

What will become of it?

Diboll commissary may be last one in East Texas

By ELLEN TEMPLE

THE COMMISSARY

As far as I can determine, Diboll has the only lumber company commissary building that's still standing in East Texas. The building was recycled in 1953 and became the corporate offices for Southern Pine Lumber Co., now Temple-Eastex Inc. The offices will be moved to newly built quarters in a year or so and the old building will be vacant.

Many lives have centered on that old building both in its function as commissary and office, and there's a great deal of affection in Diboll for it. This is a good time then to reminisce.

Among others, I talked to Mr. and Mrs. Jack Pigg of Lufkin (he helped build the Commissary) and to Mr. and Mrs. A. F. "Lefty" Vaughn, who have lived in Diboll almost all of their lives and worked 23 and 15 years, respectively, for the company. Mr. Vaughn worked many of those years at the Commissary. His father installed Diboll's first plumbing in the old library (Love Wood Products) building and Flava Vaughn's father Sage Ward was a foreman here for years.

The present building stands on the exact spot where the original commissary stood. Mr. Jack Pigg, who at that time worked for W. P. Berry Construction Co., remembers when they tore down the old commissary to build the new one. They started on March 4, 1923. He recalls pushing the Southern Pine sign off the front at 12 o'clock sharp one day.

CONSTRUCTION PROBLEMS

The biggest construction problem was digging the hole for the basement or cellar to house the boilers that would heat the building. So that the drugstore, post office, barbershop and doctor's office could still be used, they cut it off the main building and moved it north close to the building that was the office at that time. And it was there under what is now the north part of the present office building, that they dug the basement.

It was quite a feat because manpower was all they used for the digging. Earl Kellow would haul the dirt out of the hole with wagon and mules.

The hole was close to the TSE tracks that ran behind the building. Mr. Pigg recalls the time that a train almost ended up in the hole that they were digging. One rainy day when props were the only thing keeping the banks close to the tracks from caving in, an engine came "rocking along". The engineer saw the props and screeched on his brakes which sent the track skidding over the wet ground toward the hole! It didn't go in, but after such a close call those engineers would just "ease by" that hole.

All the wood for the commissary, of course, came from the mill. Mr. Berry would tell shipping clerk Buck Warner what they'd need for the day, and he'd have it pulled over and dumped at the site. According to Jim Nelson, who also worked on it, they finished the new building, basement and all, by Sept. 1923.

The building was originally very rugged looking. Out front were rough cut logs where people could sit, whittle, spit and talk.

THE ORIGINAL MALL

The commissary was designed for one stop shopping — the original mall! A person could stop first at the post office; stroll next door to the barbershop; go upstairs to see the doctor; then walk down the steps and next door to pick up his medicine and perhaps a soda at the drug store.

Next he or she would shop in the main store which was an impressive two-story room with a balcony overlooking the first floor.

Groceries and dry goods (gents, ladies, and children's "furnishings") were located downstairs while furniture and wooden coffins (it's true!) were located on the balcony floor.

Bacon and salt pork were available in back of the grocery section, but a shopper would have to go next door to the meat market for fresh meat.

The final stop was the ice house where you could get a chunk to keep food cool in the icebox at home. A person could shop right there at the commissary for almost any of the goods he or she would need in a lifetime.

Clyde Thompson, who knows all about Diboll, has a story about the basement boiler room. The first winter in the building, they stored soft coal to use to fire the boilers. But no one knew anything about soft coal — especially no one knew that it could burst into flame on its own (internally combust). Well, it did! Smoke billowed out of the basement; it looked like the whole

place was on fire. And it took most of the townspeople to haul that coal out after they doused the flames. Luckily the building wasn't damaged. Mr. Thompson says they used a lot of scrap wood for the boilers after that experience.

The commissary was conveniently located on the railroad tracks. A platform joined the Southern Pacific Depot to the store. Goods could be rolled along the platform from the boxcars into the store.

THE 'CHECK' DAYS

Employees paid for goods with company checks, issued on wages earned. The first checks were metal coins, with T.L.L. Temple's name embossed on them. Although Southern Pine never had any trouble, they learned from other companies' experience that the metal coins were easily counterfeited and too much resembled U.S. currency. So they substituted wax coated paper coins of various colors. (Rhoda Faye Chandler says her first job was dipping those checks in wax.)

Mr. P. H. Strauss was the main signer of those paper checks, but R. V. Welch Sr. and Clyde Thompson signed many also. Mr. Thompson says it was an awful, tedious job. He'd have to sign names in a little circular space all day long. In order to discourage forgers, they'd sign their name a little differently for each issue. For example, Mr. Strauss, in crossing a "t" would vary the length of the cross mark.

Checks were for \$5, \$2, \$1, 50c, 25c, 10c and 5c. According to Mr. Vaughn all prices in the commissary were purposefully even so that giving change was not a problem. Items were never marked \$3.98 for example.

Mr. Vaughn says that the check system was a "good deal for the company and a good deal for the people." Especially during the 1929 and 1930's Great Depression, employees were able to get advance on their pay so as to be sure to have enough money for food. And the commissary income is what helped keep Southern Pine going during those difficult years.

The people who worked there were the most important part of the commissary. Mr. Vaughn went to work in 1929, in the drug store, right after he was graduated from Diboll High School. Bernice F. "Pop" Hines was the druggist in charge who taught Mr. Vaughn how to soda jerk. He learned how to flip the three scoops of ice cream into a soda glass, swiftly jerk the lever to fill it with soda water, and slide it down the marble topped counter to a happy customer! Sodas sold for 5c with no charge for the show.

GOOD OLD DAYS

Besides the stools at the marble counter, there were small tables around where you could sit and enjoy any flavor soda water you liked. There was candy for sale and Lucky Strike cigarettes.

For a cigaret ad contest one time, Jake Durham's brother submitted an ad that went partly like this: The pack's cellophane wrapper will keep out the "cold, wet, damp moisture". He took a lot of teasing for that ad.

First Will Agee and then Mr. Hines dispensed drugs to company Doctor J. R. Dale's patients. Or you could buy most remedies over-the-counter. Mr. Hines sold awful-tasting stuff like castor oil, Groves Chill tonic, Syrup of Pepsin and Black Draught which Mr. Vaughn's mother insisted he take because she just *knew* that her children had malaria.

Customers could buy a box of powdered quinine for 25c and a box of empty capsules to make their own fast-acting cold capsules. Lane's Little Liver pills, which often turned a user's face red, were big items.

According to his daughter Mrs. Josephine Fredrick of Lufkin, Mr. W. P. Rutland worked for the commissary from 1896 until he died in 1938. He worked in all departments, even the post office. And he was manager of both the Diboll and Pineland commissaries. His stores offered the very best goods. People used to come down from Lufkin to buy steaks at the meat market. Taylor Powell raised the cattle especially for Mr. Rutland. K. A. Drew managed the store when Mr. Rutland died.

SOME OF THE PEOPLE

Mr. Chester Willis worked for Mr. Rutland for years and years as a delivery man and general custodian. To provide heat during the winter, he fired the commissary boilers with waste slabs from the mills.

Mrs. Farrington operated the post office and ran women's furnishings until Mrs. Glass took over. Jimmy Ferguson worked in the women's furnishings department. Mr. Lock, Joe Garver, and then Mr. Cruthirds ran the meat department.

Mr. Hunter ran the grocery department under Mr.

Rutland and Mr. Willoughby handled men's furnishings and dry goods, followed by Jim Fuller and then Mr. Vaughn.

And, of course, there were many more workers whose names I haven't mentioned.

One of the unnamed groups who played an important part in the commissary's early life were the "drummers". They would come into town by train, drum up business, take orders, sometimes spend the night at the Star Hotel and be off the next day.

According to Mrs. Vaughn one of the biggest events of her childhood in Diboll was when the drummer came to town every few months. He'd bring in his dresses, fabrics and hats and fill the dry goods aisles with bright color. Or they'd measure men customers twice a year — once for a summer suit and again for a winter suit — and have the suits made up in Dallas for later delivery.

TIMES BEGIN TO CHANGE

The company commissary was a necessary creation in its time. Retail stores weren't about to move into an isolated mill town and take a chance on opening a store in a town that could become a ghost after the trees were cut. Southern Pine flourished though and Diboll with it. The company began encouraging retail stores to locate here so that it would get out of the commissary business.

And in 1953 when Southern Pine converted the commissary building to offices, lots of changes were made. An added ceiling converted the two story grocery and dry goods section to two floors of offices. The doctor's office became Land and Timber Offices and the meat market became the law offices. New siding and gray paint spruced up the old building.

But even as office it's still known as the "Commissary" to folks who have lived here a long time.



PART OF THE STAFF at the commissary in Diboll in 1934 assembled on the front steps for this picture. In front are H. A. Cruthirds, Aden Johnson, K. A. Agee, W. H. Agee and J. C. Fuller. On the second row are Little Eugene Wright, B. F. Hines, Less Cruthirds, Lester Hicks, Vivian Smith and Lefty Vaughn. In back are Pate Warner and Big Eugene Wright.



THE COMMISSARY as it looked in the 1930's and 1940's had the same shape as it does today as the Temple Industries

main office. The building of course has been recovered and renovated numerous times.



SAWMILL WORKERS could buy just about anything in the company commissary, from overalls to iceboxes to a bill of groceries. Mill workers had no money during the Depression, but

Southern Pine Lumber Company managed to keep everyone fed through the commissary by going into debt with a number of wholesale companies.



THIS PHOTOGRAPH of the commissary drug store was taken about 1931 and shows B. F. Hines, Lefty

Vaughn and Will Agee. Later the store was rearranged with the soda fountain on the other side of the room.