loggers were essential to the small local mills and the early lumber export operations.

Farmers did not have to look far for opportunities to sell logs. Nearly every crossroads village or farm community in the Wiregrass had a sawmill to provide lumber for local needs. In 1880 there were 354 sawmills in Alabama. After gristmills, sawmills were the most common manufacturing establishment in Alabama. Lumber production was, at that point, the largest industrial employer in the state.[8] Sawmills, like grist mills or cotton gins, were an essential part of the rural economy across the South and the Wiregrass was no different. They provided essential materials for farmers and a potential opportunity for extra income. As late as 1907, advertisements for farmland in Dale County described standing timber as a valuable resource for farmers. The advertisement described one particular tract as "well timbered." Another farm had "enough timber to supply the place," and another had "50 acres of fine timber." All of these properties were "accessible to churches and good schools as well as gin, grist and sawmills."[9] Farmers looking to purchase such land would have seen good stands of timber and a nearby sawmill as assets.

In the 1870s and 1880s the population of the Alabama Wiregrass grew at a steady pace. Between 1870 and 1890 Dale County's population grew from 11,325 to 17,225. In the same period Coffee County grew from 6,171 to 12,170 and Henry from 14,191 to 24,847. The biggest leap came in Geneva which grew from 2,959 to 10,690. The largest

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[8] 10th census of the U. S., Vol. 2, Report on Manufactures of the United States (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1883), 39.

[9] *The Ozark Tribune*, September 7, 1907.

part of this growth came from the steady advance of agricultural settlement. These settlers and the subsequent growth of numerous small market towns created a substantial regional demand for building materials, especially lumber. The fast growing market towns, in particular, created a soaring demand for lumber. New towns like Dothan or Enterprise seemingly grew out of the pine forests overnight while established settlements like Ozark and Abbeville bustled with new development.

Many of the new settlements were fairly remote from regional market centers. Located away from navigable waterways, merchants in Ozark or Dothan depended on weekly wagon trains from the river ports of Eufaula and Columbia on the Chattahoochee. Even the towns on the rivers like Newton, Geneva or Andalusia struggled to maintain regular commerce with the outside world. The river towns depended on achingly slow pole boats or small shallow-draft steamboats that dodged snags and sand bars to bring goods up the shallow and unpredictable Choctawhatchee or Conecuh rivers from Florida. Because of transportation difficulties, bulky goods, especially much needed building materials like bricks and lumber, had to be produced locally. In periods of particularly rapid population growth this self sufficiency presented a problem and could even limit potential economic expansion. The editor of the *Henry County Midland* in Headland complained that the only check on his town's growth came from a shortage of lumber.[10] To the growth-obsessed small town newspaper editors of the late nineteenth-century South any check on expansion was a crisis of the first order. This particular crisis could only be overcome by an immediate increase in lumber production. Editorials throughout

[10] *The Henry County Midland*, June 1, 1894.

the region lamented the shortage of building materials and celebrated every new sawmill as if it was the greatest economic achievement of the age.

Dothan seemed to set the mark for overwrought boosterism. The editors of *The Light* waxed poetically over stacks of lumber and the sound of saws: "The wave struck us, the boom seems to have commenced and Dothan will be a city before the sinking of 60 suns. No less than 30 houses have been completed already. Lumber piled on every side marks the places for buildings all over town."[11] However, there was some truth to the boosterism of the Dothan paper. By the summer of 1889 Dothan, less than four years old, was already home to three steam powered sawmills and two planing mills. The mills employed forty-five fulltime workers who labored twelve to fourteen hours a day, and were evidently a source of great pride for the community. [12] One year later the *Covington Times* reported that Dothan was home to seven sawmills and two planers, which were still unable to meet that town's demand for lumber.[13] Dothan was not located near any of the region's navigable streams. Before the arrival of the rails the town's sawmills would not have been able to effectively export lumber products. Instead, Dothan's mills worked to meet the demands of the town's own frantic pre-railroad building boom.

Despite the high demand, the Dothan sawmills competed for customers. As would be expected, all of them advertised that they could offer the best price. The J. W. Powell sawmill, located one mile northeast of town, promised the "nicest quality of pine lumber"

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[11] *The Dothan Light,* June 12, 1889.

[12] *The Columbia Enterprise,* June 20, 1889; *Dothan Light*, July 3, 1889.

[13] *Covington Times,* August 23, 1890.

and offered free delivery. The Phillips and Folkes sawmill located outside of town on the Folkes' plantation also offered free delivery, and claimed that their planing mill on Main Street was more centrally located than the competition. Some of Dothan's sawmillers were multifaceted entrepreneurs, offering a variety of services to their customers. W.C Pilcher's Dothan Mills offered rough or planed lumber as well as ground corn on Saturdays. Four years later B.R. Pilcher of the Dothan Variety Works advertised a grist mill, cotton gin, and planing mill "all under the same roof."[14]

In this early stage of settlement, growth, both economic and demographic, necessitated the cutting of timber. The forests were cleared to make room for farms and villages. Additional pines were felled for building materials to construct the town centers, as well as the isolated farm houses and barns that popped up overnight in the clearings. For the residents of the Wiregrass the very act of carving space in the woods was seen as progress.

While the pre-railroad sawmills in the upland districts around Abbeville, Dothan or Ozark were strictly local operations spurred on by regional growth, a different type of lumber business developed in the bottomlands along the region's bigger rivers, the Choctawhatchee, Pea, Yellow and Conecuh. In these river basins timber men cut and processed logs for shipment downstream to established sawmills and lumber ports in Florida. This early export industry was the beginning of large-scale logging in the Wiregrass.

In the years before the arrival of railroads the rivers were the most important system of transportation in the Wiregrass, especially for bulky timber products. However,

[14] *Dothan Light*, July 31, 1889; *Wiregrass Siftings*, June 8, 1893.

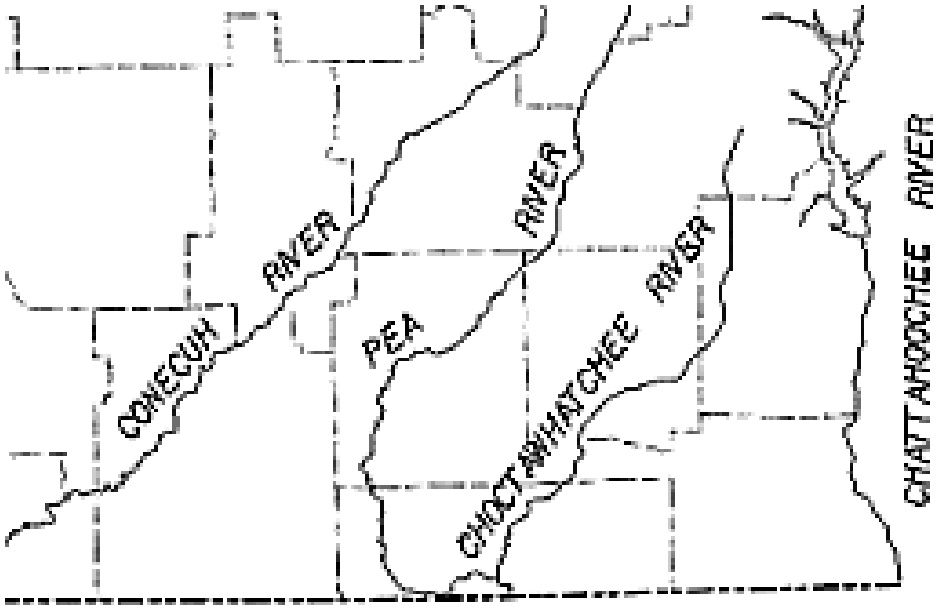

Figure 3. Major rivers of Southeast Alabama

river-based logging depended on a steady flow of water and the rivers of Southeast Alabama were at best inconsistent. Even in times of normal water flow they were shallow and plagued with sandbars or snags. In the summer the rivers often became shallow enough to walk across without getting wet. However, all of the rivers were capable of destructive flooding in times of great rainfall.[15] Because of the nature of the local rivers, the export logging trade was limited to only a few areas of Dale, Geneva, Coffee, and Covington Counties. Even in these areas logging was subject to fluctuating water levels.

The export lumber industry in the Alabama Wiregrass was entirely dependent on the Florida lumber market. Even as the local Wiregrass sawmills carried on a brisk

[15] The flood stage for the Choctawhatchee at Geneva is 23 feet. In March of 1929 the river peaked at 46.90 feet. More recently, in 1994 the river hit 42.42 feet in a flood that caused significant damage upstream in the Newton area. On June 5, 2006 the river was at 2.9 feet after a period of several weeks with little rain. US Geological Survey: USGS Real-Time Water Data for Alabama, http://waterdata.usgs.gov/al/nwis/rt

lumber trade, a growing number of logs made their way into the rivers for shipment downstream to Florida. These logs were to be processed or shipped to other market centers in the United States or overseas. Nineteenth-century Pensacola was one of the largest lumber exporting centers in the United States. Pine lumber from Pensacola was shipped overseas to Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, and Europe.[16] Smaller mills in the area of Freeport on Choctawhatchee Bay generally shipped their lumber to regional markets like Mobile or New Orleans. However, many of these smaller mills operated sporadically, shutting down frequently from a shortage of timber.[17]

The lumber industry on Florida's Gulf Coast dated back to the colonial era. In 1880, the US Census *Report on the Forests of the United States* described the stretch of the Florida panhandle between the Perdido and Choctawhatchee Rivers, essentially the area between modern cities of Pensacola and Destin, as the home of the "oldest and most active lumbering industry on the Gulf Coast."[18] The history of this industry was evident in the forests of the Florida panhandle. Years of logging, dating as far back as the eighteenth century, had taken a toll on the coastal region's pine forests. The forests surrounding the accessible inlets like Choctawhatchee and Escambia bays had "long been stripped of their valuable timber."[19]

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[16] Richard Massey, "A History of the Lumber Industry in Alabama and West Florida, 1880-1914," Ph.D. diss., Vanderbilt University, 1960, 89.

[17] Charles Sargent, *Report on the Forests of North America* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1884), 522.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

In order to meet the growing national and global demand for lumber, the Florida mills reached deep into the interior for timber. They found their timber in the Alabama Wiregrass where rivers and streams flowing south to Florida made approximately 4,000 square miles of southern Alabama forest land accessible to the mills and markets of Florida. [20] Long before any sizable mills were built in South Alabama, demand from the sawmills in Pensacola or in towns like Freeport on Choctawhatchee Bay drew logs and squared timbers down the rivers into Florida. In 1880 sawmills in Florida cut 247,627,000 feet of lumber. Of that total an estimated 77,500,000 feet came from timber originally cut in Alabama. [21] Approximately thirty-one percent of the lumber sawn in the state of Florida came from Alabama and this figure does not account for the shipment of whole timbers or lumber processed for shipment up river in Alabama. In the 1870s and 1880s the sawmills of North Florida drew heavily on the timber of the Alabama Wiregrass. Even as late as 1893, when railroads were beginning to penetrate the lumbering regions of Alabama, it was reported that "nearly all" of Alabama's lumber production was exported through the Florida ports or Mobile.[22] River-based timber export was the basis of the Wiregrass regions' earliest industry.

One of the earliest centers for the timber business in the Wiregrass was the town of Geneva. There was a sawmill in the area as early as 1838 and there were five sawmills in the vicinity of Geneva in 1880, collectively producing over three million feet of lumber a year. In 1880 it was estimated that 25,000,000 cubic feet of timber was

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid., 487.

[22] *Covington Times*, April 14, 1993.

transported down the Choctawhatchee River from the vicinity of Geneva. [23] The disparity between the outputs of Geneva's mills and the amount of wood sent downstream demonstrates how many whole logs were shipped down the river to be sawn in Florida. A year later the editor of the *Henry County Register* described Geneva as doing "a large timber business, which, with the present system of transportation proves very remonstrative."[24] The "present system of transportation," of course, referred to the rivers. Situated at the confluence of the Pea River, the Choctawhatchee River, and Double Bridges Creek, Geneva was perfectly situated for the river-based lumber business. Logs were floated to Geneva in small batches, sawn into lumber or squared and bound into rafts to be sent down the Choctawhatchee. Below Geneva the Choctawhatchee, more than doubled by the addition of the Pea River and Double Bridges Creek, carried a sufficient volume of water to float sizable rafts of timber. Geneva's location made it an ideal transshipment center for logs, squared timber and sawn lumber as the lumber industry grew in the river basins of the Wiregrass.

In the Alabama Wiregrass, logs for the export trade were cut from the flat open longleaf pine forests that stretched along the Florida border. Unlike more isolated Dale County where logging was most likely done on a part-time basis by farmers, Geneva and Covington Counties were home to a number of individuals in 1880 whose primary work was in the lumber business. The numerous log drivers, log choppers, log haulers, log rafters, log getters, square timber workers, sawyers, and various other timber or lumber

[23] *Geneva, Alabama: A History* (The Geneva Woman's Club, 1987), 108. *Geneva County Reaper*, April 24, 1958.

[24] *Henry County Register,* April 8, 1881.

workers listed in the 1880 census reflect the labor-intensive nature of the earliest logging efforts.

The trees that most loggers preferred were longleaf pines. In the virgin forests of Southeast Alabama these pines could be as tall as one hundred feet and forty inches in diameter, although most of the ones cut were more likely less than seventy feet tall and two feet across.[25] Small pines were left to continue growing and act as seed trees to sow future generations. From these virgin longleaf pines a logger could get a forty or fifty foot long log that was almost perfectly straight without a single knot. After the first fifty feet the tree began to taper and branches produced knots in the log. In these early days of seemingly endless forests this imperfect top part of the tree was simply left in the woods.[26] Despite using methods that would be considered wasteful in later years, the early loggers, because of their selectivity and limited technology, generally left a healthier forest than the railroad-based clear-cut operations that would settle on the region in coming years.

Trees were originally felled with a single-bladed pole axe. The men who wielded axes were valued for their skill and took great pride in their skill. In time, the single bladed axe was replaced by the double bladed axe, but the methods remained essentially the same. Beginning in the 1890s the crosscut saw was gradually integrated into the logging process along side the axe. The earliest crosscut saws were unpopular with loggers because the teeth became gummed-up by sawdust and the highly resinous sap of

[25] Harper, *Economic Botany of Alabama,* 39.

[26] Solon Dixon acknowledged that by modern standards these early practices would be considered very wasteful. Solon Dixon, *The Dixon Legend* (Huntsville, Alabama: Strode Publishers, 1982), 34.

the pines. To remedy this problem the saw manufacturers added raker teeth that were designed to expel the sawdust from the cut. To cut through the sticky sap loggers generously sprinkled kerosene on the moving saw. The successful use of crosscut saws dramatically increased logging efficiency. [27]

To fell a tree with a crosscut saw loggers first used an axe to cut a notch on the face of the trunk that they wished to fell. They then sawed from the side opposite the notch. Kerosene was periodically sprinkled on the saw blade to thin the inevitable pine sap. As the saw cut deeper into the tree, wedges were driven into the cut behind the saw keep the weight of the trunk off of the saw blade. Once the tree had been sufficiently cut, the wedges were driven deeper into the cut to initiate and direct the fall of the tree. Considering the available technology, logging in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was grueling work. Logging in the southern pine forests continued with basically the same tools, axes and cross-cut saws, for almost one hundred years until the widespread adoption of the chainsaw in the second half of the twentieth century.[28]

Axes were not only used to fell the tress, but to produce square timbers and spars for sailing ships. Much of the wood sent downstream to Florida was squared timber. Squared timbers were logs that had been roughly hewn to create four approximately equal flat sides. Square timbers were ideal for use in heavy construction or as railroad ties and were thus in high demand. The earliest squaring was done by hand with a broad axe,

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[27] Massey, 55; Wayne Flynt, *Poor but Proud: Alabama's Poor Whites* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1989), 147; Nollie Hickman, "Logging and Rafting Timber in Southern Mississippi, 1840-1910," *Journal of Mississippi History* 19 (July, 1957), 158. Bill Byrd, Sr. recalls loggers using Coca-Cola bottles stuffed with pine needles to apply the kerosene to the moving saw blade.

[28] Massey, 58; Ralph Clement Bryant, *Logging: The Principles and General Methods of Operation in the United States* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc, 1923), 106; Hickman, 158.

but in time simple sawmills squared the timbers. The timbers varied in size as there was no standardization in the early lumber business. However, a 130 cubic foot timber was considered newsworthy in 1890.[29] Squaring was an easy way to turn logs into a value-added product with only minimal investment in technology. In addition to drawing a higher price in the Florida markets, the squared timbers could be more easily bound into rafts for shipment downstream. [30]

The biggest challenge facing loggers in the woods was not felling the big pines, but moving the fallen logs. Transportation was the largest limiting factor in the early timber business across the country. Loggers in the north woods of Maine or the Great Lakes region traditionally waited until winter and hauled logs on the snow using draft horses or oxen. In South Alabama loggers generally relied on a combination of animal power and water transportation. The common practice was to skid, which is to drag, the logs using teams of animals to a ditch, stream, or river where the logs could be floated to the mill or collection point for rafting. This system of transportation, in one form or another, was used until the railroads penetrated the forests. In some parts of the Wiregrass that would be well into the twentieth century.

Large breed horses were the most commonly used draft animal for skidding in logging districts over most of the United States and Canada. However, in the Deep South teams of oxen or mules were universally preferred to horses for skidding and other logging camp work. Horses were admittedly more intelligent, faster, stronger, and more nimble than oxen, but they also required more care and were less durable when laboring

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[29] *Covington Times*, February 8, 1890.

[30] John Appleyard, *The W. T. Smith Lumber Company, a Chronicle* (Pensacola: Pace Printing, 2000), 15; Hickman, 156-157; Massey, 56.

in the extreme conditions of the southern forests. Readily available on the southern frontier, oxen were commonplace in the earliest frontier logging operations. They were strong, tough, and could subsist on relatively coarse food. Furthermore, ox hooves were less likely to get mired in swampy ground than horses or mules. As the southern pine forests became less isolated and better tied to national or regional stock markets, mules became more available and were therefore became more common in logging operations. There were certain advantages to using mules over horses or oxen. Foremost of these advantages was heat tolerance. Mules had the greatest tolerance of extreme heat, the biggest limiting factor for draft animals in the sweltering forests of the coastal plain. In addition, they were faster, more nimble, and more intelligent than oxen. They were also less excitable and easier to feed than horses. Some horses were used, but generally in a limited capacity.[31]

For short distance hauls logs were snaked, meaning they were simply dragged along the ground without the aid of a wheeled vehicle. While useful for a short distance, snaking by ox or mule teams was impracticable past about 500 feet. For longer hauls, it was more common to use a wheeled vehicle to move logs. Of course, loading enormous pine logs onto wagons presented an obvious problem. The most commonly used skidding vehicle was a simple two wheeled cart called a caralog or high-wheel. Caralogs consisted of two large wheels approximately seven to ten feet high connected by a stout axle. Logs were snaked into position by a "snake-mule," usually a smaller more nimble mule. The cart was backed over one end of the log, which was then winched up and secured to the

[31] Massey, 64-65; Appleyard, 73; Bryant, *Logging*, 130-132; Nelson Courtlandt Brown, *Logging Transportation: The Principles and Methods of Log Transportation in the United States and Canada* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1936), 13-16.

axle with chains. With one end of the log thus elevated friction was dramatically reduced and the teams of oxen or mules could more easily skid logs to waterways for shipment. These carts could haul logs up to two miles in the relatively flat forests of the Wiregrass.[32]

The high-wheeled carts and teams of oxen were ubiquitous symbols of logging in the piney woods. To many observers of this time, yokes of oxen pulling log carts represented the frontier logging industry. In 1896, a traveler from Abbeville described encountering such carts in Geneva County on his way to Florida.

> Soon after reaching the forest of Geneva County farming grows less prominent along this route and consequently to one who sees open fields and signs of industry on every hand constantly, the county seems less interesting. The ox man's whip and high wheeled cart greet one mostly after striking the southern pine belts.[33]

Technological limits to transporting big pine logs remained the most noteworthy check on early logging operations in the Wiregrass. Relying on animal team skidding dictated how far logs could be practically hauled. As such, to ensure the cost effectiveness of their operations loggers worked only the forests within reasonable distance of a sizable stream or river and took only the oldest high quality trees, leaving many of the smaller trees.[34] The results of these logging practices were predictable. As early as 1881 a map prepared

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[32] Charles Byrd used mules and high wheeled carts to log pine in southeast Alabama as late as the 1950s. Statement of Bill Byrd, Sr.; Massey, 63; Brown, *Logging Transportation*, 17; Bryant, *Logging*, 186.

[33] *Abbeville Times*, January 31, 1896. The uninteresting piney landscape between Newton and Geneva described by this traveler is today some of the most heavily farmed land in Alabama.

[34] Massey, 76.

by foresters working for the tenth federal census showed that all the "merchantable pine" had been cut from the banks of the Conecuh, Choctawhatchee, and Pea rivers, as well as many of their tributaries in Covington, Geneva, and Coffee Counties.[35]

To extend their water-based transportation system and reach the valuable stands of virgin pine beyond the streams, loggers of South Alabama and North Florida created an extensive network of improved and manmade waterways. The region's particularly flat topography and slow flowing streams allowed for this network. In time, the forests of Geneva and Covington Counties were laced by canals and ditches. These waterways were the most efficient means of moving logs before the arrival of railroads, allowing the river-based loggers to extend their transportation system beyond its natural limits and cut more timber.

On average the ditches were around four feet wide and three or four feet deep. The sides of the ditches were lined with rough cut lumber nailed to posts made from longleaf pine saplings. Dams were built across small streams to create containment ponds from which water could be diverted into the ditches providing the flow necessary to move the logs. [36] In addition to the ditches many small creeks in the region, like Buck Creek, a tributary of the Conecuh River in Covington County, were sluiced. In this process the banks of the creek were lined with boards in the same manner as the ditches to facilitate the movement of logs.[37] Other creeks were straightened, with ditches cut across bends

[35] The map does not indicate a clear cut, but an absence of large mature pines of the kind preferred by early lumbermen. Sargent, *Report on the Forests*, 524.

[36] H. H. Chapman, "An Ancient and Original Transportation System for Logs in Southern Alabama", *Journal of Forestry* (March, 1951), 209-210.

[37] *A Survey of Water-Powered Mill Sites in Pike County, Coffee County, and Covington County* (Troy State Archaeological Research Center, 1997).

and curves to enable the efficient movement of logs to holding ponds, larger streams, or ditches.

Sawmills were connected to the surrounding forests by an ever increasing web of ditches and streams. There were three miles of ditches bringing logs to the Prestwood sawmill near Andalusia, Alabama in 1890. Another mile and a half long ditch was used to float sawn timbers to the river. [38] A man named Eldridge was paid $1,200 to cut a new ditch from Prestwood's mill pond to Big Soldier Branch. Such a substantial investment in ditching demonstrates the potential profitability of the lumber industry in the Wiregrass. Eldridge was subsequently contracted to move logs along this ditch for ten cents per log. After the ditch was extended for some distance, Eldridge's rate was increased to fifteen and later eighteen cents per log. In 1895 over 2,000 logs were brought through these ditches to the mill. [39] This is just one example of the ditches used to move logs. There were dozens more throughout the region.

Logs were moved along the ditches or streams in clusters of three or four attached end to end with spikes and short chains. Men stationed at intervals along the waterways kept the logs moving with long poles called peaveys. Sometimes men rode the logs along the stream to ensure steady movement. [40] It was important that the waterways remain unobstructed. Some mill dams in South Alabama had special chutes to allow for the passage of logs not belonging to the mill owner. This was done out of courtesy to other

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[38] *Covington Times*, May 3, 1890.

[39] Prestwood v. Eldridge, 119 Ala. 72, (Supreme Court of Alabama, 1898).

[40] Appleyard, 14; Dixon, 36-37; Geneva, 107; Massey, 77-78, 82; H. H. Chapman, 209-210.

loggers, but also as a means of protecting the small dams from potential damage cause by log runs.[41]

Inevitably logs piled up, jammed, or became grounded in shallow water. If the water level became too low it was necessary to wait for the next rain to cause a rise in the creeks that would move the stranded logs on to their destination. Loggers occasionally used shallow streams in which logs could only effectively be moved on freshets caused by heavy rain. Long periods without rain were a source of anxiety for the lumber men. Some shifted to grinding corn or worked on their gardens. Others simple continued to pile logs into the dry stream beds or ditches waiting for the inevitable rain. With such a dependence on water to move logs, a drought-ending rain was a newsworthy event in the logging districts of the Wiregrass. The *Covington Times* reported such an episode in December of 1889. "A good deal of timber that has been in the creek since last spring was gotten out on the last high water and some is yet remaining which the owners are anxious to get out." [42] Because of their transportation system loggers and sawmillers depended on rain as much as their agricultural neighbors.

With so many loggers using a limited number of streams and rivers confusion over the origins or ownership of valuable timber seems to have been inevitable. Loggers or lumber companies often stamped a logo or brand into their logs so that they could be identified and sorted further downstream. Mills located along streams or rivers collected their own logs by use of the identifying brand. Men stationed on pilings in the river

[41] Blackman v. Mauldin, 164 Ala. 337 (Supreme Court of Alabama, November 23, 1909).

[42] Drought ending rain would have been news worthy in agricultural regions as well, just for different reasons. *Covington Times*, December 14, 1889.

would sort logs as they floated by. Using a peavey they would roll the logs to check the brand and push their logs against the pilings. Loose logs were then held behind a boom until they could be moved to the mill pond or bound into a raft.[43]

Most of the logs floated on the ditches, streams, and rivers of South Alabama were mature virgin longleaf pine, which floated well. Inevitably, though, some logs became waterlogged and sank or were pushed to the bottom under the weight of other logs. The sunken logs were called deadheads. In the early days of seemingly limitless forests little effort was made to retrieve deadheads. However, after the last of the great virgin pines in South Alabama had been cut, some enterprising lumbermen shifted their focus to retrieving these lost logs, a practice called deadheading. Deadheading involved salvaging longleaf pine logs from river channels and bays. Because of its high resin content the longleaf was largely impervious to rot. In the 1920s there was a floating sawmill on the Conecuh River that worked only deadhead timber. There continues to be a market for the valuable pine logs pulled out of rivers all along the Gulf coast.[44]

Logs were either floated to local mills for rough cutting or to the river to be sent directly to Florida. In the local mills they were often squared. An example of the type of mills producing squared timber in the Wiregrass was the sawmill run by Napoleon Bonaparte Dixon on Blue Creek in Covington County. Dixon's mill had a single vertical blade. The vertical saw worked slowly, taking thirty minutes to cut one face off of an average forty foot long pine log. At that pace it took two hours of sawing to produce an average size squared timber. The enormous slabs that were cut off the logs were burned

[43] Massey, 81.

[44] Massey, 76; Dixon, 36.

as waste. After they were cut, the timbers were stored in a nearby holding pond until enough had been produced to create a raft. Squared timbers and logs alike were stored in holding ponds to facilitate movement and reduce potential damage by insects or fungus.[45]

In 1889 the State of Alabama passed "An Act to prohibit the driving of logs, timber, or lumber in that part of the Choctawhatchee River in this state below the town of Newton." The Act made it illegal to float individual logs on the Choctawhatchee River below Newton in Dale County.[46] Before this act the bulk of traffic on the river had been individual raw logs floated to Florida mills by Alabama loggers. However, so many logs were floated on the river that they created jams, especially when the water level receded as it was apt to do. Loose logs and log jams made the river almost impassable for steamboats thus cutting off the communities along the river. The act was designed to protect steamboats from the flood of loose logs coming down the river.

While the running of individual logs became illegal, timber and logs could still be sent to Florida in rafts so long as they did not impede river traffic. Typical for the optimistic newspapermen of his time, the editor of the Geneva Record saw the passage of this bill as a great opportunity for his town. It might hurt those who had made a living cutting trees and floating the logs downstream, but he felt it would ensure an increase in the number of sawmills along the rivers at Geneva. [47]

Rafting allowed for the easy movement of timber to markets and ports with less potential for losing individual logs. The state of Alabama closed off navigable sections of

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[45] Solon Dixon, 34, 35.

[46] *Acts of the General Assembly of Alabama Passed at the Session of 1888-9* (Montgomery: The Brown Printing Co., 1889), 311.

[47] *Geneva Record*, October 9, 1889.

the Choctawhatchee to loose logs after 1889 and ten years later in 1899 a Federal law made it illegal to float individual logs down any stream navigated by steamboats. Because of technological and, increasingly, legal limits on the transportation of logs, rafting became an essential part of the early lumber business in Alabama. A raft was composed of individual logs or squared timbers called sticks. An average raft could contain as few as thirty and as many as 120 sticks. However they could be as large as the river permitted. In March of 1891 Pagett Brothers, a timber firm from Loango, Alabama, sold a raft of timber containing 130 sticks that were 40 feet long on average. Rafts were generally around 60 feet wide and 150 to 200 feet long. The individual sticks were held together by spikes and chains. The raft was stabilized with cross poles that ran perpendicular over the sticks. Large sweep oars were used to guide the unwieldy rafts. Occasionally small lean-tos were built on the raft to shelter the riders from the sun or rain. [48]

Rafts were guided downriver by independent contractors who were paid for each trip. Farmers or teenage boys might raft timber for extra money. Once they reached their destination downriver, rafters sold the timber and walked home. One man recalls taking twelve different trips from Andalusia, Alabama to Pensacola, Florida in the summer of his seventeenth year.[49] Despite the potential for seemingly easy profit, rafting involved some financial risk for the contractors. They were responsible for bringing a valuable asset along unpredictable and potentially dangerous waterways. In 1893 a Covington County man was contracted to raft timber to Ferry Pass, Florida at thirty cents per stick.

[48] *Covington Times*, March 7, 189; Bryant, 419; Massey, 83; Dixon, 23-25.

[49] Dixon, 24.

In addition he was obligated to pay three dollars for every stick he lost. Unfortunately for this man, the timber, which was stored behind a boom on the river broke lose and floated away before he could securely bind it into a raft. Thirty sticks of timber were lost. [50]

Rafting the rivers was evidently considered something of an adventure for many young farm boys in the Wiregrass. There are numerous seemingly exaggerated stories of floods, rocky shoals, alligators and other perils. Of course, there was real danger simply riding logs on the river. In 1889 a preacher working a raft on the Conecuh had his foot crushed between logs.[51] In 1891 a boy riding a raft on the Conecuh dropped a tin box containing his money. When he dove in to retrieve it he was never seen again.[52] Like other jobs associated with the lumber business, rafting could be dangerous work.

A large raft of timber could be difficult to control and potentially destructive if it collided into any structures in the river. In 1883 J. L Lewis and A. H. Rodgers ran a large raft of 150 sticks of squared timber from White Water Creek in Coffee County into the Pea River. Their goal was to eventually bring the raft down the Pea to the Choctawhatchee River and downstream to Florida. However, at Elba, the county seat of Coffee County their raft ran into the bridge over the Pea River. The bridge was destroyed by the momentum of the large timber raft. To protect themselves in such cases Coffee County required all timber rafters who passed under public bridges to file a bond for no less than $500 and no more than $1000 with the office of the Probate Judge. Lewis, however, refused to pay for the damages. He subsequently claimed that the county's

[50] Bonifay v. Hassell, 100 Ala. 269 (Supreme Court of Alabama, November 1893).

[51] *Covington Times*, December 14, 1889.

[52] *Covington Times*, January 31, 1891.

bridge was an unlawful impediment of a navigable waterway as defined by federal law. The Alabama Supreme Court ruled in favor of Coffee County. The Court suggested that the Pea River at Elba was not technically a navigable waterway as it could only be used on a seasonal basis or during periods of heavy rain. [53]

Occasionally individuals or companies would block waterways intentionally or through negligence. In these cases they were inevitably sued by those who found their access to the river blocked. One such case occurred on Pigeon Creek, in northwestern Covington County. Pigeon Creek flows into the Sepluga River, which empties into the Conecuh. The creek is only about forty feet wide and dramatically varies in depth. The creek is only useful for timber rafting during periods of winter and spring rains when it rises to over five feet in depth. On average this afforded thirty to ninety days for potential timber rafting. In late November of 1889, timber producers named Bayzer and Shepard tried to float a raft timbers to market on Pigeon Creek when they encountered a log jam purportedly created by the McMillan Mill Company. The jam obstructed the stream for over a year. Unable to sell their timber Bayzer and Shepard sued McMillan for damages. The Alabama Supreme Court, however, ruled against Bayzer and Shepard. The court suggested that because of its seasonal nature Pigeon Creek was not technically a navigable public waterway. Furthermore, the judge suggested that a ruling behalf of the plaintiffs would set a precedent in which any mill owner could be sued by someone who

[53] *Lewis v. Coffee County*, 77 Ala. 190 (Supreme Court of Alabama, December, 1884).

simply floated a raft of timber down to their dam. The case demonstrates the importance of unimpeded streams, even smaller streams, for the efficient movement of lumber.[54]

Because so much timber was shipped on Wiregrass streams and rivers, water level was an important factor in the timber business. Too much rain might scatter timber or float rafts into the woods.[55] Too little rain left rafts stranded. In the dry months timber was stacked up in the river awaiting rain. When it did rain the river could be almost covered with timber rafts. In March of 1890 the *Covington Times* observed that "the rain this week caused a small rise in the river and the log and timber men are hustling around." About three weeks after the initial rise in the river in March of 1890, one witness counted six big timber rafts pass by within an hour.[56]

The fickle nature of the South Alabama rivers even affected the timber market downstream in Florida. Prices in Pensacola actually seemed to hinge on whether it rained in South Alabama. In February of 1890 the *Pensacola News* complained of low stocks and nervous shippers. The timber men in the Wiregrass were evidently holding their stock upriver waiting for a rise in the river, and maybe prices. The paper concluded its market report hopefully, however, stating that "recent rains up country afford encouragement."[57]

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[54] Bayzer and Shepard v. McMillan Mill Co., 105 Ala. 395 (Supreme Court of Alabama, November 1894).

[55] Dixon, 37.

[56] *Covington Time*, March 1, 1890; March 20, 1890.

[57] The *Covington Times* frequently ran reprints of timber market reports from the *Pensacola News*. *Covington Times*, February 15, 1890; February 22, 1890.

Rivers were essential arteries of commerce for much of the Wiregrass region. Any obstruction of the rivers could ruin the economy of the entire district. As in any rivers, stumps, trees, deadhead timber and other debris, collectively called snags would build up and impede navigation. The Federal Government was charged with maintaining the navigability of major waterways nationwide. In the Wiregrass their efforts drew mixed reviews. In August of 1889 the editor of the *Geneva Record* publicly thanked the government engineer in charge of the "improvements" on the Choctawhatchee. He noted that before the government improvements steamers traveling to Geneva were in constant danger of hitting "driftwood and deadhead timber." [58] In contrast to the praise from Geneva, the *Covington Times* ran a series of editorials in 1890 criticizing Federal efforts to remove obstructions from the rivers. The editor complained that the snag boat used by the Government was "too slow." He suggested contracting out the service with $25,000 allotted for clearing the Choctawhatchee River and $20,000 allotted for clearing Conecuh and Escambia rivers.[59]

Rafts from Geneva were floated down river to the sawmills on Choctawhatchee Bay in and around Freeport, Florida. Those in Covington County went down the Yellow or Conecuh Rivers to Ferry Pass on Escambia Bay where they were broken up and sold on the Pensacola timber market. The price for timber in Florida varied, as any market-based commodity will. In February of 1890 the Pensacola News reported twelve cents per cubic foot for sawn timber and fifteen and a half cents for hewn timber. [60] At the mouth

[58] *Geneva Record*, August 28, 1889; September 1, 1889.

[59] *Covington Times*, July 26, 1890; Ibid., August 23, 1890.

[60] *Covington Times*, February 15, 1890.

of these rivers there were enormous booms to collect logs and hold rafts. At one point, there was a boom at the mouth of the Choctawhatchee that could hold 10,000 logs. A particularly strong tidal surge in 1882 pushed thousands of logs many miles back up the Choctawhatchee. When the tide went out, the logs came back down stream in force, broke through the boom and scattered throughout the bay. [61]

The waterborne logging business had its limits. Even with the extension of range provided by ditches loggers began to reach their practical limits in the late 1880s. There was still available standing timber, but it was located on ridges and on the uplands between the river basins. "The timber on the river has all been cut," announced the *Covington Times* in June of 1890. This would seem to be a disaster for an economy based on a growing timber industry. However, the same editorial suggested the answer to the problem, railroads. "To build the road from Troy to Andalusia on the ridge might cost the company considerably, but they would make it up in the transportation of lumber and timber that cannot be reached on river line." [62] Even as the river-bottom timber was being cut out the businessmen of Andalusia had their eye on the future.

The river-based lumber business marked an important transition for the Wiregrass. It introduced many of the region's subsistence farmers to the market economy providing additional income and outside connections for an isolated population. It boosted the economy of numerous small towns, like Geneva and Andalusia. Furthermore, the early loggers left a potential second cut in their wake. Even though a great amount of timber was cut, this first wave of loggers cut only the most profitable trees leaving many

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[61] Massey, 77, 82; *Geneva,* 107; Williams, 247.

[62] *Covington Times*, June 7, 1890.

smaller trees to mature. Despite their selective logging practices, the industry faced serious limits with transportation. As the marketable timber along the rivers and their tributaries disappeared the river-based lumber manufacturers faced inevitable decline. However, the lumber industry in the Wiregrass did not die. If anything the profitability of the Wiregrass' longleaf pine forests had been proven, and there were still vast swaths of virgin forest that remained uncut. The biggest limitation for the first lumber businesses had been transportation. The arrival of the railroads marked a period of dramatic change for the Alabama Wiregrass.

CHAPTER 3

COTTON IN THE WIREGRASS

In August of 1889, newspaper editor, T. E. Williams watched the first train pull into Dothan's newly built railroad station. The event inspired Williams to make a prediction for the region's future.

> Now our great pine forests will be cut down and the timber utilized, and the land will grow cotton, corn, vegetables, and fruits; our children will grow out of ignorance; churches and schools will be reared and our country developed morally into usefulness; in fact the benefits of the railroad will be of such value to this long neglected section of the country that as we hear the whistle blowing we can hardly stay to our seat and keep from jumping and shouting joyously at every sound.[1]

Within a decade of this editorial the Wiregrass indeed experienced a substantial transformation. The growth of railroads in the Wiregrass coincided with, and in many ways facilitated, major economic, social, and environmental shifts. Most notable among the new forces were the arrival of large-scale industrial lumber mills and the dramatic increase of commercial cotton cultivation. The lumber industry had a lasting impact on the Wiregrass. However, in 1889 when the first train pulled into Dothan a growing

[1] *The Dothan Light*, August 14, 1889.

population of farmers and small-town businessmen were willing to bet that the future would be built on cotton.

In the Antebellum period most of the South's cotton was produced in plantation districts, like Alabama's Black Belt. Outside of the plantation districts farmers planted only a small amount of cotton. Largely a region of herders, subsistence farmers, small-scale loggers, and log rafters, the Wiregrass counties contained only four percent of the state's improved farmland, and accounted for just two percent of cotton bales in 1860. After Reconstruction, however, the large-scale cultivation of cotton expanded out of the old plantation districts north into the hill country and south into the pine belt.[2] Southeast Alabama, in particular saw a substantial increase in cotton acreage in the last decades of the nineteenth-century. By 1910 the Wiregrass was growing over twelve percent of the state's cotton on slightly less then ten percent of the state's improved farmland. These numbers show both an increase in acreage and an improvement in productivity. Transportation improvements, the availability of cheap cut-over land, and advances in chemical fertilizer made it possible to grow cotton in the once marginal lands of the Wiregrass. [3]

Before 1888 and the arrival of rails, the main outlet for cotton produced in the Wiregrass was along the region's navigable rivers, the Chattahoochee and the Choctawhatchee. In the eastern sections cotton was carried overland in wagons to the

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[2] The expansion of cotton cultivation after the reconstruction has been addressed by numerous historians. Steven Hahn's book *The Roots of Southern Populism* follows the effects of commercial cotton's movement into the Georgia piedmont region. For more details on this process in Alabama see J. Allen Tower, "Cotton Change in Alabama, 1879-1946," *Economic Geography*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (January 1950).

[3] United States Census Office, *Agriculture of the United States; Complied from the original returns of the 8th Census* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1864); United States Census Office, *Thirteenth Census of the United States taken in 1910, Volume XI: Agriculture 1909 and 1910, Reports by States* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1913).

river ports of Eufaula or Columbia. From there it was either shipped upriver to the warehouses and cotton mills of Columbus, Georgia or down river to the cotton port of Apalachicola, Florida. In the western reaches of the Wiregrass, cotton was shipped down the Choctawhatchee River through Geneva to the markets and ports in Florida. Some cotton was also carried north overland to the railhead at Troy, Alabama. [4]

The expansion of cotton cultivation was initially a boon to the growth of the river towns. Columbia, on the Chattahoochee River, served as the Wiregrass region's main entrepot. Farmers from the upland areas of the Wiregrass hauled goods overland to and from Columbia. From Columbia, steamboats traveled either up river to Columbus, Georgia or down river to Apalachicola, Florida. The *Columbia Enterprise* lauded its hometown as "the most important river town between Columbus and Apalachicola." The paper also described the town's relationship with the villages and towns to the interior; "To the West of us are the thriving towns of Dothan, Newton, Ozark, Geneva, Headland, Gordon to the South, Abbeville to the North all are more or less tributary to our growth and prosperity."[5] In this brief passage, the publisher of *The Enterprise* described the region's primitive commercial network in which Columbia was the major marketing and distribution point for the interior of the Alabama Wiregrass.

Columbia had a fairly extensive antebellum history. It was the county seat of Henry County from 1822 to 1838 when the county included the entire vast unsettled frontier of the southeastern corner of the state. A post office was established there as

[4] Lynn Willoughby has provided a survey of the cotton trade along the Chattahoochee in her two books, *Fair to Middlin': The Antebellum Cotton Trade of the Apalachicola/Chattahoochee River Valley* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1993) and *Flowing Through Time: A History of the Lower Chattahoochee River* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1999).

[5] *The Columbia Enterprise*, May 16, 1889.

early as 1828. Early Wiregrass settlers used Columbia as a point of departure for moving west into the sparsely populated interior of what later became Dale and Geneva counties. Cotton planters brought slaves to the area around Columbia and cultivated the rich bottomlands along the Chattahoochee, some of the only plantations in the region. The first bank in southeast Alabama was in Columbia. It was the region's first commercial center and farmers from fifty miles to the interior hauled their produce to market in Columbia. With its bank, hotels, merchants, steamboat docks, warehouses, and established history of commercial hegemony, the town seemed poised to profit greatly from the waves of settlers seeking cheap land in the Wiregrass at the end of reconstruction.[6]

Like Columbia, Geneva was also an important river town. Situated at the confluence of the Choctawhatchee and Pea Rivers, Geneva was an early center for the lumber industry in the Wiregrass. Most of the area's settlers lived by a combination of logging, timber rafting, and subsistence farming. In the fall of 1875 Geneva's merchants only saw thirty-five bales of cotton brought to town from the surrounding countryside. However, as the pine forests along the rivers were cleared more ambitious farmers moved into Geneva County. In 1883 Geneva's merchants cleared almost six-thousand bales of cotton. With this noteworthy increase in production cotton became an essential part of the town's economy. In 1888 Geneva shipped over eight-thousand bales of cotton worth approximately $360,000 down river to the Florida ports. Cotton was becoming so important to the economy of Geneva that the next year the editor of the *Geneva Record*

[6] Fred Watson, *Hub of the Wiregrass: A History of Houston County, 1903-1972* (Anniston: Higginbotham, Inc., 1972), 48-51.

was openly concerned that hiring by the region's industrial sawmills would steal from the labor force needed to harvest the increasingly valuable cotton crop. [7]

While rivers were the initial highways for the cotton business, the coming of the railroads transformed the cotton business in the Alabama Wiregrass. However, considering the early growth of the river-based cotton business at Columbia and Geneva, it would be a mistake to assume that the railroads caused the expansion of cotton cultivation in the Alabama Wiregrass, just as it would be wrong to conclude that the rails caused the lumber boom. Even away from the rivers cotton cultivation was in dramatic increase through the 1880s. In 1888 the merchants of landlocked Dothan bought over sixteen-hundred bales of cotton, a year before the arrival of the Alabama Midland railroad in that town and only three years after that town's establishment. Drawn by the potential for freight the railroads moved into areas that were beginning to prosper. Railroads facilitated the expansion of cotton culture into the hills and the piney woods, but they did not cause it. The existence of prosperous farms and virgin forests attracted the railroads.

With a burgeoning river-based trade in lumber and cotton the Wiregrass was primed for the arrival of the railroads in the late1880s. The Central of Georgia from Eufaula reached Ozark in 1888. The next year the Alabama Midland Railroad was completed. It cut diagonally across the entire region on an axis running from the northwest to the southeast. The Midlands ran from Montgomery, Alabama to Bainbridge, Georgia linking several of the Wiregrass region's fastest growing market towns to the markets in Montgomery and the port facilities of the Atlantic coast. The primary

[7] *The Geneva Record*, September 1, 1883; *The Geneva Record,* August 1889; *The Geneva Record*, October 9, 1889.

investors in the Midlands were cotton merchants from Troy and Montgomery who wished to cut into Columbus, Georgia's economic hold on the Southeast corner of Alabama.

The construction of the Alabama Midland spurred a frenzy of building, improvement, investment, and newspaper boosterism in the towns along the proposed route. Wiregrass towns saw both the impending realization of previously unforeseen potential and a mad speculative binge prodded on by local prophets of the New South. The town of Troy sprang into action as new businesses were established and old ones increased production in anticipation of the coming railroad. Ozark, one of the Wiregrass towns along the proposed route of the railroad, held mass meetings in support of the venture and plotted efforts to induce the Midland to locate its machine shops in that town.[8]

Of all the towns and villages along the railroad's route through the Wiregrass, Dothan seems to have reacted with the most confidence in the future. Almost overnight a building boom gripped the little village. Piles of lumber and bricks along the main streets marked the future locations of dozens of new businesses and homes. In March 1889, shortly after the Midlands began construction twenty-seven year old attorney T.E. Williams moved to Dothan from nearby Headland and started the town's first newspaper, *The Dothan Light*. To Williams his new home seemed alive with activity. Everyone seemed to be in a rush and the streets were continually full of people "going to and fro." According to the new editor, potential buyers were in the town every day and, in the light

[8] Dudley S. Johnson, "Notes and Documents: Early History of the Alabama Midland Railroad Company," *The Alabama Review* XXI (October, 1968): 280, 281.

of such high demand for property, Dothan's landowners began "putting on city airs." In the frenzy lots were bought and sold in short order and carpenters were busy working on all manner of new buildings. With all the construction and increased population, new houses outnumbered old ones. T.E. Williams came to Dothan precisely because it was a boomtown. The frenetic activity he described was the very force that led him and countless others to move to what had once been "an exiled pine forest." [9]

Established in the midst of the banging hammers and busy muddy streets, *The Dothan Light* became a major advocate for the economic development of Dothan and the surrounding area. The paper's young editor was a tremendous booster from the very beginning and he worked to promote his adopted home in nearly every publication. In the inaugural edition he proudly observed that, "Dothan four years ago was only a wide place in the road, but now it is a booming town destined to be a city in the very near future." Furthermore, it was Williams' belief that Dothan would soon rank along side Birmingham or Pittsburgh as a major urban center. [10]

With regard to Dothan's anticipatory building boom and its steady trek towards city status, the confident editor crowed:

> It is a conceded fact that since grading commenced at the first of the year on the Alabama Midland Railroad Dothan has made more improvements than any town along the line from Montgomery to Bainbridge. Of course

[9] *The Dothan Light*, March 2, 1889.

[10] Ibid.

all of the papers are ready to say this about their towns; and realizing how the public view it we are willing to produce the figures to show it. [11]

True to his word, Williams filled *The Light* with the details of Dothan's economic transformation. Through its first year, almost every weekly edition of *The Light* included detailed reports of the little town's expansion. Everything, from the number of carpenters at work to the names of outside investors visiting Dothan, was included in the pages of *The Light*. Williams tracked Dothan's boom.

As he dutifully recorded the construction of new buildings, the increased bustle of commercial exchange and the steady retreat of the pine forests from the edge of town, the ambitious editor prophetically assured his readers that Dothan was "the coming metropolis of Henry, Dale, and Geneva counties."[12] Dr. R.D. Carroll, in his column in *The Light,* described Dothan's boom in less measured, but equally effective terms. "We see more pretty girls, mischievous boys, fat babies, happy mothers and poodle dogs in Dothan than anywhere else."[13] Growth was good for business.

Much of the promotional press about Dothan could be considered booster-driven hyperbole. However, underlying all of the hoopla was a real economic shift. The expansion of commercial cotton cultivation brought a related expansion of the business services that surrounded it. Farmers who grew only cotton needed to buy food from merchants or grocers. Cotton had to be ginned, baled, stored, and shipped to a market. The whole process involved the extension of credit by merchants and banks alike.

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[11] *The Dothan Light*, June 12, 1889.

[12] Ibid.

[13] *The Dothan Light,* July, 1889.

Eventually even more local industrial ventures sprung from cotton. The seeds could be pressed for their valuable oil and the fiber spun into yarn. Facilities for all of these processes were located in the numerous fast growing towns of the Wiregrass. This growth gave the little towns a real feeling of bustle especially in the fall around harvest time.

A wide variety of services grew in the small towns of cotton's frontier. In the new agricultural economy nearly all activity was predicated on the cotton market. Cotton prices were the common factor. An advertisement from a Dothan merchant asked "Can you raise cotton for 5 and 6 cents?" The ad went on to brag that "We have marked our goods so low that 10lbs cotton will buy as many goods as it ever would." [14] Town merchants all promised the lowest prices for merchandise and the highest prices for cotton. One ubiquitous face of the cotton trade was the cotton warehouse. The warehouse proprietors bought cotton from the farmers and provided the money or credit for all subsequent economic activity. Warehouses competed for cotton, promising the best money for cotton.

The cotton gin was the most basic service associated with cotton production. Gins removed seeds and cleaned cotton as it was brought in from the fields making it ready for sale and shipment. Before the Civil War large amounts of cotton were ginned on relatively self sufficient plantations. The post war expansion of cotton cultivation into the realm of the small farmer necessitated the establishment of public commercial cotton gins. In the new cotton growing districts the cotton gin anchored the most basic economic nodes. The growth of these basic industrial enterprises caused an explosion of small towns and hamlets in areas previously devoid of urban nodes. The growth of small

[14] *Wiregrass Siftings*, September 8, 1892.

towns in Wiregrass exemplified this process. Cotton gins were found in the small towns along the railroads, but they could also be found out in the country crossroads or in rural farm communities. Even though gins employed only a limited number of workers, their central location and accessibility to farmers and transportation infrastructure ensured that they became the locus for a variety of services for the burgeoning number of cotton farmers.[15]

Small Wiregrass towns grew in response to the flood of new farmers. As new towns were established and old ones boomed, their merchants competed for the business of the farmers in the hinterlands. They especially wanted the cotton. As the railroad approached Dothan in 1889 the new merchants of that town wasted little time advertising their impending advantage in transportation, and therefore prices. True to the boom-town stereotype, the stores promising inexhaustible supplies of goods at unbelievably low prices and cash for cotton had not even finished their buildings when they unleashed a marketing assault on the citizenry of the Wiregrass. One merchant touted the coming railroad in its advertisements; "The Midland Railroad is here, and so are P. L. Burdeshaw & Co."[16] J. W. Drewry was advertising in *The Light* that his yet to be completed Alabama Warehouse would buy cotton from the farmers of Dale, Geneva, and Henry counties with cash.[17] J. Steininger & Co., also a newcomer to Dothan, was more frank in its appeal; "DOTHAN! DOTHAN! DOTHAN! Dothan with her Railroad facilities and cheap transportation is prepared to compete with any point west of the Chattahoochee

[15] Weiher, *Southern Urbanization.*

[16] *Dothan Light,* March 20, 1889.

[17] *Dothan Light,* July 31, 1889.

River in paying the highest prices in cash for cotton and other country produce."[18] The advertisements for Dothan merchants through the spring and summer of 1889 contained a common theme; the railroad will make Dothan the place for Wiregrass farmers to do business in the fall.

As agricultural production in the upland interior of the Wiregrass increased, cotton buyers and merchants migrated from the area's original cotton belt along the Chattahoochee to the new railroad towns. These businessmen played a major role in Dothan's pre-railroad boom. Cotton was fast becoming the most important commodity in the region for both farmers and businessmen. As such the cotton trade was the real prize in the economic competition between the commercial centers of the Wiregrass. Competition for the cotton trade peaked late in the summer and the region's newspapers sought to convince the farmers of the advantages of doing business in their city. In August, *The Light* assured farmers "You will get a good price on your cotton by bringing it to Dothan." In case such assurances were not enough, it helped to bash the competition; "Eufaula bought her first cotton on the 15th at 10cts. Dothan bought her first the day before at 12 1/2. Look to your interest farmers!"[19]

Eufaula seemed to be a favorite target for Williams and *The Light*. On August 28 he ran a reprint from *The Eufaula Times* that lamented "Never before have the warehouses of Eufaula contained smaller stacks of cotton than at present." To this point Williams remarked "Come on down to the piney woods and you'll see what is becoming

[18] *Dothan Light,* August 14, 1889.

[19] *Dothan Light,* August 21, 1889.

of some of it."[20] Of course, not all of *The Light's* promotional appeals used attacks on the competition. One clear way to attract the farmers involved mentioning the neighbors they knew and trusted. Specific farmers and communities might be mentioned in a positive light; "Jack Shelley, a good farmer from around Baker was in town with cotton yesterday… Lots of good cotton in town Saturday from around Headland."[21] This was done to recruit other farmers from those districts and show them that their well-respected neighbors brought cotton to Dothan.

The limiting factor in cotton transportation was bulk, not weight. The fluffy cotton lint took up valuable space in box cars. If it could be pressed into denser bales then it could be more efficiently and profitably shipped. The device for pressing bales, called a cotton compress, used hydraulic presses to compact bales for efficient long distance shipping. These compresses reduced the bale size by approximately fifty percent, thus doubling the amount of cotton that could be shipped in any given rail car. While it was a part of the larger business system associated with cotton production, a cotton compress needed a larger hinterland than a gin to operate profitably. To operate in a cost effective manner a compress needed the product of as many as thirty gins. In 1900 there were only 111 cotton compresses spread across the South at major shipping points. At the center of the Wiregrass' regional rail network Dothan was the logical location for a cotton compress. By 1893 the town was home to the Dothan Compress Company, which was

[20] It is worth noting that even as the woods were pushed back to make room for more farms, the residents of the area still proudly identified with them. *Dothan Light*, August 28, 1889.

[21] *Dothan Light*, October 23, 1889.

just one example of the many agriculture processing businesses that drew on the ever-increasing farm population of the Dothan's hinterland. [22]

Not all of the Wiregrass cotton was shipped away. As production at the region's lumber enterprises began to wane, some of the small towns looked to textile manufacture as an economic respite. These mills were generally part of a larger trend in which textile manufactures moved south in search of cheap labor and resources. The textile industry already thrived in other parts of Alabama as well as upriver from the Wiregrass at the falls of the Chattahoochee in the city of Columbus, Georgia. The Wiregrass did not posses the natural advantages of Columbus, where the river dropped dramatically providing ample water power. However, as early as 1893, Columbia on the Chattahoochee had a small spinning mill. The Columbia Cotton Mill provided jobs and a market for local cotton. Enterprise in Coffee County was also home to a cotton textile mill built in 1901. Five years after it began business the Enterprise Cotton Mill was consuming six to eight thousand bales of cotton per year, but this was only a fraction of the cotton brought to Enterprise by surrounding farmers. The People's Warehouse alone received between ten and fourteen thousand bales each season. [23]

There were other industries tied to cotton and not all of them involved the famous white lint. In 1899 southern farms produced approximately 4.5 million tons of cotton seed beyond what was needed for planting. Previously viewed as a waste byproduct of the ginning process, cotton seeds were increasingly put to a number of uses by the turn of

[22] Kenneth Weiher, "Cotton Industry and Southern Urbanization", *Explorations in Economic History* 14 (1977), 60, 132; Sanborn Fire Insurance Company, Map, Dothan, 1893.

[23] *The People's Ledger: Industrial Edition*, April 18, 1906.

the century. The United States Census Bureau's report on agriculture for 1900 stated that the cotton seed business had seen more remarkable growth than any other agriculture based industry in the previous twenty-five years. The most lucrative part of the cotton seed business was the manufacture of oil. To manufacture cottonseed oil cotton seeds were hulled and the meat was heated and mashed using a hydraulic press. The refined oil was sold domestically for cooking, the manufacture of butter substitutes, and soap production. Cotton seed oil was also an increasingly valuable export to Europe where it was used as a substitute for olive oil. The oil was not the only product of the pressing process, almost all of the parts of the cotton seeds were put to use. The hulls and seed meal could be used to make fertilizer or pressed into cakes for livestock feed.[24]

The production of oil from cotton seeds was a big part of the agricultural processing industry that was developing in the Wiregrass. Increasingly common, oil mills were built in nearly every cotton market town. In 1903 there were cotton seed oil mills in Dothan, Enterprise, and Ozark. The three towns all possessed the necessary railroad connections for shipping the oil to consumers nation-wide. The Enterprise mill purportedly consumed thirty-five tons of seed for every day of operation.[25] By 1916 the town of Headland, in Henry County, was home to two cotton seed oil mills. These were typical of the agricultural processing enterprises that thrived throughout the Wiregrass.

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[24] United States Census Office, *Twelfth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1900: Census Reports, Volume VI Agriculture, Part 2, Crops and Irrigation* (Washington: U.S. Census Office, 1901-1902), 416.

[25] Sanborn Fire Insurance Company, Map, Dothan, 1903; Sanborn Fire Insurance Company, Map, Enterprise, 1903; Sanborn Fire Insurance Company, Map, Ozark, 1903; Sanborn Fire Insurance Company, Map, Headland, 1916; *The People's Ledger, Industrial Edition,* April 18, 1906.

The commercial cultivation of cotton brought a wide variety of businesses to Wiregrass towns. Not all of them involved processing cotton. The sale and production of fertilizer became a major industry, especially in the sandy Wiregrass. "Our lands are poor, but healthy. Cotton, corn, tobacco, sugar cane, potatoes, peas, and garden truck of all kinds grow most abundantly where preparation, culture and proper fertilization have been employed."[26] The soil of the Wiregrass was, by comparison to the famous Black Belt, poor. *The Henry County register* reported in a Saturday in October of 1878 when one hundred and thirty bales of cotton were sold in Columbia. According to the paper, most of the money from the sales went to pay the farmers' fertilizer bills. However, "Our farming friends are generally satisfied with the results of the guano, and are paying up cheerfully."[27] The sandy soil of southeast Alabama required fertilizer to produce cotton in profitable quantities and farmers were willing to pay for it in order to guarantee productivity.

The first fertilizer used on Alabama cotton farms was imported Peruvian guano. As sources of guano became depleted, chemists and fertilizer manufacturers began to experiment with various forms of artificial fertilizer generally composed of combinations of phosphoric acid, nitrogen and potash. Fertilizer companies experimented with varied combinations, mixing different components to meet the essential chemical needs of the plants. Increasingly towards the end of the nineteenth century, the chemical components and the finished fertilizer were produced in the South. In the 1890s phosphorus mines

[26] *The Geneva County Citizen*, October 12, 1895.

[27] *Henry County Register*, October 18, 1878.

were developed in southern states, Florida in particular. Cotton seed meal, available locally from gins and oil presses, was frequently used to add nitrogen to fertilizer. [28]

Considering the region's notoriously sandy soil, a good fertilizer was essential for Wiregrass cotton farmers. In 1879 Wiregrass farmers spent $124,983 on fertilizer. Ten years later that figure had increased to $397,226. In 1890 Wiregrass farmers worked slightly more than six percent of the state's improved acreage and cultivated a bit less than six percent of the state's cotton acreage. That same year they accounted for over sixteen percent of the state's fertilizer expenditure. In 1910, near the peak of cotton cultivation with almost ten percent of the state's cotton acreage, Wiregrass farmers accounted for over nineteen percent of all fertilizer spending in Alabama. In order to grow more cotton in the region's thin soil Wiregrass farmers were forced to make larger investments in fertilizer than their counterparts in other, more fertile, parts of the state.

Fertilizer and its components were bulky and shipping always presented a problem. Before the arrival of the rails the fertilizer was shipped on the rivers. Steamers coming up the Choctawhatchee to Geneva charged $1.50 per ton in 1891. Geneva's cotton warehouses received approximately 2400 tons of guano from steamers that year. While Geneva was the usual head of navigation, boats could actually go as far up river as Pate's Landing or if the water was high enough and the river was free of obstructions Newton in Dale County. [29]

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[28] Richard Sheridan, "Fertilizer," *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 36; D.A. Tompkins, Cotton *and Cotton Oil* (Charlotte, N.C.: Presses Observer Printing House, 1901), 408; J. Allen Tower, "Cotton Change in Alabama, 1879-1946," *Economic Geography* 26, No. 1(January 1950), 14.

[29] *The Southern Star* May 11, 1887; *The Geneva Record,* March 25, 1891.

The construction of railroads across the Wiregrass changed the regional transportation equation. Large quantities of fertilizer or fertilizer components were brought into the region along the new rails. Even though the Alabama Midlands Railroad hauled fertilizer to Dothan, Ozark, and the smaller towns from the beginning, for the first decade of operations lumber was the largest single bulk commodity hauled by the Midlands. However, in 1898 the Alabama Midland shipped slightly more tons of fertilizer than lumber. This change in cargo tonnage partly reflects a subtle shift in the regional economy from forest industry to agriculture.

The increased demand for fertilizer led some farmers to call for the expansion of railroads to smaller communities. In 1893 one such farmer from Daleville in southern Dale County wrote to *The Banner* of Ozark noting his town's lack of railroad access.

> The only drawback to this country is the lack of transportation facilities. There (sic) lands are adapted to commercial fertilizer and to freight from Ozark or from Geneva is too much for this day. It would do when we only made one bale of cotton to the plow; but now we must make ten bales of cotton to the plow, and corn and other produce to run the farm or we are not farmers. Yet give us a railroad and we will show you a country that will yield 500 pounds of lint cotton and 25 bushels of corn to the acre.

Fertilizer upped the ante for farmers in the Wiregrass and farmers remote from the railroads struggled to meet the new production expectations.

In 1893 the Golden Rod Guano Company opened for business in Ozark. This industrial enterprise used steam power in the manufacture of fertilizer. Fertilizer sales, and increasingly manufacture, became an essential part of the agricultural economy of the

Wiregrass, like cotton warehouses, gins, oil mills, and compresses. Fertilizer dealers could be found in almost all of the small towns. The larger centers, like Dothan, Enterprise and Ozark had manufacturing facilities. Abbeville had the Howard Fertilizer Company, which used its steam power to mix fertilizer and gin cotton, dealing with the crop at both ends of production. Geneva had the Geneva Ginnery and Fertilizer Company. The Samson Cotton Oil, Gin and Fertilizer Company of Geneva County offered three services under one roof. [30]

Those towns in the Wiregrass that did not have large sawmills were dependent on agriculture, cotton in particular. The newspapers of the region's small towns constantly appealed to farmers to come to town and spend their money. If direct appeal wasn't enough many editors and advertisers used flattery. The *Dothan Light* consistently commended farming as a noble profession and claimed to represent the best interest of the area's farmers. On more than one occasion, the paper ran a column that encouraged local farmers to stay on the farm and not move to town.[31] On the surface, this may seem like an odd sentiment for the promoters of a town that was aggressively recruiting any and all comers, but it reveals the editors understanding of the vital role played by agriculture in the town's future. Farming was the primary economic activity in large parts of the Wiregrass and for Dothan to be truly successful the farmers of its hinterland would have to thrive. With this in mind, a great deal of newspaper promotion was targeted at farmers. With the same zeal that was applied to appeals for outside investment, the editor

[30] Sanborn Fire Insurance Company, Map, Abbeville, Alabama 1907; Sanborn Fire Insurance Company, Map, Geneva, 1903; Sanborn Fire Insurance Company, Map, Samson 1910.

[31] *Dothan Light,* March 2, 1889; *Dothan Light,* April 13 1889.

assured farmers "Big preparations have been made here to do the farmer justice."[32] Whether it was just or not, to Dothan's merchants the most important aspect of the relationship between the town and the farmers was the ability of the latter to pay their debts at the end of the season. At the close of the 1889 season *The Light* ran a column offering "a premium to any country 30 miles square that can show as good a set of farmers as the ones who trade here. When their accounts come due, they come up and settle, and to them Dothan owes her prosperity."[33] If Dothan was born because of the railroad, it would prosper because of the farmers.

While merchants clearly felt that they owed their success to the farmers the feeling was certainly not mutual. The booming agricultural processing and service economy had costs. Farmers found themselves increasingly at the mercy of an international market economy that few truly understood. The array of goods and services available in Dothan, Ozark, or Geneva cost money. Far from liberating the region's farmers the extension of the new economy seemed to rob them of their independence.

At the close of the 1880s the farmers of the Wiregrass, unhappy with the services of gins, merchants, warehouses and bankers, became heavily involved in the Farmers' Alliance. The Alliance was as much a part of the changes in Wiregrass agriculture as the increase in cotton cultivation. The timing of the Alliance seemed perfect. The Farmers' Alliance was founded in Texas in 1875, but it did not become organized in Alabama until 1887. In its earliest incarnation the organization was open to anyone regardless of occupation, urban or rural alike. The outspoken editor of *The Light*, T.E. Williams joined

[32] *Dothan Light,* August 28, 1889.

[33] *Dothan Light,* December 5, 1889.

the Alliance but quit when the organization became what he called the "political alliance."[34] The Alliance never became well established in Alabama's Blackbelt, where the state's largest landholders held sway. However, both the Farmers' Alliance and the Grange thrived on the agricultural frontiers north and south of the Blackbelt. The Wiregrass, with its relatively small farmers just beginning to enter commercial production, was the ideal territory for such organizations. Major T. J. Key, editor of the *Southern Agriculturist*, described the Wiregrass as a region where "white men own the farms and cultivate them without any hired labor."[35] The Major over-generalized, but his point seemed to have been made in contrast to the Blackbelt where tenant farmers or sharecroppers did most of the farming.[36] Because of the strength of its farmers, the Wiregrass was influential within the state Alliance. When a statewide exchange was created, Dr. John Bird of the Henry County Alliance was elected president.[37]

The Alliance emphasized educational programs for farmers and to this end it often worked along side or in unison with the Grange. When the Grange sponsored a lecture at the Dothan Academy the largest part of the attendees were "Alliance friends from the county".[38] The Alliance also encouraged economic cooperation among farmers. The

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[34] Williams was a staunch Democrat and his paper would serve as the main Democratic instrument in the Wiregrass during the politically tense 1890s. *Wire Grass Siftings,* September 29, 1892.

[35] *Columbia Enterprise*, June 6, 1889.

[36] He was at least partially correct in the sense that the region's farmers spent more money on fertilizer than they did on labor. Also, by 1900 Black farmers worked only 19% of Wiregrass farms. This was lower than the state average of 42.1%, but is far from representing a country devoid of Black farmers. *Twelfth Census of the United States, Agriculture, Part I ,* 266, 58, 59.

[37] William Warren Rogers, "The Farmer's Alliance in Alabama," *The Alabama Review* XV, (January 1962): 8, 14; William Warren Rogers, *The One-Gallused Rebellion: Agrarianism in Alabama* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970), 154.

[38] *Dothan Light*, May 8, 1889.

organization's crusade in the summer of 1889 was an effort to break the jute bagging trust. Cotton was traditionally baled in durable jute bagging. The production of such bagging was controlled by a trust. In the late 1880s the trust artificially raised the price of jute to a level such that it became cost prohibitive for farmers to use the bagging. The Alliance actively encouraged farmers to substitute cotton bagging for the traditional jute and even investigated the possibility of producing its own cotton bagging. These actions by the Alliance forced the hand of the jute trust and they lowered the price to a more reasonable rate. The efforts of the Alliance gained the support and won plaudits from farmers and other farm supporters. *The Light* praised the Alliance's work against the jute trust and Williams gushed that "If the Alliance does no more than this then it has earned its right to the confidence and support of its members." [39] The idea of organized farmers forcing the hand of a massive international trust was almost intoxicating to the advocates of the Farmers' Alliance. The future seemed limitless.

One of the Alliance's goals was to secure the economic independence of the farmers in the face of predatory bankers and merchants. In order to secure fair and dependable services for its membership the Farmers' Alliance often entered into directly business itself. Alliance merchants and banks freed farmers from extortionate prices and high credit and offered a wide variety of services. Not all Alliance ventures succeeded. Like the Grange enterprises that preceded them many Alliance ventures suffered from

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[39]Rogers, "Farmers' Alliance," 11; *Dothan Light*, May 8, 1889; July 3, 1889; August 7, 1889; August 21, 1889.

poor management. In May 1889, *The Dothan Light* printed a notice of dissolution for the mercantile business run by the Farmers' Alliance of Headland.[40]

Of all the various Alliance enterprises, warehouses were the most widely patronized. The organization's first warehouses in Alabama began operation in Opelika and Ozark in 1888. By providing a myriad of services at low costs the warehouses prospered. They sold fertilizer and supplies. They also processed, stored, and insured cotton for farmers at well below the market cost. Economic cooperation seemed to ensure the success of farmers even in the face of the rapacious commercial elements that were arrayed against them. In a moment of pro-Alliance posturing *The Light* predicted "unity of purpose and action will bring farmers back to their true position." In the Wiregrass as in other Alliance strongholds the farmers simply sought to be masters of their own collective fate. Dothan's Alliance warehouse was built late in the summer of 1889, just in time for the cotton season and the arrival of the Alabama Midland Railroad.[41]

In Dothan the influence of the Alliance was easily noticeable. *The Light* constantly ran notices for meetings of the Dale, Geneva and Henry County Alliances. Agricultural lectures were held at the town's school and were well attended. Most noteworthy, however, was the deference shown to the farmers and the Alliance in the advertisements for Dothan's businesses. Words like honest, energetic and thrifty were frequently used to describe the farmers. Many merchants went out of their way to make it clear in their advertisements that they supported the Alliance. Fertilizer dealer Arthur

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[40] *The Dothan Light*, May 8, 1889.

[41] *The Dothan Light*, July 3, 1889; Rogers, "The Farmers' Alliance", 11, 12; John Clark, *Populism in Alabama* (Auburn: Auburn Printing Company, 1927), 72-74.

Redding assured his customers that "the trade of the Grange and Alliance is solicited." Redding's competition at W.S. Moody began their add with an eye-catching "GUANO! GUANO! GUANO! CHEAP!" but finished with the reassurance that "sales to clubs and organized farmers are a specialty." In an effort to solicit more business the owner of a Dothan saloon even named his bar the "Alliance and Grange Saloon."[42] The businessmen of Dothan seemed to understand that their continued success depended on the patronage of the farmers and that the farmers were organized.

Through the 1889 cotton harvest, Dothan's boom continued. In mid August after receiving the first bale, cotton rolled into the town in ever increasing quantities. It came slowly at first, a bale a day. The bales were bought by merchants or warehouses and sent on the Alabama Midland Railroad to the port of Savannah for shipment abroad. Within a week of the first bale, the flow increased to thirty or forty bales a day. By September the cotton was coming into Dothan at a rate of seventy-five bales a day. In the midst of the cotton season hustle, Dothan's first bank was established and began operating temporarily out of one of the town's cotton warehouses. On a single day in late September, Dothan merchants bought 175 bales of cotton from local farmers. As a result of these purchases almost $9,000 worth of goods were sold. Noting Dothan's success, T. E. Williams confidently pronounced "Dothan is now a solid cotton market."[43]

The prosperity and hum of business belied the developing frustration that was growing between the Farmers' Alliance and the town of Dothan. By the first week in

[42] *Dothan Light,* December 5, 1889.

[43] *Dothan Light*., August 21, 1889; *Dothan Light,* August 28, 1889; *Dothan Light*, September 4, 1889; *Dothan Light*, September 11, 1889; *Dothan Light*, September 25, 1889.

October the price of middling cotton had declined to 9.25 cents a pound from the original high of 12.5 cents.[44] Two weeks later the optimism of Dothan's railroad boom was crushed when a flurry of bullets left two men dead and five severely wounded. The shooting lasted only a few seconds, but it underscored the problems that existed between the merchants of Dothan and the farmers of the surrounding area. The two primary antagonists were the town's Marshal, Tobe Domingus, and the manager of Dothan's Farmers' Alliance Warehouse, George Stringer.

The origins of the conflict lie in the attempt by the Farmers' Alliance to build a warehouse within the city limits of Dothan. The Alliance planned to charge only 35 cents per bale compared to the 50 cents per bale of the town's other warehouses. The lower rates proposed by the Alliance promised to cut into the profits of the two warehouses already operating in Dothan. In an effort to keep the Alliance warehouse out of Dothan, the merchants who ran the town's government proposed a $50 per year tax on the Alliance business. Rather than pay a fifty dollar tax that they saw as unfair, the Alliance moved its warehouse just outside the city limits, but still within thirty yards of the Alabama Midland depot. Stymied in its attempt to tax the warehouse, the city government passed an annual twenty-five dollar per horse license fee for all public drays. In the same session, the city increased the salary of Marshal Domingus who was reputed to be rather a tough young man. He was originally hired to clean up the town as it made its transition from frontier crossroads to commercial center and he could now be counted on to enforce all city regulations.[45]

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[44] *Dothan Light,* October 2, 1889.

[45] *Dothan Light,* September 25, 1889; *Columbia Enterprise* October 17, 1889; Stepp, 23.

Unwilling to break the law, the Alliance dray driver quit when the warehouse's proprietors refused to pay the license fee for its two horse dray, fifty dollars. This forced warehouse manager George Stringer to run the dray himself. Unwilling to pay the fee, but still operating within city limits, Stringer was arrested and fined three times. On Saturday, October 12, Domingus again approached Stringer near the depot and informed him that he would be arrested. The Marshall helped Stringer unload the cotton and then tried to take him to the town's jail. The Alliance man resisted and Domingus used a club to subdue him. Stringer claimed that excessive force had been used. He was brought in and convicted by the Mayor. As in every previous instance, Stringer appealed his conviction to the Henry County circuit court. He then took out a warrant on Domingus for assault. At Domingus' trial the following Monday, about 300 angry Alliance men crowded into town in support of Stringer. The only venue large enough to hold the trial was the loft of one of the cotton warehouses. The tension in the crowded warehouse was palpable as farmers and town's people crowded in to watch the proceedings. Fearing violence, the trial was postponed to a later date and the crowd emptied into the streets. Words and then blows were exchanged between George Stringer's brother and Marshall Domingus. George came to his brother's defense with a pistol and shots were fired. When the smoke cleared, Alliance men George Stringer and Jeff Walker were dead. Domingus had been shot through the head and the side and was considered mortally wounded. Deputy Marshall Parker Powell was also seriously wounded along with two members of Stringer's family and an onlooker.[46]

[46] *The Atlanta Constitution*, October 15, 1889; *The Columbus Enquirer*, October 19, 1889;*The Eufaula Times*, October 16, 17, 20, 1889; *The Montgomery Advertiser*, October 16, 1889; *The Columbia Enterprise*, October 17, 1889; *The Dothan Light*, October 16, 1889.

When the farmers left town that evening, it was feared that they would return and burn the town to the ground. A large armed posse guarded the town that night, but nothing happened. As word of the violence spread, reporters from the region's major papers rushed to the town to get the details of the Dothan riot, as the incident came to be called. The *Atlanta Constitution* even chartered a private train and rushed a reporter to the scene. The Atlanta reporter spoke with the local Alliance's vice-president, who claimed that the town had mistreated the Alliance. He further accused the town's merchants of refusing to pay market value for Alliance cotton. Finally he warned that the trouble was far from over. The immediate violence was over, but the incident foreshadowed the serious political conflicts to come throughout the 1890s as Dothan expanded its hinterland to include the entire Wiregrass region and the Alliance expanded its sphere of influence from economics to politics.[47]

Farmers' Alliance businesses across the country struggled in the face of open hostility from the established interests. Few of the Alliance operations founded in the 1880s lasted more than five years. Seemingly a sound idea, the ventures suffered from attacks from the outside and weakness and poor management within. With the failure of cooperative economics, the farmers turned to politics. Throughout the South the same farmers who had supported Alliance cooperatives now campaigned openly for Populist candidates. The Alabama Wiregrass with its large Alliance organizations and growing

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[47] After being shot the Marshall ironically staggered into the Alliance and Grange Saloon and collapsed. Domingus survived his ordeal and was put on trial for manslaughter. *The Atlanta Constitution,* October 15, 1889.

urban commercial class became a battleground for the agrarian political movement of the 1890s. [48]

On August 17, 1892 representatives from the various Farmers' Alliance chapters from throughout Alabama's Third Congressional District met in Ozark to organize the People's Party in that neighborhood. [49] In November a man described as a "third Party orator" spoke at a camp meeting in Dale County near Pinckard. The speaker, a Populist supporter, enthusiastically criticized the Alabama's Democratic government for "robbing" the people through unfair taxation.[50]

In 1892 Alabama Agricultural Commissioner Reuben Kolb ran for Governor against the Democratic incumbent Thomas Jones. Kolb, a Populist, campaigned hard among the farmers on the margins of Alabama society. His opponents criticized him as a radical and even a traitor. In a typically corrupt election Jones beat Kolb by overwhelmingly carrying the Black Belt and the urban counties like Montgomery, Mobile and Jefferson. Kolb won the rural counties where his agrarian message resonated with the hard pressed farmers. The Wiregrass was firmly in the Kolb column and some of the most outspoken Populists newspapers were based in Wiregrass towns.

Ozark became the center of the political battle for the Wiregrass. The town had two opposing newspapers, the Populist *Banner* and the Democratic *Southern Star*. Typical of political press, the papers were mouth pieces for their respective movements.

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[48] Robert McMath suggests that Populism was most successful in those regions that were only recently settled and the Wiregrass certainly falls into this range. Robert McMath, *American Populism: A Social History, 1877-1898* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992).

[49] *Wiregrass Siftings,* August 25, 1889.

[50] *Wiregrass Siftings*, November 3, 1892.

The *Banner* struggled to sell advertisements to the merchants of Ozark, but was widely read by its agrarian constituency. Typical of cash-strapped Populists, farmer and blacksmith, Newton Byrd of Ozark paid for his subscription to the *Banner* with a set of wagon wheels. Like many of the Wiregrass farmers Byrd was a Civil War veteran, but hard times had probably led to disillusion with the Democratic Party. [51]

The aggressive campaign of the People's Party and the equally aggressive reaction from the Democrats only deepened the rural-urban tensions that had been demonstrated in the Dothan shoot-out of 1889. In November of 1892 Martin Keahy of the Pleasant Ridge Alliance wrote a letter complaining of the poor treatment of farmers by certain citizens of Ozark. The Pleasant Ridge Alliance centered on a rural farm community in northern Dale County where Keahy was the Post Master. In his letter he described how a number of Ozark residents had "hurled insults at the country people or those known as Peoples Party men." He goes on to suggest that a hanging sentence given by Judge Morris of Ozark was intended to be "a thrust at the laboring class." The Alliance men were especially insulted as they claimed that the Judge had been elected on the strength of the rural vote. The frustration of the farmers is evident throughout the letter. The members of the Pleasant Ridge Alliance quite obviously felt as if they were looked down upon by the people of Ozark, which was ironically only a few years removed from being a clearing in the pine forest. To make clear the irony of their urban snobbery Keahy reminded his adversaries in Ozark that "they or their fathers were rocked in a pine box, in a pine log cabin, by a pine knot fire, on a rough hillside in the country."

[51] *The Banner*, January 1, 1893

He concludes with a warning to the "mercantile men" that if they participate in the political insults the farmers will be forced to take their business elsewhere. [52]

Sadly, the political activism of the 1890s led to no tangible gains for the Wiregrass farmers. In 1894 they again supported Kolb for governor. In an effort to neutralize the strong Populist base of the Wiregrass the Democrats ran a Civil War veteran from the region. William Oates of Henry County was a one-armed Confederate hero and a staunch Democrat. As it had been in 1892 the campaign was heated and vocal. Again the Democrats won the Governor's office on the strength of the Black Belt vote. All the Wiregrass counties, except Oates' native Henry, voted for the Populist.

Wiregrass farmers did not completely abandon their struggle after the defeats of the early 1890s. In September of 1896 the annual convention of the Alabama State Alliance was held in Ozark. The President of the state alliance was J. O. Pinckard, a farmer from of Dale County and founder of the town of Pinckard on the Alabama Midland. He gave an address that, typical of the time, lambasted the monopolies and called on producers to work together in cooperative economic ventures.

Pinckard was not alone in calling for a change. Farmers were implored by all manner of editors, pundits and experts to grow more food and return to the self-sufficiency of the frontier days. As early as 1881 *The Henry County Register* described the situation in an editorial titled "Corn vs. Cotton".

> We see new houses, new fences and fresh land cleared, and the country by all appearances seems prosperous. But go to the probate courts and look at the

[52] Martin Keahy, Secretary of the Pleasant Ridge Alliance, November 21, 1892. There are two slightly different drafts of this letter in a small collection of Martin Keahy's papers at the Dale County Library in Ozark. There was no indication of the intended recipient of the letter or whether it was ever actually sent.

> hundreds and even thousands of mortgages and crop liens that cover the prosperous looking farms, the mules, the cows, the hogs, the sheep and the entire crops, sometimes for two years ahead, and they tell you a tale of woe. Two thirds, if not three fourths of our farmers are in debt, largely in debt, and a large portion of them owe as much, and some more, than they are worth. How is this? What causes it? COTTON-COTTON-TOO MUCH COTTON…

The author finished his piece with a call for more food to be grown and less cotton. "Plant peas, corn, ground-peas, chufas, and all other products that will feed man and beast and drive the grim spectre of starvation out of this country."[53] This article was published four years before the founding of Dothan. The situations described by the anxious editor would become magnified many times over before things would improve. Sadly, year after year the cotton cultivation expanded, debts grew and the number of tenant farmers in the Wiregrass increased.

The expansion of commercial cotton cultivation eroded the independence of small farmers throughout the South. The same factors at work in the Wiregrass were at work in the piedmont and Appalachian hill country. Poor farmers borrowed from merchants to put in crops, taking out mortgages on farms and mules or putting liens on their crops. Farmers depended on these merchants for seed, feed, fertilizer, and even food, as more acres were committed to cotton. Interest rates were high and cotton prices rarely seemed high enough to pay off the season's debts. As debts mounted, a growing number of famers lived in constant danger of losing their land. Any number of possible factors,

[53] *Henry County Register*, April 15, 1881.

crop failures, low cotton prices, or personal tragedy, could force families over the edge into tenancy.[54]

In the Wiregrass, renowned for its independent farmers, tenancy rates steadily crept upwards through the end of the century. In 1880 almost seventy-three percent of the farms in the Wiregrass were worked by their owners. However, by 1900 only approximately fifty-nine percent of the farms were worked by owners or part owners. The remainder of the farms were worked by a growing population of cash or share tenants. Again Coffee County provides a notable example of the processes at work on Wiregrass farms. One of the fastest growing farm counties in the state, Coffee saw a steady increase in the total farm acreage and the number of individual farms. From 1900 to 1910 Coffee added 1076 new farms comprising 5147 additional acres. In that same period Coffee County recorded the largest increase in cotton acreage of any county in Alabama. The cost of this growth was the continued increase of tenancy and debt among farmers. There were only 129 more owner operated farms in 1910 than 1900. Almost all of the new farms were worked by tenants. Whereas seventy-three percent of Coffee County farmers owned their farms in 1880, by 1910 that number had fallen to slightly less than forty-three percent. The independent yeoman of the Wiregrass frontier was in danger of becoming only a memory and despite all of the calls for change, the cotton culture, and

[54] The descent of poor southern farmers into the cycle of debt and tenancy is well documented. Wayne Flynt's book *Poor but Proud* examines the lives of poor white tenant farmers in Alabama and includes a detailed examination of tenant farmers in two Wiregrass counties, Geneva and Covington. Steven Hahn's *Roots of Southern Populism* examines this process among the poor white farmers of the Georgia piedmont.

its associated culture of debt, continued to expand. It would take more than impassioned editorials to break the growing hold of cotton culture in the Wiregrass. [55]

[55] United States Census Office, *Thirteenth Census of the United States taken in 1910, Vol. XI: Agriculture 1909 and 1910, Reports by States* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1913), 28.

CHAPTER 4

FOREST INDUSTRY COMES OF AGE IN THE WIREGRASS

The same forces that enabled the expansion of commercial cotton culture in the Wiregrass brought serious changes in the region's lumber industry. River-based logging in the Wiregrass had begun to reach its natural limits in the 1880s, but when rails replaced rivers as the main arteries of transportation a burgeoning new lumber industry grew up along the tracks. Consequently, just as commercial cotton farming replaced subsistence farming and free-range herding, large-scale industrial logging and milling operations replaced the part-time logging and small-scale sawmilling businesses.

The new lumber businesses involved substantial investment in transportation infrastructure. Rails, engines and rolling stock were expensive. To make these new ventures profitable loggers would have to cut year-round and on a larger scale. The forests retreated more rapidly than ever as crews of fulltime professional loggers flooded the woods. Vast tracts of public land were acquired to provide a steady supply of logs. Big new sawmills would be built to process the logs constantly coming in along the rails. The sawmills were modern and the new railroad-based logging operations were efficient. The early loggers with their oxen and their rafts seemed almost quaint when compared to the industrial processes that replaced them. The end result, however, of this new phase of lumbering was the rapid depletion of the very resource upon which the lumber industry

depended. This style of lumber manufacturing was doomed to be a temporary phase in the history of the Wiregrass.

The changes occurring in logging and lumber production business in the Alabama Wiregrass were also occurring across the country. In particular, transportation efficiency dramatically improved nationally. There was also a movement by industry to take control of its supply of raw materials. Whereas early mills bought logs from independent loggers the newer operations consistently bought vast stretches of forest land and hired their own loggers. The big new sawmills also produced more finished products for export directly to consumers overseas or in the urban North. Previously the overwhelming majority of wood cut in the Wiregrass had been roughly squared and floated down the rivers to Florida. Most value-added processing occurred overseas or in northern mills. A small amount of lumber was cut into boards and planed, but it was largely for local use. The new mills, however, produced planed lumber products and even specialized niche products like flooring. In the 1890s the new business culture that was sweeping America swept through the Wiregrass forests.[1]

In 1869 the state of Alabama published a promotional brochure titled *Alabama: A few remarks upon her resources and the advantages she possesses as inducements to immigration*. The goal of this publication was to attract immigration to and investment in Alabama. Of all the state's resources its most valuable, according to this pamphlet, were the vast forest of "long-leafed yellow pine." The yellow pine, asserted the brochure in typical promotional hyperbole, attains "gigantic size" and could be used for the

[1] For a better understanding of the changing business culture of the late nineteenth century see Alfred D. Chandler, *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1977).

production of tar, pitch and turpentine and "excellent and durable lumber". The postwar leaders of Alabama, hoping to rebuild their state's broken economy, were banking on outside investment in resources, in particular timber. The section on this great opportunity concludes that the forest industries of Alabama have not been developed "to a tithe of its capacity and the field is inviting." In one last flourish of boosterism the author predicts that even though this valuable forest resource has been under developed "the time is now at hand when it will receive the attention its value demands." If he only knew how right he was. [2]

In the 1880s lumber manufacturers began to buy large blocks of timberland throughout South Alabama. In the following decade there was a steady increase in the exploitation of the region's pine forests for lumber and turpentine. Loggers competed with naval stores manufacturers for the valuable pines. Railroads were built, allowing the more efficient movement of logs and lumber. More and more workers were employed by the ever larger industrial operations, logging, sawing lumber, working pines for their valuable sap, stilling turpentine, as well as building and maintaining the railroads that had become the lifelines of the forest boom. The economy, the workforce, and the Wiregrass landscape itself were all inexorably altered by the forces of modern industry.

As it had elsewhere, the construction of large-scale industrial sawmills and the use of railroads changed the lumber business in Alabama and the Wiregrass in particular. It was a process that had unfolded in timberlands across the continent as the surge of urban and industrial growth drove an increasing national demand for lumber. Antebellum

[2] Alabama Commissioner of Industrial Resources, *Alabama: A few remarks upon her resources and the advantages she possesses as inducements to immigration* (Jno. G. Stokes and Co.: Montgomery, Alabama, 1869).

commercial loggers had already cut through much of the forests in New England and the Mid-Atlantic region. At the time it was assumed that the fast growing yellow pines of the South would be structurally weaker and therefore less useful as lumber than the slow growing white pines of more northerly regions. In the years immediately following the Civil War the white pine forests of the Great Lakes region disappeared before the assault of large-scale commercial logging. In the 1870s as lumber prices increased, loggers in the Lake states shifted from traditional water transportation to railroads. Hundreds of miles of tracks were laid across Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. The result was disastrous for the forests of the region. The forests of the Lake states were laid to waste by massive rail-based logging operations. Furthermore, a series of devastating fires raged through the scrap and waste left in the cutover and spread into the remaining stands of marketable timber. Great fires swept through the woods of Minnesota in 1870, Wisconsin in 1871, and Michigan in 1881. The Hinckley fire burned 350,000 acres of Minnesota white pine forest in 1894. [3]

The heyday of Great Lakes lumbering was rapidly passing. However, even as white pine was still being cut and great forest fires still smoldered the northern timber capitalists began to look elsewhere for standing timber. Scouts called "cruisers" were sent south by the major northern timber companies. They returned to Chicago and other timber centers with the promise of a potential bonanza of tall straight yellow pine timber on cheap southern public domain. [4]

[3] Williams, 239; Walker, 89; Larson, 344; Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis*, 197.

[4] ibid.

Anxious to attract capital to the region, promoters in Alabama, and other parts of the South, actively recruited the northern investors. They advertised the high quality and low cost of the region's vast timber resources. *The Alabama Manual and Statistical Register for 1869* had boasted that Alabama possessed "an inexhaustible supply of lumber, enough to fill all demands for a century to come". They understood the processes at work in the other timber regions of the country.

> It is well known that the best lumbering regions of the North are fast being deprived of their forests. The lumber supply from Maine is in a rapid process of exhaustion. New York has to get much of her lumber from remote regions of Canada. Michigan, Upper Wisconsin, and Minnesota can not long sustain the drain upon them for the enormous demands for lumber from the Great West. The rapidity with which the lumber supplies of the North are being exhausted is indicated by the high price of lumber in the Northern markets, increasing, moreover, from year to year. Chicago sold, in 1867, about 750,000, feet of lumber. In one day last year 238 vessels arrived at Chicago from the lake ports, loaded with lumber. Not only whole regions, but even large towns and cities in the Northern States and Canada owe their importance to the lumber interests.

The author went on to predict, correctly, that the "enormous tracts of 'Piney Woods,' which can now be bought for a trifle, will soon be sought for a profitable investment." [5]

As predicted, the lumber industry took Alabama by storm. In 1869, the year of the manual's publication, the state had produced 86 million board feet [6] of yellow pine

[5] Joseph Hodgson, ed. *The Alabama Manual and Statistical Register for 1869* (Montgomery: Mail Building, 1869), 23.

lumber. Twenty years later, sawmills within the state produced 559 million board feet of yellow pine lumber. By 1904 that figure rose to over a billion.[7] Northern capital flooded the region and new sawmills were built throughout the pine belt of southern Alabama. Whereas Alabama had 284 sawmills in 1870, by 1900 there were 1,111 such establishments. Investment in Alabama's lumber industry increased from $744,005 in 1870 to $13,020,183 by 1900.[8]

The biggest barrier to the development of industrial lumber in the Wiregrass was the Southern Homestead Act. Passed in 1866 as a part of Reconstruction, the Southern Homestead Act was intended to help settle freedmen and other landless southerners on farms and make them independent of the planter class. The act allowed prospective settlers to claim eighty acre homesteads from Federal land in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Louisiana, or Mississippi. It opened approximately 47,000,000 acres of Federal land, slightly less than a third of the area of the five states, to homesteading. The same land was also made off limits to cash purchase with the idea of prohibiting speculation and land monopoly.

As intended, the Southern Homestead Act created homesteading opportunities for the region's marginalized classes. In ten years some 40,000 applications were made for homesteads in the five states under the act. In Alabama, much of public land was in the mountainous north of the state or the sandy pine belt along the Florida border. While

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[6] A "Board Foot" measure is equal to 1 foot x 1 foot x 1inch.

[7] Henry Steer, *Lumber Production in the United States, 1799-1946* (Washington D.C.: U.S Government Printing Office, 1948), 25, 27, 31.

[8] United States Census Office, *12th Census of the United States, Volume IX: Manufactures, Part 3: Special Reports on Selected Industries* (Washington Government Printing Office, 1903), 807.

agricultural settlement in these marginal parts of Alabama boomed, much of the land under the Act possessed little value for farming. It did, however, possess valuable timber and minerals. The most noteworthy effect of the Southern Homestead Act was to place almost all of Alabama's valuable forest resources and coal deposits beyond the legal reach of industry for ten years. As most of the Wiregrass was public domain, the Act effectively squelched the potential development of industrial lumber operations in the region. [9]

Many South Alabama loggers were undeterred by the Southern Homestead Act. The profitability of the lumber business made illegal land acquisition common. Loggers either filed false entries for homesteads and cut the timber or simply illegally cut timber off of the public land. Some mill owners sent their employees to file claims for homesteads thus acquiring needed timber. In some cases every member of a family might apply for and receive eighty acre homesteads. In Covington County the Federal Marshal claimed that a homestead was even filed in the name of a logger's mule.[10] Understaffed and overwhelmed, the land offices rarely checked to see if homesteads were occupied and improved as demanded by the law. With large-scale legal purchases of federal land impossible the Wiregrass lumber industry was dependent on an illegal free-for-all for its timber. [11]

The business changed, however, in 1876 when large-scale cash purchases of federal land were made possible again by the repeal of the Southern Homestead Act.

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[9] Ibid.

[10] *Covington Times*, June 6, 1891.

[11] Massey, 29-30.

Congressmen from Michigan and other northern timber states had originally supported the act as a means of squelching potential southern competition. By 1876, however, resurgent southern politicians fought for a repeal of the act. Furthermore, many northern timber producers were looking to expand their operations into the relatively untapped forests of the South. Opponents of the Southern Homestead Act argued that it stifled southern industrial development by keeping the necessary resources out of the hands of those who would develop them. The act's supporters argued that it prevented speculation and land monopoly. [12]

As predicted the repeal of the Southern Homestead Act ushered in an explosive era of land buying. Hundreds of thousands of acres of timberland were bought from the Federal government at bargain prices. The largest amount of land was purchased in the less populated districts of the five public land states of the South; Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Florida. It was a typical gilded-age speculative binge.[13]

In Alabama much of what was bought was concentrated in the lower tier of counties along the Florida border. This part of the state was thinly populated and it was still possible to buy fairly large contiguous tracts of pine forest. A vast area of Covington and Geneva counties in particular was purchased. William Yawkey of Bay City, Michigan bought over 17,000 acres in those two counties. Justin and George Wentworth

[12] Gates, 312.

[13] Ibid., 319.

also of Bay City bought over 5,000 acres in Covington and Monroe Counties. Henry Davis of Philadelphia bought 39,996 acres of land in Covington and Geneva. [14]

Not all of the land was bought for speculative purposes. Much of the land purchased in the 1880s was put to use immediately supplying logs for newly built sawmills. The new industrial sawmills required a steady and predictable supply of logs. Unlike the past when logs were randomly bought from independent contractors, the new industrial lumbermen took control of their own supply issues. Elihu and William Jackson, brothers from Maryland, bought 43,419 acres in Covington County. The Jackson brothers bought an additional 12,640 acres in north Florida. These 1888 purchases would later become the core holding of the giant Jackson Lumber Company located at Lockhart, Alabama.

While a large part of the investment in Alabama timberland came from northern sources, a substantial amount of land was bought by southerners. William Gainer and a group of investors from Geneva bought 8,840 acres in Geneva County. Florida lumber manufacturers also invested heavily in Alabama forest land. James Creary of Santa Rosa County Florida bought 8,390 acres in Covington County. Lumberman Daniel Sullivan of Pensacola bought 146,942 acres in south Alabama adjacent to other substantial purchases in Florida.

The scramble to purchase timber occasionally led to confusion as to clear ownership of any given tract. Some timber buyers acquired land legally from the government, while others acquired land illegally by filing false homestead applications. Because many land acquisitions were strictly speculative, property frequently changed

[14] Federal Land Patent Search, Bureau of Land Management, Government Land Office Records, Official Federal Land Records Site, http://www.glorecords.blm.gov/.

hands. Furthermore, in the hostile business environment of the late nineteenth-century, lumber companies were often bought by their competition. Some lumbermen cut the timber and abandoned the land. As taxes went unpaid this land reverted back to government ownership and could be auctioned off. Considering all of these factors, the ownership of much of the timberland claimed by the mills was legally questionable. In 1913 the Florida and Alabama Land Company of Covington County Alabama sold its mill at Falco and its sizable timber holding to the MGowin-Foshee Lumber Company. After reviewing the legal status of the various tracts involved, the attorneys for McGowin-Foshee notified the company's executives that they had good titles for 11,800 acres of land, but that the titles for 1,285 acres were bad. The title to these questionable acres would have to be secured through a quiet title claim in court.[15]

Timber trespass, as the unlawful cutting of timber was called, was all too common in the chaotic business environment of South Alabama in the 1880s and 1890s. The Federal Government took action against such timber theft. From late 1889 through 1891 a Federal Marshal in South Alabama went on a crusade of sorts. He began to investigate fraudulently claimed homesteads, arrested the offenders, shut down mills, and confiscated thousands of feet of timber. In May of 1890 the US Grand Jury in Montgomery returned 170 indictments for timber depredation in South Alabama and North Florida. A deputy Marshall was sent to Ferry Pass in Florida where he seized the timber rafts of suspected thieves. In March of 1890 it was rumored that over a million

[15] "Quiet Title" is an action taken in court whereby the court decides whether to quiet all future claims against a questionably held title. T.M Stevens to W.A. Blount, January 30, 1913.

dollars worth of timber then on the river between Andalusia and Ferry Pass was slated for seizure. The authorities confiscated 600 sticks of timber in one raid at Ferry Pass.[16]

The Marshall was particularly aggressive about pursuing those who had illegally logged the Mobile and Girard Railroad land grant. Land had been granted to the railroad by the Federal Government in anticipation of its completion. The road was never built to Mobile, so much of the original grant reverted back to federal control, at which time they realized that much of the valuable timber was actively being cut off of the property. At one point in 1890 federal deputies seized eight different mills along the Conecuh River. [17] The Democratic leaning *Covington Times* showed its animosity towards the federal marshal's campaign, "a little brief authority has given the Republican Caesar the big head."[18]

Despite the best efforts of government officials, theft, on a grand scale, still occurred all too often. As late as 1914 the Alabama state land agent decried the practices of the previous decades, "of all the land held in trust by the state for the schools, less than 1,000 acres has its original growth of virgin timber." He notes that "there has never been any authority to sell the timber off the land." "The timber was cut by depredators and nothing was paid for it or the land was improperly and illegally claimed by someone who sold the timber and appropriated the proceeds."[19]

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[16] *Covington Times*, March 8, 1890; *Covington Times*, March 1, 1890.

[17] Ibid.

[18] *Covington Times*, September 6, 1890.

[19] Alabama State Land Commission, *Report of the State land Agent Covering the Period from April 20th 1911 to December 16th 1914* (Montgomery: Brown Printing Company), 14.

Lumber producers had to compete with another forest based industry in their mad scramble to acquire valuable stands of timber. Naval stores producers from the Carolinas and Georgia drawn by the same resources that attracted the lumber men also bought substantial amounts of Alabama property in the late 1870s and 1880s. The Naval Stores industry included the production of pitch, tar, and turpentine from sap bled out of the living pines. Of these three products, turpentine would eventually become the most economically important. In 1889, when the Alabama Midland Railroad laid tracks between Montgomery, Alabama and Bainbridge, Georgia it cut through virtually untouched virgin longleaf. Within the first month of operation on the railroad, two men from Georgia bought 11,000 acres of "nice timber" along the railroad near Ashford, Alabama near Dothan in what was then part of Henry County. The men, B. F. Sapp (an unusually appropriate name for a turpentine manufacturer) and D. H. Moody formed a firm called Moody and Sapp. They built a depot, a distillery, and houses for their employees on the land near the rails. *The Dothan Light* announced that the firm planned to "work the turpentine business on a large scale," and would employ "75 to 100 hands" once they began to fully work their forest holdings.[20] Between the 1880s and 1920s turpentine stills could be found throughout the woods of the region.

In the late1880s the naval stores industry began to make serious inroads into the open longleaf forests of the Wiregrass. The region was ideal for the industry, which constantly moved in search of new resources. Longleaf pines were the preferred species and the open nature of the area's forest facilitated the transport of heavy barrels of sap from tree to tree. The colonial naval stores industry had been located almost entirely in

[20] *The Dothan Light*, August 28, 1889.

North Carolina. As late as 1840 North Carolina still produced the overwhelming majority, 96 percent, of the nation's naval stores.[21] However, over time, as the easily accessible trees in that region became tapped out, the industry slowly moved south and east into the coastal pine forests of South Carolina, Georgia, Florida and eventually Alabama.

Naval stores farms generally included large stands of pines, usually longleaf or slash pine[22], copper stills and iron kettles for processing the sap into pitch, tar, or turpentine, and housing for the laborers. To collect the sap, a professional chipper used an axe to skillfully cut a deep box into the base of the tree. He then made "v" shaped cuts in the tree to promote the flow of the tree's resinous sap into the box at its base. After about three weeks the box had filled with sticky resin. At this point an individual called a dipper would come by with a type of sharp spoon and remove the resin from the box. The resin was then transported by wagon to a still where it was processed into turpentine or other industrial products. Over time the cuts healed and ceased to bleed, at that point the chipper returned and cut new scars above the previous ones. In this manner the chipper gradually slashed his way up the trunk of the tree. Once one side of the tree had been fully exploited and the chipper had scarred as high up the trunk of the tree as he could, a new face would be opened on the other side of the tree. A tree worked in this manner produced a reliable flow of sap for only three or four years.

The box method of harvesting the resin was generally inefficient, not to mention extremely destructive to the individual trees. As the distance between the box and the

[21] Williams, 158.

[22] The Slash pine is actually so named because of its early association with the Naval Stores industry. Harrar, 60.

freshest cuts increased, the quality of the sap collected in the box decreased. Dripping down the open face of the tree, the sap hardened and much of the valuable turpentine evaporated out of it. Boxing, especially on multiple faces, left the pines increasingly susceptible to insect infestation, wind damage, and fire. Unlike a healthy longleaf, a tree heavily scarred by turpentiners burned furiously once ignited. Such fires could destroy an entire turpentine forest. Furthermore, because of the intense deep scaring around the base, trees worked by the box method were regarded as inferior timber.[23]

In the first decade of the twentieth century a new, less destructive system was created to harvest the sap. It used galvanized gutters to channel sap from slashes on the trunk into ceramic or tin cups hanging from a nail below the gutters. The new system promised to increase production by twenty-three percent. Furthermore, the tree was spared from the devastating cut of the box. Trees worked with the cup and gutter system still only produced sap for three or four years, but in that time span the new system produced considerably greater quantity of visibly higher quality resin. An additional benefit of the new cup-and-gutter system was that it caused the tree substantially less damage. To the delight of the naval stores entrepreneurs, trees tapped using the new system could be sold as marketable timber once they had been tapped out.[24]

In Alabama, the naval stores industry was originally established around Mobile Bay in Baldwin and Mobile Counties during the colonial era. After the Civil War, post war promotional material touted the potential windfall from naval stores production in the

[23] Thomas C. Croker, "The Longleaf pine Story", *Journal of Forest History*, (January 1979), 37; *Geneva Alabama: A History* (The Geneva Women's Club: 1987), 107; Edward Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 125.

[24] Gerry Reed, "Saving the Naval Stores Industry: Charles Holes Herty's Cup-and-Gutter Experiment 1900-1905", *Journal of Forest History*,(October, 1982).

forests of Alabama. The *Alabama Manual and Statistical Register for 1869* described an "immense orchard… already planted to hand by nature."[25] According to the manual, the prospective turpentine entrepreneur simply needed to slash the trees and let nature do the rest. Most of the turpentiners to enter Alabama came from previously tapped-out pine forests to the East and South. As the pines of the coastal regions became less productive, the industry moved up the rivers and along railroads into the virgin forests of the interior. In Alabama the production of naval stores, mainly turpentine by the late nineteenth-century, skyrocketed almost overnight. In 1873 the state produced $750,000 worth of naval stores. By 1875 that figure had increased to $1,200,000.[26]

Naval stores became an established and important part of the forest economy in the Wiregrass region. In many ways its development paralleled the lumber industry. The earliest turpentine stills relied on river transport. However, once the railroads were built into the Wiregrass, stills were built along the rails for easy access to transportation. The fast growing town of Dothan, with both the Alabama Midlands and the Central of Georgia railroads, was well situated to benefit from the growth of the turpentine business. By the mid 1890s the same town that had once been derisively described as an "exiled pine forest" and "hid in a pine thicket" was purported to be the world's largest inland shipping point for turpentine.[27] Of course, Dothan was not the only Wiregrass community to feel the economic impact of the naval stores industry. Several turpentine farms

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[25] Joseph Hodgson, ed. *The Alabama Manual and Statistical Register for 1869* (Montgomery*:* Mail Building, 1869), 22.

[26] J. M. Stauffer and George Kyle, *A History of State Forestry in Alabama* (Montgomery: Alabama Dept. of Conservation, Division of Forestry, 1960), 22.

[27] *The Dothan Light*, 1889; Wendell H. and Pamela Ann Stepp, *Dothan: A Pictorial History* (Norfolk: The Donning Company, 1984), 45.

operated in and around Geneva. The town also had several distilleries that processed the pinesap into turpentine. The *Geneva Record* claimed that in 1888 $6000 worth of turpentine was shipped down river from Geneva.[28] Once the railroad reached Geneva turpentine was shipped out in tanker cars. The cars were brought directly to the stills along sidings. A number of companies, including Standard Oil, had turpentine operations in Geneva at the turn of the century. [29]

Turpentine stills were often the first industrial operations in the small towns of the Wiregrass. It was a pioneer industry, dependent on cheap land and virgin forests. In 1896 J. P. Rawls established Coffee County's first turpentine still a mile south of Enterprise. In time he would operate five additional stills throughout the county.[30] Between Dothan and Geneva the town of Slocumb, Alabama grew out of the woods near the turpentine stills and sawmill of Frank and Will Slocumb. These brothers came to the area in 1894 and began production of turpentine. Within a few years they had built a sawmill and were producing lumber. Almost every small town in the Wiregrass claimed a turpentine still among its first businesses. [31]

Turpentine manufacture was an important industry for many years, particularly the 1890s and early twentieth century. However, the industry's economic importance waned as the pine forests dwindled under the assault of commercial lumber production

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[28] *The Geneva Record*, August 28, 1889.

[29] *The Geneva Record*, September 20, 1900.

[30] Fred Watson, *Coffee Grounds: A History of Coffee County, Alabama, 1841-1970* (Anniston, Alabama: Higginbotham, Inc., 1970), 19.

[31] Ira Jo Harris Holmes, *My Hometown: A History of Slocomb, Alabama 1901-2001*, manuscript in the Genealogy Room of the Houston-Love Memorial Library, Dothan, Alabama.

and the expansion of agriculture. Competition with loggers and farmers ensured a steady decrease in the timber available for tapping. After a decade of growth, naval stores shipments on the Alabama Midland Railroad peaked in 1900 at 27,892 tons.[32] Historically, naval stores production was not a permanent industry. Many of the turpentiners in the Wiregrass had come from Georgia and when their Alabama lands were tapped-out they simply moved south into Florida or west to Mississippi. A 1899 letter to the *Henry County News* described a large new turpentine business in Vernon, Florida run by people who had moved from Headland, Alabama in Henry County. [33]

The total environmental effect of the naval stores industry is difficult to measure. The nature of the harvesting process left trees permanently damaged. In a 1916 promotional brochure the Jackson Lumber Company bragged that they left small trees standing and that there was no turpentine production from their pines.[34] This may imply a perceived environmental degradation in turpentine production or a belief that products that come from boxed trees are flawed or weak. Regardless, the turpentiners generally left the pines of the forest standing. The tapped out pines might yet survive the increased susceptibility to fire, wind, or pest damage. While tapped pines were considered poor lumber trees they were acceptable for the production of heavy timbers or pilings. Almost

[32] Naval stores tonnage grew rapidly, peaked, and fell off steadily after 1900, but cotton and lumber tonnage continued to grow over the long run. Alabama Public Service Commission, *20th Annual Report of the Railroad Commissioners of Alabama for the year ending June 30, 1900* (Montgomery: Roemer Printing, 1900.)129.

[33] *Henry County News*, August 31, 1899.

[34] The Jackson Lumber Company did have a Naval Stores operation and a photograph in another company publication clearly shows logging crews cutting trees that have obviously been boxed for turpentine. Jackson Lumber Company, *In the Heart of the Pine: a few Random Sketches about Lockhart, Alabama* (Lockhart, Alabama: Jackson Lumber Company, 1916).

inevitably, the lumbermen followed close on the heels of the naval stores industry. The same infrastructure and natural resource factors that appealed to the turpentine farmers appealed to the loggers. [35]

The rapid extension of railroads into the Wiregrass was an important catalyst enabling the expansion of both the naval stores and lumber industries in the Wiregrass. The construction of railroads in the Wiregrass completely changed the region's geography. The rails allowed industry to move away from the rivers and streams deep into the pines. Rails enabled the efficient, year-round delivery of logs to the mills. Ensured of a steady supply of logs, mills could now run year round. Rails also allowed mills to ship finished products directly to customers nation-wide or to ports for shipment overseas.

The railroads' growth happened almost overnight in the Wiregrass. In 1888 the Central of Georgia from Eufaula reached Ozark, in 1889 the Alabama Midlands cut the region diagonally. It ran from Montgomery, through Troy, Ozark, Dothan, and across the Chattahoochee River into Georgia. Within a few short years the Central of Georgia had laid tracks from Troy to Andalusia and from Columbia on the Chattahoochee through Dothan to Hartford in Geneva County and eventually to Lockhart in Covington County home of the Jackson Lumber Company. The Louisville and Nashville controlled the Alabama and Florida line that ran from through all of the major lumber towns in Covington County, Andalusia, River Falls, Sanford, and Poley, through Geneva and on to Graceville, Florida. The region had been an interior frontier completely isolated from major rail routes in 1887 and within a frenzied five years it was tied to every major rail

[35] Massey, 77.

network in three states. Dothan became the hub of a vast regional network with rail lines departing that city in five different directions. [36]

The railroads' arrival did not completely end the use of rivers for shipping timber. Mills on the rivers continued to cut logs as long as they were accessible and logs continued to float along the streams and ditches. In 1913 a timber rafter in Geneva County sued the Central of Georgia Railroad for obstructing the Choctawhatchee River with its bridge. The bridge's piers collected driftwood. The rafter claimed that the accumulated snags routinely prohibited him from passing and on one occasion caused him to lose part of his raft. [37] While they were it odds in this case, the rivers and rails coexisted as transportation systems, at least for a while.

Most importantly, railroads enabled economic production to grow beyond the geographic limits of the riverbanks. Like the rivers before, the rails became the lifelines for industry in the Wiregrass. Wherever they were built, rails opened virgin forests to exploitation for turpentine, lumber production, or farming. In describing the economic effect of the Alabama Midland Railroad on the corner of the state that it crossed the Alabama Railroad Commission report of 1895 noted that, "Large sawmills have been built and turpentine orchards opened up on this road."[38] In 1894 a twenty-seven mile long spur was built from the Midlands north of Dothan through Headland to Abbeville, in Henry County. In March of that year the editor of the *Henry County Midland*

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[36] Alabama Public Service Commission, *8th Annual report of the Railroad Commissioners of Alabama for the year ending June 30, 1888,* (Nashville: Marshall and Bruce Printers, 1888), 9.

[37] Mauldin v. Central of Georgia Railway Company, 181 Ala. 591 (Supreme Court of Alabama, February 13, 1913).

[38] Alabama Public Service Commission, *15th Annual Report of the Railroad Commission of Alabama for the year ending in June 30, 1895,* (Montgomery: Roemer Printing Company, 1896), 19.

enthusiastically announced the opening of a new sawmill in Headland. He boldly stated that, "the finest pine timber in Alabama is to be found adjacent to Headland and having good shipping facilities affords the outside world a chance to utilize it." [39]

In the last decade of the nineteenth and the first decade of the twentieth centuries the railroads of the Wiregrass carried an ever-increasing volume of forest products, both lumber and naval stores. The freight tonnage statistics for Alabama Midlands Railroad, in particular, show how important lumber was to Wiregrass economy. In 1892 a total of 25,744 tons of lumber was shipped on the Midlands. That year lumber accounted for a larger percent (almost fifteen percent) of the railroad's freight tonnage than any other commodity. For over a decade lumber remained the line's largest single freight commodity eventually falling behind fertilizer as the region shifted from forest industry to agriculture. [40]

Naval stores shipments on the Wiregrass railroads never approached the tonnage of lumber. They remained a noteworthy part of the total none the less. In 1892 naval stores products accounted for about five percent of total freight tonnage on the Midlands. Turpentine production in the Wiregrass gradually swung into full capacity in the mid1890s. The total tonnage of naval stores shipments on the Midlands increased from 7,603 in 1892 to the peak of 27,892 in 1900. However, naval stores products as the percentage of total freight tonnage hovered slightly above five percent through the 1890s

[39] *Henry County Midland*, March 30, 1894.

[40] Alabama Public Service Commission, *12th Annual Report of the Railroad Commission of Alabama for the year ending in June 30, 1892* (Montgomery: Smith, Allred, and Company, 1892).

and began to decline in the early twentieth century. Turpentine production increased at the same pace as other products of forest exploitation, especially lumber. [41]

New spur lines built across the region in the 1890s connected the major roads and enabled big new mills to be built deeper in the forests. Lumber shipments on the Alabama Midland peaked in 1900 at 156,231 tons which accounted for thirty-three percent of the freight total for the road that year. In the early twentieth century, as virgin timber along the road was tapped-out and cleared away, forest products shipments on the Midlands started to decline relative to agricultural commodities, in particular cotton and fertilizer.[42]

Production in the forest industries along the Alabama Midlands seem to have peaked at the turn of the century. However, newer railroads in the Wiregrass continued the exploitation of virgin forests. In the first decade of the twentieth century, the Alabama and Florida Railroad, a division of the extensive Louisville and Nashville Railroad network, became a major carrier of lumber and naval stores. In 1900 the road carried only 6,022 tons of lumber, but by 1904 that total had increased to 99,663 tons. Naval stores shipments were also increasing on the Alabama and Florida even as they declined on the Midlands. In 1904 the Alabama and Florida moved 17,181 tons of naval stores products. This is lower than the Midlands total of 27,892 in its peak year of 1900, but considerably higher than the Midland's haul of 10,341 for the same year. The statistics seem to indicate that as production slowed in the older turpentine orchards along the Midland, new centers of production were being established along the newer road to the west. [43]

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[41] *Annual Report of the Railroad Commission of Alabama*, 1890-1904.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid.

Rails gave sawmills and turpentine producers a cost effective means of shipping finished products to market. They also enabled mills to bring logs efficiently to the mill. In particular, sawmills located along the Alabama and Florida railroad made heavy use of the railroad for bringing logs to the mill. Shipments of whole logs along the hundred mile long road far outweighed shipments of finished lumber. In 1904 a whopping 202,765 tons of logs were shipped on the Alabama and Florida, accounting for over sixty percent of total freight tonnage. By comparison logs only accounted for one percent of freight tonnage along the Alabama Midlands for the same year. The Alabama and Florida was built with the intended purpose of opening the vast forests of Covington, Coffee, and Geneva Counties to lumber interests. [44]

As the major rail lines were built through the region, lumber producers also experimented with various private rail systems to efficiently bring heavy logs from the woods to the sawmills. When describing the timber boom of the late 1880s the *Geneva Record* predicted that the mills would "at the present rate of progress fill the country for miles around them with tram roads and canals." Some of the earliest railways in the Wiregrass were short tramways operated by sawmills. These simple railroads used wooden rails or poles to move cars pulled by animals or small locomotives. The wheels on the locomotives and flat cars were able to slide laterally on their spindles as much as four inches to account for inevitable irregularity in the pole tracks. Pole roads were cheap and easy to build, as they were made from readily available materials. They also required little upkeep. These roads did not generally run for more than two miles or so.

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[44] Ibid.

Pole roads were used in a number of Wiregrass logging operations.[45] In 1895 the F. M. Watson Lumber Company in Covington County built a pole road to supply its mill with timber. [46]

Napoleon Bonaparte Dixon used a steam locomotive on a pole road to haul logs to his sawmill on Blue Creek in Southwestern Covington County. Logs were brought to the pole road by ox carts. Two or three of the forty-foot logs were loaded onto a flat car. For each trip to the mill the locomotive pulled between four and six flat cars, half connected in front of the engine and half behind. The little locomotive was geared high in order to haul the heavy loads so it rarely topped fifteen miles per hour. Sand was poured on the poles ahead of the locomotive to help the steel wheels grip the slick pine poles. If the engine struggled going up a slope the cars on the back could be disconnected and retrieved later. Dixon used a steam locomotive to haul logs into the mill, but rafted the finished product, sawn timbers, down the Conecuh River to Pensacola. The Dixon logging operation provides a good example of how new technology was integrated into the existing Wiregrass lumber business.[47]

The pole roads and tramways were gradually replaced by steel rails as they became more readily available. Gauge varied from operation to operation. There were advantages to using both narrow gauge and standard gauge. A narrow gauge railway was cheaper. It used lighter rails and required less right-of-way. The narrow gauge rails could also make sharper curves. While they required more initial investment, the standard

[45] Bryant, 278; Appleyard, 82; Massey, 92; *Geneva Record*, October 9, 1889.

[46] *Covington Times*, March 1, 1895.

[47] *Dixon Legend*, 41.

gauge railroad could carry more tonnage. Using standard gauge also enabled companies to save money by using secondhand rails from the commercial railroads. [48]

Standard gauge rails also had the advantage of being able to use the same cars and locomotives as the trunk-line railroads. A few lumber companies bought new locomotives, some of which were specifically designed for the demands of logging railroads. However, because new locomotives were expensive many sawmills bought rolling stock, including locomotives, secondhand from commercial railroads. The flat-cars used to haul the logs were thirty feet long, but the logs were generally between forty and fifty feet long. To compensate for the overlap the flat-cars were coupled with long spacing rods called rooster poles. These improvised logging cars did not usually have any brakes so stopping a fully loaded log train could be a real challenge. [49]

The use of railroads changed the way lumber operations used workers. In some cases the railroad required as many workers as the logging operation itself. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century railroad building was a labor intensive operation. It entailed clearing the 120 foot wide right-of-way of timber and stumps, preparing a solid roadbed, bridging any creeks or washes, and laying tracks. New spurs were almost constantly laid into virgin timber as old ones were pulled-up from the cut-over. Logging railroads were constantly rebuilt or repaired to meet the heavy demands of the logging operations. Lumber companies using railroads often needed fulltime construction crews.

[48] Bryant, 285; Appleyard, 82.

[49] Ibid.

These backwoods engineers hastily built their railroads with minimum attention to embankments or grading.[50]

Logging railroads were the focus of constant maintenance and repair work. Accidents were inevitable considering the dangerous condition of the railway, the heavy load, the soft sandy ground, and the fact that only the locomotive had brakes. Derailments occurred frequently and crews became experts at impromptu track repair. Ropes, chains, jacks, and ox teams, the same equipment used to move heavy logs, were used to put the locomotives back on the rails. All of this added to the danger and toil associated with working the log trains.[51]

The hard work associated with logging railroads was infamous. This connection was even immortalized in the music of the well known country musician and song-writer Hank Williams who was raised in Georgiana, Alabama near Andalusia. His song *The Old Log Train* describes the harsh life on the logging railroad.

A sweatin' and swearin' all day long
Shoutin' git-up there oxen, keep movin' along,
Load 'er up boys 'cause it looks like rain,
I've got get rollin' this old log train.[52]

Common in the South Alabama woods through the first three decades of the twentieth century, logging trains became a part of the region's popular culture and folklore.

[50] Bryant, 293; Massey, 71.

[51] Appleyard, 82; Lawson, vi;

[52] Hank Williams, Don Cusic, ed., *Hank Williams: The Complete Lyrics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993).

Laying tracks into the forest provided companies with the opportunity to experiment with different types of rail-based logging equipment. Steam powered skidders and loaders were used by various logging operations in Alabama. The power skidder used in the southern forests was basically a steam-driven rotating drum with a one-thousand yard-long steel cable. The cable was pulled out to the logs by a mule or ox. Logs were attached to the cable and dragged back to the train along the ground. Using similar technology, the power loader was essentially a steam driven crane that could lift logs onto the flat cars. Some models of loader had legs that straddled the tracks enabling empty log cars to move beneath them facilitating the whole process.[53]

Steam skidders and loaders increased production. However, there were enough problems with the skidders that some companies stopped using them. Firstly, the power skidders were relatively destructive to landscape. Because logs were dragged unguided along the ground almost everything along the skid way was destroyed. In particular, underbrush and the small trees needed to supply future lumber were devastated. Power skidders also left deep gouges and scars in the ground that were susceptible to erosion. The power skidder could also be very dangerous to the loggers. Logs occasionally became hung on stumps or jammed in the ground, causing the cable to become dangerously taut. In these situations a damaged cable might break and snap back towards the skidder killing or severely injuring any workers or draft animals in its path.[54]

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[53] Bryant, 232

[54] Appleyard, 74; Bryant, 232; Massey, 69; Elwood R. Maunder, ed., *James Greely McGowin-South Alabama Lumberman: The Recollections of his Family* (Santa Cruz, California: Forest History Society, 1977), 35.

Operating private standard gauge logging railroads was an expensive business venture. Only lumber companies with extensive forest holdings and adequate capital could build railways. Approximately one million board feet of timber had to be cut per mile of rail line for the railroads to be cost effective. Railroad logging required large contiguous blocks of timber.[55] By the end of the 1880s this was only possible in certain parts of the Wiregrass. The biggest railroad logging operations were in Covington and Geneva Counties, which had been sparsely settled before the timber boom. There were only two rail-fed sawmills in Coffee County and a handful in Henry County south of Dothan[56]. By the time of the lumber boom in the late1880s Dale County and Henry County north of Dothan were heavily settled by homesteaders. The patchwork of farms and forest created by intensive homesteading did not appeal to railroad loggers. In fact, Dale County did not have a single private logging railroad.[57] It would take the arrival of gasoline powered trucks to open and efficiently cut the various pockets of timber left in Dale County. [58]

The largest private networks belonged to lumber giants like the Horseshoe Lumber Company at River Falls or the Jackson Lumber Company at Lockhart, both in Covington County. These companies were also the last major lumber mills to shut down. Horseshoe had about forty five miles of track when it closed down in 1929. The Jackson Lumber rail network had grown to over sixty miles of tracks and spurs by 1928. These

[55] Massey, 108.

[56] This portion of Henry County became Houston County in 1903. After this there were no logging railroads in remainder of Henry County.

[57] Lawson, 173.

[58] My great grandfather and grandfather were in this business.

numbers can be deceptive, though, as the biggest companies saved money by constantly pulling-up tracks from cut-over forest and relaying them into new sections. The Geneva Mill Company had about eighty miles of track at the time of its closing in 1926. Their tracks ran south into Florida and north along the Choctawhatchee into Houston County west of Dothan. Throughout the boom period approximately thirty different companies operated private standard gauge logging railroads in the Wiregrass; this is not even taking into account the countless others that operated pole roads or tramways. [59]

In addition to large tracts of timber, railroad-based logging operations required large numbers of workers. Railroads therefore also changed the nature of labor in the Wiregrass lumber business Whereas the region's first sawmills relied largely on part-time or seasonal workers for logging and transportation, industrialized turpentine and lumber operations needed secure fulltime workforces to meet their supply needs. At the highpoint of production in the early twentieth century, the Horseshoe Lumber Company of River Falls, Alabama required between seven and nine hundred workers to operate at full capacity.[60]

Finding and maintaining adequate numbers of workers became one of the biggest challenges for forest industry employers in the Wiregrass. There were plenty of trees, but the local population of small farmers was historically independent and generally unwilling to work fulltime for the sawmills or turpentine stills. They may have been willing to cut timber or float a raft of logs to the mill during agricultural down time, but

[59] Lawson, 165-168.

[60] Gus and Ruby Bryan, *Covington County History, 1821-1976* (The Opp Historical Society, 1976), 63.

they were generally hesitant to abandon their farms and become fulltime industrial workers. Because local farmers were generally limited to seasonal work, much of the nonagricultural workforce in the Wiregrass came from outside the region. Wiregrass forest industry employers, as well as railroads and other industrial employers, relied heavily on African-Americans and European immigrants to meet their needs.

While they were not directly involved in the forest industry, the commercial railroads provided the earliest example of the new labor practices. The work crews of the railroads were brought in from the outside and were either southern Blacks or immigrants. In 1887 the Central of Georgia line to Ozark in Dale County was built by a work crew composed of Italians. The Italian construction workers were as much of a curiosity for the citizens of Ozark as the railroad itself.[61] These crews were worked at a breakneck pace grading and laying track. Their treatment even drew comment and criticism from the local newspapers. In the summer of 1889, as the Alabama Midlands Railroad was approaching Dothan from the southeast, the citizens of that town got their first look at the railroad's methods of labor practices. While he was generally euphoric about the coming of the railroad, the editor of the *Dothan Light* expressed genuine shock and concern that the railroad grading crew, made up of African-Americans who he called "darkeys," was forced to work on Sundays.[62]

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[61] Val McGee, *Claybank Memories: A History of Dale County, Alabama* (Ozark, Alabama: Dale County Historical Society, 1889), 81. The use of low-wage Italian workers was common in the padrone system across North America in the late nineteenth century. Workers were recruited for projects by the "padrone" who acted as a middle-man. Padrones notoriously took advantage of immigrant workers. Gunther Peck looks at Italian labor on railroads in the western reaches of Canada in his book, *Reinventing Free Labor: Padrones and Immigrant Workers in the North American West, 1880-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[62] *Dothan Light,* August 21, 1889.

The naval stores business, like railroad building involved hard time-consuming work that few local farmers were willing to undertake. However, the industry faced additional unique labor challenges. Historically, as forests were tapped-out, naval stores producers moved into virgin forests, areas usually devoid of available industrial labor. Naval stores producers generally avoided labor difficulties by bringing their experienced workers with them. In the older turpentine producing regions of the Atlantic coastal plain the work force had been largely African-American.[63] In the 1870s the majority of turpentine hands at work in the then virgin pine forest of the Georgia Wiregrass region were African-Americans from North Carolina or Virginia.[64] In the early twentieth century the migratory trend was repeating itself in the Alabama Wiregrass.

Because of this industrial migration, the work force of turpentine farms in the Alabama Wiregrass was composed almost entirely of African-Americans born in the Carolinas, Florida or Georgia, areas of historic naval stores production. Alabama had not produced naval stores long enough to have a large indigenous workforce. Workers who had learned their trade in the Atlantic coastal pine belt were now hard at work in the virgin forests of South Alabama. A turpentine crew working Coffee County in 1910 was composed of twenty-nine African American "hands" and one white "stiller". Of the African-Americans, only three were born in Alabama. Of the remainder, ten were born in Georgia, eight in North Carolina, six in South Carolina, and one each in Virginia and

[63] Robert Outland, *Tapping the Pines: The Naval Stores Industry in the American South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), 164.

[64] Wetherington, *The New South Comes to Wiregrass Georgia*, 117.

Florida. The white stiller was born in South Carolina. [65] The same year a turpentine camp in Covington County was worked by twenty-six African American men between the ages of seventeen and fifty-two. Of these men only eight were born in Alabama. The rest were born in Georgia, Florida, or the Carolinas. Like the Coffee County turpentine camp, there was a white foreman. In this case he was a sixty-two year old man, born like many of his workers in North Carolina. Another turpentine camp in the Opp area of Covington County had no Alabama-born workers. Consistent with other such camps, these workers were born in Georgia, Florida, the Carolinas, and Virginia. [66] Migrant Black industrial workers stood out in Wiregrass census districts otherwise inhabited by white, Alabama-born farm families. [67]

Naval stores employers depended on their workers for their valuable skill and experience. Turpentine production involved a series of specific skill sets unique to the industry. Black turpentine workers performed a variety of tasks such as cutting boxes in the pines, chipping the face of the trees, and dipping the pooled pine-sap from the boxes. They also provided valuable experience in the refining process. A good example can be found in a 1910 Covington, County turpentine camp. The still was owned by an unmarried twenty-three year old white man from South Carolina. However, the

[65] U.S. Manuscript Census, Population, 1910, Coffee County, Alabama.

[66] U.S. Manuscript Census, Population, 1910, Covington County, Alabama. Like the upland regions of the South, the Wiregrass had not been part of the antebellum cotton belt and thus had been home to only a few slaves.

[67] Migrant labor was a integral part of America's rural economy in this period. For a closer examination of migrant agricultural labor in the East see, Cindy Hahamovitch, *The Fruits of Their Labor: Atlantic Coast Farmworkers and the Making of Migrant Poverty, 1870-1945* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997). For an examination of migrant workers in the Midwest see Frank Tobias Higbie, *Indispensable Outcasts: Hobo Workers and Community in the American Midwest, 1880-1930* (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 2003).

"operator" of the still was a thirty-five year old Florida-born African-American man named Aaron Spears. With Spears in the camp were his wife and their seven young children. The family had evidently moved throughout the pine belt as the children had been born in Mississippi and Alabama. [68]

Like Spears, many turpentine workers seem to have brought their families with them. At a turpentine camp in Covington County fifteen workers lived with their wives. There were also thirty-four children in the turpentine camp many of whom were born in Alabama, perhaps providing a generation of native Alabama-born turpentine workers or maybe like their fathers moving on to new forests in other states. It is noteworthy that none of the women in this camp, or any other turpentine camps in the 1910 census of Covington County, were listed as having an occupation. African-American women living in the towns such as Dothan at the same time were almost inevitably engaged in some sort of work outside the home, usually domestic. This lack of outside employment for women in the turpentine camps is probably a reflection of the extremely isolated nature of the camps.[69]

There were occasionally legal difficulties to moving workers from state to state. In 1901 a Geneva, Alabama turpentine producer was arrested and extradited to Georgia for violating that state's anti-emigration labor laws. Evidently the man, R.L. Thues, had hired a number of African-American turpentine workers in the vicinity of Bainbridge, Georgia and brought them to work his turpentine orchard in Geneva County, Alabama.

[68] Ibid.

[69] Ibid.

He ran afoul of the Georgia authorities because it was illegal to recruit workers in Georgia, facing its own labor shortage, and take them to work in another state. [70]

The movement of black industrial workers into the region in the last decade of the nineteenth and first decade of the twentieth century caused a noticeable increase in the overall percentage of African-Americans in the Wiregrass. As there had been little plantation agricultural in the region before the Civil War, there had been relatively few slaves in the Wiregrass. In the years immediately after the Civil War, the African-American population remained relatively low, especially when compared to the Black Belt counties to the north. However, the arrival of the railroads, industrial lumber mills, and particularly the turpentine business, changed the region's racial composition. In Covington County, home to some of the biggest lumber operations in the United States, the percentage of African Americans rose from 11.9 percent in 1880 to 24.91 percent in 1910. [71]

The influx of large numbers of Black laborers into the Alabama Wiregrass created some social tension. Incidents of racial violence and even Klan activity can be found sprinkled in the newspapers of the region in the late 19th century. In May of 1889, T. E. Williams the prominent editor of the *Dothan Light*, announced the impending celebration of emancipation by the "colored people" of Dothan. He also asked local white people to treat them with respect. He noted that unfortunately there were "white people who gather

[70] *Geneva Journal*, April 4, 1901; Theus vs. The State of Georgia, 114 Ga. 53 (The Supreme Court of Georgia, October 21, 1901).

[71] Historical Census Browser, The University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center. http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/index.html.

at such places just to pick on them, which is wrong." [72] In 1893 the editor of the *Wiregrass Sifting* newspaper of Dothan criticized local whites for socially mixing with the Black turpentine workers at a Saturday night celebration following pay-day on the W. W. Miliken & Co. turpentine farm in rural Henry County.[73]

While they were regarded with apprehension by some elements of the general populace, African-American workers were seen as an absolute necessity by both the industrial employers and the vocal advocates of increased cotton cultivation. In 1889 the *Geneva Record* published an editorial that argued on behalf of the use of more Black workers in the Wiregrass. Interestingly, the editor was concerned that the movement of white farm laborers into sawmills would undermine the region's cotton harvest. He recommended using Black-Belt African-Americans to supplement the loss of workers on the farms.

> While we boast, and justly too, that this is a country of white men and for white men, we cannot ignore the fact that white men are likely to obtain higher wages than are now paid as a result of the demand for intelligent and reliable work by the rapidly increasing mill and timber interests of the country- sufficiently so as to make it we shall be able to go afield with as many hands as last year. We have never known a more pressing demand for labor than exists today among our farmers, and unless we shall be able to induce the hundreds of idle Negroes from

[72] *Dothan Light,* May 8, 1889.

[73] *Wiregrass Siftings,* April 3, 1889.

> the Black Belt to settle among us as day workers, another crop will be measured in its planting by the force at hand. [74]

The above passage predicted the movement of whites into industrial employment and advocated the use of African-Americans as agricultural workers, but in reality the situation was quite the opposite. African-Americans in the Wiregrass were often engaged in industrial work, while the vast majority of the region's farms were worked by white farmers and farm hands.

In 1900 Dothan African-Americans dominated industrial occupations. One hundred thirty-seven African-American men worked in manufacturing occupations including, but not limited to, turpentine hand, brickyard hand, sawmill hand, shingle mill hand, and crosstie hand. One hundred thirty-one African-American men worked for the railroads, mainly as graders and track layers. Only twenty-six of Dothan's African American men worked as farmers or farm hands. By comparison the overwhelming majority of white workers were either farmers or farm hands. [75]

Turpentine operations in the wiregrass were overwhelmingly worked by itinerant African-Americans. The workforce of the region's lumber industry was generally more diverse. Within the lumber business, logging in particular, seems to have attracted white workers. Before industrialization many local farmers had made extra money by felling timber. Some Wiregrass farmers continued seasonal timber cutting, while others moved fulltime into logging. Quite unlike turpentine camps of the same time, a number of the logging camps in Covington County were worked almost exclusively by white Alabama-

[74] Geneva Record, October 9, 1889.

[75] U.S. Manuscript Census, Population, 1900, Henry County, Alabama

born workers. At one such camp in the Opp area there were nine loggers, a thirteen year-old water-boy, six wives and numerous children. With the exception of a woman born in Florida and a man from Georgia the whole group was born in Alabama. At another camp there were twelve loggers, a teamster, five wives and numerous children. In this camp everyone was born in Alabama, except an eighty year old North Carolina-born Confederate veteran who lived in the household of one of the loggers. The old man was described as a retired farmer.[76]

While the small logging camps seem to have been locally run, the largest logging camp in Covington County reflected the national scale of the lumber industry. The superintendent of the camp was born in Canada, as was the head cook. The use of experienced logging superintendents from the cutover regions of the North was also common in lumber camps of the Florida pine forests.[77] The workforce of the camp was diverse, composed of blacks and whites, native and immigrant. Unlike the small camps where all concerned were listed as "logger," the list of occupations found in the large camp reflects the specialization of a large business organization. In addition to the inevitable loggers and teamsters there were dozens of workers described variously as "assistant cook," "bookkeeper," "ramper," "stacker," "scaler," "carpenter," "blacksmith", "swamper," "loader," "harness repairer," "tong hooker," and "washer woman." Only three of the workers in the camp were born in Alabama. The rest of the crew was born in a variety of locales, from the expected southern states, to Pennsylvania, to Canada and Scandinavia. The immigrant presence is particularly interesting. Two of the loggers had

[76] U.S. Manuscript Census, Population, 1910, Covington County, Alabama.

[77] Drobney, 83.

only recently immigrated to the United States in 1907. These loggers, born in Finland, evidently spoke no English. They were not alone; there was also a Swedish harness repairer who spoke no English. Unlike the small logging and turpentine camps, only the superintendent and the head cook lived with their wives. [78]

Comparing the various work camps in rural Covington County provides a useful analysis. The smaller camps seem to have been simple modifications of preindustrial labor systems found throughout the South, slavery in the case of the turpentine camps and the independent seasonal logging of yeoman farmers in the case of the smaller logging camps. By comparison, the larger logging camp is probably more representative of a modern industrial logging operation like those of the Great Lakes area or the Pacific Northwest.

Large or small, work camps in the rural Wiregrass were spartan, to put it kindly. Because they were constantly shifting location to new stands of timber, logging and turpentine camps were temporary in nature. Logging camps for railroad-based sawmills often used camp trains that included special sleeping, eating and kitchen cars. Far from comfortable, the sleeping cars were basically just box cars fitted with rows of bunks beds. These camp trains were very practical. Once the timber in a given area was cut clear the whole operation could be moved to a new location. [79]

Turpentine workers and their families lived in hastily built wooden shacks with dirt floors. The camps were isolated from the outside world because of their dependence on virgin timber, but also because naval stores employers were anxious to keep their

[78] U.S. Manuscript Census, Population, 1910, Covington County, Alabama.

[79] Appleyard; Dixon, 38.

valuable workers away from any other potential work opportunities. The extreme social and economic isolation of the camps accounts for the lack of outside employment by the women and older children of the camps. Without the opportunities for additional work these quarantined turpentine families would have been solely dependent on the naval stores company, more than likely mired in poverty or deeply in debt to their employer. [80]

Sawmill towns were different in that the mills themselves were often built in established towns and therefore lacked the stark isolation of the turpentine and logging camps. Workers and their families lived in permanent houses. Some of these towns, however, were no different other industrial company towns nation wide. Homes were rented from the company and food was bought from the company commissary.

Poley in Covington County, was the home of the Miller-Brent Lumber Company. The mill was connected to the Louisville and Nashville. The company brought logs to the mill using ditches and their own railroad line. Poley was one of the first sawmill towns to be built in Covington County. Like many of the industrial towns in the Wiregrass, Poley had a larger African-American population than the surrounding countryside. At the height of production in the first decade of the twentieth century, about two thirds of the population of Poley was estimated to be African-American. [81]

The already tight labor market for industrial workers in the Wiregrass was exacerbated by low pay and harsh conditions. In the face of these difficulties, some Wiregrass industrial employers used forced labor to maintain a viable workforce some.

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[80] Outland, 178.

[81] *The Opp News Historical edition*, 1973; Gus and Ruby Bryan, *Covington County History, 1821-1976* (The Opp Historical Society, 1976).

On August 7, 1889 a group of immigrant contract workers from the Alabama Midland Railroad showed up in Dothan and created something of a stir.

> Some amusement in town today over the arrest of a crowd of nine Italians who were running away from their employers on the railroad. The contractors had paid their fare from New York here for their labor and they had only worked a few days and their bosses didn't feel like being beat that way and consequently had them arrested and carried back to laying track. While on our Streets they attracted a large crowd, of course. They could not talk our language.

At first the idea of Italians stumbling out of the woods into a small Alabama town might seem amusing, as it was to the citizens of Dothan. However, their treatment underlines the harsh reality of industrial labor on in the Wiregrass. They were arrested and sent back to work. These were not free workers. In fact, much of the hardest work of the Wiregrass industrialization was done by workers who were in some way forced to labor, whether they were contracted immigrants far from home, indebted peons, or convicts. [82]

An Alabama law passed in 1896 and updated in 1903 and 1907 made it illegal for an employee to take an advance from his employer and leave before the debt was paid. With the support of the state legal system Alabama employers ensnared employees and held them with little hope of escape. In the Wiregrass these employees might be contracted immigrants, like those brought in to build the railroad at Dothan, or poor African-Americans, like those brought in by the naval stores producers. They were charged for their rent, their food, their tools, and they were even charged for their transportation to the work camp, usually by train. Indebted to the company they were

[82] *The Dothan Light*, August 7, 1889.

legally bound to work until the debt was paid, but as they continually accrued new debts, the debt was never paid. This ensured the company of a captive work force. Those workers, like the Italians who ran from the Alabama Midlands construction crew, who escaped were arrested by local authorities or hunted down by company guards.[83]

Another face of forced labor was the use of convicts. Convict labor leased from the state or local authorities was used throughout Alabama, especially by the coal mines in the mountainous northern part of the state. Several of the large sawmills in Wiregrass Alabama used convict labor. Between 1900 and 1912 convicts were leased from the state by the Henderson Lumber Company of Sanford, the Henderson-Boyd Lumber Company of Richburg, the Horseshoe Lumber Company of River Falls, and the Tyson Lumber Company of Enterprise. Turpentine companies also leased state convicts during this time; among those companies were the Henderson Turpentine Company, the River Falls Turpentine Company, and the Sanford Turpentine Company. [84]

In 1910 there were 220 convicts living in the Henderson Lumber Company's stockade near Sanford in Covington County Alabama. Twenty-three of these convicts were white; the vast majority of the convicts were African-Americans. There were 191 convicts at Richburg in Coffee County. These convicts were described as lumber mill laborers, presumably at the nearby Henderson-Boyd Lumber Company. Of the Richburg

[83] Because of the work of Pete Daniels the turpentine industry has become synonymous with debt peonage. Pete Daniel, *The Shadow of Slavery: Peonage in the New South, 1901-1969* (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1972); Sara Stoddard, *An Experiment in Progressivism: Alabama's Crusade Against Peonage, 1900-1915*, Masters Thesis, Auburn University, 1972.

[84] Alabama State Auditor, *Convict Hire Ledgers, 1885-1913*, Alabama Department of Archives and History.

convicts, only twenty-eight were white. Both the Henderson and the Henderson-Boyd operations, different companies, were railroad-based loggers. [85]

The harsh labor systems were deemed necessary because the all-encompassing nature of the big lumber operations created a huge need for labor. These mills were designed to accomplish the entire task of lumber production. The old river-based sawmills had simply rough cut lumber, often into square timbers, and sent it down river for export or further processing. The old mills often bought logs from independent loggers and contracted rafters to bring their product to Florida. The lumber companies of the railroad boom era consolidated all aspects of the business into self-contained vertically integrated operations. Company logging crews cut timber from company owned land. Company trains brought it to the mill. At the mill the logs were turned into finished products ready for shipment direct to the customer.

The mills themselves were modern efficient industrial operations. Logs were stored in holding ponds for ease of movement and to minimize insect damage. From the holding pond they were brought up to saw deck by chains. The logs were then run through a head saw that made the initial cut. After the initial cuts the lumber was sent through a resaw or gang saw to be cut into specific sizes or grades. After about 1890 most of the big mills used band saws, although circular saws were not uncommon. The

[85] U.S. Manuscript Census, Population, 1910, Covington County, Alabama; U.S. Manuscript Census, Population, Coffee County, Alabama; Lawson, 164, 174. Convicts were commonly used by the forest industry employers of Florida. For more detail see Jerrell Shofner, "Forced Labor in the Florida Forests, 1880-1950," *Journal of Forest History* (January 1981), 14.

rough-cut lumber was dried, either in the open air or in a kiln, before being sent to the planer for finishing. The biggest mills often had planing mills and drying kilns on site. [86]

Armies of workers, railroads to transport logs, and cutting-edge industrial technology enabled the sawmills of the Alabama Wiregrass to produce enormous amounts of lumber. By the first decade of the twentieth century, such consolidated sawmills could be found in numerous towns all along the railroads of the Wiregrass. Industrial lumber had heard Alabama's call for development and responded on a scale that few could have previously imagined.

By 1900 more workers toiled in Alabama's forest industries than in any of the state's other industries, even the mighty steel industry employed fewer workers. Hundreds of logging crews with their axes, cross-cut saws, oxen, and high wheeled logging carts penetrated the forest depths. Railroad tracks followed in their wake and the trains carried thousands of logs to the gigantic sawmills and planing mills that had grown up overnight from the forest landscape. Turpentine workers hacked their way through ancient stands of virgin pine, bleeding the trees of their vital, but valuable sap and leaving a scarred and weakened forest in their wake. The turpentine, lumber, crossties, shingles, poles, and pilings were sent out to the resource hungry nation on one or another of the new railroads that now crisscrossed the region. The promoters had been right, the forests were valuable.

Of course, there were costs to the industry's explosive growth. The environmental impact of this frenzied forest industry boom was dramatic. A little less than forty years after the state had promoted the forest as a source of endless wealth the vast tracts of

[86] Dixon, 80; Appleyard, 112; Brown 47-50.

virgin long-leaf pine were almost completely cut out. In 1908, the newly created Alabama State Commission of Forestry somberly warned of an impending timber famine. The language of the Forestry Commission's first bulletin is starkly different than the earlier promotional brochures. "In their unreasoning desire for gain, these corporations evidenced no thought for the future and left in their wake a trackless waste, in many instances as denuded of trees as the Sahara." Even though Alabama was still in the grips of the timber boom in 1908, the rate of forest clearing was so great that the commission predicted a coming end to the resource once touted as limitless. "The large mills must inevitably go out of existence because of the fact that the supply of lumber to keep them running will have been exhausted." [87]

Samson, Alabama was home to two large rail-based sawmills in 1910, the Simpson and Harper Lumber Company and the McCowan-Robbins Lumber Company. Both mills were tied to the Alabama and Florida Railroad. Both mills also owned private standard gauge rail lines that fed them with timber from their nearby land holdings. McCowan and Robbins Company owned six miles of standard gauge track in Geneva County. The company used its own locomotive to haul logs to its mill in Samson along its own tracks. The incoming tracks ran alongside the mill pond where logs were deposited and stored until they could be sawn. Finished lumber was then sent out on a different line that ran beside the planing mill. Simpson and Harper's private rails ran south into Holmes County, Florida. These sawmills operated as long as their timber holdings remained intact. By 1914 both mills were closed and Samson's brief lumber

[87] Alabama State Commission of Forestry, Bulletin Number 1, Montgomery, Alabama, 1908.

boom ended. The experience of Samson shows how fleeting the lumber business could be for small Wiregrass towns. [88]

South Alabama, a region described in the promotional brochures as the "Timber Belt," was home to some of Alabama's, and America's, largest sawmills. Loggers from these mills cut vast swaths of forest to feed the saws. At the height of their operations in first two decades of the twentieth century the Jackson Lumber Company, with its giant mill at Lockhart in Covington County, felled some 2,000 trees a day. Such aggressive logging left behind a radically changed landscape. The open longleaf pine forests with their famous wiregrass floor did not regenerate in the cut over areas. Where it was allowed to grow up, the young forest was decidedly different from the one that had been cut. Instead of the stately, and valuable, longleaf pines, dense growths of loblolly pine or scrub oaks covered the ground.

[88] Lawson, 170, 171; Sanborn Fire Insurance Company, Map, Samson, Alabama, 1910.

CHAPTER 5

THE JACKSON LUMBER COMPANY

In many ways the Jackson Lumber Company of Lockhart in Covington County was representative of the Wiregrass timber boom at its peak. The company's main investors came from the Northeast and Midwest. Their land holdings in Alabama and Florida were largely bought from the government during the public land grab of the late 1880s. They produced both lumber products and naval stores from their forests. They used a form of coerced labor, immigrants workers held in debt peonage. They had their own railroad network for hauling logs to the mill. They used regional and national railroad networks to transport the sawmill products to customers. They confronted the issue of cutover lands by experimenting with both replanting and selling the cut-over land for farms. In the end, having cut all of the timber from their land they shut down the mills and moved away. A close look at the history of the Jackson Lumber Company provides insight into the complex economic, social, and environmental processes at work in the Alabama Wiregrass during this epic era of transformation.

As with many of the South's largest timber firms, the capital behind the Jackson Lumber Company came from outside the region. In 1888 brothers Elihu and Wilbur Jackson of Salisbury, Maryland bought 43,419 acres of land in Covington County, Alabama and 12,640 acres in Walton County, Florida. The Jacksons were prominent

businessmen and Elihu had been Governor of Maryland. At the same time, Henry Davis, a Philadelphia based business partner of the Jackson brothers, also bought 39,996 acres in neighboring Geneva County, Alabama. In the coming years the group acquired more land in the area and incorporated the Jackson Lumber Company.[1]

Rather than launch immediately into the manufacture of lumber the Jacksons held their land for a number of years and worked to acquire lumber manufacturing interests in the region to develop their holdings. In 1895, under the headline, "A Big Land Deal," the *Geneva Record* announced that Elihu, the "ex-Governor Jackson of Maryland," was meeting in Atlanta with Frank Welch, a lumber manufacturer from Selma, Alabama. The article suggests that if the deal goes through it "will mean the erection of one of the largest sawmills in the South in Geneva County."[2] Welch did not build a mill on Jackson land, but Elihu Jackson bought Welch's operations in Dallas County and renamed the business the E. E. Jackson Lumber Company.

In 1902 Jackson found the right partners to finally begin the production of lumber on his land, the Crossett-Watzek-Gates group. The new investors bought out two of Jackson's original partners, Henry Davis and Charles Lockhart of Pennsylvania, thus acquiring a controlling interest in the Jackson Lumber Company. The Crossett-Watzek-Gates firm was an established lumber manufacturer with two large mills in Arkansas. Originally headquartered in Davenport, Iowa and later Chicago, the group developed lumber interests in Arkansas, Alabama, and eventually Oregon. The new President of the Jackson Lumber Company was John Watzek. Elihu Jackson and Edward Crossett were

[1] Gates, "Federal Land Policy in the South," 322; Bureau of Land Management, Government Land Office Records, Official Federal Land Records Site, http://www.glorecords.blm.gov/

[2] *Geneva County Citizen*, October 12, 1895.

named Vice Presidents and Charles Gates was the Treasurer. The manager of the company's new mill in Alabama was to be W. S. Harlan, a Crossett-Watzek-Gates insider and the nephew of a Supreme Court Justice. Like the company owners Harlan was an Iowa native. He had learned the lumber business working for Watzek at the Freeman Lumber Company in Millville, Arkansas. In addition to Harlan, the Crossett-Watzek-Gates people also brought in Edward Bonner, formerly with the First National Bank of Saginaw, Iowa, to serve as the company auditor. Elihu Jackson was represented in Lockhart by the sales manager J. B. Rider, who has served under the Governor in Maryland. Like the investment capital, the mill's management came from the North.[3]

In 1902 construction began on a mill and a company town at a strategic location near the town of Florala on the Alabama and Florida Railroad in Covington County. The Crossett-Watzek-Gates company modeled the new operation on its successful mill complex at Crossett, Arkansas, except the Alabama operation was to operate at a larger scale. At the time of construction the Jackson Lumber Company owned approximately 148,000 acres of timber in Alabama and Florida, more than enough to supply a large scale modern lumber mill. In fact, it was estimated that the company owned enough timber to run the mill at full capacity for twenty-five to thirty years.[4]

Lockhart, Alabama, named for one of the original investors, was established on the edge of the vast pine forest in southern Covington County near the Florida border. Unlike the haphazard shanty towns that popped-up around many of the smaller sawmills in the Wiregrass, Lockhart was well organized and modern. The streets of the town's

[3] *New York Times, May 9,* 1902; George Balogh, *Entrepreneurs in the Lumber Industry: Arkansas, 1881-1963* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995), 57; *Southern Lumberman,* September 15, 1903.

[4] Balogh, *Entrepreneurs*; *Southern Lumberman,* September 15, 1903.

neatly planned grid were named for Native-American tribes, some of whom had once roamed the very forests being cut; Cherokee, Choctaw, Seminole, Catawba, and so forth. One hundred and thirty five houses were built to house company employees and their families. The company also built a 22,500 square foot commissary, a drug store, and a bowling alley. [5]

In the Jackson Lumber Company mills white and black employees worked side by side, but the residential area of Lockhart was planned and built to be segregated. A two-block wide open space called Winnebago Park divided the town into two distinct sections, one for white residents and one for black. To meet the needs of the segregated community the company built two churches, two schools, and two hotels all located on opposite sides of Winnebago Park. The commissary, bowling alley, post office, one of the hotels, and the company offices were all located in the white side of town on Cherokee avenue, which seems to have comprised Lockhart's central business district. [6]

It took the Jackson Lumber Company only ten months from the time of ground breaking to finish building its enormous modern industrial sawmill complex in Lockhart. The whole complex was 1,000 feet by 2,000 feet and actually had two mill buildings, a large sawmill to cut the rough lumber and a planing mill to produce finished products. The people from the Crossett-Watzek-Gates group applied all of the lessons they had learned running lumber mills in Arkansas, so the whole operation was on the cutting edge

[5] Sanborn Fire Insurance Company, Map, Florala, Alabama, 1907; Jackson Lumber Company Annual Reports, 1909; *Southern Lumberman*, June 3, 2003, 45; *Op News Historical Edition*, 1973.

[6] Sanborn Fire Insurance Company, Map, Florala, Alabama, 1907; Jackson Lumber Company Annual Reports, 1909; *Southern Lumberman*, June 3, 2003, 45; *Southern Lumberman*, September 15, 1903; *Op News Historical Edition*, 1973.

Figure 4. The Jackson Lumber Company Sawmill at Lockhart, Alabama.
(Louisiana State University Library)

of industrial efficiency. Logs cut from company land were delivered to the mill by rail and stored in a twenty-six acre holding pond which could hold up to seven million feet of lumber at a time. Storage in the pond prevented insect damage or disease and facilitated the movement of the big logs. The pond excavation was the most expensive single portion of construction costs. Once production started, the company had fulltime employees whose job was to manage the movement of logs on the pond. [7]

The main sawmill building was located on the edge of the holding pond. Logs were pulled from the pond by a continuous chain conveyor and fed into the mill up an incline which carried them to the second floor where the saws were located. The highly

[7] *Southern Lumberman*, June 3, 2003, 45; Jackson Lumber Company Annual Reports, 1902; Sanborn Fire Insurance Company, Map, Florala, Alabama, 1907; *Southern Lumberman*, September 15, 1903; United States Census, 1910, Florala.

efficient continuous chain mechanism was a new design patented by W.S. Harlan, the mill's operational manager. The sawmill itself was a marvel of modern sawmill technology. The 70 x 208 foot building housed a whirring variety of saws, initially including two band saws, a gang saw, two eight-saw edgers, a ten-saw trimmer, a twelve-saw trimmer, and a five saw slasher, all on the second floor. The first floor of the sawmill building housed the shafting and gears of the saws and conveyors. Logs moved through the mill on a series of mechanized conveyors which routed the logs through the various saws, trimmers, and edgers. With all the rapid cuts, shifts, and rerouting, it was virtually impossible to follow a single piece of wood through the process of sawing.[8]

The wet, or green, sawn lumber was dried before further processing or shipment in the twelve steam-heated drying kilns, which were adjacent to the sawmill building. The use of such kilns prevented shrinkage and buckling of the wood products. From the kilns the dried lumber was taken across the complex to the planing mill, which produced finished specialty products like paneling, floor or ceiling boards. The 136 x 212 foot planing mill and a big open-air storage shed capable of holding 18,000,000 feet of lumber were situated along the railroad sidings, so the final products could be easily shipped out by rail. Both the planing and sawmills were wired with electric lighting to enable day and night production. At peak production in the coming years the whole facility ran almost nonstop. [9]

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[8] *Southern Lumberman*, June 3, 2003, 45; *Southern Lumberman*, September 15, 1903; Jackson Lumber Company Annual Reports, 1902; Sanborn Fire Insurance Company, Map, Florala, Alabama, 1907.

[9] *Southern Lumberman*, June 3, 2003, 45; Jackson Lumber Company Annual Reports, 1902; Sanborn maps Florala 1907.

A shed beside the sawmill housed steam engines with eight vertical boilers fuelled by shavings, sawdust, and the slabs cut from the big logs. These engines provided power for the saws and the dynamo used to produce the electricity to light the complex. The planing mill was powered by its own steam engines with an additional two boilers, also fueled by shavings and sawdust transported across the complex from the main mill building by conveyors. The machine shop had its own steam engine. By 1913, in the midst of its peak years of production, Jackson had added two additional boilers to its main engine room and one to its planing mill engine room. At that point there were four engines in the main power shed and a single 800 horse power engine at the planing mill. The dynamo room in the main power shed had also been expanded for increased electrical power. [10]

Once lumber production began in 1903 the Jackson Lumber Company produced and sold a wide variety of lumber products; ranging from barely finished pilings or poles to high-end luxury flooring and ceiling boards. The company's first yearly report lists fourteen different items and grades of lumber, including a wide array of specialty products. The product shipped most widely by Jackson was their special brand of rift flooring.

Dixie Rift Flooring was the company's signature item. So much so, that the Dixie trademark emblazoned all of the company's facilities and equipment.[11] By 1926 the mill at Lockhart produced 35 million feet of Dixie Rift Flooring per year. Rift flooring is a

[10] Sanborn Fire Insurance Company, Map, Florala, Alabama, 1907; Sanborn Fire Insurance Company, Map, Florala, Alabama, 1913.

[11] The trademark consisted of the word Dixie with an exaggerated X forming the crossbars of a Confederate battle flag. Photographs showing the trademark are located in the Jackson Lumber Company collection, LSU.

tongue and groove floorboard that is milled with the grain as tight and strait as possible. By using virgin longleaf pine Jackson produced flooring of superior strength and durability almost devoid of knots or irregularities in the grain. Lauded as being virtually flawless, Dixie Rift pine floors were installed in numerous public buildings in Washington, D.C., Grand Central Station in New York, the Civil Courts Building in New Orleans, and countless other high profile locations across the country.[12]

In 1912 the Jackson Lumber Company's Lockhart mill was reportedly the largest operation of its kind in the country.[13] That year 3,590 carloads of lumber products were shipped by rail to various destinations around the country. Some of the shipments were local, to Alabama, Florida, or Georgia, but most went to states in the Northeast. New York and Pennsylvania received 685 and 654 carloads of Jackson products a year, respectively. Another 491 carloads were shipped to West Virginia and 289 to New Jersey. In 1912, cars were shipped as far north as Maine and Michigan as far west as Kansas. Truly a part of the national economy, the Jackson mill shipped its products nation-wide and even internationally. In 1907, two carloads were sent to Mexico and nearly every year carloads were shipped to Ontario, Canada.[14]

Railroads were an essential factor in the success, and eventual failure, of the Jackson Lumber Company. They carried logs from the company's far flung forest tracts to the mill and brought finished mill products to customers across the continent. The town of Lockhart and the Jackson Lumber Company mill complex were well served by

[12] "Dixie Rift Flooring," 1926, brochure in the Jackson Lumber Company collection, LSU.

[13] *The Opp News, Historical Edition*, 1973.

[14] Jackson Lumber Company Annual Reports, 1907.

railroad lines. Jackson used common carriers, the Louisville and Nashville and Central of Georgia, as well as its own private rail network. Its dependence on railroads necessitated a scale of operation that could not be sustained indefinitely. In the end its large scale condemned the Jackson mill to failure.

The most important railroad for the Jackson Mill was the Louisville and Nashville Railroad which built the Alabama and Florida Railroad in 1900 from Georgiana, Alabama, through Andalusia and Lockhart, to Crestview, Florida, where it intersected the L & N's Pensacola to Jacksonville line. This line was the lifeline for the timber industry in South Alabama. In 1904 about 96 percent of the freight tonnage reported on the Alabama and Florida Railroad originated in forest industries; logs, sawn lumber, and naval stores. Sidings from the Alabama and Florida line ran beside the Jackson Lumber Company planing mill, storage sheds, and a number of loading platforms. [15]

The Central of Georgia Railroad also served Lockhart, running east through Sampson, Hartford, Slocomb, and a string of other little sawmill towns to the shipping junctions at Dothan. A spur of the Central of Georgia Railroad ran into the Jackson mill complex and split into four sidings, three of which were surrounded by loading platforms. The fourth ran alongside the Jackson Lumber Company's passenger and freight depot building. [16]

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[15] Wayne Cline, *Alabama Railroads,* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1997), 172; Sanborn Fire Insurance Company, Map, Florala, Alabama, 1907; Sanborn Fire Insurance Company, Map, Florala, Alabama,, 1913; Alabama Public Service Commission, *24th Annual Report of the Railroad Commission of Alabama* (Montgomery: Rodgers Printing Company, 1905).

[16]Cline, 170.; Sanborn Fire Insurance Company, Map, Florala, Alabama,, 1907; Sanborn Fire Insurance Company, Map, Florala, Alabama, 1913.

The company's own private tracks ran along the mill's holding pond and log dump. From the beginning, the Jackson Lumber Company operated an extensive railroad network. The length of the company's tracks constantly changed as new spurs were extended into virgin timber and old tracks were pulled up from the cutover. Railroad construction and maintenance were always a major part of the company's operating expenses, only slightly less than the expense of operating the sawmill but higher than the cost of the planing mill.[17] The company owned locomotives and a wide range of cars for hauling logs, workers, livestock and other freight. In 1905 the company owned four locomotives and eighty-three various cars. In 1912, the peak year of production, they owned seven locomotives and one-hundred-sixty freight cars, mainly log cars.[18]

In addition to its wood products production the Jackson Lumber Company ran an extensive naval stores operation from its timber holdings. The total acreage of forest under use for naval stores varied from year to year. In 1907 the company worked 14,730 acres of forest for naval stores production. Each year more acres of forest were slashed to produce the valuable pine resin. Slashed trees were most productive in their first year and became gradually less productive in each subsequent year. After a section of woods had been tapped for over four years it was phased out of use.

As a part of its naval stores division, the company operated a turpentine distillery which produced both spirits of turpentine and rosin. Whereas lumber manufacture peaked in the mid teens, the still was consistently productive. In 1907 Jackson produced 173,589

[17] Jackson Lumber Company Annual Reports, 1908; Sanborn Fire Insurance Company, Map, Florala, Alabama, 1907; Sanborn Fire Insurance Company, Map, Florala, Alabama, 1913.

[18] Jackson Lumber Company Annual Reports, 1905; Jackson Lumber Company Annual Reports, 1912.

Figure 5. Jackson Lumber Company pole and piling operation. Note the chevron shaped scars on the tree faces left from the turpentine production process. (Louisiana State University Libraries)

gallons of turpentine and 11,751 barrels of rosin. In 1922 the company produced 192,862 gallons of turpentine and 20,772 barrels of rosin. Far from being ancillary to the sawmill, the turpentine still was a sizable industrial operation in its own right, accounting for a substantial percentage of company expenses and profits. The 1904 Jackson payroll recapitulation lists the turpentine still expense as $2,206, compared to the sawmill expense which was $2,893 and the planing mill which was $1,597. The Naval Stores division maintained housing for its workers, livestock to haul the resin out of the forest,

and tanker cars to ship the refined turpentine. Relatively self-sufficient, the Naval stores unit also manufactured its own barrels and grew its own food. [19]

Some lumber interests criticized naval stores production as destructive of timber and reducing the value of the wood. The Jackson Lumber Company harvested these scarred trees for use as poles, pilings or heaving industrial timbers. Longleaf pine is exceptionally straight and because of its high resin content, relatively impervious to decay. As such, longleaf pine makes excellent telephone poles and pilings for piers or construction. The company sold large quantities of such heavy poles and pilings, shipping them nationwide. These were relatively inexpensive to process. The trees were cut down and trimmed of their tops in the regular manner. Then the bark was pealed in the woods. Once loaded on trains they could be shipped directly to market. [20]

Even though the Jackson Lumber Company could boast one of the most modern and efficient sawmill operations in the country, cutting timber and transporting the massive pine logs remained a backbreaking, labor-intensive, and expensive process. In 1908 it cost the company almost nine dollars per board measure to manufacture and sell its wood products. More than a third of this cost was accrued before the logs ever reached the mill. There were four main aspects to procuring logs for the mill; logging, skidding, loading, and shipping by railroads.[21]

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[19] Jackson Lumber Company Annual Reports, 1907; Jackson Lumber Company Annual Reports, 1922.

[20] The photograph in figure 3 depicts the process by which poles and pilings were produced. The photos clearly show loggers cutting trees that have been faced for turpentine production.

[21] Jackson Lumber Company Annual Reports, 1908.

Logging was the most labor intensive part of the process. Trees were felled and trimmed by hand with crosscut saws, axes and wedges, as had been done for years. There had been little change in logging technology from the time of the earliest pioneers. Logging remained slow, laborious, and relatively hazardous work. The summer heat and humidity in the forests and swamps of South Alabama or North Florida made it almost unbearable. Toiling from six in the morning to six in the evening as a logger for the Jackson Lumber Company, Hungarian immigrant Mike Trudics described the work as "too hot and too heavy."[22]

After the big pines had been cut down and trimmed of their tops and branches they were skidded to nearby railroads. Skidding was a major part of the forest operations. Because of the expense of maintaining draft animals and equipment, it cost the company more money to skid logs than it did to cut them down. Unlike logging, there was available technology that facilitated the skidding process. The Jackson Lumber Company used steam powered skidders and draft animals, but seems to have relied largely on the draft animals. The 1906 inventory of company resources lists a steam skidder worth $194, but subsequent inventories show no skidders. However, various draft animals, harnesses, log carts, and skidding tongs are present in every logging camp inventory. Initially, the company used horses for skidding. There were fifty-two horses in the 1905 camp inventory, five of which are listed as crippled. Over time the logging camps shifted away from horses to using more mules. Mules were easier to maintain and more durable

[22] Mike Trudics, "The Life Story of a Hungarian Peon," *Independent* 63 (Sept. 5, 1907), 562.

in the intense heat of the Wiregrass forests. The logging camp inventory for 1909 listed 79 mules.[23]

At the rails the logs were loaded onto cars for shipment to the mill. Rail-based steam-powered loaders were used during the time of the Jackson Lumber Company, but there are none listed in any of the company inventories of equipment. Nevertheless, it is almost certain that the company used steam power loaders. In 1916 the company published a collection of commemorative sketches depicting scenes from life around Lockhart. In this collection there are two sketches depicting steam loaders bearing the company's Dixie trademark. [24]

The company maintained its own network of logging railroads, including locomotives and rolling stock. In 1905 the company ran four locomotives, but by 1928 towards the end of the company's run, they had eight locomotives. As they were essential to the success of the mill, the company ran its own repair shop to keep its engines and rolling stock in operation. Railroad construction was another important part of the company operations. Throughout the history of the Jackson Lumber Company, railroad construction never stopped. Heavy use necessitated constant repair. Furthermore, rails were pulled up and relocated to new timber each time the loggers finished working in an area. The logging railroads were an expensive but absolutely necessary part of the whole operation. There was no other way that the company could have maintained its pace of production without the efficiency of rail-based shipping. The constant clanging of rail

[23] Between the naval stores operation, logging camps, sawmill, and various farming operations the Jackson Lumber Company kept a large number of draft animals. The numbers and species vary from year to year. The company did not cease to use horses, but they were less prevalent than mules in the long run. Jackson Lumber Company Annual Reports, 1905; Jackson Lumber Company Annual Reports 1906.

[24] Jackson Lumber Company, *In the Heart of the Longleaf pine: A Few Random Sketches About Lockhart* (Jackson Lumber Company, 1916)

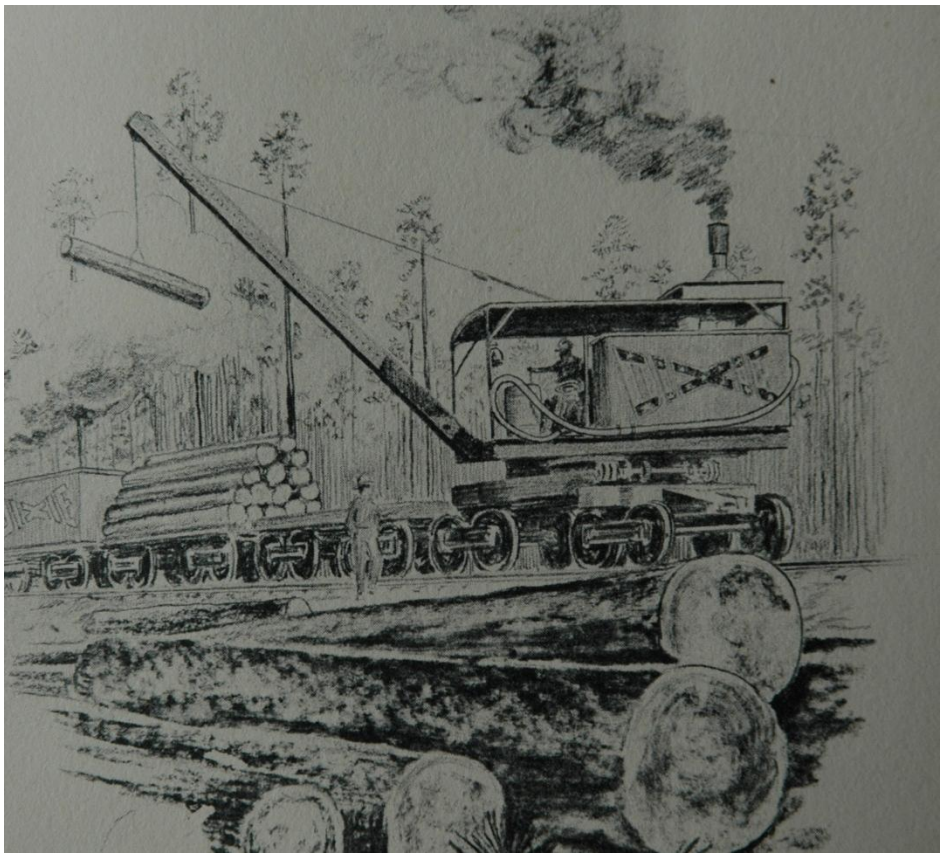

Figure 6. A drawing of a steam loader bearing the Jackson Lumber Company's Dixie Trademark. (Louisiana State University Libraries)

cars and steam locomotives was an essential part of the Jackson Lumber Company's experience.

In addition to shipping logs, the railroads were the vital arteries along which the loggers and their supplies moved from site to site. The logging camps were nomadic operations, constantly moving as timber was cut-out. Maintaining these camps with their men, livestock, and equipment was a major undertaking. The workers themselves were housed in specially designed railroad cars. The 1911 logging camp inventory lists three such sleeping cars. The focus for the sleeping cars was on efficiency, not comfort. The bunks in the cramped sleeping cars were crowded, providing little rest for the exhausted

loggers. For Hungarian worker Trudics, the sleeping cars were unbearable. Food was prepared in kitchen cars and served in special dining cars. It was coarse, but mercifully it was hardy and plentiful. Much like the men, the draft animals were housed and fed in special barn cars. Axes, saws, harnesses, and other essential tools or equipment were stored and maintained in shop cars. The whole logging camp could be packed up and relocated to virgin forest in short order. [25]

At peak production, the Jackson Lumber Company ran three large mobile logging camps to meet the demands of its ravenous sawmill. Possessing vast timber resources and cutting edge technology Jackson Lumber Company seems to have been in an ideal situation. The company, however, faced a constant labor shortage. The forested sections of the Alabama Wiregrass were not thickly settled and the independent minded farmers of the nearby communities showed little interest in becoming full-time loggers. While many farmers cut timber seasonally and rafted their logs downstream for sale in Florida, they were generally unwilling to abandon their farms and live permanently in the logging camps.

Many of Jackson's competitors in the Wiregrass leased state convicts to provide a source of labor, but the Jackson Lumber Company initially went with contracted immigrant labor instead. As South Alabama and North Florida are rarely the primary destination for immigrants seeking work, they used an agency in New York City to provide immigrant workers. In 1906 the Franks and Miller Employment Agency of New York City provided the Jackson Lumber Company with upwards of one-hundred and eighty workers, many of whom were recent immigrants from Bulgaria and Hungry. In

[25] Trudics, 562; Jackson Lumber Company Annual Reports, 1911.

groups of 12 to 25 the immigrant workers were brought from New York to Savannah, Georgia on ships and thence onto Lockhart by train. Enough Hungarians came to Lockhart that the company felt compelled to hire a Hungarian translator named Oscar Sandor. [26]

While they had been originally promised sawmill work by the employment agency, most of the workers were unskilled and therefore put to work in the logging camps where there was a greater demand for labor. Once in the woods they were isolated from the outside world, worked over twelve hours a day, crammed into stuffy sleeping cars at night, and constantly threatened and harassed by the foreman, a man named Robert Gallagher. Hungarian immigrant, Mike Trudics had been promised $1.50 per day for sawmill work, but he found himself working in the woods for only $1.00. He tried to plead his case to the foreman, but he was ignored. Frustrated and unwilling to continue working under such difficult conditions, Trudics fled the camp. However, before he could escape he was caught and severely beaten by Gallagher and the camp veterinarian Dr. Walter Grace. Trudics was then warned by Sandor, the interpreter, that if he ran again he would be killed.[27]

According to Trudics, workers tried to run away almost daily, but they were hunted down using bloodhounds, beaten, and forcibly returned to the camp. The company justified such treatment by maintaining that the workers owed them for the $18 cost of passage from New York to Lockhart and other expenses. Therefore any attempt to

[26] Trudics, 561; Harlan v. United States 184 F. 702, (Circuit court of Appeals, Fifth Circuit, February 23, 1909); Stoddard, *An Experiment Against Progressivism*; Daniel, *The Shadow of Slavery*, 86-88.

[27] Ibid.

escape was interpreted as an attempt to defraud the company. In this manner the Jackson Lumber Company maintained a workforce in a state of virtual slavery.

The Jackson Lumber Company's brutal system of labor came to the attention of the nation in 1906 when company agents pursued and captured an escaped worker in Crestview, Florida. The Federal authorities claimed that the escaped man, a Hungarian named Rudolf Lanninger, had been forcibly returned to a condition of peonage, which was a Federal crime. The government indicted a number of Jackson Lumber Company employees, including Sandor, Gallagher, Grace, and most notably the general manager of the company W.S. Harlan. The ensuing trial made national news as witness after witness testified to gross abuses that occurred in the lumber camps. The company and the southern lumber industry as a whole worked hard at damage control. They brought Emil Lesser, President of the German Immigration Society of Alabama to Lockhart, where he toured the mill and the lumber camps for several days. Lesser declared the accusations of peonage and abuse to be unfounded.[28]

Despite the best efforts of the defense the evidence was simply overwhelming. All of the defendants were convicted and sentenced to pay $5,000 fines and serve eighteen months in jail. The conviction and sentencing of W.S. Harlan, a wealthy and influential industrial manager and the nephew of a Supreme Court Justice, for the abuses that occurred under his watch shocked the nation. Almost immediately his attorneys began the appeals process and his powerful allies lobbied the President for a pardon. After five years of appeals and additional court hearings, including a refusal by the Supreme Court

[28] Trudics, 561; Harlan v. United States 184 F. 702, (Circuit court of Appeals, Fifth Circuit, February 23, 1909); Stoddard, *An Experiment Against Progressivism*; Daniel, *The Shadow of Slavery*, 86-88; *New York Times*, August 6, 1906.

to hear the case, Harlan's conviction was finally confirmed. However, in 1911after serving only four months of his sentence he was pardoned by President Taft. After his pardon Harlan returned to Lockhart where he resumed control of the Jackson Lumber Company and guided the company into its most productive years.[29]

The peonage cases brought national attention to the JLC's lumber camps and the rough life of the company's loggers. Most of the company's employees, including many logging camp workers, lived in Lockhart, not the railroad camps. The 1910 Federal Census for Lockhart gives a good snapshot of company's workforce and life in the mill town. First of all, there seems to have been a reaction to the peonage convictions, in 1910 there were only 63 foreign born white people found by the census bureau for all of Covington County and only 13 in neighboring Geneva. The vast majority of the workers in Lockhart were American born Blacks and Whites. Most of these workers were born locally in Alabama, Georgia, or Florida. The company that had once relied on foreign born labor seemed to have changed its practices.

While most employees were native born southerners, there were a number of northerners living in Lockhart. Among these were several skilled mill workers and the highest level of the JLC management. General Manager W.S. Harlan and his wife, both born in Iowa, lived on Seminole Avenue. Harlan's neighbors on Seminole included his eventual successor John Lemaistre of Pennsylvania. Lemaistre was the Superintendent of the logging camps. Also on Seminole was the Pennsylvania born superintendent of the lath mill and the Iowa born manager of the company store. The large two story homes on

[29] Trudics, 561; Harlan v. United States 184 F. 702, (Circuit court of Appeals, Fifth Circuit, February 23, 1909); Stoddard, *An Experiment Against Progressivism*; Daniel, *The Shadow of Slavery*, 86-88; *New York Times*, June 22, 1911.

Seminole Avenue inhabited by these elite northerners and their families were owned by the JLC, like every other home in Lockhart.[30]

Most of Lockhart's residents lived in single family homes rented from the company. Every home housed employees of the JLC and company work was a family affair extending across generations. Two households on Rappahannock Avenue serve as good examples of typical Lockhart families. William Jordon, born in Louisiana, lived with his wife and two sons. All three of the men, aged 46, 20 and 17, worked as teamsters in the logging camp. A few doors down from the Jordons was the home of sixty year-old widow Catherine McElroy and her three sons, all of whom were born in Florida. The three McElroy boys, aged 20, 18, and 15, worked for the JLC; the two oldest as engineers on the company's railroad and the youngest in the planing mill. [31]

African-Americans composed a large part of the JLC workforce. While Lockhart was a segregated town some of the same patterns seen on all white Rappahannock Avenue were found on the Black side of town. James Stinson and his wife Laura, both born in Georgia, rented a company house on Kickapoo Avenue. Like the Jordon men on the white side of town, he was a teamster in the logging camp. Many of the occupations at the JLC, in particular logging jobs like teamster and sawyer, seem to have been equally undertaken by blacks and whites. One difference was that African-Americans, unlike their white counterparts, might be recorded under the rather generic occupation of mill hand. Another glaring difference in the occupational patterns of black and white Lockhart

[30] U.S. Manuscript Census, Population, Covington County, Alabama, 1910; Sanborn Fire Insurance Company, Map, Florala, Alabama, 1913.

[31] U.S. Manuscript Census, Population, Covington County, Alabama, 1910.

came in the realm of working women and children. Like many of the African-American women in Lockhart, Laura Stinson did domestic work outside the home, in her case as a laundress. Living several houses down, twelve year-old John Clark worked as a water boy in the logging camp where his father was a teamster. On Kickapoo Avenue children started to work sooner than their white counterparts across town.[32]

Few white women had occupations listed in the census. Those who did were almost always managing a boarding house. The large number of single male workers, inevitable in a big lumber operation like the JLC, lived either in a boarding house or as boarders in a family home. On Osage Avenue, in the white part of town, Pearl Prescott ran a boarding house with six residents. Prescott was a 28 year-old divorced mother with a 10 year-old daughter. Of her boarders, four worked on the company's railroads, three engineers and a fireman, and the other two, a teamster and a sawyer, worked in the logging camp. There were boarding houses on both sides of town. On the black side of town a boarding house on Kickapoo Avenue demonstrates a cross section of employment opportunities available for African-American men in Lockhart. Living in the boarding house were a tailor, a barber, two railroad firemen, two railroad section hands, two railroad track hands, an edger in the mill, a pond man from the mill, and six men described simply as mill hands. [33]

Even though the company ran mobile logging camps a large number of logging camp employees lived in Lockhart at least part of the time if not year round. Alongside the saw operators, filers, pond men, lumber stackers, machinists, and technical workers

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid.

from the mill lived sawyers, teamsters, skidders, log loaders, and a wide array of railroad workers all of whom worked in the forests away from the mill itself. These men either lived temporarily in the mobile camps or they commuted daily from Lockhart to the worksite. In addition to its locomotives and heavy rolling stock the JLC owned a number of hand-carts which could have been used to take men to the logging camps or railroad construction sites. The company's employees who were noticeably absent in the Lockhart census were the turpentine workers. There were none of the chippers, dippers, pullers, distillers, or coopers associated with turpentine production. The distillery and turpentine orchards were evidently far enough away from the mill that it was not efficient for their crews to live in Lockhart. [34]

The workers living in Lockhart, whether mill hands, loggers, or rail workers, all worked toward the common purpose of turning trees into money. In the pursuit of this goal the big mill consumed timber at an astonishing pace. By 1911, the year of Harlan's pardon from peonage charges, the company had already cut the timber off of 42,330 acres. To that point they were cutting an average of 4,703 acres per year. This number, however, fails to show the increase in each year's cut. The cut for 1903 had been only 1,600 acres, while the cut for 1911 was 6,480 acres. The rate of clearing continued to increase through 1914 when the company cut the timber from 9,760 acres of land. After 1914 the yearly cut declined, but only slightly. From 1908 to 1917 the average yearly cut was 6,967 acres. By 1917 the company had cutover 86,160 acres of its land holdings. [35]

[34] U.S. Manuscript Census, Population, Covington County, Alabama, 1910; Jackson Lumber Company Annual Reports.

[35] Jackson Lumber Company Annual Reports, 1908-1917.

The JLC had been established during the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt when conservation became a standard part of the national conversation, even in the lumber business. In 1916 a JLC brochure bragged of its logging policy that, ”only the larger ones are cut, the smaller left to mature.”[36] Two years later the effectiveness of that policy was tested. In 1918 the company only cut 1,480 acres of virgin timber, but they took a second cutting off of an additional 2,034 acres.[37] This was the first recorded second cut on Jackson Lumber Company land. The initiation of second cutting indicates two things; first, it shows that they had previously left standing timber with the intention of a subsequent harvest within a reasonably short period of time. Secondly, it shows that the company was cognizant of the rapidly dwindling nature of its timber resources.

The company left young timber to mature; however, it evidently did not leave enough to make cutting it cost effective. The remaining timber was not enough to justify the high cost of relaying railroad tracks, skidding, and logging. J. E. Roberts, Secretary for the Southern Pine Association, noted that “as the large mills cut out, these big operators that have bought great quantities of virgin timber, they usually find but little on their lands to justify going back over them.”[38] This was an issue for all of the major rail-based loggers in the South and JLC was no different.

Unable to clear enough profit to warrant a second cut, the company continued to cut virgin timber. However, they began to cut more timber off each acre. In the first fifteen years of logging operations, the company cut an average of 8,279 feet of lumber

[36] *In the Heart of the Longleaf pine*, 1916.

[37] Jackson Lumber Company Annual Reports

[38] Jackson Lumber Company Annual Reports; Statement of J.E. Roberts to the Southern Pine Association, SPA Collection, LSU.

per acre. From 1903 to 1917 the average amount of feet per acre never exceeded 10,000 feet. In 1919 they cut an average of 12,028 feet per acre and in 1920 the cut an average of 15,370 feet per acre. This is a marked increase in the amount of lumber taken from each acre. Logging operations were evidently cutting trees that would have previously been left to grow and provide a second cut. [39]

In the opening decades of the twentieth century few lumber companies in Alabama had embraced scientific forestry, so cutover timber land presented the company with a serious problem. Most lumber companies in this era practiced the cut-out and get out method, wherein the company simply shut down and left once the marketable timber was cut off their land. With such large land holding the Jackson Lumber Company was able to operate steady for almost forty years, as they had initially assumed they would. However, in that time the company was faced with the issue of managing an ever-increasing amount of cutover property, which was a tax burden.

The company worked to sell its cutover land for many years. In 1910 they organized the Dixie Plantation Company to sell cutover land in Covington County. The property was sold in 40 or 80 acre tracts. Between 1910 and 1913 the JLC sold 2,993 acres. In 1916 the company's policy was euphemistically voiced in a 1916 promotional brochure:

> The South, by reason of its climate, is essentially agricultural. Here may be found the most rapid advancement of that industry. Denuded tracts are opened to the plow, and where only a few years ago where only nature in its wildest state was found, now stand small farms owned and operated by progressive citizens. Fields

[39] Jackson Lumber Company Annual Reports.

of grain and cotton and pastures of stock stand as evidence of an awakened interest in nature's soil. [40]

Evidently however, interest in the soil was not awakening as fast as the JLC was denuding the wild nature. So the JLC created a series of demonstration farms to encourage the sale and settlement of cutover land. In a short time the demonstration farms became profitable enterprises in their own right. By 1921 the company owned and operated 3,820 acres of farmland.[41]

With Harlan Farms the JLC was soundly involved in what can only be described as an early form of industrial agriculture. Harlan Farms ran the full gamut of agricultural practices. They had pecan orchards and nurseries that produced nuts and seedlings for sale. They raised thousands of thoroughbred cattle and hogs. Using modern steam-heated incubators and brooders they raised chickens on what they claimed to be the "largest poultry farm south of the Ohio River". Corporate hyperbole and exaggerated claims aside, the JLC's farm operations pointed realistically to the next chapter in the economy of the Alabama Wiregrass even as their loggers were rapidly denuding the region of marketable pine. Across the region agriculture was already surpassing the forest industry in economic importance.

In 1920, almost two decades into production, the JLC was still the largest lumber mill in the state of Alabama, producing an estimated 275,000 feet of lumber every day.[42] However, it was beginning to cut deep into its timber reserves and would not be able to

[40] *In the Heart of the Longleaf pine.*

[41] Jackson Lumber Company Annual Reports

[42] Harper, *Economic Botany of Alabama,* 121.

maintain such an exhaustive pace of production much longer. In 1923 the Jackson Lumber Company only possessed 35,983 acres of uncut timber, most of which was located in Walton County, Florida. A 1925 company survey of timber resources on cut-over lands found only an estimated 223,371 feet of lumber remaining on the company's 108,540 acres of cut-over lands. This represents less than one week's cut at the 1920 pace of logging. The available virgin timber was dwindling fast and the cut-over had been swept clean.

At the end of 1928 the company owned only 8,280 acres of uncut timber, 1,080 in Walton County Florida and 7,200 in Covington County, Alabama. This was about a year and a half's supply based on the company's average yearly cut. An inner-office memo dated to September of 1930 casually noted, "Last month we cleaned up the last virgin sawlogs in Alabama and moved our logging camp to Florida." The same memo goes on to detail the release of railroad crews and the sale of company mules. It also proposes the sale of the company's Florida land holding to the Florida Department of Forestry. In 1933 the company donated 1,640 acres to the state of Alabama to enlarge a State Forest in Geneva County. Cut-over timber land had become a burden on the company. [43]

The combined effects of the depletion of company timber resources and the national economic collapse of the Great Depression eventually killed the mill. However, they managed to limp on for a few more years by purchasing timber cut from other land. Unable to run at maximum capacity, they occasionally closed and reopened. An advertisement from the 1931 edition of the Southern Lumberman claims that the

[43] *Alabama Forest News* 7 No. 10, October 1933.

company had "resumed operations in the manufacture of dense longleaf yellow pine and is now ready to serve its former customers."[44]

The mill shut down permanently on March 31, 1940. In the weeks approaching the closing, Jackson opened its gates to tours. *The Covington News* noting the end of an era remarked that "This will be the last time, in all probability, that this generation will have the opportunity of seeing through a large sawmill."[45] At the time of its closing there were only around 500 employees working for The Jackson Lumber Company. The company land was sold to the region's new paper mills and to farmers. All 38,000 acres of the company's land in Walton County Florida was for sale in 1940. An advertisement in the *Covington News* described the property as "cut-over" capable of growing a wide range of agricultural products. [46]

Many years later E.C. Gates, the son of one of the original Iowa investors who served as manager in the company's waning years, explained to the *Opp News* why the giant mill finally closed. Most of the company's timber had been cut and they had started an organized regimen of reforestation too late. At the time of the closing in 1940 the original plan had been to resume operations after ten years of reforestation work and timber growth.[47] However, in the end the Crossett, Watzek and Gates families who still controlled the JLC stock simply wanted to liquidate their holdings rather than wait for the

[44] *The Southern Lumberman*, December 15, 1931.

[45] *Covington News*, March 14, 1940.

[46] *Covington News*, February 15, 1940.

[47] *Covington News*, April 4, 1940.

trees to grow. Gates left Lockhart in 1952 and moved to Arkansas where the company still had an operational mill.[48]

In the end, Jackson had simply used up the resource with which it began, marketable saw timber. The Jackson Lumber Company is the best example of the temporary nature of the railroad-based industrial lumber mills. At its peak it was among the greatest industrial enterprises of its kind in the country, possibly the world. However, the size and scale of the operation doomed it in the end. The mill needed an enormous supply of timber to run efficiently. Jackson cut through 148,000 acres of timber in less than thirty years. Once the large stands of virgin timber had been cut, the company could no longer run the mill profitably.

[48] Jackson Lumber Company File, Florala Public Library, Florala, Alabama.

CHAPTER 6

FORESTS TO FIELDS

The Jackson Lumber Company story is by no means unique. All through the South lumber companies rapidly cut through their timber resources. As the total acreage of cutover land increased, foresters and lumbermen openly discussed what they saw as an impending crisis for the nation and the region. The exact nature of the crisis varied depending on who was talking. For some the crisis would manifest itself in the form of a timber famine. Mills would close as supply dwindled. Lumber prices would skyrocket, limiting growth and putting the economy of the whole country into a tailspin. To others the crisis lay in the loss of inestimable acres of virgin woodland, natural bounty which could not truly bear an economic value. Of course, to a growing population of poor farmers the clear-cut land represented something else altogether, an opportunity for new farms, homes, and a future on the land. In the Alabama Wiregrass these farmers would remake the landscape of the cutover forests.

In April of 1917 the Southern Pine Association, the preeminent lumber industry trade association in the South, addressed the cutover land issue working together with the United States Department of Agriculture, the United States Department of the Interior, the United States Food Administration, southern agricultural colleges and experimental stations, and the Southern Settlement and Development Organization. The organizations

came together in New Orleans for a conference and chartered the Southern Cut-Over Land Association. [1]

The first annual cut-over land conference highlighted the differences in approach offered by the various participants; ranging from reforestation for subsequent logging, to settlement by farmers, to livestock ranching. The one thing the group could agree on was that the South's once plentiful pine forests were being cleared at an alarming rate. In their place was a growing wasteland of stumps and scrub, which was a fire risk and an economic burden to the lumber companies and state governments, alike.

The rate of deforestation that occurred in the Long-leaf pine belt of the South was the subject of numerous publications. By 1919 between 5,000,000 to 10,000,000 acres of long-leaf were being cleared every year.[2] America was growing and building cities from coast to coast. The ravenous demand for building materials was met by a devastatingly efficient combination of railroad shipping and modern industrial milling facilities, all directed by profit minded corporate systems of management.

Foresters, in their description of the cutting, laid the blame squarely on the big lumber mills. In 1928 Roland Harper, a geographer and botanist for the Alabama Geological Survey, noted that Longleaf pine was "originally probably the most abundant tree in Alabama, as well as several other southeastern states; but it has been so thoroughly

[1] John M. Collier, *The First Fifty Years of the Southern Pine Association, 1915-1965*, (New Orleans: The Southern Pine Association, 1965), 62.

[2] F.V. Emerson, "The Southern Long-Leaf Pine Belt", The *Geographical Review* VII (February, 1919), page 81.

exploited by the lumbermen in all accessible localities that the present stand may not be over one-tenth of the original." [3]

The Wiregrass region had been particularly hard hit by the cut-over. As early as 1913, Harper surveying the region noted that in the Wiregrass "most of the long-leafed pine has been removed or culled." He put most of the responsibility for the clearing on industrial lumber. "When the railroads once entered the country the destruction of the forests was very rapid." Consequently the lumber business was beginning to fade in the Wiregrass. "The lumber industry has declined rapidly here in the last decade or two, probably more so than any other part of the state." Harper, however, did not totally blame the lumbermen. He gave farmers and the rapid expansion of agriculture in the Wiregrass some of the credit for the decline of forest industries in the region, noting that in parts of the Wiregrass "farmers have put the lumberman out of business".[4]

The longleaf forests, once cut-over, did not regenerate as readily as many had imagined they would. A number of factors inhibited the growth of stately longleaf pines. The destructive harvest practices of the industrial loggers left the forest in the worst possible state for longleaf seedlings to take hold. The open range culture of the rural South allowed the free movement of livestock, cattle and hogs, in the cut-over. Hogs are particularly hard on longleaf seedlings. However, it was the issue of fire that most complicated the efforts to reestablish longleaf pines.

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[3] Roland Harper, *Economic Botany of Alabama: Part 2, A Catalogue of the Trees, Shrubs, and Vines of Alabama with their economic properties and their local distribution* (University, Alabama, 1928), 45.

[4] Roland Harper, *Economic Botany of Alabama: Part 1, Geographical Report* (University, Alabama: Geological Survey of Alabama, 1913), 112.

The longleaf pine is a fire climax species. The South's huge stands of pine were part of a landscape that had been shaped by centuries of fire, the result of both natural circumstances and intentional burning. Mature longleaf pines are somewhat fire resistant and periodic fires prepared the forest floor for proper regeneration. Longleaf seedlings in the grass stage can even withstand a brief low intensity fire like the ones that regularly swept through the piney woods. However, fire in the cutover was different. The dry dead tops and limbs of the cleared longleaf pines were left scattered by the logging crews. This made excellent fuel for wild fires. The low, dense scrub of oak and loblolly pine that grew in the cutover was also highly susceptible to burning. The intense fires that burned through the cutover destroyed all vegetation, including any young longleaf or any remaining seeds. If the area had no remaining mature trees to drop new seeds the longleaf disappeared from the area.

If uncontrolled fire was destructive, the complete suppression of fire was not much better. Without a clearing fire the longleaf could not take hold, but if fire swept through at the wrong time the young trees would be destroyed. The complexities of the fire-cycle needs of longleaf pines were unclear to most conservationists in the early twentieth century.

The residents of the rural Wiregrass, long accustomed to burning forests to improve forage for cattle grazing, continued their traditional practices much to the frustration of the lumber companies. Earl McGowin whose family ran the W. T. Smith lumber Company in Chapman, Alabama, recalled that in the early days the lumber men simply ignored the fires set by the local farmers. Fire was simply not seen as a major

threat to the industry because "big trees didn't burn," and "nobody cared about the cutover, because we never dreamed we'd go back there again." [5]

In the face of such obvious waste there were numerous calls for conservation nationally. After all, this was the era in which men like Teddy Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot worked to encourage the conservation America's natural resources. In his book *The Fight for Conservation* Pinchot identified conservation as a struggle against waste. "There has come gradually in this country an understanding that waste is not a good thing and the attack on waste is an industrial necessity."[6] Despite a broad consensus regarding the necessity of conservation, few seemed able to agree on the proper action. Some lumber manufacturers wanted the state governments to assume control of the cutover lands. This would make the state responsible for replanting, managing timber and suppressing fire.[7]

In reality, the onus for conservation lay with the major landholders, the lumber companies, and their motivation was strictly economic. The earliest southern lumber companies to experiment with scientific forestry were in Louisiana. In the 1910s Henry Hardtner, owner of the Urania Lumber Company, initiated basic reforestation and fire suppression programs in the cutover wastes of central Louisiana. Hardtner worked

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[5] The W.T. Smith mill was not in the Wiregrass as defined in this dissertation , but in adjacent Butler County. The company did, however own extensive tracts of timber in Covington County. James Greely McGowin, *James Greely McGowin, South Alabama Lumberman: The Recollections of his Family* (Santa Cruz, California: Forest History Society, 1977), 50.

[6] Gifford Pinchot, *The Fight for Conservation* (Doubleday, Page, and Company, 1910), 44. For a more detailed look at the national conservation movement see Samuel P. Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation Movement, 1890-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959).

[7] James Fickle, *The New South and the New Competition: Trade Association Development in the Southern Pine Industry* (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1980), 255.

closely with the Yale University Forestry School, which used his property to conduct field school. By the early 1920s the Great Southern Lumber Company of Bogalusa, Louisiana was adopting many of Hardtner's forestry practices on their property north of New Orleans.[8]

Sadly, aside from a few farsighted exceptions most southern lumber companies were hesitant or unwilling to invest in replanting or forestry operations. In fact, some lumbermen openly mocked Hardtner for his experiments.[9] One of the participants in the cut-over lands conference put it best when he noted that "when standing timber reaches a point in value where it pays to grow trees, men will grow trees."[10] It simply did not pay for the lumber companies to practice conservation and until it did they would do little to improve the situation in the cutover lands. In the face of such cold economic logic, many individuals continued to call for action from the state and federal agencies.

Most of the parties concerned with the dwindling forests of Alabama recognized the need for some form of state-sponsored forest management or conservation program. This management program would include fire suppression and financial incentives, like tax reductions, to encourage land owners to replant and manage growing timber. Passed in 1907, Alabama's first forestry law established a Forestry Commission to be composed of ex-officio members. The law encouraged reforestation by providing tax exemptions for land owners who plant timber trees. The commission issued bulletins to encourage sound forest management practices. The first bulletin discouraged the use of forest land to herd

[8] Collier, 53; Fickle, 255.

[9] Fickle, 247.

[10] J. E. Robert, Secretary of the Southern Pine Association, Date Unknown, Records of the Southern Pine Association, LSU Archives, Baton Rouge, La.

cattle, as detrimental to the development of young trees. Like many other early conservation efforts across the nation the first Alabama law with its emphasis on timber trees had a strong economic focus.[11]

Sadly, the1907 commission received virtually no funding from the state and was therefore not able to undertake any real tangible conservation work. One session of the Southern Pine Association meeting in New Orleans in 1920 specifically addressed the failures of the Alabama Forestry law. According to one participant, the biggest opponents to the creation of effective forestry law in Alabama were the lumbermen.[12] As deforestation continued unchecked in Alabama, concerned citizens addressed the state Democratic convention in 1922. The result of these efforts was the Alabama Forest Act of 1923 which reestablished the Alabama State Commission of Forestry. In order to gain the acceptance of the powerful lumber industry, the new commission included a number of industry leaders, notably John W. LeMaistre, manager of the Jackson Lumber Company sawmill at Lockhart. [13]

In explaining the motivation for Alabama's forestry laws the First Annual Report of the Alabama Commission of Forestry in 1924 gives some indication of the environmental degradation occurring in the state.

> The rapid disappearance of Alabama forests with the resulting decadence of the industries depending upon forest growth for their existence, the shortage of

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[11] *Forestry and Forest Preservation in Alabama*, Bulletin No. 1, Alabama State Commission of Forestry, 1908; *A History of State Forestry in Alabama*, Alabama Department of Conservation: Department of Forestry, 1960, Revised by the Alabama Forestry Commission, 1993, 22.

[12] Proceedings of the Second Annual Southern Forestry Congress, New Orleans, January 28-30, 1920, Records of the Southern Pine Association, LSU Archives, Baton Rouge, La.

[13] *A History of State Forestry in Alabama*, 24.

> building materials and other forest products, the steady impoverishment of soils of the non-agricultural areas of the state through frequent fires, the severe floods resulting from the denuding of hillsides, the lowering of land values through erosion and lack of productivity, and the generally dangerous economic situation engendered by the idle and costly timber were issues of such significance that action could not be postponed. [14]

To provide for the action missing from the 1907 law a full time technical and administrative staff was hired under the guidance of new state forester Page Bruce. Field work began almost immediately. The Commission was given the enormous task of acquiring and managing state forests, preventing forest fires across the state, helping landowners plant and properly manage forests, and educating the general public on the benefits of sound forestry. [15]

The motivation for Alabama's Commission of Forestry was largely economic. A participant at the 1920 Southern Forestry Congress noted that even the lumber men are coming to realize that at the current pace of cutting, the forest would be destroyed and "over one thousand saw-mills now engaged in cutting lumber will be chucked into the scrap heap."[16] The direst predictions of foresters were for the most part true. The mills could not sustain their hectic pace of cutting.

The immediate impact of deforestation in the Wiregrass was the collapse of the region's industrial lumber industry. As resources became depleted the bigger mills

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[14] First Annual Report, Commission of Forestry for the State of Alabama, 1924.

[15] *A History of State Forestry in Alabama*, 24.

[16] Proceedings of the Second Annual Southern Forestry Congress, New Orleans, La. January 28-30, 1920, Records of the Southern Pine Association, LSU Archives, Baton Rouge, La.

scrambled to buy remaining timber lands, reaching further down into Florida or west into less agricultural counties. Despite efforts to secure timber, the large scale sawmills with vast timber holdings and railroad networks could not continue. Big mills in Houston, Geneva, Coffee, Dale and Covington County shut down through the 1910s and 1920s, with the last holdouts along the western and southern fringes of the region closing in the thirties or early forties.

A survey of the six largest sawmills in Covington County gives an indicator of the fleeting nature of industrial logging in the Wiregrass. All six of these mills logged their own timber holdings, used railroads, and operated on a large scale. The Henderson Lumber Company based in Sanford shut down in 1914.The Empire Lumber Company of Andalusia closed in 1916. The Miller-Brent Lumber Company of Poley shut down in 1918. The Florida and Alabama Land Company sawmill at Falco, a company-owned town, was never rebuilt after a fire in 1925. Similarly, the Horseshoe sawmill of River Falls was not rebuilt after a devastating flood in 1929. The granddaddy of the Covington County lumber operations was, of course, the Jackson Lumber Company. Jackson was able to limp on until 1940, making it the last of the great railroad-based mills in the county. All of these operations suffered from some degree of timber depletion in the end.[17]

According to the 1925 report of the Alabama Forestry Commission the Wiregrass counties were among the most heavily deforested counties in the state. The average percent of forest land per county in Alabama was 63.80 percent, while the average for the Wiregrass counties was 51.23 percent. Coffee County was the second most deforested

[17] Charles E. Colvin, *The Devouring of Covington County's Virgin Longleaf pine Forests,* unpublished manuscript the Florala Public Library, Florala, Alabama.

county in Alabama with only 43.3 percent of its land in forest cover. The region was heavily cleared even when compared to Black-Belt plantation counties like Macon with 64.6 percent or Dallas with 58.8 percent of their land in forest. Logging caused the initial deforestation, but the rapid growth of farming in the cutover ensured that the forest would not regenerate. Baldwin County on the eastern shore of Mobile Bay had been heavily logged from the colonial era. It had been a close source of timber for the ravenous export sawmills of Mobile and Pensacola and was later home to numerous railroad-based lumber mills. Despite all of this logging the county retained 90 percent of its forest cover in 1925. Unlike the Wiregrass counties, Baldwin County was not heavily settled after it was cut. Without the farmers the forest was able to become somewhat reestablished, even if not to its original extent. [18]

The dramatic reduction in forest cover that occurred in the Wiregrass was the result of a combination of factors, in particular the rapid cutting rate of the rail-based industrial logging and a concurrent wave of intensive agricultural settlement. The work of the lumber companies was obvious, but they were not the only force working to clear forests. Small farmers carved an ever-expanding patchwork of fields and pastures in the cutover and even in forest untouched by loggers. Such agricultural colonization cleared timber, but it also prevented potential reforestation on much of the cutover. In 1913, state botanist Roland Harper observed that, "The region is being settled so rapidly that it is difficult to get a reliable estimate of the relative proportion of forest and clearing, but it safe to say that at least half the area has not yet felt the plow."[19] Even though

[18] *Second Annual Report of the Alabama Commission of Forestry*, 1925.

[19] Harper, *Economic Botany, Part 1*, 112.

approximately half the region was still forested, the remaining timber was scattered. There were no more giant blocks of easily accessible virgin forest. Small patches of virgin timber remained on isolated ridges or hills surrounded by farms or in the periodically flooded bottom lands along the streams and rivers.

The closure of the big sawmills and the expansion of agriculture did not mark the end of the lumber business in the Wiregrass; there were still trees to be cut. The Secretary of the Southern Pine Association, J. E. Rhodes noted that "Whenever one big mill cuts out it is almost invariably followed by dozens of little ones."[20] The giant railroad-based mills, which had been the essential vertically integrated manufacturing operations, were survived by hundreds of much smaller portable mills. The portable mills cut only rough lumber, which was sold to planing mills or wholesalers to be finished. Unlike the big operation these new lumbermen did not worry with timber acquisition or lumber markets. They had no labor issues. They employed only a handful of men at a time, often working on a part-time basis. With their low overhead and small workforces, the small mills could shut down or reopen based on timber availability or the lumber market.

Whereas the large railroad-based operations had benefited from efficiency of scale, the small mills were more nimble operations. The portable mills could move to the timber. They relied on trucks, not trains, for transportation and were therefore much more flexible. Instead of expensive machinery, the small operators used mules to skid logs. These small-scale loggers could cost-effectively cut the pockets of virgin timber that remained after the big companies cut out their vast stands and shut down their mills.

[20] J.E. Rhodes to the Senate, Undated, Southern Pine Association Records, Louisiana State University.

Their mobility allowed them to operate on hillsides or ridges where the timber remained. In dry years they even cut from the river bottoms and swamps.

Very often these small loggers succeeded because they were only part-time loggers. In some ways these new operations were a throwback to the early days of seasonal logging by farmers. In fact, most of these loggers were farmers. The large-scale industrial lumber operations had been temporary, at best. Farming was to be the true future for the Wiregrass.

Agriculture was almost always promoted as the answer to the economic crisis that ensued when the lumber companies cutout and shut down. All that was needed was a population of farmers. Numerous colonization schemes were promoted. Black farmers could be brought in from the old plantation districts. European immigrants could be encouraged to immigrate and settle. The outbreak of World War I provided the basis for a number of other resettlement plans. In 1914 *The Southern Lumberman* outlined a plan for colonizing the cleared pine lands of the South with Belgian refugees to be settled on small farms.[21] At the 1918 meeting of the Southern Pine Association H. T. Cory of the Department of the Interior told the gathered lumbermen that the government was investigating the possibility of using cutover lands in the South to provide farms for soldiers returning from the war in Europe.

While some promoted settlement and intensive farming, others aggressively pushed less intensive livestock ranching as the quick fix to the cutover crisis. In 1917 Herbert Hoover told the Cutover Lands Conference in New Orleans that they would "deserve the gratitude of the nation" if they were able to put cattle on the idle cutover of

[21] *The Southern Lumberman*, November 14, 1914.

the Southeast. An official from the USDA promised that "utilization of the South's cut-over lands for livestock production will meet a worldwide demand and will perform a service of worldwide benefit." The livestock plans required fewer of the hard-to-come-by colonists, but not everyone agreed on the viability of the cut-over land as pasture. Bureaucrats from several federal agencies discussed and debated various plans for effectively turning cutover scrub land into pastures. Different varieties of cover crops or forage were promoted. All involved were certain that the cutover land could be put to profitable use and solve problems ranging from unemployment to world hunger. [22]

Farming was the most obvious answer to the cut-over question in Alabama. Authorities and pundits droned on and on that the plow must inevitably follow the ax. It became a clichéd refrain among the promoters of cutover land development. *The Alabama Opportunity* published in 1906 promised millions of available acres in the cutover for enterprising farmers. "The lumberman and the turpentine man have passed along and done their days work in the woods. The scarred and seared woods now await the true worker, the true wealth bringer, the farmer."[23] According to the promoters the cleared land was available; it only awaited hard working farmers to coax from it the wealth that would drive the state's economy.

In many cases the cliché proved to be true. Farmers bought cutover timber lands. However, it is important to remember that in the Wiregrass agriculture did not develop after the lumber industry. The earliest loggers were seasonal workers who came from the already settled farm population. The industrial lumber business came into a region

[22] Southern Pine Association Records, LSU Archives, Baton Rouge, La.

[23] *The Alabama Opportunity* (The Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industries, 1906), 22.

already settled by small farmers and herders. From the beginning, the industrial lumber interests competed with the expanding population of farmers and cattlemen for land. In this way the Wiregrass landscape was shaped by both forest industries and agriculture working in tandem. As the loggers cut through the virgin pines, gradually undermining their resource base and eventually putting themselves out of business, the farmers expanded into the cutover. It proved to be a devastating combination for the forest. Loggers cut the trees in an increasingly efficient manner and the land-hungry population of farmers ensured there would be no subsequent growth of pines.

The relative success of agricultural settlement in the cutover was a key aspect of the long-term transformation of the Wiregrass. In different parts of the country attempts to establish agriculture in the wake industrial logging failed. In some places, despite aggressive promotion the settlers never materialized and the closing of a sawmill marked the death of the town. In other cases the soil simply did not deliver as the promoters promised it would and the farmers abandoned their plots.[24] However, this was not the case in the Wiregrass. As the forests of Southeast Alabama were cleared, thousands of agricultural settlers moved into the cutover. As sawmills closed, agricultural processing facilities were opened. The success of farming in the Wiregrass ensured the survival of the numerous small towns that had once been home to sawmills. Ironically the survival of the old mill towns as farm centers ensured that there would be no second growth forest and the forest industries would not return.

[24] In *Land Use, Environment, and Social Change: The Shaping of Island County Washington* Richard White details the failure of settlement schemes in the cut-over lands of Island County Washington. In *Nature's Metropolis* William Cronan briefly addresses the failure of farms in the cut-over forests of northern Michigan.

The pattern of clearing and farming varied throughout the region. Some parts of the Wiregrass region, including most of Dale County and the northern portion of Henry County, had been so heavily settled by early pioneer homesteaders that the big industrial lumber companies could not efficiently operate. The landscape in these areas was a checkerboard of farms lacking the large undisturbed blocks of timber preferred by the railroad loggers. In other areas, including the southernmost sections of Henry County and most of Coffee, Geneva and Covington Counties, there were large blocks of public land that could be purchased and efficiently logged. In these areas farmers followed in the wake of the railroad loggers. The rapid clearing of forests by industrial loggers was actually promoted as a labor saver for potential farmers. The back-breaking work of clearing fields was already largely accomplished. The old pioneer practice of log rolling to clear fields would now be unnecessary. In Coffee County convict loggers from the Henderson Boyd Lumber Company cleared thousands of acres that were sold to settlers as farm land. The state of Alabama noted this as an important selling point for would-be farmers in a promotional brochure. Drawn by affordable cleared land, settlers flocked to the area. In a matter of years Coffee County was one of the most heavily farmed and therefore heavily deforested counties in Alabama.[25]

Both the state government and the lumber companies actively promoted agricultural settlement in the Wiregrass. The state wanted to boost the agricultural economy and the lumber companies were anxious to unload cutover timber lands. A healthy farm population stimulated the economy of small towns and the sale of cutover relieved lumber companies of the tax burden. In the early twentieth century the State of

[25]Ibid, 34.

Alabama published a number of promotional brochures and magazines designed to encourage migration to the state. The Wiregrass, in particular was lauded by the state as an ideal destination for settlement. A common theme in these publications was the excellent quality of the state's farmland and the prosperity of its farmers. A brochure published in 1912 by the Alabama State Board of Immigration noted that "the unparalleled increase in population and development of the Wiregrass is proof of the intrinsic richness and value of the lands in South Alabama."[26] The state was aggressive in its efforts to promote the South Alabama cut-over, but it was certainly not the only promoter.

Probably the biggest promoters of the Wiregrass were the numerous small town newspaper editors. They provided lively and enthusiastic, if occasionally exaggerated, commentary on the growth of towns such as Dothan, Ozark, Enterprise and Geneva. The *Dothan Light* and the *Southern Star* of Ozark constantly raved about the progress of the region. They reported every investment and every statistic of economic or demographic growth as evidence of impending greatness. In 1895 *The Geneva County Citizen* ran an article on the successful recruitment efforts of Dooly County, Georgia. The editor of the *Citizen* argued that "Dooly County has no inducements to immigrants or their agents which Geneva County cannot meet, and settlers from the distant North or West would

[26]Alabama State Board of Immigration, *Alabama's New Era: A Magazine of Progress and Development* (Montgomery: Brown Printing co., 1912), 95.

find a welcome from our population in the rural districts (almost entirely white) fully as cordial as the one given to them in Georgia." [27]

The mention of race by the Geneva editor was not unusual for such settlement promotions. Race and racial issues were common themes in southern society at that time and the quest for immigrants was no different. Quite simply, official Alabama wanted white migrants. As such it promoted the Wiregrass as a land of white farmers. To counter the historically negative images associated with the plantations and poverty of the Alabama Black Belt the Wiregrass was called the "white belt" by Reuben Kolb, Alabama State Commissioner of Agriculture.[28] This moniker was a reference to the region's high percentage of white farmers, although it might also accurately describe the region's sandy soil as opposed to the Black Belt's fertile soil. The Wiregrass was not part of the antebellum plantation region of Alabama, so the region's African-American population had been low before the civil war and remained relatively low compared to the rest of the state. In the years following the war some African-Americans migrated to the region, but these migrants were mainly associated with industrial work like railroad construction, turpentine distilling, and lumber manufacturing. As such, the region's black population generally remained concentrated around isolated manufacturing facilities or in the urban nodes like Dothan, Ozark, Andalusia, or Lockhart. [29]

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[27] The parentheses are his. It is worth noting that Dooly County is in the Wiregrass region of Georgia, a region with a similar landscape and history to the Alabama Wiregrass. *The Geneva County Citizen*, October 12, 1895.

[28] *Alabama's New Era*, 89.

[29] This trend largely held through the period of this study. As late as 1919 the County Agricultural Agent for Dale County noted that there were "very few" African American farmers in the county. Alabama Cooperative Extension Service, Annual County Agent Reports, Dale, 1919.

As the largest private sector landowners in the Wiregrass, lumber companies were also active promoters of agricultural settlement. In addition to their sale of cutover land the biggest lumber companies also ran commercial farms on their property to serve as demonstration farms. The demonstration farms were used to encourage land sales by showing how productive the cutover could be if it were appropriately farmed. With high initial investment and cutting edge technology, these farms were portraits of productivity.

The Jackson Lumber Company sold sections of its cutover land through the Dixie Plantation Company. Despite its grand sounding name the Dixie Plantation Company sold its property in 80 or 160 acres sections. These are rather small farms when compared to the actual plantations of the antebellum period or modern commercial farms. However, small farms operated by their owners were seen as the key to the success of the Wiregrass agricultural economy.

The viability and success of small farms became something of a mantra for the advocates of farming cutover timber lands. This belief was demonstrated by an article from the Southern Lumberman in 1914. The article encouraged the colonization of cutover lands in the South by war refugees from Europe. The author expressed his faith in small farms by noting that "the day of the plantation of thousands of acres is passing. The dawn of the era of small farms in the South is at hand."[30]

From 1880 to 1920 the availability of cheap cut-over land for settlers caused a period of rapid population growth in the Alabama Wiregrass. In 1880 the Wiregrass counties accounted for only 3.9 percent of the population of Alabama. By 1920 the Wiregrass accounted for 7.6 percent of the state's population. The region was

[30] *The Southern Lumberman*, November 14, 1914.

overwhelmingly rural and the vast majority of this population increase was rural. Isolated from the state's major river arteries, the Wiregrass was Alabama's interior frontier. As such, it was the last real destination for land hungry agricultural settlers within the state. From 1900 to 1910 while the Wiregrass Counties were in the grips of a population boom, many of the counties immediately to the north in the Black Belt were actually losing population. So while Covington County's population grew 109 percent, buoyed in part by

Population	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920
State	1262505	1513401	1828697	2138093	2348174
Coffee County	8119	12170	20972	26119	30070
Covington County	5630	7536	15346	32124	38103
Dale County	12677	17225	21189	21608	22711
Geneva County	4342	10690	19096	26230	29315
Henry County	18761	24847	36147	20943	21547
Houston County				32414	37334
Wiregrass total	49529	72468	112750	159438	179080
Percent of state	3.923074	4.78842	6.165592	7.457019	7.626351

Figure 7. Population growth in Wiregrass Counties, 1860-1920

the opening of the enormous Jackson Lumber Company mill complex at Lockhart, Lowndes County in the Black Belt lost 10.5 percent of its population. The block of Dale, Henry and Geneva collectively grew by 32.4 percent as Bullock County immediately to the north lost 5.5 percent of its population.[31]

The region's rapid population growth even seemed to shock the staid botanist Roland Harper. In his 1913 survey of the region he remarked that "unless there is a serious error in the census figures or in the author's calculations, there were in this region

[31] United States Census Office, *Twelfth Census of the United States Taken in the year 1900: Census Reports, Volume 1:Population* (Washington: U.S. Census Office, 1901); United States Census Office, *Thirteenth Census of the United States taken in the Year 1910, Vol. II Population: Reports by States* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1910); United States Census Office, *Fourteenth Census of the United States taken in the Year 1920, vol. 1Population:Number and Distribution of Inhabitants* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1921). Note Figure 6.

in 1910 about 50 inhabitants per square mile, an increase of over 60% in ten years." He went on to express concerns over what modern geographers might call "carrying capacity", the ability of a given area of land to support an agricultural population. "It seems strange that an area where agriculture is still comparatively in its infancy can support so dense a population." Harper theorized that the Wiregrass farmers must be cultivating their land more intensely than the state average. [32]

Population growth in Wiregrass was noteworthy enough to necessitate the political reorganization of the region. In 1903 Alabama's last new county was created in the far southeastern corner of the state. Houston County was carved from portions of Dale, Geneva, and Henry Counties. With the Chattahoochee River along its eastern edge and the Florida border to the south Houston County became the quintessential Wiregrass county. Like other parts of the region it had been home to a number of railroad-based logging operations, but was at the time of its creation the focus of incredible agriculture growth. Dothan, the new county's seat, was one of the fastest growing cities in Alabama By 1920 Houston County was the most densely populated portion of the Wiregrass with 64.5 people per square mile.[33]

Rapid population growth in Wiregrass was driven in large part by the availability of affordable land. However, the nearly simultaneous arrival of large lumber companies, turpentine distilleries, railroads, and thousands of agricultural settlers created competition for land in the Wiregrass counties. Considering the skyrocketing demand for farm land

[32] Harper, *Economic Botany, Part 1*, 111.

[33] United States Census Office, *Fourteenth Census of the United States taken in the Year 1920, vol. 1Population: Number and Distribution of Inhabitants* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1921).

and timber, not everyone took the time to secure legal rights to property. Timber thieves cut trees indiscriminately and squatters cleared lands or moved into cutover without bothering to buy the property. In 1914 the Alabama State Land Agent outlined the problems faced by the state in the management of its public lands. Much of the state's land had been illegally cleared of its valuable timber, a practice that the Land Agent described as a "statewide disgrace". Large portions of this land were subsequently farmed, by people who either mistakenly thought they had purchased the plot, or by willful squatters. "Much of the land owned by the state is in cultivation. In many cases, only small tracts; in many other cases, large ones. These have been put into a state of cultivation after the timber was cut away, as previously referred to, sometimes under some sort of claim of ownership, but more often because no one seemed to care, and so far has not disturbed"[34]

Lumber companies also faced the problem of agricultural squatters. In 1917, the Baghdad Land and Lumber Company of Florida, a major land owner in southern Alabama, contacted its attorneys in Pensacola over the question of squatters who had placed company land under "fence and cultivation." The company wished to protect themselves, legally, from any claims by these squatters. [35] The Jackson Lumber Company also faced agricultural incursions onto its land holdings. W. S. Harlan, the general manager, reported that "by some misunderstanding of the lines" a neighboring farmer had cleared and fenced a tract of timber land near the Florida border. As the

[34] Alabama Land Commissioner, *Report*, 20.

[35] The Land Department of the Baghdad Land and Lumber Company to Blount, Blount and Carter, Attorneys, April 4, 1917. The Papers of Blount, Blount and Carter. The University of West Florida Archives.

farmer had been cultivating it for several years it was considered of little value as for timber production. Rather than force his company's claim on the cleared land, Harlan sought to legally trade the cultivated land for the title to nearby timber property owned by the same farmer. Harlan estimated the value of the cleared farm land to be approximately five dollars an acre, but the value of timber land "was considerably more than that."[36] From the perspective of big lumber companies, cleared farm land had little value beyond its sale price.

Scores of small intensely-farmed homesteads grew in the huge blocks of cutover left by lumber companies. The region's agricultural population exploded and almost overnight sawmill towns became market towns for the burgeoning farm population. The story of W. D. Grant of Slocomb in Geneva County is indicative of the changes happening throughout the whole region with the decline of the lumber industry and the expansion of the agriculture. Grant arrived in Slocomb in 1901 and worked at the Morris Lumber Company's sawmill in that town. When the mill shut down in 1912 he went to work for Faircloth-Segrest running at various times a cotton gin and a fertilizer plant. Small towns like Slocomb were able to survive the end of the lumber boom because as the forests receded they shifted more fully to commercial agricultural economies, with cotton gins, oil presses, and fertilizer works. [37]

Ironically, as the lumber industry waned and towns like Slocomb became almost fully dependant on cotton agriculture, that way of life was itself under a looming threat.

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[36] W.S. Harlan to J. W. Watzek, August 5, 1904, Jackson Lumber Company Annual Report, 1904.

[37] Ira Jo Holmes, *My Hometown: A History of Slocomb, Alabama, 1901-2001*; *The Banner*, January 5, 1893.

The boll weevil was spreading across the cotton-growing South. The ability of Wiregrass farmers to survive the boll weevil crisis by adopting new crops and improved methods of farming came to define the region probably as much as any previous single factor in the region's history.

CHAPTER 7

MODERN AGRICULTURE IN THE WIREGRASS

In the center of downtown Enterprise, Alabama there is a monument that probably ranks among the most unusual in the country. It consists of statue of a woman on a stone pedestal holding a large bronze boll weevil above her head. Chiseled into the stone base of the monument are the words "In profound appreciation of the boll weevil for what it has done as the herald of prosperity." The world famous boll weevil monument was erected in 1919 by the grateful citizens of Enterprise. [1] The weevil was honored for doing what the pundits, agricultural experts, and newspaper editors supposedly could not; check the Wiregrass farmers' growing dependence on cotton as a cash crop and force the widespread adoption of modern diversified farming. [2]

The monument to the boll weevil in Enterprise, however, represents only part of the movement to modernize agriculture in the Wiregrass. Substantive change does not

[1] Watson, *Coffee Grounds,* 107.

[2] The Wiregrass farmers' experience with modernization seems to be at odds with much of the historiography of agricultural history. The Wiregrass was a region of viable small farms that were able achieve a certain degree of crop diversification. Much of the history of southern agriculture focuses on marginal farmers like sharecroppers or explanations for farmers leaving the land. In *Breaking the Land* Pete Daniels examines the transformation of cotton, tobacco, and rice farming. For a look at the decline of farming in the twentieth-century South see Gilbert Fite, *Cotton Fields No More: Southern Agriculture, 1865-1980* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1984). Jack Temple Kirby notes that there is no single South, but numerous distinct local farming cultures. For a examination of this idea see Kirby's *Rural World s Lost: The American South, 1920-1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987).

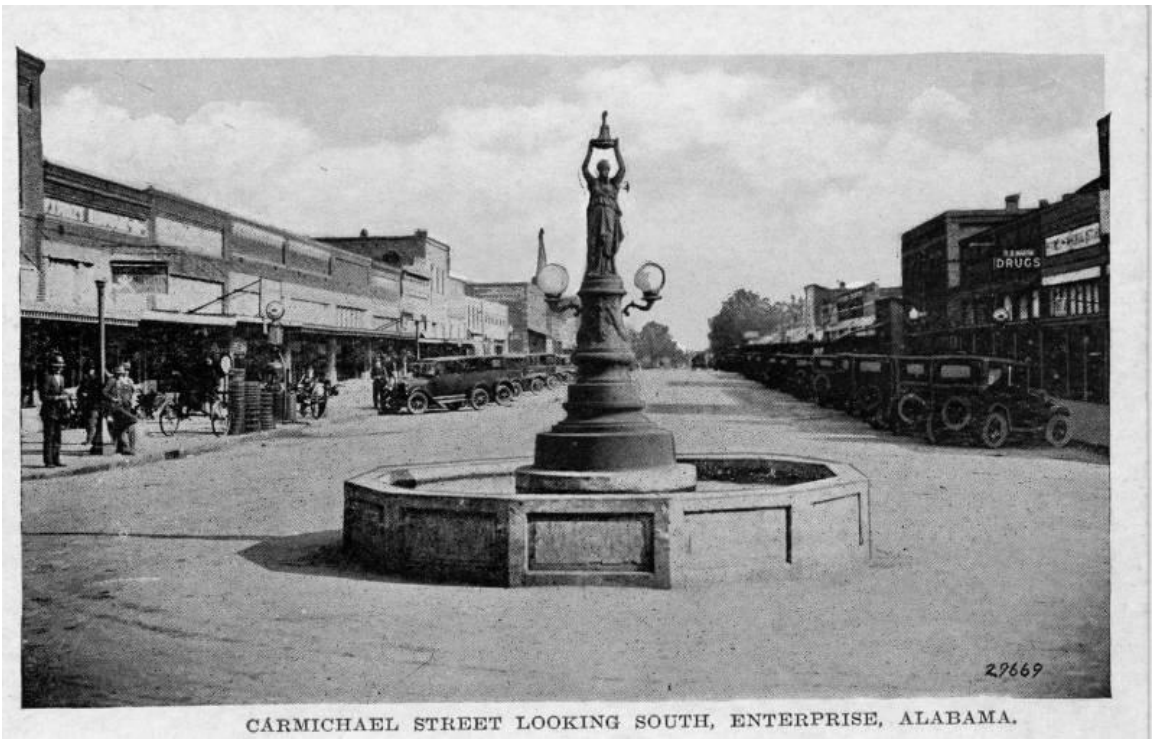

Figure 8. A postcard of the Boll Weevil Monument in Enterprise, Alabama.
(Auburn University Digital Library, Auburn University Libraries, Auburn University)

come easy for isolated rural people and there were a number of major factors at work to help them. Extension Service Agents helped farmers find other options when cotton failed, taught them new methods of farming, and tried to ensure long-term profitability by finding new markets for their produce. Furthermore, a spike in food prices caused by the Great War enabled farmers to profit almost immediately from their new crops and helped pay-off investments in breed-stock or new machinery. Numerous factors worked to enable change in Wiregrass agriculture, but it was all set in motion by the boll weevil. [3]

[3] The historiography of early twentieth century American agriculture has focused largely on increased technology and scale or the role of the government in providing experts and managing water. For a look at the role of progressive urban-based reformers in agricultural reform see David Danbom, *Resisted Revolution: Urban America and the Industrialization of Agriculture, 1900-1930* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1979). For a look at issues surrounding government policy on agriculture see Douglas Hurt, *Problems of Plenty: The American Farmer in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: Ivan Dee, 2002).

Agricultural pests are not often considered agents of positive change. However, before the arrival of the weevil, Southeast Alabama was one of the fastest growing areas of cotton production in the state, and a hotbed of agrarian political dissent. The old self-sufficient ways of farming were slowly passing out of practice as acre after acre of cut-over land was planted in cotton and an ever-increasing number of farmers slipped into debt and tenancy. The arrival of the boll weevil forced farmers to change. Farmers who had previously put their hope, and their credit, into cotton, began to profitably raise more livestock, truck crops, and alternative cash crops like peanuts. Peanuts in particular proved to be a successful crop for the region, which now hosts the National Peanut Festival at Dothan each fall.

The boll weevil makes an odd hero. The tiny weevil is a native of Mexico. A true specialist, it feeds almost entirely on the green cotton plant and is wholly dependent of the plant for its reproductive cycle. The female weevil lays its eggs in the buds, or "squares" of the cotton plant. Once hatched, the boll weevil larvae destroy the developing cotton lint, damaging the most valuable portion of the plant. After passing through egg, larval, and pupae stages in the protective comfort of cotton boll the adult weevil emerges and flies off in search of uninfected fields in which to feed and reproduce. The weevil's migration occurs from August to November. The insect's movement is halted by the first killing frost, at which point it seeks shelter in the cover of leaf litter on the ground at the

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Donald Worster is one of several historians who looked at the issue of capitalism and water in western agriculture. He defined the idea of the new "hydraulic civilization" in his work *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (New York: Pantheon, 1985).

edge of fields. The adult weevils emerge from their winter quarters in the spring and begin feeding on the new cotton plants the moment they emerge from the ground.[4]

The boll weevil spread slowly and inevitably north and east at a rate of approximately fifty miles per year. It entered Louisiana in 1903 and crossed the Mississippi River into Mississippi in 1907. The results of infestation became predictable. Wherever it lit the boll weevil caused a substantial decline in cotton production. Actual loss varied, but it was estimated to range from 5 to 50 percent reduction depending on the circumstances.[5] By 1904 Texas farmers needed an average of 1.71 acres to produce the cotton that an acre had produced before the boll weevil infestation.[6] The 1913 cotton crop of Mississippi was reduced by 33 percent.[7] For many of the South's hard-pressed cotton farmers the weevil was just one more factor to keep them from ever getting out from under their debts to bankers, merchants, or land owners

Crop destruction was devastating, especially for the poorest farmers. However, the reaction of farmers and businessmen to the weevil crisis was often more injurious than the actual infestation. Word of the weevil damage spread far ahead of the insect itself. Stories of devastating crop losses reached cotton-dependent communities in the path of the infestation and caused financial panic. In countless small towns merchants and bankers refused to extend credit on crops whose future seemed doomed because of the

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[4] W.E. Hinds, "The Boll weevil Advance in Alabama," Circular No. 5, Alabama Agricultural Experiment Station, Auburn, July 1912.

[5] W. E. Hinds, "Heading off the Boll weevil Panic," Bulletin No. 159, Alabama Agricultural Experiment Station, Auburn, December 1911.

[6] Cowdrey, *This Land, This South*, 128.

[7] Daniel, *Breaking the Land*, 9.

weevil. Some larger planters decided to weather the crisis by not putting in a cotton crop, leaving their tenants unemployed and homeless. Much of the statistical decline in cotton harvest credited to the weevil is actually the result of voluntary crop reduction born of weevil-inspired pessimism. The boll weevil panic reverberated through the whole cotton economy. Many businesses dependent on the yearly cotton harvest failed. In some places the whole cotton commodity chain of tenants, planters, ginners, merchants, and bankers seemed to be on the verge of collapse. [8]

The immediate financial costs of the boll weevil's march across the South were obvious and the crisis certainly uprooted many southern farmers. However, the extent to which the insect is responsible for mass migration out of cotton growing areas is less clear. The time of the initial weevil infestation, roughly 1892 to 1921, was one of the greatest periods of internal migration in American history. African-American farm families were generally on the move from rural areas to urban centers and from South to the North. Some contemporaries blamed the weevil for this migratory trend, but the pull of wartime employment opportunities and the push of Jim Crow are certainly also major factors in the Great Migration. Some infested areas, like Texas and Oklahoma, actually saw population increases in this period. The Alabama Black Belt was steadily losing population well before the weevil hit, so its population decline cannot be blamed solely on the infestation. In many places, like the Natchez district of Mississippi and the Georgia and South Carolina piedmont, the weevil seems to have simply been the latest and last factor that pushed downtrodden African-Americans out in search of better circumstances. Not all African –American migrants made it to the cities of the North. A

[8] Hinds, "Heading off the Boll weevil Panic"; Cowdrey, *This Land, This South,* 128.

large number simply moved into different cotton growing areas of the South. In particular, the newer plantations of Mississippi Delta bottomlands benefited from a general inflow of such weevil migrants. [9]

Almost as soon as the weevil entered Texas, agricultural experts and farmers worked to find a method by which the insect could be eradicated, or at least held in check. Farmers were told to pick and destroy infected bolls and Paris Green, an insecticide, was used in various quantities, all to no avail. Studies of the weevil revealed numerous potential predators, however the weevil reproduced in large numbers and sheltered safely within the cotton boll they seemed impervious to both predator and pesticides. [10]

The boll weevil was subjected to intense study, but there seemed to be no easy way to check its advance. As the infestation approached Louisiana, a meeting of the American Economic Association discussed the impending crisis and the possibility of losing eight million bales to the weevil in the coming year. In response, one member mentioned the possibility of using the state's various rivers, bayous, and levees to flood the weevils out of Louisiana if necessary.[11] Mercifully for Louisiana farmers, such a plan was never adopted. The only clear way to stop the weevil was to deprive it of cotton. To that extent, some experts proposed a quarantine belt in which no cotton would be grown.

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[9] Cowdrey, *This Land, This South*; Arvarh Stickland, "The Strange Affair of the Boll weevil: The Pest as Liberator" *Agricultural history* 68, No. 2, (Spring 1994); Kent Osband, "The Boll weevil Versus King Cotton," *The Journal of Economic History* 45, No. 3 (Sep. 1985).

[10] Daniel, *Breaking the Land*, 7.

[11] George K. Holmes, *Publications of the American Economic Association,* 3rd Series, Volume 5, Issue 1, Papers and Proceedings of the Sixteenth Annual Meeting. Part I. New Orleans, La., December 29-31, 1903 (Feb. 1904), 122-128.

However, questions of compensation and enforcement prevented the implementation of such quarantine and the weevil's march continued. [12]

Unable to stop the spread of the boll weevil, the USDA responded to the crisis in 1902 by hiring agricultural expert Seaman Knapp to teach Texas farmers how best to coexist with the seemingly inevitable pest. Knapp, originally from New York, was a proven advocate of scientific farming with practical experience in the South. In the 1880s Knapp had worked to establish commercial rice farming in Louisiana. In response to the boll weevil crisis he set up demonstration farms in Texas to show local farmers the best practices. However, by 1906 as it became evident that the problem necessitated a new approach, Knapp helped to establish the extension service. Agricultural extension agents would be provided with information by the USDA, but paid by the counties in which they were based. Living and working amongst the farmers, such agents could encourage better farming methods. [13]

Extension work received substantial support on the state and federal level. The first extension agents in Alabama were appointed in 1906, well in advance of the weevil's arrival. In the Alabama Wiregrass, Dale County got its first agent, Mack Maulding, in 1910. He used a motorcycle to visit the county's many farms. It was not long before local farmers knew that the cloud of dust coming down the dirt roads meant a visit from the county extension agent.[14] In 1914 the Smith-Lever Act formalized the connection between the USDA's extension agents and state agricultural colleges. In

[12] Daniel, *Breaking the Land*, 8.

[13] Ibid., 8-18.

[14] Val McGee, *Claybank Memories: A History of Dale County, Alabama* (Ozark: Dale County Historical Society, 1989), 110.

Alabama, county agents and experts from the Alabama Polytechnic Institute at Auburn were at the forefront of the campaign for efficient modern farming. In particular they were constant advocates for crop diversification. Properly diversified farms would not have to worry about boll weevils. [15]

Because the infestation forced farmers to reevaluate their commitment to cotton, many long-time critics of the cotton monoculture openly touted the weevil as a blessing in disguise. In 1910 the *New York Times* ran an article titled "Why the Deadly Boll Weevil, Bringing Revolution with him, is called the 'Prosperity Bug'". The article predicted a reduction of cotton of over two-thirds in the coming six years. This, however, would provide southern farmers with an unprecedented opportunity to diversify. The "revolution" mentioned in the title would be replacement of cotton monoculture with modern diverse agriculture and crop rotation. The *Times* raved about increases in corn production in the already weevil ridden districts of Mississippi. Of course, it seems easy for journalists in New York to find the positive when they were so distant, geographically and culturally, from the cotton farms of the South. However, not all of the optimists were outsiders. Many southerners made the same arguments on behalf of a substantive change in southern farming practices. Even the isolated farm districts of the Wiregrass were subject to the weevil-inspired push for modern diverse farming. In 1913 the *Ariton Advertiser* of rural Dale County ran an article asking "Is Boll Weevil Blessing in Long Run?" The author provides the reader with numerous hopeful examples of tenant farmers

[15] P. O. Davis. *A Century of Science on Alabama Farms*, Circular 430, Extension service of the Alabama Polytechnic Institute, Auburn, February 1952.

improving their circumstances through diverse farming after the weevil arrived in Mississippi and Western Alabama. [16]

As the weevil struck first in Texas first and moved steadily eastward through Louisiana and Mississippi, Alabama farmers and authorities had ample time to prepare for or fret over the coming infestation. One of the most consistent voices in the campaign to prepare for the weevil was W. E. Hinds of the Experiment Station of the Alabama Polytechnic Institute. An Entomologist, Hinds studied the weevil and its habits in detail. He authored several circulars and bulletins in which he advised Alabama farmers on how to deal with the boll weevil. In 1911 one of his earliest bulletins warned Alabama farmers and business men to remain calm. He described the destructive atmosphere of panic that had followed weevil infestation in many communities. He noted that in Alabama three agencies were committed to combat the weevil; the Alabama Department of Agriculture, the Alabama Experiment Station at Auburn, and the Farmers Cooperative Extension Agents. The state of Alabama was fully engaged in the campaign with the weevil and would do everything possible to mitigate the damage of the coming infestation. [17]

The weevil first reached Alabama in the fall of 1910. By the end of that year five counties were infested. By the end of the second year twelve counties were infested. Hinds was optimistic as to the potential for Alabama farmers to survive the infestation, but realistic in his analysis of the insect's advance. In his bulletin of 1914 he outlined the progress of the weevil to that date and concluded fatalistically that "it is evident from the

[16] *New York Times*, January 9, 1910; *Ariton Advertiser*, December 9, 1913.

[17] Hinds, "Heading off Boll weevil Panic".

foregoing that no section of Alabama can hope to escape weevil infestation." Hinds urged farmers to reduce cotton acreage and diversify their farms. He urged bankers and merchants to continue their support of the farmers. [18]

Bankers had good reason to be concerned. For many years cotton had been considered to be the only potentially profitable cash crop for southern farmers. On the surface the options looked bleak for the state's lenders. They could lose money if farmers stuck with cotton and lost their crop. A wholesale switch to potentially less profitable cash crops or even more dramatically a regression into subsistence farming would also strike the banks hard. In 1914 the Alabama Bankers Association issued an informative pamphlet that advised the state's bankers how to deal with the weevil crisis. The bankers were to advocate reduced acreage of cotton and more intensive care of the crop as well as some diversification of farms into food crops, forage, and livestock. The association encouraged their members to support demonstration agents in helping average farmers increase their yields. The pamphlet also endorsed the programs outlined by Dr. Hinds for combating the weevil. [19]

Bankers were not alone in seeking to take action against the weevil crisis. The combination of cotton harvests hurt by the weevil infestation and cotton acreage reduced by farmers led the cotton seed oil businesses of Alabama to seek alternative sources of oil for their presses. In 1916 Cotton Seed Crushers Association met in Pensacola to address the issue. Having made substantial investments in machinery and infrastructure, the oil

[18] Hinds, "Heading off Boll Weevil Panic"; W.E. Hinds, "Boll Weevil Effect upon Cotton Production", Bulletin no. 178, Alabama Agricultural Experiment Station of Alabama Polytechnic Institute, Auburn, July 1914.

[19] The Agricultural Committee of the Alabama Bankers Association, *Banking and Farming in Alabama,* July 1914.

manufacturers were looking for a new raw material to supplement the declining quantity of cotton seeds for the production of vegetable oil. At the convention Dr. H. B. Battle of Montgomery delivered a paper called "Velvet Bean, Soy Beans, and Peanuts as adjuncts to Cotton Seed." Battle concluded that peanuts actually produced higher quality oil than cotton seeds. If produced in the necessary quantities peanuts could profitably replace cotton seed as a raw material for the oil presses. [20]

Despite vocal calls for diversification and the growth of alternative crops, some agricultural experts in Alabama were unwilling to wholly abandon cotton. In a 1912 circular Hinds emphatically stated "IT IS NOT A HOPELESS FIGHT. COTTON CULTURE NEED NOT BE ABANDONED". He then outlined the methods by which cotton could be grown in spite of the weevil infestation. Early planting and harvest were advocated to disrupt the life cycle of the weevil. The complete destruction of all cotton plants after harvest was suggested to deprive the weevil of a food source. Hinds also encouraged progressive farming techniques like deeper plowing, crop rotation, and careful selection of seed. According to the experts, the farmer who followed this program could mitigate his losses to the weevil and still profitably farm cotton. [21]

From the beginning, farmers in the Wiregrass were active in the campaign to deal with the boll weevil. In 1915 a meeting held in Pinckard on an October Saturday to address the Weevil was typical of the organized efforts to fight the infestation. The Dale County Demonstration Agent and agricultural experts from A.P.I. met with local farmers

[20] H. B. Battle, "Velvet Bean, Soy Beans, and Peanuts as adjuncts to Cotton Seed," Paper Delivered before the Alabama Cotton Seed Crushers Association, Pensacola, Florida, June 16, 1916.

[21] W.E. Hinds, "Fighting the Boll weevil," Circular No. 6, Alabama Agricultural Experiment Station, Auburn., July 1912; W.E. Hinds, "Destroying Boll weevils by Clean Farming," Circular No. 7, Alabama Agricultural Experiment Station, Auburn., July 1912.

to discuss techniques for battling the boll weevil. Even children were part of the project. In the Dale County Rural Schools November 5th was declared "Boll Weevil Day" and children were to be taught the "best methods of farming with the presence of the boll weevil." Despite the positive efforts of the various experts the *Ozark Herald* concluded rather pessimistically that "even the most stubborn admit that very little cotton can be grown here next year." [22]

The paper's prediction for Dale County's cotton crop proved true in 1916. In 1914 the county had seen 31,185 bales of cotton ginned. In 1915 the number declined to 20,677. Dramatically, in 1916 Dale County only ginned 5,520 bales. Whether it was a result of weevil losses or intentional crop reduction, the bottom fell out of the Dale County cotton business in 1916. The news was the same across the Wiregrass, as it had been all over Alabama and the cotton-growing South. To the west of Dale, Coffee County lost sixty percent of its 1915 cotton crop and an even greater portion of the 1916 crop. [23]

All was not lost in Dale County, or in the rest of the Wiregrass. It was true that the region had rapidly progressed to become a major producer of cotton. The region's towns had become part of the cotton business economy. The Wiregrass, however, was also renowned for its diversity of agriculture and self-sufficient farm traditions. Unlike the Black Belt, the Wiregrass had never become a region of strict cotton monoculture. The region's small farmers seemed capable of shifting their resources into other products. In

[22] *Ozark Herald*, October 6, 1915; *Ozark Herald*, October 13, 1915.

[23] Fred Watson, *Forgotten Trails: A History of Dale County Alabama, 1824-1966* (Birmingham: Banner Press, 1968), 81; Watson, *Coffee Grounds*, 93.

the wake of the weevil infestation Wiregrass farmers simply grew more of the products that they already produced in addition to cotton: peanuts, corn, and hogs. [24]

Crop diversification campaigns were as much of a part of southern life as the cotton they railed against. For the most part they were failures, for a myriad of different reasons most southern farmers clung to cotton through good times and bad, and the times were all too often bad. The South's cotton farms were infamously dependent on livestock feed and food stuffs shipped in from the Midwest. Reformers of southern agriculture never tired of pointing out the regional imbalance of trade caused by this dependency on imported produce. [25]

The Alabama Wiregrass offers a different turn to the story of dependence. Despite a meteoric increase in cotton cultivation, the region's farms generally remained more diverse than most in Alabama. Ironically, the diversity was not born of modern scientific farming. It was more likely a remnant of the region's long history of isolated self-sufficiency. In 1900 Wiregrass farmers planted more acres in corn and peanuts than in cotton and in 1910, a year when Wiregrass fields accounted for over twelve percent of the cotton in Alabama, Wiregrass farmers still planted nearly as many acres in corn and peanuts as they did in cotton. Cotton had become important, but it was far from being the

[24] Many farmers also found part-time work and additional income logging the region's remaining pockets of timber. Wiregrass farmers traditionally relied on forest industry work to supplement their agricultural returns in lean years.

[25] The failures of antebellum agricultural reform in the South are outlined by a number of historians. For a comparison of nineteenth century agricultural improvement movements in the North and South see Steven Stoll, *Larding the Lean Earth: Soil and Society in Nineteenth Century America* (New (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002).

only crop on Wiregrass farms. Before the weevil destroyed a single boll of Alabama cotton Wiregrass counties produced food, in particular corn, peanuts and hogs. [26]

Dale County offers a good example of the self-sufficient tradition. Ozark, the Dale County Seat, had an established reputation as the hub of a food exporting region. A 1906 promotional brochure written by the State of Alabama described Ozark as the "capital of the hog and hominy county." At a time when railroad cars bearing Nebraska corn or Iowa pork became symbolic of regional dependency, the Wiregrass counties shipped food out on such cars. "Ozark has shipped meat on many cars to Montgomery and other cities. Not in one year has this been done, but in several successive years. The farmers about Ozark have loaned and shipped cars of Dale raised corn to other towns and sections of Alabama." The small farmers of Dale County were not alone in their production of food stuffs. Two counties to the west, there was a highly productive and well funded corporate demonstration farm that claimed many of the same outcomes as the small farmers of Dale County.

Harlan Farms was named for the manager of the Jackson Lumber Company. With its gigantic mill running at peak production the company's lumber crews created an ever-growing swath of cut-over. The farm was established in the early1910s by the company to demonstrate the agricultural potential of this cut-over land. The ultimate goal was to encourage sale and development of these lands for farming. The company tried hard to put a positive spin on its deforestation.

> The South by reason of its climate is essentially agricultural. Here may be found the most rapid advancement of that industry. Denuded tracts are opened to the

[26] *Twelfth Census, Agriculture, Part 1*; *Thirteenth Census, Agriculture, Reports by States.*

plow, and where only a few years ago only nature in its wildest state was found now stand small farms owned and operated by progressive citizens.

According to the Jackson Lumber Company, logging crews were agents of civilization fighting back the wilderness and paving the way for progressive modern farming.[27]

The focus on "small" progressive farms, not plantations, shows the heavy influence of the agricultural reformers. It may also reflect the company's Midwestern roots and ownership. A key element of this approach involved using the most modern and up-to-date farm methods at Harlan Farms. With the arrival of the boll weevil in Alabama, the Harlan Farms promotion focused heavily on the potential alternatives to cotton farming; livestock, poultry, truck gardening, and orchards.

Harlan Farms actively encouraged profitable farming, husbandry, and horticulture. In 1916 the farm's nursery was producing over 100,000 pecan trees a year. The work seems to have had some long-term effect. By 1930 Covington County, the home of Harlan Farms, was the largest producer of pecans in Alabama with over 43,000 pecan trees, almost half of which had yet to reach bearing age. [28] In addition to its nurseries, the company boasted the largest poultry production facility south of the Ohio River. It included steam incubators and brooders. The company also offered the advantage of its own cold storage facilities in Lockhart "sufficient to take care of the local supply of meats, fruits, and vegetables." [29] Much like the Jackson Lumber

[27] "In the Heart of the Longleaf pine".

[28] "In the Heart of the Longleaf pine"; United States Census Office, *Fifteenth Census of the US, Vol. II Agriculture, Part 2 The Southern States* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1932).

[29] "In the Heart of the Longleaf pine".

Company's sawmill and logging operations, Harlan Farms represented cutting-edge modern technology in the far reaches of the Wiregrass cutover.

Sadly, Harlan Farms' operations required substantial investment in technology and few of the Wiregrass farmers possessed the resource base of the Jackson Lumber Company. The region's small farmers would have to approach agriculture from a simpler perspective. The average Wiregrass farmer did not survive the weevil infestation by building steam brooders nor could he wait for years as pecan trees slowly grew to bearing age. The average farmer needed an immediate alternative to cotton as a cash crop, one that could be grown using roughly the same technology. The common man simply needed to shift his acres out of cotton and into other crops. The most successful replacement crop for cotton in the Wiregrass was peanuts.

The humble peanut had many advocates in the cotton-growing South, especially as the weevil threatened to undermine a whole regional system of agriculture. Famously, George Washington Carver's research in the late 19th century demonstrated nutritional benefits and multiple uses for the peanut. In 1914, as the weevil was making its way into the Wiregrass, The Alabama Agricultural Experiment Station at A.P.I. published a bulletin touting the value of the peanut and advising farmers of the best ways to fight its pests. For obvious reasons agricultural pests were on the minds of most farmers. Frederick Wolf, the bulletin's author, noted that "The peanut is among the field crops whose culture throughout the Southern States is being emphasized at this time, when so many agencies are at work to promote the practice of diverse farming. " Before delving into a detailed study of potential peanut rusts and fungi, Wolf offered a brief survey of the plants useful applications. Peanuts were a popular and nutritious fodder for cattle and

hogs. They could be pressed for their valuable and high quality oil. And increasingly, they could be sold as human food in a variety of forms ranging from peanut flour or peanut butter, to simply roasting them as snacks. [30]

The peanut is a legume, related to beans or peas. Like other legumes, the peanut is a nitrogen fixer, meaning the plant pulls nitrogen from the air and fixes it with nodules on the roots. This nitrogen fixing capacity makes peanuts a logical part of a crop rotation. The peanuts themselves are seeds that form underground on the tips of vines that reach the ground. Peanuts will grow in a variety of soils, but sandy soils facilitate their harvest. The sandy soils found in southeast Alabama, southwest Georgia, and the adjacent areas of northern Florida are particularly well suited to peanut cultivation.[31]

The two most commonly planted varieties of peanuts in Alabama were the Spanish peanuts preferred for human consumption and oil production and the Runner variety preferred for livestock fodder. A farmer wishing to plant peanuts prepared the ground as he would for cotton, or any other crop. Despite their nitrogen fixing properties peanuts required fertilizer for the best results, especially in the sandy soil best suited to their harvest. Peanut harvesting in the early twentieth century was a notoriously labor intensive process, by most accounts even more so than infamously demanding cotton. The crop was plowed up to expose the peanuts. The dirt was shaken from the peanut vines and they were raked into rows to wilt. After the vines had wilted, the farmers set up vertical poles approximately nine feet in length secured with simple cross-pieces at the

[30] Frederick Wolf, "Leaf Spot and Some Fruit Rots of Peanuts", Bulletin no. 180, Alabama Agricultural Experiment Station, Auburn, December 1914.

[31] L. LeMar Stephan, "Peanut Production," *Economic Geography* 21 No. 3 (July 1945), 184-185; Wolf, "Leaf Spot".

base. The peanuts, still attached to the vines, were then stacked with pitchforks in huge heaps around the poles. Stacked in the fields the peanuts cured for four to six weeks. [32]

The process of separating the cured peanuts from the dry vines was called "picking". A small home crop of peanuts could be picked by hand, but larger crops called for a mechanical picker. Like many early agricultural machines, the devices were often sent from farm to farm. In the fields these machines were stationary and could be powered by tractors or even automobiles. They worked much like a grain thresher. Peanuts were fed into the machine and the dried vines, now called peanut hay, were separated from the peanuts. Many early mechanical pickers were notorious for damaging the valuable peanuts and relegating them to hog feed. With these pickers "A large part is fed to hogs, and with peanuts at their present price this method is absolutely wrong". The manufacturer of the Benthall Peanut Picker Company claimed that its product would reduce such damage to peanuts and keep the valuable peanuts away from the hogs. [33]

There was an important link between hogs and peanuts. After harvest a certain portion of the nuts remained in the ground, having broken off of the vines during the digging process. These peanuts were not lost to the farmer. With the keen sense of smell and ability to root out food, hogs were perfectly capable of digging-up and consuming the lost peanuts. This provided an excellent supplement to the hogs' feed and prevented the waste of peanuts after harvest. Some farmers left the peanuts in the ground and allowed hogs to consume the entire crop. This process was called hogging-off the peanuts. It was

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[32] Stephan, "Peanut Production," 186-187; *Peanuts*, Leaflet No. 5, Agricultural Experiment Station of the Alabama Polytechnic Institute, July 1934.

[33] "Benthall Peanut Picker advertisement", *The Cotton Oil Press: Official Monthly Bulletin of the Interstate Cotton Seed Crushers Assn.* 1, No. 1, (May 1917), 37*;* Peanuts; Stephan. *Peanut Production*, 186-187.

a cheap way to quickly fatten hogs. An acre of peanuts could be converted into approximately 325 to 350 pounds of pork. If peanut prices dipped too low, the crop could simply be converted into pork, an option that was never possible with cotton. In 1917 Geneva County farmers planted approximately 35,000 acres of peanuts, only 15,000 acres of which were actually harvested. The majority of the Geneva County peanuts were hogged-off that year. Hogging-off peanuts was also an option for famers who lacked the labor to undergo the labor intensive harvest process. Allowing the hogs to harvest the crop not only saved money on labor and fattened the hogs; it left the nitrogen rich peanut vines in the field.[34]

Considering all of their benefits, peanuts presented an ideal substitute for, or addition to, cotton agriculture, but they were not new to the Alabama Wiregrass. Farmers in the region did not learn to plant peanuts only because weevils ruined their cotton. They had been growing them to some extent for many years. The region's sandy soil was ideal for peanuts. In 1900, ten years before the bug even reached the state, farmers in the five counties of the Wiregrass had planted over 53,000 acres of the legume. Henry County was the state's leading peanut producer, followed closely by Dale, Geneva, and Coffee. The Wiregrass accounted for approximately 68 percent of Alabama's peanut acreage at the turn of the century. In 1910, as cotton cultivation in the Wiregrass reached its greatest extent yet, the same counties planted over 62,000 acres of peanuts. Before the war and the weevil created a market for peanuts, most of the region's peanuts were planted as hog

[34] Harvested peanut plants produced a sizable amount of hay. After the picker separated the nuts and the hay it was baled. Every acre of peanuts produced roughly a ton of nutritious hay which could be used to feed cattle. However, hay production left the fields deprived of benefits of the nutrients in the plant matter. *Peanuts*; Stephan. *Peanut Production*, 186-187; Battle, *Velvet Beans, Soy Beans and Peanuts as Adjuncts to Cotton Seed*, 4.

fodder, but some farmers began to look at peanuts as a cash crop. In 1913 the *Ariton Advertiser* reported the purchase of a mechanical peanut picker by a local farmer named Charlie Wood. The paper described the new picker as "the most progressive farming implement that has been seen in this country." Such reporting further demonstrates that Dale County farmers were investing in peanuts even before the weevil devastated their cotton.[35]

It was not shocking that farmers in the Wiregrass committed more acreage to peanuts and less to cotton after the weevil swept the region. The surprise comes in the success and longevity of the peanut as a key crop in the region's economy, even after the recovery of cotton in subsequent years. The most famous story of peanut success is found in Enterprise, which built a monument to the boll weevil. The Enterprise story centers on a businessman named H. M. Sessions. A merchant in Enterprise, Sessions was facing unredeemed debts from his farm clients. In the hopes of getting some return he encouraged C. W. Baston to plant 100 acres of peanuts to replace his lost cotton, even providing the seed for the hard-pressed farmer. Baston harvested a bumper crop that year, most of which was sold as seed to local farmers who now rushed to adopt peanuts as their main crop. In 1917 local farmers harvested over a million bushels of peanuts. Prices were high and those farmers who had put in peanuts profited handsomely. Enterprise merchants and bankers thrived as well. Debts incurred in the cultivation of cotton were

[35] *Twelfth Census, Agriculture, Part 1*; *Thirteenth Census, Agriculture*; *Ariton Advertiser,* November 4, 1913.

paid and the stores were full of farmers. Sessions and Enterprise were officially in the peanut business.[36]

The quantity of peanuts harvested for sale in Alabama skyrocketed. In 1916 Alabama farmers grew over nine million bushels, in 1917 almost fourteen million, and in 1918 over seventeen million, which represented over thirty-one percent of the total American peanut harvest for the year. Alabama farmers had seriously taken to planting peanuts. Wiregrass farmers, somewhat familiar with the crop and goaded by numerous diversification campaigns, led the way in embracing the peanut as a potentially profitable alternative to cotton. In 1917 the county agent for Geneva observed that peanuts had "come to be one of the main cash crops in the diversification scheme following the appearance of the cotton boll weevil." In 1919 the extension agent for Dale County described his county's success with peanuts, "since the appearance of the boll weevil this crop has done more and made more money for Dale County farmers than cotton did or any crop ever has." In 1920 the six counties of the Wiregrass accounted for more than half of all peanut acres in Alabama. That same year farmers in Dale and Coffee Counties planted more acres of peanuts than cotton. [37]

Like other subsidiary cotton industries, the production of cotton seed oil suffered because of the boll weevil infestation. By the time of the weevil's arrival Ozark, Enterprise, Dothan and numerous smaller towns were home to thriving oil presses. The dramatic decrease in cotton acreage caused by the weevil panic presented an obvious

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[36] *Enterprise Ledger,* April 30 1954; Watson, *Coffee Grounds*, 100-103.

[37] *Alabama leads the Nation in Peanut Production* (Washington, D.C.: United States Railroad Administration, Agricultural Section, 1919); Alabama Cooperative Extension Service, Annual County Agent Reports, Geneva, 1917; ACES, Annual County Agent Reports, Dale, 1919.

threat to the growing oil industry. At their 1916 meeting in Pensacola the Alabama oil manufacturers openly addressed the need for new raw materials to supplement, but not necessarily replace, the flagging supply of cotton seed. Of the several options discussed at the meeting peanuts were the most promising adjunct to cotton seed. According to H. B. Battle, peanuts held promise for both the farmer and the oil miller. Peanuts had roughly twice the oil yield of cotton seed. Peanut oil was of decidedly higher quality and required less costly refining than cotton seed oil. Furthermore, the remaining meal could be sold for animal feed or even human consumption after being processed into peanut flour. In 1917 the *Cotton Oil Press* reiterated Battle's suggestion when it recommended that oil manufacturers encourage farmers to "supplement their intense cotton planting with peanuts."[38] Oil presses in the Wiregrass, where cotton acreage was rapidly being replaced by other crops, adopted the peanut solution. The Southern Cotton Oil Company in Dothan had offered farmers 60 cents per bushel of peanuts "for crushing purposes" as early as June 1916. In 1918 R. C. Conner of the Enterprise Oil Company used his cotton oil press to make peanut oil in Enterprise where peanuts were the new boom crop. [39]

While the boll weevil may have initiated change on Wiregrass farms, major shifts in international agricultural markets certainly facilitated these changes. In 1914 the Great War began in Europe. The war created enormous swings in commodities markets. Sharp wartime demand for certain products seemingly presented southern farmers with the opportunity to fully recover from the nightmare of the weevil crisis. However, in 1914

[38] Battle, *Velvet Beans, Soy Beans and Peanuts as Adjuncts to Cotton Seed; The Cotton Oil Press* 1 No. 1 (May 1917), 26.

[39] *Enterprise Ledger,* April 30, 1954*; Dothan Weekly Eagle*, April 7, 1916.

the farmers' initial experience with war markets was harsh. As the war began the British navy implemented a blockade that shut off German markets for various commodities, most notably cotton. The 1914 cotton crop was the last solid cotton crop produced in the Wiregrass before the arrival of the boll weevil. Unfortunately the war caused a collapse in the price of cotton in the fall of 1914 and the bumper crop seemed a loss. [40] In 1917, when the United States joined the war on the side of the British and French the country shifted into war mode both industry and agriculture were steered into support of the war effort.[41]

The collapse of cotton prices in 1914 coincided almost perfectly with the arrival of the boll weevil in the Wiregrass counties. The two factors combined to discourage cotton planting. On the other hand, wartime demand for food products and vegetable oil caused the price of peanuts to skyrocket. Peanut oil was of particular value to the war effort. In addition to increased food and cooking demand, the government now required enormous amounts of oil for the production of glycerin, a major component in the explosives needed for the war.[42] Before the war, almost all of America's imported peanut oil came from European manufacturers whose colonial African territories provided a cheap source of raw peanuts. The war simultaneously shut off these sources and increased demand. Farmers across the South were encouraged to grow peanuts as a part

[40] George Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South, 1913-1945* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), 33.

[41] Deborah Fitzgerald has argued that World War One was a major factor in the industrialization of American agriculture. For a detailed examination of agricultural industrialization see Deborah Fitzgerald, *Every Farm a Factory: The Industrial Ideal in American Agriculture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

[42] In 1945 it was estimated that every blast of the main 16 inch guns on an America battleship during World War II used the product of 17 acres of peanuts. Stephan, "Peanut Production," 184.

of their patriotic duty. Record high peanut prices helped to encourage their patriotism. The dramatic increase of peanut cultivation and the sudden profitability of the crop caught the attention of observers nationwide. Under the headline "War Brings Huge Increase in United States Peanut Crop" the New York Times concluded that, "down in cotton country they are saying that we are soon to see the rise of peanut barons". [43]

The Great War ended America's dependence on European nations as a source of peanut oil. More importantly, it gave a needed boost to the nascent American peanut industry. Increased demand born from wartime shortages encouraged businessmen to invest in the facilities needed to process larger number of peanuts for both oil manufacture and human consumption. High peanut prices provided the capital needed to build the agribusiness infrastructure that would make peanuts easier and more profitable to grow. Farmers could now afford to purchase seed and equipment like pickers, oil manufactures could retrofit cotton oil presses to work for peanuts, and cotton ginners could buy peanut shelling machines. In many parts of the cotton-growing South, the Wiregrass in particular, a new peanut infrastructure sprung up along the railroad tracks amongst the cotton warehouses, often run by the same entrepreneurs.

The war ranks alongside the boll weevil as a major factor shaping southern farming, certainly in the Wiregrass, where farmers benefitted from soaring prices for peanuts and hogs. In 1920 the *New York Times* published a full page article titled "South's Giant Stride from the Pawnshop to Prosperity: World War One Taught Crop Diversification and Revealed Resources". The article, like numerous other similar essays published since the end of the Civil War, touts the great progress made in the recent

[43] Andrew Smith, *Peanuts: The Illustrious History of the Goober Pea* (Urbana: The university of Illinois Press, 2002), 89; *New York Times*, March 25, 1917; *New York Times*, March 23, 1919.

South. It mentions the boll weevil and the war as the primary agents of change and cites peanuts as one example of the positive changes afoot in the South. The article even uses the boll weevil memorial in Enterprise as testimonial proof that things are better. [44]

Despite the hoopla and memorials, peanuts were only one part of the broader diversity program preached in southeast Alabama. For many Wiregrass farmers the goober was only an adjunct to the more profitable enterprise of livestock production. Various agencies and authorities promoted livestock as the key to future prosperity for weevil stricken regions. The Dothan Chamber of Commerce advised Houston County farmers of the benefits of hog farming in July of 1914.

> Beginning in 1915 the acreage in cotton is going to be reduced. Under boll weevil conditions less cotton must be planted so that it can be cultivated more closely and watched more carefully. Besides such truck crops as will be planted every farmer should plan to use some of his land for grain and forage crops and RAISE HOGS. There will be a cash market here in Dothan for all livestock. If this system is adopted here in Houston County it will not only save the farmer from loss on account of the boll weevil, but it will in a few years pay off the mortgage on every farm. [45]

The Dothan Chamber of Commerce and the editors of the Dothan Eagle were aggressive advocates of hogs farming for the farmers around Dothan. There were very appealing reasons for Wiregrass farmers to put resources in livestock, high price being the most obvious.

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[44] *New York Times*, February 15, 1920.

[45] *Dothan Weekly Eagle*, July 3, 1914.

As with peanuts, high wartime demand helped to boost production of hogs in the Wiregrass. In 1917 the federal government became involved in the hog business through the Food Administration. The enormous number of draft animals used by the Allied forces on the western front created a huge demand for animal feed. Corn prices skyrocketed. It became more profitable to sell corn overseas than to use it to feed hogs on Midwestern farms, where most of America's pork was produced. Concerned over the possible decline in meat production, the Food Administration fixed the price of hogs to the price of corn. The price for hogs was initially set at thirteen times the price of a bushel of grain per every 100 pounds of hog. The high prices seemed especially profitable to Wiregrass farmers who unlike their Midwestern counterparts did not depend upon expensive corn to fatten hogs. Relying on peanuts and a combination of other local feed crops Wiregrass farmers could potentially profit handsomely from the federally stabilized prices. [46]

Wiregrass farmers were well positioned to profit from the increased demand for hogs. Their cotton acreage was steadily being converted to peanuts, an ideal hog feed, and they had always produced livestock. Wiregrass stock historically ranged freely through the region's grassy forests; cattle and hogs fending for themselves until such time as they were rounded-up for slaughter or sale. As a result locally bred hogs and cattle became hardy semi-feral survivors. In the first decade of the twentieth century, even as lumber crews cleared the forests and cotton cultivation spread at breakneck speed, Wiregrass farmers still produced a significant number of hogs. In 1910 over seventeen

[46] William Mullendore, *History of the United States Food Administration, 1917-1919* (Stanford University, California: Stanford University Press, 1941); Frank Surface, *American Pork Production in the World War* (Chicago: A.W. Shaw Co., 1926); Wayne Rasmussen, *Readings in the History of Agriculture* (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1960).

percent of the hogs in Alabama were found in the Wiregrass. On the other hand, the rapid conversion of the forest range lands into cotton fields had caused a decline in cattle production from the times when huge herds freely roamed woods and grazed on wiregrass. [47]

Much like peanuts, Wiregrass farmers were familiar with the idea of raising livestock, in particular hogs. However, razorbacks or piney woods rooters would not do for the new export market. The free-range process was cheap and it allowed the landless or small farmer to raise stock, but it produced only a minimal amount of marketable meat per animal. The old methods were fine for producing meat for home and selling the odd hog or two, but to truly live up to the predications of the experts and replace cotton they would have to change their methods. Participating on a national or international market for hogs necessitated a more modern scientific approach to farming.

Improved feed was major part of the new methods. Quality hogs needed high quality feed, which could be cost prohibitive for poor farmers. The connection between hogs and peanuts had its strengths and weaknesses. Wiregrass farmers understood the process of hogging-off peanuts. It was a cheap and efficient way to convert acres of farmland into fat marketable hogs. Unfortunately, meat packers did not like hogs raised exclusively on peanuts. The high oil content of the legumes supposedly made the meat and the lard too soft. To compensate for this factor other feeds, like corn or velvet beans were used to supplement the hogs' diet in addition to the peanuts. County agents actively

[47] Blevins, *Cattle in the Cotton Fields,* 49.

worked with farmers to grow feed crops that provided a nutritious balanced diet for efficiently fattening their hogs.[48]

Improved feed was only part of the equation for better livestock. Another important factor was the improvement of breed stock. The traditional Wiregrass hogs were hardy, but lean and there was little consistency of size, shape, or color. Farmers needed better stock to breed with local hogs in order to improve size and meat production. Breeds of hog such as Berkshire, Poland China, and Duroc became more popular and the Wiregrass newspapers were increasingly full of advertisements for breed stock. Some farmers had already begun to purchase breeding hogs before the weevil arrived. In 1907 an Ozark farmer advertised his "registered Berkshire hogs bred from premium stock". He advised his fellow farmers that "If you want to raise the best buy this breed."[49]

Of course, if the farmers were to invest breed stock they would have to keep their hogs penned–up and practice selective breeding. However, livestock historically roamed free in South Alabama. Traditional stock laws made it the responsibility of farmers to fence their crop, while animals were legally allowed to roam wherever they pleased. The stock laws were slow to change in Alabama. In 1903 the state legislature allowed for county commissions to take up the issue of free ranging stock locally. In the Wiregrass the debate was heated, often pitting more progressive farmers with their pure bred stock against the poorer farmers with traditional semi-feral stock. The economic benefits, not to mention the issues of hygiene, put most urban newspaper editors squarely in favor of

[48] *Peanuts*; Stephan, "Peanut Production"; Braund, "Hog Wild", 24.

[49] *Ozark Tribune*, January 19, 1907.

the extension of stock laws. In 1893 a Dothan newspaper editor expressed revulsion at the number of flea-ridden hogs lolling about his town's streets. [50]

Gradually, the Wiregrass developed stock laws. In 1906 Dale County voted to become a stock-law district. Mule dealer J. D. Holman took advantage of the new turn of events in his advertisements for registered Berkshire hogs. "Stock law is on us. We will have to prepare pastures and pay more attention to stock than before, and it pays to get the best breeds possible." The new fence laws were considered part of progressive agriculture. The quality of Wiregrass stock improved dramatically, especially as hogs replaced cotton as the most profitable agricultural product in the region. In 1916 farmers in Ozark organized a Swine Breeder Association. The region long known for large quantities of hogs was now working on quality as well. County agents throughout the region worked with school children in "Boys Pig Clubs" to teach the most modern methods of hogs farming. Geneva County had a Poland China Hog breeder association that worked specifically to encourage that particular breed of hog. By 1920 the extension agent for Dale County could brag that almost all hogs in the county were of good purebred stock. [51]

Many farmers were hesitant to invest their limited capital in hogs when they may fall victim to hog cholera. Hog cholera could wipe out every hog on a farm, especially if all were enclosed in the same cramped space. However a serum had been

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[50] *Wiregrass Siftings*, June 8, 1893. The fence law issue has been portrayed as a key element in both the transition into profitable modern farming and the decline of self-sufficiency among formerly independent southern yeomen. For more details on this issue see Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism*, Shawn Everett Kantor, *Politics and Property Rights: The Closing of the Open Range in the Postbellum South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), or J. Crawford King, "The Closing of the Southern Range: An Exploratory Study," *The Journal of Southern History* Vol. 48, no. 1 (February 1982).

[51] ACES, Annual County Agent Reports, 1920, Dale; ACES, Annual County Agent Reports, Geneva, 1920.

Figure 9. Two Alabama farm boys with their prize Poland China hogs in 1925.
(Auburn University Digital Library, Auburn University Libraries, Auburn University)

created as a preventative for the cholera. The local papers and agricultural experts worked hard to encourage its use. Still there were many doubters. Counties where the free range persisted presented a particular challenge in the anti-cholera campaign. The *Dothan Eagle* urged that anyone who still didn't believe the value of the serum to go to the Agricultural Department at Alabama Polytechnic Institute and hear it from them.

As with almost all of the agricultural reforms, county agents were at the forefront of the battle against hog cholera. Charged with working to improve all aspects of farming, in the Wiregrass they spent the greater part of their time dealing with issues of hogs. Work with swine took more time than fertilizers, boll weevils and all other issues combined. Extension agents vaccinated thousands of hogs every year and worked to teach farmers how to better care for their livestock. As a part of this work, agents trained

farmers to vaccinate their own hogs, they worked with local pharmacists to acquire serum, and they lectured endlessly on methods of hygienic hog farming. As the 1920s dawned, the agents began to report confidently that the scourge of hog cholera was largely under control.

One of the issues confronting would-be stock raisers in southeastern Alabama was the lack of a local or regional market for livestock sales. The biggest meat-packing facilities in the United States at that time were in the Midwest. Wiregrass farmers needed a local market if they were to reap the rewards of their livestock investments. In 1914 representatives from a meat-packing plant in Moultrie, Georgia set up shop in Dothan to purchase hogs and other stock. They created a year-round market for local stock. In response to the new market a stock raisers' association was created in Dothan, with the intention of encouraging selective breeding and improved husbandry. In 1915 a packing plant was built at Andalusia in Covington County. The plant had a capacity for 400 hogs and ran night and day. The packing plant caused a great deal of excitement among Covington County farmers. The county agent for Covington was amused by the growing popularity of hogs on local farms. "The farmers and businessmen of this county have gone crazy about hogs. Everybody has hogs, even if they have to keep them in the backyard."[52] With the new local packing plant, the weevil's effect on cotton, and record high prices, the Wiregrass farmers would have been crazy not to raise hogs.[53]

[52] ACES, Annual County Agents Reports, Covington, 1916.

[53] *Dothan Weekly Eagle*, September 25, 1914; Watson, *Forgotten Trails*, 81; Sanborn Fire Insurance Company, Map, Andalusia, Alabama, 1916.

In 1917 the Henry County agent noted that "the hog and peanut business has put more money in Henry County than all other crops combined, for once we are independent."[54] In Dale County, hogs and peanuts were called the "backbone" of the economy.[55] The combination of hogs and peanuts indeed proved successful for many Wiregrass farmers. War-time prices encouraged farmers to invest as heavily in hogs as they did peanuts. The tireless efforts of county extension agents led to improved stock quality and fewer losses from hog cholera. Local bankers and merchants long maligned as the cause of indebtedness, encouraged farmers by loaning money for serum, quality breed stock, and feed-crop seeds.[56] The replacement of many acres of cotton with feed crops like peanuts, corn, and velvet beans ensured that Wiregrass farmers would not be dependent on Midwestern grain to fatten their hogs for market. Finally cooperative marketing and the development of new local packing houses improved the ability of farmers to sell their hogs.

Ironically, cattle, which had been a staple of the frontier days in the old Wiregrass, were less important to the development of modern farming in the region than hogs or peanuts. In many ways cattle symbolized the old way of farming, open range in the wiregrass beneath the pines. The remaining forest acres, often owned by lumber companies became the refuge of the last open range cattle herders in the Wiregrass. Until

[54] ACES, Annual County Agent Reports, Henry, 1917.

[55] ACES, Annual County Agent Reports, Dale, 1919.

[56] ACES, Annual County Agent Reports, Geneva, 1917.

the 1930s herds of cattle roamed free on Jackson Lumber Company land in Covington County. [57]

One factor limiting the cattle industry in the Wiregrass was a cattle tick, which carried a micro parasite that weakened and could possible kill cows. The federal government quarantined areas with the tick to prevent the spread of the disease. The ticks could be killed by dipping cattle periodically in a chemical solution; however that meant keeping cattle close at hand. Alabama's tick eradication program started in the north of the state, but by 1919 it was extended state wide. The law required all cattle to be dipped and vats were built in every county. The new law flew directly in the face of the old low-maintenance style of herding. In the first year eleven different Geneva County farmers were fined for violating the tick eradication law.

Many of the old-time free range herders were not worried about tick fever. Their tough local stock had long since developed immunity to the disease. It was the expensive pure-bred stock that suffered the most from the ticks. As such, owners of pure-bred cattle were the most out-spoken advocates of fence laws and tick eradication. "You can't raise ticks and cattle at the same time," observed the prophets of progressive farming at the *Dothan Eagle*. "Land must be fenced in and dipping vats used for cows." Like other innovations in agriculture, fences and dipping vats became standards of progress duly promoted by all the forces of diversification. [58]

The doggedly free range counties, like Geneva and Covington struggled to eliminate the pest. In 1919 the citizens of Geneva County voted against compulsory

[57] Blevins, *Cattle in the Cotton Fields*, 62.

[58] Blevins, 62; *Dothan Weekly Eagle*, July 31, 1914.

cattle dipping.[59] In 1922 over two-thirds of Covington was still in the free-range. Fence law counties like Dale and Henry County became tick-free with little fanfare, possibly because of the low number of cattle in the counties. Despite being released from quarantine Dale County did not develop a substantive cattle business. The agent blamed a lack of good pastures for fattening cattle. The few cattle raised in Dale had to be shipped elsewhere to be fattened for market. Farmers in the county seemed more inclined to invest in hogs than cattle.

The Central of Georgia Railroad was involved in agriculture throughout the Wiregrass. They stood to profit from any improvements in farming. The company sponsored a number of demonstrations in the region, including a tobacco expert in Covington County. The railroad showed particular interest in improving the cattle industry. To this end the company's agricultural specialists worked with farmers and county agents to establish good pastures. They gave farmers seed for lespedeza, Bermuda, and Sudan grass pastures. [60] After the federal quarantine was lifted from Dale County, the railroad loaned farmers in that county two pure-bred shorthorn bulls to improve the quality of the region's stock. [61] Despite the company's efforts to stimulate the cattle industry, Dale County largely remained a hog and peanut producing district.

In addition to peanuts and hogs, Wiregrass farmers experimented with a variety of other commercial crops. As noted, the Central of Georgia Railroad brought tobacco

[59] ACES, Annual County Agent Reports, Geneva, 1919.

[60] ACES, Annual County Agent Reports, Dale, 1921; ACES, Annual County Agent Reports, Geneva, 1921.

[61] ACES, Annual County Agent Reports, Dale, 1919.

farming experts to Covington and Houston.[62] Despite their efforts, tobacco cultivation never really took hold in the Wiregrass. More farmers took up truck as an alternative to cotton or peanuts. The region's warm climate and long growing season seemed particularly suited to fruit and vegetable production. Truck farming was enthusiastically promoted by the newspaper prophets of diversification. Farmers in Houston County established a truck growers association at Dothan in 1913. The organization was set up to provide for collective marketing of produce grown by local farmers. The growers' association planned to crate their produce in Dothan and ship it out using the town's railroad facilities. [63] Farmers in cooperative marketing efforts throughout the region grew a number of different products. Farmers from around Opp in Covington County grew 5000 bushels of cucumbers in 1916. Six years later Covington County farmers cooperatively sold over one hundred car loads of watermelons. Farmers in Houston County also grew watermelons for market that were shipped out of Dothan. [64]

Farmers in the Wiregrass grew a number of crops for home use that could be marketed commercially. Sweet potatoes, in particular, were grown on the majority of farms for food. There were several efforts to encourage farmers in Houston County to grow them for sale. A sweet potato cannery was established in Dothan. The cannery paid farmers a good price for their potatoes. Encouraged by the new local demand, farmers in the neighborhood of Dothan grew more sweet potatoes. If prices declined the farmers

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[62] ACES, Annual County Agent Reports, Geneva, 1916; ACES, Annual County Agent Reports, Houston, 1915.

[63] *Dothan Weekly Eagle*, August 29, 1913; *Dothan Weekly Eagle*, September 5, 1913.

[64] ACES, Annual County Agent Reports, Covington, 1916; ACES, Annual County Agent Reports, Covington, 1922; ACES, Annual County Agent Reports, Houston, 1922.

could always eat the potatoes or use them to fatten hogs. The potatoes did not challenge peanuts or cotton as a primary cash crop, but they provided a source of much needed income as part of a diverse rotation of crops. [65]

Like sweet potatoes, corn was grown on most Wiregrass farms before the arrival of the weevil. Houston County farmers grew almost 900,000 bushels of grain in 1910, mainly corn. In the aftermath of the boll weevil, corn acreage was often expanded to replace the cotton. On most Wiregrass farms corn was used to help fatten the ever growing number of hogs. In 1917 Geneva County farmers planted over 75,000 acres of corn interspersed with velvet beans. Only twenty-five percent was harvested, the remainder was left for livestock forage.[66] Many Wiregrass farmers planted corn together with velvet beans. Velvet beans were a legume that enriched the poor wiregrass soils saving farmers money on fertilizer. They also provided an excellent feed source for hogs or cattle. The beans were a key part of the modern scientific farming methods advocated by the extension service agents.

The increased importance of livestock in the region's economy prompted the creation of feed mills and local market for grain. Covington County had two feed mills that bought corn, velvet beans and peanuts to create livestock feed. The Brandon Grain and Elevator Company built their Dothan facilities in 1916. The grain elevator with a capacity of 1500 bushels was situated on the Atlantic Coastline railroad near the Young and Sanders Company's peanut oil mill. The Wiregrass was not historically known as a major center for grain export, but the construction of the elevator shows that some grain

[65] ACES, Annual County Agent Reports, Houston, 1921.

[66] ACES, Annual County Agent Reports, Geneva, 1916.

was being sold and shipped away. It serves as further evidence of Dothan's growing importance as the region's premier agricultural processing center. [67]

By around 1920 the sharp wartime demand for hogs and peanuts began to wane. In 1921 the agent for Covington County pessimistically predicted that "peanuts are rather low in price right now and we may never count on them as a money crop as we did in 1919 and 1920".[68] Furthermore, the difficulties associated with the new crops began to show. Peanuts were labor intensive and some Wiregrass farmers lost their crops by trying to cure them on the ground instead of stacking them. Peanut farmers who harvested their crop and baled the hay were beginning to see a notable decline in soil fertility. Farmers did not always heed the advice of the extension agents. Some farmers even gave up putting velvet beans in the corn because it made the harvest of corn by hand more difficult.

Cotton gradually crept back into the fields. Improved farming methods, new fertilizers, and dusting with calcium arsenate mitigated the impact of the boll weevil. Even more appealing for farmers, prices were high. Boll weevil infestation had caused a massive reduction in cotton acreage and new war industry created a high demand. The factors combined to create record high cotton prices in 1918. Many farmers were tempted to return once again to the old cycle of cotton farming. Cotton was by no means dead in the Wiregrass. As most farmers had grown some cotton all along, never really giving up on the staple, it was easy for them to return to cotton as a main money crop. Drawn by

[67] *Dothan Eagle*, September 8, 1916; Sanborn Fire Insurance Company, Map, Dothan, 1920; *Thirteenth Census, Agriculture*; ACES, Annual County Agent Reports, Covington, 1921.

[68] ACES, Annual County Agent Reports, Covington, 1921.

high prices and the promise of a return to pre weevil production levels, these farmers expanded their cotton acreage at the expense of corn, peanuts, or velvet beans.

The increase in cotton acreage worried many observers, who feared a return to the debt riddled monoculture. The Wiregrass extension agents worked to keep acreage down and encourage the continuance of diverse farming. In 1920 representatives of the concerned parties met at Dothan to discuss the future of farming in the Wiregrass. The meeting was attended by state agricultural experts, extension agents, leading farmers, bankers and merchants. The result of this conference was the "Safe Farming Program for Southeast Alabama". The ideas behind the Safe Farming Program were expressed by the Covington County agent in 1921.

> The time is coming and it isn't far off, when we will all follow a good sound cropping system- some cotton, some livestock, some peanuts, hay, oats and some good pasture, lots of good terraces, worlds of velvet beans and cover crops, along with some truck crops, possibly. Then we will have less "leap-froggin," jumping from cotton to hogs, from hogs to peanuts and back again to cotton.[69]

The Safe Farming Program was designed to accomplish these goals and limit the reckless pursuit of quick profits by farmers.

The program, designed for a one-horse farmer with 40 acres in cultivation, focused on balance, sustainability, and financial security. It offered prescribed acreages for a variety of crops. Farmers following the program were to plant six acres of cotton, six acres of peanuts, twelve acres of corn and velvet beans together, two acres of oats, and one acre each of sweet potatoes and sugar cane. The program recommended a

[69] ACES, Annual County Agent Reports, Covington, 1921.

Figure 10. Corn raised on a Geneva County farm in 1926.
(Auburn University Digital Library, Auburn University Libraries, Auburn University)

variety of livestock in addition to the diverse crops. Farmers were to keep two brood sows of good breeding stock. The sows would produce two litters each per year. Each sow required three acres sown in feed crops, like peanuts, velvet beans, corn, rye, or oats. Two additional acres would be kept in permanent pasture of good grass. Farms should have a dairy cow and a number of hens. Farms should also have a garden and an orchard to produce fruits and vegetables for home use. The goal of the plan was to create as much self-sufficiency as possible.

Safe farming implied more than a diverse array of crops and livestock. It meant farmers should work hard to make their farms modern and efficient. The program encouraged sound soil conservation techniques, like the use of terracing and cover crops.

Farmers were to maximize the productivity of their fields by removing stumps, which was still an issue for many farmers in the cutover districts. Livestock were to be penned, properly cared for, and protected from disease. Furthermore, the program advocated the judicious use of appropriate fertilizer and the purchase of labor-saving machinery. The plan's proponents hoped for a revolution of modern farming. Efficient and profitable farming would benefit the whole community. The Safe Farming Program was aggressively promoted by banks and extension agents, alike. It was pushed in the schools and at civic organizations throughout the southeast corner of Alabama. The new farming program represented only the latest in a long line of diversification efforts aimed at southern farmers. Perhaps, however, years of work to encourage balance had finally begun to work.

In 1920 cropland in the Wiregrass was planted roughly in accordance to the safe farming guidelines. That year, farmers in the region planted approximately thirty-six percent of their cropland in corn, twenty-one percent in cotton, and sixteen percent in peanuts. They also raised 286,230 hogs, almost twenty percent of all the hogs in the state. In 1925 Wiregrass farmers grew more cotton and peanuts. That year they planted approximately thirty-eight percent of their cropland in corn, thirty-six percent in cotton, and eighteen percent in peanuts. The acreage of each crop was distributed evenly across the regions farms as around ninety-one percent of farmers grew cotton, eighty-one percent grew peanuts, and virtually all of then planted corn. In addition to their crops seventy-seven percent of Wiregrass farmers had hogs in 1925, accounting for almost a quarter of Alabama's total hog population. Cotton acreage had increased from the lowest

Figure 11. A Coffee County farmer plants peanuts using a mule in 1939. (Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection, LC-USF34-051480-D DLC)

years after the boll weevil. However, far from a cotton monoculture, it had become part of a more balanced program of modern farming. [70]

Modern farming, however, was not cheap. The safe farming program had a number of costs that could bury farmers; machines and equipment, quality breed stock, veterinary services, quality seed, and increased amounts of chemical pesticides and fertilizers, to mention a few. Like their counterparts across the nation, Wiregrass farms were adopting more machinery in their work in the 1920s. In 1921 the Ford Motor company ran a field demonstration of improved plows, stump pullers and other heavy

[70] Census Report, 1920; 1925 Agricultural Census.

farm equipment in Geneva County. Anxious to bring the latest technology to his charges, the county agent set up the demonstration.[71]

Fertilizer in particular was a major expense for farmers. Scientific methods of farming depended heavily on fertilizer to increase yields in the sandy Wiregrass soils. The methods of cotton cultivation used to overcome the effects of weevil infestation also called on the use of more fertilizer. The commercial harvest of peanuts also drew heavily on the soil, thus necessitating the use of fertilizer to replace lost nutrients. Chemical fertilizer was absolutely essential to productive farming in the Wiregrass. In 1920 farmers from the Wiregrass counties were responsible for almost forty percent of fertilizer expenditures for the whole state of Alabama. In 1925 Coffee County led all Alabama counties in fertilizer purchases, spending over $611,000. By 1920 there were numerous manufacturers of fertilizer in the Wiregrass. Dothan alone had five companies manufacturing or mixing fertilizers. [72]

The county agents encouraged the collective purchase of fertilizer ingredients by farmers who could then mix them as needed at home. Some farmers were able to take advantage of this money saving idea, but most were not in a position to engage in cooperative purchasing. In 1922 the Dale County Agent observed that collective buying programs struggled because as much as eighty percent of the county's farmers were in debt to banks and therefore obligated to buy supplies from their sources. [73]

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[71] ACES, Annual County Agent Reports, Geneva, 1921.

[72] Census Report, 1920; 1925 Agricultural Census; Sanborn Fire Insurance Company, Map, Dothan, 1920.

[73] ACES, Annual County Agent Reports, Dale, 1922.

To look at the Wiregrass on the eve of the Depression was a study in the complications of modern agriculture. The prosperity of the Great War era had faded. However, agricultural diversity had been truly embraced by the region's farmers. The agricultural sector steadily grew along side the last vestiges of industrial lumber. The region's towns were home to numerous agricultural processing and service facilities. It is indicative of the success of the diverse agricultural economy of the region that in 1929 the Rawls Bonded Cotton Warehouse and Gin shared the same block in Enterprise as the Sessions Trading Company Peanut Warehouse and the Warren Guano Company. In Headland the Home Fertilizer and Cotton Oil Company, the kind of business found along the railroad tracks in nearly every Wiregrass town, had a bigger peanut warehouse than cotton warehouse. Dothan was something of an agricultural metropolis. It was home to numerous cotton gins, compresses, and oil mills, peanut warehouses, processors, and oil mills, several fertilizer and chemical plants, a cannery, a syrup manufacturer and even, quite appropriately, an overall manufacturer. The freight depots were surrounded by lumber yards, tanks for cotton seed and peanut oil, hog pens, and blocks of warehouses for various agricultural processors. The town prospered from farming. As early as 1920 Dothan even had a country club, an auto dealer and a Coca-Cola bottler. [74]

Through the early years of the 1920s it seemed that farming would be the business of the future for the Wiregrass. Even in towns where lumber mills closed and pulled up their tracks, the farm economy brought a new sense of prosperity. Diversity efforts and scientific methods seemed to make it possible for farmers to weather the bad years and thrive in the good. The rapidly expanding network of railroads and towns, years of

[74] Sanborn Fire Insurance Company, Map, Dothan, 1920.

aggressive promotion, high wartime prices, and the relative success of the peanut and hog combination had cause an explosion of farming in the Wiregrass. By 1930 the Wiregrass counties were among the most heavily cultivated regions in Alabama. More than seventy-five percent of the land in Coffee and Dale Counties was farmed.[75]

The longleaf pine forests with their ubiquitous wiregrass had been largely relegated to the realm of distant pioneer memories. In place of the forests were seemingly endless fields. The vast forests disappeared and the few remaining stands of virgin timber were steadily cut by "peckerwood loggers", often farmers looking to earn extra money. Farmers waged war on the remaining stumps in the name of efficiency and modern agriculture. Open pastures of Bermuda grass replaced the fire-dependent native grass just as cotton and peanuts replaced pines. Iconic images of southern agriculture in the fall became the most representative image of the Wiregrass; fields white with cotton or, more unique to the Wiregrass, fields dotted with conical piles of stacked peanuts.

[75]The state average was only fifty-three percent. Federal Census Reports, Agriculture, 1930.

EPILOGUE: THE BEAR FARM

The late 1920s were a hard time for farmers nationwide and the Wiregrass was no different. Encouraged by artificially high war-time food prices and facilitated by new techniques and technology, farmers had aggressively expanded their acreage at the end of the 1910s and into the early 1920s. Much of the expansion occurred by developing marginal or less fertile land, which was often subject to erosion.[1] When prices dropped in the mid-twenties many farmers were unable to produce a living on the less productive land. In the Wiregrass even the best land required fertilizer to produce a good crop, the weakest and most highly eroded soils required more fertilizer than the farmers could afford. By the time of the stock market crash in 1929 some farmers had already seen several years of low prices and hard times.

With too many farmers working underproductive plots, the Great Depression hit Coffee and Dale Counties particularly hard. All of the banks in Dale County and all but one of the banks in Coffee County failed. Tragically, the international financial crisis came to the Wiregrass on the heels of a local natural disaster of historic proportions. In March of 1929 large parts of Coffee County were inundated by the flooding Pea River. The flood was the most destructive in the region's history, completely washing away the

[1] A similar process of over-extended agriculture on marginal lands led to the "Dust Bowl" tragedy in the Great Plains. For an excellent exploration of that story see Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

town of Elba and many surrounding farms. Farmers in Dale and Coffee struggled to rebuild in the wake of this flood just as the nation was gripped by financial crisis. [2]

Under Franklin Roosevelt the scale and scope of federal government work among the people was vastly expanded. In particular, a wide variety of federal programs were designed to mitigate the effects of the depression for farmers. Notably, there were crop reduction programs and acreage allotments for commodities like cotton and peanuts. In Dale County the extension service agents worked with farmers to reduce cotton acreage and distribute Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) aid. In 1933 Coffee County farmers plowed up 14,775 acres of cotton under the auspices of federal crop reduction plans. An additional 6,850 acres were destroyed that year by Dale County farmers. County agents worked to enroll farmers in federal programs and government checks became an essential part of the rural economy in the Wiregrass. By 1935 over $83,000 in AAA checks were distributed in Dale alone. In Coffee County another federal program was initiated to create new subsistence homesteads for struggling families on relief. The Federal government bought over 50,000 acres as a part of the homestead project in Coffee County. Despite all of the federal aid the region's farmers continued to struggle. [3]

In 1934 Dale County Agent Doug Thomason received a brochure from the USDA that described a federal program to buy marginal farmland, move residents to more productive land, and reforest the property to create wildlife preserves and recreation

[2] Watson, *Coffee Grounds*, 226; Val McGee, *The Origins of Fort Rucker* (Ozark, Alabama: The Dale County Historical Society, 1987), 5.

[3] ACES, Annual County Agent Reports, Dale, 1933; ACES, Annual County Agent Reports, Coffee, 1933; ACES, Annual County Agent Reports, Dale, 1935; ACES, Annual County Agent Reports, Coffee, 1935.

areas. Called a Land Utilization Project the program initially started under the aegis of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. In 1935 a number of similar programs were consolidated under the newly created Resettlement Administration. By 1937 the Resettlement Administration was absorbed by the Farm Security Administration, but the land use projects were shifted into the Bureau of Agricultural Economics. Despite all of the bureaucratic shuffling, a number of large-scale land use projects were initiated in Alabama. In Macon County 10,358 acres were acquired under this program. The land was reforested to create the Tuskegee National Forest.[4]

Doug Thomason saw the new resettlement program as an opportunity for Dale County. To qualify for the project the land in question had to be submarginal for acceptable farming, at least forty percent in cultivation, and planted in crops currently contributing to agricultural surplus. Thomason understood only too well that in 1934 substantial portions of Dale County met the program's qualifications. On a map of the county Thomason circled two potential districts that he felt best met the government stipulations. The first was east of Ozark between the West and East forks of the Choctawhatchee River. The second was west of Ozark along Claybank Creek. He sent the map to the program's regional director in Mississippi and returned to his busy schedule working with Dale County's farmers. [5]

To his surprise, in March of 1935 Thomason received word regarding his proposal and a visit from Dr. W. A. Hartman the regional director for the Division of

[4] Sidney Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics: The Rise and Decline of the Farm Security Administration* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 107; Sarah Warren and Robert Zabawa, "The Origins of the Tuskegee National Forest: Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Land Development Programs in the Black Belt," *Agricultural History* 72, no. 2, (Spring 1998): 459, 501.

[5] McGee, *The Origins of Fort Rucker*, 16.

Land Utilization, Resettlement Administration. Thomason drove his guest on a tour the first section on his map east of Ozark between the East and West Forks of the Choctawhatchee, but Dr. Hartman was not impressed. The next day Thomason enlisted the help of Henderson Johnson, a local farmer who had helped him in the past with hog sales. Johnson took the visiting bureaucrat along the dirt roads west of Ozark showing him only the poorest farms and most heavily eroded land. After his day of driving the Dale County back roads with Thomason and the local farmer, Hartman agreed to recommend the second tract, west of Ozark for the Land Use Project.

The final tract included 32,335 acres. Approximately two-thirds of the land was in Dale and with the remainder in Coffee County. The area was composed mainly of highly erosive red clay hills on either side of the aptly named Claybank Creek. Infertile to begin with, the land was further exhausted from decades of intensive farming and poor management. The tract to be purchased was officially called the Pea River Land Use Project after the river that flowed through the two counties. [6]

For the Pea River Land Use Project to succeed the land owners would have to voluntarily sell their property to the government. In 1935 the extension agent for Coffee County was confident that the landowners in the Coffee County portion of the project were nearly unanimous in their support of the proposal. There was more of a debate in Ozark where some of the community hesitated to support the government purchases. However, vocal support of the program by Thomason and Ozark's paper, *The Southern Star*, led to community support.

[6] Soil Map (Montgomery: Alabama Department of Agriculture, 1953); McGee, *The Origins of Fort Rucker*, 23.

Through the Pea River Land Use Project the government bought approximately 35,000 acres. The purchase involved the transfer of 178 separate deeds, 54 in Coffee and 124 in Dale. The land was purchased at an average rate of $7.46 per acre. Large portions of the land were under the control of the Federal Land Bank. In all 223 farm families were moved off of the property. Unlike the Tuskegee Project in Macon County where over ninety percent of the resettled families were African-American, the vast majority of the families involved in the Pea River Project were white. Some of them were tenants who had no say in their fate. Not all of the area's farmers agreed to sell to the government. The residents were not unanimous in their willingness to leave. The citizens of the Haw Ridge community refused to voluntarily sell. They eventually lost their property to the government by eminent domain in 1942 when the Pea River Project was converted into a military base.[7]

Once the deeds were processed a project manager came from Birmingham and established the Pea River Land Use Project headquarters in Ozark. He hired a local man, H.L. Holman, to serve as chief engineer and architect. By March of 1936 there were over 2,500 men at work on the project. Most were laborers taken from the WPA roles of men on relief. However, a number of professionals also worked on the project; surveyors, construction supervisors, foresters, and wildlife experts. [8]

The project's field headquarters was established in an abandoned farm house on the site and telephone lines were strung between the site and Ozark. A nursery was built to provide seedlings for the projects reforestation efforts. Foresters supervised the

[7] McGee, *The Origins of Fort Rucker*, 47-49; "Tuskegee National Forest", 502.

[8] McGee, *The Origins of Fort Rucker*, 50.

planting of tens of thousands of these pine seedlings. In addition to the planting trees, firebreaks and roads were planned and built to provide for the long term maintenance of the new forest. Wildlife experts released quail, a popular game bird that had grown rare as its habit disappeared. Two park areas were built along the main highway between Ozark and Enterprise that bisected the tract.

In the summer of 1935 as work on the project reached a high point the country side was alive with crews engaged in the various tasks of conservation and construction. Curious Ozark residents wondered aloud what exactly the government was doing out there on the project. According to Doug Thomason, an employee with the Dale County Farmers Exchange coined the name "Bear Farm." The young man grew tired of all the questions, so he just started telling people that the government planned to raise bears on the property. The name stuck and the Pea River Land Use Project was locally known as the "Bear Farm."[9]

The center piece of the Bear Farm's recreation area was to be an 800 acre lake. Project engineer Holman oversaw the creation of the lake which was to be three miles long and one mile wide. To create the lake a 47 foot high and 2,500 long earthen dam was built across Claybank Creek. The dam had a 50 foot concrete spill way which would maintain a regular water depth of 37 feet. As the lake filled, it was stocked with a variety of fish species. The lake also had a man-made beach for swimming.

Upon completion in 1940 the Pea River Project was leased to the state of Alabama for fifty years. The Bear Farm's recreation, forestry and wild life resources were to be administered and maintained by the Alabama Conservation Department.

[9] Ibid. 49.

Large crowds attended the grand opening in June 1940. There were speed boat races on the lake now officially dubbed Lake Tholocco. Tholocco is purportedly the Creek Indian name for Sam Dale, the man for home Dale County was named. In August, when the lake was officially opened to fishing over 600 fishing permits were sold on the first day alone. [10]

In many ways the Pea River Project represented the New Deal at its best. A combination of federal and local effort turned 35,000 acres of under-producing, erosion riddled farm land into a forested recreation area. The project employed local workers at all levels. The land itself, long scarred, was healed and put to positive use in recreation. However, this is not the end of the Bear Farm story. As Ozark families picnicked on Lake Tholocco and Dale County farmers bought fishing permits, the clouds of war gathered on the horizon.

There were people in Ozark and Enterprise who dreamed of drawing an even more active federal presence to the Wiregrass. Europe and Asia were torn by conflict and seemed only a matter of time before the US would be drawn into the fray. The army would need more training facilities for the coming conflict. Community leaders in the Wiregrass especially noted the economic impact that Fort Benning had on nearby Columbus, Georgia. Almost as soon the Pea River Project opened, it was actively promoted by local leaders for conversion to a military base. With the support of Congressmen Henry Steagall, an Ozark native and key ally of FDR, the Pea River Project was selected to serve as an army training camp.

[10] Ibid. 68, 84.

The State of Alabama willingly surrendered its lease to the federal government, but the Bear Farm was not technically large enough to host the full scale training of military personnel, including barracks, firing ranges, air fields, and numerous other facilities. The federal government exercised eminent domain to acquire an additional 27,220 acres in Dale County south of the original project tract and 1,834 acres in Coffee County. Those who had been initially unwilling to sell to the Pea River Land Use Project were now forced to surrender their property. Holdouts like the Haw Ridge community disappeared from the map. In all, there were fourteen churches and two schools in the property acquired in late 1941 and early 1942. The Fort Rucker Reservation was used for training during the Second World War and the Korean War. In the 1950s it became the home of Army Aviation, meaning it was the base for US military helicopters training. Fort Rucker remains an important training facility for Army Aviation. [11]

In some ways the Fort Rucker story brings the landscape of the Wiregrass full circle. In less than one-hundred years the Wiregrass had gone from longleaf pine forests, to cut-over, to farms, and because of the Pea River Land Use Project a substantial portion of it was returned back to forest. From the beginning, the Wiregrass landscape played an important role in the region's development. Industry and economy developed because of, and in many ways limited by, the resource base available in the region's unique environment. Conversely, economic development and the exploitation of resources inextricably altered the Wiregrass landscape, changing the equation and forcing people to readapt to the new environmental context.

[11] Ibid. 83.

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