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Four Who Counted

Laurence C. Walker

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Lighthouse beacons and the lesser lights of buoys are indistinguishable among the people who have added immeasurably to the utilization of Texas wood for the needs of mankind. Without endeavoring to classify as either a lighthouse beacon or the lower light of a buoy, the contributions of the four men whose stories follow were significant in the development of the industry upon which they and many others would in time depend.

The material is excerpted from oral interviews conducted in 1979 and 1980. I asked the questions. Peter A. Racki, Robert A. Wood, Simon W. Henderson, Jr., and Carter A. Caton cheerfully answered the questions in order to preserve for posterity the knowledge and opinions remembered by these folks about early-day forestry in Texas. The interviewer was interested particularly in the economic and cultural history of East Texas.

The unabridged tapes and unedited typescripts of these tapes are permanently filed in the Forest History Archives in the Steen Library at Stephen F. Austin State University.

Robert A. Wood

Eldest of the four is Robert A. Wood. Wood was born on November 1, 1886, in the Texas Panhandle town of Nalden, no longer on the maps. After high school and a year at an academy, he enrolled in civil engineering at the University of Texas.

Wood tells of the young lady in his surveying field class who, when she approached the compass, caused its needle to dance a jig. This continued until the instructor called the lass aside to suggest she "no longer wear steel stays in her corset."

"After two years (at the University), I was offered a position on railroad construction for Kirby ... to operate a power driver in building wooden trestles across the streams" where the company was preparing to harvest the virgin pines and hardwoods. These trees typically exceeded five feet in diameter. Since John Henry Kirby was anticipating non-company commercial use of his rails in 1907 and 1908, Wood was soon "setting stakes for the track and pegs for the location of the bridges and it was my duty to see that the steam-powered pile-driver operator drove down the pylon until it was in a good solid, firm base." The pylons were then cut to a level mark and capped. Wages for the job were $60 per month, plus room (often a tent), and board.

The Burr's Ferry, Browndel (or Browndell), and Chester Railway was one of these shortlines. R.R. Griswold, a railroad buff of Colorado, has

Laurence C. Walker is Lacy Hunt Professor of Forestry, retired, at Stephen F. Austin State University.
documented the Railroad's history from records in the Tyler and Jasper county courthouses, the Texas Railroad Commission, and the written narrative of James A. Black of Evadale, a resident of Browndel at the time of the line's construction. He noted that the BF, B, & C RW operated for approximately twelve miles east of Rockland.

Five different woods were used in the trestles, each from trees harvested in the area. Certain species were selected to withstand the strain of "sharpening," tension, and stress. The longleaf pine used on the bridges had to be "hill-top-grown."

Shay locomotives and log carts, the latter drawn by teams of eight oxen, pulled the untreated longleaf pine heartwood timbers to the logging tram bridge-trestle sites. Mule skidders worked their teams, giving the beasts such names as Bacon and Beans, because they would run for the camp for their rations at quitting time. A good skinner could emblazon his initials on the rump of a mule with his whip, or so it was said.

The BF, B, & C was laid out to go by Kirby's birthplace, somewhere between Chester and Randall, off the Santa Fe line. Nevertheless, construction ceased when the financier's allocation of funds was exceeded. Nor did the line, according to Wood, reach either Burr's Ferry or Browndel. However, Reed, in the History of Texas Railroads, notes that the T & NO bought out Kirby interests in 1914, and operated the train until the timber in the area was cut out in 1927.

Wood returned to the University of Texas to graduate in 1910, using his experience with Kirby as his senior-year thesis. After graduating, he worked as a bridge builder for the Santa Fe Railroad. Upon retirement from the Railroad, he returned to land surveying, often working for the wood-using industry.

Wood remembered surveyor's notes that read like this: "Thence east 245 varas to stake in a hurricane." This kind of a hurricane was a chunk of clay torn out by the ground by the roots of a tree blown over by the wind. He also recalled "tree stumps of heart longleaf pine that served for decades as witness trees following the initial survey."

About the construction camps, where the laborers and engineers lived in tents, Wood commented, "The chief engineer and his assistant came out once or twice a week. They both had good appetites; so the cooking tent, providing good food, was nearby." When shown a photo from his collection, Wood noted that the inspectors wore business suits, complete with coats and ties, because "they didn't get out and do any extra work." Horse-drawn wagons brought supplies to the camp. Bunkhouses, a commissary, and a company office provided comforts for the work crews in towns such as Browndel. The town jail there was built of 2x10-inch sawn timbers, with spikes in the walls to make escape difficult.
Carter Caton

Next in age among those interviewed is Carter Caton, named for and by the patriarch of the W.T. Carter & Brother Lumber Co.

Many were the tales of the eighty-four-year-old citizen of Deep East Texas who vividly recalled his days with the Carter Company and the enterprise's predecessors. Like his engines, no longer "running pert," Caton has been switched to a siding, narrating this story from a rest home. Age has slowed neither his recall nor his interest in people. Included among the latter are a sixteen-year old history correspondent — whose contributions are here acknowledged, and a "girl friend" who, because of her continued involvement in courthouse politics, will remain unnamed.

Sometime prior to 1882, when W.T. Carter would have been twenty-six years of age, he entered the sawmill business. Perhaps it was the normal thing for the time and place, for his father, Joseph Carter, had been a lumberman from "an early age." Carter's brother, Ernest, too, affiliated with him, thus giving rise to the company name. The business association began in 1882.

Joseph Carter's mill apparently fell on hard times in 1876, due, according to Caton, to inability to make payments on machinery. Creditors foreclosed. Auctioned to Colonel Sam T. Robb by order of the District Court of Walker County, the prominent Confederate soldier-lawyer soon conveyed the property to W.T. Carter, then only eighteen years old. So the historic enterprise began.

Caton was born on October 23, 1892, in Memphis, Texas. He moved to Camden, Texas, via the wood-burning locomotive of a narrow-gauge rail. Carter Caton followed his father in the employ of the Carter mill, remembering the changeover from narrow- to standard-gauge tracks for the Moscow, Camden, and San Augustine Railroad that never reached the latter town. At seven miles long, it remains the state's shortest line. Over the years, Caton was a locomotive engineer, steel-gang foreman, and timekeeper for the railroad. The engineer received a raise of $.50 a day the first day on the job. Apparently Mr. Carter liked his employee's name.

Caton liked to tell about the time he took "Mister" Carter and his daughter on a Sunday ride in the company train. The boss' coach did not make the whole trip; it fell into the stream below the trestle as it crossed McManna's Creek. When Carter scolded Caton for running wide open, Caton said he told Carter to "put rubber tires on your train." Caton's locomotive burned four-foot wood, mostly green oak. "Comin' home I sometimes had to stop the engine and gather pine knots to keep up enough steam to get back to Camden."

I met up with Caton at a retirement home in Diboll. For about thirty-five years before that he lived at the famous old Camden Boarding House, nearby the Company sawmill and rail track. The Boarding House, originally a physician's residence, was built in 1912. One could still get
a big lunch there for $1 in the early 1960s. U.S. Plywood tore down the "hotel" after purchasing the Carter mill and, with it, Camden.

Elaine Jackson reported stories about Caton in the Diboll Free Press in 1980. One account will suffice: "the time a man got drunk in one of the (Camden) saloons and shot another man below the eye. 'He pulled a silk handkerchief through the wound and never saw a doctor.'"

Carter Caton was a whittler. I prize a whistle he carved from a bamboo stem, each end of the whistle when blown imitating a particular locomotive's scream.

On Christmas day, perhaps 1910, cutting was going on "way out in the timber," and the mules at the site of the logging operation needed water and feed. To provide for their nourishment, the logging superintendent and Carter Caton fired up the locomotive and made the run. Having cared for the beasts of burden, the return trip was begun, only to be impeded by a large stump which somehow now was not cleared by the engine. The track earlier had rested on the edge of a swollen butt of the stump. Now, the track had settled suddenly, exposing all of the stump between the rails. "Running pretty pert," Caton recalls, the engine of the homeward bound locomotive "hit the stump, rocked about, jumped the rails, and headed for the woods on solid ground. A hundred yards from the rails, still upright, it stopped."

Caton described the East Texas forests like this: "I can still hear those longleaf pines playing a tune and the yellow pollen filling the sky. Fourteen-inch pine needles were so green they looked black, and pine stumps with resin an inch thick." He sat on one such stump and got stuck. "Mules would not cross a bridge if hooked to a wagon. They refused. The only way to get them to the other side of a stream was to lead them across the creek ... Once, it rained so hard we [the mules and Caton] had to spend the night near Pine Grove across Kimball Creek. All they [the local family he spent the night with] had to eat was block mutton and black coffee."

Carter Caton provided valuable information about the Shay locomotive now located on the campus at Stephen F. Austin State University. I quote from two of his hand-written letters, dated 1975: "I just saw a small part of the No. 2 Shay engine that came from Camden, Texas. I can give you a little history. The Bering Lumber Co. of Bering, Texas, bought the Shay from Lima Locomotive Co. in 1907. When the company ceased to operate in 1911, Mr. W.T. Carter & Bro. bought it from the Bering Lumber Co. The No. 2 Shay in 1912 was used in the hills to move the loaded cars that a rod engine could not handle. The original bell that belong [sic] to the Shay is in a small church on Highway 59 near the road not far from the little red store. I offered them $100 for the bell but the women in charge would not sell. It's not used any more, so the members say. I was Engineer at the time of purchase."

The second note read, "I was only too glad to give you the history
of the Shay. There were nine rod engines and a geared Shay, when they were all discarded and let go to rust. The cab was put on the Shay by a mechanic named Dunn. He made steel cabs in all the engines that did not have one already.

"Speaking of the Panama engine No. 201, it was built by the American Loco works 1906 and had a 5 ft. gauge wheel base as all government tracks in the Canal Zone was 5 ft., but could be converted to a standard gauge 4-8 1/4., I believe. I have written to Moscow to try to find out about the bell. I sure wish you could get it as there's where it belongs. The whistle you have is an antique as it has been many moons since I have seen one like it. I have a friend who collects Loco., artifacts and has just recently sold $18,000 worth to a museum in Pa., and has quite a collection now. You may can do some trading with him for a smaller whistle or bell. In case you can't get the one that belongs on the Shay, his name is John W. Hedge, 304 Glover Dr., Longview, Texas 75906. He would love to hear from you.

"I did not finish telling about the Panama 201. It and 3 others went to Arkansas and are now being worked over for use for a tourist attraction, if not already. Even the old passenger coach went to Arkansas."

Caton remembers the first woodburning cook stove sold in Polk County. The buyer wanted his money back because the stove smoked up the house. Seems he had built the fire in the oven.

Caton liked to recite a parody on Psalm 23, called the Loafers: "The government is my shepherd, I need not work ..."

Peter Racki

Peter A. Racki was born in Yugoslavia on June 24, 1897. He was reunited with his father, a white oak-stave merchant in Hunting, Texas, when he was three years old. Those staves, Racki said, went to France for kegs for shipping wine to America and Great Britain and for storing Scotch whiskey. Low-grade oak cooperage was used for olive oil shipments. Hence, Racki learned the business from his father before ocean shipping of such luxuries as French wine and Scotch whiskey was prohibited by the Eighteenth Amendment.

The stave business boomed for a while after the First World War. It waned when quality white oak was exhausted and the French began to bottle their wines for export abroad. In those days, the reuse of casks — worth $70 to $100 each — was prohibited in the United States. So, bottles replaced the wooden kegs. Until then, Racki noted, casks had been used and reused for fifty years.

Racki learned the logging and lumbering business the hard way. In the late 1920s, he logged for others, paying landowners $3 and $5 per thousand board feet, logging with mules, and working flatheads. "They were smarter than square heads," he said. Then, unable to sell logs, he put
in his own mill. "We didn't cut the land clean. We high-graded. Buyers were particular as the devil. Trees with any defect were left in the woods. If one sounded hollow, you left it. Typical diameters were 30 inches, unless it was an exceptionally good-looking tree."

The immigrant's first venture on his own was a pine-hardwood mill at Rye, Texas, begun in 1948. Soon cutting was limited to hardwood, stumpage costing up to $6 per thousand board measure. While most of the output of the Trinity River Valley Hardwood Lumber Company was utilized in Texas, some high-grade material went to the East for furniture.

Maintaining lumber quality was a problem: "We had a green inspector and a dried inspector. In the earlier days, if we didn't get 40 percent Number 1 grade oak, we quit that tract; ... went back later to get the rest of the trees for some other use." Hardwoods were mostly one merchantable log. "The rest of the tree was left in the woods to fertilize the ground."

About fires, Racki noted, "they were all deliberately set. Cattlemen wanted fresh grass in the spring. Fires didn't hurt the trees much .... Folks that had cattle running in the woods would throw a match everytime they saw a dry patch of grass. So there would be fresh grass .... When the Forest Service came in, and it began to get after people about setting fires, and they quit 'firen,' we didn't have this [the present] kind of woods. Now the fuel builds up on the ground 6 to 8 inches thick; so when that gets to burning, it takes timber and all. Back when the old cattlemen burned, there wasn't enough fuel on the ground to do that [kind of damage]."

About lumbering during World War II, Racki observed, "We couldn't get enough men to run the mill. They were all in the Army, munition plants, oil plants. They use to send a man out here from the War Production Board who asked what they could do to help. I said, 'Have you got any men?' That ended the conversation. During that time a lot of the little mills were making oil-field board. That's a cheap grade of lumber [used for planking well sites and roads]. It was suppose to be 3x8, but it turned out 2x7 inches. They got paid for 3x8 ... Trillions of feet of top-grade hardwood went into that stuff: pecan, white oak, even magnolia."

Racki paid $10 an acre for land he bought in the 1930s, "right in the middle of the Depression." This was a high price, but the land had good timber on it. The men "floated the logs down the Trinity River to Wallisville, close to Anahuac, for a big mill down there. This prime timber was heart pine and cypress." Cutters "girdled the trees and let them sit a year. Then they'd go back and cut them down, accumulate them in the sloughs, tie more than 50 logs together to make a raft, wait for the water to get high enough for floating, push them out into the river, and float them down. Three to four men rode the logs, camped on them, cooked on them, and at night tied them up. The Neches River is full of sinkers
Racki never hired a forester, though he did retain consultants. To this forestry dean he said, "I have a farm boy here that was a whole lot better than those you turn loose ... When he retired, I made him a promise, I'd pay him the difference between his Social Security and what he was getting then."

Blacks worked for the Trinity River Valley Company as mule skinners, seldom as flatheads. The principal problem encountered with the blacks was the need "to loan them money all the time to keep them going.... A truck driver every now and then wanted to borrow a dollar. What'd he want with a dollar? He belonged to the church down the road. The dollar was his dues. If he paid that, it was alright whatever he did; but you had to pay your dues."

Really good mules, weighing 1200 to 1500 pounds, were worth $400 to $500. They would live for eight to ten years if cared for. "Mules were never separated, always working as a team. In fact, when one got sick and died, you'd have trouble mating him with another. They didn't want to work other than together, ever. When loading logs on wagons in the woods, loaders just threw the lines up on the hanes and talked to them. The mule'd take that log right on up to that wagon, and when it hit the wagon, the mule would stop dead still. They didn't need much coaxing. I had a young mule from Kansas I picked up and put to work in the worst place in the world. The water was belly deep. He had to cross a flat. He never looked back. The log went right on. If you hooked him to something he couldn't move — like a true — at noontime, he'd kick the devil out of you. If you left him hooked to a log, he didn't pay you no mind. He knew he could move the log. But if he was hooked to something that wouldn't move, look out. They dragged logs 200 to 300 yards.

"Mules ate only once a day and drank water once a day. They got oats in one trough and alfalfa in another. A day's rations cost less than $2. That was cheap logging."

When questioned about injuries to workers, Racki said some were premeditated. "They'd want to get hurt so they could write what they called 'polly.' Polly was short for an insurance policy."

To a question about wages, the lumberman replied, "In the '30s, $1.50 a day, a 10-hour day, 6 days a week."

Fuel for the mill? "Sawdust, and slabs when the sawdust pile was low."

Racki recalled how loggers searched for figured red gum for export. They could cut a box into a tree to see if it had enough red to make its harvest worthwhile. Walnut was bought from around home places for the unheard-of price of $100. "Owners never did get their $100. The feller who got the trees never came back."

And as for the valuable baldcypress tree, he narrated this story: "I
told a man who worked for me to mark the cypress trees he wanted to
make boards out of to cover his house. Put a hack on them. A year later,
I asked if he got that cypress tree. He nearly died laughing. I said, ‘What’s
so funny?’ He said, ‘Kirby had so many more than you did, we got one
of his.’

“That’s the way it was in the Trinity River Valley of the Big Thicket
until these companies hired foresters to watch their stuff.”

Simon Henderson

The last of the four pioneers in the Texas forest industry is Simon
W. Henderson, Jr. He was born in Keltys, now part of Lufkin, on March
19, 1904. His father worked in the office of the Angelina County Lumber
Company (ACLC). After grammar school, Henderson quit the local
school, later went to Lufkin’s Southwest Commercial College for a year
and a half, and then for a year at the L.C. Ferrell School, a private
institution in New Orleans.

Simon Henderson became involved in the lumber business at the age
of fifteen or sixteen by “hanging around the office at night and running
up the log-scale on the adding machine, working for nothing.”

ACLC was bought by Joe Kurth, Sr. from Charlie Keltys in 1887.
It was the first company in the area to hire a full-time forester, in 1935.
“Paul Hursey was a very capable forester whom we got to look after our
forests, especially for a long-range outlook. Until that time, it was just
a matter of buying a tract, cutting it out, and forgetting it. The last virgin
timber that I recall was the 14,000 acres of longleaf near Zavalla that we
bought from Kirky Lumber Corporation. We cut 300 million feet out in
about ten years, at $12.50 per MBM. That was about 1933. All of our
crowd thought we would go broke. At that time Ernest Kurth was manager
of ACLC and Ely Weiner was president.” The lumber mill’s output
included longleaf pine for ship-decking and big ship-timbers.

The price for the Zavalla stumpage was in contrast to the $5-$10 per
acre the company usually paid for land and timber, most of which was
bought before the crash in 1929, when prices were high. At about the time
of the Depression, the company had 100,000 to 120,000 acres. Sam
Rayburn Lake took 10,000 acres in the 1960s. Rights-of-way have taken
more.

ACLC had about 350 men on its payrolls in the 1930s. Laborers made
about 35¢ an hour, scale labor a little more. Rent for the company houses
was $5 to $10 a month. Because all the company owners lived “on the
grounds, if there was a hardship among the employees, the company or
individuals among the owners took care of them.” ACLC never had much
labor trouble.

Let Henderson tell about how he got into the paper business: “My
father, who died in 1923, and Ernest Kurth, were close friends. Later,
Ernest took me on. He wanted to organize a paper mill, and so he got in touch with Lou Calder, a prominent paper man in New York. At that time, Calder was with Charles Herty, a chemist who figured out how to control the pitch in southern yellow pine. [Herty died before the mill opened.] They organized the Southland Corporation with about $100,000 to promote the mill. They had several partners, Joe and Ernest Kurth and this 'old boy' who founded the Republic National Bank of Dallas. He had $25,000 in stock. They got him to come here and I drove him around, showing him the timber country and the lumber mills.

"The Angelina County Lumber Company, the Temple crowd at Diboll, and the Illinois Railroad managed to get the mill located on its (IRR) track, about 4 miles east of Lufkin. We let them (the IRR) have half interest. The IRR had been just a couple of rusty streaks for a long time; it ran to Chireno. We used it as a logging railroad and then, finally, it just dried up. We're talking about 1938."

Pressed for more background on the development of Southland Paper, Henderson said they logged as far away as fifty miles to supply the first newsprint machines, using much Temple [then the Southern Pine Lumber Company] wood. The organizers wanted to get into paper manufacturing because 'the lumber business was terribly cyclical, up and down.' Paper, they thought, would be more profitable. Newspapers that joined the venture included the Dallas News, the Fort Worth Star-Telegram, and the Daily Oklahoman. The Southern Newspaper Publishers Association also participated.

At first twelve to fifteen Canadian paper-makers were brought in to get the mill running. Some stayed.

Henderson's personal relationship to Southland Paper was as secretary to Kurth, "sort of an office boy, to sign papers," the secretary said. He remained a director of the paper mill while continuing as vice president of ACLC.

About Lou Calder: "He started out with the Perkins, Goodwin Co. as an office boy. He bought stock in the company; and, as other owners in the company died, he bought more. Finally, I think he controlled the whole company. Calder was one of the original tenants of the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York City. He was one of those fellows who came up the hard way; had a place in Florida, an orange orchard, where he took people hunting and fishing."

Henderson related a story of how money was made, and lost, in the 1930s. When the U.S. Forest Service was purchasing land for the four national forests in Texas, Thompson Brothers had 96,000 acres for sale in Trinity County at $12.50 an acre. ACLC would have bought the tract, had not Weiner [a partner] insisted that "he had to have his dividends." The government bought it and, after four or five years, sold $5 million worth of timber.
These same three families — Kurth, Weiner, and Henderson — organized Lufkin Foundry and Machine Company, later known as Lufkin Industries, with $20,000 in capital. This company originally repaired sawmill machinery. Later it manufactured sawmill equipment.

In answering queries about the Ewing, Texas, operation, which Henderson had mentioned, he said they cut out eight to ten thousand acres of family-owned hardwood land and closed the mill there in 1936 or 1937. Henderson was president at the time of the closing. That mill was located seventeen miles east of Lufkin on the IRR. H.G. Bohlsen, an “old-timer down at New Caney,” started the company, chartering it under his name in 1923 to harvest oak and gum. A year later, Bohlsen was killed when heavy 12x12-inch timbers fell on him while loading a gondola. The company name was then changed to Angelina Hardwood.

The Angelina and Neches River Railroad, which carried wood to the papermill at Herty and paper from the mill to the Southern Pacific and Cotton Belt railroads in Lufkin, was truly a short line road of only thirty-one miles. It, too, belonged to the Kurth, Weiner, and Henderson families. Towns such as Etoile and Chireno were once served by the line for delivery of feed and gravel.

Henderson concluded his comments by noting that Harvey Sprott was Southland’s first forester, that many industrialists never expected the cut-over lands to grow trees again, and that the company’s land investments in Washington State in the 1930s were soon liquidated because of the continued threat of destructive wildfires.

For Henderson, as for Wood, Caton, and Racki, industrial forestry had been a fascinating career.