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THE LEGACY OF A GENTLEMANLY SCHOLAR:
DR. ROBERT MAXWELL AND HIS CONTRIBUTIONS
TO FOREST HISTORY

by James E. Fickle

Some historians leave their mark as teachers, others as researchers and writers, and some contribute by locating, preserving, identifying, and cataloging the basic raw materials, the documents and records, which others will use to construct written histories. The best of our profession are active and effective in all three areas, and Bob Maxwell was among that fortunate and gifted breed. As a teacher he inspired students and colleagues to develop an interest in the natural history of this region and nation. He developed ties and friendships with the forest products-industry leaders of East Texas. This resulted in the deposit of collections in the library of Stephen F. Austin State University which make it a mecca for students interested in the history of the Southern forest-products industry. Finally, Bob Maxwell's pioneering books and articles helped to establish the standards of scholarship for what is now a growing area of historical specialization.

It is interesting to examine Bob's career against the backdrop of developments in the historical profession. After earning a Ph.D. at the University of Wisconsin in 1949, Bob returned to his native state and taught at the University of Kentucky until 1952, when he joined the faculty at Stephen F. Austin. At that time the shelves devoted to the history of Southern lumbering were relatively bare. This is remarkable, considering the fact that over a long period of time the lumber industry employed more people, generated more income, and had a greater impact on the physical nature of the region than any thing else that happened. Neither tobacco, nor sugar, nor cotton, nor even petroleum, was truly king in the South—it was lumbering and later pulp and paper manufacturing that occupied the central role during much of this area's history.

Until the discovery of oil at Spindletop in 1901, lumber manufacturing was Texas' most important industry in terms of income and employment, and it remained second from that time until 1930. During the "bonanza" period from the 1880s to the late 1920s, Texas was among the leading lumber producers in the nation, with most of the output coming from large mills owned and operated by fewer than fifty lumbermen. More than 600 mills operated in the Lone Star state in the course of that fifty-year span.

What was happening in Texas was part of the story of the South generally and of the lumber industry nationally. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, lumbering was a migratory industry. Because of cultural, political, and economic considerations, the typical lumberman followed

James L. Fickle is a professor of history at Memphis State University. An earlier version of this paper was presented to the East Texas Historical Association on September 13, 1991.
a "cut out and get out" philosophy. The industry moved from the Northeastern woods into the Great Lakes states and then jumped to the South and the West in its endless search for raw materials to feed its mills.

Between 1880 and 1920 Southern lumber production rose from 1.6 to 15.4 billion board feet annually, with the peak year coming in 1912. By 1919 the South was producing thirty-seven percent of all of the lumber in the United States, and in the early decades of the twentieth century Dixie produced nearly as much timber as all other regions of the United States combined. The industry’s march across the Southern landscape had reduced the original wooded area by almost forty percent by that time, from nearly 300 million to 178 million acres, of which only thirty-nine million were virgin forest. By 1920 there were about ninety million acres of cutover land in the piney woods regions, and many of the big operators were on their way to the Pacific Northwest to repeat the process.

Even as Southern lumbering seemed to be dying, there were pioneers who were working to bring it back and to create a permanent industry on its crumbling foundations. They included men such as Henry Hardtner of Louisiana’s Urania Lumber Company, who was demonstrating in the north central hills of his state that if protected from fire and hogs and allowed to reseed naturally the southern pines would come back faster than most people thought possible. There were also the early government and industrial foresters—Austin Cary, Carl Alwyn Schenck, Inman F. Eldredge, Elwood L. Demmon, Walter J. Damtoft, Joseph E. McCaffrey, Charles Connaughton, Philip C. Wakeley, and others who were trying to teach the lumbermen that “cut out and get out” was not the only way, that trees could be grown as a crop profitably. There was W. Goodrich Jones who pushed for conservation in Texas. And there was Charles Holmes Herty, whose research provided the scientific and technological foundation for the rise of the modern pulp and paper industry in the South.

These pioneers created the vision of a permanent Southern forest products industry, and historian Thomas D. Clark describes the result:

Pulp, paper, and plywood mills rushed into the region, bringing with them pragmatic managers preaching reforestation and managed timber production. They not only preached but substantiated their messages by purchasing millions of acres of submarginal cotton and scrub forest lands and setting them to growing the South’s third, fourth, and maybe, fifth forests. They established nurseries, isolated superior mother trees, introduced generations of improved seedlings, and their scientists even tinkered with the genetics of hardwoods...To date there has been no end of the movement of wood-using industries into the South. They come to the woods, the sun and water, the labor pool, and to short-haul transportation facilities. All of this has brought significant social and economic changes to the region, so deep in places as to create entirely new human relations to the land itself.

This was the story that Bob Maxwell did so much to document and tell, and at the time he arrived at Stephen F. Austin it was still a tale largely
neglected. That neglect was the product of both the nature of the industry and the myopia of historians. The antebellum industry was ignored because of the preoccupation of scholars with the plantation economy, and the relative scarcity of source materials resulting from a lack of historical consciousness, and sometimes even reasonable literacy, on the part of many industry pioneers. Comprehensive company records were rare in the early days, and lumber mills were notoriously vulnerable to fires which destroyed many of the records that did exist. When he wrote *Andrew Brown & Cypress Lumbering in the Old Southwest* in 1967, John Hebron Moore reported that "There is no history of lumbering in the Southern region...." The post-bellum industry was only slightly better represented. Said Nollie Hickman in his 1962 bibliographical essay for *Mississippi Harvest; Lumbering in the Longleaf Pine Belt, 1840-1915*, "Very few books have been published on the history of the forest industries in the longleaf pine belt of Mississippi." This was true for other areas of the South as well, including the piney woods of East Texas. The bibliography of Ruth A. Allen's *East Texas Lumber Workers*, which appeared in 1961, included no published secondary works on the history of the Texas lumber industry, although it did cite Hamilton Pratt Easton's University of Texas dissertation on the history of the industry (1947) and Charles R. McCord's University of Texas master's thesis on the Brotherhood of Timber Workers (1958).

Libraries and archives in the South had shown little interest in acquiring the records and papers of lumbermen and their companies. As Hickman said in his "Preface":

Although lumbering played a role of major significance in the economic history of the South from the beginning of settlement to the present...University libraries and state archives only lately have begun to gather the documents from which a history of the southern forest products industries could be written. Most of the extant records of lumber or naval stores companies remained in the possession of business firms or heirs of the owners of enterprises no longer in operation and were therefore not readily available to scholars.

While the situation in Texas and the South was not totally unlike that in the forested regions of other sections, the fact was that in the North an interest in the history of the lumber industry was developing. This resulted partially from the growing historical consciousness of some industry leaders, among whom the Weyerhaeusers were undoubtedly the most important. By the 1940s that enormously influential family was in its third generation of leadership, and the grandsons of the elder Frederick Weyerhaeuser were becoming interested in preserving the record of their ancestor and his company. Scholars in areas where the industry was important were also awakening to the significance of its history, thus the involvement of people like historian Theodore C. Blegen, Dean of the Graduate School at the University of Minnesota, located near the then St. Paul base of the Weyerhaeuser empire. Also business history was becoming fashionable.
Harvard had established the Business History Group, and among the project histories undertaken by the noted historian Allan Nevins of Columbia University was his *Timber and Men* (1961) study of the Weyerhaeuser story, co-authored with Ralph W. Hidy and Frank Ernest Hill.

Theodore C. Blegen was instrumental in persuading the Weyerhaeuser family to contribute the first money for the establishment of The Forest History Foundation (Society) in St. Paul in 1946. Bob Maxwell became a stalwart of this group, eventually serving as a member of its board of directors. The Foundation's *Forest History Newsletter*, predecessor to the *Journal of Forest History*, first appeared in the Spring of 1957. However, it was not until 1966 that the Forest History Society, Yale University, and the Business History Group of Harvard University sponsored the first national colloquium on the history of the forest products industries at Harvard. So, as you can see, forest history, conservation history, or environmental history, whatever you want to call it, is a relatively young area of specialization in the field of history.

One of the Forest History Society's missions was and is to assist scholars and depositories in the discovery and acquisition of manuscripts and other materials documenting the history of the forest-products industry. It is significant that in 1957 Mr. E.L. Kurth, president of the Angelina County Lumber Company, joined the FHF board of directors. His interest in the history of the industry was reflected in the first issue of the *Forest History Newsletter*, which noted that "Dr. Robert S. Maxwell of Stephen F. Austin State College, Nacogdoches, Texas, reports progress on the processing of the Kurth Industries records which have been deposited there. This collection, comprising probably one of the most complete sets of records in any Southern repository, will be of inestimable value to forest history scholars when it is ready for use."

The Kurth Papers became the heart of the forest history collection at Stephen F. Austin State University and helped to establish its reputation as a major source for information on the Southern lumber industry. If he had done nothing else, Bob Maxwell's role in acquiring and processing this collection would establish him as a major figure in promoting the history of the Texas and Southern forest-products industries. The Angelina County Lumber Company (or Kurth) Papers, were eventually joined by the Foster Lumber Company Papers, the Frost-Johnson Lumber Company Papers, the W. Goodrich Jones Papers, the Kirby Lumber Corporation Papers, the Lutcher and Moore Lumber Company Papers, the Temple Industries Papers, and other collections to constitute one of the most significant concentrations of forest-products industry records in any United States depository. However, Professor Maxwell was not only collecting these materials, he was beginning to make them available to a wider audience through his own research and writing.

While Bob had an estimable reputation as a student of the Progressive
Era, the field of forest and conservation history is my focus, and his first published effort in this area was *Thistle In The Piney Woods: Paul Bremond And The Houston, East And West Texas Railway,* issued by the Texas Gulf Coast Historical Association in 1963. Among the primary sources Maxwell consulted were the Kurth Papers, as well as other manuscript sources at Stephen F. Austin. Maxwell wrote that this was “the story of a railroad and the dreams and schemes of the man who built it,” but, as he emphasized, it was this and other railroads that opened up the East Texas lumber industry.\(^6\) The history of the railroad and of the lumber industry were inseparable, and as Maxwell concluded, “The building of the HE&WT and its connecting lines to a large extent made possible the commercial lumber industry in East Texas and along the route of ‘Bremond’s Road’ were to be found the plants of most of the big names in Texas lumber. The Carters, Temples, Kurths, Knoxes, Haywards, Frosts, Thompsons, Ragleys and Saners and Pickerings all built their mills near its right-of-way and shipped their lumber on its cars. They supplied the principal traffic; the HE&WT supplied the transportation.”\(^1\) During 1963 Maxwell also presented a paper at the Southern Historical Association on the lumbermen of the East Texas frontier.

The following year Bob Maxwell continued his study of the East Texas piney woods in an article “The Pines of Texas: A Study in Lumbering and Public Policy, 1880-1930,” published in the *East Texas Historical Journal.*\(^1\) Industry giants such as John Henry Kirby began to stride across Maxwell’s pages, and the author examined their influence upon politics and in turn the growing grassroots reaction against the lumber barons and the demand for public regulation of their practices. This resulted in state legislation to protect the workers’ interests, but not in any major improvement of their condition. After the turn of the century with many companies anticipating cutting out in East Texas, the reformers’ attention shifted toward conservation. An important symbol and step in that direction was the state legislature’s establishment of the Texas Forest Service in 1915, largely because of the efforts of W. Goodrich Jones, who was to become one of Maxwell’s favorite subjects. By the 1930s the Texas national forests were established, utilizing cutover lands from a number of companies, and the United States Forest Service was demonstrating how these lands could be regenerated. In turn, these efforts inspired a new approach by forest products companies which began to employ and need the professional advice of industrial foresters. Again, as he prepared this article, Maxwell was unable to draw much from the few publications about Texas and the Southern lumber industry. Once more he relied heavily upon the holdings at Stephen F. Austin, including the Kurth Papers, the oral history collections, and the Forest Lumber Company Papers.

In 1965 Maxwell presented his research to a larger audience for the first time in an article entitled “Lumbermen of the East Texas Frontier” in *Forest History.*\(^1\) He began by informing his readers that “Contrary to the
popular stereotype, Texas does not entirely consist of wide open spaces, cowboys and longhorn cattle. The landscape is not wholly devoted to the silhouettes of oil derricks on the treeless plains, ten gallon hats and bawling dogies. Through short vignettes Maxwell introduced such East Texas giants as Henry J. Lutcher, G. Bedell Moore, William H. Stark, the ever-present John Henry Kirby, and David and William T. Joyce. Maxwell also suggested that “In a longer study it would be profitable to look at the personalities and activities of such lumbermen as R.A. Long, J.H. Kurth, E.A. Frost, Thomas Lewis Latane Temple, John Martin Thompson, W.T. Carter, and Mrs. Lillian Knox.” “All,” said Maxwell, “were interesting individuals.” Again, Maxwell relied on the few published works, theses and dissertations, personal interviews, and the collections at Stephen F. Austin for most of his sources.

Maxwell looked anew at some of these lumbermen in an article in 1971, “Researching Forest History In The Gulf Southwest: The Unity Of The Sabine Valley,” published in Louisiana Studies. In addressing his obvious theme, Maxwell described the careers and companies of men who operated along the Louisiana-Texas border or in both states. He concentrated upon Lutcher and Moore, which was based in Orange, Texas, but logged both sides of the river, and the Frost-Johnson Lumber Company, with headquarters in Shreveport and lands and mills in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Texas.

By now Maxwell’s focus was shifting from an emphasis on the early years and the labor aspects of the Texas and Gulf Coast forest products industry toward conservation, although it should be noted that “conservation” in the terminology of the forest products industry or an industrial forester is often a quite different concept from that of an environmental activist. Pursuing this subject, in 1970 the School of Forestry at Stephen F. Austin State University published Maxwell’s A Short History of Forest Conservation in Texas, co-authored with James W. Martin. This was in considerable part the story of W. Goodrich Jones, which Maxwell continued to develop in articles during the early 1970s.

In 1973 Maxwell emphasized Jones’ role in an article, “The Impact of Forestry on the Gulf South,” published in Forest History. He described the southern migration of the lumber industry, and again the familiar figures—the Kirbys, Lutchers, Frosts, Kurths, Temples, and others such as Edward Hines, Herman Dierks, Edward Crossett, and the Gardiners—marched across his pages. He emphasized their belief that the southern pines were inexhaustible, illustrating his point with a speech by Henry J. Lutcher at a United States Senate hearing in Washington:

...Professor R.L. Sargent’s forestry report for the year 1880...show[s] that the amount of longleaf standing timber in those states bordering in the Gulf of Mexico was one hundred and seven billion feet. If you were to take ships at 500 tons each, load them with this one hundred and seven billion feet, place them in a direct line, stern to stern, beginning at
Maxwell then discussed the growing concern among the public and some enlightened industry leaders about the rapidly-disappearing timber resources of the South. He outlined Henry Hardtner's early efforts in Louisiana, but spent most of his time chronicling the career and accomplishments of W. Goodrich Jones. Educated at Princeton and in Germany, where he observed first-hand the accomplishments of the Teutonic foresters who were to have a profound impact on that profession in the United States, Jones became a banker in Temple, Texas, where as an advocate of conservation and forest culture he became known as the "tree crank" and "Hackberry Jones."

At the behest of Dr. Bernhard E. Fernow, Chief of the U.S. Bureau of Forestry, Jones made a survey and report on the condition of the forests of East Texas. He concluded that the wasteful practices of the lumber producers, large and small, made the situation critical. Jones reported that "What escapes the big mill is caught by the little mill, and what the little mill does not get the tie-cutter and rail-splitter soon has chopped down. They are going and going fast—big buffalos, mother buffalos, and little buffalos." Jones, said Maxwell, was probably decisively influential in the creation and early survival of the Texas Department of Forestry, and his efforts contributed to the adoption of more enlightened practices by such Texas lumbermen as J. Lewis Thompson, Ernest L. Kurth, and T.L.L. Temple. Similarly, efforts by Edward Crossett and his associates led to the dawn of sustained yield operations in Arkansas, while Louisiana's Henry Hardtner was joined by companies like the Great Southern of Bogalusa and Industrial at Elizabeth in such practices as cutting to a diameter limit, leaving seed trees, establishing nurseries to provide planting stock, and protecting the trees from fire and hogs. Maxwell concluded that:

In 1923 Robert A. Long announced that the timber supply of the South was fast disappearing and those companies that wished to continue operations would be forced to the west coast. Instead the forests of the mid-South rebounded from the dismal years of 1930-32 which found lumber production falling to the lowest point in fifty years. Due to sound forestry practices the sturdy second-growth forest in these states today rivals the original stands in total quantity. Except for the petroleum industry, the forest products industry ranks at or near the top in the several states in dollar production, total number of employees, and employee payrolls. Obviously forestry has had a vital impact on the prosperity of the mid-South.

Maxwell continued to chronicle the Jones saga in a 1974 article in the *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, "One Man's Legacy: W. Goodrich Jones and Texas Conservation," which featured a more comprehensive treatment of Jones' life and career. His thesis was clear:

Today the East Texas region is reforested with second-growth pine forests, sturdy, strong, and well managed. Though not as impressive as
the towering virgin longleafs, the new forest provides perhaps more board feet of merchantable lumber than ever. Wood-using plants and mills of great capacity and diversity have been developed to harvest and utilize this second-growth forest in the most efficient and economical ways. The prospects are for continued growth and sustained yield for the foreseeable future with no end in sight. Thus the Texas forest picture has turned the full circle within a single century. The reasons for this spectacular recovery are many and varied, but much of the motivating force for reforestation and conservation in Texas can be traced back to one man: W. Goodrich Jones.29

By this time Bob Maxwell had spent more than two decades collecting materials, studying, and writing about the forest-products industry. His publications constituted an important part of the growing volume of studies on the subject, and the time had come to begin synthesizing these works and painting the picture on a larger canvas. In 1983 Maxwell joined his former Stephen F. Austin State University colleague Robert D. Baker, professor of forest science at Texas A&M University, to produce Sawdust Empire: The Texas Lumber Industry, 1830-1940, which was described on the dust jacket as the “first comprehensive story of logging, lumbering, and forest conservation in Texas....”30 The work was deservedly well-received. Writing in the Southwestern Historical Quarterly, John Hebron Moore described the volume as “a welcome addition to the short list of historical studies of southern lumbering,” and concluded that “Both professional historians and casual students of Texas history or southern economic history will find this excellent book well worth their time. Indeed, it could well serve as a model for future studies in the field of lumber history.”31 The reviewer for Business History Review said that “Sawdust Empire” should stand the test of time as the definitive study of Texas lumbering.32

In reviewing the book for The Journal of Southern History, I noted that it examined “the setting and origins of Texas lumbering, its workers, leaders, institutions, accomplishments, and controversies, largely through the perspective of company records and interviews with industry leaders and employees... The vantage point is largely that of the big operations that survived for two or three generations....” I praised “the richness of detail that creates a better picture of the industry’s organization and of how the work was actually done in both woods and mill than this reviewer has encountered in any other work,” and noted that “on the whole the treatment is thorough and judicious....”33 While I have not yet discussed the culminating publications of Bob Maxwell’s career, my conclusion in the Sawdust Empire review could stand as a valedictory:

Principal author Maxwell is one of the distinguished pioneers in the field of forest history, and his love and enthusiasm for the subject permeate this delightful book...Sawdust Empire is based on sound scholarship and succeeds in both telling the story at hand and placing it in a larger context. It is a must for students of Texas, southern, and United States forest, business, labor, and economic history.34
During this period Maxwell was also involved in other aspects of "doing" forest history. Again joining forces with Bob Baker, he was working on projects for the history program of the United States Forest Service. In 1988 Maxwell and Baker teamed with two other scholars to produce *Timeless Heritage: A History of the Forest Service in the Southwest*, and he also contributed to a work entitled "A Living Legacy: The National Forests of the Northern Region, 1908-1988," which is still in manuscript. In addition to his efforts for the Forest Service, Maxwell was a contributor to various collected works, including the massive *Encyclopedia of American Forest and Conservation History*.

In a fitting conclusion to Bob Maxwell's career, he was chosen to co-author the first modern synthesis documenting the central role of forests in the American experience from the colonial era to the recent past. Supported by the Forest History Society as well as the National Endowment for the Humanities and published in 1985 by the University of Nebraska Press, the resulting work, *This Well-Wooded Land, Americans and Their Forests from Colonial Times to the Present*, was instantly recognized as a standard and a classic. Said the noted historian David Smith of the University of Maine, this work is "A substantial contribution. Nothing like it now exists, and earlier works were not as soundly based on modern scholarship.... This should become the standard book on its subject."

Working on *This Well-Wooded Land* allowed Maxwell to utilize his knowledge of the Southern forest products and integrate it into the national picture, for the four authors organized the book chronologically, and each was principally responsible for a particular time period. In 1909 United States lumber production peaked, and Maxwell picks up the narrative at that point and carries it down until 1976, where the authors chose to end their study.

His major emphasis is upon the fact that during this era resource management decisions and policies were the products of broader and more diverse constituencies and interest groups than had been the case in earlier periods. Maxwell discusses technological and organizational changes in the forest products industries, the conservation records of the several presidents of the twentieth century, and the proliferation of different types of forest and wilderness users, as well as the passage of such landmark legislation as the Wilderness Act (1964), the National Environmental Policy Act (1969), and the National Forest Management Act (1976).

Reviewers were uniformly laudatory in their assessment of the book. The reviewer for *The Journal of American History* asked, "Is it possible to provide a brief yet trustworthy guide through the tangled thicket of United States Forest History?" and concluded that indeed it was: the book, he said, "bids fair to become the standard." In summation he described the work as "a balanced exposition...with care taken to avoid even the hint of bias against the key players in hot disputes... This Well-Wooded Land...success-
fully redresses the absence of a first-rate introduction to United States Forest history." Said the reviewer for the *Journal of Forest History*, "*This Well-Wooded Land* is a grand addition to the meager bookshelf of comprehensive histories of American forests written by historians...any serious student of forest history in the United States must read *This Well-Wooded Land.*" 

My own assessment of the book, for *Environmental Review*, summarizes the state of scholarship in the forest history field by the mid-1980s, and, of course, as I stated earlier, Bob Maxwell’s work represented an important part of that story. As I said then, "*This Well-Wooded Land* is a book that could not have been written a generation ago. [For it is] based largely on the burgeoning secondary literature in the fields of forest, conservation, and environmental history and studies...This Well-Wooded Land will be the standard introduction to its subject for some time to come." It represents an appropriate capstone for Bob Maxwell’s distinguished career as a forest historian.

I would like to close with a few personal remarks about Bob Maxwell’s contributions to forest history through his remarkable enthusiasm for the field and his generosity. I first met Bob when I was a young graduate student with an interest in but little or no real knowledge about the Southern forests and the forest products industry. Bob welcomed me to Nacogdoches with open arms, made it possible for me to research the remarkable collections at Stephen F. Austin State University, and above all provided both material, psychological, and intellectual encouragement to continue digging in order to acquire knowledge in the field. Whenever we got together, in Nacogdoches or at professional meetings, Bob and I talked about basketball (an inevitability for a Kentuckian and a Hoosier), our mutual passions for golf and tennis, and always about forest history. Who was doing what, what do you know about this, have you seen this source, and so on. I never wrote a paper, or an article, or a book manuscript without Bob offering encouragement and a willingness to read and critique. His critiques were always pertinent, sensible, and generous. In the ideal world, academe is supposed to be inhabited by a community of scholars. Too often academics fall far short of that ideal. Bob Maxwell, through his work and his personal warmth and generosity, demonstrated to me that the ideal world can sometimes be real. I value my memories of his friendship, warmth, and example very highly.

NOTES

1This paragraph is largely based on Michael Williams, *Americans and their Forests: A Historical Geography* (Cambridge and New York), 1989, p. 238.


Hickman, *Mississippi Harvest*, p.i.


*Forest History Newsletter*, I. (Spring, 1957), p. 3.


*Whistle in the Piney Woods*, p. 71.


Fickle review of *Sawdust Empire*, p. 474.


1 (New York, 1983).


