

## Life in a Southern Sawmill Community

A description of the Saner-Ragley Lumber Company at Carmona, Texas in 1930.

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### By William T. Chambers

Carmona is a small sawmill community in the pine forest belt of eastern Texas. It is located in Polk County about twelve miles east of Groveton, the seat of Trinity County, with which it is connected by railroad and highway. The place is a property of the Saner-Ragley Lumber Company which purchased a 10,000 acre tract of virgin pine forest here about twenty years ago, erected a mill to cut the timber, and built a village to house employees engaged in the work. The mill is located on the northern margin of the tract where railway and road give contact with lumber markets and sources from which supplies are obtained. The tram railroad by which logs are brought to the mill has been lengthened as the logging "front" receded and is now about eight miles long. When the original forest holding was cut over, the purchase of additional stumpage perpetuated the life of the industry. But the timber reserve is again nearing exhaustion, being estimated as sufficient only for eight months' continuous operation.

### LANDSCAPE OF THE COMMUNITY

Carmona is situated in an expanse of typical southeastern Texas cut-over and fire-swept forest land. It has an open stand of young second-growth pine and hardwood timber with much grass, and, since it is unfenced, farmers [1] use the land as free range for cattle, hogs, goats, and sheep. The village landscape is dominated by the sawmill with its large low buildings, high smoke stacks, rows of lumber ricks, and large mill ponds. The residential area is beside the mill. The rather small, old, unpainted wooden buildings have paper and galvanized iron roofs. They are arranged in rows along sandy streets which divide the land into rectangular blocks, and are overrun with grasses and weeds except where traffic keeps them bare. A company store or commissary retails general merchandise including such staple commodities as flour, corn meal, bacon, beans, potatoes, canned vegetables, work clothing, shoes, and gasoline. Neatly painted relatively new community church and public school buildings present a striking contrast to the characteristically weather-beaten structures of the village. The entire population, about half of which is colored, depends directly or indirectly upon the sawmill payroll for its livelihood.

### THE LUMBER INDUSTRY.

The sawmill at Carmona is of moderate size, having a daily capacity of 40,000 board-feet of lumber. The turpentine camp has been discontinued because relatively small trees are being cut and prevailing prices for naval stores are low. Workers called "flatheads" fell trees at the logging front and cut their trunks into appropriate lengths. A skidder is not employed in dragging logs to the railroad track because operations are on a rather small scale. Workmen known as "swampers" clear away some of the underbrush so teams may be used in dragging logs into "bunches" at places accessible to trucks and carts which haul them to the railroad track. A loader operated by steam power places the logs upon cars, and train loads of them are transported to the mill and dumped into the log pond. Pilots guide the floating logs to a chain conveyor which drags them up an inclined trough into the mill. They are rolled upon the carriage and moved against the saws which cut them into slabs. After passing thru the edger and trimmer the lumber is sorted into various grades and sizes, ricked upon cars, and run into the kiln where it is thoroughly dried. If there is no immediate demand for the output, it is stored in warehouses to await sale. Most of the lumber is passed thru planing machines before it is shipped to market.

### HOME LIFE IN THE VILLAGE

Rather heavy continuous labor and modest earning power are dominating factors in the life of the mill hand. He is tired and hungry when he comes from work at the close of day. After eating heartily of the plain nourishing foods prepared for the evening meal, he ordinarily desires to remain at home and rest in preparation for the labor of tomorrow. Hence relatively little time is spent working about the home, reading, or engaging in social activities. Cultural attainments tend to be dwarfed, and interests are narrowly centered upon the satisfaction of such basic and immediate needs as food, shelter, and clothing. The mill people support candidates who favor legislation to improve their industrial condition. Political abstractions such as "honest and businesslike administration of public office" and "sound economic policy" have secondary appeal only. Loyalty to political leadership which secured semimonthly payment in cash in lieu of monthly payment in company "checks", which are accepted at the commissary in payment for merchandise, is intense.

Women participate freely in the work and cares of mill town life. They prepare and serve the family food regularly; and many of them produce foodstuffs by tending a vegetable garden, milking a cow, or raising chickens. Poor white sandy soil limits the productivity of gardens; but free range upon grassy cut-over land makes the cost of keeping a cow negligible, and facilitates the raising of chickens altho wild animals prey upon them. The women of the community also spend much time keeping house, caring for children, and washing and ironing clothes. Limited income accentuates the housework problem by discouraging the employment of help and the purchase of labor saving devices which lighten household tasks.

The people save little or none of their incomes for use in time of emergency. This is said to be about as true of well paid men as of ordinary workmen. Apparently this is an adjustment to sawmill town environment which thwarts the development of a stable home owning society by causing all the people to live in rented houses and depend upon a single set of officials for continued employment there. As a result families are unprepared for sickness, accident, or loss of employment due to occasional depression of the lumber industry. In such cases the company grants employees limited credit at the commissary and discontinues the collection of house rent. It assumes liability for necessary hospitalization and medical service. Law requires the company to insure employees against industrial accident, and income from these policies frequently helps families thru trying experiences. Many of the men also have some life insurance. These arrangements facilitate evasion of such disaster as comes to persons having little or no financial resources.