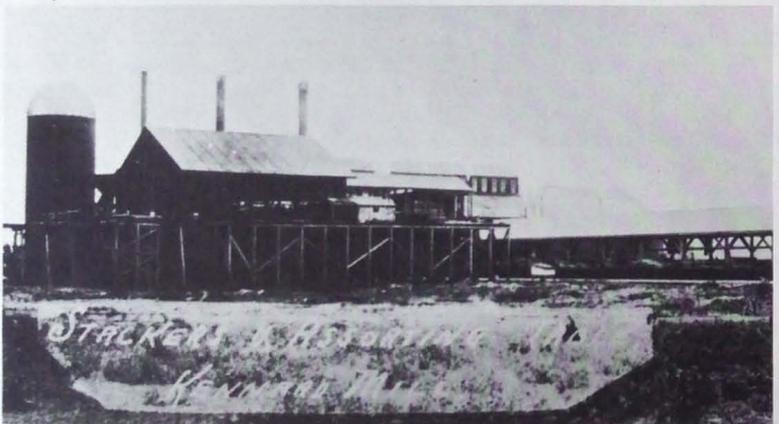




The office building and commissary store of the Louisiana and Texas Lumber Company.



The stacker and sorting table at the 4-C sawmill at Ratcliff.

## “The Largest Sawmill in the World.”

As passenger trains entered Angelina County in the early 20th century, conductors often asked if anyone wished to make a stopover in Lufkin.

The reason, the conductors explained, was that Lufkin was where passengers could make a trip on the Eastern Texas Railroad to see “the world’s largest sawmill,” a plant operated by the Louisiana and Texas Lumber Company.

The mill was situated in Houston County between the towns of Ratcliff and Kennard although the company’s official address was Kennard. The lumber company owned and operated the sawmill, but it was commonly known as the “Big 4-C,” an abbreviation of the lumber company’s parent corporation, the Central Coal and Coke Company of Kansas City.

Contemporary newspapers and trade journals of the day boasted of the mill’s immense size, using such superlatives as “gigantic” and “mammoth.” It may have been an exaggeration to say that the mill was “the largest in the world,” but it was certainly the largest sawmill housed under one roof in Texas between 1902 and 1918.

Everything about the 4-C mill was large. The sawmill measured 486 feet in length and the planing mill was 450 feet long. The main buildings were so big, in fact, that they were reported to require electric lighting during even the brightest parts of the day.

Air circulation was also a problem and in June of 1909 workers began the installation of “a cool air system.” It isn’t clear what type of cooling system this was, but it was acclaimed as the first air conditioning unit in Texas.

A 1905 history of the mill recorded that the plant employed 1,000 men and supported some 3,000 people. The company town at the

time had at least 500 houses, a commissary store, a church, a two-story schoolhouse, and an ice cream parlor.

The mill pond, now the central attraction of the U.S. Forest Service’s Ratcliff Lake Recreation Area, covered 160 acres. It was accessible to two log trains at a time and could float six million feet of logs. As many as six men were needed to work the logs in the pond to keep the mill supplied.

Throughout the 16-year history of the 4-C mill, it cut shortleaf pine at tremendous rates, approaching 75 million board feet in 1904. Using extremely large saws of various kinds, the sawmill reportedly had a daily cutting capacity of 300,000 board feet per 11-hour day.

The configuration of the saws, however, is unclear. The first known history of the mill appeared in the November 1, 1902, issue of *American Lumberman*, which reported the mill had three log decks, but made no mention of more band saws than two. *The Beaumont Enterprise*, however, reported in 1905 that the mill used three single-cutting band saws while the *Southern Industrial and Lumber Review* recorded in 1912 that the mill was equipped with “two bands, a circular, and a gang.” Oral history interviews tell of a three-banded mill, so it is possible the mill underwent at least one equipment modification, which would not have been uncommon.

Nevertheless, it is certain the big saws ran regularly. Their voracious appetite for yellow pine seemed quenchless.

The end, however, came soon enough. The mill was reportedly “cut out” by 1918, just prior to the beginning of operations of the new R.W. Wier mill at Wiergate in Newton County. *The Gulf Coast Lumberman* in December of that year said the Wiergate mill had replaced

the 4-C mill as “the largest mill west of the Mississippi River.”

The 4-C mill made its first trial run on May 20, 1902, and cut through more than 120,000 acres of thick pine stands in just 16 years, an admirable feat for just one mill during that era.

The reasons for the mill’s demise are numerous. Foremost is the fact that the mill simply ran out of timber. Reforestation was not commonplace and, although the company tried to cut portions of its holdings a second time, the second-growth stands could not support the mill’s capacity.

The 4-C owners had previously operated a mill at Texarkana, Texas, but their entry into Houston and Trinity counties was too late to compete with older lumber companies already established in the region. In addition, an out-of-state management and poor labor relations, including a strike in August of 1908, further inhibited any attempts at long-term operations.

This year marks the 75th anniversary of the ceasing of large-scale operations of the 4-C mill, which was dismantled and probably replaced with a smaller mill to cut the remaining second-growth timber.

The Thompson lumbering family later acquired much of the 4-C’s cutover lands through their Houston County Timber Company. E.O. Kirkland, the Thompsons’ long-time friend and timber estimator, advised against logging the lands in 1923, recommending instead their sale “as soon as the farming gets good again.” Hoxie Thompson held onto the lands for 12 years until the middle of the Great Depression when he sold them to the federal government for \$1,071,935.

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3<sup>RD</sup> QUARTER 1993, pp. 3-4.