

DAVE KENLEY
Interview 14a
1954, Lufkin, Texas
John Larson, Interviewer

ABSTRACT: In this 1954 interview, Dave Kenley (1886-1975), longtime land surveyor and head of Southern Pine Lumber Company's Land & Timber Department, tells John Larson of the Forest History Foundation (later known as the Forest History Society) about early forest land and timber issues. He describes early forest management practices, including evolving logging methods, concerns with fire prevention, and land and timber purchasing and surveying, including a controversial title suit involving Trinity County lands in the early 1900's.

Dave Kenley: In the spring of 1908, I was going home from teaching school, had 35 miles to go on horseback. I made all the short-cuts I could and since I was on horseback and going the trail way, I ran into where the Southern Pine Lumber Company was cutting timber in Trinity County just south of Cedar Creek. And the tops had stopped the trail and being a cloudy day, I got lost or turned around and met the woods foreman, a Mr. Massingill, and he asked me what I was doing there. I was ashamed of being lost, having been raised in the woods, and I told him I was hunting a job. So he immediately began to talk to me about a job with the Lumber Company.

The Lumber Company had been sued for a million dollars for cutting timber on what was known as Jose A. Supulvado's survey (4428 acres) in Trinity County, which had been granted to this man, Supulvado, in 1824. So I took the job of measuring the timber that had been cut on this land. I went to every stump and top on the survey of this land which averaged about 35 trees per acre that they cut on the 4428 acres. I put a blue keel mark on each stump and each top and placed a piece of wood on each stump so as not to go back to it. This job took two men seven months. I had one helper, a senior man by the name of Tom Vansaw who had helped clean off the mill site at Diboll in 1894. This law suit was brought by a man by the name of H.B. Falls. He attacked our title on the grounds that since it was granted while the state of Texas was under the rule of Mexico in 1824, the man in Mexico City had no authority to make the grant. This put the burden on us to show that this man signing the grant did have the authority, which was impossible for us to do. We did thousands of dollars worth of work. We spent thousands of dollars trying to find records in Mexico City. We traced so far as to find that the original grantee, Jose A. Supulvado, was kicked by a mule in Nacogdoches and killed. The suit was tried in Tyler, Texas, in the Federal Court in 1911 and they got judgment for 16 thousand dollars instead of a million. We refused to pay that amount and continued to fight the case and kept it in court nine years. At the end of nine years the State of Texas passed an act validating the title to Supulvado and we held the straight claim and title from Supulvado and ended our suit. [Note: The spelling "Supulvado" is probably a derivation of José Antonio Sepúlveda. The latter spelling is found in the records of the Texas General Land Office. See Abstract 40 of Trinity County.]

Tom Vansaw, who I worked with, and myself stayed out in the rural districts and boarded with two or three different families and slept together, while we were doing this work. He gave me a history of the business from the time it started up in 1894 to 1908. The history of Mr. Temple was that he came from Virginia to Texarkana since he had an uncle who was a railroad conductor and he hoped to get to be a locy-man on the train. While waiting on this job he clerked in a commissary at a little mill and got interested in the sawmill business. He finally in 1894 located six thousand acres of land in Angelina County that was owned by Mr. Diboll of New Orleans. He made a deal to build a sawmill and cut this timber and pay for it as he cut it at the rate of 50¢ a thousand, the logs being scaled as they were hauled in, and the payments to be made monthly. He bought in fee from Mr. Diboll 50 acres on the HE & WT [Houston, East & West Texas] Railroad, now known as the Southern Pacific, to build the mill site. He erected a mill and boarding houses and started operating. He continued operating on this for a long time, and before he finished cutting all of this six thousand acres (there was adjoining timber that was for sale very cheap) and as he got a little capital ahead, he bought this adjoining timber and begun building a narrow gauge railroad and operating a small Shay engine over it to haul the logs in. The first logging was done with oxen mostly, and later part of the oxen were replaced with mules, the last oxen being done away with in 1913. This growth was gradual and regular up until about 1906. He sold practically all of his foreman that wanted it stock in the company and let them pay for it when they could and very few of them ever made any payments on it. The stock paid itself out. They drew their salary and the stock was left. He didn't ever declare any dividends, but kept all the profits invested; never drew any salary for himself in the lumber company.

After I finished the job in 1908 scaling the timber, I spent about six or eight months in school and came back in 1909, and took the job of surveying all the land they owned, probably 75 or 80 thousand acres. In 1906 they attempted to borrow a million dollars on their land from a concern in Chicago, but the title was so hard to clear up that they only got between a half and three-quarters of a million. They took this money and invested it in more land and timber and built about between 20 and 25 miles of mainline railroad which most of it still stands and is known as the Texas Southeastern Railroad, finishing this railroad in 1908. Also during that time they built what was known as Mill No. 2.

When they begun cutting timber in 1894 they cut the stumps from 36-40 inches high. The most convenient height for a man to stand and saw with a cross-cut saw. They continued this high stump cutting until about 1907 or '08 and they reduced them down to about 24-30 inches high. And they continued the 24-30 stumps until 1921 and begun in 1921 to cut the stumps 12 inches high.

In 1921 the first efforts were made toward the end of growing timber or selective cutting. We cut some timber that year from 14 inches up and left the other timber under that to grow and go back and cut again. It was impossible to keep forest fires out of the woods. We were sold on the idea of reforestation, but we were afraid to leave the timber owing to the fact that we couldn't keep the forest fires out and it would burn up. Since that date of 1921 we have grown rapidly but we worked hard. From the date 1921 we rapidly went into the idea of reforesting and selective cutting. The state of Texas, with the aid of the lumbermen and donations, got to giving better forest protection.

John Larson: Did that gradually lead to the decline of railroad logging?

DK: Yah. The logging to begin with was mostly by oxen, then went to mules and ox about 50-50 until about 1914. Then we got rid of all the oxen and used nothing but mules. And we laid our railroad across the wood using what is known as slip tongue carts in hauling logs a quarter of a mile and wagons from there back one mile. Tried to lay the railroad so no haul would be over a mile long, and wagon hauls was quarter, three-quarter and a mile. The carts drug the logs on the ground. Four mules to it; the driver never got down. Somebody hooked the two logs under the cart when he drove straddle of them and then when he reached the railroad another man unhooked them. All he had to do was just ride and haul logs.

JL: And where was the log hooked? Toward the end or toward the middle?

DK: The logs hooked near the middle, just so the back end slightly balanced down on the ground. The price of a usual haul when it was contracted was two and a half a thousand for the first quarter and two bits a quarter as we went back away from the track. These distances were guessed at by the woods foreman and the contractor. In other words, if he hauled three quarters, he got three dollars for his haul. We always used some other equipment in addition to our own. We never had enough and we used these contractors so we could stack up logs for wet and bad weather and then lay them off when we got a surplus of logs.

JL: Well, then how could those men earn money during that other season, that wet season?

DK: During the wet season he could haul, but it was during the dry season he had a hard time. We tried to manage our logging so as to have longer hauls and put on fewer logs in dry weather and shorter hauls and put on more logs in wet weather, that is, the days we could work. It was generally understood that the manager of a mill who could keep logs all the time to keep the mill running and never got too many logs on had was a good manager.

Since I've been with the company we paid all the way from 20¢ a thousand to \$8.00 a thousand for log cutting. The company extended its buying of timber on the territory bought in the Trinity-Houston and Anderson County about 1906 when they got the heavy loan. But most of this was bought in reasonable small tracts, possible from about 100 to sometimes 2000 or 3000 acres.

JL: Who owned that land?

DK: The smaller tracts was owned by a farmer, and in some instances the larger tracts were owned by lawyers or somebody that had just accumulated it at a very small price. I remember buying one tract of 2700 acres from a man who had paid ten cents an acre for it. I think we gave him about ten dollars per acre for the timber on it about 1914. He had bought it many years before.

We got a considerable spurt in lumber about the time of World War I. About this time we bought approximately 15 million feet of timber from the Kirby Lumber Company and the Southwestern Developing Company in the southern part of San Augustine County and logged it over what is known as the Cotton Belt Railroad that extended from Lufkin to

White City. We then took it over our own road from Lufkin, Texas, 17 miles to Diboll. This was very fine long leaf timber. We paid five and a half per thousand for it as we cut it. The five dollars went to Southwestern Settlement Company or some of Mr. Kirby's creditors and he got 50¢ a thousand. This proved to be a very, very profitable deal. I think it's possible the Lumber Company made a million dollars out of it.

JL: How did the price of lumber go up during those years?

DK: During World War I the government built an awful lot of wooden boats. One occasion while we were building boats the government agent called the lumbermen together and explained how essential it was to have material for boats and wanted us to have it on the road as early as possible. Each lumber company took an order for some definite boats. I went to the woods the next day to see about getting the timber out and getting it hauled, and the next night we had the lumber on the cars on the way to the coast wherever the boats were to be built. And we handled it all through the war that way. Mr. Temple was very enthusiastic that we did and stayed on everybody to stay right on their toes and get the job done. While I was doing the surveying, I kept a wagon and team with me and a light camping outfit and camped. I kept a cook in the camp and about ten men and moved from one location every week or two to where the bodies of land lay to survey it. We still have field books I had when I was doing the surveying in our files showing the date I worked on each survey.

JL: Do you have those in your own department?

DK: Yes. In the Land and Timber Department. In 1921 we began to cut the stump 12 inches from the ground to conserve timber. Mr. T.L.L. Temple was very enthusiastic about this stump law to conserve timber. It was Mr. Temple's idea to buy the timber in San Augustine County which I have referred to above.

Up until 1907 logs were loaded on railroad cars with ox or mules. At this time the steam loader was built which was a great improvement. In 1914 log skidders came in to use but as a whole never was too satisfactory and after about 1928 was gradually abandoned. We began the extensive use of the trucks about this time. We abandoned use of oxen in 1915 having about 80 head on hand at that time. We used four yoke or 8 steers to a wagon.

Our first camp was at Lindsey Springs about 8 miles east of Diboll. We next moved across the river into Trinity County in 1907 to what is now known as Rayville. This was known as Camp 1. We established a camp four miles southwest of Rayville known as Camp 2. We stayed at this camp until 1912 when we moved to Walkerton, stayed here until 1914 and then moved the camp to White City in San Augustine County and another to Gilbert in Angelina. In 1921 we moved both camps to Fastrill in Cherokee County where we stayed until 1941 when we moved back to Diboll.

END OF INTERVIEW