Reflections upon the Past and Present in Southern Forest History

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Practitioners of history tell us that we learn from the past, or that without knowing our past we have no future. In common parlance these ideas are frequently translated into the cliche that "history repeats itself." Sometimes it does, and often it seems that we have not learned much from the past—but it is far more common for history not to repeat itself exactly. However, similar issues, situations, and patterns do commonly occur, allowing us to gain insights into the present from studying the past. The forest history of the South provides some prime examples.1

Certification has been a recurrent issue among forest product manufacturers. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as railroads began to crisscross the South and link the southern pine forests to the consumers and markets of the North, southern pine lumber was not well regarded above the Mason Dixon line. It was considered tough to work, prone to warping, and haphazardly manufactured, with no uniformity in drying and manufacturing standards. The industry responded to these problems by creating manufacturers' trade associations like the old Texas and Louisiana Lumber Manufacturers' Association, the Southern Lumber Manufacturers' Association, the Yellow Pine Manufacturers' Association, and the Southern Pine Association. These organizations established manufacturing quality standards as well as inspection and grade marking, or certification, procedures, which enabled the consumer to buy a product with the assurance that it was of a certain size and quality. The public demanded standards and the industry responded. The advent of certification was an important factor in the rise of Southern lumber manufacturing to national leadership.2

Today an important segment of the population is again demanding action. Environmentalists and others have become greatly concerned about the rapid harvesting of the rain forests of the southern hemisphere and the old growth forests of the United States, as well as about the impact of some logging practices on streams and other parts of the natural world. The forest products industry has responded to these concerns with new kinds of certification reminiscent of grade marking. The first is called "green certification." Manufacturers who agree not to log in rain forests or old growth areas, and who do not use destructive logging methods, are monitored by outside agencies. If they abide by their agreements they are allowed to mark their products as "green certified." Although such products tend to be somewhat more expensive, retailers like Home Depot and Walmart have agreed to sell green certified products in their stores.3 The other component of the process is training loggers in the use of responsible techniques. The training is usually conducted under the auspices of state forestry associations, and loggers who complete the course and maintain certain standards are allowed to advertise

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that they are "certified in sustainable forestry initiative." In the area of certification the present echoes the past.  

Critters have been an integral part of the lives of Southern foresters, loggers, and forest products manufacturers over most of the last century. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the razorback hog was number one on the "public enemy list" of Southerners who attempted to reforest their lands after they were logged. The damage that a hog could do to young growth and plantings was documented by the pioneer Mississippi forester Posey Howell, who spent an entire day on horseback following a hog, observing that during that day the hog rooted up more young seedlings than a man could plant in a week. Fire and hogs were two of the major obstacles to Southern reforestation, and the construction of hogtight fences around planted areas was among the factors that brought the Southern forests back to life.  

In recent years critters have again occupied center stage. Spotted owls have virtually shut down the timber industry in parts of the Pacific Northwest. In the South we have our own birds of a controversial feather, although they have never achieved the notoriety of their feathered brethren in the West. They are red-cockaded woodpeckers, and while not all environmentalists would agree with my statement, the Southern forest products industry and loggers have generally done a reasonable job of protecting their habitat without undue disruption of the industry. There are also efforts under way to protect and preserve other endangered or threatened species such as the Louisiana black bear, dusky gopher tortoise, Louisiana salamander, and various other plants and animals. Critters past and present have impacted the Southern forest and its human inhabitants.  

Opposition to "government control" has existed within some segments of the American population since the colonial period when colonists took up muskets and barrels of tea in opposition to British imperial officials. Forest land owners and forest products manufacturers have been especially vigorous in their opposition to what they considered "excessive government zeal" in the governance or regulation of their affairs during the last century.  

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as the Southern lumber industry entered its bonanza era, cries from conservationists that the U.S. was facing a "timber famine," and the announcement in the U.S. Census Report of 1890 that the frontier was gone, triggered efforts to preserve and protect some of the nation's remaining "wild country." Inspired by leaders like John Muir, Gifford Pinchot, and Theodore Roosevelt, the nation began to establish national forests and national parks to save some of our natural heritage. The national parks and forests of this period were concentrated in the West. The South was barely affected. Nevertheless, even then some Southern lumbermen and foresters decried the fact that valuable timberlands were being excluded from development. Pinchot's calls for federal regulation of logging and cutting practices on privately owned land also met fierce resistance. Later, during the depression of the 1930s lumbermen who had cut over their lands with little or no effort at reforestation were all too happy to unload these
"worthless" tracts on the government for what seemed at the time handsome prices. Thus our Southern national forests were born, including the Angelina, Sabine, Davy Crockett, and Sam Houston National Forests in Texas.

Today, government regulation remains a hot issue. The potential for government regulation of logging practices remains real, especially in today's atmosphere of environmental activism. Thus we have seen in recent years the movement by the forest products industry to regulate its own practices through the implementation of "sustainable forestry initiative" programs implemented and monitored by state forestry associations. The sustainable forestry movement sounds a lot like Gifford Pinchot's old definition of conservation as "wise use."

We have also seen a renewed debate about our national forests. Today the question is not about their existence, but rather about their use and management. The national forests, administered by the U.S. Forest Service within the Department of Agriculture, have traditionally been managed under a "multiple use" philosophy. This means that unlike national parks and wilderness areas, where the management goal is preservation, in the national forests resources can be harvested and utilized. Water development, mining, and logging have been permitted in national forests, although they are supposed to be done in accordance with a philosophy of "wise use," with provision for the regeneration of the resources whenever possible. However, critics complain that the national forests have been run as little more than "tree farms" for the forest products industry, and they particularly object to excessive harvests, clear-cutting, road building, the disruption of wildlife, and "below cost" timber sales.

Some environmentalists believe that resource use in the national forests should be stopped entirely, or at least substantially reduced. President Clinton's recent effort to ban logging and road building on approximately one third of the national forest acreage is responsive to this point of view. On the other hand, the forest products industry and officials of rural counties that depend heavily on their share of timber harvest revenues from national forest lands within their borders complain bitterly about the influence of "radical environmentalists" on policy. Many environmentalists are also concerned that in an age of resource scarcity there will be additional pressure for development in the traditionally protected lands of our national parks, wilderness areas, and wildlife refuges. The growing debate over petroleum exploration in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is emblematic of that issue. Controversies over the role of government in resource policy remain with us today.

Conservation is another issue that has remained in play over the last hundred years. At the turn of the last century there were two main strains in the conservation "community." There were preservationists, symbolized, inspired, and led by John Muir, who concentrated upon wild areas and wanted them set aside and preserved for eternity because of their scenic, historic, or cultural significance. Muir's legacy is our national parks, wilderness areas, and wildlife refuges. Muir's great antagonist among conservationists was the first chief of the U.S. Forest Service, Gifford Pinchot, who, as mentioned...
earlier, was the spokesman for utilitarian conservation, or what Pinchot termed “wise use.” Even Pinchot’s “wise use” philosophy was a hard sell among lumbermen, who considered themselves tough, practical entrepreneurs, and a public that regarded mowing down trees as “progress” as America “conquered” and “civilized” the “wilderness.” The prevailing attitude was summed up in 1919 by the general sales agent of the powerful Kirby Lumber Company, which operated in Texas and Louisiana. “As a lumberman,” said he, “my interest in forestry is nil…. When the lumberman of today sees the trees he owns and scraps his plant, his capital will enable him to become the banker, the ranchman, or the manufacturer of some other commodity….”

Gradually, as knowledge grew, some Southern lumbermen like Henry Hardtner in Louisiana and public officials like W. Goodrich Jones in Texas began to realize the importance of harvesting trees responsibly, controlling fires and critters, and providing for planting or natural reproduction so that the Southern forests would not be exhausted. But the definition of a conservation-oriented operation was minimal. If you were doing something, anything, to operate responsibly you were, by the standards of the time, a conservationist. How to do it was another matter, and often a source of controversy, for as a later spokesman said to a crowd of foresters, “There are as many definitions of…good forestry practices as there are people in this room….”

Conservation remains an issue today, but it is more complicated and the terminology has changed. The term environmentalism has replaced conservation, and some modern environmentalists would not acknowledge the old foresters and conservationists of a half century or more ago as kindred spirits. Aldo Leopold has supplanted Gifford Pinchot as the patron saint of many environmentalists, and his ideas are closer to those of John Muir than of Pinchot. Leopold is famous for popularizing the concept of the “land ethic,” in which the land and the people who inhabit it are regarded as part of a larger community, called an “ecosystem.” In this system, humans have no greater status or rights than the other plants and creatures that inhabit the earth. For foresters and land administrators this has led to the concept of “ecosystem management,” under which all of these interests are to be respected and reconciled. Protection of wildlife and watersheds and responsible timber use and harvesting are all part of the package. Some foresters quarrel with the concept and say that it is nothing more than what they have done for years under the label “multiple use,” but the vehemence of their reactions and rhetoric indicate that there is indeed something new and that they feel challenged. Clearly the “new” resides in the modern emphasis on other components of the forest - water, wildlife, plant life, and aesthetics - in contrast with the old concentration on commodity production - timber.

Technology and technological change have triggered controversy over the last century in the Southern forests, although again the specifics have changed. Two examples will demonstrate this point. At the turn of the last century the new technology upon which the bonanza period of Southern lumbering was built was railroad-steamlogging. The economics of railroad-steamlogging lent themselves to the “cut out and get out” operational
philosophy adopted by most lumbermen. The equipment was expensive, the mills required a vast amount of timber to feed them, and most lumbermen operated on borrowed capital raised through the sale of timber bonds, with the timberlands, or more accurately the timber, as collateral.

The economics of the industry dictated that the lumbermen would move into an area, log it, and move the logs to the mill with steam powered skidders, loaders, and tramlines as quickly as possible. Then they would take up the tracks, salvage as much of the equipment as they could, and move on to a new area. Lumbering was a migratory industry, moving from the New England woods to the Great Lakes states, and then to the South and Pacific Northwest.

The lands were left bereft of timber and seemed to have little value or potential for regeneration. The process was graphically described by one forester: "Steam-powered skidders with long cables dragged the logs from the stump to the rail siding. This process tore at, broke off, and often dug up young trees in the path of these logs. This type of operation left the land bare with stumps as the only reminder of what was once there ... beautiful stands of trees. The bare soil began to erode and small rivulets grew into gullies." A contemporary observer remembered "Loggers were chewing up the pine forests like locusts cutting a swath through a field of wheat." William Faulkner utilized the theme of the lumber industry's impact on the forest and on people in his writings. In Light in August he writes of a doomed sawmill town:

All the men in the village worked in the mill or for it. It was cutting pine. It had been there seven years and in seven years more it would destroy all the timber within its reach. Then some of the machinery and most of the men who ran it and existed because of and for it would be loaded onto freight cars and moved away. But some of the machinery would be left, since new pieces could always be bought on the installment plan — gaunt, staring, motionless wheels rising from mounds of brick rubble and gutted boilers lifting their rusting and unsmoking stacks with an air stubborn, baffled and bemused upon a stump-pocked scene of profound and peaceful desolation, unplowed, untilled, gutting slowly into red and choked ravines beneath the long quiet rains of autumn and the galloping fury of vernal equinoxes.

The destitution wrought by these logging and lumbering procedures was dictated by taxation, economics, and technology, and represented important components of the world that early conservationists and foresters sought to change.

Today many environmentalists see a similar threat to the natural world predicated upon technology. The danger they see comes from the pulp and paper industry, and the technology is in the form of chip mills. Machines known generically as chip-n-saws convert logs into wood chips, which become the raw material for paper and fiberboard products. The chip mills can utilize timber of much smaller diameter than the pulpwood processed by traditional mills, meaning that loggers who supply these operations are harvesting young trees that environmentalists see as the forests of the future.

The appetites of the chip mills are gargantuan. Their pace of moving through the forests that supply them is reminiscent of the railroad-steam
logging and lumbering operations of the past as they utilize more and faster clearcutting. The descriptions of their impact written by contemporary critics are chillingly akin to those left by the observers of the steam skidders and loaders of early last century. Again, however, this is not a precise repetition of the age of railroad-steam logging. When the lumbermen of the early twentieth century cut over an area, there was usually no provision for regeneration of the forest. Today, while the harvests may be huge and the cutovers large and ugly, we can usually assume that within a few years the forests will reappear.

However, the nature of these replenished forests also demonstrates the superficial resemblance and underlying dissimilarity of issues past and present. In the early twentieth century there was little debate over harvesting. The forests were rapidly clear-cut. The questions at that time centered around reforestation. The first question was would there be any effort to reforest at all. If the answer was yes, the next question was would the process be natural or by means of planting. It was assumed that the new forests would be pine.

Today, unless harvested land is converted to other uses, it is assumed that it will be reforested. But the methods of harvesting are controversial. The public has reacted strongly to the ugliness of clear-cutting. Industry has responded to these concerns, by limiting the size of clear-cuts, cutting in irregular mosaic patterns, and leaving trees along roadways to “screen” cut-over areas from casual view. Lumber companies have also adopted the practice of cutting some tracts selectively, taking only the older trees or others that for various reasons are candidates for removal.

On the reforestation front, the issues have changed as well. Many people today object strongly to the practice of harvesting mixed-age and species forests and replacing them with single-age pine plantations that do not in most ways resemble the forests they replace. This controversy reflects the fact that today’s citizens take a broader view of the forest than did their predecessors. They do not view it either as an obstacle in the path of progress or as a single-purpose producer of wood fiber. They place greater emphasis on the total world of the forest – its wildlife, plant diversity, water quality, and aesthetics. They believe that the landowners hold those lands by the sufferance of society and have a responsibility to manage those lands wisely. In these concepts there is ample room for severe conflicts over landowner rights, societal objectives and values, and the proper role of government in setting and enforcing standards and adjudicating disputes.

While all of the issues I have discussed, and many others that I have not, are found throughout the span of Southern forest history over the past century, relatively few of the people who have actually made the decisions regarding the use and protection of our lands have exhibited much interest in history or the lessons some believe it can teach. Would it have mattered if they had been more historically minded? Could they have learned lessons from the past that would have enabled them to deal more constructively with the present? My answer is, yes.
As I have tried to demonstrate, at least in Southern forest history, history seldom, if ever, "repeats itself" precisely. Conditions, people, and other factors change. Yet there are many issues that in a broad sense seem to link the past with the present. It seems to me that knowing how we got to where we are, knowing what worked in the past and what did not, could surely make us more effective and sensitive in dealing with the challenges of the present and future. History can also reveal trends. For example, I think that the forest manager or landowner can readily assume that the citizens of today and the future will demand a greater voice, probably expressed through government, in how lands are managed. They will insist that forests be utilized for more than commodity timber production. They will expect to see other values of the forest – wildlife, water quality, and aesthetic – recognized and protected. They will not be willing to see all of our forests converted into single age monocultures in tree plantations. They will demand the protection of species and age diversity, and the preservation of at least some "old growth" forests. At the same time, the past shows that in many areas foresters and the forest products industry can achieve reasonable compromises with conservationists and environmentalists if all are willing to think creatively. The sustainable forestry initiative and green certification are examples.

Beyond any measurable "practical" uses, knowledge of our past is important in terms of pride, understanding, and enjoyment. It is fascinating to learn how our predecessors lived and worked, what they thought and felt, what they achieved, and where they fell short. Recounting and preserving their stories allows us to reach across the generations to know them and to understand better who we are today, why we value what we value and act as we act. Scholars like Bob Maxwell and Larry Walker of Stephen F. Austin State University were instrumental in getting the process of illuminating our forest history underway. Our challenge and responsibility is to build upon those efforts so that our children and grandchildren will better know, understand, and appreciate their legacy.

NOTES

I dedicate this article to the memory of Drs. Robert S. Maxwell and Laurence C. Walker of Stephen F. Austin State University who kindly encouraged my work and provided assistance over the years and to my dear friends Archie and Judy McDonald who have been eternally supportive and uplifting.

James E. Fickle, The New South and the "New Competition": Trade Association Development in the Southern Pine Industry (Urbana, 1980), pp. 11, 13, 15, 17, 33, 179, 181-190, 193-195. There is an account of the Texas and Louisiana Lumber Manufacturers' Association’s organization and purposes in the Beaumont Journal (May 12, 1894), a copy of which is in the Alexander Gilmer Collection, University of Texas Archives. The Journal served as the official organ of the association. Copies of the group’s reports and tables which it circulated to members are in the Kurth Papers, Box 2, housed in the East Texas Research Center of the Ralph W. Steen Library at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches.

James E. Fickle, Mississippi Forests and Forestry (Jackson, Mississippi, 2001), pp. 256-257.

Fickle, Mississippi Forests, pp. 257-258; American Forest and Paper Association


"Fickle, Mississippi Forests, pp. 244-245. See also David L. Kulhavy, Robert G. Hooper, and Ralph Costa, eds., Red-cockaded Woodpecker: Recovery, Ecology and Management (Nacogdoches: Center for Applied Studies, College of Forestry, Stephen F. Austin State University, 1995).

"Fickle, Mississippi Forests, pp. 124, 151-152, 252-253; Robert S. Maxwell and Robert D. Baker, Sawdust Empire; The Texas Lumber Industry, 1830-1940 (College Station, 1983), pp. 207-209.

"Fickle, Mississippi Forests, pp. 258-259; American Forest and Paper Association Sustainable Forestry Principles and Implementation Guidelines, pp. 5-8.


"Fickle, Mississippi Forests, p. 120. Quote is from "The Lumber Industry Speaks," Journal of Forestry, V. 37 (November, 1929), p. 759.


"Fickle, Mississippi Forests, pp. 233-234. The Journal of Forestry devoted its January 1998 issue to two articles presenting contrasting views of Leopold and much of its April 1998 issues was devoted to several critiques and comments on the January articles. For a brief overview of Leopold's thought and contributions, see Susan Flader, "Aldo Leopold's Legacy to Forestry," Forest History Today (1998), pp. 2-5.


"Fickle, Mississippi Forests, p. 103. The quote is from Thomas D. Clark, The Greening of the South; The Recovery of Land and Forest (Lexington, 1984), p. 48.

"Fickle, Mississippi Forests, p. 103.


"Fickle, Mississippi Forests, pp. 205-206.

"Fickle, Mississippi Forests, p. 229.

"Fickle, Mississippi Forests, pp. 249-251.