

Forest History Foundation, Inc.
St. Paul, Minnesota

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Clyde Thompson
Diboll, Texas
1954

by John Larson

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by John Larson, Forest History Foundation, Inc.

(Where were you born?)

In Lufkin on November 13, 1899, and we moved to Huntington when I was about two years old. Huntington is about 10 miles from Lufkin. I went to school there and when I was about 11, I went to work in a store in the afternoons and on Saturdays. I finished high school when I was 15 and I went to Tyler Commercial College in Tyler and took stenographic work. It was my intentions to make a lawyer and I had in mind I was going to be a secretary to the president of the Lou Morris College at Jacksonville. I hoped to work my way through college and then study law. But when I was eight or nine, I was struck in the eye with a baseball bat; I was catching at a baseball game and a boy drew back and hit me and paralyzed that muscle in my eye. And it turned out I can hold it straight, but it hurts me, and I have had much trouble with it.

And about the time I was ready to go to Jacksonville to start college toward my law degree, they gave me the job here at Diboll. I thought I'd come down here and work a few years and save about 90¢ of every dollar, and I guess I never saved the first 90¢! Anyway, I came down in short trousers; wore my first long suit here. At that time Mr. Watson Walker was the manager, and Mr. P. H. Strauss was the assistant manager in charge of the office and I worked for him. I did stenographic work and I took dictation from Mr. Henry Temple. Mr. H. G. Temple, whom you've heard mentioned all through here, and Mr. G. W. Cleveland, who was then in charge of the hardwood part, and Mr. D. C. Kenley, who was then in charge of the land and timber. He's still with the company; you should ought to get hold of him, too. Then as time went on I was given various promotions and I went on, went through invoicing and at one time I went out to a logging camp and stayed several months during the first World War.

(What were you doing in the camp?)

Keeping books, running the office there. There was only one man in the office during the first World War. It was hard to get labor in those days. I'd stay out there - they couldn't get anybody else to stay out there.

And then when I came back, the man who was the head stenographer here quit, and I was given that, and given the title of "Assistant Purchasing Agent". I continued as purchasing agent then for some thirty years. After Mr. Watson Walker passed away, I was made assistant to Mr. Strauss; he was made co-manager. Mr. J. J. O'Hara was the other co-manager. Mr.

Strauss had charge of the logging operations. And that was where I got my first taste of logging. He'd send me out two or three times a month to do very minor things, but it worked on down until when Mr. Strauss retired, I was at that time purchasing agent and handling the insurance for all the affiliated companies. We set up a branch office here for the various insurance companies and I handled - actually did the paying, investigating claims and everything else. I'd work all day here and drive to Pineland or one of the yards somewhere. And I kept that up from 1932 until Mr. H. G. Temple passed away, which I believe was in '48. When Arthur Temple, Jr. was made vice-president and general manager, he divided the operations here and Eddy Farley was made superintendent of manufacture and I was made logging superintendent. But before that time, I had kind of been the go-between between Mr. H. G. Temple and the logging operations. He called me about everything. I didn't actually have charge of it, and still I was more or less running it. We had a set-up in Louisiana for two or three years, had a camp at Longstreet then and I particularly looked after Louisiana operations - even did some of the timber buying.

I was called purchasing agent. That was supposed to be the big job and all this other was on the side. They used to kid me about doing so much. I recall that during the depression when so many men were out of work, Mr. Arthur Temple, Sr. who was general manager - he was either general manager or president of the company - they came down for a stockholders' meeting. So after the meeting was over with - prior to the meeting we had been talking about the unemployed situation, how many was out of work and how deplorable the situation was - and after he came from the stockholders' meeting, he called me and said, "Well, I hate to tell you but the directors saw fit to dis-pense with your services today."

I said, "Well, that will help the unemployed situation some."

He said, "Well, yes, it'll put another man out of work."

I said, "No, it'll give work to six more men."

So from then on he called me "Big Six". That's where I got that.

A good many years ago we didn't have any way to go here like we do now; transportation was kind of nil and I was about the only one that did very much going for the company. They sent me, I did what little public relations work that was done. They sent me around to these various political rallies all over the country just to kind of find out what was happening. I was on all kinds of boards here in the county and I knew about 90 percent of the people in the county. Now, of course, since all these industries come in and I don't do it, why I don't know anybody hardly. But during the time I've been on most of the county boards that they've ever had, and at the present time I'm on Salvation Army, Angelina County Chamber of Commerce, Tuberculosis

Association. I don't believe I'm on the Red Cross right now. I have been but I think my term has expired, but I've done a lot of that kind of stuff all down through the times.

And where I got this name of "Duke of Diboll" that everybody calls me away from here. Mr. A. E. Cudlipp of the Lufkin Foundry and Machine Company introduced me at a banquet in Lufkin - Rotary or Lions Club, as the "Duke of Diboll" and that's what's hung on. That's hung on more than anything else.

I've had a pretty rich experience. I don't work anything like I used to. For some sixteen years I held down this desk here and made on the average of about 150 miles a day - that's what my cars would show. I went all the way from the Red River to the Rio Grande handling these claims and things.

(Against that background now we might be able to trace some of the development of the company in various ways.)

Something I'm very proud of, I am now president of the Texas Lumber Manufacturers Association. I'm awfully proud of that. I was just elected last April. And I'm also a director of the Southern Pine Lumber Company and the Texas Southeastern Railroad Company. Well, I'll tell you anything I know now. I know a lot of stuff, but I don't know what you want me to tell. The old logging camps used to be cars on railroad tracks. They'd send them out in cars and they'd move the camp in just a few days, from one place to another.

(They wouldn't take it off the wheels or anything like that?)

That's right - left right on the car.

(That's the kind of camp they had when you came here probably?)

That's right, and that's where I lived out at what we called the
* Camp. Some of them called it "Gilbert".

(Then I understand they had more permanent camps. What was the reason for that, what was the background? That would explain this change - they had more permanent camps, and they would just leave the camp.)

Well, the way they used to do: there was no trucking and we had to log entirely by railroad and they made the camps out in the forests, would try to pick out where they would be two or three years at least and set up a camp. They'd have a doctor and a barber and a store, timekeeping office - just a little city, and in most instances they had electric lights. It would be on the banks of a river ordinarily and they'd have running water into the houses.

* The tape was indistinct and the interviewee could not recall the name in making the corrections.

(They all ate in their own homes, they didn't have a central . . . ?)

Ate at their own homes, but they did have what they called a boarding house because they'd have so many single men. The camps were pretty complete and they was a happy bunch of people. They lived in the woods and they liked it. Now in 1922 they established a camp up at Fastrill, that's in Cherokee county. That is derived from a combination of names. F. A. from Mr. Farrington, who is the husband of the woman you interviewed a while ago, and S. T. R. was from Strauss, and the L. L. L. part from Hill, the logging superintendent, Will Hill. That camp lasted from 1922 to 1941 and was the longest camp, situated longer in one place than any of them. Instead of having railroad cars, they built permanent homes and they were laid out in a real little town style. They had trees lining the streets and it was there something like twenty years and I sure personally hated to see it torn up.

(How many camps do you have?)

We don't actually have any camp now. In 1941 we moved the camp people into Diboll, except twelve families which we took to Louisiana. They were up there some three years and we moved them back here. Now in 1949 we established a little camp down at Daisetta, that's a town in Hardin county, near Liberty, and we had 24 families there. We kept that there until last year, but now we've cut that timber out and moved them here, and I doubt we'll ever establish any more camps.

The far away timber it's now our plan to contract. We now have logging contracts at Humble, which is 18 miles north of Houston, and we also have two logging contracts up in Anderson county, Anderson and Cherokee county; they alternate around the counties right near the town of Palestine and not very far from Rusk. We don't have any Louisiana operations right now. I doubt that we'll ever establish any more camps, other than maybe have a mechanic. Out in Trinity county we have a mechanic living now that services the trucks. That's the only thing that really resembles a camp right now.

(How do you explain the trend toward contract logging?)

The trucks coming in.

(When did you first feel that railroad logging was on the way out?)

Well, when we started selective logging. Because, you see, to log from railroads, you've got to have a pretty good volume of timber to justify the tremendous expense; and then a railroad is not mobile enough for selective cutting.

(How many camps did you have back in 1916, 1917?)

They had, they always maintained two camps until about 1924, when

we cut the camp out in Angelina county and just had the camp at Fastrill. From about '24 or '26, somewhere in there, until '41. But prior to that they'd always had at least two camps. They had to in order to get enough logs in there.

(What were the changes in logging methods as you've seen them from the time you came here?)

I've seen from mules and log wagons up to the trucks and tractors.

(What were the steps in between?)

Well, they first came in with little trucks and they'd do part of it by trucks and part of it by high wheeled carts and part by the log wagon. They gradually passed out of the picture and left trucks, and now we have larger trucks than we had then and I think the biggest thing we have done in the last few years is build roads. We have some hundred miles of road in the company's holding, which have cost considerable to make, build, but will be economical in the long run, besides, in addition to providing the roads for the trucks for logging, they give access for transportation of all types, for the forestry crews going all through the woods. Another thing, it's a fire breaker, fire lane, to stop forest fires. Our roads have 50 feet right-of-way with a 24 foot road crown, and we are fortunate that we don't have to do very much topping. What surfacing we've done has been with available native stuff. We have purchased very little stuff to make our roads, but we are very proud of them and we have gone to great expense to properly drain them. We have our own concrete plant here, make our own concrete tiling, and we use that mostly for drains. At places we do build bridges, over the larger creeks and where it's indicated that tile is not the thing to do. I have in my department a road engineer that lays all these things out.

(Gradually the railroad efficiency men are going out and . . . ?)

The railroads are going out. At one time the railroad extended at least sixty five miles from Diboll, and at present time it's twenty-four, I think. We pulled it up. And I think I can see in the next couple of years where we will not use the railroads for maybe a period of ten years, when we come back through our cycle. Ten years is the cutting cycle, and I think we are going to be logging entirely with trucks for some eight years. We use loaders for loading on to trucks. Some of our contractors still load with what they call cross-haul, which consists of pulling the logs up with teams. We have a number of tractors that we use primarily for building what we call sets for the loader and to get from the road to the timber and then for towing the trucks. We do very little skidding now with tractors. We have when we were down in the big thicket in Hardin county. In Hardin county at Daisetta camp we were right in the middle of the big thicket of Texas. We did use the tractors then for skidding purposes. We think the mules are cheaper with the size timber

we have now and the distance we have to skid.

(On the longer haul it's better and on the bigger trees it's better to use the tractor, is that it?)

Well, in the bigger timber where they're too big for mules, yes, but we may go to mechanized equipment entirely some time or another. We have been toying with the idea now. In fact, I have just completed a two-weeks' trip on the West Coast looking at their logging operations, studying them. And it's so, it's just a different world, a different type timber and all. We also have our machines, bulldozers and things, and now we have graders which we maintain our roads with, and have a regular set-up for it. I think that next year we'll complete all of our permanent roads.

(Has the source of supply for workers in the woods changed over the years?)

I'd say not a great deal. We have in lots of instances the grandsons of the ones who started. The woodspeople, until we moved them to Diboll, in our particular company - and I think that would be true with the experience of all companies - are different type people. They are as fine a people as ever lived, but they have been in the woods - their fathers before them and their grandfathers before them. They were perfectly happy and satisfied and that's where they wanted to be. I think now we would have little difficulty though in moving the men from the mill back to the woods. I personally always thought the company made a mistake in bringing them in. I wanted to establish a camp out about twelve miles from here.

(Let them continue their way of life?)

That was before I had charge of it or we'd have probably done it. I didn't have any - Mr. Temple didn't think, and he's probably right - Mr. Henry Temple I'm talking about - he wanted to get them all here.

(If you were going to describe those people and how they were different from the people who lived in Diboll when you came here, how would you do it?)

Well, what I really meant in "they're different," their mode of living was different. They had been contented being out in the woods where only in a few instances did they have access to any luxuries like picture shows, for instance, and they were just happy and hardy to have

their men folks leave about daylight every morning and get back about dark. They were accustomed to it and it was just their way of living. There's no finer bunch of people ever lived, and they just wasn't used to having more or less luxuries like the people in the communities have. The company always provided churches for them, and in some instances there were some shows, but that was always individually owned. The company maintained as good a school as they did at Diboll and paid the teacher themselves, teacher or teachers, as the case might be. At Fastrill they had four or five. And they were on the company payroll. They were accustomed to, for instance, drinking the river water. The woods foreman told me just a few days ago the healthiest people in the world are people that drink river water.

(And of course those people remained about the same until you moved your camp into Diboll?)

That's right.

(And now you're developing a whole new race, you might say, as far as woods people go.)

They're accustomed to the things that a community or a bunch of people banded together naturally have advantages over those scattered out in the woods. I think, as I said a while ago, we'd have difficulty in moving them back to logging camps now. When they knew we were going to abandon the Fastrill camp and move to Diboll, they certainly didn't like it, the majority of them didn't - they wanted to stay there.

(When did you first pick up this idea of selective cutting? Where did your ideas come from and how did you start putting them into effect?)

I imagine that the idea actually originated from Mr. T. L. L. Temple himself and with Mr. L. D. Gilbert, who was secretary and general manager for the company. They actually were put into practice in 1940. In selective cutting the idea of it is to take timber that should come off the land and leave the other so they will grow more. The first cut in a forest for selective cutting is what we call the scavenger cut, where they go in and timber markers, mark the trees that are defective. Also, the trees that have reached maturity, and the trees that need thinning, in order to provide more sunlight and nourishment naturally for the other trees. Then each ten year cycle, or whatever the cycle is, they follow more or less that same practice. You are naturally improving the quality of your timber at all times, as well as improving to a great extent the quantity too, because you get larger timber when it's opened up. We notice that where we've logged for instance with tractors, where we tore up the ground, or plowed it, so to speak, that the timber

grows faster than it does when it's just left alone. A tree is like a man - it reaches maturity, then it goes to going down. And another thing, when they go through they pick out the trees that for any reason look like they are not healthy and may be dying. Lots of them have crowns broken off in snow storms or wind storms, and the trees that are left, as a general rule, are the healthy growing trees. And after they have had the other trees removed and naturally are given more sunlight and all, they grow more, faster and better timber than they did before. Consequently you are improving your stands at all times.

(What role is it that the paper pulp, introduction of the paper pulp mills into this area played in this particular field?)

We send to the paper mills the tops of our trees that otherwise would just be left. By the tops I mean it's what's left after we cut all the timber that would be merchantable for the sawmill. Then in logging we naturally damage a lot of small trees, accidentally of course, and those are cut and sent to the pulp mill, and then in some areas the timber is so thick that it needs thinning, something like chopping cotton. And we take out the small trees for that, and send them to the pulp mill.

(Yes. How do you get the men out to the logging operation?)

We have large labor buses and labor buses leave Diboll around six o'clock in the morning. We transport the men direct to the logging operation and then bring them back at night. Of course, we do have some employees who live nearer the logging operation than Diboll, and they go in their own automobile or other transportation. We don't force anybody to ride our labor buses; all we ask is to be there at the time for work. They, of course, carry their lunches and they are out some ten or twelve hours a day by the time they leave Diboll until they get back. In the instance of our saw crew, we have a bus that hauls the log sawyers, or commonly called in this country, flatheads; then we have another truck following them that hauls their power saws and the gasoline and the oil and the axes - that's a safety measure only. All of our men use power saws now, a one-man light power saw.

(When did you introduce the power saw?)

About three years ago. Had a lot of trouble at first. The men saw it as something to take their jobs. Sawyers are the highest paid men working in the logging operations. They work by piece work and there again we have the sons and grandsons of the men working for us, and that's true of pretty much every company. When we went to talking about power saws, they thought it was something to take their job. The first

saw we bought on an experimental basis. I gave it to a pair of sawyers to try. The second day they threw a tree on it. They claimed accidentally, and we quit for a while. Then they got to reading about them and getting more educated to it. Finally one man tried another saw and it proved so satisfactory within three months all of them had them. Now we have only power saws, and whereas we used to have to have around twenty-four saws, which would mean forty-eight men, we now have about eight saws, or eight men.