

ROBERT WEEKS

Interview 30a

November, 1953, Lufkin, Texas

John Larson, Interviewer

Retyped by Courtney Lawrence

ABSTRACT: In an interview with John Larson, Robert Weeks recalls the beginning of the Southern Pine Lumber Company in Diboll. He started work helping to dig the mill pond in 1894 and progressed to working in the woods, hauling logs, and working in the various mills as a planer in Diboll. He eventually moved to Hemphill and Pineland as Planer Foreman. He also recalls Diboll's first baseball team.

Interview with
Robert Weeks

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By John Larson, Forest History Foundation, Inc.

Robert Weeks (hereafter RW): I was born about a mile this side of Burke. My folks came from Louisiana here right after the Civil War. I finished High School at Burke and there wasn't very much work around the country in them days. That was in 1894. Pretty tight times. And Frank and Dick Warner had taken a contract to dig that pond for Diboll, which was the first mill pond there. I was raised in the country; I was pretty familiar with the bull language and I drove a yoke of steers to run them scrapers till they got the pond done. That was when they first come down there to dig that pond for the mill. I was twenty then.

It was a circular saw. And what they called in them days a groundhog mill; it was right down on the ground. And a pretty small affair. It didn't take very many men to operate. The mill foreman was saw filer and mill foreman too. And there was the man that operated the cage; and the block setter and two diggers.

John Larson (hereafter JL): You didn't have mechanical doggers then?

RW: No, not at all. Course, I was the man behind the saw that took the lumber away from the saw as the saw cut it – what they call the saw tailer – and it went on down a little bunch of live rollers to the edger and one man pulled it off them live rollers onto some benches for the edgerman to edge it. Then there was one man behind the edger. He loaded it on trucks. They pushed them out by hand then; they had no way of pulling them.

They had what they called the Arkansas kilns. They was housed up around the kiln, boxed up with 1 x 12 and lumber was stacked in there and it was stacked so it had flues and they put the fires underneath the lumber. They used the slabs from the sawmill to fire it with and the lumber was just as black as that lid right there when they got it dry.

The mill was powered by steam. They burnt sawdust. They had trowels with chains in them, you know, and them chains would bring the sawdust over the boilers, and then them days they fired with a scoop shovel and chains would dump that sawdust in front of the boilers and the firemen fed that in the furnaces with a shovel. Didn't have no self-feed.

After we got that pond dug, I went down to Emporia, a mile below there. It was in operation, and I went to work out there in the woods. And after the Diboll mill got started up in November or December – November, I reckon it was – I come back up there and went to work at the Diboll mill. That was in '94, the fall off '94. They started up in November in '94. I worked in the woods mostly, drove an oxen team, hauled logs. We hauled directly into the mill then, didn't have no tram engines. We had a four wheel wagon. We'd load them on that and bring them into a skidway and unload them on the skidway. They had a track by the side of the skidway that went up into the mill, and a four wheel buggy. And off of the skidway they'd load it onto this buggy and pull them up with a wire rope. They didn't use the pond then. We went right into the woods with the wagon. Four yoke, eight oxen, that was considered a team. The lead yoke – you had one yoke called the tongue stirrers – worked at the tongue of the wagon, and there was the lead yoke and a swing yoke; that is, you would pull them out of the woods to where your wagon was and where you had your logs up beside the wagon and you'd have an extra yoke of oxen, you know. You'd load them on the wagon with that extra yoke. You had a chain; put that chain around it; pulled it up skid poles onto the wagon; get the oxen on the other side and pulled.

The mill was a right smart ways from the pond. If I was down there I could show you right where it was at. But from here I don't know whether I could explain it or not. By the machine shop – the mill set, the boilers set right along in there near the brick house by the machine shop, and the mill set back north towards the pond from there. Well, they overhauled that old mill and kind of rebuilt it and made a pretty good-sized mill out of it. They got it up to where it would cut about sixty, seventy, maybe seventy-five thousand feet of lumber per day. That was in 1895. Finally in 1900 they decided to rebuild and put in that bank mill, the number one mill. Then they cut the old mill out, done away with it. Operated number one – I forget just now how long, but they run it day and night for a while, then they decided to build number two mill. That's the one they're tearing down now. Number two had just a single band and a gang; that's the way they built it. And number one was a double band to start with. Number three well that was in 1910, or '11 – it was a hardwood mill. It was across the railroad from number two. Old number three burned. I believe it was 1913. The old box factory was built on site of number three mill.

I quit the woods in 1898 and went to work in the plant – at the old plant. It's the lumber shed now – the old planing mill – they were building it. I started in feeding a sizer, a big old double sizer, and I worked there till 1901. They had a short, live timber over across the river. And they had to move it or it would go back to the owners, so they asked me to take some teams over and put it in, and I went over there the first day of February, 1901, and stayed over there till the 20th of June, 1902, and then I come back to

the planer. After I got that timber put in I come back to the Diboll planer. I married there at Diboll and raised a big family there.

I done all the changing on the sizer, looked after it. I'd help the foreman do any kind of repair work. And after I come back from across the river in 1902, September, October, Mr. Ashford who was planing for them, he'd taken the measles. He's never had the measles and he was a middle-aged man. He was not very healthy no way, and the measles like to kill him. He was out of the planing mill about four, five months. And what little time he was able to be out why he spent it up there around where they was building this other mill. I had the old mill down there by myself. We had a double sizer and a molder and three matchers. Pretty good planing mill. Mighty slow, mighty slow.

Well, we first put in the old-style square head machine and they developed a thin knife with a round edge, and we swapped out for them. That took place mostly in 1910. It was entirely a different operation from the old style. We had fifteen machines in that planing mill and after we got through changing out, I think we had eight turning out just as much or more. And doing a heap better work.

I got – I was just considered a helper down there in the old mill – but I got a hundred dollars a month. There wasn't many people got that. When you needed groceries you'd go get a check. You'd use them just like you would money. They was good. They wouldn't cash it for you, but at the company's office you turned in what checks you hadn't spent on the twentieth of the month. They'd give you a due bill and on the first of the month they'd cash that. It didn't cost a third as much to live then.

We lived in a company house and the rent was way low then. The first house I lived in – you know the house that's known as "Dr. Dale's house?" It's right up that first street as you go back up to the railroad. Anyway, it was a little box house and I think I paid about something like three or four dollars a month for it. And after they rebuilt the mill, why they tore down a lot of them small houses and put up pretty-good sized houses, four or five rooms, and mine was the house that Dr. Dale lived in later. Mr. Pierce lived right next to it. I think I paid about eight dollars a month for that new house. In 1908 I built out northwest of Diboll on ten acres of land I got a hold of that way, and I moved out there. Stayed out there till, well I was out there twenty years. And Nancy, my wife, was out there by herself and she didn't like it. She wanted to move back to the mill; so Mr. Walker built me that house that Walter Purdy lives in now in 1928; I moved back in there. In 1932 I went to Hemphill. The Temple Lumber Company had bought out the Knox Lumber Company there and I worked as Planer Foreman for five years at Hemphill (East Mayfield.) The planer mill burned and we were transferred to Pineland, another Temple mill. I served as Planer Foreman at Pineland until my retirement in 1944.

I remember there in Diboll – that was back in 1896 or 97 – we all decided to play baseball. We chipped in together and fixed us up a ball ground and we hired two old Irishmen to grub the ground; this was right out in the thicket. We fenced it and fixed us up a little grandstand and we had about four or five acres there in the baseball diamond – had it fixed up pretty nice for the times. And we played Lufkin one Sunday evening and

about the middle of the game there was right smart drinking going on and they all got to fighting. And they had the devilest fight around there and old man Tom come in that night from Texarkana. He heard about it and he got a hold of the details on it and he closed our baseball down. He took our baseball park and got two old Englishmen and put in a garden there, a truck farm. That baseball season was soon over.

The panic of 1907 make everything tight. If you had any money in the bank, you couldn't get but just the seven percent of it, but the company told everybody if they'd leave their time in, as quick as business got to where they could, why they would make it good, which most of the people did. I saved up more money during that panic than I ever did in one little time. They'd give you a statement every month what you had left over. You'd draw checks, you know, and get your stuff at the commissary.

The First World War left things pretty tight for man power. Well, I kind of worked and worked to it to where most of my men was too old, and I kept a pretty good crew all the time. Lots of places suffered for men, experienced men. We didn't have any women in the planing mill in the First World War but in Pineland they had a lot of them. That was during the second War – I put in that furniture plant over there and I had forty-five women on my time sheet. Men got so scarce you just had to work them. After I got started with it, they could do that light work faster than men could; they didn't give you half the trouble the men did. Every able-bodied woman around there worked.

END OF INTERVIEW