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Laurel, Mississippi: A Historical Perspective

A thesis
presented to
the faculty of the Department of History
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts in History

by
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ABSTRACT

Laurel, Mississippi: A Historical Perspective

by

David Stanton Key

Laurel, Mississippi exemplifies the new southern development that occurred in the years following Reconstruction. Coinciding with continental rail building and the depletion of northern timber resources, Laurel emerged as one of Mississippi's great industrial centers. Laurel's survival after the early twentieth century timber boom predicated itself on the diversification of its industry coupled with the continued growth of its infrastructure. Although Laurel's industrial ascension is not unique in the annals of southern history, its duality regarding northern capitalistic impulses and southern labor and material serves as a successful industrial model in the era of "cut out and get out" sawmill and timber operations. Along with primary resources this study employs secondary source material to place Laurel, Mississippi in the scope of southern historiography. In addition to contextualizing Laurel's place in southern history, this essay also serves to highlight Laurel's social and economic development after the arrival of its northern benefactors.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Laurel, Mississippi rests in the heart of the Piney Woods approximately 138 miles Northeast of New Orleans, 90 miles due north of Gulfport, Mississippi and the Gulf of Mexico and 85 miles southeast of the state capital of Jackson. Though isolated throughout most of the nineteenth century, the Piney Woods blossomed after the Civil War and Laurel developed into the one of the South's top lumber and industrial centers. Laurel built its foundation on the progressive impulses of its northern benefactors while following a pattern of new southern Industrialism that did not visit many parts of the agrarian South until after the Second World War. The town owes its foundation to the great timber industry of its past, but luck and industrial savvy fostered a diversification of the town's manufacturing centers that enabled Laurel to evolve and prosper. In addition to the capital investment, the socially progressive heritage of its benefactors allowed Laurel to absorb the cultural mores of its founders and create a new cosmopolitan existence. These new cultural attitudes fused with the preexisting southern culture to produce an enclave of New Southern development that thrived in the heart of Mississippi's Piney Woods.

Although development in the Piney Woods provided many Mississippians with their first forays into industrial labor and management, the story often becomes lost when placed against the backdrop of the state's often colorful and sometimes dark history. The grand historical perspectives that center on the creation and demise of the Old South often overshadow the story of the Piney Woods. Although the story of Mississippi's place regarding New Southern

development is less dramatic than the siege at Vicksburg and the burning of the state capitol of Jackson, the region's impact on the state's society and economy are no less important.¹ Formulations about southern industrial evolution, though mainly encompassing studies regarding the postbellum period, idealistically spawn from the social and cultural pathways derived in an era prior to Reconstruction.

Land speculators and venture capitalists swarmed over the South in the years following Reconstruction. In addition to northern capitalists many established members of southern society used the events surrounding Reconstruction to thwart the development of a new equitable southern existence.

During the industrial age, the South's immense resources and abundant labor attracted numerous external business interests. These outsiders played a major role in the redefinition of southern culture and economy. Most scholars insist, however, that northern capital alone did not transform the South's culture or economy. Southern social mores combined with northern socio-economic values to redefine many areas of the South. This idea of shared industrial responsibility is paramount in formulating an understanding of southern industrial development

The evolution of the New South and the growth of southern industrialism rapidly developed following Reconstruction. Historian C. Vann Woodward in Origins of the New South, 1877-1913, chose to focus his synthesis of southern transformation on this critical period. Woodward dispels notions of

¹ Polk Noel, Mississippi's Piney Woods: A Human Perspective (Jackson: University Press, 1986), 6.

benevolence and saintliness that are sometimes associated with southern leaders of the “lost cause.”² He generally discounts the terms and language that defined the southern condition. Woodward finds little merit or relevance in such terms as “Redeemers” or “Solid South.” These terms inadequately define a people and a region that exhibited such differing and complex ideals. The term Redeemers does not appropriately describe those who wished to “liberate” the South from carpetbagger control. He views the Redeemers’ actions as self-serving and manipulative. Woodward contends that the Redeemers also sought control of the industrial evolution of the region. To this end, they often disguised their agenda by summoning the emotional issue of the “lost cause.” Woodward views the Redeemers’ real legacy as one of economic and social disorder. He contends that while trying to assert their control, the Redeemers provided a foundation of stagnation concerning matters of race, economics, and politics.³ These problems, in turn, retarded southern growth and expansion well into the next century. Woodward concludes that no matter who controlled it, the caste system led to economic, if not cultural, control of the impoverished. He asserts that this paternal system insured land owners constant control over the poor for their own economic gain. In essence this unjust, but widely supported, structure kept the South functioning in a perpetual colonial mode. Though detrimental to the South’s eventual development, the shortsighted members of the southern establishment did little to improve southern economic opportunity. Although the region contained an

² C. Vann Woodward, Origins of the New South, 1877-1913, A History of the South, ed. Wendell Holmes Stephenson and E. Merton Coulter, no. 9. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951) , 1-6.

³ Ibid. , 11-13.

abundance of raw materials, southern economic ambivalence undermined the widespread production of manufactured goods.

Economic historian Gavin Wright echoes many of Woodward's contentions in Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy since the Civil War. He stresses that the South's isolationist economic principles greatly affected the region's prospects for economic growth. The Old South's traditions of racism, paternalism, and low educational investments insured a low-wage economy that remained isolated from the technological and economic progress made nationwide.⁴ Wright explains that even after outside capital entered the southern economy, most industrialists paid little attention to political and economic conditions associated with the laborer. He contends that the southern worker's condition improved only after the Great Depression forced federal legislation. Post Depression era programs, such as minimum wage, coupled with mechanization brought an end to the South's plantation economy.⁵ Like Woodward, Wright views the South's policies of racial segregation as a major obstacle to widespread industrialization. He asserts that the problems associated with the family labor systems of the agricultural South manifest themselves in the southern manufacturing process. In addition to the family wage system, Wright asserts that racial separatism continually plagued the black work force in the industrial centers of the South.⁶ This separatism led to diminished equality and opportunities for African-American industrial workers.

⁴ Gavin Wright, Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War (New York: Basic Books, 1986) , 13

⁵ Ibid. , 78.

⁶ Ibid. , 197.

In the opening of his book, Industrialization and Southern Society, 1877-1984, noted historian James Cobb iterates many of the arguments made by Gavin Wright. Cobb concurs with Wright's assertion that the post-bellum South's future hinged on the changing cultural and economic systems of race and caste that plagued early industrial development.⁷ After a brief discussion about nineteenth-century economic and social principles, Cobb dedicates the remainder of the text to the industrial problems associated with the twentieth century. He analyzes the attempts of southerners to enlist outside capital. Cobb also laments that the poor conditions associated with the South's labor force, such as cheap labor, limited unionism, and meager employee benefits, made the South an attractive target for northern investment.⁸ Nevertheless, Cobb argues that while cheap labor conditions made the South an attractive market, educational deficiencies continually plagued industrial development. Southern boosters tried to combat this problem by enhancing the educational system thereby luring outside investment.⁹ These efforts, however, were often times shortsighted and inadequate to deal with the region's massive illiteracy. Although southern educational development remained stagnate, outside investment successfully spurred industrial and municipal growth. Cobb also illustrates the immense damage caused by southern industrialization. In addition to labor and municipal problems he outlines the environmental

⁷ James C. Cobb, Industrialization and Southern Society, 1877-1984, New Perspectives on the South, ed. Charles P. Roland, no. 2. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1984) , 25.

⁸ Ibid. , 18.

⁹ Ibid. , 104.

problems caused by development. These problems did not become readily apparent until the latter half of the twentieth century. Even in the face of mounting environmental concerns, most southern states refused to act. Cobb attributes the lack of an environmental policy to the absence of a liberal political tradition to address and plan for more environmentally sound development.¹⁰

James C. Cobb again focuses on the questions concerning southern industrial development in The Selling of the South: The Southern Crusade for Industrial Development, 1936-1990. He evaluates the trends concerning the onslaught of industrialization and their relation to aspects of traditional southern life.¹¹ He contends that northern investors perpetuated the social mores of caste and place inherent in the southern antebellum culture. This type of societal structure insured massive profits for both northern and southern investors. However, reliance on past models of economic and social behavior ensured economic success at the cost of social gains. In fact, Cobb illustrates that by growing slowly, rather than dramatically, industrial development actually helped to foster existing socioeconomic attitudes.¹² While noting that basic southern attitudes suffered little change, the author does address the problems associated with short-sided social and economic policies. He argues that these antiquated policies consistently deterred and undermined modern day environmental and civic concerns. Tax incentives designed to lure

¹⁰ Ibid. , 134-35.

¹¹ James C. Cobb, The Selling of the South: The Southern Crusade for Industrial Development, 1936-1990 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993) , 4.

¹² Ibid. , 64.

corporations and produce jobs, in time, drained many municipal areas of badly needed resources. This lack of civic funds resulted in a reduction of public services and an increasing debt load.¹³ Cobb remains adamant that because of short-sided economic and municipal planning, current environmental and economic troubles continue to offset many of the South's industrial gains.

Although the works of Cobb and his colleagues identify the problems associated with southern development, they often appear too absolute in their contentions. New social historians, conversely, try to include all voices in formulating their conclusions. In this tradition, Edward L. Ayers in The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction, offers a different perspective concerning the evolution of southern industrialism. He constructs his synthesis by including the historical perspectives of all southerners. This type of inclusive study allows historians to portray accurately the concerns and problems of people from all walks of life. Inclusive studies not only give voices to the disenfranchised, but also tend to redefine previously held outlooks and historical conclusions. The conclusions reached by Ayers in Promise of the New South tend to support this hypothesis. Ayers contends that notions of a unified South based on "top down" political and economic models do little to accurately portray southern life. He suggests that by defining "southernness" as a whole and including the lives of ordinary people historians can accurately depict southern life.¹⁴ This type of historical redefinition relies more on changing methodology than actual new historical data. Ayers, in fact, makes the same kind of arguments that fuel works by C. Vann Woodward and Gavin

¹³ Ibid. , 234.

¹⁴ Edward L. Ayers, The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) , 4.

Wright, but unlike many of his predecessors, Ayers combines traditional quantitative methods with diaries and memoirs to construct his “bottom up” inclusive arguments. Ayers concludes that many patterns of culture and economy united southerners, but long-standing southern social patterns such as race and paternalism tend to provide contradictions that prevent the formation of a consensus about southern life.¹⁵

New social constructs and criticisms perpetuate continual redefinition of many antiquated notions and historical interpretations. Broad syntheses, by nature, carry enormous burdens for their creators. To avoid broad generalizations and vain attempts at cohesion, it becomes necessary to formulate many historical analyses into a narrow focus. Focusing narrowly does not mean historians must forsake parallels and similarities. Precise historical studies and depictions, in fact, allow historians to better understand the subject matter. Understanding and specialization allow historians to accurately portray events while placing them into broad historical frameworks.

In any study of southern industrial patterns, sampling a myriad of historical interpretations is paramount in reaching a broad based consensus. In the South, the vastness of the region and the different values and cultural nuances help create different variables for industrial development. In addition to studying broad southern syntheses, an analysis of scholarship concerning the South’s three major nineteenth-century industries of coal mining, textiles, and timber harvesting might better provide an insight into turn of the century industrialization.

¹⁵ Ibid. , 5.

Southern textile mills provide historians an excellent backdrop to study the impact of southern industrialization. Studying these manufacturing centers also allows scholars to conduct not only economic and political studies but also to analyze the values and cultural constructs of the southern mill village. Hanging by a Thread: Social Change in Southern Textiles, a work developed from an interdisciplinary collaboration of Jeffery Leiter, Michael Schulman, and Rhonda Zingraff, offers insights concerning mill development. Their study centers on human interaction and structure in the southern mill towns.¹⁶ This compilation focuses on labor recruitment, worker protest, and southern paternalism. The authors conclude that southern cultural patterns contributed to the paternalism experienced in the mills. They also assert that southern labor did, in many cases, organize and resist corporate paternalism. Also, labor's reaction to gender roles receives ample consideration throughout the text. The authors concede that defined gender roles and senses of place prevailed in the mill village, but the writers also contend that women played a vital role in shaping all aspects of mill economy and community.¹⁷ Concerning gender, however, there is some disagreement about the origins of the female role in the workplace. Jeffery Leiter and Roger Penn disagree with earlier paternalistic assumptions made by historian Gary Freeze. Penn and Leiter conclude that though gender roles in the workplace were defined by southern cultural mores, economic principles, and profit motives often times superceded cultural norms ¹⁸ Though differing somewhat in their conclusions about gender

¹⁶ Jeffery Leiter, Michael Schulman, and Rhonda Zingraff, eds. , Hanging by a Thread: Social Change in Southern Textiles (Ithaca: ILR Press, 1991) , 17.

¹⁷ Ibid. , 199-205.

¹⁸ Ibid. , 139-40.

roles and the southern economy, the contributors to Hanging by a Thread successfully construct an inclusive look into southern mill life.

In Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall and others also present a comprehensive view of life in a textile village. The authors use oral histories and primary sources to construct an inclusive view of mill life. This volume investigates the quality of mill workers' lives in the textile states of Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama. Despite this large area of consideration, the authors maintain a clear and coherent focus. Like other southern historians, Hall and company reason that the abundant labor force fostered southern mill development.¹⁹ Just as the authors of Hanging by a Thread, the creators of Like a Family do not view the mill workers as passive. They contend that workers influenced many aspects of mill life. Sometimes, however, control was not in the hands of either party. Often times the fluctuations in the market economy played a substantial role in organizing the power base of the mill. In prosperous times, labor concerns played into the hand of the workers. Conversely, times of depression caused favorable employer markets. Market concerns aside, existing southern cultural patterns dominated many aspects of mill life. Even with such volatile labor problems, strict racial and gender roles existed. Blacks encompassed the lowest rung of the mill hierarchy. They performed only the

¹⁹ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall and others, Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987) , 14-17.

most dirty and menial mill jobs.²⁰ White women fared only slightly better. Women performed exhaustive tasks not only in the mills, but they also fulfilled roles as union organizers, cooks, mothers, and spiritual guides. This flexibility ended, however, upon entering the mill. Strict gender roles prevailed in the mill system. Men and women generally did not perform the same tasks; but each played a crucial role in defining mill culture. Though females enjoyed some autonomy and successes outside the mill, entrenched gender roles limited the female advancement within the mill.²¹ To their credit southern mill women not only adapted, but also prevailed in their precarious position of mill hand and family overseer.

Though gender issues garner a great amount of analysis, a large portion of Like A Family focuses on family labor as a whole. This extensive allocation fosters an insightful analysis of family labor conditions. This commitment to the subject of family also allows the writers to illustrate the pressing problems associated with child labor. As children came of age, they generally migrated to millwork. This family system provided the company with an abundant supply of cheap labor. Children often tried to subvert the authority of the mill bosses. In the early stages of industrial development, children wandered in and out of the mill on deeds of childhood mischief, but after the 1920s barbed wire and locked gates sealed the fate of the mill town youth.²²

²⁰ Ibid. , 111; Leiter, Hanging by a Thread, 17; see also Daniel J. Clark, Like Night and Day: Unionization in a Southern Mill Town (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997) , 6-11, 157.

²¹ Hall, Like A Family, 59-67.

²² Ibid.

David L Carlton, in Mill and Town in South Carolina, 1880-1920, also confronts the problems of paternalism and mill life. He narrows his study to the plight of the mill workers in South Carolina. Unlike Hall and company, Carlton's use of primary material focuses mainly on documents and manuscripts as opposed to oral histories and personal interviews. Given this different methodology and direction, the text does not possess the same kind of emotional impact found in works by Hall and her contemporaries.²³ Carlton's book began as a dissertation under the guidance of C. Vann Woodward at Yale University. Given the book's origins, its political and analytic nature is not surprising.²⁴ Carlton's conclusions about mill life paint a somber reality. He agrees with Hall's notions of worker self reliance and resistance, but Carlton surmises that the workers to this day remain trapped in a system not of their making.²⁵

Southern industrial historians continually evaluate and analyze questions of worker autonomy and satisfaction. A sampling of textile mill historiography provides mixed results and conclusions. While most historians give credence to notions of agency and employee action, they differ on the size and scope of the contentment. Also, different methodologies seem to determine

²³ In addition to Like A Family, Hall and her writing partners used the North Carolina Oral History Project as the basis for other scholarly works. See, for example, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, Robert Korstad, and James Leloudis, "Cotton Mill People: Work, Community and Protest in the Textile South." American Historical Review 91 (April 1986) : 245-286; and Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "Disorderly Women: Gender and Labor Militancy in the Appalachian South." Journal of American History 72 (September 1986) : 354-382.

²⁴ David L. Carlton, Mill and Town in South Carolina 1880-1920 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1982) , 111-13.

²⁵ Ibid. , 272.

the outcome of worker analysis. Personal interviews often present a fondness for mill town life, but analytical surveys of news clippings and raw data seem to provide historians with a decidedly grimmer view of the mill existence.

Different historiographical views are not unique to mill town studies.

Historians concerned with the evolution of coal town life often follow different patterns of methodology, which produce different conclusions. These results often parallel the conclusions reached by cotton mill historians.

Crandall Shifflett in Coal Towns: Life, Work and Culture in Company Towns of Southern Appalachia, 1880-1960 uses oral history collections and company documents as the basis of his study. Shifflett's research produces the same kind of backward looking fondness that generated Hall's conclusions.²⁶ He also concedes that prior historical scholarship failed to capture the true essence of company town life. Shifflett contends that the coal miners and their families enjoyed many aspects of company town life. The miners, in many cases, voluntarily left the seclusion of the family farms of Appalachia in search of a better life for their families. The evolution of the company town's social and cultural constructs only in part emulated the miners' agrarian past. Shifflett argues that in the face of rapid industrialization, the miners blended their agrarian roots with the formality of company life to forge a meaningful existence. Though the miners struggled against the cultural trappings associated with race and class, they remained resolute in creating their own style of life in the coal towns of Appalachia.

²⁶ Crandall A. Shifflett, Coal Towns: Life, Work, and Culture in Company Towns of Southern Appalachia (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991) , 16.

In the same vein as Shifflett, historian David A. Corbin uses primary historical accounts to construct a perspective of coal town life and rebellion.²⁷ In his book, Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields: The Southern West Virginia Miners, 1880-1922, Corbin details the lives and labor struggles of the Southern West Virginia coal miners. Corbin asserts that the struggle for labor rights and improved working conditions manifested themselves in company town culture. These demands did not stem from “knee jerk” reactions of ignorance or from employee aversions to rapid industrialization. Corbin concludes that based on oral interviews, the reactions and rebellions associated with coal production resulted from a rational and well thought-out response from the miners. Corbin also concludes that in matters of labor and working conditions, class solidarity triumphed over notions of caste and race²⁸

With regard to race and coal mining, Joe William Trotter echoes the sentiments of David Corbin. However, Trotter, in Coal, Class, and Color: Blacks in Southern West Virginia, 1915-32, more closely details the racial issues associated with southern West Virginia coal towns. In this installment of *The Working Class in American History* series, Trotter contends that while African-American men did involve themselves in aspects of unionism and class solidarity, they also lived in an era of race division and Jim Crow laws.²⁹ He

²⁷ David Alan Corbin, Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields: The Southern West Virginia Miners, 1880-1922, *The Working Class in American History*, eds. David Brody, Herbert C. Gutman, and David Montgomery, no. 2. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981) , 8.

²⁸ Ibid. , 61-63.

²⁹ Joe William Trotter, Coal, Class, and Color: Blacks in Southern West Virginia, 1915-32, *The Working Class in American History*, ed. August Meier, no. 29. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990) , 1-5.

illustrates the black communities' intricate interplay of racial and labor issues that influenced not only the development of the African American communities but also the company towns as a whole. Black support, in matters of labor, defined examples of cooperation amidst the backdrop of the Jim Crow South. By taking this multifaceted approach, Trotter not only displays the racial interplay associated with the Southern West Virginian coal village, but also stresses that problems unique to the black community exist.³⁰

Unlike racial question, issues concerning gender did not primarily center on labor. Though coal town life provided African-Americans with some autonomy over their condition, women did not participate in the direct mining of coal. Unlike the textile mills, the coal mine remained the domain of men.³¹ Much of this exclusion is derived from early twentieth century stereotypes of women. Conversely, virtually all the labor that transpired outside the mill fell into the female realm. Women not only provided for their families' domestic needs, but they also had an active hand in organizing and developing many of the labor actions of the day. Women commonly organized and participated in union activities and efforts. By transcending entrenched cultural norms, female organizational efforts, both industrial and domestic, helped define the economic and social structure of company town life.³²

With men and women working in close proximity, the collective efforts of entire mill families fueled the evolution of coal and textile villages. These new patterns of industrial evolution changed the social and economic make up in

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Shifflett, Coal Towns, 82.

³² Daniel J Clark, Like Night and Day, 6-12, 204.

many areas of the South. From the Appalachian coalfields to the Tidewater textile plants, capital investments transformed many backwater communities into thriving company towns.

Though industries such as coal and textiles generate massive amounts of social and economic studies, timber, the South's largest industry, remains largely neglected. The timber industry of the southeastern United States shares many similarities with coal and textile development. However, historians have focused little attention on the company towns of the lumber mill industry. Though studies on lumber mill villages remain, for the most part, an untapped southern historical endeavor, a few works of recent historical scholarship highlight the transformation of southern timberlands.

Historian Thomas D. Clark points out in his book, The Greening of the South: The Recovery of Land and Forest, that although many aspects of the timber industry occurred in the Deep South, other parts of the region also became transformed. Areas of Appalachia produced hardwood timber for the mills, but mountainous terrain caused problems with harvesting and timber transport. The Deep South, with its flat-forested landscape, abundant rivers, and, most importantly, cheap labor market, provided the optimum site for large-scale timber production. Though timber became the South's largest industry, Clark contends that historians become "cotton blinded." He contends that historiographical interest in southern politics, race relations, and staple agriculture masked the importance of the southern timber industry.³³

Historian Michael Williams details Southern deforestation and mill evolution in his book Americans and Their Forest: A Historical Geography.

³³ Thomas D. Clark, The Greening of the South: The Recovery of Land and Forest (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1984) , 11-25.

Although this book synthesizes the evolution of the American forest, a large portion of it focuses on what Williams calls “an assault on the southern forest.” Although charts and tables do not describe the social impact of timber cutting in the South they do serve to illustrate the grand scope of northern timber acquisition. By 1888, ninety-three purchasers acquired over two and a half million acres of land in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Arkansas, and Florida. Northern capitalists accounted for nearly seventy percent of this land acquisition.³⁴

Northern capitalists generally worked on the premise of “cut out and get out.” This dubious principle involved the cutting and removal of all profitable timber products from one area before moving on to the next. This system receives attention in Kenneth L. Smith’s book, Sawmill: The Story of Cutting the Last Great Virgin Forest East of the Rockies. Smith paints a picture of “burned out” towns accompanied by personal and ecological devastation in the pine forest of Arkansas and Eastern Oklahoma. Smith uses oral interviews and personal recollections in order to put a humanistic spin on American deforestation. Smith focuses on the large southern operators that, by the middle of the twentieth century, exhausted their lumber supply and moved on the greener pastures of the American Northwest.³⁵

James Fickle in Mississippi Forest and Forestry points out that although land speculators and sawmill operators clear-cut most of the useable forest,

³⁴ Michael Williams, Americans and Their Forest: A Historical Geography (Oxford: Cambridge University Press, 1989) , 242.

³⁵ Kenneth L. Smith, Sawmill: The Story of Cutting the Last Great Virgin Forest East of the Rockies (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1986) , 8

they did not do this because they were inherently evil. Rather, they acted in accordance with the tradition practices of their time.³⁶ Much of the deforestation of the South took place when industrial America became enamored and even obsessed with creating highly efficient operations where maximization of human motion and industrial capacity were of paramount importance. These practices became a reality during the Progressive era when technological advancement allowed for the streamlining of America's industrial operations. In addition to the quest for efficiency, the nation's tax laws and credit systems penalized holding unusable lands.³⁷ Although scientific farming methods later helped sustain crops for new industrial and agrarian developments, few early lumbermen held enough expertise or foresight to prevent eradication of the South's great timber stands.

R.D. Forbes sums up the era of "cut and get out" in a 1923 article, "The passing of the Piney Woods" :

No wonder the hotel was empty, the bank closed, the stores out of business: for on the other side of the railroad, down by the wide pond that once held beautiful, fine-grained logs of Louisiana longleaf pine, the big sawmill for twenty years had been the pulsing heart of this town, was already sagging on its foundation, its boilers dead, its decks stripped of all removable machinery. A few ragged piles of graying lumber were huddled along the dolly ways in the yard where for years lumber had been stacked by the million feet....The mill had "sawed out"—had cut its last log six months before. Within the town grass was beginning to grow in the middle of every street and broken window lights bespoke deserted houses.³⁸

³⁶ James Fickle, Mississippi Forest and Forestry (Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2001) , 7.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Williams, Americans and Their Forest, 281.

All parts of the South in some way were influenced by the commercial timber industry. The Piney Woods of Mississippi and Louisiana experienced greater capitalistic intrusion than any of the other southern states. Northern acquisition of land in Mississippi and Louisiana accounted for over eighty percent of all the land purchases made between 1886-1888.³⁹ The reasons for such an enormous land acquisition lay not only in the area's vast tract of cheap land but also in the abundance of cheap labor.

In most instances, timber workers suffered at the hands of paternalistic bosses. In his article, 'Comfortable and Happy?' Louisiana and Mississippi Lumber Worker's, 1900-1950," historian James E. Fickle illustrates the problems associated with timber industry labor.⁴⁰ He outlines the conditions of bad housing, dangerous work, and low wages that constantly plagued the lumber industry worker. As in other industrial efforts throughout the South, the most severe worker victimizations generally befell the African American laborer.⁴¹ Unlike many Appalachian bi-racial efforts, black and white timber industry workers did not attempt worker solidarity. Fickle concludes that poor working conditions, hostile managerial attitudes, and the excruciating physical labor associated with lumbering combined to provide harsh conditions for most lumber mill workers. Many mill owners placed a low value on their labor force, especially those with black skin. These indifferent attitudes coupled with little

³⁹ Ibid. , 242.

⁴⁰ James E. Fickle, " Comfortable and Happy? Louisiana and Mississippi Lumber Workers, 1900-1950 " Louisiana History 49 (Fall 1999) : 407.

⁴¹ Ibid.

state or federal intervention made lumbering in the South a hazardous and unrewarding occupation for many poor southerners.⁴²

Not all northern capitalistic forays into the American South ended with tales of doom and despair as historian Edward L. Ayers points out in The Promise of the New South:

Eventually some of the lumber camps developed into real towns. Independent merchants came to set up stores and other businesses among the lumbermen. The company commissaries offered only the most basic items and left room for other businesses. Lumbering towns contained barbershops, hotels, churches, schools, post offices, and leisure time establishments that included skating rinks, theaters, and Y.M.C.A's, as well as the machine shops, foundries, planing mills, and turpentine stills related to the lumber industry.⁴³

The exception to which Ayers refers is the South Mississippi Town of Laurel. Ayers formulates his conclusions about Laurel from Jo Dent Hodge's article "The Lumber Industry in Laurel Mississippi at the Turn of the Century." Hodge suggests that not all instances of northern intervention and investment ended badly. She contends that the development of Laurel, though funded by northern capital, evolved with the help and contributions of the native population. This symbiotic development helped sustain the town after the timber boom subsided in the early twentieth century.⁴⁴ Laurel's evolution, though different from the coal and textile villages discussed in works by Shifflett and Hall, also evokes the same arguments of agency and self-sufficiency.

⁴² Ibid. , 432.

⁴³ Edward L. Ayers, The Promise of the New South, 129.

⁴⁴ Jo Dent Hodge, " The Lumber Industry in Laurel Mississippi at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century," Journal of Mississippi History 35 (November 1973) : 365.

Laurel began as another nameless mill town along the railway to New Orleans. Unlike many of the other southern “cut out and get out lumber operations,” Laurel endured and eventually prospered. The Northern Industrialists not only moved their business dealings south to Mississippi but also permanently relocated their families to the region. This complete relocation convinced the new arrivals to invest heavily in Laurel’s infrastructure.⁴⁵ Whether self-serving or not, the capital investment provided by the new northern arrivals eventually benefited the community as a whole. This community investment explains how unlike many of South’s other timber communities, Laurel avoided many of the pitfalls of poor community morale and substandard labor conditions.

Bi-racial investment and philanthropy displayed by the city’s benefactors stood in stark contrast to the views of most white Mississippians. The benefactors’ progressive outlook transcended traditional racial divisions and helped create a town of the “New South” in the heart of the Piney Woods. Like all southern cities, strict racial separation kept the citizens of Laurel apart. The northern born members of the community adhered to the “separate but equal” policies, but they also implemented programs and institutions that would help foster Laurel’s African American community. Although Laurel’s black residents still lived under a system of regional and national injustice, Laurel provided them with opportunities unavailable to blacks in many other parts of the “Old South.”⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Cleveland Payne, Laurel: A History of the Black Community: 1882-1962 (Laurel: privately printed, 1990) , 11-12.

Regional and racial cooperation contributed to the successes in Laurel, but eventually the profitability of the sawmill faded and the lumber interest moved westward. Fortunately for Laurel, new industries arose to sustain the town. Masonite, a particleboard invented by Laurel resident William H. Mason made use of the stumps and skinny second growth timber of the Piney Woods.⁴⁷ Lumber mills began to diversify and produce finished wood product from the era's hardwood timber stands. In addition to the successes of the lumber products industry, in the post war era, Laurel joined the rest of America's gulf coast states in exploiting vast land and water based oil deposits. Though Laurel's oil industry remains an important part of the local economy, other industries such as poultry and agribusiness continue to contribute to the regional economy. In addition to natural resource oriented businesses, many of Laurel's new enterprises center around technological ventures that continually diversify the local economic base. This type of industrial shift allowed Laurel to maintain a healthy fiscal existence after the depletion of its yellow pine timber, while fostering the development a new progressive culture. Laurel's commitment to bi-regional industrial development in conjunction with its emphasis on economics, education, and society propelled this tiny Piney Woods hamlet into one of Mississippi's economic and cultural success stories.

⁴⁷ John H. Moore. "William H. Mason, Southern Industrialist," Journal of Southern History 27 (May 1961) : 169-71.

CHAPTER 2

THE BEGINNING

Before the roar of industrialism descended upon the Piney Woods of Mississippi, the people of the region etched out a quiet hardscrabble life amidst the enormous yellow pine forest. Prior to the arrival of settlers from the Carolinas, small bands of Native Americans dotted the landscape of the Piney Woods. The Choctaws entered the land below the Alabama River while neighboring Chickasaws settled to the North¹ The Choctaws remained in the area until white settlers eventually forced them to move. Although eventually displaced, for a time the Native Americans existed peacefully with the settlers. The Choctaws periodically erected their pine bark tents among the pioneers and carried on their daily activities. After a few days of trading, hunting, and fishing, the Choctaws packed their belonging and descended deeper into the woods² Although the native population lived a subsistence lifestyle that created little pressure on their natural surroundings, it is important to note that native populations were not ardent environmentalists. The Native American population simply used available resources in an area then moved on when those areas failed to sustain their lifestyle. In today's efforts to rationalize our environmental past, the industrial fervor that decimated the nation's natural resources is often contrasted against Native American environmental "sensibilities." In truth, these two lifestyles followed the existing cultural

¹ Suzanne Spell, "A History of Jones County, Mississippi" (Masters Thesis, Mississippi College, 1961) , 5.

² Noel Polk, ed. , Mississippi's Piney Woods (Jackson, University Press, 1984) , 12-15.

norms of their society.³ In the Native American case, however, lower populations and subsistence lifestyles placed little pressure on their surrounding ecosystems. Only after the land became transformed into a commodity did the ecological balance become skewed.

After the displacement of the Native Americans, small white-dominated settlements and subsistence farms erratically dotted the South Mississippi wilderness. Jones County (the present site of Laurel) was founded in 1826 nine years after Mississippi's admission as the twentieth state in the union. The county, forged out of portions of Covington and Wayne Counties, finally received official recognition in 1843. Though recognition and government formation came late to the area, the citizens of Jones County soon found themselves dramatically involved in events surrounding the Civil War and forever linked to the events leading to war and secession.

Far from the cotton plantations of the Mississippi Delta, the citizens of Jones County focused on basic survival instead of large cash crop commerce. The subsistence nature of life in the Piney Woods contributed to anti-secessionist feelings on the eve of the Civil War. In the early 1800s Jones County held relatively few slaves. By 1850 only 274 slaves resided in the county. Conversely, neighboring Jasper County contained 1,887 slaves. Ten years later, on the eve of the Civil War the number of slaves in Jones County increased to only four hundred while the slave population in Jasper County

³ The ideas of cultural relativity concerning native populations and their role in the history of the Piney Woods are from James Fickle, Mississippi Forest and Forestry (Jackson, University Press, 2001) , 6. and Noel Polk, ed. , Mississippi's Piney Woods (Jackson, University Press, 1984) , 12-15.

escalated to almost five thousand.⁴ These small slave holdings, in addition to subsistence lifestyles, explain why anti-confederate sentiment permeated the Piney Woods. This sentiment manifested itself in the actions of many Piney Woods residents at the outset of the Civil War. Though class and economic conditions contributed to some unionist feelings, many of Jones County's young men heeded the call of the Confederate cause. Jones and its neighboring counties became a place of divided loyalties and wild uncertainty following the events at Fort Sumter. Characterizations of the region often owe more to myth and legend than fact. Such is the case regarding the legend of the "Free State of Jones" and Newton Knight.⁵

Clearly many deserters and unionists migrated to Jones County during the war, but the prevalence of union sentiment remains unclear. More likely, the people of the Piney Woods felt an independence and sense of personal place that often superseded any feelings toward either side of the sectional conflict. This sentiment of independence and isolationist self reliance was by no means exclusive to the Piney Wood. Areas of Appalachia also struggled with notions of governmental control and class domination associated with the plantation economic systems of the time. Ironically, by the dawn of the twentieth century the people of South Mississippi and the Appalachian people again found

⁴ Polk, Mississippi's Piney Woods, 20.

⁵ Information pertaining to the Free State of Jones varies by account and author. For information regarding the Civil War and Jones County consult; Daniel E. Southerland, ed. , Guerillas, Unionists, and Violence on the Confederate Home front (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1999) and Ethel Knight, The Echo of the Black Horn (Baton Rouge: Franklin Press, 1951)

themselves in similar circumstances. This time, however, industrial boardrooms not bullets decided the fate of the South.

Jones County's ambiguity regarding Civil War loyalties foreshadowed things to come. Though lightly affected by Reconstruction, soon the coming of industrialism would again create a dualistic society this time of Northern industrial capital and southern men and material. This tenuous union eventually transformed the once quiet Piney Woods into one of the southern industrial centers of the early twentieth century.

Isolationist patterns of life ended with the emerging national rail system. The new rail system dramatically shifted the ebb and flow of rural life. The small hamlets and backwaters of the rural South found themselves forever altered by the coming of the railroad. Prior to the arrival of the railroads, country life fell under the dictate of seasonal change. With the arrival of the locomotive, the ticking of the clock forever altered the pathways of rural life. In 1883 the railroad companies divided the country into four specific time zones and the railway became the timekeeper of the land.⁶ Standardized by time, America's early rail system also required a uniform method of travel. Railroad companies often experimented with different engineering methods to resolve the problems of varying track width. Areas of the North and South often used different track gauge that impeded cross regional commerce. Some operators tried to alleviate this problem by using railcars with wide wheels that operated on either type of track. Some companies used cars with adjustable axles, while others completely elevated the cars and replaced the wheels. Though these methods allowed for the continuation of travel and commerce, each solution

⁶ Ayers, The Promise of the New South, 12.

proved costly and inefficient.⁷ In 1855, the railroad companies voted to standardize nearly 13,000 miles of track. Most of the refitting called for replacing the South's wider three-inch gauge track. To allow for an expedient transfer the realignment of America's rail system took place in one day. On Sunday, May 30, 1886, crews shoved thousands of miles of track three inches closer forever linking the countryside to the industrial pulse of the nation.⁸

The construction of Mississippi's railway system began in earnest as a method to channel commerce to the southern port cities of New Orleans and Mobile. In the late ante-bellum period the New Orleans, Jackson, and Great Northern (later the Illinois Central) and the Mobile and Ohio Railroads formed the backbone of commerce for Mississippi's hinterlands.⁹ After Reconstruction, Mississippi's rail system increased dramatically. Along with the completion of the Mobile and Ohio and the Illinois Central lines, the next three decades witnessed the creation of four more rail lines that penetrated deeper into the southern pine forest.

In addition to the rail completion, Mississippi's timber industry began to evolve with the eradication of the Southern Homestead Act. The 1876 reevaluation of the Homestead Act eliminated all restrictions on public land acquisition. No restrictions limited the amount of land a single purchaser could own, and most of the land was sold at public action or for the minimum price of one dollar and twenty-five cent per acre.¹⁰ After the repeal of the

⁷ Ibid. , 13.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Nollie Hickman, Mississippi Harvest: Lumbering in the Longleaf Pine Belt, 1840-1915 (University, Mississippi: University Press, 1962) , 212.

¹⁰ Fickle, Mississippi Forest, 82-83.

Homestead law, Mississippi's legislature also passed laws that exempted timber companies from taxation for the period of ten years. This move expressly highlights the government's yearning for outside investment while imprudently ignoring the benefits of taxable industrial revenue. While acquisition of lands involved various lumbermen and venture capitalists, northern investors provided the majority of investments. Northern financiers sent "timber cruisers" to search out land for its market value. Special trains ran into the Piney Woods allowing investing lumbermen a first hand look at the southern timber stands. Cruisers returned to the North with grandiose reports of how the South's supplies of yellow pine could sustain the lumber industry for many years to come. With the northern lumbermen's supply of white pine timber exhausted, they put aside their doubts about the quality of the South's yellow pine and moved their operations south.¹¹

Timber operation in Laurel began with the building of the New Orleans and Northeastern railroad in 1882.¹² Later named the Southern, this railroad line ran from New Orleans in a northeasterly direction through the pine forest of Louisiana and Mississippi to Meridian, Mississippi located on the state line. The railway's top booster, Captain William Harris Hardy, conceived the project on the assumption that southern timber's increasing value demanded the need for efficient transportation in and out of the region's pine forest.¹³ His assumptions proved correct and soon mills began to spring up along the new throughway.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Hodge, "The Lumber Industry in Laurel, Mississippi," 361.

¹³ Hickman, Mississippi Harvest, 213.

The creation of a new railway not only gave outside investors a pathway to the vast timber deposits of the Deep South, but the railway also facilitated the need for local operators to supply timber for the construction of the lines. In 1882, a local sawmill operator named John Kamper formed a small mill eight miles north of Ellisville for the expressed purpose of providing timber for the construction of the New Orleans and Northeastern Railroad. Kamper's mill produced logs for the railroad for the next six years. However by 1888, with the railroad nearing completion, Kamper's main source of business soon evaporated. Although the region contained vast deposits of timber, Kamper found it progressively difficult to sustain the profitability of his mill. The increased distance of the timber stands and the shortage of willing buyers made his fledgling mill inefficient and unprofitable.¹⁴ While on business in Slidell, Louisiana, John Kamper soon made a business deal that not only rid him of his fledgling enterprise, but also set in motion the industrial development of the Laurel and the Piney Woods.

With their stands of White Pine timber diminishing in the Midwest, George S. Gardiner and his father, S.B Gardiner, along with Charles Eastman, brother of Lauren Eastman, traveled south to inspect the Yellow Pine timber of the Deep South. Charles Eastman looked at timber on the Illinois Central while the Gardiners inspected property along the New Orleans and Northeastern Railway.¹⁵ While en route to New Orleans the train stopped in Slidell to allow the northbound passenger train to pass. The pair decided to leave the train to take a walk along the platform. While waiting to re-board, the

¹⁴ *Laurel Leader Call*, 8 March 1939.

¹⁵ *Laurel Leader Call*, 11 April 1916.

two men overheard John Kamper exalting the lumber possibilities of his Laurel sawmill. Intrigued, the Gardiners introduced themselves to Kamper and agreed to survey his southern Mississippi holdings.¹⁶

Although not overly impressed with Kamper's mill or the disintegrating town of Laurel, the possibilities of the enormous tracks of yellow pine convinced the Gardiners to secure Kamper's timber and sawmill operation. One week after their first encounter with Kamper the Gardiners purchased sixteen thousand acres of land for the sum of four dollars per acre. In April 1891, the Eastman Gardiner Company with George S. Gardiner as president, L.C. Eastman serving as Vice President and Silas W. Gardiner as treasurer began its Laurel operation.¹⁷

The Eastman Gardiner interest arrived in Laurel only to find their new timber and mill acquisition in a state of disrepair. While overhauling the dilapidated mill, the Gardiners shifted the logging camp from the east to the west side of the New Orleans and Northeastern Railroad¹⁸ In order to improve transportation they also began laying a dummy rail line into the pines to efficiently remove the freshly cut logs. The Gardiners spent the remainder of 1891 making repairs to the old Kamper site. The new seven mile long dummy line boasted thirty-five pound steel rails and one small Baldwin locomotive that for the next two years efficiently transported the yellow pine to mill. The plant

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ *Laurel Leader Call*, 8 March 1939.

¹⁸ Hodge, "The Lumber Industry in Laurel, Mississippi," 363.

reopened in January 1892 and continued a lackluster operation for the next sixteen months.¹⁹

As the company languished inside the refitted mill, George Gardiner envisioned an enormous new mill that might effectively make use of the region's great resources. After designing the new mill, Gardiner hired and imported skilled Midwestern and Northeastern lumbermen and millwrights to supervise the new operation.²⁰ Although the new plant encompassed the latest technological advances and the burgeoning region supplied ample men and material, the survival of the new industrial enterprises, and the town of Laurel itself, fell victim to the economic and social uncertainty that swept through the nation during the final years of the nineteenth century. This socioeconomic uncertainty gave rise to the American grass roots movement of Populism that predicated itself on local and regional self-determination. It also affected the national markets of the late nineteenth century and caused a severe crisis that threatened the well being of the country's monetary and economic system.

The "Panic of 1893" resulted from a number of ill-conceived laws coinciding with the natural ebb and flow of cyclic American financial patterns. America's monetary system became unstable due in large part to the struggle between the grass roots silver advocates and the established eastern financiers' reliance on the gold standard. In part to validate the silver market the United States passed the Sherman Silver Law. This 1890 regulation required the United States to purchase a set amount of silver each month, thereby increasing the value of America's silver holdings. In compliance with the law,

¹⁹ Ibid. , 364.

²⁰ *Laurel Leader Call*, 8 March 1939.

the United States Treasury paid for the silver acquisition with gold thereby depleting the nation's gold reserves.²¹ This politically motivated solution proved costly for America's banking and financial systems. America's gold reserves became threatened to such an extent that hundreds of banks and thousands of business closed their doors.²²

The Gardiners, like most other manufacturing enterprises, suffered greatly during the Panic of 1893. Not only did their company suffer from a depletion of operating capital, but the railroad, their main supply line, also became chaotic and unreliable during this turbulent financial era. Hoping to save their operation, Silas Gardiner and Lauren Eastman courted outside capital to save their struggling mill. While his partners obtained outside support, George Gardiner initiated a fiscal plan that involved the support and agreement of the mill employees. The outcome and institution of this plan serves to illustrate the growing symbiotic nature of northern lumber interest and the southern workforce.

George Gardiner informed the mill hands that in order to maintain mill operations, each man needed to draw only subsistence wages until conditions improved.²³ Although Gardiner's plan contained no absolute timetable, he assured the men that after the downturn subsided workers would receive full retroactive compensation and a restoration of their hourly pay rate. The men survived on skeleton wages for a period of seven months, but as promised their pay was reinstated, and each man received the full amount of back earnings.

²¹ Calvin Linton, The Bicentennial Almanac: 200 Years of America (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1975) , 238.

²² Ibid.

²³ Hodge, "The Lumber Industry in Laurel, Mississippi," 365.

The financial crisis gradually eased, and the mill began to show a profit.²⁴ With imminent disaster now behind them the region's new lumbermen focused on milling their newly acquired timber stands. In the years leading to the century's end, new rail lines and new technologies served to further expedite the sawmill operations. The financial prosperity of the Laurel mill attracted both northern and local industrial inventiveness and development. These new developments not only fostered new economic prosperity, but also advanced the link of northern and southern developers.

In 1898, a local sawmill operator named John Lindsey began to perpetuate southern ingenuity in the wake of the southward timber explosion. Lindsey worked at his small mill supplying the New Orleans and Northeastern Railroad with a small amount of timber.²⁵ He soon realized that to maximize his diminutive mill's output, a new system of timber delivery was needed. His solution eventually manifested itself in an eight-wheel log wagon that produced far superior results than the antiquated transportation methods of the day.

Before the advent of Lindsey's new device, log transportation relied on various types of skids and small wagons. Of these early transportation methods, one of the most efficient was known as the Caralog. Invented by a slave from Pearlinton, Mississippi, this device proved more effective than the earlier sleds. The wagon featured two large wheels and a long tongue that when attached to livestock enabled the operator to extract two or three logs at a time. Although these devices provided suitable extraction methods, the

²⁴ *Laurel Leader Call*, 8 March 39.

²⁵ John Eudy, "A Mississippi Log Wagon," *Journal of Mississippi History* 30 (May 1968) : 143.

eight-wheeled wagon invented by Lindsey soon drastically increased early sawmill production.²⁶ John Lindsey's younger brother, Dr. S. W. Lindsey, a local practicing dentist, also provided the new enterprise with much needed financial and business experience. The patent for the eight-wheeled log wagon was issued in January of 1899. In the follow months the Lindsey brothers agreed to a fifty percent partnership in the newly formed Lindsey Wagon Company.²⁷

In 1900, disaster struck the Lindsey brothers when their sawmill and wagon works caught fire. Rather than rebuilding in the small hamlet of Sandersville, the brothers decided to relocate their wagon works. As the surrounding towns began to court the new entrepreneurs, the brothers decided to locate to the new mill town of Laurel. Incorporation transpired in Laurel in 1901 and the company issued a small amount of stock. Dr. Lindsey assumed the company's presidency, while John became the Secretary and Treasurer.²⁸ The brothers soon produced more than four hundred wagons at their new facility. To attain the needed iron stock for the wagon's assembly, the brothers agreed to bankroll the creation of a local foundry. With the brothers' support, Laurel Machine and Foundry incorporated on April 21, 1904, with a capital stock of thirty thousand dollars.²⁹

The company's relocation to Laurel immediately paid dividends. As Laurel's mill industry began to ascend, the brothers Lindsey adeptly capitalized

²⁶ Ibid. , 144.

²⁷ Ibid. , 145.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid. , 146.

on the mill's production. In addition to early industrial triumphs, the brothers also contributed to America's war effort. The Lindsey brothers saw their invention gain recognition on the battlefields of Europe in World War I. Robert Lindsey, the son of the inventor, transported several of the wagons along with a small sawmill to France. The Lindsey Wagon Company received numerous citations for helping construct the trenches on the battlefields of Europe. The successes in Europe also gave the company the exposure to expand its business in several overseas markets.³⁰

Technological shifts in industry and transportation such as internal combustion signaled the end for wagon production. The wagon's transportation capacity, however, greatly enhanced the production of the great southern sawmills. The company received ample new orders from the ever-expanding Mississippi timber interest. During the turn of the nineteenth century, the new mill operators and expanding rail lines benefited each other in a continually increasing and intensifying industrial cycle.

As the nineteenth century came to a close, the industrial might of the Piney Woods dictated the need for an ever-expanding rail infrastructure. Between 1896 and 1902 two new railroads serviced Laurel and Jones County. The Gulf and Ship Island Railroad was constructed between Gulfport and the state capital of Jackson.³¹ Construction of this railroad demonstrated the enormous influences of the timber interest. This railroad came to fruition specifically to transport yellow pine to market. Between fifty and sixty sawmills

³⁰ Ibid. , 147.

³¹ Hickman, Mississippi Harvest, 213.

dotted the lines of the Gulf and Ship Island Railroad.³² In addition to its northerly route from the Gulf Coast to the state capital, the railroad also contained a spur line that made use of the old Eastman-Gardiner logging trails. Coupled with its many spur lines, other time saving engineering innovations made the Gulf and Ship Island Railroad one of the South's main timber producing railways. In an effort to save time, the railroad dug a deep-water channel from Ship Island to Gulfport to expedite the unloading of lumber carrying railcars directly onto oceangoing merchant ships ³³

A second rail carrier, the Mobile, Jackson, and Kansas City also greatly enhanced lumber transportation in the Piney Woods. The line originally began construction in 1870 to exploit the great pine reserves of Mississippi and Alabama, but financial crisis and low timber demand delayed the railroad's completion. In 1896, Col. Frank B. Merrill resurrected the project and plotted the line's direction from Laurel due north to Jackson, Tennessee. ³⁴

Mississippi's railroad and mill capacity skyrocketed at the dawn of the twentieth century. In the 1880s, rail capacity doubled from 1, 127 miles to 2,366 miles. After the Panic of 1893 stable economic factors fostered the continual development of Mississippi's rail system. In 1910, the state accumulated over 4200 miles of track that serviced not only industrial production but also a newly expanding passenger rail service. This rail system fostered the continual harvesting of state's lumber supply. By 1907, the total output of the Gulf and Ship Island line was estimated at eight hundred million

³² Fickle, Mississippi Forest and Forestry, 75.

³³ Hickman, Mississippi Harvest, 213.

³⁴ *Ibid.* , 214.

board feet, or one tenth of the southern pine supply.³⁵ Throughout the early part of the twentieth century the symbiotic relationship of the railroad and timber industry continued. Railroad builders purchased vast quantities of lumber for railroad construction that in turn provided the sawmills with new outlets for timber transportation. Each mile of track required approximately three thousand wooden cross ties which, because of insufficient lumber treatment methods, needed replacement every few years.³⁶ With mill operations and infrastructure construction invading Mississippi hinterlands the relationship between the sawmills and the railroad perpetuated each other's existent in the South for the next forty years.

Although the timber stands of the southeast could never sustain a timber industry that metamorphosized with such force, Laurel's new reputation as an industrial center attracted investors and mill hands from across the nation. In addition to the mill enterprises of the Eastman-Gardiner group, other northern lumber interests began to arrive. In 1906, the Gilchrist-Fordney Company refurbished an existing site in the Kingston area that originally served the Kamper-Louin mill concerns. The mill became the property of Louin after he and Kamper dissolved their partnership shortly after Laurel's early local timber boom. The Gilchrist-Fordney Company refitted the plant, and then joined their fellow Northern lumbermen in milling the native timber. The Wausau Southern Lumber Company began purchasing vast tracts of Mississippi timber as early as 1902, but mill relocation did not occur until

³⁵ Figures and facts concerning early rail building and sawmill output are taken from Fickle, Mississippi Forest and Forestry, 73-75, and Hickman, Mississippi Harvest, 212-23, and Williams, Americans and Their Forest, 238-59.

1911. In the following years, the Marathon Lumber Company completed Laurel's early mill history by constructing a plant in the area North of the Wausau Southern Group.³⁷

Representative of the continual competition and drive for efficiency that became a stalwart of America's Progressive Age, the original Eastman Gardiner Corporation embarked upon the completion of a modern new facility that utilized the most technological time saving inventions of the era. On August 1, 1904, the plant opened its doors to eight hundred employees with the capacity to turn out about 250,000 feet of lumber daily.³⁸ The new mill boasted 1,100 workers that required a payroll of 35,000 dollars. To facilitate transportation needs, eighteen miles of spur lines and seven locomotives eventually serviced plant facilities.³⁹ Visitors from the Louisiana Engineering Society marveled at the plant's level of technological sophistication during a society conference visit. The visiting engineers marveled at the efficiency of devices such as the band saw which produce a cleaner cut and produced less waste than it predecessors. Overnight the big new mill gained a reputation for being one of the most modern and efficient operations in the Southeastern region. In order to facilitate such a large productive endeavor, the company continually

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Laurel Centennial Committee, 100 Years: The Laurel Story (Laurel 1982) : 11.

³⁸ *Laurel Chronicle*, 30 July 1904.

³⁹ Hickman, Mississippi Harvest, 180.

expanded its lumber holdings throughout the Piney Woods to include much of the timber wealth along the newly created South Mississippi rail system.⁴⁰

By 1905, the Eastman-Gardiner firm had become one of Mississippi's largest industries. The company eventually acquired nearly all of the yellow pine timber located between Laurel and the Strong River, which encompassed a distance of sixty-five miles. The tracts of land ranged from ten to fifteen miles on either side of the Gulf and Ship Island Railroad.⁴¹ With such enormous holdings Laurel's early lumbermen began to create other industries to diversify their burgeoning financial holdings.

The Laurel sawmill industry necessitated the creation of complimentary industrial endeavors. The timber industry perpetuated the creation of The Laurel Cotton Mill, Mississippi Knitting Mills, Laurel Brick and Tile, and Laurel Oil and Fertilizer.⁴² The growing industrial capacity of Laurel also facilitated the need for a growing workforce and an adequate infrastructure.

Although the financial capital and direct influence of northern businessmen laid the groundwork for city building, the local population supplied the majority of the industrial workforce. While the empire building of America's industrial age often produces images of great men overcoming perpetual odds to secure their place among the titans of industry, it becomes important to note that this industrial ascension often came at the price of disposable men and material. In addition to the capital and civic investment made to Laurel by its benefactors, an analysis of the legacy of work

⁴⁰ Hodge, "The Lumber Industry in Laurel, Mississippi," 371.

⁴¹ *Laurel Leader Call*, 1 April 1916.

⁴² Hodge, "The Lumber Industry in Laurel, Mississippi," 369.

accomplished by the common citizenry fosters a better understanding of the creating of an industrial dualistic society.

CHAPTER 3

PROGRESSION

Discussion surrounding America's industrial creation requires proper definition of the different aspects that contributed to the movement as a whole. Often, discussions regarding the paternalistic nature of industrial systems offer absolute contentions that pigeonhole workers and industrialists into separate definite camps. Using notions of paternalism as absolute markers for defining working and living conditions undermines the subtleties that exist within each economic situation. Strictly defined paternalistic impulses are inherent in every type of workable socioeconomic model. Capitalism, with its reliance on efficient profit producing systems, often exhibits the worst qualities of human relations. Simply put, to typecast or scapegoat one class or system becomes, in essence, diluting. Truly, paternalism exists in every working economic model, but varying degrees of control and intent often existed between workers and bosses. To this end, it becomes important to observe the subtle difference within the industrial systems to avoid typecasting and absolutism. The early Laurel industrial system demonstrates that though obvious paternalistic tendencies manifested themselves in employee-boss relationships, the early Laurel industrialist often exhibited benevolent paternalistic behavior that superceded economic concern. However, even though these deeds often times benefited labor, they still exhibited paternal actions performed at the discretion of the employers. Even in an industrial progressive atmosphere such as Laurel, early twentieth century labor enjoyed little power.

Although laborers existed in the confines of new industrial patterns, the rural folkways of their previous lives manifested themselves in mill and camp life. Faith and family still dominated the rural subsistence lifestyle. The logging camps of Laurel's entrepreneurs, though centered on the demands of industrial output, exhibited the trappings of a small rural community. Lumber camps controlled by various Laurel timber concerns existed throughout South Mississippi. These camps, positioned on an extensive network of dummy rail lines, served to fuel the ever-expanding mill industry. Given the nature of their construction the camps could be moved to other locations when the available timber resources were exhausted. Many of the camp structures such as houses and commissaries were converted railcars and other easily transported structures. As the logging industry developed and progressed, early male dominated lumber camps began a transformation into a more family oriented mill village.¹

Replacing the smaller boxcars, prefabricated pine structures better served the needs of the companies while supplying improved housing to the burgeoning lumber communities. These readymade housing units not only provided more space for families, but their smaller construction and maintenance cost appealed to company sensibilities. Each unit consisted of an eighteen by six foot living space that received a fresh coat of red paint upon issue. Residents received housing based on the size of their families and most families occupied between two and six units. The residents did not pay rent until after 1910, at which time the company collected one dollar and fifty cents

¹ *Albany Evening Journal*, 24 June 1922.

per month for each prefabricated room. Families that used more than one room multiplied that amount per each room generally making rent around six dollars per month.² After the existing timber stands became depleted, a temporary track was placed at the edge of the camp and a steam driven loader accomplished the task of lifting each unit onto the track. To efficiently move each dwelling, two holes were drilled into the top and bottom of each unit during construction. On moving day, a workman simply attached a steel rod and cable through the roof and floor beam of each unit before the loader placed it upon the temporary tracks for transport to a new site.³ The emphasis Laurel's lumbermen placed on family oriented lumber camps drastically altered lumber camp culture. The new camps transformed old images of rough and tumble testosterone driven workplaces into small communities that encompassed a sense of family and place. This sense of family and fraternity remained ingrained in the minds of early villagers long after the timber boom subsided.

In accordance with their progressive nature, the lumbermen of Laurel maintained many of the finest lumber camps in the Piney Woods. Places such as the early Cohay camps of the Eastman-Gardiner interest, and the Dushau encampment established by the Gilchrist-Forney mill exemplifies Laurel's commitment to a progressive family oriented lumber camp. The Eastman-Gardiner group established the Wisner, Rogers and subsequent Cohay camps in an attempt to maximize profits while providing a stable work environment for the men and their families. Though the earlier Wisner and Rogers enclaves

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

did not possess the modular housing and comforts of the future Cohay sites, they did establish a pattern of mobile progressive camp development that exemplified and characterized the ensuing pattern of camp expansion.

Eastman-Gardiner's Cohay camps epitomized the progressive nature of lumber camp development. After the manufactured housing arrived on site, the men used the available lumber supply to connect each unit within the family dwelling.⁴ The camps utilized their own water supply, electricity, and contained a fully staffed hospital. The Cohay camp contained about 137 white families and 96 black families totaling about one thousand people.⁵ In keeping with the racial practices of the times, the camps' accommodation and schoolhouses remained segregated. The school for white children contained one hundred and seventy five pupils who received instruction from four teachers. Conversely, the school for black students numbered one hundred pupils led by two teachers. The community also boasted a Y.M.C.A that served both religious and secular purposes. The hall generally hosted segregated worship activities as well as constituting the central gathering place for meetings and recreational activities.⁶ Camp entertainment varied from regularly scheduled silent films to Chautauqua programs offering a variety of speakers and vaudeville performances.⁷ Despite company efforts to maintain a positive lifestyle for its inhabitants, the lumbermen of the camp often found

⁴ *Albany Evening Journal*, 24 June 1922.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *The Clarion Ledger*, 28 October 1979.

time to indulge themselves in many of the vices that once dominated the after hours of camp life.

Although inundated with such modern conveniences as automobiles and electricity, the rural folkways of the worker's agrarian past manifested themselves in the tenets of keeping livestock and subsistence gardens. Each family generally maintained a small garden and a few animals to subsidized their diet and income. Though fully engaged in the industrial process of the early twentieth century, the residents of the early camp managed to incorporate their rural society around the structure of the company clock. Unlike the days of the mill hand's agrarian past, the company clock dictated the actions of daily life. Even though camp life offered intriguing possibilities with its steady wages and modern conveniences, it also presented its workforce with dangerous and unfamiliar working conditions.

Early timber laborers buoyed by the prospects of a steady paycheck often fell prey to the innumerable hazards of mill life. Documents concerning early twentieth century labor conditions are fraught with tales of death and dismemberment. Although camp housing remained distanced from the felling of timber, the camp's residents received troubling news via the bellowing of the train's steam whistle. As accidents occurred, the company train blew its whistle in route to alert the camp of dismemberment or death ⁸ When hearing the whistle sound, families and residents of the camp made the arduous pilgrimage to the platform only to find family members or friends forever altered by life in the pines. Tragedy befell the early timber encampments on a daily

⁸ Ibid.

basis. One resident of Cohay remembers one of the most terrible months produced forty injuries and two deaths.⁹

Despite the peril, men came in droves to seek the wages and steady work that accompanied the industrialization of the pine forest. The men of the Cohay camp worked a ten-hour day from six thirty to five o'clock stopping a half hour for lunch. The workers received one dollar seventy-five cents per day for unskilled labor and up to seven dollars fifty-five cents a day for skilled labor. Though the work was arduous, wages in the pine forest were far superior to meager hardscrabble living and working conditions often found in the fields of the Mississippi Delta. The sharecropping lifestyle of the Delta offered few assurances with its constant battle to make crops profitable against mounting debt and natural disasters. Conversely, if one avoided the dangers of the workplace, the pine forest offered poor southerners a viable alternative to the uncertainty of tenant farming. In most labor camps, long hours dictated by market demands and weather patterns encompassed camp life. However, with increased industrialization, Mississippi's legislature began to review the feasibility of implementing defined daily working periods. In 1912, the legislature established the ten-hour workday in manufacturing while exempting loggers and timber haulers.¹⁰ Already realizing the humanity and benefits of shorter working days the Eastman-Gardiner interest enacted ten-hour days as early as 1906.¹¹

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Fickle, Mississippi Forest and Forestry, 105.

¹¹ Ibid.

While the camps of the Laurel interest evolved into a model for early twentieth century southern camp and worker life, conditions surrounding the work in the woods remained dangerous and life threatening. Axes and falling timber claimed many victims, but lumbermen of the period lament that most loggers became injured while extracting the logs out of the forest. The removal process involved powerful skidders pulled by livestock and latter on by mechanically driven steam skidders. The skidders with their long chains and sharp points often snapped under the weight of a large load. In the event that a chain breakage occurred, the men who could not move out of the way became beheaded or maimed.¹² Even if the chains remained secure, logs regularly became dislodged from the skidders and rolled over nearby workers. In most cases serious injury resulted in the amputation of crushed and disfigured limbs. Due to the plethora of dangers, awareness was key to surviving the logging camp workday. Although log removal presented the most frequent cause of accidents, falling tree limbs and timbers also claimed a significant number of victims.¹³

Even in the face of overwhelming danger, the families of the early lumber camps managed to persevere through often-harsh working conditions to create a meaningful existence for themselves and their families. The progressive lumber camps of the Laurel sawmills offered many families a chance to build for a better tomorrow. The Eastman-Gardiner Company, in addition to building and maintaining a progressive camp structure, also took the

¹² *The Clarion Ledger*, 28 October 1979.

¹³ *Ibid.*

unprecedented step of providing a bonus payment to its employee base.¹⁴ In the winter of 1916, twenty thousand dollars was distributed in such a fashion that the common laborers received more than skilled employees. Skilled laborers rated at more than two dollars fifty cents per day received two percent of their earnings over the past year, while unskilled workers making less than two dollars fifty cents per hour received a four percent share.¹⁵ The bonus also rewarded an employee's length of service. Bonuses continually increased to a rate of seven percent for unskilled men with over five years service. Though such bonuses were left to the discretion of the company bosses they served to illustrate a measure of company good will. In some instances the men received enough bonus to open a bank account or pay down on some land. This type of personal investment fostered a growing upwardly mobile society that eventually created a new southern working middle class.

While the families of the lumber villages toiled in an effort to better themselves, the timber barons of South Mississippi sought to improve the lives of their own families by transforming the existing hardscrabble community of Laurel into a cosmopolitan town. Their efforts paid immediate dividends as Laurel soon became the envy of the entire state. The city builders set about augmenting existing southern lifestyles with the social, cultural, and economic systems of their northern heritage. Emerging from their efforts blossomed a town that redefined aspects of the existing culture while adhering many of the native southern mores and lifestyles.

¹⁴ *Laurel Daily Leader*, 20 December 1916.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

In the years between 1902 and 1918, Laurel realized an enormous amount of civic growth. Education was essential to this upward surge. If not for a well-defined educational system, Laurel might become just another short-lived mill town. In 1907, R.H. Watkins, a young superintendent from Bristol, Tennessee, accepted the same position in Laurel. Laurel, like many other “New South” towns, took a progressive posture concerning education. George and Silas Gardiner sent the new superintendent to learn progressive educational methods at the University of Chicago. Watkins’ educational sojourn to Chicago not only gave Watkins valuable educational experience and direction, but also created opportunities for Laurel’s High School students to gain admission to the prestigious university.¹⁶ R.H. Watkins exemplified Laurel’s commitment to education. As Laurel grew and evolved, the town’s founder’s attitudes toward education helped the new superintendent build schools and provide for a progressive academic curriculum. Watkins, in conjunction with other civic-minded leaders, also defined Laurel’s attitude toward race. With educational reforms as the catalyst, Laurel’s leadership began to address many of the problems and concerns associated with life in Laurel’s African American community.

Laurel’s benefactors differed from many of their northern industrial counterparts in relocating their families to the South. In doing so they naturally brought with them their own set of values and observances. Most notably the city builders’ outlook regarding issues of race gave rise to Laurel’s African American middle class. Even though the new arrivals adhered to the southern Jim Crow policies, they introduced their civic-minded progressive

¹⁶ Laurel Centennial Committee, The Laurel Story, 32.

principals to help create an African American bourgeoisie that transcended the possibilities of their agrarian past.

Though Laurel was by no means a utopia for black Americans, the jobs and benefits created by emerging southern industrial patterns offered Laurel's black population a better life than their Mississippi Delta neighbors. Black Laurelites not only benefited from the steady wages offered by the new mills, but the local black community also greatly enhanced the viability of early mill operations. This symbiotic relationship manifested itself in early labor development as African Americans supplied the bulk of the workforce for John Kamper's 1882 mill operations.¹⁷ As the mills grew and evolved, the black population began to form a sense of community around mill life. Early community development laid the groundwork for subsequent generations of black Laurelites to overcome many of the socioeconomic and political obstacles of life in the Deep South. This sense of upward mobility gave the black community burgeoning hope as new lumbermen moved into the region and mill development exploded at the end of the nineteenth century.

Kamper's mill attracted a growing black workforce, but the ascension of Laurel's black community began in earnest with the arrival of the Eastman-Gardiner interest. The Eastman-Gardiner Company's attitudes concerning its black workforce enticed other black Americans to Laurel to seek their fortunes. In keeping with their progressive stance, an Eastman-Gardiner subsidiary, *The Laurel Chronicle*, printed a 1902 article regarding the successes of Laurel's black community.

¹⁷ Cleveland Payne, Laurel: A History of the Black Community, 1882-1962 (Laurel: privately printed 1990) , 17.

No well-intentioned Negro desirous of bettering his condition need hesitate for fear of ill treatment or discrimination in business or labor matters to come alone or with his family to Laurel. Here he will not only find remunerative employment and an excellent business field, but good education and religious privileges and an excellent school taught by well-qualified colored teachers... The school is open to the children without fee. Nowhere else can the ambitious Negro be more certain of achieving higher standard of living or acquiring property. He will see what others of his race have accomplished and the same opportunities they enjoy are equally his.¹⁸

The Laurel Chronicle article not only served to laud the community's accomplishments but also additionally served as a quasi advertisement for mill labor. Self-serving or not, the article's claims spurred a steady migration of blacks to the new mill village. Although Laurel remained solidly in the grips of legal and cultural racial discrimination, the paper's claims of a better African American existence proved relatively true. In the context of racism as a southern and American problem, the African American existence in Laurel proved decidedly better. Systematically, black workers often received lower pay than their white counterparts, but compared to other parts of the agrarian South, blacks held a better chance for social and financial advancement. Blacks earned roughly ten dollars per week for mill work while sharecroppers in the Mississippi Delta earned approximately one fifth that amount.¹⁹ Improved wages and working conditions greatly benefited Laurel's black population. Eventually small savings blossomed into capital investments that established Laurel's black infrastructure.

¹⁸ Ibid. , 20.

¹⁹ Ibid. , 19.

The investment made by Laurel's black middle class is best exemplified in their conscious dedication to education reform. The community professionals realized that efforts toward societal improvement were predicated on continual educational advancements. Laurel's biracial community cooperation is best exemplified in joint educational commitments. After reading an account on education in the *New York Sun*, the philanthropic wife of George Gardiner contacted Laurel's city officials to ascertain the local government's commitment to black education. After learning that black school children received one quarter of the funding appropriated to white education, Mrs. Gardiner spearheaded the building of a new school for blacks. She offered to contribute ten thousand dollars to the endeavor provided that the local government and the black community supply an additional ten thousand dollars each. After the announcement, black leaders organized a myriad of different collection methods. Teachers and students went door to door, while mill hands donated in some cases an entire day's pay to help with the construction cost. In 1925, the community rejoiced as their efforts produced a modern facility to educate the youth of their community.²⁰

Private donors and municipal funding converged again in 1927 to create the Oak Park Vocational School for Blacks. The building received financing through the implementation of a twenty-five thousand dollar bond issue, while private funds donated the two hundred and thirty nine acres that encompassed the school's campus. The school consisted of a manual arts building, a home economics building, and a large area for agricultural production. The campus also contained housing for the principal and faculty. Though centered around

²⁰ Ibid. , 58.

agricultural and service industry trades, Laurel's Oak Park Vocational school became the State of Mississippi's first municipally maintained agricultural and vocational school for blacks.²¹

Laurel's sawmills, so integral to the establishment of the early black community, soon gave rise to upwardly mobile black businessmen and professionals. The efforts of black professionals in conjunction with the progressive attitudes and actions of the northern industrialists created an atmosphere of education, religion, and work ethic that transcended the early hopes and possibilities of the community. By the mid 1920s, Laurel's black population evoked a confidence and culture that paralleled the socioeconomic ascension and development of many northeastern black communities.

Laurel's civic leaders expanded the progressive views beyond matters of industry, education, or race. Throughout the early part of the twentieth century, Laurel's elite created an enclave of cosmopolitan culture that defined its subsequent pattern of growth. The civic-minded community leaders controlled and orchestrated the socioeconomic growth of the entire community. The enormous success of their business interest allowed business and community leaders to create their idea of a modern model industrial city.

Civic duty and industrial growth became stalwarts of Laurel's early expansion. However, in addition to city planning and economic growth elements of culture and society greatly impacted and influenced Laurel's development. In keeping with the civic-minded fervor that marked life during the nation's Progressive Era, Laurelites fielded a myriad of civic-minded clubs and organizations. Laurel's female population often times spearheaded these

²¹ Laurel Centennial Committee, The Laurel Story, 36.

cultural and civic organizations. Concerns as varied as city beautification and women's rights often found their way inside the club's ledgers. In 1912, membership drives resulted in Laurel becoming the smallest town in the United States to receive an official Y.W.C.A charter. In 1923, sixty thousand dollars, accumulated through private donations, resulted in the erection of a permanent Y.W.C.A headquarters.²² The Oak street Y.W.C.A building provided a meeting place for many groups and organizations. An indoor pool replaced the popularity of the local swimming hole, while exercise classes, badminton tournaments, industrial tours, and multiple instructional classes entertained and informed Laurel's youth.²³ In addition to the activities surrounding the Y.W.C.A, Laurel's female leaders spearheaded such organizations as the Progress Club and the Business Girls Club.²⁴ These clubs helped Laurel's young women define and establish new roles within the society. Though often instilled with the charms and femininity of the established southern culture, many of Laurel's young women combined these traditional attitudes with an emphasis on education and self-sufficiency.

In addition to professional and civic organizations, garden clubs and beautification societies illustrate Laurel's connection to the Progressive Era's ideals of conservation and municipal planning. Laurel's female elite and growing middle class combined to secure land for parks and greenways throughout Laurel. By the late 1920s, The Boulevard Club, Park Place Club,

²² Pauline Hester, "Yesteryears: Stepping Stones to Tomorrow." Published in conjunction with the Mississippi American Revolution Bicentennial and the Laurel Bicentennial Commission, 1976 : 63-64.

²³ Ibid. , 61.

and the Laurel Garden Club planned and initiated citywide landscaping and horticultural maintenance efforts. In 1931, these clubs joined with several other beautification organizations and coordinated their activities in a city wide Garden Club Council.²⁵

In the 1910s and 1920s, Laurel's philanthropist and community leaders initiated a multitude of civic and cultural programs. While garden clubs and business groups flourished in Laurel, artistic and cultural endeavors symbolized Laurel's maturation into a cosmopolitan municipality. The Lauren Roger Museum of Art, dedicated on January 26, 1924, firmly established Laurel's commitment to art and culture. The Museum opened as a memorial to Lauren Eastman Rogers after his death in 1921 following complications of appendicitis. Lauren Roger's father, Wallace Brown Rogers, and his town-founding grandfather, Lauren Chase Eastman, organized the campaign to preserve the memory of their son and grandson through art, learning, and culture. Although the founding families made numerous contributions to the infrastructure and culture of Laurel, the Lauren Rogers Museum epitomizes the town's commitment to culture and education.²⁶

Laurel's dedication to education and culture also manifested itself in many other social and cultural organizations and events. Chautauqua programs frequently gave the town's residents a chance to gain knowledge of different social, political, and economic thoughts and ideas. In addition to the lecture circuit, Laurel's citizenry often welcomed members of traveling theaters.

²⁴ Laurel Centennial Committee, The Laurel Story, 32-33.

²⁵ Pauline Hester, "Yesteryears: Stepping Stones to Tomorrow," 63-64.

²⁶ *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 29 October 1933.

Laurel hosted a regular summer theater called the Airdrome in which traveling stock companies performed ever-changing bi weekly productions.²⁷ Traveling theater productions also gave rise to a homegrown theater movement. Records indicate that long before the Little Theater Movement swept through the United States, Laurel, as early as 1916, regularly presented homegrown performances.²⁸

Laurel's vigorous social life centered around an organization known as the Tallahoma Club. Musical concerts highlighted the club's early existence. In the years between 1908 and 1912, numerous traveling companies and local musical devotees preformed at the club. As Laurel's industry continued to grow, many members of the Tallahoma Club organized the creation of the Laurel Country Club.²⁹

The creation of numerous economic and social clubs defined culture and community among Laurel's growing elite. Throughout the 1920s, Laurel's cultural ascendancy paralleled the town's rapid economic growth. Laurel's society constantly welcomed a steady stream of northern and southern arrivals that continually contributed to Laurel's social and economic development. By the middle of the 1920s Laurel's economy and culture reached its zenith. In the coming months and years Laurel's preoccupation with society and culture gave way to an economic uncertainty that threatened to turn Laurel into another unsuccessful "cut out" mill town.

²⁷ Laurel Centennial Committee, The Laurel Story, 33.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Pauline Hester, "Yesteryears: Stepping Stones to Tomorrow," 53.

The exhaustion of timber supplies coincided with the national and international economic depression of the 1930s to threaten Laurel's industrial survival. Even before the Great Depression crippled the viability of the timber market, dwindling timber supplies and production disasters began to affect Laurel's lumber production. On Friday May 4, 1928, the Eastman Gardiner mill erupted in chaos. Shortly before 4:00 p.m., an explosion near the mill's sorting shed ignited a firestorm that rapidly spread throughout the plant.³⁰ The Laurel Fire Department quickly joined with the Eastman-Gardiner fire crew to combat the wind fueled blaze. As thousands of townspeople gathered, the symbolic figure of Laurel's industrial might vanished before their very eyes.

Laurel's "great mill fire" ignited when a whirling circular saw propelled a spark into a nearby oil drum. The resulting flame spread through the engine and boiler room before igniting the machine shop and automobile garage.³¹ The fire not only destroyed the great mill but also caused a great deal of collateral damage that negatively impacted Laurel sixteen months before the onslaught of the Great Depression. Saw filers, blacksmiths, and woodworkers lost many of their personal tools and possessions in the fire. Four family homes became engulfed in the blaze before firefighters from several municipalities and nearby counties brought the eleven-hour inferno under control.³²

³⁰ David Higgs, "Eastman, Gardner and Company and the Cohay Camps: A Mississippi Lumber Empire, 1890-1937." Masters Thesis, Mississippi College, 1991, 78.

³¹ Ibid. , 79.

³² Ibid. , 81.

The cascading economic effects of the fire caused many Laurel businesses to greatly reduce payrolls and slash operating costs. To offset mass unemployment, Eastman-Gardiner officials increased payrolls at many of their other Laurel industries. In addition to placing workers in new positions, the company announced on May 6, 1928, that the company planned to rebuild on the site of the original mill.³³ Although the business lost between 550,000 to 650,000 dollars, the company immediately began construction of a new smaller mill. On Tuesday October 29, 1929, the Eastman-Gardiner Company's grandiose construction plan came to a halt. As the stock market crashed, the demand for construction ceased, resulting in a slashing of the company's production schedule. As the Great Depression intensified, the Eastman-Gardiner interest joined many of their industrial neighbors in completely scaling back and redefining their business interests. Laurel's industry continued to redevelop through the 1930s. New companies and resources eventually re-ignited Laurel's industrial base, but the great mill industry that propelled Laurel's early cosmopolitan existence slowly faded away.

The economic uncertainty of the late 1920 and 1930s overshadowed the South's enormous environmental devastation. Years of uncontrolled milling and mining left the countryside scarred and battered. In the Piney Woods of South Mississippi, aggressive lumber harvesting methods created barren landscapes consisting only of tree stumps and eroding soil. The mill industry's technological advancements that once gave rise to the promise of an easier industrial life regrettably contributed to the forest's ecological and fiscal demise.

³³ Ibid. , 82.

Although the policy of clear cutting decimated the southern landscape, the era's lumber extraction and transportation methods also levied a great toll on the natural landscape. Steam skidders with their enormous power and extensive cable system eradicated acres of undergrowth and felled thousands of young trees and saplings.³⁴ Though timber extraction and traditional harvesting methods caused much of the environmental devastation, state and local taxation policies heavily contributed to industrial policy. In an effort to maximize their revenue, state and local authorities taxed lands that contained timber at a higher rate. These taxation policies made reforestation and selective timber harvesting costly and inefficient to the timber companies.³⁵ In the 1930s, Eastman-Gardiner officials gave many of their cutover lands to any individual willing to assume the back tax burden. Many mill owners upon deciphering the state's tax code initiated the uprooting of trees for recently seeded lands.³⁶

The stringent tax code coupled with the exhaustion of local timber supplies marked the end of Laurel's wide scale sawmill production. Though many timber interests retooled and diversified, others totally relocated to new holdings in the northwest. The Gilchrist Company relocated to Oregon in 1938 by founding a timber village that bears its name.³⁷ Many of Laurel's residents both black and white followed the promise of the new northwest timber bonanza. The former residents of Laurel built a railroad, a dam, and a sawmill

³⁴ James Fickle, Mississippi Forest and Forestry, 103.

³⁵ Ibid. , 101-02.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ *Sarasota Herald Tribune*, 11 January 1983.

in Oregon's lower Deschutes River valley. Just as the Northern industrialists fused with Laurel's existing southern culture, the workers from Laurel joined with the new workers from the northwest in creating a little piece of Dixie in the shadow of the Cascade Mountains.³⁸

As the southern forest vanished and lumber production slowed, Laurel's future depended on the emergence of new industries and business. Though many of its timber interests diversified their financial holdings, without a major manufacturer and employer, Laurel's usefulness as a southern industrial and financial center might vanish with the milling of the last piece of virgin timber. Fortunately for the citizens of Laurel one man's industrial inventiveness and his connection to Laurel's capital base coincided with the complete eradication of virgin timber stands, and helped Laurelites usher in an era of scientific forestry and management. Though this management and attention to crop yield was predicated on business concerns, it initiated a transformation and redevelopment of South Mississippi's forest and economy.

³⁸ Ibid.

CHAPTER 4

DIVERSIFICATION

Laurel's development throughout the first three decades of the twentieth century revolved around the harvesting and milling of southern timber resources. The boom in the timber market following the First World War gave way to steady peacetime sales in the 1920s. The South's exhaustion of timber supplies coincided with the economic devastation of the Great Depression to greatly alter the South's sawmill industry. The region's timber giants faced three possibilities, either relocate their operation to obtain timber supplies, shut down their mills altogether or retool and diversify their business holdings. Fortunately for the residents of Laurel, inventiveness and scientific forestry combined to diversify the town's economy prior to the onslaught of the Great Depression.

As early as 1919, the United States Forest Service predicted that southern sawmill operators would decimate the region's timber supply as early as 1931.¹ According to a report issued by the National Lumber Manufacturers Association, twenty five percent of all felled trees remained in the woods, and another forty percent dissipated in the milling process. Sawdust ultimately accounted for twelve and a half percent of the finished product.² In Laurel's Eastman Gardiner mill, waste helped fire their drying kilns. Instead of coal, another Eastman subsidiary, the Laurel Cotton Mills, used mill waste from the

¹ John Hebron Moore, "William H. Mason, Southern Industrialist," Journal of Southern History 27 : (May 1961) , 171.

² Ibid.

sawmill to fire its boilers.³ Early uses for mill waste demonstrated Laurel's industrialists yearning for efficient cost saving measures. Although the burning of waste illustrated the usefulness of mill byproducts, the eradication of the southern forests soon fostered the need for greater industrial efficiency and conservation.

William H. Mason, a Virginia born engineer and inventor, closely monitored the waste and inefficiency that plagued the early mill industry. After receiving technical training at Washington and Lee and Cornell, Mason apprenticed under Thomas A. Edison. Mason first became interested in wood and its properties while working in a shipyard during the First World War. While still employed as an associate of Thomas Edison, Mason married into a mill family that owned massive timber interests in Wisconsin and Mississippi.⁴ After touring the family's vast holdings, Mason's interest turned from shipbuilding to finding practical and efficient uses for mill waste. In 1920, Mason's experimentation with wood and steam first convinced him of the possibilities of turpentine extraction. The inventor's extraction methods not only produced valuable pine byproducts, but they also improved the quality of the pine boards. Mason pitched his ideas for a turpentine extraction kiln to the directors of the Wausau-Southern Lumber Company. The investors, familiar with Mason's engineering credentials and family connection, agreed to bankroll the new enterprise.⁵

³ Jo Dent Hodge, "The Lumber Industry in Laurel, Mississippi." 371.

⁴ *Biloxi Daily Herald*, 10 February 1962.

⁵ *Laurel Leader Call*, 23 February 1943.

The Wausau-Southern group began extraction operations in January of 1921. The results yielded such promise that the company converted large portions of its kilns into several byproduct units.⁶ Rosin and turpentine extraction methods provided multiple benefits for the Wausau-Southern group. In addition to increased lumber quality, the extraction process produced additional marketable products and greatly lowered the lumber's shipping weight, which served to further increase profits. The company concluded that savings in shipping costs, coupled with the improvements in lumber grade, provided sufficient savings benefits to warrant continued extraction operations. Mason's endeavors resulted in acclaim from both the financial and academic community. By 1922, recognition and awards culminated with Mason receiving a one thousand dollar prize from the National Lumber Manufacturers Association.⁷ Technologically, Mason's inventions demonstrated the enormous possibilities of science and industry. Financially, the plant's continued economic success depended on a constant supply of freshly milled timber. Unfortunately for the South's entrepreneurs and timber barons, southern timber depletion loomed ominously on the horizon.

By the end of the 1930s, Marathon Lumber Company and Gilchrist-Fordney closed their large-scale Laurel operations. Faced with the depleting timber supply, eventually even the large mills of the Eastman-Gardiner Company redefined and downsized lumber production.⁸ In 1937, the Eastman Gardiner group decentralized their varied holdings and formed the Green

⁶ John Hebron Moore, "William H. Mason, Southern Industrialist," 172.

⁷ Ibid. , 173.

⁸ *Laurel Leader Call*, 30 July 1962.

Lumber Company to continue milling operations. Fortunately for Laurel, prior to the cutbacks and financial instability of the late 20s and 30s, William Mason initiated work on a series of processes and inventions that eventually propelled Laurel back into the center of the wood products industry.

By the middle of the 1920s, William Mason entrusted a former Edison Associate, Charles Westphalen, with the organization and operation of the extraction businesses. Unburdened of business pressures, the inventor once again turned his attention to the possibilities of finding useful ways to use mill industry waste. Mason became intrigued by the possibility of using steam and high pressure to reduce coarse wood chips into more useful wood fibers. In the spring of 1924, Mason conveyed this plan to his longtime associate Westphalen. Mason suggested the creating of soft timber fibers by exposing coarse wooden chips to the pressures of steam and force.⁹ In conjunction with pieces machined and assemble by Laurel Machine and Foundry, Mason assembled a cannon like apparatus to explode the coarse wood chips. The experimental gun contained a steel shaft three inches in diameter and fifteen inches long. One end of the shaft tapered to fit into a valve that connected to the gun barrel. A small oil filled brass fitting imbedded in the shaft provided Mason and his associates a means by which to measure the gun's internal temperature.¹⁰ After successful cannon assembly, Mason loaded the chamber with wood chips and water. He then heated the primed gun to a temperature of 480 degrees thereby producing approximately 600 pounds of steam pressure per square inch. As Mason released the cannon's pressure valve, the ensuing

⁹ *The Clarion Ledger*, 19 April 1959.

¹⁰ John Hebron Moore, "William H. Mason, *Southern Industrialist*," 175.

explosion produced a fine wood fiber. After subsequent tests revealed the gun's optimal temperature and pressure requirements, Mason and Westphalen discussed the presentation and implementation of Mason's invention.¹¹

In April of 1924, Mason traveled to Wausau, Wisconsin, to present his findings to his financial backers. The Wausau group agreed to fund continued research in exchange for Mason's service and patent rights. Upon securing adequate fiscal support, Mason arranged for the construction of a new prototype utilizing power from several Stanley Steamer Automobile engines.¹² After inviting members of the investment group to Laurel, Mason and Westphalen discovered that their leaky antiquated engines yielded insufficient pressure to fire a successful shot. Instead of aborting the planned demonstration, Mason proposed to fake the shot if necessary.¹³

On the day of the demonstration, the eager investment group converged in Laurel. After loading his invention with the required amount of wood chips and water, Mason detonated the cannon with full knowledge that the device lacked the proper steam pressure. Immediately following the blast, Charles Westphalen initiated his and Mason's prearranged plan. While the gun blast distracted the investors, Westphalen quickly entered the chamber and returned with the best available sample.¹⁴ Impressed with Mason's ingenuity, the consortium agreed to finance Mason's new venture. Though Mason's product illustrated ingenuity and technical expertise, fiscal sensibilities dictated the

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid. , 176.

¹³ *Biloxi Daily Herald*, 10 February 1962.

¹⁴ *Laurel Leader Call*, 23 February 1943.

exploration of marketable uses. Mason initially assumed that his “wood wool” might be useful in the making of paper products.¹⁵ After tests revealed that his product produced inferior grades of paper, Mason began to research other possibilities for his new creation.

Undeterred by initial setbacks, Mason examined the possibility of making his wood fibers into pressed insulation board. After initial tests proved promising but unsuccessful, Mason hypothesized that his experiments might prove more successful with the use of more sophisticated equipment. In the hopes of achieving greater success, Mason shipped an entire carload of his fibers to Rothschild, Wisconsin. The Marathon Paper Mill’s steam-heated presses greatly improved Mason’s progress. Though Mason’s progress produced higher quality insulation boards, fabrication of a suitable lumber replacement eluded him. Fortunately for William Mason and the industrialists of Laurel, patience and inventive luck soon converged to produce a product of great potential.¹⁶

After placing the wood fibers in a press for continued experimentation, Mason turned off the machine’s pressure valve to adjourn to lunch. Unknown to Mason, the press possessed a leaky pressure valve that allowed high-pressure steam to react with the wood fibers for an extended period of time. Returning from lunch, Mason found that the hot smoking press melded his fibrous material into a compressed board that exhibited extraordinary strength. Future tests revealed that the new particleboard actually possessed greater

¹⁵ John Hebron Moore, “William H. Mason, Southern Industrialist,” 176.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Laurel Leader Call*, 23 February 1943.

strength than the original wood.¹⁷ Although the invention proved technologically successful, Mason's Wausau backers knew that to use the invention to its full potential they needed additional investment. The group approached their fellow Laurel lumbermen to help finance and market the new product. After negotiations about patent rights and financing, the Eastman-Gardiner group formed a partnership with the Wausau group to manufacture Mason's insulation and particleboard. The syndicate, which also included other Laurel timber interests, voted Eastman-Gardiner's Charles Green the company's first president. Although his concentration remained with invention and product evolution, William Mason assumed a vice presidential role as factory construction began on October 1, 1925. Almost one year from the start of construction the newly formed Mason Fiber Company launched its Laurel operation.¹⁸

Initially, production problems and low market demands hampered company operations. In the late 1920s, Mason's refinement of the hardboard manufacturing process ushered in a new era for the plant. Hardboard sales began to outpace the company sales of insulation board and the new company seemed poised for success. Although the Great Depression slowed production, the newly renamed Masonite Corporation persevered through the unstable markets. Mason's goal of using sawmill waste revolutionized the timber products industry. Unfortunately, the mill's ascendancy corresponded with the depletion of virgin timber supplies that for years sustained Laurel's mill

¹⁷ *Laurel Leader Call*, 23 February 1943.

¹⁸ John Hebron Moore, "William H. Mason, *Southern Industrialist*," 179.

industry. To insure production resources, Masonite began using scientific management and commercial reforestation techniques in the mid 1930s. The company encouraged farmers to acquire and reforest Mississippi's abundance of cut over lands. To ensure proper management and yield, Masonite freely provided professional advice and seedlings trees. Masonite's initial resource management successes encouraged other Laurel business interests to explore the possibilities of scientific resource management and production.¹⁹ With the impending exhaustion of the region's virgin timber, Laurel's civic leaders joined Mason in further redefining Laurel's industrial and commercial foundation.

In the 1930s, Laurel's industrial base firmly moved away from the saw pine industry. Even enduring lumber interests such as Eastman-Gardiner's Green Lumber Company initiated the milling of hardwood to offset the depletion of pine production. In this new climate of industrial diversification and scientific management, Laurel's businessmen embraced the nation's Chemurgic movement. The Chemurgic movement evolved out of the Depression era scientists' quest for more efficient farming and resource management and bio engineering techniques.²⁰ Two researchers, William J. Hale and Charles Holmes Herty, hypothesized that crop overproduction resulting from mechanization and fertilizer use precipitated the Great Depression. The scientists hoped that new uses for surplus agricultural products would boost the farm economy. The scientists advocated the farm

¹⁹ Ibid. , 180.

²⁰ R. C. Morrison, "Chemurgy in Laurel, Mississippi," Holland's, The Magazine of the South, November 1939, 13.

“chemurgic,” a term Billy Hale coined from the root of “chemistry” and “ergon,” the Greek word for work.²¹

Laurel’s problems, stemming from over harvesting the area’s timber resources, fueled a local chemurgic response that propelled Laurel’s businessmen into the forefront of the state’s resource management movement. The town’s progressive northern industrialists, previously schooled in the Progressive Era’s strive for efficiency, easily adapted to the production of agriculturally based industrial products. In the 1930s, as Laurel’s Masonite plant fought through the Great Depression, other agricultural influenced businesses provided strength for Laurel’s transforming economy. In 1934, the Sweet Potato Growers Inc. opened a facility in Laurel to manufacture starch from sweet potato extracts. By 1939, the plant produced 2,6000,000 pounds of starch, and continued operations until 1947. With the advent of scientific tree farming and advancements made in agribusiness, Laurel proclaimed itself “The 100% Chemurgic City.”²² Laurel’s obsession with resource management and natural industrial products highlighted the town’s 1930s industrial impulse. Although Laurel’s resource oriented manufacturing industry continually evolved, national and international events soon placed great demands on Laurel’s industrial production. America’s involvement in the Second World War greatly enhanced the town’s industrial base, and provided for new markets and opportunities.

²¹ David Wright, “Biotech Beginnings,” Michigan State University Graduate School News, available at <http://www.msu.edu/unit/vprgs.html>; Internet; accessed 8 August 2001.

²² *Ibid.* , 15.

Paralleling Laurel's mill growth as a result of the First World War, the industrial needs of the Second World War provided Laurel industry with a plethora of military and civilian orders. The town's timber products industry, which made modest gains through the 20s and 30s, gained popular acceptance as World War Two military requirements demonstrated the strength and versatility of particleboard products. Masonite Corporation materials proved highly valuable in both foreign and domestic campaigns. Domestic hardboard production virtually stopped due to the military's large demand for Masonite hardboard. Both the Army and Navy used Masonite for the interiors of nearly 150,000 Quonset huts for distribution throughout the European and Pacific theaters of war. The company also developed many military specific products, including hundreds of carloads of high-density material used in the Manhattan project.²³ Though Masonite dominated Laurel's wartime industrial scene, other Laurel industries and endeavors greatly contributed to the country's wartime industrial output. Green Lumber Company employed as many as 1500 men, working around the clock, to produce prefabricated military housing units.²⁴ In addition to Laurel's sizeable industrial workforce, many Laurel men and women served their country at home and abroad.

Men from all parts of the nation trained and drilled at Laurel's Army Air Base. The station also provided a staging area for many of the nations strategic bomber units. Nearby Camp Shelby served not only as one of America's largest training facilities but also as an internment camp for captured German prisoners of war. In keeping with the region's progressive and southern social

²³ *Laurel Leader Call*, 23 February 1943.

²⁴ *Laurel Leader Call*, 30 July 1962.

ideals, the prisoners stationed at Camp Shelby received excellent treatment. The men participated in a myriad of educational, cultural, and athletic endeavors. Prisoners regularly competed against each other in track and field events, though events such as pole vaulting were prohibited for obvious reasons. Prisoner camp life left an indelible impression on the many inspection teams that frequented the camp. Red Cross workers lauded Camp Shelby as the finest prison camp in America, while a Y.M.C.A. inspector commented on the camp's outstanding string quartets.²⁵ Though images of prisoner treatment serve to reinforce the area's preoccupation with society and culture, the treatment of German prisoners also illustrates the region's racial inequities. In most instances, the German prisoners of war received better treatment than many of the base's African American workers and soldiers. While the German prisoners practiced Mozart and swam by the base lake, the camp's African American population provided menial labor and entered buildings via the back door.

Although military service offered African Americans a multitude of obstacles and challenges, many of Laurel's black residents heeded the country's call to arms. Laurel's black populace served in the Pacific and European campaigns, scoring both racial and military successes.²⁶ After returning from the war effort, black Laurelites hoped to further redefine their economic and social existence. Even though racial cooperation still existed in post war Laurel, with the advent of mass communication, African Americans

²⁵ Merrill R. Pritchett and William L. Shea, "The Enemy in Mississippi, 1943-1946." Journal of Mississippi History 41 (November 1979) : 357.

²⁶ Cleveland Payne, Laurel: A History of the Black Community, 94-100.

began to shed Laurel's paternalistic industrial culture and take their cues from national black leaders and events of the fifties.

Post war Laurel differed substantially from the Laurel of the early 1900s. In 1946, Green Lumber Company began to dismantle its entire mill operation. By 1948, the company's workforce shrank to 800 workers. The plant and its workforce gradually eroded until the plant ceased operations entirely by 1956.²⁷ The sawmill that once defined Laurel's industrial strength became the centerpiece of Laurel's post war economic and commercial district. As Laurel's industry advanced and decentralized, Laurel's industrial founders continually diversified their financial holdings and businesses. Although Masonite remained the town's primary employer, in the late 40s and 50s Laurel began to augment its timber resource economic base and join the rest of the Sunbelt states in a crusade for oil and gas riches.

In 1943, the discovery of oil in the Eucutta field 18 miles east of Laurel initiated an oil boom that propelled the local economy for the next 40 years. Four months after the discovery of the Eucutta oil field, an additional oil discovery reinforced the validity of the region's oil reserves. Located 20 miles north of Laurel, the Heidelberg field hit paydirt in early 1944.²⁸ The discovery of the second oil pool initiated wild speculation and rumor. Soon the discovery of oil gave Laurel the aura of an old west town fueled by wildcat oil ventures and increased land speculation. Oil fever reached a boiling point when the news of the region's oil findings sent Masonite stock soaring on rumors that the company's cut over timber land contained vast deposits of oil. Company president Ben Alexander tempered the speculation on Wall Street by issuing a

²⁷ *Laurel Leader Call*, 30 July 1962.

statement that iterated the company's timber holdings and deflected attention away from the possibilities of Masonite's operations or profits becoming skewed by sudden oil riches.²⁹ Although oil did not tremendously augment Masonite's portfolio, members of Laurel's founding families parlayed their timber holdings and investment into the era's growing oil industry. In 1957, the region's 800 producing wells and 50 new oil companies made Laurel the center of oil commerce for the entire state. By 1960, Laurel's oilfield and gas production rose to over 60 million dollars, which gave rise to 150 oilfield related companies and services.³⁰ The rise in oil and gas production propelled Laurel's industrial diversification and insured the community's continued economic success. As the boom in oil gained momentum, many Laurelites gravitated to the inherent sense of adventure and large wage packages offered by the oil companies. The rise in oilfield production, however, did not spell the end for Laurel's timber products industry. Although large numbers of Laurelites migrated to the oil industry, many remained employed in Laurel's wood products industry.

Masonite's production volume increased substantially as the demand for fabricated home products increased as American servicemen returned from war. Although the company's patriarch died in 1940, Masonite continually produced new technological innovations.³¹ With each new invention, Masonite brand wood products gained an increasing market share. By December of

²⁸ *Laurel Leader Call*, 19 April 1959.

²⁹ Jerry Hills, eds. Masonite: Celebrating 75 Years of Innovation (Chicago: privately printed, 2000)

³⁰ *Laurel Leader Call*, 21 October, 1960

³¹ *Laurel Leader Call*, February 23 1943.

1950, the Masonite Corporation expanded its operations to include plants in California as well as several production facilities in Europe and South Africa.³² Masonite's impact on Laurel's economy expanded throughout the 1960s, but as company profits and production accelerated, labor unrest and union activity steadily rose as unionism tried to make inroads in Laurel's economy.

Throughout Laurel's industrial history, paternalistic impulses almost always dominated labor organization and outside intervention. Although Laurel's labor history in no way resembles the labor conflicts of industrial Appalachia and the textile mill villages of the Tidewater, many of the town's early mill workers tried to establish small amounts of worker autonomy. In 1933, the *Jones County Tribune* reported that 300 men walked out of the Eastman-Gardiner mill in an orderly matter to demand better pay and shorter working hours. In the same issue, the paper also reports that in that same week the Laurel's Gilchrist-Fordney operation increased pay by ten to twenty percent.³³ In 1937, just months after Laurel's Masonite workers voted in favor of their own employee council, the *Laurel Leader Call* reported the representatives of the C.I.O. were escorted by a group of over 30 men to a northbound Southern Railway train and informed that their presence in Laurel was no longer needed.³⁴ Eleven years later, in September of 1948, the members of the International Woodworkers of America walked out on Green Lumber Company in the hopes of securing higher wages. The strike ended without incident as the company increased pay by about five cents to seventy-

³² Jerry Hills and others, eds. Masonite: Celebrating 75 Years of Innovation (Chicago: privately printed, 2000)

³³ *Jones County Tribune*, 3 August 1933.

³⁴ *Laurel Leader Call*, 10 August 1937.

five cents per hour.³⁵ Though Laurel's economy suffered through sporadic labor strikes and negotiation, the town's industrialists and labor organizers usually reached a rapid compromise. While Laurel's industry remained largely unaffected by the national upsurge in unionism and labor management in the 1950s and 60s, Laurel's Masonite plant did experience mounting incidents of labor unrest.

After labor's patriotic wartime response, the government's easing of wartime labor controls allowed men nationwide to seek increased pay and better working conditions. In Laurel, men that previously spurned efforts at collective bargaining and unionism began to further consolidate their labor power. A surge in labor activity at Laurel's Masonite plant exemplifies Laurel's steady transition to stronger unionism and worker solidarity. In the years 1946 through 1967, Laurel's Masonite union went on strike a total of seven times resulting in a total of \$10,440,00 in lost wages.³⁶ Strikes in 1946 and 1949 lasted from six weeks to five months, while shorter strikes of three months and four days affected plant operations in 1951 and 1958. In the 1960s, Laurel's labor unrest epitomized the era's penchant for social, political, and economic unrest and violence. In 1967, Laurel experienced unprecedented episodes of labor unrest and violence. Episodes ranging from throwing rocks and other projectiles to reports of physical abuse and gunplay threatened Laurel's progress. Laurel's episodes of labor unrest, though mild when compared to the widespread and lengthy violence and worker solitary of other industrial regions, illustrates that the town did experience the growing pains

³⁵ *Laurel Leader Call*, 24 September 1948.

³⁶ *Laurel Leader Call*, 9 May 1967.

often associated with industrial expansion and capitalism. Though battered by unrest and mistrust, union and company officials eventually came to terms and the Masonite Corporation and its employees turned their attention to the impacts of globalization and corporate consolidation.

The nation's recessionary period of the 1970s affected most of America's business interests. High inflation and rising gas prices coupled with a stagnant economy marred life in the 70s. Conversely, Laurel with its burgeoning domestic oil production prospered in the wake of Middle Eastern violence. With high domestic gas prices and a shortfall in America's crude imports, Laurel's oil centric Sunbelt economy blossomed as the rest of America felt the sting of industrial downsizing and unemployment. Laurel's Masonite plant endured the fluctuations and market demands of the 1970s to become one of America's fortune 500 companies. Research and continued product development diversified Masonite's product base. The company increased research and development spending from 4.7 million dollars in 1978 to 7 million dollars by 1981 to meet American demands for more energy efficient home building materials.³⁷ As Laurel's business community continually evolved in the wake of market shifts and demands, Laurel's society and economy, once dominated by regional resource management and production, gradually transformed in the wake of national and international economic shifts. The fall in oil prices and the streamlining and acquisition of local companies severely crippled the upward mobility and the expansion of Laurel's

³⁷ Jerry Hills and others, eds. Masonite: Celebrating 75 Years of Innovation (Chicago: privately printed, 2000)

middle class. In the early 80s, Laurelites faced an uncertain economic future that intensified with demands of social and government reorganization.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Reminiscent of the timber exhaustion and mill closures of the 1920s and 30s, Laurel's residents faced an uncertain economic future in the 1980s. As improving stability in the Middle East eroded Laurel's oil production, local oil company's trimmed payrolls and laid off much of their workforce. The area's oilfield personnel plummeted from 1900 jobs in 1982 to roughly 1150 jobs by 1984.¹ By 1986, local unemployment figures skyrocketed to over 13.7 percent. The decline in the oil industry perpetuated a citywide economic crisis. Home sales and new business construction stalled as Laurel became mired in recession. As the economy stalled, the tax base declined and the area's banking institutions noticed a steady drop in loan revenues. Local bank officials noted that in 1986 applications for construction and new business loans virtually evaporated.² The decline in oil production also gave rise to increased need for government aid and assistance. Family aid claims mirrored the decline of the oil industry as Laurel's economy struggled to reach stability. Throughout the 1980s, as Laurel faced increased economic uncertainty, changes in the town's civic and political structures added to the turmoil. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, socioeconomic and political reorganization coincided with the reduced production of Laurel's oil industry. Vast government and educational restructuring challenged Laurel's economic and social institutions. Mounting local and national pressures initiated widespread reform of Laurel's school system in compliance with nationally mandated racial

¹ *Laurel Leader Call*, 29 July 1986.

reorganization. Municipally, constitutional issues forced a change in Laurel's governmental structure.

Laurel's municipal reorganization began in earnest with passage of the country's 1964 Civil Rights Act. After a short-lived freedom of choice plan, the courts ordered a complete desegregation of Laurel's school system. Rezoning of school districts and the closure of the city's traditional black institutions resulted in Laurel's first real foray into racial desegregation.³ Although both black and white students attended R.H. Watkins, Laurel's only high school, the federal government initiated court mandated busing policies to further racially redistribute students.⁴ Though controversial, Laurel's elementary and middle school students complied with the busing regulations and ordinances without major incident. In the 1970s and 80s, as Laurel completed mandated school reorganization, traditional forms of government also came under federal fire. Laurel's longstanding system of municipal compartmentalization and citywide elections ran afoul of constitutional law that guaranteed equal representation.

Laurel's commissioner-style government came under severe scrutiny as opponents sought to challenge the system's constitutionality. Detractors argued that the commissioner system, which consists of a generally elected mayor who oversees different municipal departments, did not effectively represent the citizenry. After years of debate and legal maneuvering, Laurel's government adopted the mayor council system. Although Laurel's new governmental system provided for a more diverse community voice, the

² Ibid.

³ Laurel Centennial Committee, The Laurel Story, 51-52.

⁴ Ibid.

additional representation also presented Laurel's government with new challenges. As in any democratic form of government, increased representation challenged lawmakers to seek areas of compromise in order to address the community agenda. As Laurel moved into the late 1980s and 1990s, the legal wranglings and economic troubles of the 1970s and early 1980s slowly faded as Laurel's economic fortunes began to improve. While Laurel made strides to improve the functioning of its new government, new industrial enterprises began to once again provide for Laurel's continuing success.

New products and industrial endeavors flourished in Laurel as the nation's economy began to gain steam. Laurel's poultry industry began to prosper as health conscious Americans clamored for a healthier, reduced fat diet. Local technological and engineering innovations fueled diversity in Laurel's economy. Laurel's economy fostered both resource orientated and technologically based enterprises. Several local enterprises used the technological boom of the 1990s as a springboard for unprecedented economic success. Howard Industries currently ranks as the number one producer of distribution transformers in the United States. The company's 1.6 million square foot facility is the largest transformer plant in the world. Howard Industries employs hundreds of Laurel residents in its many area plants. These local workers allow Howard industries to supply electrical and computing components for a diverse group of utilities and companies. Another of Laurel's technological concerns, Thermo Kool, supplies large refrigeration solutions to companies worldwide. One of Laurel's oldest industrial endeavors, Laurel Machine and Foundry, continues to operate producing iron works and metal fabrication. Although the oil and timber industries do not operate at previous volumes, they remain integral to Laurel's economy. In the 1980s and

1990s, Masonite Corporation underwent several buyouts and reorganizations. Laurel's oil industry also rebounded slightly after its demise in the early 1980s and stands poised to heighten production levels if the need arises.

Laurel's social and economic shift into the twenty first century presents the community with a new series of problems and challenges. The economic downturn of 2001 ignited grumblings of instability and production easements at many of Laurel's industrial enterprises. As in the past, the town's economic future depends on the forward-thinking nature of its business and municipal leaders. With the nation's constant demographic evolution, Laurel's political and municipal structure must adjust to meet the needs and desires of its diversifying population base.

Laurel's developmental pattern demonstrates the town's ability to adjust to constant shifts in the nation's socioeconomic systems. Following Reconstruction, Laurel's progressive development embodied the social and economic changes that transformed many agrarian southern enclaves into thriving industrial centers. Although Laurel's industrial development is not unique, its commitment to progress and change embodies the development of the New South. The town's ability to fiscally prosper while providing its citizens with an upwardly mobile existence remains as one of Laurel's greatest accomplishments. As Laurel moves into the twenty first century, the line between the native southern citizenry and its northern benefactors forever melds into one. As the Sunbelt economy continually changes and expands, new economic and social demands repeatedly alter and contour Laurel's economy and society. Laurel's future as one of the South's economic and social stalwarts depends on its subsequent generations ability to effectively

continue the progressive tradition that made Laurel one the cultural and economic success stories of the New South.

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