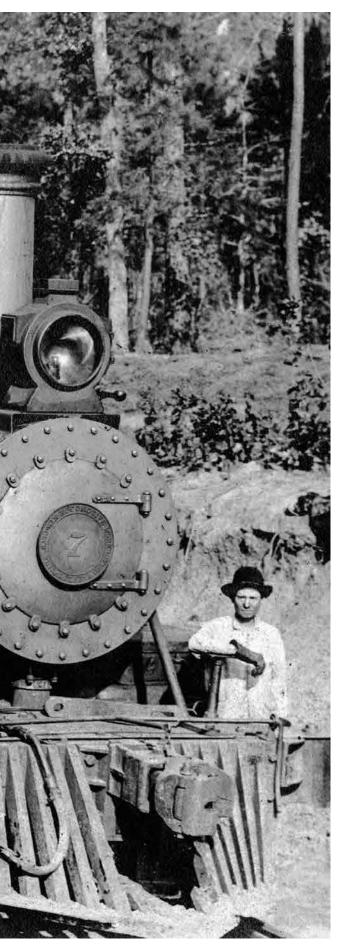
PINE CURTAIN of the PAST

TRACING EAST TEXAS' HISTORIC TIMBER BONANZA

Text by **MATT JOYCE** Photographs by **WILL VAN OVERBEEK**

l Engine No. 7 near Dibo

tern Railroad



ooking up into the thick pine canopy

of deep East Texas, it's hard to believe that the pristine forests the pioneers encountered here are long gone. Loggers harvested the bulk of the virgin Piney Woods about a century ago during a bonanza that revolutionized the region with an influx of newcomers and industry. Little remains of the bonanza days, but travelers can immerse themselves in the era at local museums and historic sites—and by exploring new forests that have reclaimed some of their old ground.

A good example is the Aldridge Sawmill Historic Site at the Angelina National Forest in Jasper County. The ruins of a few concrete buildings are all that remain of the mill, which operated from about 1906 to 1918. The sawmill anchored a company town of nearly 600 people along the Neches River. Now, loblolly pines and sycamore trees have muscled their way up among the mill's foundation blocks and in the old railroad bed.

"When you see old pictures of sawmill towns, all you see are stumps, because pretty much every tree was cut down," says Jonathan Gerland, director of The History Center in nearby Diboll. "What you see here today is a big difference."

Because the Aldridge mill site is now within the National Forest, the ruins have been mostly left alone, Gerland notes, which subjects them to frequent graffiti but also protects them from being bulldozed. "This is what I like to see," Gerland says, pointing to the forest's regrowth. "It's a railroad grade with a big pine tree growing up in the middle of it. The railroad was what facilitated the harvest of its ancestors."

The route that linked Aldridge to timber markets in Dallas, Beaumont, and beyond now serves as part of the Sawmill Hiking Trail, a 2.5-mile path between Aldridge and Boykin Springs Recreation Area. The Civilian Conservation Corps developed the recreation area in the 1930s, including a pine-fringed lake for swimming and fishing, campsites, and picnic areas. Near the lake, artesian springs pour cool and clear from a sandstone bluff over Boykin Creek, which flows into the Neches.

Meandering along Boykin Creek, the sandy hiking trail passes through an understory of yaupon, sweet gum, and white oak. Loggers once trudged these woods to harvest the four-foot diameter longleaf pine trees that dominated the forest. Two men called sawyers worked opposite ends of a crosscut saw, felling the trees and removing their limbs; teams of mules or oxen dragged the logs to wagons or the train spur, which took the timber to the mill.

"It was a lot of hand-to-hand work," Gerland explains. "Nowadays, no human hand touches a board until it's in Lowe's or Home Depot. It's all machines. In those days, you wrapped chains on by hand, you had to work with the animals, and it was a lot more labor intensive."

Aldridge was one of more than 1,000 sawmill towns that sprang up in East Texas during the timber bonanza, which began after the Civil War and continued until the Great Depression, Gerland says. Abundant pine forests, the expansion of railroads throughout East Texas, and the depletion of softwood forests in the Northeast United States all contributed to the growth of the regional forest industry.

Texas lumber production peaked in 1907, when about 550 East Texas sawmills churned out 2.25 billion board feet, third highest in the nation that year, according to *Sawdust Empire: The Texas Lumber Industry, 1830-1940*, by Robert S. Maxwell and Robert D. Baker. Driven largely by population growth and western expansion, the bonanza collapsed with the onset of the Great Depression, which happened to coincide with the clear-cutting of most of East Texas' old-growth forests.



BOGGY SLOUGH

Read about the Temple Foundation's plans for its historic Boggy Slough property at texashighways.com/ webextra

> Boykin Springs in the Angelina National Forest



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FORESTRY IN MOTION

The History Center in Diboll chronicles the history of the East Texas timber industry, including a restored 1920 Texas Southeastern Railroad locomotive. Below. a steamdriven log loader at work in Trinity County, 1907.



But the timber industry didn't disappear. While some businesses moved to the Pacific Northwest, other companies started growing pine trees on clear-cut land and adopted agricultural practices aimed at sustainability. Meanwhile, the economic challenges of the Great Depression prompted timber companies to negotiate the sale of huge tracts of their East Texas holdings to the federal government, resulting in the creation of four national forests: Sam Houston, Davy Crockett, Angelina, and Sabine.

he forest sector is still a significant part of

the East Texas economy, generating a direct economic impact of \$5.7 billion and employing 19,000 people in 2012, the most recent data available from the Texas A&M Forest Service. Log trucks piled high with fresh-cut timber are a common sight on the highways of Angelina County, where travelers will find two museums dedicated to the timber industry.

In Diboll, a sawmill town founded by T.L.L. Temple in 1893, The History Center houses an industry archive, research library, and exhibits related to the timber industry. Temple and his descendants operated the region's biggest and longest-running local timber company until it broke up over the last several years.

Constructed in the Craftsman style of native yellow pine and cypress, The History Center's exhibits tell the story of the Temples, Diboll, the railroads, and logging with historic photographs, audio recordings, and artifacts such as a weathered, six-foot crosscut saw. In the courtyard, visitors can climb aboard a restored 1920 Texas Southeastern Railroad locomotive and pull a rope to sound its steam-engine whistle.

"It's said that during the peak of the timber industry, there was not a place in Angelina County where you could not hear a train whistle," Gerland says.

Up the road about 11 miles, the Texas Forestry Museum in Lufkin preserves the history of the industry with exhibits of

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easily digestible information, historic photographs, videos, restored equipment, and an outdoor walking trail.

In the Money Trees exhibit, the Forestry Museum explains the many uses of pine trees, from newsprint to toilet seats. The display shows the historical methods of tapping trees for their sap to make turpentine, and how East Texas longleaf pine trees were used to build U.S. ships during World War I.

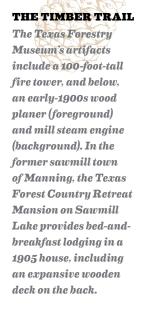
In the History Wing, the museum walks through the steps of logging, moving, and milling lumber during the bonanza days. An impressive collection of historic equipment helps paint the picture, including a steam engine and its moving LOGGING MILES

A 1946 Chevrolet log truck on display at the Texas Forestry Museum in Lufkin.

parts, which visitors can activate with the push of a button (now run by electricity). Steam engines served as the heart of a mill by motoring the saw and other equipment via belts and pulleys. One of the tools attached to the motor was the sharpening machine, one of which is on display. Saw-sharpeners were a specialized group of employees and among the mill's most highly paid. "It was one of the most important jobs







to keep the mill running," says Rachel Collins, director of the Forestry Museum. "He was nicknamed 'the dentist,' because he worked on the teeth of the saw."

In the Everyday Life in the Mill Town exhibit, the Forestry Museum recalls daily life in a remote company town. It was standard in sawmill towns for companies to pay their employees mostly with "scrip," rather than cash. Employees could then exchange their scrip for goods at the company commissary. A register with employee charge accounts helps illustrate the system. "The commissary had everything under one roof, from coffins to canned goods and castor oil," Collins says.

Forestry Museum visitors can also see a four-foot-square diorama of Manning, a former sawmill town about 20 miles southeast of Lufkin. The Carter-Kelley Lumber Company built the mill in 1906 and then abandoned it after a 1935 fire. Most of the 1.600 residents moved away, but the Flournov familv stuck around, and in 2011, the family opened the 1905 sawmill manager's house as a bed-and-breakfast called the Texas Forest Country Retreat Mansion on Sawmill Lake.

The two-story home, made of red bricks and longleaf pine, provides elegant country lodging, as well as an atmosphere rich in the history of its sawmill origins. Hefty sycamore trees shade the front of the house, where visitors can relax in a 90-year-old porch swing. In back, a wooden deck looks out on a rose garden and a small wedding chapel that was repurposed from the home's old washroom. An expansive lawn rolls out to a patch of pine forest, which has regrown tall and thick since the sawmill days.

The home's furnishings are a combination of antiques, Flournoy family heirlooms, and furniture selected to complement the historic theme. On the walls, decorations evoke Manning and the logging bonanza-paintings of old sawmills and old-growth longleaf pine forests, and a postcard showing the Manning sawmill fire of 1916.

There's also a black-and-white photo of the Manning sawmill pond chock-full of logs, which are jumbled up like giant pick-up sticks. Ponds were critical to sawmills as a water source for the steam engine and as a storage place for logs, says Bob Flournoy, who grew up on the property. The logs were better preserved in water and were much easier to move around as they floated on the surface. Some of those logs sank over the years, and Flournoy has recovered several to make furniture that's used in the bed-and-breakfast.

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It's a short walk from the bed-andbreakfast to the 15-acre sawmill pond and the Manning sawmills' concrete ruins, which rest in thick stands of vegetation, overgrown in muscadine grapevines. For those interested, the folks at Mansion on Sawmill Lake will show you around the historic ruins and explain the layout of the vanished mill town.

The rivers of deep East Texas were a key water source for the sawmill towns of the bonanza era, but the rivers weren't used much for transporting logs after about 1900. In the waning days of the logging bonanza, conservationists recognized that forested river and stream corridors should be protected for the sake of water quality and wildlife habitat; most timber companies today have followed

suit. As a result, floating the Neches and Angelina rivers is one of the best ways to get a look at relatively untouched portions of the Piney Woods landscape.

The Davy Crockett Paddling Trail follows 9.2 miles of the Neches on the eastern border of Davy Crockett National Forest, with put-in and take-out points not far from Lufkin. The river flows unhurriedly to the southeast through forests of pine and a panorama of hardwood trees—sweet gums, red oaks, willow oaks, and hickories, to name a few.

In the quiet of the river bottom, miles from the nearest highway, wildlife begins to emerge. A little blue heron alights from a downstream sand bank, carefully keeping its distance. Water striders scatter atop the brown water, dispersing like the fracture of a shattering windowpane. Soft-shell turtles emerge for a peek, while a three-foot alligator keeps watch from a muddy bank. The river wends one way and then the next, forever eroding the bank's outside bend. The trees cling to the bank, their sinewy roots exposed as the soil slowly gives way. Eventually, they'll topple into the river. All the while on the opposite bank, the shore is growing with





ESSENTIALS **TIMBER TRAIL**

For Angelina County tourism information, call the Lufkin Convention & Visitors Bureau at 936/633-0349; www.visitlufkin.com. For Jasper County tourism information, call the Jasper-Lake Sam Rayburn Area Chamber of Commerce at 409/ 384-2762; www.jaspercoc.org. Information for sites in the story follows:

Aldridge Sawmill Historic Site is on Forest Service Rd. 326 about 16 miles southeast of Zavalla. Call 936/897-1068; www.fs.usda.gov/detail/texas/ specialplaces/?cid=stelprdb5291444.

Boykin Springs Recreation Area is on Forest Service Rd. 313 about 14 miles southeast of Zavalla. Call 936/897-1068; www.fs.usda.gov/ recarea/texas/recreation/hiking/ recarea/?recid=30208&actid=71.

The History Center is at 102 N. Temple Dr. in Diboll. Hours: 8-5 Mon-Fri, 9-1 Sat. Free. Call 936/829-3543; www.thehistorycenteronline.com.

The Texas Forestry Museum is at 1905 Atkinson Dr. in Lufkin. Hours: 10-5 Mon-Sat. Free, Call 936/632-9535; www.treetexas.com.

The Texas Forest Country **Retreat Mansion on Sawmill Lake** is at 156 Grimes-Flournoy Rd. in Huntington. Call 877/829-2422; www.texasforestcountryretreat.com.

fresh dirt and debris-fertile ground for the next generation of the great Piney Woods of deep East Texas. \star

TH Associate Editor Matt Joyce is grateful he doesn't have to work for an early 1900s logging operation. Photographer Will van Overbeek was fascinated by the treasure trove of historical images at The History Center in Diboll.