

In this excerpt from A History of Florida Forests, published in 2007 by the University Press of Florida, author Baynard Kendrick interviews Martin Hoban about his lengthy career in cypress logging. The Introduction and Chapters 1 through 18 of the book were written by Baynard Kendrick for the Florida Board of Forestry in 1966–67. The manuscript then went unpublished for nearly 40 years. Known as the Kendrick Papers, it was accessible in the library of the Florida Forest Service, which in 1969 became the Division of Forestry in the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. In 2003, the Division of Forestry enlisted environmental writer and editor Barry Walsh to edit the Kendrick chapters, add updated chapters, and compile sidebars, tables, and illustrations.

MEMOIRS OF MARTIN HOBAN

LOGGING FLORIDA'S GIANT CYPRESS

Baynard Kendrick grew up in Philadelphia, the son of a publisher. After fighting in World War I, he came to Florida to visit his brother-in-law Martin Hoban, a partner in the Tilghman Cypress Company Lukens Mill near Cedar Key. There, Kendrick met his future wife; her brother was a logging engineer.

Over the years, Kendrick held various positions in Florida's forest products industry, always finding time to write. The following introduction by Kendrick sets the stage for chapter 8 of *A History of Florida Forests*, Hoban's first-person account of logging the giant cypress.

Baynard Kendrick: Probably no man living can better serve as a catalyst to demonstrate the early day tie-ups and mergers of the giants in the Florida lumber business than Martin J. E. Hoban. The following reminiscences, given in his own words, are from a tape recording made in the spring of 1966, when Mr. Hoban, then in his nineties, still operated, by remote control, the destinies of the Forest Products Company in Port Everglades, Florida. His memoirs are a valuable addition to the archives of lumbering in Florida, as well as in other parts of the United States.

Martin Hoban: I came down to Florida from Saginaw, Michigan, in 1895, and started to work as a bookkeeper for the

Wilson Cypress Company in Palatka. My father worked there as a sawyer.

WILSON CYPRESS COMPANY, PALATKA

The name had just been changed from the Tilghman-Wilson Company, formed in 1891, to the Wilson Cypress Company, when the Wilsons and some other lumbermen from Michigan bought out the Tilghman interest.

My father died when he was a very young man. Everyone thought it was because of the fine sawdust that he breathed into his lungs while sawing logs for Wilson's in Palatka. The sawyer is the highest paid job in a sawmill, but it is also the hardest on your health.

In 1896, when I had been with Wilson's for just over a year, I developed a bad cough, and a local doctor told me I had

BY BAYNARD KENDRICK AND BARRY WALSH



WALTER L. BEERS, JR.

A steam-driven skidder loads a railroad car with logs in this 1938 Works Progress Administration mural by Florida artist George S. Hill. Entitled *Logging Old-Growth Cypress, it hangs today in the U.S. Post Office in Perry, Florida.*

tuberculosis. I then planned to go with a firm in Boulder, Colorado. I believe it was called the Finest Woodland Company.

J. C. TURNER LUMBER COMPANY

During the winter in Palatka, I met J. C. Turner, who had just started in the lumber business with a yard in Irvington, New York. When he heard that I was leaving Wilson's, he asked me to come to New York to talk with him. I took the Clyde Line steamer from Jacksonville to New York and called on Mr. Turner. I also saw a specialist who said there was nothing wrong with me except a bad cough, and I certainly didn't have TB. The outcome was that I agreed to go to work for Mr. Turner. That was in 1896.

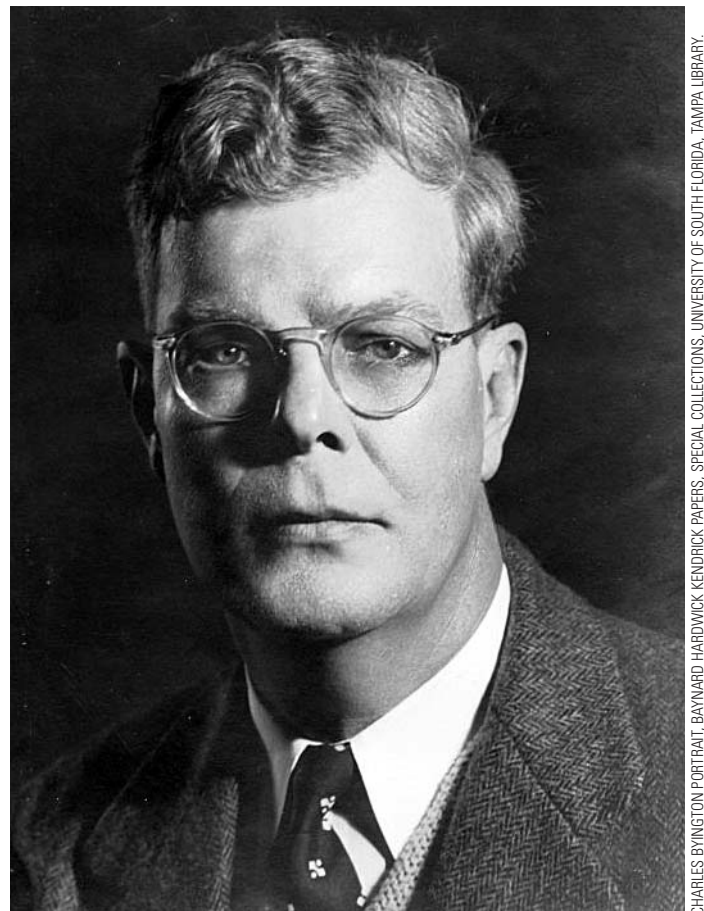
I worked for the Turner Lumber Company for many years, but it is difficult to figure exactly how long, since I left once and then returned to work for him again before striking out, finally, on my own. Our offices were two rooms opening on a court in the Mohawk Building at Fifth Avenue and Eighteenth Street. Those two inside rooms were a modest beginning for probably the last remaining giant cypress manufacturer still in business and operating in 1966—the Lee-Tidewater Cypress Division of the J. C. Turner Lumber Company at Perry, Florida.

My recollection of J. C. Turner is that he was never a very fast man with a buck. I got Bill Hughes, who forty years later had the Hughes Lumber Company in Jacksonville, to come from Muskegon, Michigan, to work for Turner. After several years Turner began to make some real money, but he certainly wasn't passing any of it out to Bill Hughes and me.

We both quit cold. I went to Philadelphia and opened an office with the Wood-Barker Company, which was a competitor of the Turner Company. Bill Hughes went to Boston as bookkeeper for Wood-Barker. Bill wrote me saying there was less money around Wood-Barker than with Turner. Barker and Wood had the money—at least Wood had the money and was backing Barker—but there was certainly no capital to swing things in a big way, and it was no place for him. I found out the same thing, so before the year was out, made arrangements to go back with Turner.

The second time I left Turner was for keeps. I was supposed

to be secretary of the corporation but had no more authority than an office boy. Turner was out of town when I got a good buy on several carloads of cypress; but when he got back, he turned them down. I quit, went out, and sold the lumber to someone else. There was a fat commission in it, which I took and went out on my own.



CHARLES BYINGTON PORTRAIT, BAYNARD HARDWICK KENDRICK PAPERS, SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA, TAMPA LIBRARY.

Baynard Kendrick, author of twenty-nine books, among them the *Duncan Maclain* detective series, also wrote on Florida history observed during a long career in the forest products industry.



Barry Walsh, editor and coauthor of *A History of Florida Forests*, is shown with the recording machine used by Baynard Kendrick in 1966 to tape the Martin Hoban interview.

WILSON CYPRESS: NEW YORK REP

I got an office in the Metropolitan Life Building and became New York Representative of the Wilson Cypress Company. We didn't have a lumberyard, just the office, but I was beginning to learn my way around, and I couldn't see much future in just being a sales representative for a single company, no matter how big it was.

CURTIS-HOBAN LUMBER COMPANY

I organized a business of my own with Lindsey Curtis, only child of Mr. Curtis of Curtis & Brothers, a paper manufacturing company in New Bern, North Carolina. His father had offices in New York and Philadelphia, but because Lindsey didn't want to work for him, the old man put up \$10,000 to start the Curtis-Hoban Lumber Company.

Lindsey, a graduate of Princeton University, bought himself a Pierce Arrow automobile and took his bride on long vacations. This left me all alone in New York to deal with the panic of 1907. I had to go out and collect money due me in gold and put it in the bank and then take it out a \$20 gold piece at a time. No one could collect on bills, nor borrow any money, and credit was no good. People were just scared to death. Each time Lindsey returned from one of his vacations, he was less interested in the business. I'd had it at the end of three years and dissolved the company.

HOBAN-HUNTER-FEITNER COMPANY

About this time, I was approached by a group of men from Louisiana, where cypress was very plentiful. They wanted a yard in New York to carry Louisiana cypress to compete with Turner's yard, which was carrying all Florida cypress. We called them the "Louisiana boys," since it was a group of them all working

together. I believe they were actually known as the Louisiana Cypress Selling Company. I got together with two friends of mine, E. L. Hunter and P. J. Feitner. We put in \$5,000 each and opened a yard way out in Brooklyn, on Newtown Creek, under the name of the Hoban-Hunter-Feitner Company. It was a good deal. The Louisiana boys stocked the yard themselves, and we didn't have to put any money in. They would ship up lumber by the schooner load, and we just carried it on the yard. When we sold anything, we just reported it to the Louisiana boys and paid them for it, taking out our profit. It wasn't as easy as it sounds, for my wife and I lived in an apartment on West Eighty-sixth Street in New York City, and it took about two hours and two changes of streetcars to get out to Newtown Creek. I used to have to get up so early, and I'd get home so late that I'd meet myself coming back. Still, we made \$35,000 net profit the first year. The business started to grow, and at the end of the next year, we had more than \$100,000.

TILGHMAN CYPRESS COMPANY, LUKENS MILL

We were doing business with the Tilghman Cypress Company at Lukens on the Gulf Coast of Florida near Cedar Key. They'd built a logging railroad, which ran up to the Suwannee River, where they were logging, and they also could make up log rafts on the Suwannee and tow them down by the Gulf direct to the mill.

A. E. Wilson was running the Wilson Cypress Company in Palatka. I heard that his brother Henry Wilson died, leaving an estate with a quarter of a million shares in Tilghman. I consulted with my partners, made a trip down to Palatka, and told A. E. Wilson that I wanted to buy those shares. A. E., who had always treated me like a son, told me he didn't want to see me lose my money, even though he was executor of his brother's estate. He said Tilghman had never paid a dividend and never made any money; but before approaching him, I had gone over the company's books.

I knew from the way the company had kept their books, that if they bought anything like a locomotive, a new railroad, or machinery, they just charged it off to expense. They hadn't set up any asset values. For instance, I knew what lumber they had in the yard at the mill, the locomotives, and the cost of the twenty-two miles of railroad they built. They'd been making money all right, but instead of paying dividends, they dumped it back into the business.

A. E. Wilson and I finally made a deal for \$30,000 for his brother's quarter of a million shares, which had cost Henry Wilson, originally, \$25,000. Then I went to John Tilghman, who had put in \$25,000, and I also bought his shares.

The other half of the Tilghman Cypress Company was owned by some people in Delaware, who were represented by L. W. Warren in Palatka. Dr. Warren didn't know much about the lumber business. The mill superintendent was making money for the company more by lending money to his employees and charging them heavy interest rates. This was one of the rackets they used to have in the South, especially with the Negroes. They would lend them a dollar; and at the end of the week, the Negroes would have to pay back \$1.50. Of course, their pay wasn't much more than that. They used to work six ten-hour days a week for \$4.80, or about 8¢ an hour.

I finally bought all the interests in the Tilghman Cypress

Company for \$120,000. I decided I'd better leave my family in New York and move down to Lukens to pay us out. Well, we certainly paid for it in a hurry. The company made \$105,000 in the first year.

A great deal of money was there, but I couldn't see much timber back of the thing. I knew that in two or three years we would run out of timber, and there was no more to buy. I think the 14 million feet we finally bought was the last of it.

Only a few of us are left who can give an accurate picture of the primitive conditions that existed in the early Florida cypress mills, but I'll make a try.

Lukens, I notice, is still on the road maps, about three miles this side of Cedar Key. State Road 24 will take you from Gainesville through Archer to Lukens.

The Tilghman Cypress Company was a single band-saw mill that cut about 30,000 feet of cypress a day. Including the woods camp on the Suwannee River, it employed around a hundred men, 80 percent colored. It cut out in December 1918, and I was there supervising the final cleanup. One cypress log we had to leave in the boom because it was too big to get up into the mill. It broke the log hoist down, and there wasn't enough dynamite handy to split it in two. We bored a hole in the butt, put in dynamite and tamped it in with a giant log screw. The results were rather startling. Instead of splitting, the old boy turned into a cypress cannon and blew the log screw up through the commissary. After that we decided to leave it alone, and it may still be there.

In its heyday, the town of Lukens, in addition to the mill, boasted the commissary, a fine collection of unpainted green pine sappy houses almost kiln-dried then from many summer suns, a larger building known facetiously as the "Boarding House" or "Hotel," and the "Bungalow," where I or one of my partners lived, when condemned to a tour of duty, along with the mill superintendent.

The Bungalow, a two-bedroom mansion of pine, had a screened front porch, a piano, a Victrola, and the finest collection of bedbugs and fleas in Florida, a state that could always, in those days, boast of its share.

The Bungalow was presided over by Aunt Sallie, who, when not engaged in preparing delectable meals, waged an endless and fruitless battle against the crawling and hopping pests. The white enamel double bed, which I occupied in the front room, was covered with a mosquito net (Oh, yes, there were a few mosquitoes!) that hung on a wire frame from a cord in the ceiling. The four legs of the bed stood in protective cans of kerosene.

Any old-time operator will be glad to tell you that back in those days you couldn't run a sawmill out in the wilderness and keep colored help without a jook. The jook at Lukens was a large, barn-like structure set slightly off on the edge of town. It was furnished with chairs, knife-scarred tables, a roof of Swiss cheese appearance due to bullet holes from many weekend brawls, and half-a-dozen curtained cubicles at the rear, whose purposes, I regret to tell you, were strictly dishonorable.

The Quarter Boss kept a certain amount of order in the jook, because of a large blacksnake whip that he wielded with a skillful and powerful hand, plus the fact that he controlled the moonshine, gambling, and all other concessions. Still, it's a mystery to me why stray bullets, if nothing else, hadn't penetrated him years before.

Every Saturday evening, the Seaboard Railroad brought in a



WILSON CYPRESS COMPANY, FLORIDA STATE ARCHIVES

A girdled giant is measured by a Wilson Cypress Company crew in the early 1900s. Loggers learned from Native Americans to girdle a tree with a three- to four-inch cut that dried the sap, making the logs easier to float to the sawmill.

carload of colored ladies from points north, some of them from as far away as Jacksonville. By midnight the jook joint was really jumping. It usually closed in the wee small hours with a fusillade that reminded one of the trenches in World War I. Logging camp jooks were the forerunners of those flashing, chromium, dime-eating "Juke Boxes."

Sunday morning the ladies departed, Dr. Turner came over from Cedar Key to patch up the casualties, and an occasional trigger-happy gunman was carted off by the sheriff to jail. Peace reigned for another week, and all was still. The whistle blew, the band saw moaned, and work went on.

We had our share of death and destruction at Lukens, too. I'm not likely to forget the night when they left a dead Negro man under my bedroom window. This was a case where I had warned a Negro woman that I thought her husband was bringing liquor in from Sumner, about twelve miles north of us, where the Cummers had a cypress mill.

A local deputy sheriff had told me so, and the very next Saturday night, the deputy was waiting for him when the train came in. We had only one train a day on the Seaboard, which came in at night, went on to Cedar Key, stayed there overnight,

and came back in the morning. When the man got off the train, the deputy was there and asked him to open up his bag, where he had his clothes and one thing and another, so it could be searched for contraband liquor. The man started to run, instead of obeying, and the deputy sheriff just pulled his gun and shot him down dead in the back, right there, just a few yards from the train.

I was in the Bungalow, about half a mile away near the sawmill, when a delegation of the Negroes waited on me and told me that a colored man had been killed. I told them that there was nothing I could do about it right then, that it was all over, but I'd certainly look into it thoroughly the following day.

About an hour later, after the train had gone on into Cedar Key, the delegation was back again. This time they said that a band of armed white men had formed and walked over from Cedar Key and had stopped at a trestle, over one of the little streams that came in from the Gulf of Mexico. A group of Negroes from the mill, all unarmed, had gathered on the other side of the trestle and were waiting for them. The trestle wasn't very wide, maybe thirty or forty feet. They urged me to come down there and try to do something about it. Otherwise, there would likely be a lot of shooting and killing going on.

I got down there in a hurry. The dead man was lying right in the middle of a muddy road and his wife was going through his pockets to see what money he had, as he'd come down on the train after payday at Sumner, Saturday night.

She was carrying on terribly. So, I tried to quiet her and said that I would pay the expenses of the funeral. They had an island there, nearby Lukens where they buried the Negroes. She quieted down a little, and finally they put him on one of the flat wagons—commissary wagons—and carried him off. I thought, of

course, that they had taken him to his house in the Negro quarters. Instead of that, when I got back to the Bungalow, the wagon had been unhitched from the mule and backed right up against my bedroom window with the dead Negro on it.

The situation was pretty tense. A group of the armed whites had followed the wagon up to the Bungalow and were insisting that the Negroes had to take care of the dead man and move him, right away. Although there were many more Negroes than whites gathered around, the whites were all armed, and the Negroes weren't. I finally talked the whites into leaving; and the Negroes quietly took the body away.

The Negroes didn't have much chance down there at Lukens, nor at any other of the cypress mills out in the sticks, for that matter. If they were caught drinking or gambling, they were arrested, although the whites did it all the time. At Lukens, gangs of white men would black their faces and get into the Negro quarters and try to catch them gambling. They would come over on Saturday night and arrest all of the Negroes they could get their hands on. Then Monday morning, I would have to go over to Cedar Key, pay their fines, and get them all out of jail for the next week's work. All my good workers, I paid the fines for; but, if one was worthless, I would leave him in jail. They were afraid to run away owing money to me, so I didn't have too many run out on me.

The railroad that ran from the mill up into the swamps where we were logging was built more for utility than comfort. It was real rough in the joints—some were higher than others. The greatest hazards I encountered at Lukens were rides on a handcar between the mill and the logging camp over that scenic railway. I much preferred the cabin cruiser we had, although the trip took much longer by water. Also with the cruiser, you had to

watch the tides, or you'd be hung up on a sandbar. That happened one afternoon, and four of us had to get back to the mill, all of us pumping the handcar for power. In spite of this, the handcar jumped the tracks, and threw the big fellow opposite me flat on his back between the rails. Luckily he didn't hit his head or hurt himself badly, but I came sailing right over the handlebars and landed on my head right in his stomach. It knocked him cold for a little while, and he blamed me for it, as though I had done it on purpose, ever afterward.

One evening we were coming in from the Suwannee River to Lukens on the handcar, which had been motorized by then. I was in the front, and Henry, the mill superintendent, was in the back operating the motor. We started over a bridge, and the car jumped the track, hit one of the crossties that held up the bridge, and stopped dead. I flew straight up in the air, nose glasses and all, and came down on one of the crossties. I landed on my right side and broke a rib.

Henry said that one of the Negroes who furnished the wood for our loco-



U.S. FOREST SERVICE, NATIONAL FORESTS IN FLORIDA

Early Florida lumbermen often rode the rails from the mill to the woods on handcars similar to this one, as described in painful detail by Martin Hoban.

motives lived near there. He started off to find where the Negro lived, leaving me on this trestle with the wrecked handcar.

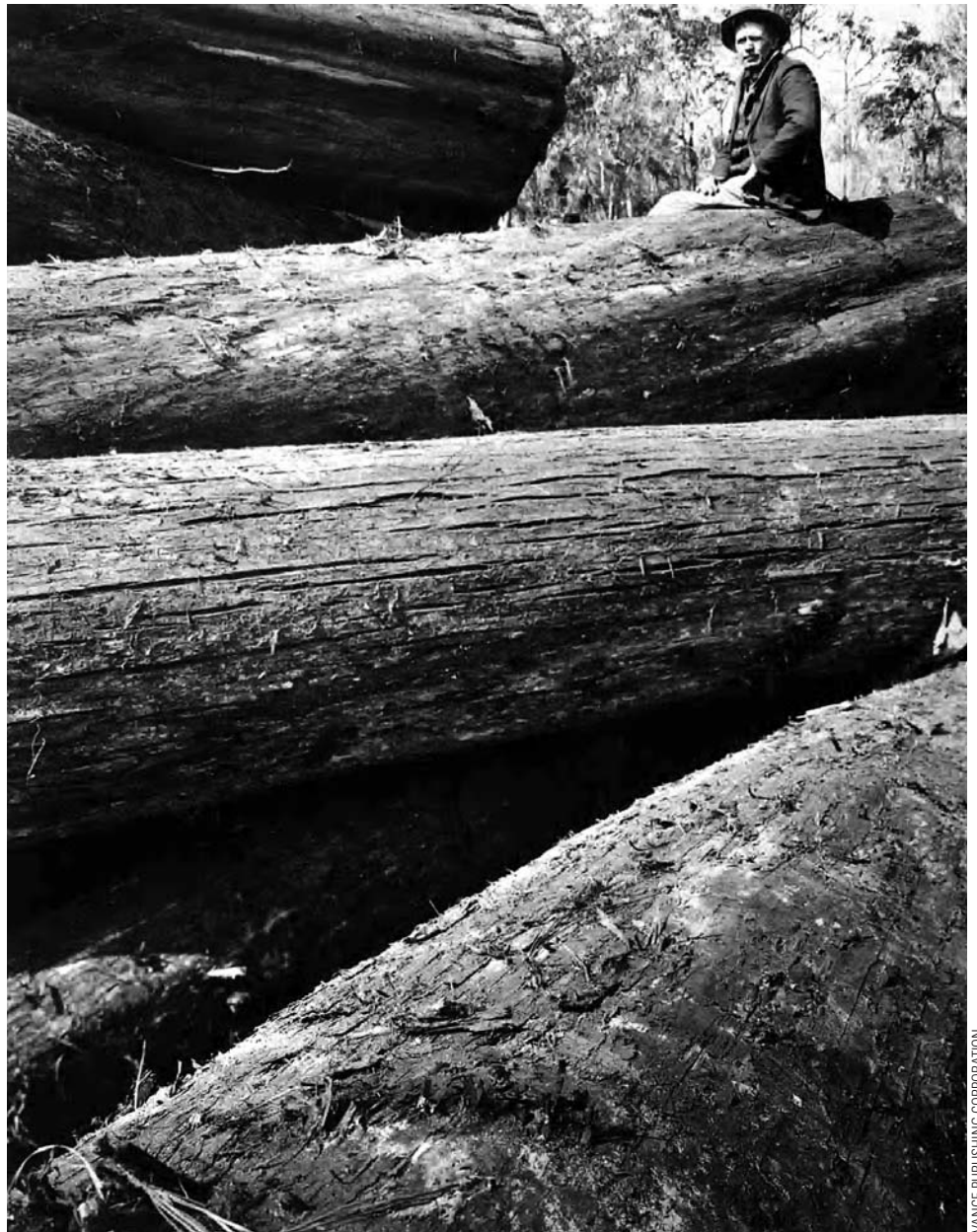
The Negro woodcutters built their homes along the tracks or logging roads, where they could have easy access to the wood they cut and the locomotives that used it. They were paid for this wood by the cord, and they would go to endless trouble, measuring and staking just the proper footage for a cord of wood. Then Henry would come along and kick the stakes to be sure they were tight and measured properly. This would have been funny, if it hadn't been so pathetic, because they were paid so little for the wood. I think, perhaps, they got a dollar a cord, and it was amazing to see the pains they took for setting those stakes just at the proper measurements.

It was pitch black by the time Henry came back with the Negro, and the mosquitoes had nearly eaten me alive. They had brought a mule, but no saddle. Together, they practically lifted me onto its back and told me to just sit there and give the critter his head, and the mule would take me to Lukens. Henry slapped the mule on its rump and started him on his way.

I don't know how many hours I hung on there and prayed while the mule plodded on—wading creeks, navigating thorny jungles, dodging sinkholes, and walking ties over trestles, all in inky blackness. I must have been half unconscious, when I felt a wire against my face. I knew that it was one of the wash lines around Lukens and that I had made it back. The mule took me right up to the mule lot, from which he originally had been taken, and stopped. I found I couldn't get off his back, so I caught hold of the 6-foot fence that went around the mule lot and kicked the mule out from under me, then fell to the ground.

The night watchman heard our arrival, came running up, and shone a flashlight on me. He shut up the mule and then lifted me up to help me to the Bungalow. "Did you ride that mule in from the log camp, Mr. Hoban?" he asked me in dismay. "Every inch of the way," I said. "He must have some sort of a homing instinct. He seemed to see the trail back here just as well as if it were day." "Hell, he couldn't have seen it any better, if it were broad daylight," the watchman told me, "he's as blind as a bat!"

We had our own doctor at Lukens, and he came and taped up my rib. I was back on the job when the morning whistle blew in the mill.



As the supply of Florida's old-growth cypress dwindled, giant logs, such as these, became a prized acquisition.

VANCE PUBLISHING CORPORATION

OSCEOLA CYPRESS COMPANY

Even back then, the cypress was getting less and less in Florida, and millmen were always looking for some new tract to buy. A few years before we cut out at Lukens, I was in Jacksonville at the Seminole Hotel. I came down to breakfast, and Mr. Gallagher, who had been cruiser for the Wilson Cypress Company when I was there in 1895, was sitting in the lobby. I hadn't seen him in years. He joined me for breakfast and told me he was down in Florida, cruising some cypress. That really amazed me, because I thought that Wilson, Putnam, Cummer, and Turner had bought up every foot of stumpage that was to be had in the state.

Gallagher told me some Englishmen had started a project down along the East Coast in South Florida to grow early vegetables. They had run into a big stand of cypress while clearing the land. They had planned a series of canals with lateral feeding to drain the truck land toward the East Coast, and this stand of cypress

stood right in their way. The J. G. White Engineering Company of New York was handling the engineering work on the canals.

I sat down and dashed off a letter, and the very day I arrived in New York, I had a call from J. G. White, in person. James Gilbert White was a capitalist, an engineer, and a contractor. He had graduated from Cornell in 1885, gone into investment banking in 1890, and established the J. G. White Company, Limited, London, in 1900. He had tremendous offices at 37 Wall Street in New York, where he sat me down at a director's table, in a room about fifty feet long, with a secretary to take down every word we said. I'd been told never to get into an argument with Mr. White, unless I knew exactly what I was talking about, because there would always be a record of it. He was involved in so many things that this was necessary for him to keep his business straight.

He questioned me, at some length, and when he found out that F. H. (Herb) Wilson was probably my closest friend, that was wonderful. Herb was mayor of Palatka, and to be publicly elected by the people of a town was very impressive to White, who had his Florida headquarters in Palatka.

On the following day, he produced a big map of Florida; and where this timber was located, a big two- to three-inch square on the map was marked "impenetrable swamp." At the next conference, a civil engineer informed us that the area marked off was known as Lake Wilmington, although it was more swamp than lake. It was in and around this swamp where the cypress was growing. "Okay," White decided abruptly, he was interested. He not only put in the tract of cypress on which he had a lien, but he would back my partners and me financially and handle all the details. That was the start of the Osceola Cypress Company.

There were, originally, J. G. White, myself, E. L. Hunter, P. J. Feitner, and F. A. Dudley, Sr., of the Sterling Lumber Company in Philadelphia. Herb Wilson and his brother Ralph were in it, too. Herb was the first president, but the Wilson Cypress Company interests objected to him being president of a competing outfit, so we bought him out.

J. G. White backed us to the hilt. He financed bond issues for

us, capital stock and all. We needed him badly, too, for the first mill was burned out. Everybody felt sure that the superintendent had gotten drunk and accidentally set it on fire. I think it was the finest yellow pine timber I ever saw—long needle yellow pine, about seven feet in circumference. Later on, I made a deal with the government to take out the stumps on that land to build a second mill at Osceola. The Osceola mill itself was on Lake Harney, about fifteen miles from Sanford, practically at the end of navigation on the St. Johns River.

CONCLUSION

Let me say, in conclusion, that when I started in the business, timber wasn't worth anything. Wilson's, for example, probably paid \$1 or \$2 an acre for their land, with some fifteen thousand feet of cypress to the acre, which works out close to 6¢ or 7¢ a thousand board feet. Wilson's got \$21 for their top grade, and many of the other mills delivered in Fernandina and Jacksonville for \$18 a thousand. For that \$18, you had to figure grade, logging, and manufacturing expense. So it wasn't until many years later, when prices started to rise, that the money began to roll in.

In 1966, well, let's just say that the cypress that brought \$18 a thousand in the 1890s, will bring \$500 a thousand—if you can get the wood. And pecky cypress! It's way up in the stratosphere and almost unobtainable. That's the stuff we used to throw away! (Martin J. E. Hoban, Interview by Baynard Kendrick, 1966) □

Baynard Kendrick (1894–1977) is best known as the author of a popular mystery series starring blind detective Duncan Maclain. A founder and first president of the Mystery Writers of America, Kendrick also wrote on Florida history. He was the history columnist for the Tampa Tribune, and served on the editorial board of the Florida Historical Quarterly. Barry Walsh was a senior editor of the Journal of Forestry and is current Chair of the Society of American Foresters' Philosophy and History Working Group. She is now Managing Editor of the Selby Botanical Gardens Press.

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