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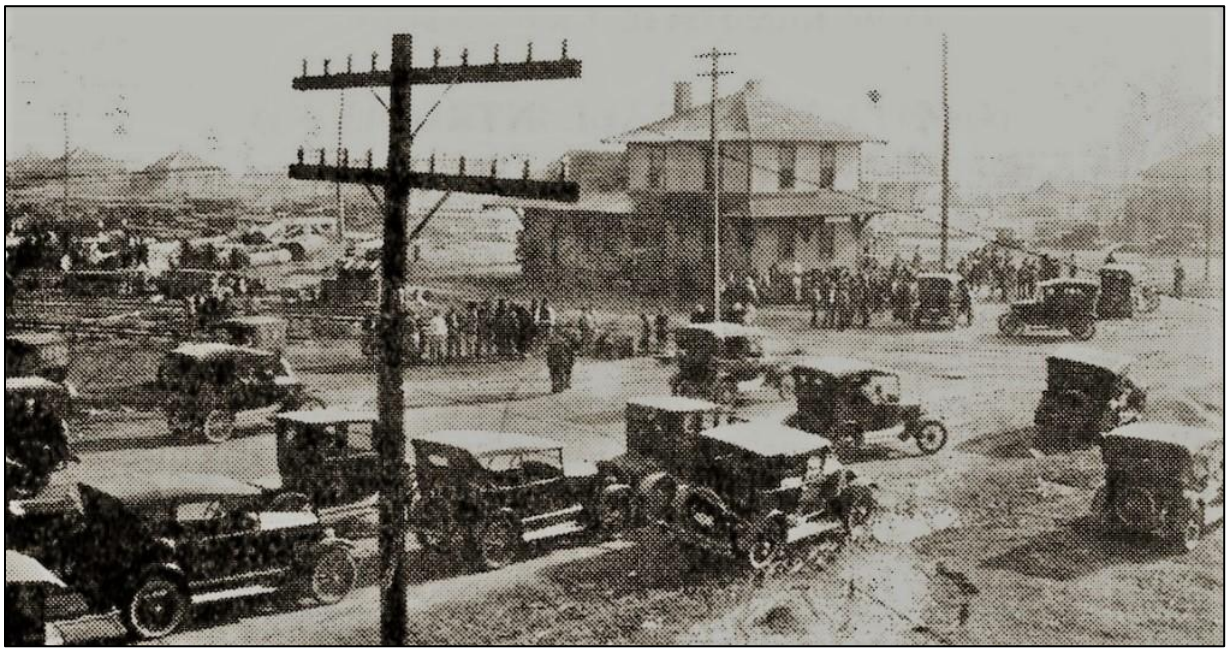
THE MOVE OF THE CADY LUMBER COMPANY AND ITS EMPLOYEES FROM MCNARY, LA, TO MCNARY, AZ, IN 1924



JAMES P. BARNETT

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Author:
James P. Barnett, Secretary/Treasurer, Southern Forest Heritage Museum, Long Leaf, LA, 71448.

Cover photo:
Families gather in McNary, LA, for the departure of the sawmill workers on February 10, 1924. Trains are being loaded with 500 employees and their families, including their belongings and animals, for their move to Arizona. (Photo from the South Rapides Chronicle newspaper)

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Abstract:
The lumbering enterprise that developed in the South during the late 19th and early 20th centuries came with a singular purpose—to cut the mill's acreage of timber and shut down with no thought of any further use of the land. The vast majority of towns that were developed to house the mill's workers ceased to exist after the mills closed. The Cady Lumber Company of McNary, LA, was an exception to this practice. The owners were determined to stay in the lumbering business and provide employment for many of their workers. They found a defunct mill on the Apache Indian Reservation in northern Arizona and moved about 800 employees and family members to a new mill that was renamed McNary, AZ. These mostly Black employees became the vanguard of timbermen leaving the South to find jobs in the West.

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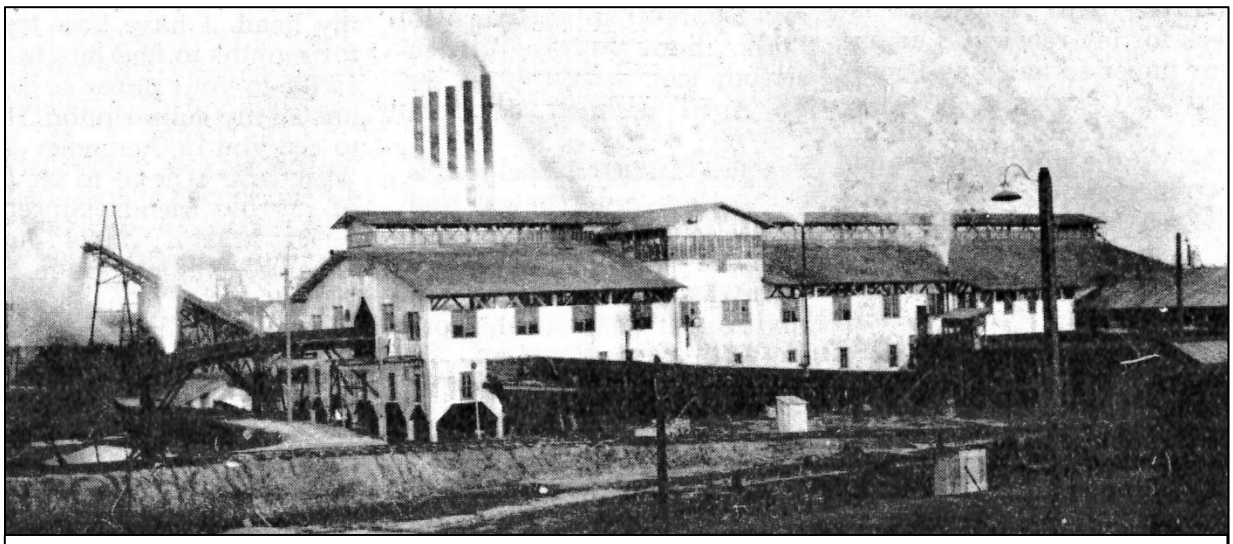
THE MOVE OF THE CADY LUMBER COMPANY AND ITS EMPLOYEES FROM MCNARY, LA, TO MCNARY, AZ IN 1924

James P. Barnett

In the early 20th century, when lumbering was at its prime in the South, lumbermen bought old-growth longleaf pine forests for as little as $1.25 per acre and built sawmills in isolated areas near their forest land. To support the operation of these mills, towns would be built to house the workers and their families. When their forests were cut, the owners had two options—buy more timberland or close their mills. Guidelines for reforesting the land had not been developed, and it was viewed as unrealistic. This was the problem faced by the Cady Lumber Company at McNary in 1924. Although the owners wanted to buy more timberland, none close to the mill was available, and closing mills usually resulted in the demise of the town.



A photo of the Cady Lumber Company sawmill in McNary, LA, taken in the early 1920s. The mill was a large and productive one. (Photo from the South Rapides Chronicle newspaper)

Wanting to stay in the lumbering business, William M. Cady, with his two partners James McNary and Alfred Smith, began to look for options for relocating their mill. They found and purchased a small defunct sawmill and town named Cooley on the Apache Indian Reservation in the White Mountains near Flagstaff, Arizona. In addition to the Apache Lumber Company, they purchased its ponderosa pine timber leases and the accompanying Apache Railroad (Lewis 2012).

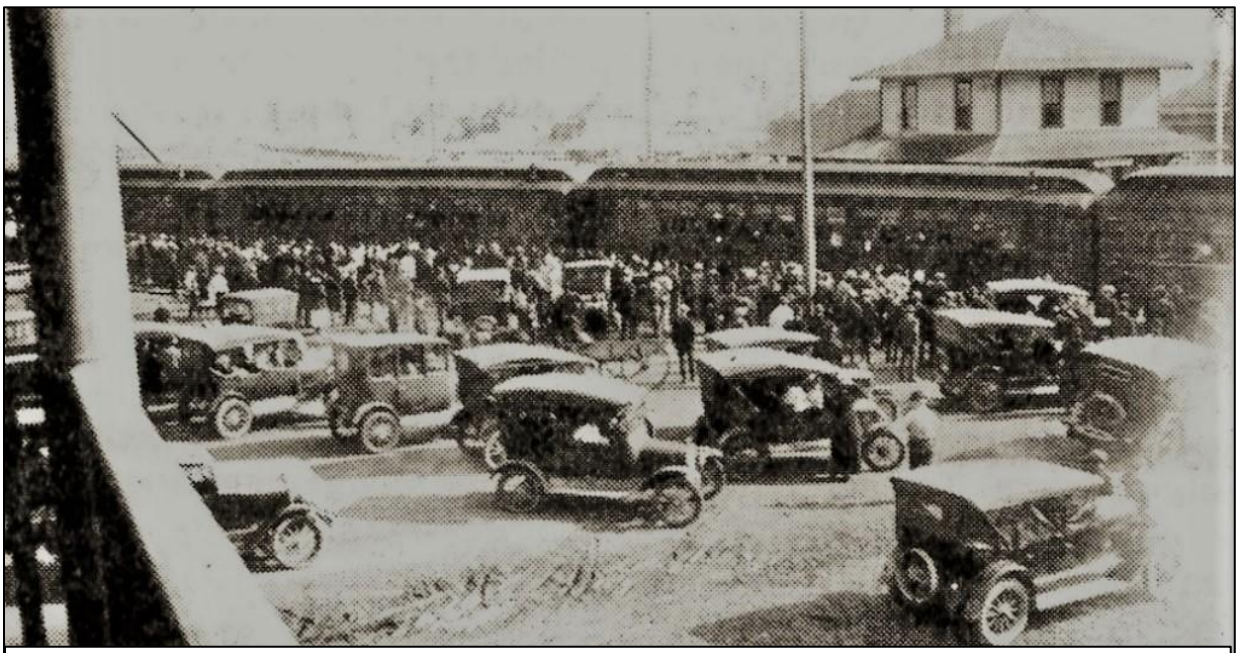
The Cady Lumber Company had been chartered in 1913. In its heyday, the town of McNary had a population of nearly 3,000 residents with a church, school, post office, hospital, swimming pool, and a large theater (Coen 2014). With the closure of the mill and the move of many of the workers to the new mill in Arizona, the town's population decreased to a few hundred, and it

struggled to survive. In 1929, McNary's charter became inactive. The community petitioned the state to have its charter reestablished in 1965.

The purchase of the Arizona mill had to be approved by the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the U.S. Forest Service because some of the timber leases were on land of the Sitgreaves National Forest. Cady Lumber Company then spent $3.5 million to install an all-electric mill with three band saws. For marketing purposes, the company received permission to rename the town Cooley as McNary (Chanin 1990).

On February 7, 1924, the last log in the McNary, LA, mill was cut. Because an experienced labor force would be needed at the new mill, three days later mostly Black employees and their families—about 800 in all—boarded special trains with their baggage and equipment and moved west to the new home that awaited them. They moved from the heat and humidity of Louisiana to a town at 7,300 feet above sea level, where annual snowfall could measure in feet.

McNary noted, "Cady could not visualize a lumber operation without the employment of Black labor, and he decided to import about 500 of our experienced and faithful employees to Arizona" (Chanin 1990). One employee who made the trip commented, "It was quite an adventure. It took us about three days to make the trip—we were well equipped, dining cars and everything. The people had lots of baggage with them, household goods, you know, and even their chickens" (Reid 2016).

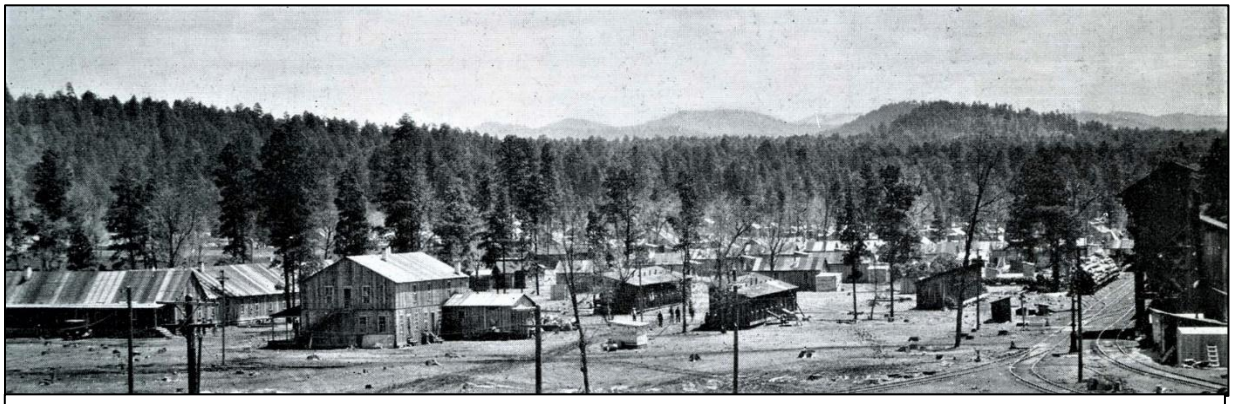


Employees and their families boarding trains in McNary for their trip to the new town of McNary in the White Mountains of Arizona. The trip would take three days and would result in a completely different living environment. (Photo from the South Rapides Chronicle newspaper)

Most of the employees who moved were African American. According to the 1920 federal census, there were only 8,005 African Americans in the entire state of Arizona. James McNary commented, “There was a good deal of indignation in some quarters in Arizona over the importation.” The threatened violence never materialized. Gradually, some workers returned to Louisiana because of the cold climate, but even more went to Arizona over the years because of the availability of high paying jobs.

One employee who helped build the town described the new lumbering town as, “The town grew with a Negro quarter, and a Spanish-American quarter, each of which had its own elementary school, church, and café. There also was a gathering of Navajo shacks which gradually developed nearby Navajo town. On the hill, was the Apache Hotel, commissary, lumbermill office, bank, post office, garage, theatre, hospital, and finally a clinic that made up the town” (Baeza 2005). It was described by all as a beautiful town.

This was the newly built commissary to serve the town of McNary, AZ. The mill owners made a special effort to meet the needs of their workers.



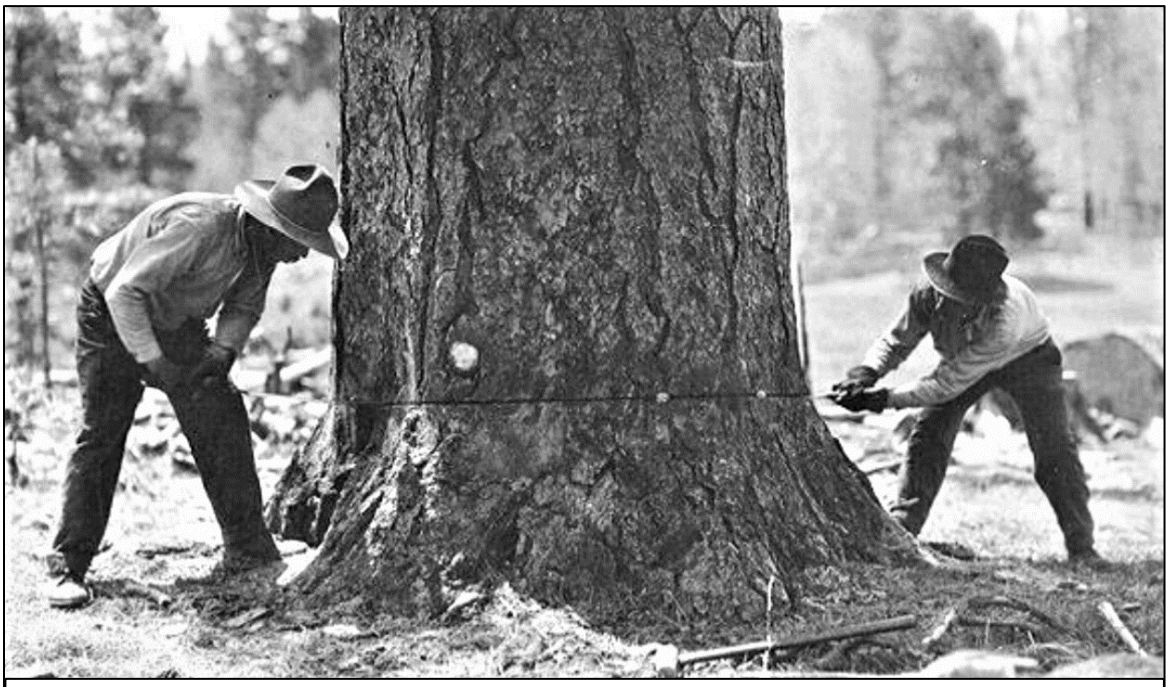
The town of McNary was created in the White Mountains of Arizona. The workers were pleased with the town and found the site very attractive.

Although the elementary schools were segregated by race, all the children attended McNary High School. One resident commented, “There was no entertainment except what we made ourselves. We never fought. I don’t remember any of us fighting. We used to make games out of nothing.” An individual who was born there and later returned as a teacher commented, “We used to say McNary school was a ‘little United Nations” (Baeza 2005).

Strangely, even though McNary was a community divided into segregated districts, there was a surprising closeness among its residents. Old-timers never got over their enchantment with the town. Some commented, “Although there was still a lot of discrimination, it was not the strict racial segregation that was enforced by Jim Crow laws and practices where we came from.” The town became known for its diversity and composed race relations.

An important aspect of this migration was family connections. Within the constraints of segregation, travel was dangerous and uncertain and demonstrated the resilience of the African American community. It was the power of communication and relationship networks among families and friends that met the challenges encountered by moving to opportunities in the West.

Formation of Black neighborhoods offered support to others migrating to the area. These Black communities had contacts who could help newcomers find work, secure housing, and move more easily into the new society. These neighborhoods could provide readily available services where Black people could go out and have a drink, get a haircut, buy a sandwich, and socialize with friends. Although these Black neighborhoods were small, families and individuals could become more easily assimilated into a larger society than in their previous southern experience.



Many of the lumbermen who came from the South were timber cutters—they had the experience needed to harvest the large Ponderosa pine trees in northern Arizona.

Long-Bell Lumber Company, which had closed their sawmill operations at DeRidder and Longville in the 1920s and moved to California where they established new mills, actively recruited Black workers from Louisiana. The company needed experienced lumbermen.

The McNary sawmill had a large log pond where logs were held until needed for processing. The mill itself can be viewed in the background.

The uniqueness of the town caused it to be studied by numerous sociologists. Through this process, the fate of many Black lumbermen from Louisiana and other southern states has been defined. Between 1920 and 1960, an unknown number of African American loggers and sawmill workers migrated from farms and sawmills in the South to new mill towns and logging camps being constructed across the Southwest and into the Northwest. These workers came from a pool of Black timber workers whose numbers rose from 83,000 in 1910 to 180,000 in 1950. Because of their expertise, well-paying jobs, and their families were assimilated into the newly developing industrial society

Ironically, the fate of McNary, Arizona, ended up being the same as so many other sawmill towns—the mill burned in 1979, and its operation was moved to Flagstaff. The town of McNary now has only about 500 residents. In 1935, James McNary bought the mill from William Cady and renamed the company Southwest Lumber Mills (which later became the Southwest Forest Industries).

A typical Black worker moving logs in the pond to a position they can be moved into the mill for processing.

Nearly 100 years after the move of the Cady Lumber Company from McNary, LA, to McNary, AZ, there is no sawmill in either town, and neither has ever fully recovered. But the move established the migration of experienced Black timber workers from the South to jobs in the West that continued for decades. This process demonstrated the effect of lumbering on the movement of Black families from a time of servitude into the mainstream of the nation's developing industrial society (Barnett and Lueck 2020).

CLOSING REMARKS

The lumber industry changed the way of life for central Louisiana and had a major effect on the development of the South's economy and culture. Although most of the sawmill towns did not last, the workers gained benefits of which they had never been accustomed—stable pay and training which served them well and provided for their movement into the industrial age.

The movement west of Black timber-related workers who lived and worked in McNary, LA, resulted in employment using the skills developed in the southern mills. They set the pattern of timber worker migration to the West, where good paying jobs were available. Workers from across the region followed those of the Cady Lumber Company and moved west. The Cady company owners did not realize the migration pattern that they started led to the movement of many other Black families to the West.

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