

## East Texas Sawmill History and Contributions of German Prisoners during WWII



Kendall Gay

Kaitlin Wiseman

The Saturday, September 19, 2020 Fall Meeting of the Tyler County Forest Landowner Association was held under the open-air Pole Barn at Heritage Village in Woodville, Texas. Kaitlin Wieseman and Kendall Gay, from the Texas Forestry Museum, displayed pictures and artifacts while sharing facts about East Texas' sawmill history and the contributions of German prisoners during WWII.

Kendall explained that there was a sawmill boom in East Texas near the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Prior to railroads, logs were hauled by oxen, mules and horses to rivers and then floated downstream to sawmills. With completion of the north-south Sabine and East Texas Railroad through Tyler County in 1882, it was possible to mill the logs locally and then transport the lumber via rails to markets in Beaumont and beyond. Seventeen sawmills emerged along this railroad which came to be known as the East Texas Railroad.

The lumberjacks who used cross-cut saws to harvest the huge native East Texas trees were called flatheads. It is believed the name was derived from flathead wood borer beetles. The earliest skidders were high-wheeled carts which dragged the logs to either wagons or railroad cars. Later steam skidders which used a retracted cable were used. The steam skidders moved the logs more easily but damaged small trees in their path. At the sawmill, logs were temporarily stored in mill ponds; the water eliminated damaging bugs and facilitated the movement of the logs.

Sawmill employees were very specialized. Skills included edger men, length cutters, width cutters, saw sharpeners, managers, clerks, and timekeepers. The highly skilled saw sharpeners enjoyed job security. There were very few women employed at the mills and they were generally limited to clerical positions. Employees were provided simple housing and were paid with currency tokens which could be spent only in a commissary (general store) owned by the same company that owned that mill. Towns frequently grew up around a sawmill.

The sawmills in East Texas began to decline in the 1930s because of the depression, the depletion of large trees and the rise of other industries.

Kaitlin shared pictures and documents while she informed the attendees of the contributions of WWII German prisoners to the timber industry in East Texas during the 1940s.

There were numerous Prisoner of War (POW) camps across the United States – including 120 in Texas which held 79,000 prisoners. Most of the German prisoners confined in Texas were from conflicts in North Africa and could not speak English. Gestures and hand signals were used for communication.

Productivity at Lufkin's Southland Paper Mills, Inc., which produced newsprint, began to decline because of labor shortages that reduced deliveries of logs. Because the pulp and paper industry was classified as essential to the war effort, Southland officials Ernest Kurth and Arthur Temple received approval from the War Manpower Commission to employ POWs. German prisoners were held in two locations in Lufkin – Camp Number 1 was located on North Raguet Street at the site of a former CCC Camp; Camp Number 2 was located where Lufkin Middle School currently stands today. Five hundred prisoners were held for six months at the Lufkin Middle School location and three hundred prisoners were held for eighteen months at the facility on Raguet Street. The POWs were provided transportation and were paid wages equivalent of \$15 a day today; they could work up to ten hours a day.

The POWs in Lufkin were used to harvest timber. After the January 1944 ice storm, the damaged trees had to be salvaged within six months and the POWs were a significant help with that effort. A typical workday would have twelve POWs in a truck with one guard and a civilian employee driver. When the truck reached its destination in the forest, the driver would mark the trees for the POWs to cut.

German prisoners who were previously civilian professors could teach classes and a gardener planted roses around the camp. POWs could play sports and usually chose soccer. Lufkin camp personnel graciously prepared a Christmas dinner for the Germans.

German POWs at Mexia made a table for the First Presbyterian Church and painted murals. German POWs were subjected to de-Nazification programs and at least one German prisoner returned to Texas after the war.