Kilraven, a Ghost Town in the Southern Part of Cherokee County Texas

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An East Texas ghost town with a colorful history, Kilraven, located on the Cotton Belt Railroad and the old Jim Hogg Highway about midway between Forest and Wells, Texas had its beginning in the early 1890's under the leadership of William Henry "Bill" Spinks. Before coming to Cherokee County, Bill Spinks had been a successful lawyer, owner of a sawmill, gin, and a general store at Kennard, Houston County, Texas. Spinks' Cherokee County sawmill, at first produced only rough lumber and railroad ties, was built on top of a hill near Shook's Bluff and about one mile from Staton Lake. A large wooden commissary and fifteen or twenty houses for the workers were built around the mill. A fire which destroyed the mill in the 1890's, a shortage of water, and lack of railroad transportation caused Spinks to move his sawmill to the present site of Kilraven near the then recently built Tyler Southern, or Southeastern, or better known "Cotton Belt" Railroad, which ran from Tyler to Lufkin and White City, Texas. The former mill site was sold to Nelson Jones in 1891. Five of the mill houses were still standing when Jones bought the property.

The new mill community was known as Spinks Switch or Mill during the W. H. Spinks' ownership. A short time before, another sawmill had been built about a mile north of Spinks' mill on the railroad nearer Forest. In a short time Spinks installed a planer in his new mill and was able to produce a better grade of lumber. At the same time Spinks operated a general merchandise store for his mill workers and the general public at Forest, Texas, which was about two miles north of his mill. In time, Spinks built a commissary and crude rough lumber houses for the workers near the mill. J. Will Tyra tells a story that shortly after the store was built, an intoxicated man came in and asked the men there if any one of them wanted to fight. No one accepted the man's challenge and the drunk man slapped a boy. Tyra took up for the boy and a fight almost took place. Spinks came in and reprimanded Tyra for getting tough with the drunk. Then the drunk man cursed Spinks and almost had a fight with him, too. When the boy's father heard about the slapping incident, he wanted to cut the drunk's throat. Most of Spinks' employees lived near the mill and farmed when they were not working at the mill.

Other than that sold locally at Forest, Wells, and other nearby places, Spinks shipped all his lumber by the Cotton Belt Railroad. Henry Arnold, a young employee of Spinks at both the Staton Lake and Kilraven location, said that for being a blocksetter he was paid "six bits" (seventy-five cents) for a day's labor of eleven hours. Will Tyra, a crosscut saw filer in the woods, received $1.50 for an eleven hour day. Some of the others workers received as much as one dollar for a day's labor of eleven hours. The Spinks mill cut about

*Professor Cravens is not interested in what a lumber mill produced. He is interested in the people who worked in the mill, their housing, food, amusements and other social problems. He gained his information from interviews. In a few years interviews will not be possible.*
three to four thousand feet of lumber each day. Jim Bailey, another employee, said that he began to work at the Spinks mill at the age of fourteen as a cleanup boy. Excitement would occur when a belt on the machinery would sometimes break and he and the other employees, to prevent injury, would hurriedly flee from under the mill shed. Jim said that Spinks took a personal liking for him and made him errand boy. Spinks said that Bailey was so efficient and returned so quickly on assigned errands that he wished that the young boy were his own son. Spinks did some of the sawing of the logs himself. Jim Sanderson, a red-haired log tipper for Spinks was the best that Bailey ever saw. Bailey lived with his parents about a mile from the Spinks mill and walked to and from his work each day. Lee and John Brown hauled logs to the Spinks mill skidway in wagons, each pulled by two or three yoke of oxen. The wagons at first had four wheels. Later, six and eight wheel wagons were used to haul the logs. During rainy seasons, because of the boggy conditions of the land, only one load was brought in each day even though the logs were located nearby. For a time, Tyra drove a six-oxen log wagon. The axles of the wagon would drag the ground during wet weather and the oxen would groan while pulling the heavy load.

Because of Spinks' other professional and business interests, he sold his mill in 1900 to W. H. Holmes, H. F. Williamson and E. H. Williamson who were stockholders in the Arkansas Lumber Company. Along with his mill, Spinks also sold to the same company one hundred acres of the Levi Houston Survey for which he received $489. The president of the Arkansas Company, D. T. Morton, was from Kansas City, and the community bore his name during his leadership. T. C. Skeen of St. Louis was secretary-treasurer and W. H. Bonner of Angelina County, Texas, served as one receiver of the corporation. Morton obtained a post office for the community which was in existence from May 14, 1902, to March 13, 1904. The only two postmasters were Shields P. Skeen and John T. Simpson. In 1904, the Post Office Department closed the post office at Morton and ordered the mail to be sent to Forest. Under the leadership of Morton, the sawmill, planer, and commissary were enlarged and improved. Also, a boarding house, an electric light plant, a millpond, and wooden railroad tracks to facilitate the movement of logs and lumber at the mill site were built. Mules were first used to pull a tramcar on the four-by-four-inch wooden tracks before a locomotive was purchased. Sawdust, slabs, and pine knots were used as fuel for the locomotive or “dinkey.” T. C. Skeen had succeeded D. T. Morton as president of the Arkansas Lumber Company by 1902. Will Tyra operated the tram engine for a time in 1901 at a daily wage of two dollars for an eleven hour day. Tom Harris, of Forest, worked for many years as the engineer on the locomotive. Tyra said that the locomotive usually pulled seven cars of logs at a time. The rails for the locomotive were of wood like those used when mules pulled the tramcars. These were nailed to crossties of a larger size. The first tramroad, about five miles in length, was built toward Devil's Bayou and the Loan Chandler place. John T. Simpson, the woods foreman, and later postmaster, used oxen and mules to load the logs on the tramcars with chains. Eventually, the wooden tramroad was extended west to the Neches River and later to the Angelina River. Other lumber workers received daily wages of from $0.75 to $1.50 during the Arkansas Lumber Company operation. Will Tyra lived at the Arkansas Company boarding house while he worked there. The boarding house was a one-story building at the time. Cornbread, biscuits, bacon, beans, potatoes, and syrup were the principal foods
served. Tyra and the mill workers slept on mattresses made of wooden shavings. The shavings, according to Tyra, often turned up edgewise when he attempted to sleep. Once in order to get some rest, he decided to cut a hole in the mattress and straighten out the small pieces of wood. Shavings flew all over the room when Tyra cut the mattress, and the boarding house boss charged him five dollars' damages. After the payment, the manager promised to bring him a good mattress to sleep on; but when it came, it too was made of shavings. Tyra in time grew tired of the rough lumberjack life and moved to Wells in 1910 or 1911 where he established a general store.13

Jim and Willie Bonner, of Lufkin, operated the sawmill, planer, commissary, and boarding house at Kilraven for a time. They experienced several interesting incidents. Jim Bailey tells a story that he attended a dance given at the boarding house one night after taking several drinks of whisky. He walked into the front of the building where a soft drink stand was located and caused a disturbance. About the same time Jim Bonner walked up to Bailey and asked, "Who the hell you think you are?" Then Bonner slapped Bailey in the mouth before he could give a satisfactory answer. Using his fist, Bailey struck Bonner on the side of his head. The blow caused Bonner to turn a flip and fall on the floor. Nat Wade, a friend of the Bonners, pulled a gun on Bailey. When Bailey snatched the gun out of Wade's hand, the gun fell to the floor. The two men scrambled for it, but Bailey got the gun. Wade then began to beg for the gun by saying that it was his gun and he wanted it. Dr. Bay Stokes, the local physician, and Eli Bailey, the constable, asked Jim Bailey to give up the gun. In the process, Eli Bailey, in Jim Bailey's opinion, wanted to make an impression on the influential Bonner and hit Jim Bailey on the side of his head with the pistol. During the fight, Ed Hester, another guest, got his foot hung in a chair and had a struggle getting out of the danger area. Later that same night, Jim says he went into the commissary and purchased some clean clothes because those worn during the altercation were soaked with blood. Willie Bonner was in the commissary at this time, but did not say a word to Bailey, Bailey's head continued to hurt even after he returned to the Charley Hester home where he lived. The pain was so great the next day that a co-worker, Wiley Hester, took Bailey to be treated by a Dr. McClure at Wildhurst. Bailey was fined ten dollars for his misconduct at the dance.14

Will Dew, who was also a mill worker at the time, tells of another incident while the Bonners were in charge of the mill. Bud Dowling worked at the planer. He quit his job before payday because he grew tired of the working conditions and the salary scale. He then went to the bookkeeper, Shields P. Skeen, and asked very courteously for his pay. The paymaster told him that it was the policy of the owners to pay only on the regularly established dates, the first and fifteenth of each month. Dowling asked for his pay a second time, but Skeen, with short and snappy words, said that under no circumstances was he going to pay him until payday. Then Dowling went to his home near Newton Sanders place and got his 45 colt revolver. On entering the commissary, he went directly to the paymaster's window and stuck the gun into the window and asked Skeen again in a kind voice to give him his money. Without hesitation, Skeen promptly paid Dowling his wages.15

The name Kilraven for the mill settlement came during the leadership of Harry C. Kiley, Allen Kiley, and Alfred Craven in 1909. The ownership was known as the Kiley-Craven Lumber Company. This group bought only the
timber, as part of the timberland was owned by F. C. Bennett of Dallas. Bennett was some sort of promoter and sold five-acre blocks of land for $500 each, which seems to have been an exorbitant price. A man by the name of Swofford bought one of the tracts, but it is said that he never received a deed to the land. The Sae family, from Mount Pleasant, also bought one of the five-acre tracts on which to grow strawberries. The family cleared the land and planted strawberries, but because of financial difficulties, had to give up after a short time. Later, a 660-acre tract including the mill site was acquired by C. H. Richmond. On the last day of March in 1913, John T. Simpson bought from Richmond the “Old Arkansas Mill Site” of 20 acres, which included two ponds of water. Simpson paid Richmond twenty dollars an acre for the mill site. Although they did own the mill site, the Kileys and Craven built a new and larger commissary, erected some new houses, and enlarged the boarding house. The sawmill and planer were both enlarged and better equipped. The mill capacity was increased to fifty or sixty thousand feet of lumber per day. An electric power plant built by the company also supplied the whole community with electricity. The new company continued to use the dinkey train locomotive, but in time the tramroad was replaced with ox and mule log teams. During the last years the company was in business, Ruben Drurey and Hub Maddox used five or six six-mule teams each to furnish the mill with logs. Maddox used two four-up teams of oxen for the real difficult logging operations. The log wagons had four, six, and eight wooden wheels.

Wages were paid on the first and fifteenth, or twice a month. Workers could draw pasteboard company checks ranging from five cents to one dollar between paydays to buy needed supplies at the commissary. Claude Darby, the store manager, bought a large number of these checks from the workers for twenty-five cents on the dollar. Darby attempted to cash the checks at the bookkeeper’s office, but he was refused. He then used the paper money to buy needed supplies at the commissary. Darby was paid one dollar for ten hours work a day. The store opened at seven in the morning and closed at six-thirty in the evenings. Raymond Wade tells that one morning Harry Kiley reprimanded Darby for not keeping the store cleaner and better arranged. Darby explained to Kiley that a large amount of supplies had been delivered to the store in the night and that he simply had not found time to arrange the store in the manner that the owner desired. Claude Darby tells that once a young girl living on the Arthur James’ place came into the commissary and told him that her family was hungry. He did not know whether or not the family was as desperate as was represented or whether it showed a lack of morals on the part of the girl. She asked for five dollars’ worth of groceries explaining that her brother was working at the mill. Darby consulted with Wiley Craven and the two found that the brother had not worked enough for the five dollars’ credit. The sixteen or seventeen-year-old girl began to cry when Darby refused to sell the groceries on credit. Darby says he became sympathetic and told the young woman that he would stand good for the groceries. On starting to leave the store, the girl told him that she would pay him then if he would go into the woods with her. Darby says he refused and the family eventually paid the five dollars.

Kilraven existed during the time of few automobiles but it had its moral problems. Women of questionable moral standards lived in or often visited the community. It is said that only one known prostitute ever stayed at the boarding house for any length of time. This type of woman came by train
to the sawmill camp and met men in the woods on the opposite side of the pond from the mill and the houses of the settlement. The four daily passenger trains made it very convenient for transient women to carry on their occupation at the sawmill. Sometimes the men would leave the mill and say they planned to go swimming in the pond, but would go to the other side of the pond. The respectable women of Kilraven and surrounding communities referred to the visiting women as wood rats. Other mills must have had the same problems.

Gambling was popular at Kilraven especially on weekend nights. The players usually met in a vacant house near the mill. Some mill workers attended just to see the games. Gambling, of course, was illegal, and Rollie Dew, who served for a time as constable, was responsible for enforcing the law, but apparently never caught the gamblers.

One among the many workers was Neal Glover, a blocksetter at the Kilraven mill; he worked in the mill for six years from 1915 until it closed in 1921. Because World War I caused wages to increase, Glover received $3.10 for a ten-hour work day. When the mill broke down, he was assigned to the task of stacking lumber and lost no pay for the day. Other jobs paid less, but those firing the boilers were paid the same as Glover. At the same time sawyers were paid from five to six dollars a day. Two others workers, Will Dew and Will Pounds, fired the boilers and the old Arkansas dry kiln. John Bradley was the sawyer when the mill closed. Obe Byars ran the cutoff saws. Raymond Wade caught the finished lumber and slabs; this job was called trailing the saws. Eugene Bailey received $1.50 for a ten-hour day as a dogger on the carriage at the mill. When he asked for higher wages, the manager raised his wages to $1.75 for the same number of hours, but he had to do two men's jobs as tailer of the edger and trimmer setter.

Three Negro families lived in company houses and others who lived in private houses worked at the Kilraven mill. Black Frank Jones, a dogger on the carriage, was taught by Neal Glover to set blocks. Boss Blanche and Ben Blaylocks were black log haulers. One of the Negro families living at Kilraven was Ed Castle and his wife Susanna, his daughter Minnie, and his two sons, Rans and Jim Eddie. The family lived in a large two-room house made of rough lumber. A large wood heater was used to cook on and heat the house.

The boarding house and the nearby sleeping shack of eight or ten rooms were one-story wooden buildings. Claude Darby remembers that a "raw-boney" woman from the North ran the boarding house for a time. During her tenure, the dances there were called balls. At the same time, she dated the superintendent of the sawmill. Neal Glover roomed at the sleeping shack and ate his meals at the boarding house before he married on June 29, 1918. Beans, potatoes, bacon, biscuits, cornbread, syrup, coffee, and sometimes fresh meats were served at the boarding house. No milk was ever served there because of the lack of refrigeration. When the woman from the North left, John Baggett, his wife and his daughter Alice ran the boarding house. All the boarding mill workers did not live in company houses for some of them boarded at the six-room home of John C. and Lucy Calhoun who lived near the mill. Glover married their daughter Carrie and their first child, Marshall, was born at Kilraven.

Glover, the leading fiddler of the community, did not have the opportunity
to play at the boarding house before his marriage because the manager would not allow any dances. However, the Calhoun family and others around the community allowed dances to be held in their homes. Glover played the fiddle and Jim Calhoun accompanied him with the guitar. Carrie Glover played the organ at the dance if one was available. However, the Calhoun home and only one other house in Kilraven had an organ. The tunes played by Glover and the Calhouns were what he says were old breakdowns. Some of the tunes were "Turkey in the Straw," "Yes, We Have No Bananas," "Winter Times are Coming and We've Got No Clothes," "Ragtime Annie," "Old Wagoner," "She'll Be Coming Around the Mountain," "Down Yonder," "Wednesday Night Waltz," "Sallie Goodin," and always a dance was closed with "Home Sweet Home." Glover's group charged fifty cents per person for dancing. Neal says he made ten to twelve dollars each night. The dances were always peaceful since national and state prohibition had been enacted. Homemade liquor, or shinny, and home brew had not been introduced to an appreciable extent by 1921.

Before Glover became the fiddler of the community, Elmer Durham says he and his brother William ("Bill") once were paid six dollars to furnish the music for an all night dance at Kilraven at 1915. Elmer played the fiddle and Bill played the guitar. The dance was held in a two-bedroom box house made of one-by-twelve-inch boards covered with one-by-four-inch strips. Before the dance began, all the beds and dresser were moved into the kitchen-dining room combination. Pallets were made in the kitchen for the children of the married dancing couples. Durham estimated the crowd at six to seven couples. No drunks were allowed and no alcoholic beverages were served.

Some accidents and one murder took place while Glover lived at Kilraven. Clyde Calhoun was injured when a piece of saw broke and severely cut his leg, even though he had tried to outrun the spinning piece of metal. Another worker, seemingly an accident prone person, Aaron Smith, received a broken leg while working at Kilraven.

Glover also tells of a strange, old gray-haired Irish paddy about sixty-five years of ago who stopped at Kilraven one afternoon. The crew felt sorry for the old man and took up a collection which more than paid for his supper, night's lodging, and breakfast the next morning. That same day he was found on the railroad track above Wildhurst, a few miles away, with his throat cut and an empty money sack by the side of his dead body. A train crew discovered the body and stopped the locomotive before running over it. A Negro, Sidney Tarver, was accused of the murder but left the country to escape prosecution. A white resident of Kilraven was also accused of the murder, but was acquitted.

Claude Darby, like Neal Glover, worked for the Kiley-Craven Lumber Company until it closed in 1921, and was moved to Louisiana. Both Kiley and Craven urged Darby, only nineteen years old at the time, to go with them. Darby was told that they would have a larger and better commissary there and might be able to pay him a little more as there would be more work to do. Darby refused to go to the new location and continued for a number of years to live near Kilraven. Darby now lives in Alto. Ella Bailey, a customer of young Darby, said he was a very honest man. Even when weighing peas or beans, he would add one or take one bean out to make the correct weight. There were many peddlers of farm produce at Kilraven. Darby called Ella Bailey of Crossroads the "queen of the peddlers." She sold milk, butter, eggs,
and other farm products from her buggy. Also, Jennie Darby and Callie Bailey, neighbors of Ella Bailey, sold farm products there. Rollie Staton, Sara Chandler Goodwin and her granddaughter Evie, of Shook's Bluff, sold farm products at Kilraven. The Goodwins walked about three miles and carried their produce. They sold eggs for ten cents a dozen, buttermilk for ten cents a gallon, and live grown chickens for twenty-five cents each. After the mills closed, Darby’s friends would often greet him with “Hello Kilraven.”

A privately owned general store was built across the railroad tracks and the Jim Hogg Highway by S. A. Spears who later sold out to William Clark Wade and his son Raymond. The Wades sold out later to George W. Barrington who sold the Wade stock of goods and continued to live in the store building for sometime after the Kilraven mill closed. Barrington is said to have written several books and many articles for magazines and newspapers before returning to Dallas where he worked for the Dallas Times Herald. W. C. Wade was a Union Civil War veteran. He told that while he was in military service, Abraham Lincoln came out to observe his unit one day. The President asked Wade for a drink of water from his canteen and the young private cheerfully complied. Then Lincoln told him that he tried in every possible way to avoid getting into the irrepressible conflict but he had failed. Wade’s son Raymond served in World War I. On Raymond’s return home, the elder Wade excited the Kilraven residents by walking real straight and wearing Raymond’s military uniform with the wrap-around leggings.

Today, nothing remains of the ghost town of Kilraven other than the millpond, the railroad tracks, and the old Jim Hogg Highway. Jim Durham, an evangelist preacher in the 1920’s, used the pond to baptize new converts. No signs remain on the highway or railroad to remind one of the ghost town. Even the highway seems to be deserted as Highway 69, about a mile east of Kilraven, has taken all but the local traffic from the area. Cattle graze the partially cleared pastures on both sides of the highway and railroad. Like many other abandoned mill towns, the present day visitor would have difficulty in imagining what had gone on at this once lively place many years before.
FOOTNOTES

1Interview with Jennie Spinks, daughter of W. H. Spinks, Wells, Texas, August 30, 1969. Ike Daniels of Crockett was Spinks' partner in the gin at Kennard.

2Interview with Frank Jones, son of Nelson Jones, Route 2, Alto, Texas, September 20, 1969. The St. Louis and Southwestern Railroad is the present name of this Tyler to Lufkin road. The tracks have been taken up from Lufkin to White City.


4Letters of W. H. Spinks, General Merchandise Store, J. H. Starr Papers, Archives of the University of Texas, Austin.

5Interview with J. Will Tyra, Jacksonville, Texas, September 11, 1969.

6Interview with Claude Darby, Alto, Texas, December 30, 1969.

7Interview with Henry Arnold, August 28, 1969.

8Interview with J. W. Tyra, September 11, 1969.


14Interview with J. W. Tyra, September 11, 1969.

15Interview with Jim Bailey, August 29, 1969. Eli Bailey later served as Justice of Peace of the same precinct for a number of years.

16Interview with Will Dew, a mill worker at the time, Wells, Texas, August 30, 1969.

17Interview with Raymond Wade, one of the last residents of Kilraven, Wells, Texas, September 14, 1968; interview with Will Dew, blocksetter at Kilraven,
August 30, 1969; Neal Glover, a blocksetter, believes that Craven's first name was Alfred, while Raymond Wade contends that his first names were John Henry; interview with Claude Darby, Alto, Texas, December 30, 1969; C. H. Richmond to J. T. Simpson, contract dated March 31, 1913, filed for record April 1, 1913. Recorded in Vol. 60, pp. 490-491, Deed Records, County Clerk’s Office, Cherokee County, Texas.

Interview with Claude Darby, Alto, Texas, August 30, 1969, December 30, 1969.


Interview with Claude Darby, Alto, Texas, December 30, 1969.

Interview with Neal Glover, Wells, Texas, August 30, 1969.

Interview with Elmer Durham, Wells, Texas, January 1, 1970.

Interview with Neal Glover, August 30, 1969; interview with Frank Jones, Alto, Texas, September 20, 1969.


Interview with Raymond Wade, September 14, 1969; William Clark Wade was born January 1, 1842 at Petersboro, Ontario, Canada. He died at Lufkin, Texas in the early 1920's; interview with Frank Jones, Alto, Texas, September 20, 1969.