The timber industry has always been an important part of the economy in South Arkansas. I can only imagine how things looked when our ancestors first arrived. Most of them were interested in having land for farming and much of the land was covered in timber. They picked out areas that were suitable for growing crops and begin to remove any standing timber that was growing there. That was quite a job in those days with the primitive equipment they had.

The two main occupations in the rural areas were farming and sawmilling. Cotton was the main money crop, but farmers also grew corn and oats for the animals, sorghum for making syrup, and vegetables to feed the family. They also grew peanuts, popcorn, and watermelons which were considered treats in those days when trips to town were few and far between. Most farms had an orchard to provide fruit supplemented by blackberries, muscadines, wild plums, and persimmons found growing wild.

GROUND HOG SAWMILLS

There were some large sawmills around, but the most common type in the rural areas were small mills called ground hog mills. In some areas, they were called doodlebug mills, jerkwater mills, or peckerwood mills. These small mills could be dismantled and moved in two or three days to get closer to the timber to be cut. A tract of forty acres of timber was enough to warrant moving the mill. It might take six months to a year to cut forty acres of timber in those days. A typical mill had four or five men working at the mill, a couple of teams hauling logs, and two saws cutting the logs. The cutting was done by two men using a cross-cut saw. These little ground hog mills were run by steam engines and later gasoline engines. Sometimes, automobile engines were used to run the mill. I have read that Buick and Cadillac engines were best suited to run a sawmill. Short spur railroad lines (trams) were sometimes constructed off the main railroad line to access large areas of timber.
The logs were hauled by teams of horses or mules pulling wagons loaded with a few logs. You can see why it took so long to cut forty acres of timber using this type of equipment.

By the late 1800s, most of the smaller communities had one or two sawmills which produced lumber. Some of them had a grist mill in conjunction with the sawmill where people could get their corn ground into corn meal. These mills employed several men and were the principal industry in these small communities. Some communities were
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even named after the person who established the mill in that community such as Barham on the railroad near Chidester and a community called Bright near Lamartine. Sawmills often changed ownership which meant the name of the mill was changed. Here are just a few of the sawmills mentioned in the local news columns in Nevada County.

Bluff City – J. W. Dill (1918-1970s); 2 mills not named (1907)
Bodcaw – Munn & Brockman (1886-1891; C. H. Jones (1917)
Boughton – H. R. Clarke (1886); H. M. Basham (1886); Henry Barham (1886); J. C. Byrd (1887); I. H. Wilson (1888); Marshal & Haltom (1889); Graham & Graham (1889)
Caney -- George W. Mendenhall (1887); Jones, Smith & Co. (1891)
Carouse – Mr. Brower (1889)
Glenville – J. W. Blake (1910)
Harmony – Mr. Wilson (1891)
Laneburg – Munn & Hudson (1885)
Morris – Arthur Fletcher & W. C. Wicker (1907)
Mt. Moriah – Munn’s Saw & Grist mill (1865); new mill (1914); Brice Barham/Tom Williams (1916); new mill (1921)
Piney Grove – Jones, Smith & Co. (1891)
Redland – Leroy McKelvy (1950s)
Smash Up – R. H. Delaney (1916); J. W. Bevill (1916); Houston Delaney (1950s)

SHINGLE MILLS

Some mills specialized in making certain products. An example was the shingle mill which manufactured wooden shingles for roofing houses. When I was growing up, many of the older homes had cypress shingle roofs. These were short thin boards approximately eighteen inches long and overlapped to cover the roof. These type roofs were also used on the out-buildings and lasted for many years.

Laura Kirk home in Bluff City
Orland McKelvy home at Rocky Hill

STAVE BOLTS

The word “bolt” in this case refers to a short section of a log (approximately 39 inches long) from which staves were made. The wooden staves were used in making wooden barrels. This was common around 1900. Oak was the main species of trees used for making staves. The local news reporter from Bluff City reported in 1910 that “Arkadelphia
Milling Co. is doing a good bolt business in this settlement and putting lot of money into circulation. Bluff City looks like a regular bolt yard”.

HANDLE MILLS

Another specialized mill made handles for various tools like axes, hoes, shovels, cant hooks, etc. Rather than buy a new tool when a handle broke, a new handle could be purchased. Hickory was the species of wood most often used to make handles and good quality hickory trees brought a good price.

SPOKE MILL

The only spoke mill I know about in our area was located at Dill’s Mill, a few miles southwest of Bluff City. It was reported in 1918 that Mr. J. W. Dill had opened a spoke factory. He had an order from the U. S. government, but was having trouble finding enough men to work. This mill produced wooden spokes used in wheels for vehicles before metal wheel rims were used. You can find photos of old vehicles with wooden spoke wheels. One of my cousins told me she had a spoke made at Dill’s Mill that she used for a potato masher. Here is a picture taken at Dill’s Mill showing what I believe to be stacks of wood used to make these wooden spokes.

Dill’s Mill, also called Caney Creek mill, was a major landmark in our area for many years. It was quite a large operation which employed several men from the community. It was located on the Reader Railroad line which provided a way for the lumber to be shipped from the mill.

FLOORING MILLS

A few mills produced hardwood flooring. When our home was being built in the mid-1950s, hardwood flooring was used throughout the home. I think it was purchased at a mill located at Beirne in Clark County. I can remember helping to install the short hardwood boards when I was a young boy. It was time-consuming work, but resulted in a beautiful floor as long as it was maintained properly.

MAJOR SAWMILLS

The large sawmills were usually located in the larger towns which had a railroad so the lumber produced could be easily shipped to other parts of the country. An example would be the Ozan mill at Prescott. Gurdon Lumber Co. at Gurdon, Chidester Lumber Co. at Chidester. Barringer Lumber Co. at Whelen Springs, and numerous others. Some mills
primarily used pine timber while others used hardwood timber. Some mills produced hardwood flooring for houses.

Most of these larger mills were later purchased by large timber companies like Potlatch, Deltic, Georgia-Pacific, and International Paper Co. Some mills were expanded and are now the major industry in some of the towns in our area. Some specialize in producing lumber, while others produce plywood, OSB boards, and other products which are in demand at the time. Ownership of these mills sometimes is changed as companies buy and sell their facilities to meet their goals. For example, the big mill at Gurdon, now owned by Georgia-Pacific, was purchased from International Paper Co. who had purchased it from Arkla Chemical Co. Some companies owned many acres of timberland to supply wood for their mills and also bought timber from private landowners. I was fortunate in 1974 when International Paper Co. decided to purchase 145,000 acres of timberland from Gurdon Lumber Co. I was hired that year to help manage their timberland and spent the next 31 plus years working for that company. About the time I retired, the company decided to close their paper mill at Camden and no longer needed all the timberland. Most of that land is now owned by other companies or investment groups such as insurance companies. The ownership may change, but the land remains and the timber keeps growing.

Sawmills must adjust to the changing times and produce whatever products the consumers want –everything from basic lumber in all sizes and lengths, 4 x 8 sheets of plywood and OSB in different thicknesses, pressure-treated lumber for outdoor projects, landscape timbers, railroad ties, and many other specialized products. It all starts with harvested timber and our part of Arkansas has an abundance of that natural resource.

People often complain about the large timber companies clear-cutting so much timber. It looks bad for a year or two, but new trees are planted and soon a new forest is growing to supply the demand. You must think of growing timber the same way as growing a crop like corn or soybeans. It just takes a lot longer for the crop to mature before it’s ready for harvest. Trees get old just like people, and if left alone, many will begin to rot, be attacked by insects, be hit by lightning, or become diseased. Most sawmills in our area now mainly use smaller pine trees than in the past because so much of the timber available is from pine plantations that were planted after the older timber was harvested. It takes about 30 years to grow a pine tree from a seedling to maturity and they need to be thinned at least twice at about age 15 and 20. When mature, the crop is harvested and the process starts all over again. Hardwood trees like oaks do not grow as fast as pine, but some of the softer hardwoods like sweet gum grow much faster.

RAINFALL RECORD

January (7.5 inches); February (7.7 inches); March (7.8 inches); April (10.4 inches); May (5.3 inches); June (7.3 inches). That’s 46 inches for the first half of the year. Our normal annual rainfall in 52 inches. Looks like 2020 is going to be another very wet year if this trend continues.
WHAT IS IT?
Made from cast iron. Many homes had one of these in the old days.
Send me your answers.

YEGG MAN ARRESTED AT PRESCOTT

When I saw this headline in the Prescott Daily News from 1912, I immediately wondered what a Yegg man was. This term was popular in the early 1900s and refers to tramp thieves, hobo burglars, and safe breakers. The term is said to have been first used by the Pinkerton detective agency. Some think the name came from the surname of a man who was caught doing that type crime.

A man had arrived in Prescott from Hope, checked into a hotel and ordered a meal. He paid with postage stamps. The hotel proprietor called the police. The officers located the man and found almost $100 in postage stamps inside his grip (suitcase). They arrested the man and put him in the city jail. They called the Hope police and discovered that he had paid for things with postage stamps at several places in Hope.

After further investigation, it was believed the man belonged to a gang from Tennessee which broke into safes in small country post offices stealing the stamps along with any money found.

LAGNIAPPE

I also found an item in the newspaper from 1908 saying that Camden merchants had agreed to designate Saturdays as Lagniappe Day to induce customers to shop. My curiosity was aroused and I had to look that word up in the dictionary to see what it meant.

It means to give a small gift or extra measure to customers who purchase something such as a bakery giving an extra doughnut when you buy a dozen doughnuts.

The word is of Creole-French origin and is pronounced (lan-yap’) or (lan’-yap).
THE COVID-19 BLUES
By Jerry McKelvy

The virus started in China
At a place called Wuhan
Airplane travel helped it spread
All across China and beyond

Soon it reached our country
The first hot spot was New York City
Millions of people there
Thousands getting sick. What a pity!

Experts were called in and asked
What we could do to stop the spread
Since there was no medicine to help
“Stay at home” was the first thing they said.

The schools and most stores closed
Which was not a surprise
This could be a serious situation
People rushed out to get needed supplies.

Hand sanitizer and disinfectants sold out
And the people began to panic
The news reports were very bad
From the countries across the Atlantic.

Toilet paper and paper towels
Disappeared from the store
Also, meat and poultry
Baby diapers and more.

Crowded places were closed
Right from the start
The people were told
To stay six feet apart.

Families were stuck together at home
In a voluntary quarantine
Soon boredom set in
And we missed our old routine

Wear a mask we were told
To cover our mouth and nose
Wear rubber gloves
And wash our clothes.

Wash your hands often
You can’t do it too much
Germs could be anywhere
So watch what you touch.

The older people were most at risk
So we did what we had to do
We kept them isolated
Because this was no ordinary flu.

Deaths were daily reported
On the evening news
The weeks dragged on
We all had the Covid-19 Blues

The economy was hurting
Products were in short supply
Even if we had the money
Some things we could not buy

The people needed help
To buy food and pay the rent
The government stepped in
And a stimulus check was sent.

Some states had many cases
And others had only a few
Each state governor had to decide
What he or she should do.

Churches had to close
Unless the number of people was less than ten
But Walmart and Lowe’s could stay open
With hundreds of people flocking in.

Hair salons and barber shops
Were all closed down
Our hair grew longer
Our smile turned into a frown.

Eating out was very much missed
Because restaurants were affected
They switched from dine-in to carry-out
Lest someone get infected.
Thousands of tests were given
To check for the disease
“It will only take a minute”
“Be careful with that swab, please”.

Some states began to open back up
With certain restrictions
But the virus kept spreading
Confirming the predictions.

Some people went along as usual
And didn’t follow the rules
Crowding together in close places
And acting like fools

The daily death reports
Were quite depressing
Any tidbit of good news
Was considered a blessing.

Schools need to re-open
Children need their education
But how to open them safely
Is the problem facing our nation.

Thousands of jobs were lost
As our good economy ground to a halt
It may take years to recover
From something that was not our fault.

The year is half gone as I write this poem
This virus is the worst we have seen
I suppose people will continue to get sick
Until they can develop a good vaccine.

We are hoping and praying
For some much better news
Because we are tired of dealing
With the Covid-19 Blues

Senior Citizens Day, Aug. 21
In 1988, President Ronald Reagan signed a proclamation declaring August 21 as National Senior Citizens Day. To celebrate, spend time with the senior citizens you know. Let them know that they are appreciated and loved. Take a senior citizen out to lunch or dinner. (Don Mathis says he is available.) 😊

The other day on the freeway
I saw a sign.

It just flashed by on my daily drive;
I gave it no mind.

Hey, wait a sec,
I can’t neglect a message this great!

Have I read what I thought it said
—or was it a mistake?

“Elderly man, white Dodge van,”
they’re looking to find,

“License plate GX4-98.”
Hey, that’s mine!

I didn’t know I shouldn’t go wandering off all alone.

But Alzheimer’s is for old-timers who have to stay at home.

If I’m not wrong, I missed the ‘A-Bomb,’
I don’t have memory loss.

“Where’s my residence?”

Who’s the president?”
These questions make me cross.

Bigger than any sign that you might find for a missing person is the proof, to tell the truth, you’re an octogenarian.

Yes, turn the page; you’re past middle-age, and in the final story.

If you’re lucky at all, you won’t recall how far you fell from glory.

Life in the Past Lane – by Don Mathis