

FRANK B. WILLIAMS

CYPRESS LUMBER KING

by Anna C. Burns

Louisiana's vast stands of virgin cypress timber, the largest in the United States, enabled her to lead the nation in cypress lumber production during the first two decades of the twentieth century.¹ Those were the days of giant trees, giant mills, and giant lumbermen. Although cypress is known as the "wood eternal," its industrial lumbering phase lasted only a brief time before the virgin stands were consumed.

As cypress timber disappeared from the state, so did many of the big lumbermen. A man of long tenure in the business, and something of an exception, was Frank B. Williams, often cited as the "largest and wealthiest" of the cypress operators.²

Williams headed an empire that was unique in several ways. It was a closed, family operation, with no public stockholders, and it kept all of its



courtesy of Williams, Inc.

cutover lands. These business principles continue to characterize the family company today. Williams, Incorporated, now headed by Frank B. Williams, grandson and namesake of the founder, probably has the largest acreage of family-owned swampland in Louisiana. Although cypress reforestation may never be feasible, the lands remain among the most valuable in the state because of their sub-surface oil and gas deposits.

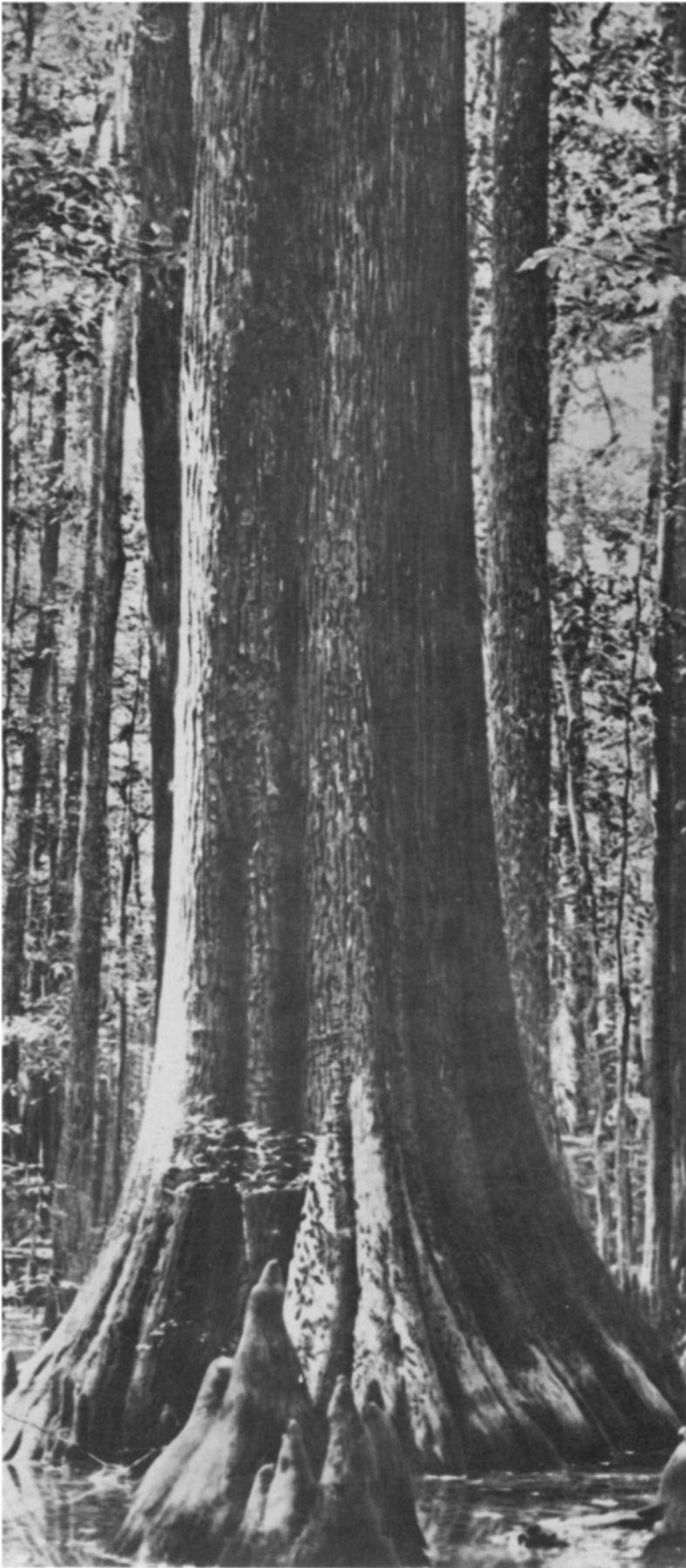
A new interest in the history of this family empire was awakened recently by the discovery of a 16-mm film taken in the late 1920s by L. Kemper Williams, one of the sons of Frank B. Williams.³ The twenty-minute film shows scenes of swamp logging and views of the main sawmill at Patterson, Louisiana. The film, a valuable archival find, is an authentic visual document of the cypress operations that once played such an important part in the state's golden age of lumbering.

The cypress operations captured in this historic film employed logging methods that were typical at that time across the swamplands of southern Louisiana: felling trees from frail pirogues, pullboats snaking logs along "runs" to the canal, steam skidders and loaders, steamboats taking cribs of logs across the lake, and railroad cars dumping logs into the millpond. Even though it is a silent movie with captions, the screen vibrates with life and action as the viewer's

¹Charles S. Sargent, *Report on the Forests of North America Exclusive of Mexico* (Washington: GPO, 1884), p. 536; James Elliott Defebaugh, *History of the Lumber Industry of America*, 2 vols. (Chicago: American Lumberman, 1906), 1: 284-85; Henry B. Steer, comp., *Lumber Production in the United States, 1799-1946*, U. S. Department of Agriculture, Miscellaneous Publication No. 669 (Washington, 1948), pp. 11-15.

²Rachel Edna Norgress, "The History of the Cypress Lumber Industry in Louisiana," *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 30 (July 1947): 1010; Edwin A. Davis, *Story of Louisiana*, 4 vols. (New Orleans: J. F. Hyer Publishing Company, 1960-1963), 2: 7-9; "Model Sawmill Plants," *American Lumberman*, February 18, 1911, pp. 59-62; E. C. Glenn, *Francis Bennett Williams, 1849-1929: A Tribute to One of the Founders of the Southern Cypress Manufacturers Association* (N.p.: Southern Cypress Manufacturers Association, 1929), pp. 9-10.

³Interview with Frank B. Williams, president of Williams, Inc., New Orleans, Louisiana, November 3, 1977; Records of Williams, Inc., Patterson, Louisiana (hereinafter cited as Williams Records); Interview with Hugh C. Brown, vice-president for Land and Mineral Management of Williams, Inc., Patterson, Louisiana, April 28, 1977.



Large baldcypress in Louisiana swamp, 1916.

U. S. Forest Service photo, FHS Collection

imagination furnishes the appropriate crashes, whistles, and splashes.

The film, however, does not tell the story of Frank B. Williams, the cypress king. The founder of this empire came from a long line of lumbermen who, for four generations, had owned sawmills in the Northeast. Charles Williams, Frank's father, had moved to Alabama and operated mills at Shiloh and Citronelle before his untimely death in 1861, when Frank was twelve years old. Mrs. Williams and her four children moved to Mobile where she taught school to provide for the family. The only son, named Francis Bennett Williams but known as Frank B., went to work as soon as possible to augment the family's meager income.

Young Frank B. was a hard worker, determined and ambitious, and most likely would have achieved some success in whatever work he chose. He was first employed in the construction department of the Mobile and Ohio Railroad. Studying at night and working by day, he gained knowledge of surveying and engineering and later was hired by the civil engineering department of the contractors building the Louisville and Nashville Railroad into New Orleans.⁴ In 1869, during a period of major railroad expansion, he went to work on Charles Morgan's Louisiana and Texas Railroad, which was being built across the bayou country west of New Orleans.⁵ Williams became a contractor for the extensive trestle construction along the route, learning in the process how to manage men. Williams won their admiration, it is told, as "a square boss, if he does drive," and one who "knows his business, even if he is young." The hard outdoor work toughened his physique; he was remembered as being "tall, slender, wiry, alert, quick-eyed, and active."⁶ The construction work went well as the line passed through Morgan City, Louisiana, but stopped suddenly near Patterson when news came that the railroad had gone into the hands of a receiver. With no more construction, and out several thousand dollars, Williams was left with lots of building materials, some tools, a gray riding horse, and \$25 cash.

Fate could not have left him in a better location in which to apply his business acumen to the

⁴Glenn, *Williams*, pp. 7-8; Williams Records; L. Kemper Williams Papers, The Historic New Orleans Collection, New Orleans, Louisiana.

⁵Walter Pritchard, ed., "A Forgotten Louisiana Engineer: G. W. R. Bayley and His 'History of the Railroads of Louisiana,'" *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 30 (July 1947): 1065-66; Edward Dale Odom, "Louisiana Railroads, 1830-1880: A Study of State and Local Aid" (Ph.D. dissertation, Tulane University, 1961), pp. 254-55.

⁶Personal and family information obtained from Williams Records and L. Kemper Williams Papers.

great potential of cypress lumbering. He had seen the dense cypress brakes north and east of Bayou Teche and had already recognized the excellent qualities of cypress in railroad construction. Williams determined to use his leftover railroad timbers by repairing bayou bridges for local sugar planters. He secured this work by canvassing the plantation owners, informing them that he was the "most skillful bridge fixer in the sugar country" and that "they would . . . get good work at low prices. . . ." His work proved up to their expectations, and soon his bridge gangs were busy on jobs up and down the bayou.

The visionary Williams also saw beyond the immediate scene. He observed the local cypress mills' limited methods of handling and shipping. Hearing about the great demands for lumber and railroad timbers in Texas, he went to Galveston to investigate further. There he contracted to deliver heart cypress to the Galveston wharf, engaging some schooners for transportation. He also arranged for a bank to discount his drafts with bills of lading, thus enabling him to pay cash for the entire lumber output of several small mills in and around Patterson. Williams therefore knew precisely what he could afford to pay for the cypress, yet leave himself a proper margin of profit. The enterprise prospered.⁸

Williams was in fact so successful in this operation that he did not go back to the railroad when construction was resumed two years later. He wanted to operate a sawmill himself, in addition to making the middleman's profit. In 1872 he formed a partnership with Captain John N. Pharr, a sugar planter who owned some cypress stands, and together they were able to secure funds from the railroad. Williams persuaded railroad officials that financing the new partnership would result in increased traffic for the line, besides availing the railroad of a "steady and dependable supply of timbers and lumber for their own use, at a good price."⁹ Williams and Pharr thus borrowed sufficient funds to buy a small mill at Centerville. They moved it to Patterson and began operating successfully. When the mill burned down two years later, without insurance, they readily borrowed additional money from the railroad to build a new mill, larger than the first.

The partnership of Pharr and Williams was mostly one of ownership. Williams was the active partner; he secured stumpage, managed the mill and logging operations, and supervised sales. Captain Pharr's involvement was limited to his capital investment and supply of cypress; his main business interests involved a fleet of steamboats. Williams's managerial talent enabled them to pay off

their debt to the railroad after two years. His salesmanship was another factor in the success of the enterprise. Williams continued to buy the production of other mills and, using sixteen schooners, transported lumber to Galveston, Corpus Christi, and Brownsville, Texas, and even to Tampico and other Mexican ports on the Gulf. Several large cargoes were shipped to Boston during the 1870s, and in 1880 they made their first shipment of lumber to Chicago. This was followed by shipments to Cincinnati, Philadelphia, New York, and other eastern points, thus introducing cypress lumber to northern consumers. But compared to later developments, the operations of Pharr and Williams were still on a small scale.¹⁰

In 1892, following twenty years of partnership, Williams bought out Captain Pharr's interest, reportedly for more than \$350,000, plus dividends. From that point on, the Williams lumber enterprises would be solely owned by Frank B. and his family. (He had married Emily Seyburn of Patterson in 1876, and from this marriage came four sons who eventually took over the vast operations.)¹¹ As the sole owner, Williams steadily expanded his land holdings and mills until he owned more than 86,000 acres (conservatively estimated at more than a billion board feet) and four huge sawmills—at Patterson, Garden City, Arabi, and Ponchatoula.¹²

This era of tremendous growth was made possible by two developments that profoundly affected the cypress lumber industry: the availability of public swamplands in large blocks at very low prices, and technological improvements in cypress logging and milling.

By the Swamp Land Acts of 1849 and 1850, the state of Louisiana had been awarded the whole of the swamp and overflowed public lands that were unfit for cultivation. But it was the state's responsibility to locate, survey, and list such lands to gain title. In Louisiana many agents or surveyors were given half of the swamplands that they located. In the 1850s the heavily timbered cypress brakes did not have the appeal that came later, when large-scale industrial lumbering was economically possible. Thousands of acres of swamplands, therefore, remained unsurveyed

⁷*Ibid.*

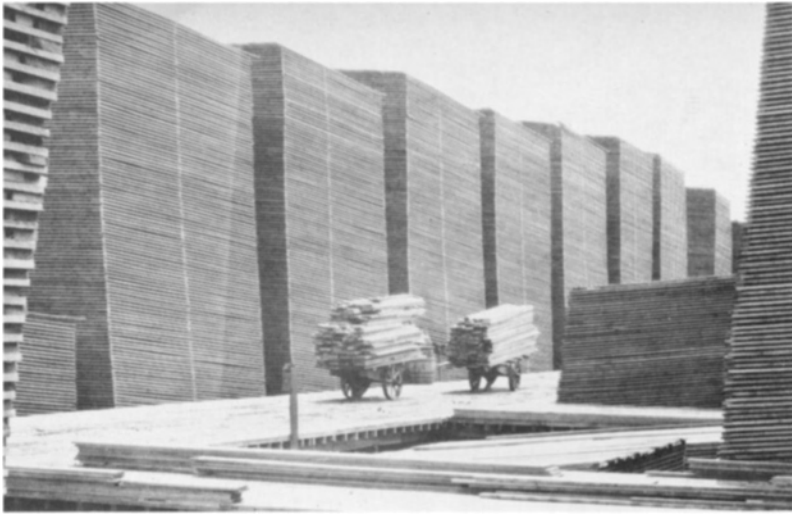
⁸*Ibid.*

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹Frank B. and Emily Seyburn Williams had one daughter and six sons, but only four of the sons survived infancy, and the daughter lived only one day. The surviving sons and their dates of birth were: Charles Seyburn, October 12, 1878; Laurence Moore, November 1, 1880; Lewis Kemper, September 23, 1887; and Harry Palmerston, October 6, 1889. L. Kemper Williams Papers.

¹²Williams Records and Brown interview.



prior to the Civil War.

During Reconstruction the federal government excluded public lands in five southern states, including Louisiana, from any mode of disposition other than homesteading, hoping to provide farms for freedmen. The bulk of these public lands were unfit for homesteading, but lumbermen and politicians recognized their economic value and worked for the repeal of the Southern Homestead Act of 1866. This was achieved in 1876; the repeal legislation specified that the public lands, including vast tracts of cypress swamplands and yellow pine forests, were open for public sale.¹³ At about the same time, Louisiana's General Assembly removed restrictions on the sale of the state's swamplands, divided them into three classes, and set prices ranging from only 12½ cents to \$1.25 per acre. It was common practice for pioneer cypress lumbermen to work with government surveyors in "looking up" the best cypress stands and buying them at those very low prices. Williams began such purchases in 1876. According to one account, he and surveyor Joseph Norgress located and bought thousands of acres of government swamplands in the Atchafalaya Basin for 25 cents per acre. By 1905 Williams had acquired the bulk of his land holdings, all purchased during the era of low prices.¹⁴

Improved technology was another factor in Williams's success. Lumbering had always been a laborious and slow process, even after the advent of machine-driven circular saws. Williams was especially alert to new developments in labor-saving and cost-cutting devices. He was the first in the South to install a "steam nigger" and "shotgun feed." The "steam nigger" was a device that replaced the hand-turning of logs on the saw carriage, thus greatly increasing the speed with

which logs could be handled. The "shotgun feed" was a speedier type of saw carriage. Quicker handling on the carriage called for faster saws, and this was achieved with the band saw, an endless band of steel strung over two wheels. Although first patented in 1808, it was not perfected until the 1880s. Its great advantage, besides speed, was that its narrower blade eliminated much of the sawdust waste associated with circular saws of wider kerf. Williams installed the first band saw in the South in his Patterson mill.¹⁵ He was also the first cypress mill owner in Louisiana to install a monorail system, which was a great labor-saving method of transferring lumber from the sorting shed to the dry lumber shed, planing mill, and yards.¹⁶

None of these devices for speedier milling and handling of lumber would have been practical with cypress if it had not been for important inventions that made possible year-round swamp logging. Louisiana's once-vast stands of baldcypress (*Taxodium distichum*) grew in swampy areas called brakes and in low-lying river floodplains. Such site conditions prevented traditional logging with animals. Instead, the early loggers depended on spring floods to float out their logs, which they had deadened during the winter. Deadening made the logs buoyant enough to be floated out during the June "rise." This was a slow and unpredictable method at best, and one not suited to full-scale industrial logging.¹⁷ For that reason the bulk of Louisiana's cypress stands were relatively untouched until the last decade of the nineteenth century, when the pullboat system of logging was perfected.

The pullboat system was invented by a Louisianian, William Baptist, and was first used in 1891. Pullboating consisted of a slack-rope skidder mounted on a shallow-draft boat. Pullboats dragged the logs into canals, which had been dredged into the swamps. Cypress logs were cribbed up into booms and pushed like barges from the canals to the mill. The pullboat worked in a complete circle, with log "runs" radiating from it like the spokes of a wheel. Many of these runs are still visible from the air and on aerial photographs. Williams was one of the earliest operators to employ the pullboat system. Later a method of railroad swamp logging was devel-

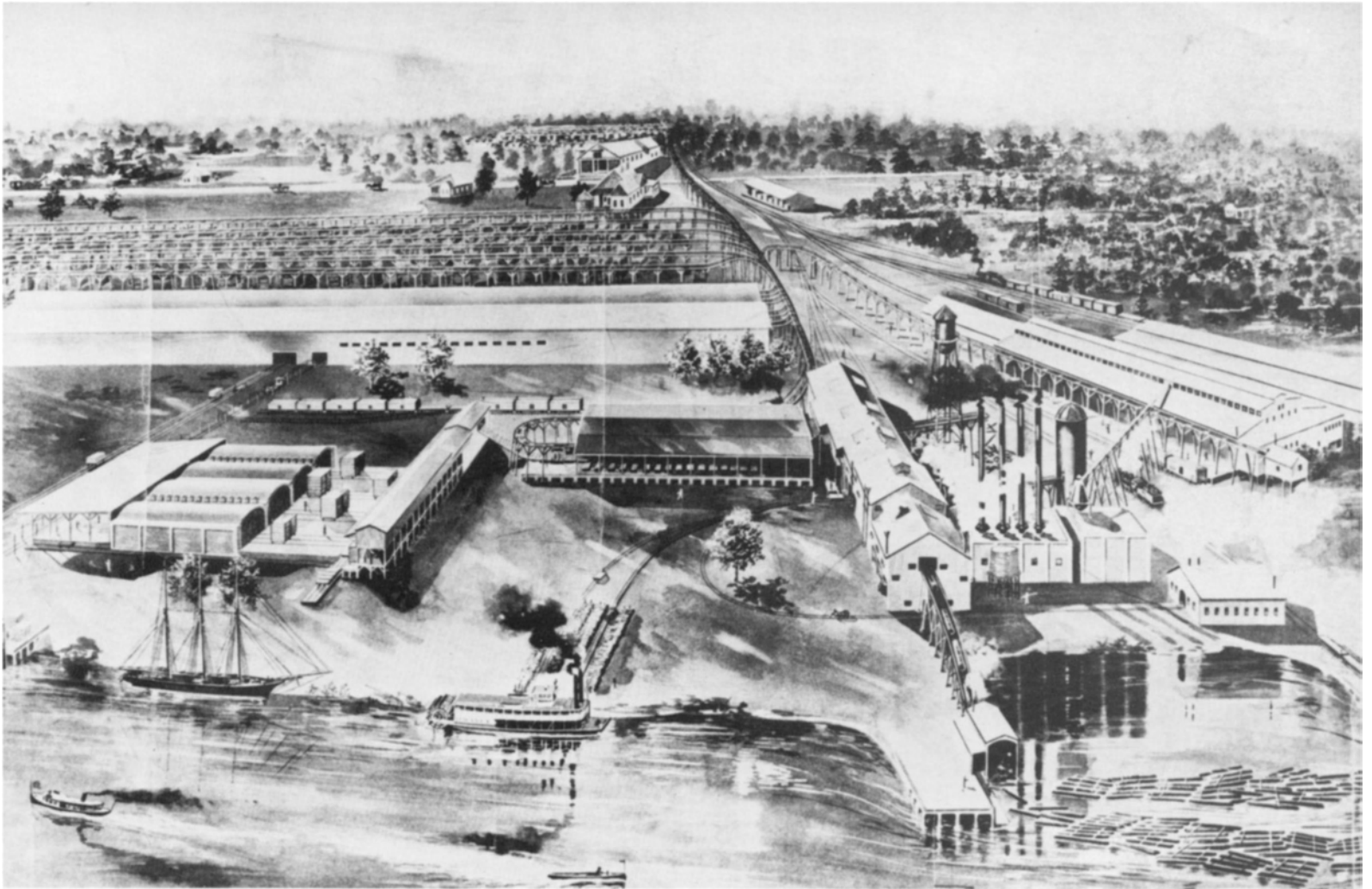
¹³Norgress, "Cypress Lumber Industry," pp. 986-98; John Ise, *The United States Forest Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1920), pp. 45-53; Lee Joseph Melton, "The Swamp Land Act of 1849 as Applied to Louisiana" (M.A. thesis, Louisiana State University, 1948), pp. 82-91; William O. Scroggs, "Federal Swamp Land Grants of 1849-50," *Louisiana State University Quarterly* 6 (1911): 159-64.

¹⁴Norgress, "Cypress Lumber Industry," p. 1012; Hugh C. Brown to author, December 7, 1977.

¹⁵Norgress, "Cypress Lumber Industry," p. 1011; "Model Sawmill Plants," p. 59; Williams Records.

¹⁶Williams Records; *American Lumberman*, February 1, 1919, p. 105.

¹⁷"Commercial Cypress," *American Lumberman*, March 25, 1911, pp. 1, 69; Norgress, "Cypress Lumber Industry," pp. 979-80; J. H. Foster, *Forest Conditions in Louisiana*, U. S. Forest Service, Bulletin No. 114 (Washington, 1912), p. 15.



An artist's view of the cypress mill at Patterson, Louisiana, appeared in *AMERICAN LUMBERMAN* in 1911.

courtesy of Williams, Inc.

oped, and Williams adopted this cheaper and more efficient system.¹⁸

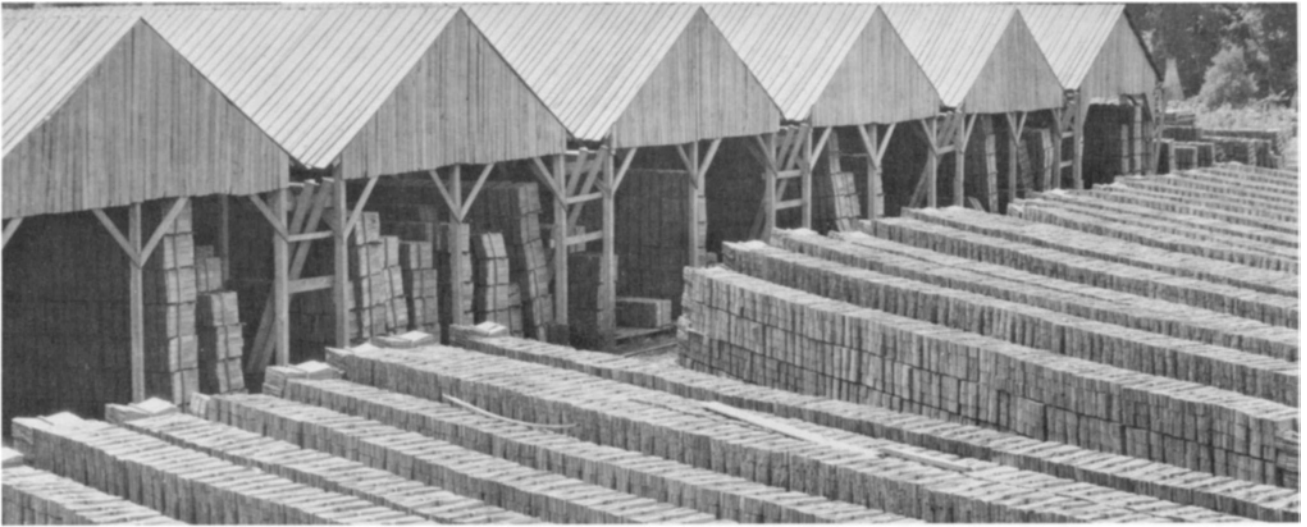
One of Williams's chief contributions to the industry was his part in developing a national market. A frequent claim was that "Williams, more than any other man, introduced Louisiana cypress to the outside world."¹⁹ Cypress, a south-

ern conifer, had long been recognized locally and within its natural range along the Gulf Coast and the South Atlantic for its unique qualities of resistance to decay, weather, and insects. Because of its ability to tolerate dampness, without affecting a liquid's taste or odor, it was ideally suited for water tanks and cisterns. It was widely used in fencing, as shingles, and in general construction. Southerners valued this "wood eternal," but it took intense advertising campaigns to create a nationwide demand. Following through on earlier marketing efforts in the North, Williams's salesmen systematically carried the story of cypress to exhibits in Chicago, St. Louis, New York, Buffalo, and other cities, awakening wholesale and retail lumbermen to the splendid qualities and wide applications of cypress.

Williams was an organizer of one of the early trade associations of cypress lumbermen, the Teche Cypress Association, formed at New Iberia, Louisiana, January 2, 1900. Five years later, producers throughout the South formed the Southern Cypress Manufacturers Association. Williams was an active member of this group, which worked for several years to establish grading standards for cypress lumber. The association registered a special trademark for the highest quality heart

¹⁸"Logging by Steam," *Forestry Quarterly* 6 (March 1908): 1-4; *An Illustrated Description of Approved Devices: Logging By Steam Employing Improved Systems* (New York: Logging Machinery Department, Lidgerwood Manufacturing Company, 1905), pp. 60-69; Ralph Clement Bryant, *Logging: The Principles and General Methods of Operation in the United States* (2d ed.; New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1923), pp. 232-33; Ervin Mancil, "An Historical Geography of Industrial Cypress Lumbering in Louisiana," 2 vols. (Ph.D. dissertation, Louisiana State University, 1972), 1: 7, 82-85, 89-118. See the following article in this issue, by Ervin Mancil, for more detail on pullboat logging.

¹⁹"Model Sawmill Plants," pp. 59-62; *Story of Louisiana*, 2: 9.



Cypress shingles air drying in the Atchafalaya Basin, ca. 1915.

FHS Collection

cypress and assigned each participating mill a special number. This number was part of the trademark branded into each piece of lumber manufactured. In the event that some boards were not up to standard, the trademark number would identify the source.²⁰

To promote cypress in national and international markets and to coordinate sales, fifteen Louisiana manufacturers formed the Southern Cypress Lumber Selling Company in 1906. The F. B. Williams Cypress Company was one of the firms selling through this organization, which handled 85 percent of the entire output of Louisiana cypress in subsequent years. In 1912, however, the selling company discontinued business; it was replaced by the Louisiana Red Cypress Company, which Williams served as second vice-president. This huge selling concern employed fifty salesmen, advertised widely, and claimed to market as much as "all other concerns combined."

The Louisiana cypress manufacturers promoted their product by lavishly entertaining visiting groups of retailers, and Williams was frequently at the center of these efforts. His steamers, the *F. B. Williams* and the *Sewanee*, were used for sight-seeing excursions, private hunting trips, and impressive dinners. Similar outings were staged for politicians and state officials. (Williams was a prominent Republican, having served from 1896 to 1900 in the Louisiana Senate, as chairman of the Republican State Central Committee, and as a member of the GOP National Committee.) When the steamer *F. B. Williams* burned in 1912, the *American Lumberman* reported the loss to the company at \$15,000 and noted the sadness of many guests and friends among the lumber fra-

ternity who had enjoyed Williams's hospitality aboard the boat.²¹

One of the most impressive promotions of cypress was the 1910 annual convention of the National Lumber Manufacturers Association held in New Orleans. The theme of the convention, cypress promotion, was carried out not only in formal speeches and field trips but even on the covers of the convention program, printed to resemble cypress boards, with scenes of Louisiana swamp logging scattered throughout the booklet.²² As a result of this kind of promotion and salesmanship, the national market for cypress expanded rapidly until the demand for the product was greater than the mills could supply.

Expansion for the cypress industry meant expansion for Williams's own operations. When Williams bought out Captain Pharr's interest, he operated the company under the name of F. B. Williams, listing the firm on his letterhead stationery as "successor to Pharr and Williams." In 1902, however, he organized the Frank B. Williams Cypress Company, Limited, taking his wife and sons into stock ownership with him. His oldest son, Charles Seyburn, then age twenty-four, was named vice-president and served as superintendent of the logging department. His second son, Laurence Moore, was named secretary-trea-

²⁰Norgress, "Cypress Lumber Industry," pp. 1025, 1028-29; *New Orleans Times Picayune*, Rotogravure Supplement, December 26, 1924; "Association Places Branded Cypress on Market," *American Lumberman*, May 25, 1923, p. 34; "This Couldn't Happen to You," *American Lumberman*, December 29, 1917, p. 15; *American Lumberman*, April 26, 1913, p. 9.

²¹Norgress, "Cypress Lumber Industry," pp. 1039-40; George E. Watson, "The Coming of Cypress into Its Own," *American Lumberman*, May 25, 1923, p. 46; "Crescent City News," *American Lumberman*, January 20, 1912, p. 78. Most biographical sketches refer to Williams's involvement in Republican politics. See, for example, *American Lumbermen: The Personal History and Public and Business Achievements of One Hundred Eminent Lumbermen of the United States*, 3 vols. (Chicago: American Lumberman, 1905-1906), 2: 397-400.

²²Program, *Eighth Annual Convention of the National Lumber Manufacturers Association, New Orleans, April 19, 20, 21, 1910*, in Williams Records. Mrs. F. B. Williams headed the Ladies Recreation and Entertainment Committee, which provided diversions for the lumbermen's wives.

surer of the company. They undertook additional expansion in 1910 by building a large manufacturing plant at Patterson. In 1912 they built a large mill at Arabi, forming the St. Bernard Cypress Company. The second son later served as general superintendent of this mill.²³

For many years Williams had been closely connected with business interests in New Orleans, especially the Whitney Central Bank of which he was president. In 1913 he and his wife left Patterson for New Orleans, and he turned over more of the actual mill operations to his sons. The two younger ones by this time had been brought into the company, having worked in and learned the whole operation. For example, the youngest son, Harry Palmerston, was directing a logging crew of sixteen men before he was twenty years of age.²⁴ In 1916 Frank B. Williams formed Williams, Incorporated, a family-owned holding company to coordinate further expansion. Acquiring land in Tangipahoa Parish in 1920, he built the Williams Lumber Company at Ponchatoula. In 1924 he bought out the Albert Hanson Lumber Company at Garden City. Williams celebrated his fiftieth year in the lumber business by

distributing \$100,000 in bonuses among his employees.²⁵

But the inevitable had to be faced. The virgin cypress was rapidly disappearing—consumed by the nation's ever increasing demand for the "wood eternal." Although cypress lumber has an eternal quality, the swamp forests from which it came were practically exhausted. Some companies "cut out" and were liquidated in the 1910s. Hastened by the Great Depression, the state's large cypress mills closed within a few years of each other, mostly between 1929 and 1932. The Williams Lumber Company in Ponchatoula suspended operations in 1929, the first of the family's four mills to close.²⁶ That was the same year that Williams died, at age seventy-nine. Thus Frank B. Williams, whose imagination and financial genius "gave employment to thousands of workers" and sped the development of southern Louisiana, was both a pioneer in the cypress lumber industry and a witness to the demise of its industrial cycle in American forest history.²⁷ □

²³L. Kemper Williams Papers; Williams Records.

²⁴*Ibid.*; Patterson High School, Eighth Grade Louisiana History Class, *A History of Patterson, Louisiana* (N.p., 1965), p. 45.

²⁵*Story of Louisiana*, 2: 7-9; Williams Records.

²⁶Norgress, "Cypress Lumber Industry," pp. 1044-46; Mancil, "Industrial Cypress Lumbering," p. xviii.

²⁷*Story of Louisiana*, 2: 9; *New Orleans Times Picayune*, February 2, 1929.

