

JESSE PARKER

Interview 104a

August 11, 1954, Jesse Parker's home in Diboll, Texas

Clyde Thompson, Interviewer

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ABSTRACT: In this 1954 interview with Clyde Thompson, Jesse Parker recalls working for Southern Pine Lumber Company on log cutting crews off and on from 1900-1954.

He worked in the woods, living in the lumber camps, spending 12-16 hours a day cutting logs. Mr. Parker eventually worked his way up to the position of saw boss.

Clyde Thompson (hereafter CT): This is an interview with Mr. Jesse Parker at his home in Diboll, Texas, on August 11, 1954.

Jesse Parker (hereafter JP): I started to work with Southern Pine Lumber Company in 1900 with Jack Osborne. I started with him. I cut logs with my father. For the log-cutting we were doing at that time we were getting twenty-seven cents a thousand for it. Our wager would average about from \$1.35 to \$1.75 a day. I worked here something like a year, and then I left here. I didn't come back here no more until 1904. When I came back, I went to work for they dry kiln for a fellow, Brad Tucker. I'd work here a while; and then I'd drift off, and I'd drift back. Then I went back in the woods on the 13th day of September, 1912. I stayed in the woods until the first day of April, 1954. All that work I done, I was cutting logs part of the time, part of the time I cut live waste, and then I scaled; and I went from that to saw-boss.

CT: You were the saw-boss?

JP: Yes.

CT: Tell us something about early operations. What time did you go to work in the morning?

JP: I went to work just as quick as it got light enough for us to see. In camp, as quick as it got light enough for you to see, that was when you went to work. In the wintertime, we would get back in at 6:30 or 7:00. On some jobs we'd leave camp at 5:00, and if we got back in at 12:00 at night we were doing good. In that day and time, officials or nobody else ever thought anything about safety-first. We didn't know what it was. That day and time there was an old slogan of the sawmill people, "If we kill a man, we'll hire another one; if we kill a mule, we'll buy another one." That is about the way we worked. But this safety business, this safety engineering started, then they started examining a man before they let him go to work. It just drifted on from there to where now we don't hardly ever hear of a man getting hurt, not like it was then. I'd say there wouldn't be one-tenth of

what there was then, in the woods department. Now when you get a man hurt, they gather him up right there and carry him to the doctor, and if he is hurt badly enough he goes to the hospital.

CT: Mr. Parker, would you tell us something about how the men went to work, what was the conveyance?

JP: Our conveyance then, we were riding what we called skeleton cars. It was just a car that was a frame with no floorboard on it. We got on that, and the engineer pushed it ahead of the engine. It was dark, and we didn't know what we was going into. We didn't see trees and houses or anything else. That is the way we went in, and that is the way we came out.

I chopped pine knots out of there, and you just had to keep your hat pulled down, your collar rolled up, and your pants down over your shoe top and you just burned up.

CT: You say the engine pushed this ahead of it?

JP: Yes, pushing it ahead of it.

CT: What part of the woods did you first go to work in?

JP: I started in Camp Spring back out here from Old Home.

CT: That is northeast from Diboll?

JP: Yes, sir, it's back this way.

CT: I suppose you worked in all of the woods all over the entire region?

JP: No, I didn't go back into the woods after I left there until--they were on Wharton when I came back; and they had two camps, I think, after they left there before I came back into the woods. I went back there to Wharton, and I stayed with them in all their woods operations.

CT: Could you tell us something about Mr. Tom Temple and his operations as he used to come into the camps?

JP: Yes sir, he used to come around very often and just look the woods over. I remember one thing that happened one time that I never will forget. I thought it was mighty nice of him. He walked up and looked over in the feed troughs in the corral where we fed the mules, and Mr. Hill was with him and there wasn't any feed in there. He told Mr. Hill, he said, "Will, let's don't let this happen no more. That's all them mules get, is what they eat. We don't know whether they get enough or not till they leave some in the trough. Let's let them leave some; then we'll know whether they are getting plenty to eat."

When they go to move the camp, the first thing they do is cut around the camp site off and cut the trees out, and they had to lay the railroad up them trees. They took what we called a Giffert loader, them that don't run no more. They would take that loader and load those cars on these flatcars; and then they would haul it to the camp where they were going, and the track would be laid there. They would park each man's house where it was going to be, and they would unload it with those steam loaders. That's where it sat until the next move.

When the last camp had been moved when they went to Bascom, they did away with part of those car houses, and they built houses for the white people. For the colored people they used what we called a car house, something similar to a boxcar, only it was sealed.

CT: You had a store there too?

JP: Yes sir, we had a store and all, store, office, doctor, and drug store.

CT: What did you do on your day off out there in a place like that, go fishing or hunting?

JP: We would go fishing or hunting. You see, then there wasn't no cars or anything out there. You just had to stay around the camp all day. There wasn't any passenger trains. In these present ones, they come to camp once a day. They come out there in the evenings and come back the next morning.

CT: But the men that worked in the woods didn't do that; they stayed right there.

JP: Yes, sir.

CT: Mr. Parker, when did they change over from the old cross-cut saw to the power saw?

JP: We have been running them power saws about three years now, I wouldn't say exactly, but I'd say something about three years.

CT: They are much faster and more efficient?

JP: Yes sir, one man can cut as many logs with one saw by himself as two men can cut with a cross-cut. Well, you can really cut more.

CT: What was the most you ever got per thousand for cutting timber in the woods?

JP: The most that I ever got was seventy-five cents.

CT: Seventy-five cents a thousand?

JP: I take that back. The most I ever got was \$2.00. That was during the First World War when wages went up high then, and we got \$2.00 a thousand.

CT: But you would say that the normal peacetime average was seventy-five cents?

JP: Up until the First World War forty cents a thousand was high on any job that you come to. It generally run thirty-two cents. Thirty-two cents was what you got for cutting logs.

CT: How many thousands would you cut a day?

JP: I have cut thirty-five.

CT: Thirty-five thousand.

JP: I have cut timber along in those days and cut fifty thousand pieces extra. We cut it all, and now we don't do that. We cut now what they call a spot cut. We cut part of it and leave some to grow so we'll have some next time.

CT: When would you say they came in with this spot cut?

JP: That was along about 1940. That is when they first brought it out in Diboll. If the Southern Pine Lumber Company had taken care of their timber up until then like they do now, they never would have cut out.

CT: I don't think they intend to cut out now.

JP: No, they don't intend to but if they don't get some more timber, they will eventually cut out.

CT: Thank you, Mr. Parker.

JP: We loaded logs when I first started with Southern Pine Lumber Company; we loaded with two big black mares. They called it the chain gang loading crew. They pulled the logs out and pushed the steel cars from out of the woods. The way they laid that steel, they snaked it off the car with yolk oxen, and then the men laid it on themselves.

CT: Tell us something about how those chain gangs would go to work.

JP: Well, the chain gangs would go to work. They would take a pair of skids about twelve feet long. They had a stand-up man, they had what we called a train puller, they had a cross-pole driver, and they had another one that drove the horses. They built a skidway; and they hauled the logs on a skidway. They had it up on poles, kind of.

CT: The steel gang, all they had to do was lay the ties and take the rails out?

JP: Take the rails out. When the engines came back to pick up a train of logs, we would back in there and load that in there on the steel. They would load them again; and while they were gone to the mill we would lay the steel. When the steel car was loaded again,

we would take the steel car and put it over on the spur. Then it would pick her up and skid that steel up there, and we would lay it up on there with our hands.

CT: In other words, the steel car did not follow right behind the men when they were laying.

JP: No. When times were flush, they had what we called a regular steel gang and a regular steel engine. That is all they handled, just the steel gang and the men and the engine. Then they done away with it all.

CT: Did they still have the old engine when you were here?

JP: Yes, sir.

END OF INTERVIEW