National Park Service
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Big Cypress National Preserve
Ochopee, FL

AFRICAN AMERICANS and THE SAWMILLS of BIG CYPRESS — *A BRIEF HISTORY*

Prepared by:
Frank & Audrey Peterman
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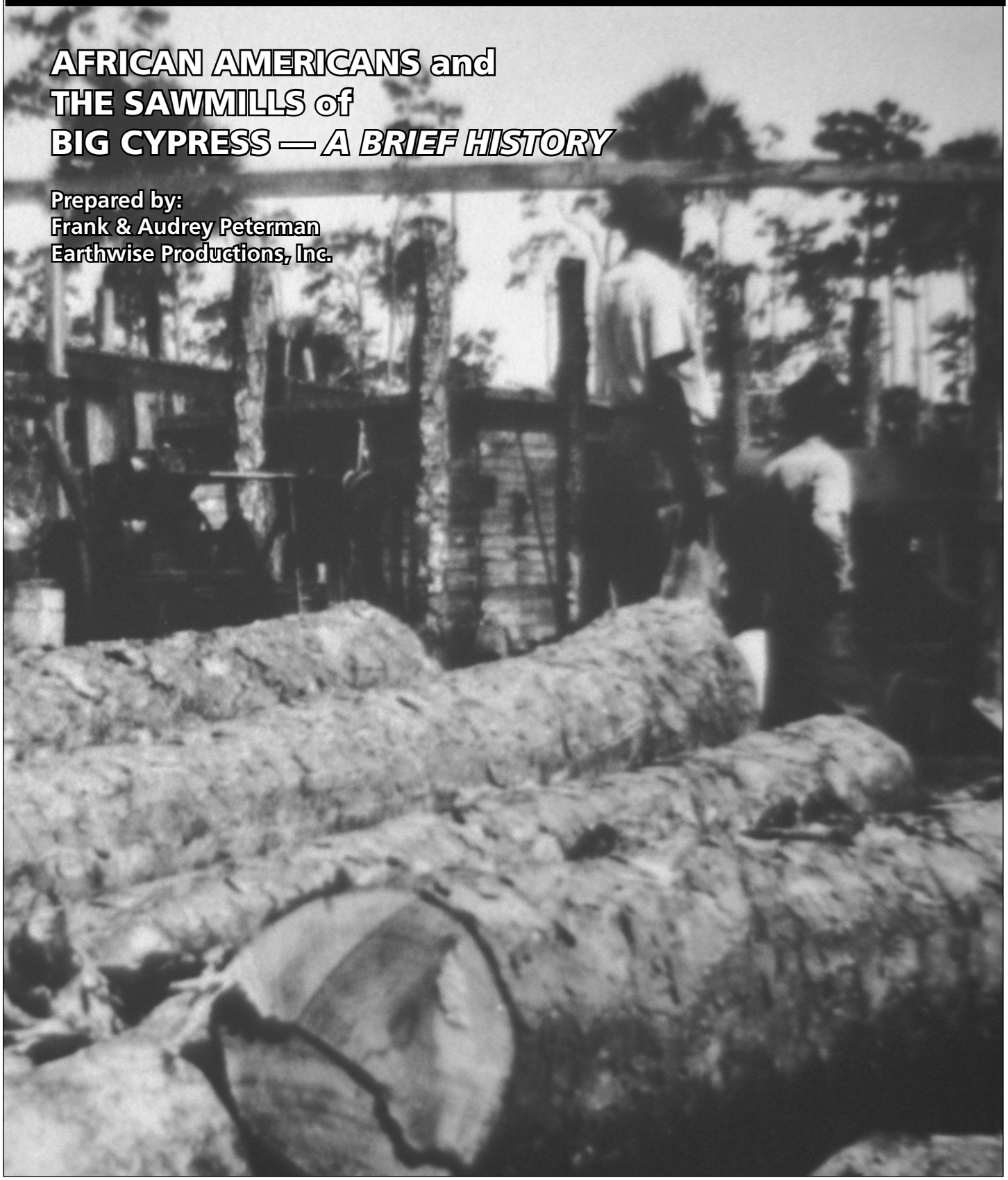

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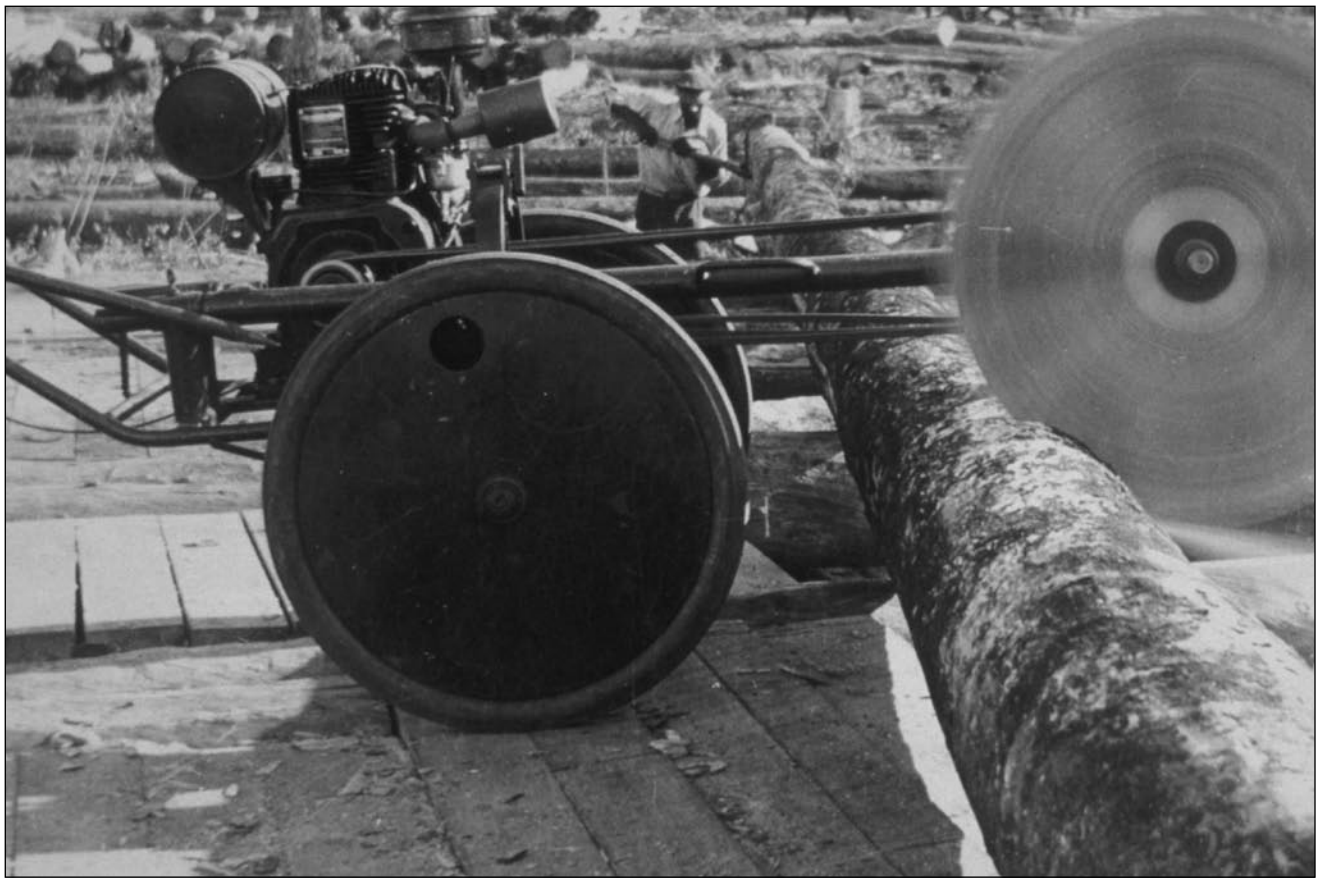

Bucking a fallen tree into logs using a power saw in the 1950's. Double handle cross-cut saws were used prior to this time.

Acknowledgements
One of the great delights of working on this project was the enthusiastic assistance we received from everyone we approached. The museum managers, curators, library volunteers, archival assistants and library volunteers were as eager to help uncover this story as we were. We gratefully acknowledge the help, assistance and guidance of the following people and institutions in preparing this report: Ron D. Jamro, Director, Collier County Museums; Donna M. Ridewood, Museum Manager, Museum of the Everglades; Daisy Upshaw Benjamin, Director, William Academy Black Museum, Lee County Black History Society, Inc.; Jerry Johnson, Librarian, Naples Daily News; Matt Johnson, Education Coordinator/Historian and Dr. Kent, Historical Museum of Fort Myers; Mrs. Frances Hodge; Capt. Franklin Adams; Mother Annie Mae Perry and her daughter, Pearline Dixon, and Fred Dayhoff. Recordings and photographs of the latter five supplement this report.

Methodology
Newspapers and Periodicals
The initial research of the Sawmill Story of Big Cypress National Preserve began with the written historical material furnished in newspaper articles appearing in the premier newspapers in Collier, Lee, Hendry, Broward and Miami-Dade Counties. Many of the periodicals published during the operation of the sawmills are no longer in publication or have merged with more recent newspapers – such as the relationship between the present Naples Daily News and the defunct Collier County News.

Newspaper stories being snapshots of community life, they help put into context the relative importance of members of the community. The logging and sawmill industries were driving forces in the local economy — towns were built around the industry. The labor pool was predominantly Black. Yet, there are barely passing references to this group in the newspaper and other reports that survive. The failure to mention them indicates their status as marginal citizens in terms of the viewpoint of the communities at large.

The primary importance of the newspapers and periodicals was to find trails leading to persons who worked or lived in the area during the operation of the sawmills. We used the information we accumulated from documents to formulate questions for the video interviews. We checked the accounts given in different sources against each other and compared what we heard from the interviews.

Archives, Museums and Historical Societies
South and Southwest Florida have a growing number of Museums and Historical Societies with information on the early development of the area. These are the venues that would most likely house the folklore, customs and traditions of the period It was hoped that since the laborers in construction and land clearing were such an indispensable part of the effort, there would be stories and vignettes touching on their lives. In addition, we hoped to find photographs, oral transcripts, tools, artifacts and surnames with connections to the people still living in Copeland or Jerome. However, we found that most of the information is devoted to the Pre-Columbian eras of the Calusa and Tequesta inhabitants, the built environment and the magnates that developed the area, with a heavy emphasis on the latter.

Video/Audio Interviews (Oral histories)
The last sawmill is reputed to have closed in 1957, almost half a century ago. Getting on record anyone who lived, worked or knew the area from 1940 to *1957* was the paramount objective of our research. Anyone mature enough to work in the cypress swamps is now of considerable age and much of their

information is anecdotal, subject to corroboration by other interviewees and the information gleaned from sources such as those listed above. But the interviews provide a direct link to the times and activities of the loggers and a firsthand account of their lives. Irrespective of whether the information given by these informants meets the professional standards of reliability and validation as historical facts, they provide scholars with important foundation to build a historical record.

Travel, Contacts and Resources

Our research carried us from the University of Miami Richter Library Archives, in Coral Gables north to the Williams Academy Black History Museum in Fort Myers and back to Everglades City Museum and City Hall. In between those points contact was made with the Labelle Heritage Museum and the Clewiston Museum. Interspersed in those travels were searches conducted at the Historical Museum of Southern Florida, Historical Museum of Ft. Myers, the Historical Museum of Collier County, the African American Research Library and Cultural Center, the Sun-Sentinel (Fort Lauderdale Daily News), Miami Herald, Fort Myers Press, Clewiston News, Naples Daily News (Collier County News). We traveled over *1,750* miles and talked to *35* museum managers, archivists, curators, librarians, experts and oral historians. We reviewed some *50* books, documents, periodicals and the Florida State Archives on line.

The total proceeds from that research are vastly exceeded by the information recovered in personal interviews. Mrs. Frances Hodge, the 96-year-old African American woman who remains in the faded town she still calls "Lee Cypress," told us about the logging days from her perspective as a cook at Lee Cypress. Her husband was recruited by Lee Cypress because of his experience in the rail industry in North Florida, and she has been there since they arrived in 1950. She recreated for us life in the segregated company town during its heyday, when "there was so much work, and so many (black) people here, that people were sleeping on other people's porch...", "We thought the work would last forever," she said, "but once the power saw came in, it was all gone in a little while. Most of the people moved back to where they came from, which was Perry, North Florida, Georgia and Alabama."

Mother Annie Mae Perry, a sprightly 92-year old, retains an engaging and enthusiastic personality usually associated with much younger people. She lives in Naples in the center of her family, surrounded by her children and grandchildren. Mother Perry gave us a lively recounting of her years in Copeland, where her husband was a logger. Mother Perry was known far and wide as the midwife, and delivered more than 500 babies in Copeland, Jerome, Immokalee, Everglades City and later Naples. To this day, she still gets them all together annually for ice cream and cake, every second Sunday in June. Mother Perry's daughter, Pearline Dixon, is also a source of information, since she spent some childhood years in Copeland.

Fred Dayhoff provided the bulk of the information about the Reynolds Sawmill, located just north of Monroe Station and south of the current Big Cypress Administration complex. Fred had a very personal relationship with the Cromartie family that continued to live there after the mill closed in 19. The Cromarties lost a son who was killed in the mill, subsequent to which the mill owners gave them permission to stay on the property for the rest of their lives. Fred's relationship with George and Hattie Cromartie was deeply personal. He felt a good deal of kinship to them, and they apparently treated him just like a son in his formative years. This relationship will prove hugely beneficial to the future because Fred attached value to their lives and has collected as much of the artifacts as he could, saving them from certain destruction. He is also instrumental in drawing the attention of SEAC to the old Reynolds Mill Site, and an archaeological research project is in the works. Having exposed the bare bones of this story in the Black newspapers and in conversation with groups, we have found an astoundingly high

level of interest in the local community. Consequently, it is imperative that all remaining artifacts are saved. It was exquisitely and almost painfully poignant to hear Fred Dayhoff and Captain Adams talk about the questions they wish they had had the foresight to ask when they interacted with members of the segregated black community. They also talked almost reverently about the cypress forest, Captain Adams having seen it in, and Fred seeing the rejected trunks of the old giants still lying in the swamp.

We have also been informed that the Big Cypress has a collection of oral interviews of many of the black logging and sawmill families, gathered by Cesar Becerra. As a next step, it would be useful for the Big Cypress National Preserve to fund an effort that will bring these collected resources together to provide a holistic picture of life in the big timber days. This way of life is almost gone, but thankfully we have a small window of opportunity to do a comprehensive job of capturing all that remains, so that future generations may be inspired and put their own life-spans into context.

A debt of gratitude is also owed to writer Maria Stone and to the Museum of the Everglades that have captured some of the stories from the mouth of the people who lived them. (We Also Came: Black people of Collier County, by Maria Stone; oral interviews collected by the Museum of the Everglades, April 28, 2001 and April 27, 2002.

The Scope of this Project

Early on our research revealed that the story of logging in the Big Cypress is incomplete without a dedicated focus on the contributions of railroad workers and Tamiami Trail builders whose numbers were overwhelmingly black, and whose efforts made logging possible in the Big Cypress Swamp. Their lives are interlocked with those of the multiethnic loggers of the Lee Tidewater Cypress Company and sawmill workers of the C. J. Jones Company. Black workers helped deforest the Big Cypress region from Naples to Miami, built railroad lines and a highway across the swamp, provided the wood that supported WWII and international industries, and accomplished it all under conditions as physically challenging as any job in America at the time.

A confluence of events converged in time to drive the logging of the cypress forest: diminishing resources all over the southeast and North Florida, development of the Tamiami Trail, extension of the railroad into the swamps and the advent of World War II, accelerating the need for the sturdiest and most durable timber.

The material we have gathered on the history of the African American workers in the sawmills of the Big Cypress involved distinct operations: the Lee Tidewater Cypress Company, the C.J. Jones Company and the Reynolds Sawmill. Lee Tidewaters milling operations and company headquarters were located in Perry, Florida. But the company towns of Lee Tidewater, Copeland and Jerome were the primary logging operations devoted to cutting the cypress. In less than two decades, from 1944 to *1956*, the Lee Tidewater Cypress Company shipped approximately 360 million board feet of cypress lumber. The “company towns” just north of the deepwater port at Everglades City had living accommodations, a commissary and community life. Vestiges of the original community remain, in buildings and identifiable landmarks. Copeland is still home to the last remaining African American woman from that era that has been living there continuously from the height of the logging operations in 1950 to the present.

At the sawmill of the C. J. Jones Company at Jerome, logs were milled into lumber after the trees were cut. This operation involved mostly the cutting of pine and other softwoods, on the higher pinelands. This was the more traditional type operation that deforested much of the woods of the South Eastern states. Indeed, the Jones Company was an outgrowth of the trend of such operations to move southward as the forests in Georgia, Alabama, and South Carolina were no longer productive. A majority of the African American loggers were originally from Alabama, Georgia and North Florida.

An aerial view of the Reynold's Sawmill operation within Big Cypress.

AFRICAN AMERICANS and THE SAWMILLS of BIG CYPRESS — *A BRIEF HISTORY*

The People

Like shadows of history, black sawmill workers and loggers in the area that is now part of the Big Cypress National Preserve and its environs, made a way of life laboring in fearful and dangerous circumstances. They raised families, worshiped in harmony, and then disappeared with little notice taken of their presence, their passing or their contributions. In less than five decades, a way of life, and many of the people who lived it, has been dispersed from public memory. More is known about the ancient Calusa and Tequesta Indians than is known about this segment of the population from our recent past, and the tremendous contributions they made to our country and the world. It almost begs the question, "Were they ever really there at all?" There are only passing references to "negro labor" in the best-known history books. Recent efforts by local writer Maria Stone and the Museum of the Everglades have captured some of the stories from the mouth of the people who lived them. (We Also Came: Black people of Collier County, by Maria Stone) oral interviews collected by the Museum of the Everglades, April 28, 2001 and April 27, 2002.

Historical Overview

One of the pitfalls of historical perspective is the myopic view occasioned by fragmenting and segmenting history by civilization, ethnic groups, wars and dominant cultural influences. The more generous view is to look at history as a continuous flow wherever possible. A case in point is the emphasis upon the arrival or "white settlers" in the Everglades, although the area has been peopled by cultures for eons prior to the arrival of Europeans. The fact is that Europeans are only the last in a succession of people to live in the area. Perhaps as much as 20,000 years ago, the ancestors of the Calusa and Tequesta indigenous people began to slowly migrate southward from North Florida and the northeast. About 2000 years ago they had moved into the southern part of the Florida peninsula. Written records of early Spanish explorers reveal that there were Tequesta as far south as Cape Sable.

In the area of the Big Cypress and Copeland, the Calusa were clearly the dominant population. In the 1500's there were estimated to be eight hundred Tequesta and two thousand Calusa in the area. The Calusa lived in some thirty villages. Their political organization is a matter of speculation but the cultural influences in terms of artifacts archeologists have discovered and classified suggest that the Calusa exerted influence over all of the indigenous people south of Lake Okeechobee. Like the inhabitants that followed them, they lived off the "fat of the land," relying on the natural food sources readily available to them. They ate shellfish, especially conch evidenced by the shell found in their mounds, fish and wild game. Plants included cocoplums, pigeon plums, the heart and berries of thee cabbage palm, the royal palm, and wild papaya.

Ultimately the Calusa and the Tequesta disappeared as they succumbed to territorial wars with the Creeks to the North and European-imported diseases such as influenza to which they had no defense. Some experts allege that about 80 Calusa families evacuated to Havana in the 1760's. Dr. John C. Gifford, professor of tropical forestry of the University of Miami found a remnant of Calusa inhabitants on a remote hammock in the Everglades as late as the turn of the 20th Century.

The next wave of inhabitants of the Big Cypress was the Seminole Indians. Their numbers steadily increased in the 1700s as a result of the pressure of the Europeans' relentless expansion in Georgia and Carolinas. There was another influx at the end of the Creek War of 1812-1814 after which Creeks

ceded extensive lands for white settlers and their enslaved Africans in Alabama and Georgia. As the intensity of European expansion increased, the Seminole Indians moved deeper into the Everglades, fleeing the U.S. Army's campaign to capture ands relocate all Indians to the west of the Mississippi. The Seminole Indian fight against the U.S. forces began to take on a new dimension with the steady influx of escaping en-slaved Africans joining forces with them. However, it is a mistake to assume that the relations between the Indians and the Africans were always harmonious. Of the Five Civilized Tribes -- Choctaw, Chickasaw, Cherokee, Creek and Seminole -- only the Seminole rejected slavery, opting to make allies of the escaped Africans. It is believed that the form of slavery practiced by the other tribes was not as brutal as what they had suffered under the European system of slavery, especially as practiced in the southern states. There was even a smattering of Spaniards among the Seminole forces resisting the U.S.

The contribution of escaped Africans to the Seminole resistance is a matter of record. The formidable terrain, heat, swamps and thickets of the Everglades was daunting to the Seminoles and their pursuers, and the Big Cypress was even more impenetrable. As late as the 1840's the entire peninsula of South Florida was considered "too sickly and too sterile" to merit serious consideration for settlement. It was said that the Territory was uninhabitable for whites and should be left to runaway Africans and Indian "savages." It is evident that there has been an African "presence" in the Big Cypress even back to the Calusa. The contributions of African Americans in the logging history in the 1 940s and 50s is but one episode in the unfolding history of human involvement in the area.

The Resource

It is estimated that prior to 1845 when Florida became a state; there was still 27 million acres of virgin timber in the state. By that date only 15 million remained. The cypress is referred to as "the Wood Eternal" because growing in water allows it to develop in protection from the elements. These "Giants of the Swamp" reportedly measured up to 25 feet in circumference and reached heights up to 150 feet. Core samples revealed that some tress were more than 600 years old. As the timber industry moved south to the Big Cypress in the early 1920's, they encountered deep swamps, unstable terrain, mosquitoes, snakes, panthers and alligators, conditions that quickly discouraged logging operations in the area.

Florida's world famous anthropologist, Zora Neale Hurston, who was honored with a U.S Stamp issued in December 2002, captured the poetry and pain of black life in the logging and sawmill industry in exquisite detail. In "Mules and Men" she sheds light on this era of American black life for succeeding generations. Relating her experience in the Everglades Cypress Lumber Company, in Loughman, Florida -- which would be very similar to life on other cypress lumber companies in Florida, including those in the Big Cypress -- she says:

"Cliffert Ulmer told me that I'd get a great deal more (stories of their lives) by going out with the swamp-gang. He said they lied a plenty while they worked. I spoke to the quarters boss and the swamp boss and both agreed that it was all right, so I strowed it all over the quarters that I was going out to the swamp with the boys next day. My own particular crowd, Clffert, James, Joe, Willard, Jim Allen and Eugene Oliver were to look out for me and see to it that I didn't get snake-bit nor 'gator-swallowed. The watchman, who sleeps out in the swamps and gets up steam in the skitter every morning before the men get to the cypress swamp, had been killed by a panther two weeks before, but they assured me that nothing like that could happen to me; not with the help I had.

Having watched some members of that swamp crew handle axes, I didn't doubt for a moment that they could do all that they said. Not only do they chop rhythmically, but they do a beautiful double twirl above their heads with the ascending axe before it begins that accurate and birdlike descent. They can hurl their axes great distances and behead moccasins or sink the blade into an alligator's skull. In fact, they seem to be able to do everything with their instrument that a blade can do. It is a magnificent sight to watch the marvelous co-ordination between the handsome black torsos and the whirling axes. So next morning we were to be off to the woods.

It wasn't midnight dark and it wasn't day yet. When I awoke the saw-mill camp was a dawn gray. You could see the big saw-mill but you couldn't see the smoke from the chimney. You could see the congregation of shacks and the dim outlines of the scrub oaks among the houses, but you couldn't see the grey quilts of Spanish Moss that hung from the trees.

Dick Willie was the only man abroad. It was his business to be the first one out. He was the shack-rouser. Men are not supposed to over-sleep and Dick Willie gets paid to see to it that they don't. Listen to him singing as he goes down the line. ' ***Wake up, bullies, and git on de rock. 'Taint quite daylight but it's four o'clock.****' Coming up the next line, he's got another song. '****Wake up Jacob, day's a breakin'. Git yo' hoe-cake a bakin' and yo' shirt tail shakin'.'***

. . .about that time you see a light in every shack. Every kitchen is scorching up fat-back and hoe-cake. Nearly every skillet is full of corn-bread. But some like biscuit-bread better. Broke you hoe-cake half in two. Half on the plate, half in the dinner-bucket. Throw in your black-eyed peas and fat meat left from supper and your bucket is fixed. Pour meat grease in your plate with plenty of cane syrup. Mix it and sop it with your bread. A big bowl of coffee, a drink of water from the tin dipper in the pail. Grab your dinner-bucket and hit the grit. Don't keep the straw-boss waiting..." p. 65-67

The Coming of the Train

The swamp was as inhospitable to machines as to humans. It took one to two months to lay one mile of track, provided the average depth of the water was no more than one foot. And even when completed, they were often washed out by water flow. The powerful steam locomotives were stilled when they reached waist deep water that put out the fires that provided the steam power.

Narrow guage trains were instrumental in hauling cut timber out of the swamp. Eventually 35+ miles of track were laid. The cut lumber was hauled to the north using rail as well.

It is impossible to talk in historical terms in Collier County without acknowledging the impact of the man for whom the county is named, Barron Collier. Almost everything that existed had the imprint of Barron Collier and his companies. Places like Jerome, Copeland, and Deep Lake, were vitalized by the lumber industry and were basically "company towns." Copeland was named for his long time agent. Jerome and Milestown were named after his sons. Jerome was lumber town and "The Jerome Juke" was a favorite gathering spot for the people in

the area. It was an old two-story building, owned by Buster Graham, who is reputedly related to James Melton. It is locally believed that James Melton was born in Tuckertown, a little north of Deep Lake. One house remains.

The center of this report is Copeland which was revived by the timber industry after the when in the late forties when willow bushes began to the prairie land left to rest between plantings for two years when the Lee Tide Water Cypress Company move there in 1944. While Collier or his companies do not appear to are directly involved in the sawmills most of Collier and his companies owned the timber rights. Deep Lake was the first holding bought by Collier and is reputed to be the starting place of timber activity in the area. Much of the lumber that was taken out was over tracks that ran from Deep Lake to Everglades City.

Early Morning Copeland 1950's

I'm not allowed to run the train, the whistle I can't blow.
I' not allowed to say how far the railroad cars can go.
I'm not allowed to shoot off steam or even clang the bell;
But let it jump the goddam track and see who catches hell.
(Anon)

The deep woods were quiet at 2:00 A.M. as a lone black woman stirred in her small wooden shack, a company house built by the Lee Tidewater Cypress Company. By lamplight she moved deliberately around her kitchen, preparing her husband's breakfast and lunch before she dressed for work.

Frances Hodge moved to Copeland with her husband Monroe, who was a "steel man" working on the railroad tracks. It was his skills as a "steel man" that brought them to Copeland. They came to the little company town in 1947 in the peak of the Cypress logging era. Mr. Hodge steel driving job extended the tracks further and further into the Giants of the Swamp. Finishing her preparations at home she dressed and headed for the company complex.

Walking along the narrow dirt road she could see small animals scurrying about in the moonlight. "Little, puny, tough" rabbits munched and hopped about in the moonlight. She didn't like to eat them, because they compared so poorly with the big, fat rabbits back home in Alabama. There were snakes about, one in almost in any direction she looked. But she wasn't worried. She found them to be more "scared of her "than she of them. She thought about how she always kept a cat to kill the snakes that came around her house. The cat seemed to "charm" them by sitting perfectly still, except for its wagging tail, fixing the snake with a hypnotic stare . . . until the moment it pounced on the snake and broke its back. In the early morning, stars glittered against the blue-black sky, with the domes of cypress trees silhouetted in the distance. Arriving at the brightly-lighted dinner ball she spoke to the elderly white man who started her fires each morning. She had an electric stove but most of the cooking was done on wooden stoves. She started making her biscuits, put on the bacon, grits and warmed up last night's leavings for the workers who preferred leftovers for breakfast. She laughed, remembering how she bad done a little of everything, including a failed attempt to pick tomatoes, until she got the cooking job and found her place. There were farms all over Ochopee, and land around Copeland. But farm work was not her best talent.

By the time the company whistle blew at 5:00 a.m. and Mr. Hodge began getting ready for work, Frances had already fixed breakfast and started dinner for the 30 or more white workers at the dining hail. These were the mechanics, operators, foremen and crew leaders of the company. The whistle

was the community alarm clock. In fact whistles were a major instrument of communication in the community. The loggers worked from "cain't see to cain't see." During the long daylight hours the screaming morning whistle came awfully quick after a 15-hour workday. World War II was over but the demand for the "wood eternal" had not slackened. America's housing market was taking off and Europe was rebuilding. Much of the cypress cut from the l940s through the end of the war in 1945 was used in boat building and other military uses.

Frances Hodge doesn't get up at 2:00 a.m. now but, 52 years after she first came to Copeland she is still there fishing, welcoming visitors and is the guardian of one of the last vestiges from the logging era: the church built in the community for use by the three denominations: Baptist, Methodist and Holiness.

Frances Hodge, born Sawyervile, Hale County, Alabama, August 22, 1906 (Interview with Mrs. Hodge, at her home, Nov. 8, 2002)

Came to Copeland, 1950. My husband, Monroe, they sent for him to come here to lay steel for the Lee Tidewater Cypress. He was laying steel for the railroad, tracks, for trains to run over, for Lee Cypress.

They sawed logs out there in the woods. They hauled them in here on the "dollies" I call them, unload them in here then put them boxcars on the load on the Atlantic Coastline and take them to Perry.

I cooked to the boardinghouse for Lee Tidewater. Cooking for the laborers that work for this company, not just ones sawing logs, section hands, some of them. All I had was white workers. Some white was sawing log, some was keeping up the tracks, keeping them in line, going through woods marking what trees to cut, what size to cut, "gauge men, "some that go along, have some rule, measure them, all those were white.

I wasn't cooking for the steel gang crew that my husband had. They were all black. Most of the loggers were white and black, but the steel gang that was laying steel was all black. More blacks than it was whites here in Lee Tidewater.

My job was... on the last end of it, I was a standby cook. After the job here went down, people went back to Perry. That was where most people was from. Then I started cooking up there ... I just cook and feed them, I didn't have to wash, scrub get no wood or nothing. Just fixing food. When the food run out, I make a order and the man come and pick it up, take it back to the store, and send me what I want, a truck come out from Miami with lard, flour, meal, sugar cream and coffee... we got our meat from up here at Copeland Market.

How did I get the job? I guess somebody told them that I could cook, like they told them about my husband, he was up there in Alabama -- my husband had been here in Florida before, somewhere up in north Florida. He had friends here and they sent for him and gave him a job.

I cooked for the white workers. Well, I have to get up every morning. .I'm slow, I can't work fast – I get up every morning about 2.00, 2:30. Sometime I sleep late, that'd be 3:00 or something like that... then I go up there and there were two elderly men, foremen, one for the logging crew, and those two men, they would have me afire going. . . have the stove hot, they had a wood stove, an electric stove too, but that was just to bake on. They'd have everything warmed up, especially in the winter time. When I got there they would say, "Well, we got everything warmed up for you. "And I sure appreciated that. Then I go in there and put on the coffee, get them some coffee so they could drink and go on.

The black loggers stayed in the quarters here. There was so many people in here, people didn't have a place to stay, they'd be people sleeping on people's porch, all different ones, there was so much work. But the biggest number of people was from Perry. Some was from around Tampa, Tallahassee, Plant City.

The work was very dangerous. Because sawing trees down, you have to look out for one another. . according to how you cut it, . . . it could buck back on you, and you wouldn't know which way it was going.. .you would think it was all clear... One man... he was hurt when I came here... something about his eye... it caused him to lose his eye.

Brother Perry and Mother Perry... they used to live right cross there. (waving south from her house) they moved, they bought in Naples. They have a nice home ...she's feeling right good, a nice lady. She got a bunch of children, grandchildren, they all see after her. Her sister, Miss Rosetta, she died, last year I think, she was a preacher. She got a church up there in Immokalee; she got a home up there, and a bunch of children and grandchildren.

Wages? They wasn't making nothing. After this job closed down, they went to build over there in Marco and Naples... the few that were left here went out on odd jobs. .. they were building these high rises.

When I came here, Naples didn't look as good as this here look right here now. They didn't figure the city was going to grow....all of that been built since I was here... honey there was one little old store, side the road, the man was selling ice cream, and sausage, you would stop in if you want a sandwich.

Loggers... They rode the train, it had a caboose, to take all the men. . . they'd leave out here round about 6:00, maybe 5:30. . . they all got to go together and be put off at d'fferent places. , they can't leave without the rest, they got to leave together Some of them worked task work, like the steel gang crew, f they go out there and do two hours, and the work is finished, they get a day for it...

It's plenty water out there. The loggers worked in that water...sometimes they'd be up to their neck, but it didn't bother them. They did it.

Snakes? Oh yeah! There's a lot of them round here. Sometimes I go out and they're right there on the steps, and I have to say, 'where you think you're going?' the one I'm afraid of an not used to is the rattlesnake, and that little one you call the horsewhip, they are bad too. I didn't hear of any loggers getting snake bit. I guess they be looking out.

I have a book where my husband kept everybody time on it, everybody's name on it, and their time. To show you how they wasn't paying nothing, my husband was getting $1 little dollar and 75 cent per hour, f I'm not mistaken, and when they call themselves raising it, he was hardly getting $40 a week, after they get through cutting you for this and cutting you for that. . .

We didn't have to pay no water bill, but we had to pay light bill. And rent. The rent was $3 and something or other, a month, they should have just given them the rent cause they wasn't paying them nothing.

All I was getting was 50 cent an hour up there cooking. They call themself raising it, to 75 cents an hour and it was hardly nothing by the time they finish taking out for this, taking out for that, you ain't got nothing.

Well I'd rather be up there cooking than out there in the field, because I was going to the field and I didn't know nothing about picking no tomatoes. And don't make them say we gong be picking by the piece...

others be glad for that but I couldn't pick no tomatoes up there… one day we were gonna pick tomatoes by the piece and then you had to lug them… I made one $7. Other people was making $20 and $30. I said this ain't no place for me.

Where did the black loggers eat? Some of them had families here. They would eat at home. The single guys, they had a boarding house, some black people was running it, I never did know them... a man and his wife. Something happened down there and the whole place burned up. I was up here and they was down there. The single men some would eat here, some there... if you are boarding with somebody, they pay them so much to cook for them.

What was community life like? There was nothing but malt, whiskey and beer, lots of clowning up and down the street. OOH man, especially Friday night would be a bad night. Every time you see one he got a cup in his hand, f he don't got a cup he got a can. Yes, They had a juke here, they had a theater here when I came, but this guy who runned it, he soon put it down and left and went to Naples. His wife got killed up around that bridge around Carnestown.

It was nice here. The people was nice. Some was rowdy, some was Christian hearted people on this side. There's some of everybody here now. About 2 or 3 families... the black ones... that are there right now. Geechies… they came here after… they worked in the field all the time.

I don't think there's anyone else out here that know anything concerning the loggers.

That was our little church out there but I donated it for a museum... I goes to the white church up there... I was going to Immokalee, but it cost me too much money to go there... it's a good little jump.

When the sawmills were here… the Atlantic seaboard... that's where we get all our preachers from.

Records of births and deaths? The woman (Gracie Goff works in the Oyster House) told me they were at the church, but people been breaking in there and taking things… I can't find any records or anything. I don't get around too much now like I used to. Vince Blackman stay out there where Mother Perry stay, on Pulley Road, out from Naples. Vince can tell you more… he was here when I came here, and I think he may have been raised here… they have some children… Pastor of Macedonia Church on 10th street.

Stories? No, only Brother Monroe say when they gonna pay off, like this evening, he'll be up there with some crushed ice and soda water, boiled peanuts and parched peanuts,
bawling out "cold sodas, boiled, parched peanuts..." I think he'd get 5 cents a bag or something...

Pet did cleaning, him and his wife lived near me. He cleaned up the office washed out the shower, make the beds, swept and mopped.

They built the place for black people then they turned around and burned it up to get them out of there. There was a place named the help quarter, a man burned up in there.

A whole lot of things been smothered under the cover here. Everybody's afraid to speak out some of these things. I just let them be and go on and tend to myself cause I don't have anybody here. All I'm looking at is the man up there. Jesus. That's who I depend on. When I got something on my mind, I'm gonna tell them. I hope it's some help to you."

Down the street Annie Mae Perry packed her husband's lunch and started getting her children ready for the school bus to Immokalee. She and her husband came to Copeland in 1947 and considered it an improvement over their lives in Monticello, Florida. They came for the logging since her husband James, had worked for the Lee Tidewater Company in Perry, Florida. Pearline, their oldest daughter, was especially happy to be in Copeland because back in Monticello, she had to walk an hour to school and an hour back. In Copeland, all she had to do was walk across the street to the bus stop.

Mother Perry remembers:
(Mother Perry, Annie Mae Perry, (nee McKinney,) born in Monticello, Jefferson County, Feb 18, 1910. Interviewed at her home in Naples, Nov. 13, 2002)

"*Came to Copeland 1947. My husband had been a log sawyer up home. We had a brother in law, Perry Rubin, working with Lee Cypress. He got my husband down here to work with the sawmills. I came down to pick tomatoes. In Monticello, I did anything I could get a chance, made 25 cent a day, working in the field.*

Brother-in-law was a "skitter," run the thing that brings the logs out the swamp. He was the head of pulling logs out the swamp at Lee Tidewater Cypress.

My husband had experience sawing logs in Monticello, cutting the tree down, limbing it up, cutting the top off getting ready to put it on the car. When they got through with it, it was a smooth as this, (pointing to marble table)

Working in the swamp was very difficult. Working up to your waist in water, the danger of felling trees. Several workers were injured or killed due to accidents. No one remebers injuries from snake bites.

There was about 80 head of people in Copeland when we first moved there.

I'd get up every morning 5:30 to get him ready. They didn't have anywhere out there to get a hot lunch. I'd make him sausage, hamburgers, biscuits, cakes -- he loved cake -- syrup cape, pound cake. He carried it in a lunch bucket.

He'd leave home at about 6, 6.30 in the morning, and get home about 6:30 or 7 o'clock. They had a train would carry them out, take them wheresoever they were going to take trees.

While he was away, I'd do anything I could find to do. I was the midwife, drove school bus, cooked in the lunch room. There was a lot of farming, beans and tomatoes, okras and things, plenty of it back there.

The work was dangerous. He worked in water up to his waist just about every day. When came home, he'd come look like a wet chicken. But they didn't seem to get sick and hurt like they do now.

There wasn't too many accidents - every now and then somebody'd get killed sawing the logs, sometimes a limb would knock them down.

The hospital was in Naples and Miami. A local doctor, Dr. McKinley was the first one, Dr. Nunnery (?) was much later.

Pearl wasn't but 11-years-old when we came to Copeland. They went to school, when they was out of school, didn't do nothing. They went to school in Everglades, there wasn't any high school, just elementary for black. About 40-50 children in school.

The loggers made pretty good money, bus drivers, cooks in lunch room, teachers and helper made pretty good money.

(Pearl's husband was making $30 something dollars a whole week.)

The company furnished homes, we paid $42 dollars and something.

There were different type jobs -- some marked the trees, some determined how large they were to be cut. Deacon Brock was a marker. Mr. Perry sawed the logs.
They were using the two man saw, then they got power saws. My husband had a power saw. They bought their own saw. He owned the gatortooth two-handled saw. It used to be one here.

They used to kill deer down here often, and a lot of people loved to eat them, rabbits and squirrels and birds.

I don't know nobody got bit by a snake down here. There were plenty of them around, but they were just as scared of you as you were of them.

Deaconess Bedell - a Seminole, took care of the Indians. She was a preacher. She lived in the Everglades. The Indians worked out there too, as loggers. Black people made up the largest amount of crew out in the woods.

C.J Jones Company, he ran the sawmill about four miles from Lee Cypress, sawing lumber… cutting anything he could get.

The biggest majority of black people came from Perry, Tallahassee, Monticelo, Thomasville, Madison, North Florida. Georgia and Alabama. My brother in law came from Alabama...

I left Copeland about 35 years ago, maybe longer than that. When the claim got cut out on the cypress, they had to hunt for another job, went wherever they could get work. They worked on the farms… moved to different places. When the cypress ended, some of the women took in washing and ironing, cooked, worked on the farm.

Alligators? They mostly had big dens and the men catch the alligators and put them in the den. There were mourning doves, pigeons, eagles. At certain time of year, you'd see them gathering together, then they would go south.

Mrs. Hodge... I know when she came to Copeland

Railroad men, they had them to keep up the tracks."

Willie Perry rode the trains into the swamps of the giant cypress but unlike the train workers he would spend most of his day up to his chest in water, hacking away at the hard wood of the trunk of the cypress trees. He and the men who worked beside him in the thick swamps and dark water of the thick swamp were the ultimate elements in the assault on the primeval water forest. It was hard, dangerous work but from most accounts the wet condition under which they worked did not expose them to any special health hazards. And curiously enough there are no records or oral histories that document any snakebite experienced by the loggers. Nor are there stories of hostile encounters with panthers or alligators. The mosquitoes were the greatest pestilence. The real threat was from on-the-job accidents.

Danger began the moment he jumped down form the train car at the site where they were to cut that day. The footing on the bed of the swamp of decaying vegetation, oozing matter and slippery marl made for precarious footing while carrying heavy equipment and sharp tools. Felling the trees was an added risk. A "cruiser" would go out and mark the trees for cutting, then James Perry and his partner began their work. The men worked in pairs with the axes and the most revered tool in cypress cutting; the two-man, cross cutting saw affectionately know as "Old 'Gator Tooth." The men's first challenge was just staying upright as the ground shifted like a trampoline. An angry female alligator or an irritated moccasin did not present a challenge as great as staying on one's feet. The chopping and sawing was done in water from waist deep to neck deep. It was reported in ***The Saturday Evening Post*** as the toughest logging job in America in *1955*. The work was truly a "team effort." It took everything from the train engineers, steel drivers, cruisers, and markers, men who bore holes in the trees to drain them before cutting and the loggers to make logging cypress profitable. Early in the 1900's there were attempts to log the cypress with many small operations but, most experts and entrepreneurs agreed that it was an impossible task under the conditions that existed in the swamp.

Willie Perry and the Cypress from "We Also Came: Black People of Collier County" by Maria Stone, (p. 63)

When I worked in the log camp, we was goin' in cuttin' timber. We'd clean 'round the tree and saw it down. We'd make it up in logs. They was hauled on the railroad. They sent two trains of 85 cars each week to Perry, Florida.

That's cypress timber. It was pretty hard, but we was used to it. You know, we'd try to beat another fellow cuttin'.

They was payin' us $100 a week. You'd make that and sometimes more. That was in 1949 to 1955. That was a lot of money back them days.

Using a boom to move a cut log.

When I first came down here, oooh, more cypress than I ever seen in my life! We didn't have to do nothin' but turn from one to the other, jes' like that. You know, you had to have a lever here to cut it, 'cause it was so thick. We had to know which way to cut and which one to cut and how to fall it. We used a big, crosscut saw. We had a wedge of wood made out of 'simmon wood from up in West Florida. There were a bunch of us workin' cypress. There was about ten or 12, maybe, workin'. Some were white and some were black.

We'd cut 100 logs a day, sometimes, or more than that, accordin' to luck. It turned out that power saws come in existence. When them power saws come in existence, that's when we went to slayin' it. One man could get out there and cut what two saws could cut. One man could get out there and make it somethin' like $100 by noon, jes' that quick.

We took out about all the cypress but there's some out there now. That cypress harvest lasted about 12 years, and there was no more of that work.

Them logs were moved out of the swamp woods with an overhead skidder. We'd put them logs on the railroad-head skidder and pull them lines out way back yonder like, way across to that road. You have your tail tree and a fellow back out there, a back rigger; he'd carry it up there and hook it, block up your tree and pull it up there and stretch it. He'd holler, 'Pick that bucket up!' Then they'd run it back down and they'd hook it.

The thing that pulled the log had a big old wheel, "buggy" is what we called it. It had a pair of tongs on it. You drops down and hooks the log with it. When you hook the log, you holler. The flagman would flag that you are gon' You only go with three or four logs. Gone! They put them logs down there and the loader would load them, and then they was carried on to the camp by train. That's right. Accidents happen, and some got killed.

One got killed one mornin' out there and hadn't even worked yet. He was standin' up in front of the skidder, and when the skidder pulled up like that and dropped the log, the log broke. That piece came walkin' and knocked his brains out. He was named Shepherd or something like that"

"We Also Came: Black people of Collier County" By Maria Stone.

Even when Mr. Perry worked during the height of the cypress logging, the trains often operated with two to three feet or water covering the tracks. Like conventional timber cutting the trees were chopped and sawed with wedges inserted to facilitate cutting and influence the direction in which the tree would fall. But things did not always go as planned and the trees could take an unpredictable path to the ground. This caused a dilemma for James Perry and his companions as well as for all forms of life in the vicinity.

A 150-foot tree, twenty feet in circumference, weighing several tons, crashing to earth in the thickets of the swamp, was an event dangerous to both man and other beasts. It wasn't the mere misdirection of the path of the tree's fall; it was all of the subsequent and consequential events that could follow. Tree limbs flying in all directions as shot from bows; splintering wood fragments piercing the air in random directions, and smaller trees and saplings becoming missiles. All this could happen in a split second. It was like a domino effect from hell. With little maneuverability in the chest high water and the soggy footing, even these were not the greatest dangers. The ultimate threat was being caught and crushed beneath a falling Giant of the Swamp. The tree's descent to earth, with its green crown that filtered the air above everything else for perhaps 200 years or more, ended in a crashing splash that reverberated throughout the forest primeval. The annoyance of mother alligator and the irritation of the moccasins turned to apprehensions for safety. The whole area was alive with scurrying raccoons, possums, deer, and even the panthers resting on the high ground of a nearby hammock were alerted. The giant was down, and on most occasions no one was hurt, and the wood would start on another journey of use and recycling.

Willie Perry and his companions were hardy men of "strapping proportions" as one observer put it. They had to be, because felling the tree was just the beginning. It now had to be "limbed" -- a process of cutting off the limbs. After "limbing" the tree if it was rounded at the bottom to prepare it for transporting by rail to the sawmill. The process involved cutting the flaring bottom of the tree into a round configuration that allowed it to be grappled and pulled out from the site to a point to load onto a rail car. Then it was cut into 30-foot lengths to fit on the train car. This was initially done with the two-man cross cut saw. Some trees were too large in diameter for the saws to cut through. This problem was solved by removing the handle from one end, and only one man sawing from one side until he tired. Then the other man would cut from the other side. Once the tree was ready to be pulled out and hoisted overhead with several hooks clamping the log at different spots there was still great danger. Sometimes the hooks would slip and the log would careen out of control endangering anyone nearby. Other times the tree might slip from the hooks and start "walking." Mr. Perry witnessed a fellow worker killed in that manner.

Pearline Dixon, the Perry's daughter, recalls:
(Interview at her home in Naples with Mother Perr, Nov. 13. 2002

"I knew some loggers. They had a good life. Them and my dad worked together. They left early in the morning and were gone 10-12 hours. They worked 6 days, sawed logs 5.

Recreation? Most went to church on Sunday. There was a juke joint, a lot of younger people went out there.

Indians? Oh yes! We knew a few that we were real close to… Johnnie Tiger, Lina, his wife, and Lousie. They came around all the time.

I heard how dangerous it was from my dad… what close calls they'd have. My uncle ran the skidder, a lot of times things would happen. Sometimes logs would slip, people would be close, sometimes it would be a close call. But God was good. I was concerned about my father's safety.

Sometimes, the train came in blowing, before time, we knew somebody was in trouble, hurt real bad or dead. Everybody would run up there and wait. I was scared. Very nervous. I was always thinking it could be my father...

I don't remember him having any serious injuries… I was away some of the time...

The Perry's viewed the pay to be very good with him making as much as a hundred dollars a week on some occasions. Others say that the pay wasn't that good but, there are reports of cypress loggers making as much as $800.00 per month. The method of pay was another distinction between the C. J. Jones Lumber Company and Lee Tidewater Cypress. C. J. Jones paid its workers in company script or "babbit" that was a type of "currency" issued by the Company for wages and good for paying rent and merchandise at the company store. Lee Tidewater Cypress paid in U.S. dollars. The reason given for this difference is that the cypress logs being shipped to Perry constituted interstate commerce and therefore the loggers were under federal regulations as to their wages.

The Community

As a company town, Copeland was organized along racial lines as most southern communities were at that time. Copeland had its black side and its white side. By community here we are referring to the black community. It is important to note that there was a Seminole Indian settlement nearby both

communities. The Indians preferred to live on their own. They worked in the cypress with much of their work consisting of boring the trees prior to cutting, so the water could drain and make the tree easier to handle. The community was purely southern in every aspect with the African American loggers coming from the Deep South states of Alabama, Georgia and North Florida. The woods and swamps were not foreign to most of them.

During the height of the cypress logging the community was burgeoning with people. Many single men lived in a boarding house and ate their meals there. Families rented in one of the company cabins. In the early logging period the loggers worked 5 days per week but, as the demand for cypress grew while at the same time pressure mounted to preserve what was left of the ancient trees, the logging pace quickened. The advent of the power saw increased the pace even more and workers began working seven days per week. When logging of the cypress began in earnest in the 40's it was predicted that it would take 40 to 50 years to exhaust the cypress. With the coming of the power saw, it took less than two decades.

During the peak of the logging operations several full trains were heading north. The "wood eternal" would be used for pickle barrels, stadium seats and to build PT Boats during WW II.

The Steam whistle announced the workday and it also announced the tragedy on some workdays. Mother Perry, Mrs. Hodge and Pearline Dixon all attest to the fear they had when they heard the whistle signaling that the train was returning from the swamp off schedule. That sound usually telegraphed that a logger had been seriously injured or killed. Everything came to a stop in the community and the women and children rushed to the train stop to hear the bad news of who had been injured of killed. They describe it as the worst sound you could hear in Copeland.

Medical help was in Everglades. For more serious matters it was in Fort Myers or Miami. There was an infirmary that treated minor injuries or illnesses. Unfortunately what professional help that was available locally was dispensed on the basis of color rather than by need. There were instances of injuries to black loggers that were either not treated or treated with less professionalism purely on the basis of their color. However, it was the paucity of professional medical help that led to the extraordinary work of Mother Perry. As a matter of need she became the midwife for the area delivering 517 live births of black and white babies.

Much of community life was centered around the church. When the company built the housing it also built a church. In a unique bit of religious tolerance three denominations shared the same building which stands today. The Baptists, Methodists and Holiness members each held their services on rotating Sundays. The same was done for religious holidays. For example each year a different denomination would be in charge of the Christmas services and all the members of the other denominations would join in celebrating the holiday.

Not everyone centered their free time around church activities. Copeland was a "lively" place on Friday and Saturday nights. According to eyewitness, Mrs. Hodge, almost everyone walking up and down the streets from Friday night to Sunday would have a cup or bottle in their hand. There was the "juice-joint" a standard feature of every southern community in America. There was also at one time a movie house.

The "numbers" were run out of Miami. "Numbers" was the name commonly used when referring to "bolita." There was a man who went to Miami each weekend for the numbers run.

Captain Franklin Adams, interview, Everglades City, Nov. 10, 2002
Family spent lot of time in Everglades City, fishing, hunting in Big Cypress, just getting away. Came first time in '55, spent a lot of time since. Bought the Albatross, boat originally built from cypress. Lives in Collier County, runs eco and fishing tours out of Everglades City.

"Copeland established by Lee Tide Cypress Company. A company town. Segregated, if you see the old plattes, one side black, one side white.

In WWII, the government wanted 'the wood eternal' to build ships, boats, stadium seats. Shipped CALIFORNIA REDWOOD into Copeland to build the big barn. A lot of the houses were pre-fabricated -- built out of logs in Perry, then brought down and assembled.

Logging was a hard job, and a lot of black people worked as loggers. Trees couldn't be longer than 40 feet, had to fit to be shipped on the train.

People were paid in "babbit," which they spent at the company store. Most of the people that went out preliminary, a lot of them were Miccosukee Indians. They cut the right of way before the steel gangs. Lots of black people worked on the steel, big strapping guys that could drag those big piles...

Before the advent of the power saws trees were feld by axe or double handeled cross-cut saws.

They'd dig up the swamp on both sides and pile it up, make the road, lay the tracks. By the time I came they had logged it all out, except Corkscrew, and Fakahatchee. They'd leave early in the morning, when you can't see, come back at night when you can't see.

There were recordings made of the people on the steel gang working in sync to keep their spirits up.

Randolph Swain was a logging boss. When he retired, moved to Perry. He's the one that told my wife Cathy about these recordings of black men driving the spikes, and laying the tracks, but he did not tell her the source.

Monroe Graham, sawyer, worked for many years, is recorded on video and audiotape by Cesar Becerra.

After the logging stopped, some of the black people stayed, and some white people, but a lot moved away to where there was work -- Naples, Marco, Miami and Fort Lauderdale. Some had relatives, went wherever they could find work. I wish I knew more about them... I was in high school then. Shy. You didn't want to pry.

Hattie, involved indirectly in people and what went on there. Remember seeing these people going to work, had a big whistle that would blow, just to make sure you were up, get their lunch bucket, get on the train, a wood burning train that put out a lot of smoke. Built spurs that went off wherever they found lot of trees, to access trees. "Skidder" could run out a long way and snake the logs out to the flat car.

C.J. Jones, footage in Big Cypress National Preserve collection, names the individual, slender black gentlemen, ran alongside the trains as they are loaded, fairly dangerous looking job. Footage might identify him.

There were a lot of injuries, some deaths, people being crushed by trees. You had to be very careful, trees 100 foot tall. Miccosukees would girdle tree, so much of the water drained out. If it wasn't drained, tree could fracture when it came down. Very dangerous.

As demand mounted, work was not so judicious, began taking trees down as fast as possible, and without girdling. Log cutters working in water up to their arms. Used cross-cut saws. If they were working on a real thick tree, they would cut and if saw was not long enough to go through the tree, one man would cut from one side after which the other man would continue cutting from the opposite side.

Used wedges to guide where tree fell.

There were lots of snakes, water snakes that were harmless, but also cottonmouths. When I started going there, '54- '55, near the end, you could look for miles down those huge big trees... there were still ivory billed woodpeckers in the area, (thought to be extinct, but unconfirmed sightings have been reported in Louisiana) an ornithologist saw one, Carolina parakeets, now extinct.

Hard, dangerous work, you don't move very fast when you're standing waist deep in water.

Had an infirmary, someone called a doctor.

From what I understand, wages were pretty good. Sawyers that made $800 a month. But hard, dangerous work. No thought from the timber company to reforestation.
Story about somebody from the Saturday Evening Post came to do article on loggers.
They were working on the trains, and he saw a hat floating in the water. 'Somebody lost his hat', he said, and lifted it up to reveal a man's head. The man said, 'That's the highest ground I've found all day…'

I would have liked to see it when it was virgin. When they come in and acquire these places and put them into public ownership, people that are there are run out.

They had a church, a juke joint that was only open on weekends. First they only worked 5 days, then it went to 5 and a half then six. One old timer told me you didn't have to work every day, but if you didn't, the boss would sure make it hard for you.

There were lots of black people involved with farming. Get a hold of interview with Hattie - talks about life on the tomato farm. Ochopee, many lived along the road. Along 29, and on Tamiami Trail in Ochopee, on both sides, were three little green cottages, porch on front. We had fires in the early 60s, lots of places burned up, people were getting old, moving away. When they were farming, that was all prairie, pines have grown up since.

George, an itinerant preacher, lived there for many years. Old rambling house... cypress was wide open, people hunted and camped. Lot of people kept their swamp buggies at George's place. People looked out for them."

Fred Dayhoff interview November 18, 2002

"Fred bought cypress and pine from C.J. Jones' mill, but doesn't recall meeting him, he was probably gone by the time I got there. Logging companies only took the most valuable lumber, it was just not profitable for them to take trees that were 10-12-14 inches in diameter, they cut everything that was worth cutting best, didn't have time to fool with moderately big trees. Trees big as a room, cutting as fast as they could, pines. Any little scrawny thing wasn't worth time. Only trees left standing, in the strand one or two of the enormous only took the most valuable lumber. Cut everything that was worth cutting. Cypress gets heart rot, a man would climb up, pound on it with an with axe, 'sounding'. If hollow, not worth cutting. Leave really big cypress for pulley, boom tree to pull logs (cable) they would have cut everything f they could have sold it. The other thing they'd do is leave some of the really big tall cypress.

Locomotives: I started to buy them... this is a funny story... they were offered to me for $150 apiece. Sandy and I drove up to lee tidewater right after we were married in '64. I asked the foreman, 'What are you going to do with the engines?' He said. 'We're gonna cut them up for scrap. I said, 'What do you think they're worth?' He said 'I'll take $150 each for them right now if you can get them out of here.' Of course in 1964 I didn't have $150. And secondly, how would you move a locomotive in here? The bridges to this place were wooden bridges at the time. They wouldn't support anything like that. Sometime later on Highway 29, I saw the engines loaded on flat cars, shipping to north, that's when the railroad still ran along 29. There is one in downtown Naples at the Collier County Museum. I have photos of the old engines. They were beautiful.

George and Hattie Cromartie worked at the Reynolds Sawmill, Highway 41, operated probably '28- '29 and abandoned '44, because all the good timber had been cut. I first met George when I was 11 or 12. (1951 or '52) At that age, you don't know what questions are worth asking. You think everybody's gonna live forever, and you can ask them later. George was a climber. Part of his job may have been to climb the trees and 'sound' them, and also put the tables in them. He was a very small person. Hattie worked around the mill -- she may have cooked, I don't know.

The reason they were still living there when I knew them was that her son was killed in the mill - he got his shirt caught in the machinery and was pulled in. The people who owned the mill told them they could live in that house for the rest of their lives. Once the mill ended, they just stayed on.

George I think died in '66 or '68 of a heart attack in Naples while crossing the street, going to the Post Office. Just to give you a physical description, they were funny to look at together. George was very short and small, and Hattie was an enormous woman, close to 6 feet tall, probably in her 80s. She had big bones, long arms. She would get a hold of my arm and her fingers would wrap all the way around my arm. She spoke a dialect, Gullah, I believe. They both came out of Georgia. You had to listen closely to understand what she was saying.

They were very religious, particularly Hattie. George, I think was religious just to get along with Hattie. I don't know f they were ever really married by the terms we use today, but I think it was fairly common in the sawmill life that if your wife died or your husband, you'd take up with someone else, just out of survival reasons. . .

The house they lived in was a two-room house. The front part had a big wood-burning stove that they cooked on. In the west corner of that was Hattie's bed, which set way off the ground. It was very high so they could store things under it. George slept in the other room, and the front room was not only the kitchen but also where you would eat. Many a night when we were camping there as kids, if the weather changed and it got cold, Hattie would send George out in the middle of the night with a lantern to get us. She'd say, 'You got a bring those children in, you can't leave them out there in the cold.' And we'd go in and we'd sleep by that big wood-burning stove. It was just beautiful.

There's questions I should have asked, and never did ask.

They raised hogs and chickens. I think George did some hunting. I know he went out and collected honey from bee trees, because we were talking about that very thing one day, and he said, 'Well, Grandma's boy - he called me Grandma's boy because my grandmother would come out with me and she and Hattie would read the bible -- I'll tell you a bee story you'll never forget. I climbed up this big cypress tree, about 60 feet off the ground, to figure out where the honey was in the tree, and I was up there with my hand axe and I heard some noise below me. I told Hattie to come with the washtub to get the honey, and I keep talking to her down there that I hadn't got the honey yet, it'd be a little while, but Hattie won't answer me. And the next thing I knows, I feel something on the tree with me. And coming up the other side of the tree is a black bear. And me and this bear are up the tree trying to get the honey. Well, I let the bear have the honey. I just went down that tree as quick as I could and got out of there.'

"There aren't too many honey trees anymore, because there's no big hollow trees for the bees to put their hive in. I found one in the Fakahatchee about 25 years ago that I cut down. You just cut a notch out of it below the nest and you get the honey out of the tree.

I can't tell you what a typical day in the loggers' life would be like, and I don't think there's anybody left alive here that could tell you. Maybe if you went up to South Georgia, maybe around St. Mary's or somewhere up there, you might find some of the old folks alive that could tell you. I got the impression that when these people came in to log in Florida, these were mill operators that came out of Georgia, and they brought their people with them.

They were people who had worked in mills in Georgia, and Alabama and North Florida and they just brought them down because it was the simplest thing... these people already knew how to do it. They brought their whole logging crews, set up a little community. They built houses, and usually there was a little store and a juke joint where they could have entertainment at night.

Functions of the logging crew? There was a foreman who'd direct everybody what to do; then there were people who "skittered" the logs, drug the logs out. They either used oxen or mules or that pony loader winch system. In Lee Tidewater Cypress, there was a crew that would load the logs onto train cars. But most of the logs they skittered out, drug the logs behind whatever they were using until they got them to mill.

Then you had a whole new crew that worked in the mill to cut the lumber up. Racial makeup of the workforce? Probably two or three white people that'd be the foreman, and perhaps someone that knew

something about grading lumber, and someone that went ahead and marked the trees. The rest was almost 100 percent black, with a few Seminole or Miccosukee Indians. Again, I think that was because they brought their people with them. There was no source of labor here. Naples almost didn't exist, Immokalee was nothing, and Miami was just too far to bring people out. I don't think there would have been any convict labor -- when the logging was going on there were hardly any jails except town jails, not enough to support an industry. I know in North Florida, they used prisoners.

The mill owners would build small one or two-room houses made with slab wood -- that's the outer side of the trees that they can't use for anything else -- and that's where they lived, right at the mill site. There'd be what they call a quarters, one where blacks lived, and some distance away, one for whatever white workers there were. They lived separately.

The women and children, I don't know what they did. A lot of women were involved with cooking for the logging crews, and washing. I think it was probably enough then to take care of the housework. You have to remember there was no instant anything. If you wanted a chicken, you killed it. If you wanted a hog, you killed it and scraped it and boiled it. And washing clothes was probably a continuous thing. I remember the way my grandmother did it -- she was around the same age as these people, this was one of the pots she washed her clothes in right here. She'd get boiling water and dump it in there and take a battering stick and actually wash the clothes by beating on them. There was no gas, no electricity, no cell phones, or computers. They washed clothes in pails, beat 'em, and used 'blue' on them.

If there was any schools, the kids were probably taught at mill site. No buses came that took them to school. The nearest school to these sawmills would have been Everglades City, and there was a black section of town. Then, it was a very racially divided town. It still is, but then, you just didn't mix. The black section of town could have had a school

There was no sawmill at Lee Cypress. They had an exclusive contract with the military for WWII. They were not even allowed to keep cypress for their own use. Some of the old houses in the quarters I'm told were made of Redwood shipped to build homes... there's only two left...

Laying a railroad track into the heart of the swamp.

The workers ate anything they could get. Grits, bacon, salt pork. George raised hogs and killed them and cured the meat himself packed it in barrels of salt. Possums were a favorite with George. They ate young raccoons but possums were the favorite. Deer was very rare, they had been hunted out because in the 1930s, the state cattlemen came up with a theory that the deer were carrying a tick that infected the cattle, so they paid a bounty for hunters to kill the deer. They decimated the deer population, until they found out that there was no truth to it. I think they just did not want the deer competing for range grass. My father killed 30 something in one day for the bounty. It was a mass slaughter of deer. There was some wild turkey and they probably got some when they could. They fished, whenever they could in canals. But, I've cut some logs myself when I was about 15, and at end of a day working hard pine and lighter post for fence for like 16 hours with

an axe, what you want is something simple, probably salt pork and grits. Most people had gardens, grew collards and mustard green. George grew tomatoes that he and Hattie pickled in mason jars. They were the most delicious thing I ever ate. She pickled or preserved everything she could in mason jars.

They worked with hand-held cross cut saws that two men used together. What you'd do first is build a platform. Cypress trees have a huge buttress at the base. You didn't want to cut through that, because it would take you forever. So they'd build a railing above it so they can get above the ground to where the tree became straight. Then they'd go completely around the tree with an axe and girdle it, and leave it for so many days, to let the water drain out. They'd go ahead of the logging crew doing this. My friend, Taylor Alexander, professor at the University of Miami, saw it. He said the cypress forest in the Fakahatchee looked like it had been burned, because all the tops of the trees looked like they had been burned, because they had been girdled. Cypress lumber is solid with water -- even a 10 inch board, 12ft long, rough cut one inch thick, it'd be all one man can do to carry it. By letting it bleed, it would be much lighter. Then they would come back and go into the tree and make a big notch, then go in with the cross-cut saw. Two men would work on the platform to cut it down. I would think two men with a sharp saw could cut one down in an hour. They sharpened their saws constantly... kept them razor sharp. In between every tree cutting, they'd sit down and sharpen their saw teeth, and then they'd go back to cutting another tree.

Cutting the logs up into lumber was very fast. Some of the mills were steam driven, some diesel driven. The Reynolds Mill had an enormous steam engine. It had a belt system that ran through the entire 2-story mill, with shafts and gears and belts, and this big steam engine ran one main belt into the system, then everything else ran off the belts coming off that one main system and that ran the big circular saw, went anywhere from 48 to 60 inches diameter. And you just run the log through there and it cuts it really quick. You can cut a tree into lumber, a good sawyer can do it in 15 minutes or less.

They cut in probably 20-foot sections laying out in the swamp... that'd be done with crosscuts... most trees you'd have to make the initial cut... and maybe three more ... they wasted more lumber than you'd ever believe. .there's trees out there the tops of them are this big around (holing out both arms wide) 20-25 feet left that they never took, they would only take the main trunk of the tree, and those old logs are lying there and they are as hard today as they were cut solid lying there in the swamp as if they were cut yesterday... beautiful lumber... but they'd only take what you would call the prime cut -- three or four sections and cut them in 20-ft sections, leave the rest. . .

I think every job was dangerous, the most dangerous was probably the guy falling the trees. We have to remember it was not like today, there was absolutely no safety equipment. Nothing, he was just there alone in the swamp with axes and crosscut saws, and a million things could happen. And at the mill itself none of the mills I've actually seen today in Central America, none of the belts or pulleys or anything protected by guards or thing to keep people from getting into them. You just know not to.

But I'd think the guy that fell the trees had the most dangerous job. Because they could kick back, they're big trees and a lot of time when they fall and sometimes take other trees with them, branches and stuff raining down.

I don't know if f they ate alligator. Alligator hunting was big business, legal to take them, some kill them for their hide. Gators down to low number... but they might have eaten young gators.

I have eaten coots gizzard and rice... When I used to go hunting I'd kill the coot, my grandmother always wanted the gizzard. Coots have a huge gizzard, take 4 or 5 coots gizzards cooked with rice., really good

meal probably something they would eat, problem was most of the areas where these mills was, there wasn't enough open water where they could find coots.

Injuries to workers, I'm sure they were just unbelievable.

Always suspected that the mill op had somebody they could call to come to the mill if somebody got hurt, or perhaps they'd take them to the Doctor in 'Glades City. Snake bites would have been rare, cotton mouth would have been most likely. ..I've hunted here all my life and never been bit… my wife has been rattlesnake bit right here… I guess it just depends on your luck.

Lee Tidewater came in to cut lumber supposedly mostly for WWII. They had operations all over Florida. The cutting op in fax apparent. We were told the lumber was shipped into the Pacific, used for building docks… maybe military barracks too, all kinds of war effort things.

Did they collect wild orchids? There were so many orchids then, I don't think there'd be much of a demand... everybody wanted the big fancy ones from Central America.

Floods - almost everything was closed by then… only ones in Jerome, Immokalee and Naples still cutting cypress.

4 7-48 floods… almost everything was closed by then. Most of the mills had cut everything usable, and was out of business. The only ones still working were Jerome and Immokalee, flooded the cities more than it did here, out here it had normal ways of escaping, probably lasted October to January, and normal time they cut sawmill work was in dry season, March, April and May so by then it was probably back to normal.

Relationships good. The Indians at that time had no source of income. The white man had come and killed all the game out, and there wasn't much else they could do so they were looking for anything they could get. They did logging, planting tomatoes.

A lot of black people worked on building the Tamiami Trail. My uncle worked on one of the steam dredges that dug the Tamiami Trail.

Interaction with Blacks: We came out hunting, our base was where George and Hattie was, and here on Loop Road where the Corners Mill (?) *was, my friend owned Bauman's* (?) Mill, *this side of Ochopee, my friend old lady Bauman ran it.. . I'd go in the Copeland store and they'd be there buying their supplies. We'd go to Jane's Restaurant, the only place to dine in 1964 reachable from where we lived... You want to go out for lunch or dinner, that's where you went. And it was good. Behind that there was a big juke joint. It was racially segregated. I never saw a black person in Jane's restaurant. There was a back window behind the bar where they sold whiskey and wine and any black customers that wanted to buy something from the restaurant would come to that window. They seemed to be in a friendly relationship laughing and joking. But the big juke joint was where the black community went for parties and dancing.*

You get indebted...you owe money at the company store, you don't get to leave until you work it off and if you do try to leave, then they just have the sheriff come get you."

Naples News, *3/15/45*, "<u>Collier County Industries Paraded for Naples Lions</u>"...
"The tour started at the Lee Cypress Co. camp where the visitors boarded a railway flat car equipped with

benches which was hauled over company tracks into the vastness of the Big Cypress swamp where few men, white or Indian, had penetrated until the logging operations started about a year ago. Now a part of the huge 65,000 acre track is threaded by some 35 miles of narrow gauge railroad on which three logging trains are in continuous operation.

Only the cypress is being taken out, leaving a variety of hardwood trees and a tangle of underbrush standing. Once off the narrow right-of-way the Everglades swamp is still a forbidding region. The woods are dry at this time of year but the undergrowth is so thick that the logging crews have to hack paths to the trees marked for cutting.

Getting them out is actually simpler than getting to them. Removal is accomplished by an overhead 'trolley' line extending back 800 feet from each side of the track. From this line cables are dropped with hooks attached. These are clamped to the sawed-down trees by the loading crews, then hoisted above the undergrowth and trundled back to the railroad where they are deposited neatly on flat cars. The work is all done by a steam-powered locomotive crane.

Back at the Lee Cypress Co. camp on the Coast Line branch from Immokalee to Everglades City, the logs are reloaded for the shipment to company mills at Perry in North Florida where the timber is processed. Most of it goes directly to the government for war purposes.

Some 225 men are now at work in Collier County and in nearly a year's time have made scarcely a dent in the company holding which it is estimated will take from 20 to 25 years to clear. At present two trainloads of about 40 cars each are being shipped out every week to Perry. . . At the site of the company administration buildings there is a considerable settlement with dwellings and other accommodations for both white and negro employees. There will soon be a new church.

At the C.J. Jones sawmill, a short piece up the road from the Lee Cypress settlement, the Lions found the establishment buzzing with activity. Although it was nearly 6p.m. operations were going full blast, the plant being on a 60-hour week schedule. Mr. Jones arrived from out in the woods shortly after the visitors reached the mill and conducted them personally on a tour of the place.
Only pine is being handled at present, all of it going to the government. Most of the shipments have been of lumber for chemical tanks at war plants but a big order has just been received for boards to be used in erecting military barracks in Europe. Much of the Jones lumber goes abroad, being shipped from docks at Tampa and Jacksonville."

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Everglades Museum 239-774-8476
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