

Florida Historical Quarterly

Volume 75
Number 2 *Florida Historical Quarterly, Volume
75, Number 2*

Article 3

1996

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Jeffrey A. Drobney



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Recommended Citation

Drobney, Jeffrey A. (1996) "Company Towns and Social Transformation in the North Florida Timber Industry, 1880-1930," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 75: No. 2, Article 3.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol75/iss2/3>

Company Towns and Social Transformation in the North Florida Timber Industry, 1880-1930

by JEFFREY A. DROBNEY

THE history of industry and labor in the Post-Civil War South for many historians is a story of coal mining and textile manufacturing. Both industries have generated hundreds of historical monographs and represent a very visible part of Southern labor history, when the South's largest industry, lumbering, has been virtually ignored. Historian Edward Ayers has reminded us, however, that the lumber industry "captures the full scope of economic change in the New South, its limitations as well as its impact."¹ A few monographs, such as Nollie Hickman's study of Mississippi and Robert Maxwell and Robert Baker, and Ruth Allen's work on East Texas, have examined the lumber industry in the South, but for the most part historians have neglected the industry in the region. This is especially true for Florida despite its extraordinary impact on the state and the South.

The history of lumbering in Florida reaches far back in time to the small water-powered sawmills operated in Spanish Florida, and stretches forward to the paper and pulp mills of the present day. No period captures the imagination more than the heyday of Florida's lumbering boom between 1880 and 1930. During this period, thousands of loggers toiled in the piney woods and cypress swamps of the state on any given day to supply the hundreds of mills with raw logs for finished lumber. By 1930, lumbermen had virtually razed the virgin forest, the same dense growth which originally covered an estimated twenty-seven million acres. After only a few decades of frenzied cutting, it was estimated that only six million acres of virgin forest remained.

A significant part of the history of the South's lumber industry between 1880 and 1930 is the displacement of agrarian people, beginning with men and young boys who turned to seasonal work for modest wages, and culminating in families leaving the farm alto-

Jeffrey Drobney is assistant professor of history at Youngstown State University.

1. Edward Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York, 1992), 123.

gether and moving into the company town. Workers who alternated between the family farm and seasonal work in sawmills or logging camps, gradually disappeared over the late 19th and early 20th centuries, replaced by men who became totally dependent upon the industry for their survival. This process, the move from family farm to company town, took place in steps, over two or three generations.²

This article is about the lives of the men and women who lived in the lumber towns of North Florida between 1900 and 1940. It focuses on the use of “paternalistic” devices, such as company-controlled housing and company stores, by lumbermen in their efforts to create a stable and loyal workforce.

In addition, it shows that the culture that developed in company towns reflected a merging of both company and worker ideas and attitudes. Despite the sometimes negative and controlling mechanisms of paternalism, this article challenges the traditional perception of company towns. Oral histories conducted with former residents sometimes differ sharply with standard portraits of company towns. Lumber workers accepted paternalism as part of their working environment and used it to their advantage to better their lives.

The development of large sawmill towns in North Florida began after 1900 with the movement of large lumber corporations into the state. The company town in North Florida was not born out of any desire to control the lives of the workers, although this did come to play a role in the industry. Rather, the company town was created out of the necessity of locating workers near the timber because it was much more economical to transport finished lumber to retailers than to haul logs great distances to a mill. Since the mills were generally located far from any population centers, the company had to provide housing, schools, and recreational facilities for its employees.

In addition to being a center of lumber production, company towns represented an important solution to the persistent difficulties of securing a stable work force. Mill owners actively worked to develop a permanent core of working families. Managerial policies

2. Jacqueline Jones, *The Dispossessed: America's Underclasses from the Civil War to the Present* (New York, 1992), 158.

were aimed at attracting such families and fostering their loyalty to the company. These policies involved employee provisions that were not part of the basic wages-for-labor contract. Company officials also encouraged a flourishing company culture that included, among other things, baseball teams.

Such corporate practices composed what is usually referred to as corporate paternalism, or welfare capitalism. In his study of Southern Appalachian coal towns, Crandall A. Shifflett referred to paternalism as “contentment sociology.”³ The term corporate paternalism means official company policies which provided non-wage benefits to workers to help create a distinctive corporate culture and regulate the living environment of the employees and their families. Such policies existed not only in North Florida lumber towns, but also in coal and textile villages throughout the South. Corporate paternalism rarely existed in North Florida in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, but emerged as a definite response to labor market trends of the first two decades of the 20th century.

Celebrated portraits of company towns are universally disapproving, as anyone familiar with the scholarly treatment of them will attest. The towns have been depicted in government studies, newspapers, novels, and scholarly studies as filthy, crowded, exploitative environments. What is surprising is that through the course of researching this article, the oral histories and testimonies of former residents of North Florida sawmill towns challenge this popular image.

Many scholars and journalists writing in the early 20th century about coal, lumber, and textile company towns routinely gauged the quality of life in the communities against urban, middle-class standards of housing, sanitation, and leisure. Consequently, company towns infrequently measured up to the “national” standard. Modern day scholars studying the company town have underscored the seemingly total authority of the company while neglecting the efforts of workers to shape their own lives and destinies. In addition, much of their interest has focused on the most suffocat-

3. Crandall A. Shifflett, *Coal Towns: Life, Work, and Culture in Company Towns of Southern Appalachia, 1880-1960* (Knoxville, 1991), 54.

ing aspects of the company town, especially the scrip system, the company store, and the company house.

It is not necessary, or even realistic, to deny that paternalism did create certain forms of oppression in the company town. There are plenty of examples to document the oppressive scrip system, antilabor practices, and the disregard for worker safety. However, it is also unrealistic to disregard the positive recollections of life and work in a company town. There is abundant evidence to support the argument that many residents of North Florida lumber towns accepted company paternalism as something in their best interest. Consequently, the typical picture of a company town does not apply to North Florida. Rather, what emerges is a culture, defined by work and leisure, that was shaped by both parties, instead of just the company. Mill workers and their families accepted the benefits of paternalism, without compromising their independence entirely. Despite company control over education, religion, and even leisure, town residents maintained some control over their lives by resisting and circumventing company paternalism when it became too restrictive.

Sawmill company towns in North Florida varied in appearance and size. The largest towns contained several thousand residents and most often were named after or in honor of the founder, owner, or general manager of the company building the town.

The ethnic background of the towns was remarkably homogeneous. Except for the black population, the inhabitants were overwhelmingly Anglo-Saxon, native-born, southern, white, and Protestant. The majority of workers were from Florida, although substantial numbers were from Georgia, Alabama, or South Carolina. In these characteristics the people of the sawmill towns did not differ substantially from other residents of the piney woods. Each community had a social dynamic all its own, one not easily dismissed by the sweeping generic term of "company town." However, the unifying element for every town was that life was dominated by the company. The company town was not only the site of one's work, the source of one's income, and the location of one's residence; it also provided an introduction to organized community life and for many it was a setting in which new attitudes and values emerged.

Typical company towns in North Florida included Foley, Shamrock, and Bagdad. These communities were permanent in nature, unlike the community of Lukens and other semi-permanent saw-



Aerial view of Lacoochee, a company town of the Cummer Lumber Company near Dade City in Pasco County as it appeared in 1939. *Photograph courtesy of Florida State Archives.*

mill camps. The community of Foley, Florida, was located approximately five miles south of Perry, Florida, in Taylor County. When the town was built in 1928 it was named after Jeremiah (Jerry) S. Foley. After serving as general manager of the Brooks-Scanlon operation in Kentwood, Louisiana, Foley moved with the company to Eastpoint, Florida, as vice-president and general manager and later to Foley in the same capacity. In 1930, he succeeded Mr. Scanlon as president of Brooks-Scanlon Corporation in Foley, a position he held until his death in 1945.⁴ Foley, like other company towns in Florida, was a permanent, self contained, company-dominated setting with a population of over 1,300 people. Many of the inhabitants and workers in Foley had followed the Brooks-Scanlon Company from Minnesota to Louisiana and then to Florida when the company moved their operations to Eastport. From the town of

4. Brooks-Scanlon Company Records, Forest History Society, Durham, North Carolina (hereinafter FHS); In Memoriam, *Brooks-Scanlon News*, August 1946.

Foley, it was possible to see the smokestacks of the sprawling sawmill that provided work to its residents and to smell the lingering aroma of pine that was used to fuel the boilers.

The town of Eastpoint, Florida, served as a pattern when Brooks-Scanlon designed the layout of Foley. The streets, which were unimproved and largely sand, were given the names of different species of trees. Employee houses ranged in size from four to seven rooms with the larger homes being built for company executives. Most homes were constructed of either pine or cypress, had a front and rear porch, and were generally painted and well constructed. The homes in Foley were equipped with plumbing, electricity, and screens to help keep out the mosquitoes. Some of the houses were moved from the nearby logging camp at Carbur, but many more were constructed by the company under the direction of Arndt Larsen. Rent was approximately ten dollars a month for a four-room house and 17 dollars a month for a five-room house, with water and electricity provided. Rent for homes of black workers was \$2.50 per week for a four-room house.⁵ Residents tried to make their company houses into homes. Most people spruced up their yards by planting grass or rye and small gardens and installing fences. Sewer and water lines were installed and electricity for the community was produced from the company's own mill turbines.

Forty miles south of Foley, the Putnam Lumber Company built the company town of Shamrock in Dixie County in 1928. Shamrock was named in honor of William O'Brien, who was of Irish descent and president of the Putnam Lumber Company, by Marc Fleishel. Fleishel was vice president and operations manager of Putnam, and became president of the corporation when O'Brien died in 1925.

Shamrock had a population of over 2,600 people, of which blacks constituted 67 percent. Men accounted for approximately

5. Rent for company houses owned by the Alger-Sullivan Lumber Company of Century, Florida, ranged from a low of \$4.00 a month to a high of \$12.00. Workers were also charged for electricity which ranged from \$1.00 to \$1.50 a month. Rent Book, 1920-1927, Alger-Sullivan Lumber Company Records, John C. Pace Library, Special Collections, University of West Florida, Pensacola, Florida (hereinafter UWFJCL). In 1902, the Southern States Lumber Company charged employees \$5.00 per month for rent; Louise Childers, "Foley— Its Beginnings," *Fiberscope* 4 (June 1974): 1-8.

55 percent of the population.⁶ Consequently, Shamrock was the largest of the company towns in Florida.

Company-built houses for white employees were equipped with garages, screened porches, indoor plumbing, and electricity. The streets of Shamrock were paved with shell rock which was excavated from the millpond. In addition to company housing, Putnam built a theater, dairy, ice house, gas station, commissary and two hotels to house single men or employees with families who were unable to secure company housing. Across from the mill and main commissary was the most elegant building in Shamrock, the Putnam Lodge. The lodge was built to offer accommodations for Florida's ever increasing tourist traffic. The interior of the lodge was finished with pecky cypress. There were 36 rooms with private or connecting baths.

The community of Bagdad, Florida, had a long history as a lumbering community. It developed as a lumber town between 1840 and 1939. Located at the confluence of Pond Creek and the Blackwater River in Santa Rosa County, Bagdad was a major center for the manufacture of yellow pine lumber for most of the 19th and early 20th centuries. The first mill at Bagdad was built in the 1840s and the town was subsequently home to several lumber companies. Bagdad was somewhat atypical of the traditional North Florida company town because of its more varied and older architectural structures. Much of the "company town" development of Bagdad occurred between 1903 and 1939. In 1903 a syndicate of Chicago businessmen purchased the Simpson and Company mill of Bagdad, renaming it the Stearns and Culver Lumber Company.⁷ Subsequently, the Stearns and Culver Lumber Company changed its name twice, as the Chicago syndicate changed ownership, to the Bagdad Lumber Company, and then in 1912, to the Bagdad Land and Lumber Company. The new management began an aggressive modernization program and new houses were built for superintendents and workers, who numbered nearly 1,000 by 1910. By 1930, Bagdad's population of 1,186 residents was equally divided along gender lines, but was overwhelmingly white. Whites accounted for 75 percent of the population.

6. *Fifteenth Census of the United States, Population.*

7. *American Lumbermen: The Personal History and Public and Business Achievements of One Hundred Eminent Lumbermen of the United States* (Chicago, 1906).



R. G. Granger's sawmill and company housing shown here were located at Slocum in northern Columbia County. Less permanent than Bagdad, Foley, Shamrock, and La-coochee, it lasted a few years until the timber was cut out. Both company and workers then moved on to other locations. *Photograph courtesy of Florida State Archives.*

Homes in the white section of the community had varied architectural styles. Colonial Revival, Greek Revival, Shingle, Gothic, and Bungalow style homes all could be found. Most of these larger homes were either privately owned— or if they were owned by the company— reserved for company managers. Home ownership was rare in company towns. In Bagdad, however, because of the long history of the community, residents not associated with the mill owned homes. The majority of employee houses were three-room “shotgun” style structures. Typically, they were one story in height with unpainted wood siding. Most of them had front porches and rather spartan exteriors. The homes for black workers were similar in structure to those of white workers, but most of them were unpainted and fell into disrepair from neglect. The streets of Bagdad were unpaved, but according to community residents, were kept fairly clean of debris by company employees. The majority of company homes set aside for mill management had water toilets with individual cesspools. The houses for workers, both black and white, however, had “deep pitted” outhouses which were cared for by a company employee. Homes for whites had running water but black workers had to share water pumps for three or four houses. Electricity for the community was supplied by the Bagdad Land and Lumber Company. The company charged residents a flat rate rather than per kilowatt hour.

Besides company housing, companies offered a variety of non-wage benefits to their employees. Such benefits were instituted to secure and maintain a stable work force. Paternalistic programs included schools, churches, and recreational facilities. Despite the seemingly dominant company control over the lives of their mill workers, the sawmill culture that evolved within each community through these facilities was not one sided. In fact, it was a combination of company paternalism, the demands of mill labor, and the values brought to the community by its residents.

Educational facilities for workers were a critical element of welfare capitalism. Southern industrialists, whether they were involved in coal, textiles, or lumber, often pointed to company schools as evidence of their dedication both to the enrichment of the town and to the uplift of workers. The educational opportunities in the company towns were similar to those found in other North Florida communities. Schools were in session for eight to nine months and most teachers working in schools for whites had high school diplomas and college training. Black teachers, however, had little formal

educational instruction. The company played a large part in all phases of education. It owned the buildings and the land on which the school stood, and in some cases paid the teachers.

In Shamrock the Putnam Lumber Company built a fully accredited high school which was home to 18 teachers and 600 pupils. The facility was a two-story brick building that provided modern educational opportunities for children of company employees. In Foley, there was a junior high school but older students went to the local high school at Perry. In the last years of the 19th century Simpson & Company built a two-story wooden school building in Bagdad. The school burned in 1914 and was replaced by a one-story brick structure with class rooms, an office, library, and an auditorium seating approximately 400 people. Schools also served as community centers and meeting halls. Schools organized athletic teams, and debate teams, as well as community support groups, such as the Parent Teachers Association.

The school was only one of the many tools company officials used to create a company culture in which working families could take pride and to which they would feel a sense of loyalty. The company church was a product of the same forces that gave rise to the schools— a desire to recruit and retain a stable workforce. Most of the mill owners also took an active role in the spiritual life of company employees. Mill owners encouraged church attendance, piety, and sobriety among their workers. To support such behavior they provided church buildings, made donations to pastors' salaries, and in some cases provided substantial monetary contributions to local congregations. Public records show that the Brooks-Scanlon company of Foley deeded parcels of land to various churches, including the Baptists, Methodists, and the Church of Christ, in the area of Foley and surrounding communities. Company officials regulated the use of donated land by restricting its use as a place for "divine worship." If at anytime the land was used for any other purpose, such as union organization, ownership of the land reverted back to Brooks-Scanlon. The company was careful to exclude any standing timber on donated land by retaining the right to enter and remove any trees.⁸

8. Incorporation Record Book A, 102; Incorporation Record Book A, 137; Incorporation Deed Record Book 11, 535; Deed Record Book 22, 245-246, Taylor County Court House, Perry, Florida.

Although mills might run seven days a week during peak periods of production, most workers did not work on the Sabbath. Not everyone attended church, however. For example, of Bagdad's 1185 residents in 1930, only 697 or 59 percent were registered members of a church and even fewer were regular attendees. The average attendance for the Methodist church, which had a membership of 81 was 25 or 31 percent, while the Church of Christ, which had 100 members, had an average attendance of 55 worshippers. The Baptist church had the relatively high attendance rate of 69 percent, or on average 120 of 174 members would be at the Sunday service.⁹ It seems that mostly women and children attended church services, especially Sunday school. After a long week of work many men chose to hunt, fish, or just relax around the house. In addition, the number and variety of leisure activities kept the church pews empty. Churches lost out to baseball games, hunting trips, and other informal gatherings.

In most company towns mill management provided community churches that were used in turn by the principal denominations. In Foley, the black Baptists shared the same building with the Methodists by alternating every other Sunday. Most of the churches had few amenities, with no offices, space for Sunday schools, or baptismal pools. Consequently, log ponds often were used for baptisms. Few churches had full time ministers and even fewer had parsonages. To increase their visibility in the community, many lumber companies required company-paid preachers to participate in non-religious activities such as refereeing baseball games, acting as scout masters, or chaperoning dances for local young people.

Community residents had access to a rich and varied spiritual life nonetheless. Church services were held every Sunday and weekly prayer meetings were usually held on Wednesday evenings. Residents could choose from a variety of denominations, including Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist, Church of Christ, Assembly of God, Holiness, and Catholic.

Sawmill workers and their families participated in an extended social life and perhaps in more than any other domain of their lives, lumber workers at rest and play were able to build their own world. This world of leisure and recreation reflected a carefully balanced line connecting the acceptance of new forms of company

9. Florence L. Carter, "A Study of The Bagdad Community," Santa Rosa County Papers, UWFJCL, 23.

supported activities, while maintaining a closeness to more traditional rural and agrarian forms of entertainment. Recreational facilities varied from community to community, but some forms of leisure were common to all. Visiting neighbors to exchange news or gossip was commonplace. On weekday evenings, most adults visited their neighbors after supper for some porch sitting, card playing, and story swapping. Dan Leach, a longtime resident of Century, Florida, built by the Alger-Sullivan Lumber Company, recalled "front porches were important. The porches of houses all over town provided a platform for community socialization. During the era prior to the advent of air conditioning, residents would find relief from the sodden summer heat sitting in the late afternoons and early evenings on chairs, rockers, and porch swings chatting with passing friends and neighbors and fanning to cool themselves and discourage mosquitoes."¹⁰ Visiting also took place outside the home in a variety of settings and circumstances. Church socials such as Vacation Bible School, church suppers, or the occasional tent revival, company picnics, baseball games, movie theaters, weddings, funerals, and baptisms, offered community residents an opportunity to exchange recipes, tell jokes, or just exchange news about their families. Adding to a town's social life was the periodic touring carnival, circus, or minstrel show that would pitch a tent or build a stage in a nearby vacant lot or field. Thelma Garrett Wadkins recalled "recreation included socials with games around a bon fire, attending basketball and baseball games, swimming in the Escambia Creek, and visiting the Louisville and Nashville depot on Sunday afternoons to watch the passengers on the trams as they arrived or changed trains."¹¹

For company towns located near water, swimming on hot summer days was a favorite pastime. Streams, rivers and lakes offered community residents relief from the summer heat. Sometimes, residents of Bagdad ventured to Blackwater Bay which had platforms and diving boards for use. Men, and sometimes women, found relaxation in hunting and fishing. With its forests and numerous rivers and streams, not to mention the Gulf of Mexico, North Florida offered many opportunities for the sportsman.

10. Dan Leach, "Century: A Reminiscence," in *A Sawmill Scrapbook* (Century, Florida: Alger-Sullivan Historical Society, 1991).

11. Thelma Garrett Wadkins, "Life Was Simple," in *A Sawmill Scrapbook*.

Although conventional forms of leisure dominated, some town residents involved themselves in what were essentially “middle-class” activities. In a few towns reading and singing clubs were organized and flourished for many years. In Milton, a sawmill community located near Bagdad, Chautauqua Circle meetings began in 1911. Two years later the name of the organization was changed to the Milton Shakespeare Club. Comprised of local women, the Shakespeare Club met every other Tuesday. Programs included discussions on music, drama, national affairs, women of the world, international news, and current books. The motto of the club was “literary study, community service and mutual helpfulness.” The women participated in community service projects ranging from providing money for scholarships to donating money to the West Florida Children’s Home.¹² In Foley, wives of company executives and mill managers organized the Foley Women’s Missionary Society to provide assistance to the ill, aged, and underprivileged.

Many people spent their weekends engaged in what were, in effect, company-sponsored activities. Special holiday occasions were a small but influential aspect in a company’s attempt to create a corporate culture. Picnics, company-sponsored baseball teams, and company-built facilities were the backdrop for many social gatherings. In Foley the annual flower shows were held at the Garden Club built by the company. The building was a gift to the Lantana Garden Club of Foley from the Brooks-Scanlon Corporation for its efforts in “making Foley the most beautiful saw mill community in the country.”¹³ The company also built a movie theater for community residents.

Companies often sponsored picnics on holidays. Such activities were usually fairly elaborate affairs attended by the majority of the workers and their families because the mill was usually shut down for the entire day. Every Fourth of July the Bagdad Land and Lumber Company sponsored a company picnic and barbecue. Workers and their families boarded company owned railroad cars for an excursion trip to the picnic site some 45 miles north of Bagdad. On Thanksgiving and Christmas employees were given the day off to spend time with their families. In addition, on Christmas,

12. For a more complete history of the Milton Shakespeare Club see the Santa Rosa County Papers, UWFJCPL.

13. *Brooks-Scanlon News* (June 1938), Brooks-Scanlon Company Records, FHS.

lumber companies usually provided children of employees with small gifts or red stockings filled with nuts, candy, and fruit.

Company newsletters were an important part of community spirit. The Brooks-Scanlon company newsletter kept workers and residents alike abreast of the news that affected their community. In addition to other material, the newsletter highlighted a certain worker each month, commented on production statistics, and provided a list of visitors to the plant.

The pride of many of the company towns was its baseball team. The team was often the most visible symbol of company culture. During the 1920s baseball truly gained its position as a sport of the masses. Every spring, the team manager would post a notice calling for all interested males 18 years and older to try out for the team. Game days were the center of community attention and crowds numbering in the hundreds packed company stadiums. The companies contributed in various ways towards the maintenance of the ball team. In most situations the company provided uniforms and equipment, and paid other costs connected with the game. The Foley Red Caps were the official representatives of Brooks-Scanlon on the diamond. The Red Caps, composed of workers and their sons, played highly competitive ball with teams from nearby communities. Brooks-Scanlon provided a field and grandstands. The Bagdad Land & Lumber Company also sponsored a baseball team composed of workers and the occasional non-worker placed on the team because of his baseball prowess. There is ample evidence to suggest that some companies frequently hired men solely for their ability to play baseball.¹⁴ The Bagdad team played other teams from the nearby towns of Milton and Pensacola. Occasionally players from the small time teams made it to the major leagues. Ed Morris, who played on the Bagdad team in the early 20th century, played for the Chicago Cubs and the Boston Red Sox.

By the 1930s companies were also sponsoring softball teams. The Brooks-Scanlon sponsored team was described by the *Brooks-Scanlon News* as a combination of Ty Cobb, Rogers Hornsby, and Joe DiMaggio. According to the paper the players fielded like "Honus

14. Interview with Joe Foley, September 15, 1994. Foley said most workers for the Brooks-Scanlon team were workers, although it wasn't uncommon for the team to bring in a few "ringers."

Wagner, throw like Christy Mathewson and run the bases with the fleetness and abandon of Pepper Martin."¹⁵ Because of the popularity of the team with company workers, regular games were scheduled under the arc-lights at the stadium in Foley on Saturday nights.

Organized sport was a product of the transformation of work, and reflected an increasingly developed industrial society. The baseball team, with its uniforms sporting the company logo and the players competing in a company-built stadium, was yet another indicator of how tightly interconnected the company and its employees had become.

Beneath the flare of company picnics and company-sponsored baseball teams, some less visible, but highly significant, policies were put into place to enhance the workers' security. Since many of the company towns were relatively isolated, the employer made provisions for medical care where none was available. The company either contracted with a local physician to care for the injured or sick, or hired one outright. The company doctor was an important person in the sawmill community. He lived in a comfortable, well-furnished house and was constantly in demand to treat a variety of illnesses and injuries. People with colds, influenza, and pneumonia were common sights in the doctor's office, as were workers with smashed fingers, mangled hands, and various amputations. He practiced in a combined office and clinic that was built by the company. Black workers frequently turned to black midwives who helped deliver babies or cared for the sick in the quarters.

Dr. Walter J. Baker, or Doc Baker, as he was called by his patients, is still fondly remembered in Taylor County. Dr. Baker moved to Carbur, Florida, in 1922 as company doctor for the Brooks-Scanlon Lumber Company. A January 1944 "personnel portrait" found in the Brooks-Scanlon company newsletter praised Doc Baker: "whether it's colicky babies, expectant mothers, workmen with broken arms, hay fever, pneumonia, appendectomies, hang nails, or boys with boils, 'Doc' has a bedside manner that would be the envy of a lot of Park Avenue medicos."¹⁶ In a 1975 interview Dr. Baker recalled the payment he received for the first

15. *Brooks-Scanlon News*, August 1938.

16. *Brook-Scanlon News*, January 1944.

baby he delivered in Taylor County: "payment was two deer skins and a ham venison plus the honor of the girl being named after me. She was named Jo Baker Whiddon and proudly bears the name today."¹⁷

Out of the practice of hiring company doctors developed the custom of charging workers a monthly medical fee of one to two dollars. The medical fee was one of the biggest complaints of lumber workers. Since fees were not voluntary, they were charged whether workers utilized the services of the company doctor or not. The fee of one or two dollars represented a substantial part of a worker's salary since the medical charge equaled a day's pay. Most lumber workers only worked an average of twenty-two or twenty-three days each month because of frequent shutdowns.

Companies took paternalism to new heights when they introduced employee life insurance policies. Employees of the Brooks-Scanlon Corporation were covered by policies from the Provident Insurance Company of Chattanooga, Tennessee. The company paid half of the premium and employees paid half. Under each policy, employees were covered for several hundred dollars in case of an accident or sickness which resulted in total disability. Despite the mandatory medical fee and premium payment, medical and life insurance benefits may have helped suppress any desire to move away from the company town during an era in which workers' compensation, pension plans, and government welfare programs were unknown to southern workers.

To most residents of a company town, the center of interest and activity was the commissary or company store. In most communities the company commissary was a large, prosperous operation. Since the mill hands and their families usually bought all their supplies from the company store, it carried virtually everything, from grapes to garters, butter to baby shoes, and oranges to overalls. The interior of the store was clean and spacious. Goods were neatly piled in shelves or display counters. Groceries were arranged in a separate section. Depending on the company, the commissary ranged from providing a real service and convenience to employees, to being an instrument of employee control that recovered a substantial part of their wages through price gouging. Recollections from former residents of Shamrock and Foley are unclear over whether

17. Louise Childers, "Carbur: A Look Back," *Fiberscope* 5 (March 1975): 9.

prices in the company stores were higher or lower than in the surrounding areas. Ellis Crosby of Shamrock believed prices were equal or slightly less than Cross City merchants. Alton Wentworth recalled the prices at Carbur to be slightly higher. More exact comparisons of the company store with local merchants are available in government studies. In one such study conducted by the United States Department of Labor in 1935, it was found that the aggregate average prices charged by company stores were from 2.1 percent to 10.4 percent higher than those charged by independent stores.¹⁸

In both Foley and Shamrock the company stores were show-cases of modern facilities and both were the heart of their respective communities with their long front porches serving as a meeting place for town residents. The stores were large, well lighted, and one of the few air-conditioned buildings in either town. The stores carried a diversified stock of merchandise and the quality compared favorably with goods found in an independent store. The commissary housed both a grocery store and a meat market. In addition, there was a drug store, which served as a local hangout for teenagers, and a barber shop where the men could shoot a few games of pool while waiting for a hair cut or just drop in to visit. The commissary at Bagdad housed the company doctor's office, a barber shop, and a drug store.

The company stores were centralized places of communal life and affiliation. No other place in the company town brought as many people together in one location. The company store was a crossroads where people of different classes, races, and genders came into close contact with one another. Company managers shopped alongside millworkers, both black and white. Wives of mill workers met and talked about their children, while their husbands swapped stories about the big fish that got away, or the breakdown of a piece of equipment at the mill. For many workers the company store represented a place of enjoyment, recreation, and lively conversation.

The company store was also an official extension of the company. Lumber towns throughout the South were often closed to outside businesses, that is, the company reserved all rights to furnish the requisites of life. Cases of North Florida lumber compa-

18. United States Department of Labor, "Company Stores and the Scrip System," *Monthly Labor Review* 41 (July to December 1935): 51.

nies actively coercing employees to trade at a company store are rare. The communities of Foley and Shamrock were near larger communities with independent stores. Foley was five miles from Perry and Shamrock was one mile from Cross City. According to former mill workers, residents of both communities had access to outside merchants. The community of Bagdad had two privately owned grocery stores. Mill owners, however, used a form of “extended control” over their employees to dictate where and what they would buy. The economic status of many employees forced them to seek credit, and the extension of credit by the employer as a charge against future wages obligated those employees to patronize the company store. The length of the pay period, and the length of the period for which wages were withheld, had a bearing on the employees’ ties to the company store. Some companies paid employees once a month although most paid twice a month.¹⁹

The key to the operations of many of the company commissaries was the “merchandise check.” It was through the merchandise check that workers came into contact with the worst the company had to offer—outrageous prices, a monopoly of food and other essential supplies, and crippling debt. Although North Florida company stores frequently did an annual business in excess of \$70,000, very little of it was in cash. In 1935 the Department of Labor determined that only 8.2 percent of the company stores in the lumber industry did over 50 percent of their business in cash, 29.1 percent did between 20.1 percent and 50 percent in cash, 31 percent did between 10.1 percent and 20 percent in cash, and 31 percent did less than 10 percent of their business in cash.²⁰ The merchandise check varied from pseudo coins made of brass, aluminum, or tin alloy, to punchout cards, coupon books, or merchandise books. Metal tokens, more commonly called babbitts, had the company name printed on one side, and “good for \$1.00 in merchandise” or “good for [\$].50 in merchandise,” stamped on the other side.²¹ Many companies used hard cardboard merchandise checks issued in several denominations. Others used punchout cards or merchandise books. The printed side of cardboard punchout cards had “payable on demand in merchandise only” directly above the employee’s

19. Childers, “Foley— Its Beginnings,” 1-8; The Alger-Sullivan Lumber Company of Century, Florida, paid employees twice a month.

20. “Company Stores and the Scrip System,” 47.

21. Interview with Joe Foley, Naples, Florida, May 21, 1994.

name. The value of the punchout card was stamped in big, bold print next to the employee's name. On the outer edges of the card numbers totalling the value of the ticket were printed. If the merchandise ticket was valued at \$1.00, ten boxes with the number 5, representing .05 cents, were printed in a row on both the top and bottom of the ticket. Each box would be "punched" for every .05 cents in merchandise purchased. The Southern States Lumber Company paid employees in celluloid chips. Known as "chips" or "lightweights," they could be traded in for merchandise at the commissary.

Officially, the company issued merchandise checks and babbitts at the request of the worker, but since paydays were infrequent and irregular, workers regularly had to take pay advances to survive. A number of mills in the state issued coupons at the end of each day for work performed during that day. By paying in merchandise checks companies were able to avoid paying employees in cash.

Whether these substitutes for cash were in brass coins or punchout cards, they had the same essential characteristic: they were good only for merchandise at the company store, or for other payments to the company which denied the workers the freedom of individual choice to buy in the cheapest market.

Payment of wages exclusively in the form of scrip was not common. It was common, however, for a company to pay their employees half in cash and half in merchandise checks. By paying workers in merchandise checks companies were able to avoid paying employees in cash, which rendered them "cash poor." Lumber companies avoided redeeming merchandise checks for cash. Consequently, if the worker needed cash for any purpose he had to sell his accumulated merchandise checks to a private individual—other mill workers, local people, or merchants, at a large discount. In addition, almost every company town had one or two loan sharks. The practice of discounting scrip for cash by merchants and other members of the community was widespread, ranging from being common and the amount considerable, to being incidental in nature. Employees who did trade babbitts or merchandise checks for cash did so at a loss of from 15 percent to 40 percent.²²

22. "Company Stores and the Scrip System," 52; Alger-Sullivan Lumber Company to A. C. Blount Jr., August 23, 1915, Alger-Sullivan Lumber Company Records, Box 1, Folder 9, UWFJCLP.

Legally, lumber companies were required to “cash in” merchandise checks upon employee request. For full pay, however, one might have to hold the paper for several weeks. Under Chapter 6914 of the Acts of the Florida Legislature of 1915 companies issuing coupons did not have to redeem them until after ninety days from the date of issuance. The Alger-Sullivan Lumber Company in Century issued merchandise checks daily as a time record with amount due for labor performed. On demand merchandise would be issued from the company store. The check could be redeemed in cash 30 days after it was issued only if it was presented by the payee.²³ As company attorneys acknowledged, “it would seem that it would be difficult for the employee to negotiate them, except at great sacrifice.”²⁴

One North Florida lumber company issued merchandise checks for an amount less than that actually due employees. If the merchandise check was traded at the company store, the employee was given the full amount due. If the employee sold the merchandise check, however, the company redeemed it for face value. For example, if the company owed an employee \$3.00, the employee was given a merchandise check for \$2.50. If the employee traded at the company store he received merchandise for the full amount of \$3.00. If the check was redeemed or cashed in, the company would only redeem it for the amount of \$2.50. This type of company control over employees restricted where employees could shop and denied them the opportunity to receive their full earned income in cash.

The commissary and merchandise check system were effective in keeping all of the worker’s financial transactions within the company. By 1933, over 40 percent of the annual payroll of Florida lumber companies was recovered through company stores.²⁵ Company records from the Alger-Sullivan Lumber Company of Century, Florida, reveal the tight hold that lumber companies had over the financial lives of their employees. Commissary records for the company’s #8 logging camp show that for a six month period from May 1927 through November 1927 total store sales amounted to

23. For an example of a merchandise check see Stearns and Culver Lumber Company, Beggs and Lane Collection, Box 147, File 1475, UWFJCPL.

24. Blount & Blount & Carter to the Alger-Sullivan Lumber Company, August 16, 1915, Alger-Sullivan Lumber Company Records, Beggs and Lane Collection, Box 1, Folder 9, UWFJCPL.

25. “Company Stores and the Scrip System,” 48.

\$9,220.30. For this same period coupon sales amounted to \$5,769.35 or 63 percent of total sales, while cash sales amounted to only \$846.87 or nine percent of total sales. For a second six month period extending from December 1927 to June 1928 total sales in the company store totaled \$12,929.27. Cash sales totaled \$709.45 or six percent and coupon sales totaled \$7486.15 or 58 percent of total sales.²⁶

Long intervals between pay days, curtailment of working time, retention of wages, and paying workers with merchandise checks all detracted from the workers' freedom of choice and their ability to purchase food, clothing, and household items at the lowest possible price. The practice of paying employees in merchandise checks, which deprived workers of cash for long periods of time, forced many workers into a chronic state of indebtedness to the company. In addition, the practice of charging all the employee's purchases to his wages before he received his pay, tended to make it impossible for him to get credit outside the company store. Some workers, consequently, were tangled in a vicious cycle of perpetual debt to the commissary.

The company towns brought many changes to rural life in North Florida. Mechanization and routinized work days meant that men were away from the home ten to twelve hours a day, and women spent much of their time alone, or in the company of their children and neighbors. The company town and its commissary eliminated many of the traditions and customs that tied women to their older female family members. With the development of the company store, the wifely duties of household production— the making of handicrafts, canning and preserving, and large scale gardening— all but disappeared. Patterns of socializing also changed as a result of the company town. Corn shuckings and molasses boilings gave way to socializing on front porches, baseball fields, garden clubs, saloons, and the occasional hunting or fishing excursions. These socializing patterns reflected a line tightly drawn between men's and women's worlds in the lumber camps and towns. Men engaged in certain forms of activity, women in others. Drinking, gambling, and organized baseball were male activities; quilting, church socials, and home visits to help care for the sick or needy were most associated with women. Going to the movies, a

26. Employee Time Book, Alger-Sullivan Lumber Company Records, UWFJCL.

family reunion, or company picnic were often family events, but even at these men and women usually divided— men in one area and the women in another— to talk about work, their children, the weather, or just life in general.

The company town system has been denounced as vicious, enslaving, and degrading to both black and white workers and their families. Looking at it from the outside it is impossible to argue that the system was not all of these and more as the years and decades passed without any discernible change in the social, economic, or political control of the community. The impact of the lumber company town was very disruptive on patterns of social organization since it dramatically altered the economic and social status of its inhabitants. On the farm, the worker had been master of his own fate, the social equal to any man in the community. By coming to the company town, he exchanged his independence for subordination to the lumber company and dependence upon a cash income. By living in the company town, workers worked in the company's mill, took orders from company bosses, were governed by local politicians hired by the company, and lived in the company's house from which they could see the mill.

The mill worker's lack of home ownership also defined his new position in the social structure of North Florida. The company owned or leased all of the land in and around the company town and refused to sell or sublet to individual workers. The worker, whose family and culture tied him to the region, had no opportunity, therefore, to purchase property or acquire a home. A workman's temporary relationship to company housing added to the uncertainty of his status. Tenancy was conditional upon a man's service in the mill or logging crew, and when a man left the job for whatever reason, he lost the right to occupy his house as well. A sudden disagreement with the mill superintendent might end in dismissal and concurrent loss of shelter for the worker's family. "Everyone's life was directly or indirectly dependent on the company. If you didn't work or pay the rent you didn't stay in their houses," recalled Carol Snider in 1982 when she spoke about the Grove-Dowling Lumber Company in Otter Creek.²⁷ Too often the company not only exploited the worker and his family during the years

27. Carol Swaggerty Snider; "Gulf Hammock, The Town," *Search For Yesterday: A History of Levy County, Florida* (Bronson, Florida: Levy County Archives Committee, 1982), 15-17.

of operation but then left them without a future when the mill suddenly closed.

Yet there is more. The negative legacy of company towns cannot be denied; however, at the same time, corporate paternalism helped to create a system of shared benefits and values. Many mill owners were genuinely concerned about the well-being of their employees. Despite the inequities of the merchandise check system, the low wages, and poor housing, the sawmill workers in North Florida were surprisingly loyal. The attitudes expressed in many oral histories of former residents of the region's sawmill towns stand in sharp contrast to the popular images of company towns. Most of the veteran employees usually had high praise for the mill owners. Speaking positively of Jerry Foley of Brooks-Scanlon, Mrs. Lonnie Holton said "We did everything to make Mr. Foley proud of us. He was quiet but had a spot of humor and with his keen eyes could see everything."²⁸ Gavin Wright contends that lumber towns "did not build up either the sense of self-identity or the social visibility of the cotton mill people."²⁹ In his study of the lumber industry in wiregrass Georgia, Mark Wetherington remarked "the transition from farm to mill town took pinelanders out of the context of the individual family farm and local kinship network and placed them in a more impersonal, corporate community."³⁰ Both statements are very misleading. Based on oral interviews with former mill workers and community residents, working for a large lumber company gave many employees a sense of "belonging." There was a strong feeling of "family" in the more permanent company towns.³¹ One employee of the Brooks-Scanlon company described Foley not as a company town but a "family town." The idea that community residents comprised an "extended family" was common among mill workers. Lumber mill workers and their families tended to be more migratory than textile workers or coal miners and thus removed from immediate relatives who might form part of an extended household. Residents of a company town thought of themselves as family because of their shared experi-

28. Childers, "Foley— Its Beginnings," 5.

29. Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War* (New York, 1986), 161-162.

30. Mark V. Wetherington, *The New South Comes to Wiregrass Georgia, 1860-1910* (Knoxville, 1994), 131.

31. Interview with J. Ellis Crosby, July 7, 1993; see letters submitted by residents of Foley, Florida, in *Brooks-Scanlon News*, FHS.

ences in an industrial environment and mutual dependency. The awareness of “community” created by company towns filled the feelings of emptiness many families had.

One long-time resident of Foley observed, “There will never be another place like Foley— all were neighborly and loved each other.”³² Residents lived close to one another, in stark contrast to the loneliness and seclusion of farm households and isolated logging camps. Once they were in close proximity to one another, workers thought of themselves as members of a great extended family, divided along racial lines, in ways similar to those of workers living in Piedmont textile villages, or Appalachian coal towns. Writing in the 1930s Bagdad resident Florence Carter thought of the Bagdad community “as a group of people living in a miniature world.” Carter believed there was “a ‘we feeling’ of unity and cooperation” in the community.³³

Because of the relative lack of alternative employment opportunities, the heavy handed paternalism of mill owners, the company store, company doctor, company-built houses, and company-financed churches were all part of the pattern of life which became accepted in the company towns of North Florida. Yet there is still more. The acceptance of company paternalism must also be seen in the context of living and working conditions in the rural South during the first half of the 20th century. Workers and their families did not have to migrate to the sawmill town. However, the chronic misery of rural life, whether it was in North Florida, Georgia, Alabama, or South Carolina, was a powerful push factor. Low wages, long hours, heavy physical labor, inferior housing, isolation, the scarcity of medical care, and the uncertainty of agriculture, gave community residents a different perspective on their situation. For many, subsistence farming held out limited opportunity while work in a large sawmill offered what seemed to be limitless opportunities. Roads, railroads, towns, stores, electric lighting, medical and dental care, and modern education were welcomed by most families.

Writing during the depression of the 1930s Florence Carter listed the five major problems confronting the town’s residents. Unemployment, interference of stock on highways, “hogs kept too close in for proper sanitary conditions,” lack of year-round super-

32. Childers, “Foley— Its Beginnings,” 4.

33. Carter, “Bagdad,” 4.

vised play grounds, and limited recreational facilities such as libraries, were of primary concern.³⁴ Carter's list suggests that issues such as high prices at company commissaries, company housing, and company scrip, problems that have drawn the attention and ire of historians and sociologists looking to attack corporate paternalism, were of minor concern or were simply accepted as equal for the conveniences of town living.

By listening to the words and examining the writings of former lumber workers and company town residents, it is apparent that the universal negative perception of company towns is unfounded. Oppression did exist in the communities and there were abundant opportunities for exploitation. Yet at the same time company towns offered solutions to problems associated with rural life and provided opportunities for education, recreation, and employment, thus creating a new culture composed of both company and worker values. No longer can positive recollections of life and work in company towns be dismissed. Scholars must use the perceptions of workers and their families and how they saw their own social condition and their measures of fulfillment to get a more accurate view of company towns.

The company town represented the pinnacle of industrial evolution in the North Florida lumber industry. Even while Shamrock and Foley were being constructed, their demise was within sight. By the mid-1930s the vast forests of virgin pine and cypress that had covered North Florida were nearly depleted. Most companies had not adapted reforestation practices by this time, or if they had, their timber would not be harvestable for another 20 years.

Beginning in the late 1940s, lumber production began to slow and then ceased altogether as the last great trees were cut and processed. As the industry declined, company towns were systematically dismantled and company homes were sold to former workers for as little as one and two dollars. The last vestiges of company paternalism—the company stores, company-sponsored baseball teams, and company-sponsored churches—all vanished. As the institutions died, the company culture they spawned was interred with them.

34. Carter, "Bagdad," 24.