

Title Sawing Logs - The Southern Forest Heritage Museum
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As time goes by, it's only natural that modern generations lose touch with the old ways of doing things. Like it or not, the times that seem like "just yesterday" are quickly becoming the "good old days."

How many people remember when there were only three television broadcast companies? Or remember what it was like to rise up from the easy chair and walk to the TV set to change the channel?

How did we exist without cell phones, electric toothbrushes, the Internet, mp3 music files and fast food?

Go back a little further. How many folks can recollect what it was like to use steam engines? Or experience the sound, smell and danger of a steam powered lumber mill?

According to Henry Taves, site director of the Southern Forest Heritage Museum in Long Leaf, hardly anyone does any more.

Believe it or not, as late as the 1950s, many southern lumber mills were relying on steam engines to provide power to convert pine trees into two-by-fours, planking, molding and flooring.

During the first half of the 20th century, steam powered freight trains chugged constantly across the South enabling industry to tap the wealth of the vast pine tree forests.

Louisiana lumber towns like Long Leaf, Meridian and Bogalusa sprang up practically overnight and became tiny, self-contained cities, providing everything for their labor force with one goal in mind: supplying quality lumber for America's growing economy.

Bogalusa grew into a real town, but Meridian, which was located just north of Turkey Creek in Evangeline Parish, no longer exists. Today, the town of Long Leaf is little more than a post office along the Missouri Pacific rail line, but at one time it was host to more than 1,000 people who made their living from the longleaf pine forest.

No one lives in the heart of Long Leaf, but the spirit of the lumber town lives on at the Southern Forest Heritage Museum. During a visit there, a sightseer can step back through the pages of history and practically hear the grunt and toil of the hundreds of sawyers, engineers, machinists, blacksmiths and laborers who produced more than 75,000 board feet of lumber daily by 1910.

The museum, consisting of 34 buildings on 57 acres, rests on a rolling hillside just south of Forest Hill in Rapides Parish on La. 497. It is a pristine example of the life and labor of a bygone day. The buildings, including a sawmill, planer mill, roundhouse, machine shop and commissary, and all of the boilers, steam engines, belt drives, locomotives and log loaders, even the piled-up paperwork of the overworked machine shop foreman's office, were literally abandoned when Crowell Lumber Industries ceased lumber operations in 1969.

It is literally an antique lumber town frozen in time.

"We have a general store, where everybody came and did their trading," said Bob Madison, the executive director of the museum. "At one time there were 165 houses. The town had a café and a doctor on site and a two-story hotel."

Only three actual living quarters remain on the site, and the sawmill and planer mill are slowly being

restored.

The site was overgrown with scrub trees, climbing vines and brush when Crowell Lumber Industries donated the historic location to the newly formed Southern Forest Heritage Museum and Research Center, a non-profit organization under the wing of the Louisiana Forestry Association. The lumber mill had lain dormant for nearly 30 years.

"When we got the site it was all overgrown with vegetation and it took two years to get that taken care of where it could be open for tours," Madison said. "When Crowell left in 1969, they left all of the machinery here. They just literally left. Nothing was done from 1969 to 1994."

A general tour, which can take anywhere from an hour to two hours to complete, starts with a visit through the old commissary or general store. The store is actually the third commissary serving the lumber town. The vintage wooden building dates to 1948.

"The first one was too small and the second one burned down," Taves said. "We're lucky to still have the 1948 commissary."

The restored commissary houses a museum timeline exhibit and features a number of artifacts taken from the mill, including a six-foot saw blade and the mill's old telephone exchange. Inside the comfortable 40-person theatre, a 10-minute video gives the viewer a sense of how an old southern sawmill operated.

With actual footage of sawyers cutting planks, workmen chopping and moving logs into the mill pond, and other milling activities, Madison said the video depicts southern forestry in general.

"Somebody had the foresight to take some black and white film way back then, and when the video was put together we were able to define that and make it part of the tour," he said.

A modified railcar takes visitors from the commissary to the roundhouse with a stop at the only vintage planer mill left in the South.

"This planer mill is our second most important building," said Taves. "It's a 1910 planer mill and you can't go anywhere else and find one."

The open-air wooden structure towers four stories into the sky and is supported with huge structural roof trusses to minimize the placement of support posts in the working area. A bank of windows at the upper part of the roof allowed ventilation and light.

"It is a marvelous structure," Taves said.

Behind the planer mill is a Corliss steam engine with a 12-foot flywheel. Four huge boilers nearby burned sawdust and other wood waste to power the belt drives that ran all of the machines in the planer mill. It is the largest of the 25 steam engines at the location.

The museum also has three locomotives they hope to restore. One is a steam driven machine, the other two are oil burners.

Taves said the expansion of the railroad into southern forests provided the technology for large scale lumber production. Other steamdriven machines were developed to assist the logging industry including the Clyde 4-line rehaul skidder and the McGiffert loader.

Taves said the Clyde skidder is the only skidder known to exist in the country. The rusted machinery, laden with cogs and gears, sits on rails that once led into the longleaf forest. It was

equipped with its own wood-burning steam engine and traveled by rail to logging worksites after the trees were cut and trimmed. Thick wire ropes were pulled from drums on the skidder and attached to the felled logs with steel tongs. Through a series of gears and pulleys, the skidder dragged the logs to the rail line at a high rate of speed. Because of the mix of moving cables and iron tongs, and the speed of the dragging logs, the skidder was a dangerous machine to work near.

After the logs were piled near the railroad, the McGiffert loader lifted the wood onto rail cars for transport back to the sawmill.

The loader, also powered by steam, was tall enough to straddle a rail car after its wheels were lifted up. When the wheels of the gargantuan machine were lifted, the machine was supported by curved legs that allowed an empty rail car to be pushed through. Tongs on cables from a wooden boom descended from the belly of the beast and lifted the logs to place them on cars.

The crown jewel of the museum is the 1910 sawmill.

At the foot of the old mill was a pond where logs were floated and sorted. A conveyor chute sent the green logs into the mill where a six-foot blade cut the raw log into the desired length. The logs were then cut by sawyers with eight-foot band saws into rough planks. The boards were transported down a wide conveyor rail to be sorted and trimmed.

Taves pointed out some minute details about the cut-off man's work station.

"You can see the floor is worn where he stood and where he placed his hand on the work desk," Taves said. He points to a steam radiator at the work station. "He was a decision maker so he got a radiator. Only the six most important men at the mill got radiators because they were the decision makers."

The biggest decision he would have to make was whether or not to pull the steam whistle chain alerting the millwright that there was a problem at the work station.

It's not difficult to imagine what kind of problems might occur after looking at the naked saw blade. Considering the noise level of the cutting blades, the constant chugging of the steam engines and the whirring of the belt drives, accidents were part of life at the sawmill. Most of the lighting comes from windows.

Working at the sawmill was not a cushy job.

"Their standards were much lower than ours today for occupational health," Taves said.

Taves said the museum has enough restoration work to last another 30 years.

"It will take \$3 million to restore one of the locomotives," he said.

Although funding comes from the 300 friends of the museum membership and tour admission rates, it will take a lot of money if the historic site is to ever be completely restored. Madison realizes it will be a challenge.

"But what we're doing here is preserving the significance of all the people and families who worked the sawmills of the South," Madison said. "We're honoring the role they played in building the nation."

The Southern Forest Heritage Museum is open seven days a week from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. with the exception of Thanksgiving and Christmas. There is an admission fee. For more information, visit

www.forestheritagemuseum.org or call (318) 748-8404.

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