

The Little Sawmill That Could

Rural sawmills gave rise to Mississippi's earliest towns while helping farm families to survive

By Debbie Stringer

Barry McLemore is one of the Mississippi Agriculture and Forestry Museum employees who demonstrate the vintage sawmill during special events. Small sawmills once served as the "heartbeat" of early communities in the state, he said. The mill, moved from Jefferson Davis County, is powered by a 1947 diesel engine, which drives a series of flat belts and pulleys. The carbide circular saw blade is a recent replacement.

Turning logs into lumber takes place in massive automated mills that produce tens of thousands of board feet per hour.

There was a time, however, when trees were felled with hand saws, hauled in mule-drawn wagons to a small rural sawmill and cut into boards, one at a time—as long as the saw didn't overheat.

These mills played a vital role in the growth of towns along the new railroads being built throughout Mississippi in the 19th century. "You couldn't build anything until a sawmill was set up, unless you wanted to hew logs," said Aaron Rodgers, director of the Mississippi Agriculture and Forestry Museum, in Jackson.

Cutting lumber with hand tools was a difficult, extremely slow process. "You might be able to get two sides of a floor joist done in eight hours," Rodgers said. Village building demanded a more efficient means of lumber production, hence the rise of the small rural sawmill with its engine-driven reciprocating (and later, circular) saw.

The advent of the circular saw in the mid-1800s, along with later innovations, led to the rise of large commercial sawmills capable of producing and shipping great numbers of board feet per day. Yet rural sawmills continued to supply local needs into the early 20th century as their power sources advanced from steam to gasoline and diesel engines.

Tucked behind the cotton gin at the Mississippi Agriculture and Forestry Museum is one such rural sawmill, moved to the site from Jefferson Davis County. During special events at the museum, the sawmill's 1947 diesel engine is fired up to demonstrate its operation for visitors. Through a series of flat belts and pulleys, the engine powers a circular saw and a rail-mounted carriage that moves logs into the spinning saw blade.

Next, the lumber goes through a vintage edger to neaten rough edges and create a four-sided board.

This type of small-scale mill was called a peckerwood sawmill in its day. The saw would cut just about any wood, hard or soft, for making everything from fence posts to framing materials to siding. Little skill was required to operate the mill and it could be disassembled, packed into wagons and moved to the next logging site.

Working in a rural sawmill was not a full-time job back then, Rodgers said. Most rural Mississippians were subsistence farmers, producing enough to feed their family and maybe some extra to sell. But when the harvest was done or the crops failed, farmers could find work in the local sawmill to earn income until the next planting season.

"That was really, really dangerous work, so the guys who worked in them did it because they had to, to supplement their [farm] income," Rodgers said. "It was like you were putting your life in your hands to do that kind of thing."

Hazards surrounded the workers. Sawdust spewing from the logs threatened their eyes and lungs, and nothing

