

**Oral History Interview**

**Brooks Lambert & Ed Leigh McMillan**

with

Roy R. White

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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

Mr. Brooks Lambert and Mr. Ed Leigh McMillan

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Brewton, Ala.

**White:** Mr. Lambert, when did you first meet Dr. Cary?

**Lambert:** I began to work with Dr. Cary in the woods in 1928. We began doing some thinnings in our big stands that he said were too thick to mature into saw timber and we erected a treating plant in 1927 so we began to take out the inferior trees and the ones that were desirable for fence posts we would bring into the plant. Then we did look at, and we acquired, two tracts of forest land that I looked at with Dr. Cary, one a 35,000 acre tract and the other 34,000 acres. One thing I remember very well about one of these tracts he said, "Make the report your natural way." I thought we saw a thousand acres of wasteland covered with blackjack oak. We were to make out our reports and then compare them with each other's. Reading my report to myself I thought that was a lot of acres in just oak and no pine so I rubbed the thousand acres out and put down 800. So when we compared our notes he had a thousand acres of wasteland in blackjack oak. So I was so near in my evaluation with Dr. Cary I liked to have jumped out the window. I was surprised that I was figuring right along with him. Then one thing that he enjoyed in the woods was coffee every day. We carried this teapot. He would ask me, "You got a teapot?" So we boiled this [...] all over the entire country every day for lunch. One of the questions I asked Dr. Cary once was when we thinned sections (we brought it to a hundred trees to an acre) was how would he handle the area from here on out. He said, "Well, first I would control burn it and then with reasonable intelligence you could make it do thereafter."

**White:** Dr. Cary was interested in fire control. Did fire rage pretty much out of control in this area?

**Lambert:** That's right. We contributed [sic] it to the cattlemen. I guess that was so. We had a lot of fire when it got started. But he was a firm believer in controlled burning.

**White:** He made that statement in the face of firm opposition.

**McMillan:** Yes, that's right, he believed in it.

**White:** When he first contacted you did he write you and make an appointment or did he just walk in and introduce himself?

**McMillan:** I got in touch with him. I had heard of him and I got in touch with him and told him when he was in this area that we would like to see him, that we would like to discuss things and go over problems with him. He told me the next time he was down (he was then with the Agricultural Department I believe as a logging engineer). He came, he saw us, we talked and then I made arrangements for him to come here with the State Forester, Col. Bunker, the Alabama State Forester and that was the first visit he made in our properties. He had made preliminary ones but he and Col. Bunker spent several days going over the property. Now I don't know if - Brooks, were you in on that? /Yes/ I know there was Mr. Neal and we were just going around giving him a general view.

**White:** Did he make his visits annually after that?

**McMillan:** He made them often. Also after he retired from government service he was retained by us.

**White:** Was he here with Miss Gerry?

**McMillan:** Oh yes. Miss Eloise Gerry. Her interest was naval stores. We were not interested in naval stores; they were here together but we were not interested in her work. I remember one night I went down to get Dr. Cary when he was a Century. He had been down there for a lecture, he and Miss Gerry. They lectured jointly at Century, the home of the Alger-Sullivan Lumber Co., a large operation just over the line in Florida. After they got through with their lectures he told me he was coming to Brewton, was going to my home to stay and was going to spend some time in Brewton going around looking. Miss Gerry could come to the hotel and stay or go out and do what she wanted to. After the lecture he said to her, "Now, I'm going off to Brewton with McMillan. You pack up, bring this stuff with you, come on the noon train tomorrow and go to the hotel."

**White:** He stayed with you when he was here?

**McMillan:** Yes. He was not only a good forester, he was a food faddist. He would go into the room and look down at the meal that was on the table. It wasn't being served in style but all that we were going to have was on the table. He would stand up at the table and look over everything and inspect it and then say to my wife, "Well, Mrs. McMillan, this is a well balanced meal."

**White:** He mentioned frequently in his letter that he was ill. Do you recall any time he didn't seem himself?

**McMillan:** Never.

**White:** Mr. Lambert?

**Lambert:** No. He was very healthy and robust.

**McMillan:** I don't remember any details. I can't give you the details of just how his drinking wine came about. He took wine and it helped him, maybe it was prescribed for him while he was in France or some time. He told me that is where he liked wine and learned to drink wine. Because of prohibition he couldn't get wine and when he was at my house he found that we had homemade strawberry wine that he liked. From that time whenever he wanted it I kept him supplied with it. I sent it to him as "strawberry juice." He lived with his cousins, he said, in Starke, Florida and he said that his cousins didn't like for him to have wine but that he was going to have it anyway.

**White:** He felt that industry's business should be left to industry, sometimes against general forest service policy; was industry very conscious of his position on this?

**McMillan:** Oh yes. We didn't have any forest service here as I recall. We didn't have any government foresters to come around except Dr. Cary. He was the only one we ever invited at that time. He was first.

**White:** It has been said frequently by foresters and operators that he gave them their start. How do you feel about that, Mr. Lambert?

**Lambert:** I think he certainly gave many their start in forestry.

**White:** How? Did he have the knowledge and information that gave so many a start?

**Lambert:** Yes. He knew how to handle stands of timber. He would go out and show us how to put it on a sustained yield. He would mark the trees that should come out, teach us how to get the age of trees, cruising and how to manage it.

**White:** I believe you said that Mr. Miller was conscious of a need for sustained yield by 1912.

**McMillan:** He was conscious of it before that time. Let me give you this on Mr. Miller. Now Mr. Miller was just brought up in it. He couldn't read or write but he could tell you the cubicle contents of a tree of a stick of timber.

Mr. Miller was principally a lumber or timber producer, for export. He wanted to get as much of that tree as he could without the scales and guts, cutting it up into boards and dimensions of that kind he cut it into square timbers and floated it down the creek. He rafted it and nature took it to shipside in Pensacola. There it was exported. Mr. Miller was a natural forester. When he started in the morning and then he would take his logging crew out into the woods and show them the trees that he wanted cut. Then he wouldn't let them top them he was just cutting trees. Next morning he would get his sawmill going. Then he would leave that to the foreman and would go out in the woods with the logging crew and show them where to cut it off to get the most cubic feet out of that log that would go to make square timber. He sold by the cubic foot.

**White:** Was he ahead of others in seeing that he had to have forestry to continue to operate?

**McMillan:** Yes, he did. And they had another thing that came in here. We had to have forestry [...?]. It wasn't so much from a forestry standpoint as it was a production standpoint. All the logs that came to this mill until 1904 came by water and they had to float and that was the only logs that were cut. Any logs that were cut and that wouldn't float they got docked for it.

**White:** Because so many operators became conscious that they needed a sustain yield not until the 1920s I was very interested to learn Mr. Miller had the idea so far back.

**McMillan:** In 1912, as I have told you, turned over to me, I don't mean turned over to me, but put me to going out and buying timber. He and I would go out in the woods and he would show me how to estimate how much timber there was on the land, how much the land was worth. He told me at that time that if this business was going to continue as the T. R. Miller Mill Co. that we were going to have to grow the timber. That the time was coming when you couldn't buy it. At that time you could buy anything you wanted, there was timber everywhere.

**White:** Possibly that early realization was helped by the fact that he was a native.

**McMillan:** He wouldn't let a skidder come in his woods. He wouldn't let - and we were cutting virgin timber then - he wouldn't let a skidder come in. Everything was done by oxen. And he wouldn't let a turpentine axe come in.

**White:** Are you familiar with the Tombigbee tract that the government proposed to buy in the early 1930s?

**McMillan:** I don't know anything about that area.

**White:** How did you and your company stand on government acquisition? Were you interested in seeing the government buying land?

**McMillan:** I arranged a purchase for them with a man named Cramer.

**White:** What did you think the advantage would be in the government purchase of land?

**McMillan:** Well they had the land that wasn't being protected, it wasn't being anything, it was just being skidder logged and it was just going to waste and burning. It wasn't coming back. It was ruining the forest. And we thought that if the government took it over, bought it and protected it - now we didn't have it - they money to do that. I bought thousands of acres for them at \$3 an acre and less.

**White:** Who was doing the cutting then, large companies like yourselves?

**McMillan:** Yes they were. But they weren't burning. The sheep and the cattle owners were burning but the companies were just thinking about cutting out and getting out.

**Lambert:** They used the skidders.

**White:** Were those companies locally owned or by outsiders? Were they small?

**McMillan:** No, they were not small. There was the Horseshoe Lumber Co., Bagdad Land and Lumber Co., Bagdad Land and Lumber Co. was the biggest. They were the ones that were cutting the lands we were interested in seeing protected.

**White:** Did many of the companies feel the way you did about that?

**McMillan:** I don't know. I know when Bagdad sold their lands, several hundred thousand acres, that was in Alabama and Florida right on the line. The lands that St. Regis own now in Santo Rosa, Florida, were owned by a man named Pace. Mr. Pace wanted to sell to the government and the government wouldn't buy it. I remember him talking to me and saying he wanted to sell it but afterwards he organized a paper company and put his lands in and then he began protecting it. It had been all turpentine and that's now the St. Regis paper company and the lands are all productive now.

**White:** Getting back to Dr. Cary. He would return about annually and check all the plots you had laid out?

**Lambert:** Not exactly annually. We would skip. We would have in several and would try to check about every 5 years so we could get a true picture of the growth.

**White:** Do you remember his notes?

**Lambert:** Oh yes. I remember one time we came back in the office. The girl had typed his notes but there was one paragraph she couldn't read. There wasn't anybody in the office that was going to ask him what it was so I got up enough nerve to ask him. He said, "Aw, anybody ought to be able to read that; 'the last hard fire ran through here in 1935.'" He wrote it while we were touring in the car.

**White:** Your trips in the woods were limited to a day?

**Lambert:** That's right.

**White:** You laid off sample plots and took complete measurements?

**Lambert:** Every tree. Diameter breast high, how high to the first green limb, total height, just described that tree fully in your notes, and then we would tag it with an aluminum tag and we would mention it was tagged on the north side of the tree, the south or east, whichever side of the tree we put the tag on. At that time we weren't using a bandsaw and it was all right to use a six-penny nail. I brought in some not long ago and Mr. Mac said you had better cut all those trees down or somebody will bring them through the mill and hit them with a bandsaw.

**White:** He used to hold meetings and lectures. Did he hold any here that you recall?

**McMillan:** Not here. It was all individual work here. He had, as I told you, a meeting at Century. I went to that.

**White:** Will you, Mr. McMillan, describe him personally, and Mr. Lambert will you add anything you can think of.

**Lambert:** He was of medium height. A little on the stocky side, I would say. He was stout. Looked robust. Wore a beard and a mustache. He liked to smoke. He smoked cigars and never knocked any ashes off his vest. If he burned that cigar clean down and if you would stick him a cigarette between his thumb and finger, already lit, he would go right on smoking, never thinking.

**White:** He has been described frequently as a man with a single track mind. Did you notice that about him?

**Lambert:** Yes, I did. He wanted to finish what he had undertaken.

**White:** Mr. McMillan, do you recall any outstanding personal features?

**McMillan:** Yes, I remember one evening he and Col. Bunker, the State Forester, were going to have dinner. They were at the hotel. They hadn't begun coming around to my house and staying with me so much. They were at the hotel and that Sunday afternoon we had been out riding with him and he was coming to the house for supper, you would call it dinner. Mrs. McMillan's mother lived across the street, and there was a lady who was very prim, nice looking. And she told this lady, who was Mrs. Gunn, who by the way, is in a home in Lakeland, Florida now and was the county health nurse. She invited her to come over and have supper with these two distinguished lumbermen, Dr. Cary and Col. Bunker. Well, Mrs. Gunn dressed up like she was going to a ball or a party or a dinner party. Anyway, she was dressed and Dr. Cary came in just in his regular clothes that he was wearing every day. Col. Bunker had on his - I don't know what you would call it, a timber suit or what kind of uniform - but he had on his woods clothes too. They didn't pay any attention to her and all through the supper they were talking timber and forestry. They didn't pay any attention to her. Col. Bunker was a widower and I didn't know then that Dr. Cary was a widower, I thought he was a bachelor. But there wasn't any attention paid that time to anything but their meal eating and the forestry program.

**White:** You never heard Dr. Cary mention his marriage?

**McMillan:** I never did.

**White:** What did you learn of that later?

**McMillan:** Well, my recollection is it was Dr. Chapman, H. H. Chapman of Yale, who for years, as long as he could do it, would come through Brewton and would go over the forestry program with Mr. Lambert after Dr. Cary's death, and he could still come back if he would, and he knew it, on a retainer. He is retired. It is my recollection that Dr. Chapman - he either went to school to Dr. Cary or Dr. Chapman taught Dr. Cary - one or the other they were contemporaries in that way. Dr. Chapman asked me if I knew that Dr. Cary had ever been married and I told him no that I had always known him and referred to him as a bachelor. It seems that Dr. Cary was out on the west coast on an occasion and while he was there he came in contact with a



or learned of a former girlhood and boyhood relationship with this lady who was ill of tuberculosis and who had no one to take care of her or nothing. And they say that Dr. Cary contacted her and saw her condition and asked her to let him marry her so that he could take care of her. She was an invalid, bedridden, but he married her and stayed with her until she died.

**White:** Did you ever refer to him as a bachelor in his presence and have him fail to deny it?

**McMillan:** No.

**White:** How did the many lumbermen and foresters you knew seem to feel about Dr. Cary?

**McMillan:** They held him in the highest regards. Everybody that ever came in contact with Dr. Cary held him as just the tops. He knew more about it than anyone else we ever came in contact with, than they or we had come in contact with.

**White:** Were you familiar with his handbook? Did you use it, Mr. Lambert?

**Lambert:** His Woodsman's Manual? Yes. I read it over and over and over. When we would go out to work he would have that wallet with his diameter tape and that Woodsman's Manual in that wallet. And a hand-hatchet on one occasion and cleaned up the tape - it was full of turpentine - and he said, "Oh boy, this is the place you can really get things done." I had that steel tape all shiny and pretty so you could [...] all the spaces and he liked that.

**White:** Did many practical woodsmen use his book?

**Lambert:** I don't know. All of our boys do.

**McMillan:** Dr. Cary got these for me. That's the first increment borer that I ever had and that's the woodsman's magnifying glass. I don't know if you ever saw one. That glass is bound with leather. He got those for me. I keep them polished up but I have used these ever since.