

**THE VILLAGE OF WOODWORTH**

A Paper

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In 1890, acres of longleaf yellow pine lands grew unimpeded, except for a railway track, in the center of Rapides Parish in the heart of Louisiana. This land had been little invaded since the days of early America, when an Indian settlement was located four miles to the southwest at the site of the present town of Forest Hill.

There is some speculation that the area was the site of some battle action during the Civil War. The idea originated when a four-pound slug was discovered imbedded in a sweet gum tree cut during the construction of the Civilian Conservation Corps camp near Woodworth in 1933.<sup>1</sup>

Although there is no recorded evidence of settlement in the area before 1890, it is told that a man named George Hendricks came from Arkansas in about 1880, set up a rice mill, and attempted to grow rice. He apparently was unsuccessful and moved away before the village was established.<sup>2</sup>

The land was owned by John McEnery, an agent for the New Orleans Pacific Railroad, who lived in New Orleans. As many railroads were acquiring large tracts of land from the government during the middle of the nineteenth century, it is assumed that this area of land had been acquired by the railroad, and Mr. McEnery in turn had received it from the railroad, perhaps as a stock dividend.

On November 25, 1890, Mr. McEnery sold his land, which measured 18,000 acres, for \$4.25 an acre to C. E. Roberts, C. S. Woodworth, and Ed Rand, all of whom were from Texas. The history of these men before they came to this area is not known.<sup>3</sup> They incorporated the Rapides Lumber Company and began to build a saw mill. In 1892 Mr. Woodworth, the present of the company, declared the establishment of a town and give it his name.

In 1895, the Long-Bell Lumber Company, with main offices in Kansas City, Missouri, bought Mr. Woodworth's interest in the Rapides company. Mr. Woodworth therefore left the town which bore his name only three years after it was established. A year later Mr. Roberts also sold his interest to the Missouri concern and the company was re-named the Long-Bell Lumber Company of Woodworth. Mr. Rand retained his interest in the company.

By 1904, Woodworth was populated by 1000 people, all of whom depended on the mill for their livelihood. At that time there were 103 homes in the town and new houses were being built by the lumber company for its employees.

A "Union" church was built where services were held every Sunday under the auspices of either the Methodists or the Baptists, according to which denomination could secure a minister that week. There was a one-room school where the grades one through six were taught. There was also a church and school for Negroes in Woodworth.

There was a general store, owned and operated by the lumber company, which in 1904 carried an average stock of \$15,000.00 worth of goods. The Long-Bell employees customarily were paid mainly in "Bat Hides", crude lead coins that were redeemable only at the general store. The store also had an "Ice House", which was made available to all residents of the town as a free service of the lumber company.

A post office was set up in the main building of the mill, where it remained until the mill closed in 1927.

Electricity was supplied by a generator in the mill to the store, the “Ice House”, and all mill buildings.

The mill had private, private telephone lines which consisted of a six-mile line westward to the town of LaMourie, a line to Alexandria which connected with the Cumberland long distance telephone, and a line extending southward along the St. Louis, Watkins, and Gulf railway as far as Forest Hill.<sup>4</sup>

The Long-Bell Railroad added a fourth chief line to their railway system which became the Woodworth and Louisiana Railway Company, which joined the junction point of the South Pacific and Texas and Pacific lines in the town of LaMourie. The local line had fifty-two cars and five locomotives, four of which were for pulling log trains and one for traffic between Woodworth and LaMourie.<sup>5</sup> In addition to the line to LaMourie there were sixteen miles of line in the area for logging operations exclusively.<sup>6</sup>

The mill proper was located in the center of the area. Bayou Clear ran through the town, and had been so named for its remarkably clear water. Today, the bayou is found to be only a trickling stream the main body of which is about three miles south of Woodworth in a small settlement named Bayou Clear that is inhabited by about six families.

This area of longleaf yellow pine was excellent for the lumber industry as the rolling hills facilitated logging in all sorts of weather. Near the mill plant was a log pond formed by Bayou Clear where the logs were stored until sold. The lumber produced at the Woodworth mill was sold by the Long-Bell company directly to the trade industries.

The mill also operated the Rapides Machine Shop and Brass Foundry, which added to the town's self-sufficiency.

During the years that the mill was in operation the residents of the town did little farming. Only a few families had cows, pigs, chickens, and small gardens; and these were tended by the women and children. Meats and food staples were brought in by the lumber company, and vegetables were furnished to the residents through the store from a colony of Belgians who lived near the logging operations but apart from the town proper. Little is known of their origin or number, but it is believed that they were brought from Pennsylvania by the lumber company after Long-Bell assumed operations in Woodworth. They were provided cottages and well-fenced farming areas and raised vegetables and cotton and had good livestock which they had brought with them. They exchanged their products for goods at the store and also carried them in wagons to Alexandria where they sold them. The greater portion of this group moved from the area when the mill closed and only two families in Woodworth today are considered to be descendants of this group.

In 1912, a group of about fifty Mexicans settled in the southwest section of the town, but they left the area also in 1927 when the mill closed. There is today near the site of their settlement a cemetery remarkably large considering the short time they were in the area. This group, like the Belgians, had little contact with the other townspeople.

In 1913, the Rapides Gravel Company was incorporated three miles southwest of Woodworth and gravel extraction on a small scale was begun.

At the time of World War I, the town still enjoyed a remoteness that prevented it from feeling to any extent the effects of the war. There was still a market for the lumber produced and only a few men of the town left to join American military forces.

The town grew steadily, and by 1915 there were doctors, lawyers, and several small businesses there. There was an epidemic of influenza in 1918, but knowledge of its extent is not available. At any rate, it did not much effect the town's growth, a process which continued until the timber source was about to be exhausted. Had the mill-owners been more conservative-minded in their logging operations, the story might be a different one. By 1927, however, it became impractical to maintain the mill as the timber supply in the area dwindled.

A new school was built in 1927 by the Rapides Parish School Board to replace the old one-room school and consisted of three classrooms and a large auditorium which was used for both school and community functions.<sup>7</sup> Grades one through six were taught by three teachers, one of whom also acted as principal. Students in the higher grades were sent by bus to the high school in Lecompte. The Woodworth school was closed at the end of the school year in 1963 by the Rapides Parish School Board as the low enrollment made it impractical to maintain the school. Students were transferred to the Lecompte school. The school building and grounds were designated by the school board to be used for community functions free of charge. The building continued to be the poll station for public elections as it had in the past.

In 1927, construction of the present First Baptist Church building was also begun. The Church had been chartered in 1914 and housed in the old "Union" church building, which was destroyed by a storm in 1926. The Church today has a new brick residence for the pastor and is collecting a building fund to build a new church building. Other churches in the village include a Negro Baptist Church, chartered 1940, a Pentecostal Church, and a Catholic Church. The Pentecostal Church was built in 1936 and today has only a small membership. Catholics in Woodworth attended church in neighboring towns until a small frame building was purchased in 1956 to be used as a Church. In 1963 a new brick structure was dedicated and the old building was converted to serve as a Catholic youth center.

By 1930, the town that had steadily grown for about 35 years had waned considerably. The post office moved to one of the two remaining general stores, and the other store became a combination movie house-grocery store. People who stayed in Woodworth were for the most part those who had settled there in the early days of the mill. Land and houses were excessively cheap when the mill workers left to follow new mills or other methods of earning livelihood elsewhere. Therefore, people who had owned modest farms near-by bought large tracts of land and began to farm it. Settlement of the area then was more sparse but also more widespread than it had been during the mill days. Several of the houses in the center of the town that had been occupied by mill employees were left vacant or were torn down for lumber. The clearing of a roadway from Woodworth to Alexandria was begun in 1930 and completed in 1931. This dirt road was replaced by a concrete highway during World War II. In 1942, the Village of Woodworth was officially incorporated. The pattern of government set up at that time is still in effect. Town officials include a mayor and three aldermen, who are elected at village meetings every four years and are non-salaried. Village meetings are called by the mayor whenever necessary and are open to the public.

The advent of World War II initiated a boom in Woodworth. A Civilian Conservation Corps camp was set up in the Alexander State Forest. An army installation, Camp Claiborne, was set up about six miles southeast of Woodworth, and its construction and maintenance brought

many new residents to Woodworth. This boom lasted only as long as the war, however, and a desertion of the village such as that when the mill closed again took place.

During World War II, the Louisiana Forestry Commission began a program of reforestation of 9,000 acres of land on the eastern border of Woodworth, and named the area the Alexander State Forest. The forest today is an area of beautiful towering pines with a system of gravel roads maintained throughout the forest. The fire tower there is reportedly the tallest such tower in the state. About 25 Woodworth residents have employment at this branch of the Forestry Commission.

Since 1950 little change has taken place in Woodworth. There is no influx of newcomers; rather there is only the leaving of youth as they grow up.

So, it is that a village founded a quarter of a century ago has today only 80% of the population number that it had at its beginning.

## EVALUATION

The Village of Woodworth bears little similarity to many such communities located in the South. Its origin came from industry, rather than from agriculture, and for that reason its subsequent history is different. There have never been any problems of racism in this village where 20% of its present population of 820 is composed of Negroes.

There is little feeling of the type usually observed in small rural communities. This can possibly be attributed to the varied interests of the residents. For the most part, they earn their

livelihood independently of the village in Alexandria, Pineville, Lecompte, or Forest Hill and their social, political, and recreational interests are therefore centered in these towns.

What is to be the future of Woodworth? We might speculate a continuing decline in population or at best a stand still except for one fact, and that fact is the proximity of Woodworth to Alexandria. The town of Alexandria is undergoing tremendous growth, and Alexandrians are building their places of business and residences further southward on the highway to Woodworth. No longer existent are the dense and swamp-like lands that even five years ago lined both sides of the highway.

Perhaps in years not too far in the future Woodworth will again undergo change; this time by becoming a suburban development of the town of Alexandria.

#### NOTES TO THE TEXT

1. This slug was found by and is in the possession of Mr. M. R. Smith, of Woodworth. It has not been authenticated.
2. Some of the older citizens report having seen in the extreme southeastern section a grave marker bearing the simple inscription: "Baby Hendricks – 1885".
3. It is believed that Mr. Rand was engaged in logging in Texas, recognized the potential of the Woodworth area, and asked the other two men to join his venture as he needed capital.

4. The first telephone conversation between two points in Rapides parish supposedly occurred between Alexandria and Woodworth when that line was completed.
5. In order to travel anywhere outside of Woodworth at that time (except to Lake Charles via the St. Louis, Watkins, and Gulf) it was necessary to depart from LaMourie.
6. The preceding description of the mill's organization plan was derived from interviews with residents of Woodworth and from a copy of the July 2, 1904, issue of "The American Lumberman", a periodical magazine which belongs to one of the residents. This is the only written materials, except for court records, that could be located concerning Woodworth.
7. The hot-lunch program was instituted at the school in 1947, and part of the auditorium was then partitioned off as the lunch room.

## SOURCES OF REFERENCE

### Written Materials

Legal transactions (1864 – 1931) as recorded at the Rapides parish Court House

"The American Lumberman", July 2 1904, pp. 82-84. (No other bibliographical information is available.)

### Persons Interviewed

Mrs. M. L. Bridewell – Librarian, Rapides Parish Library

Mrs. Carl Butler – Resident of Woodworth

Mrs. Mattie Smiley – Resident of Woodworth since 1898

Mr. C. L. Bushnell – Secretary, Rapides Police Jury, Past Mayor of Woodworth

Mr. W. L. Marler – First Mayor of Woodworth

Mr. M. R. Smith – Resident of Woodworth since 1898

Mr. M. R. Smith, Jr. – Assessor's Office, Rapides Parish