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HARVESTING OF THE KISATCHIE WOODS BY THE MERIDIAN LUMBER COMPANY, 1934-1940, A PICTORIAL VIEW



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Cover photo:

This photo of Meridian Lumber Company locomotive #303 was taken by Forest Service employee G.A. Gerhart in July 1939, while it was being used to log in the Kisatchie Woods tract of timber near the community of Kisatchie, LA.

Photo credits:

The photos were taken by Tommy Kohara as a student worker for the Southern Forest Experiment Station and by U.S. Forest Service employee George A. Gerhart. Kohara later became a professional photographer and worked under contract to the Forest Service and the Louisiana Forestry Association. The photographs are now in the collections of the Southern Forest Heritage Museum and Research Center.

Abstract:

The Meridian Lumber Company was one of three lumber companies developed by the owners of the Crowell and Spencer Lumber Company. The companies were connected by the company owned 75-mile Red River and Gulf Railroad. Even though the mill at Meridian burned in 1928 and was not rebuilt, the Meridian Lumber Company continued to function. In 1935, the company began the harvest of a 14-square mile tract of timber known as the Kisatchie Woods. Most of this timber was shipped by rail to the mill at Alco. This logging operation continued until 1940. During this period, two photographers documented the harvesting techniques. The result was an extraordinary collection of photos of field logging operations toward the end of the steam powered logging and milling period. These photos are the basis for this paper.

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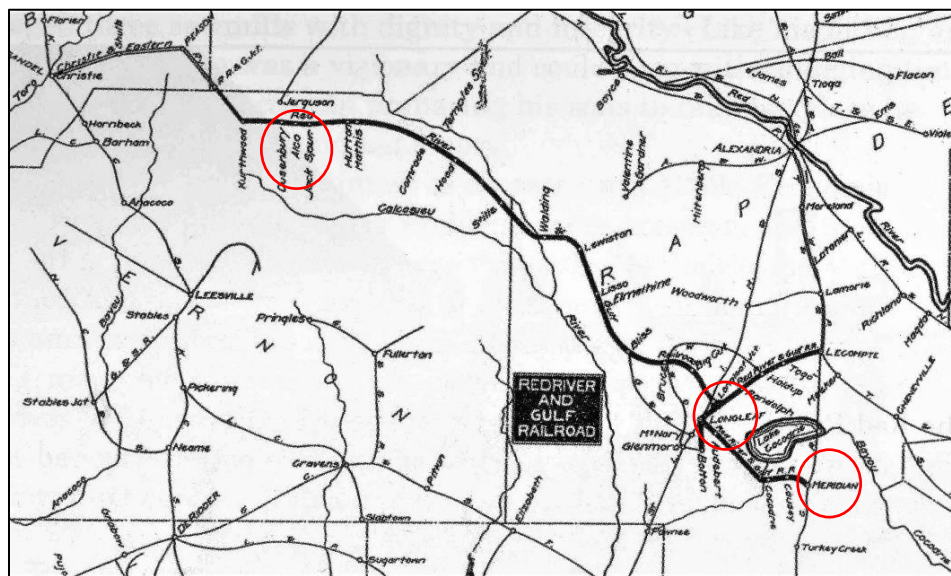
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HARVESTING OF THE KISATCHIE WOODS BY THE MERIDIAN LUMBER COMPANY, 1934-1940, A PICTORIAL VIEW

Everett W. Lueck

The Meridian Lumber Company was one of three sawmill operations created by the Crowell and Spencer Lumber of Long Leaf, LA, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Smith 2007). Originally, the company was located just at Long Leaf, but soon expanded to new towns developed and named Meridian and Alco. The original mill town of Long Leaf was organized by Caleb T. (C.T.) Crowell, who had a Mississippi background.

In 1893, Crowell and his friend Alex Spencer organized the sawmill town of Long Leaf along Barber's Creek near Glenmora, LA. Although Spencer led in the building of the mill, he left in 1902 due to health reasons. C.T. returned to his business ventures in Los Angeles and sent his son Stamps, age 20, and a few years later Draughon at age 17, to manage the mill. In 1905, Stamps and others of the family saw the need for a railroad support system and incorporated the Red River and Gulf Railroad (RR&G) to support their operation.



This map of the Red River and Gulf Railroad shows the locations of the Crowell and Spencer mill towns of Alco, Long Leaf, and Meridian.

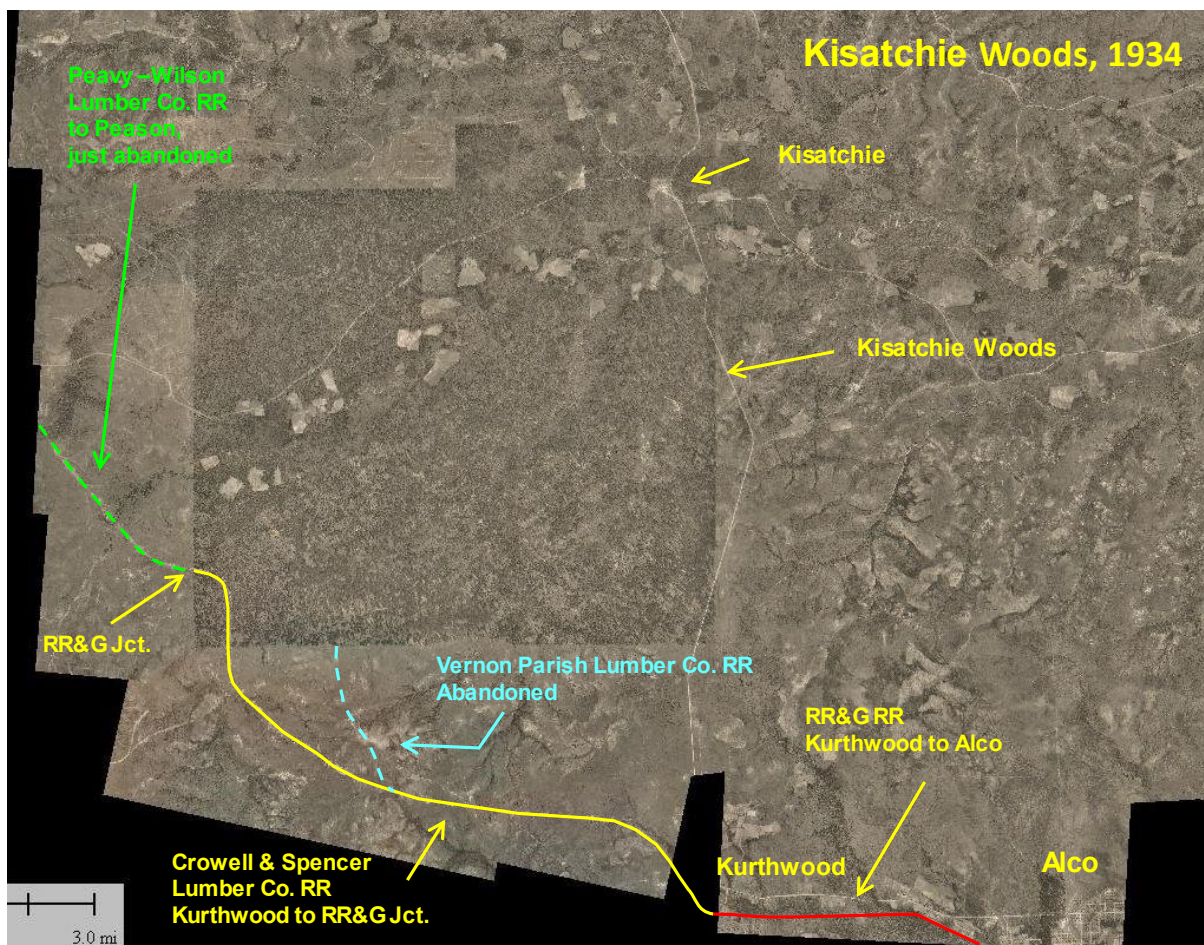
The RR&G served two purposes. It was used for freight and supplied the sawmills with timber by means of log trains. It also provided passenger service between Long Leaf, the mills at Meridian and Alco, and surrounding communities and other railroad connections.

In 1913, additional timber land was bought, a mill constructed, and the town Meridian created about 12 miles southeast of Long Leaf. In 1928, the mill at Meridian burned, was not rebuilt, and the town ceased to exist. But the Meridian Lumber Company continued to function milling the logs at Alco.

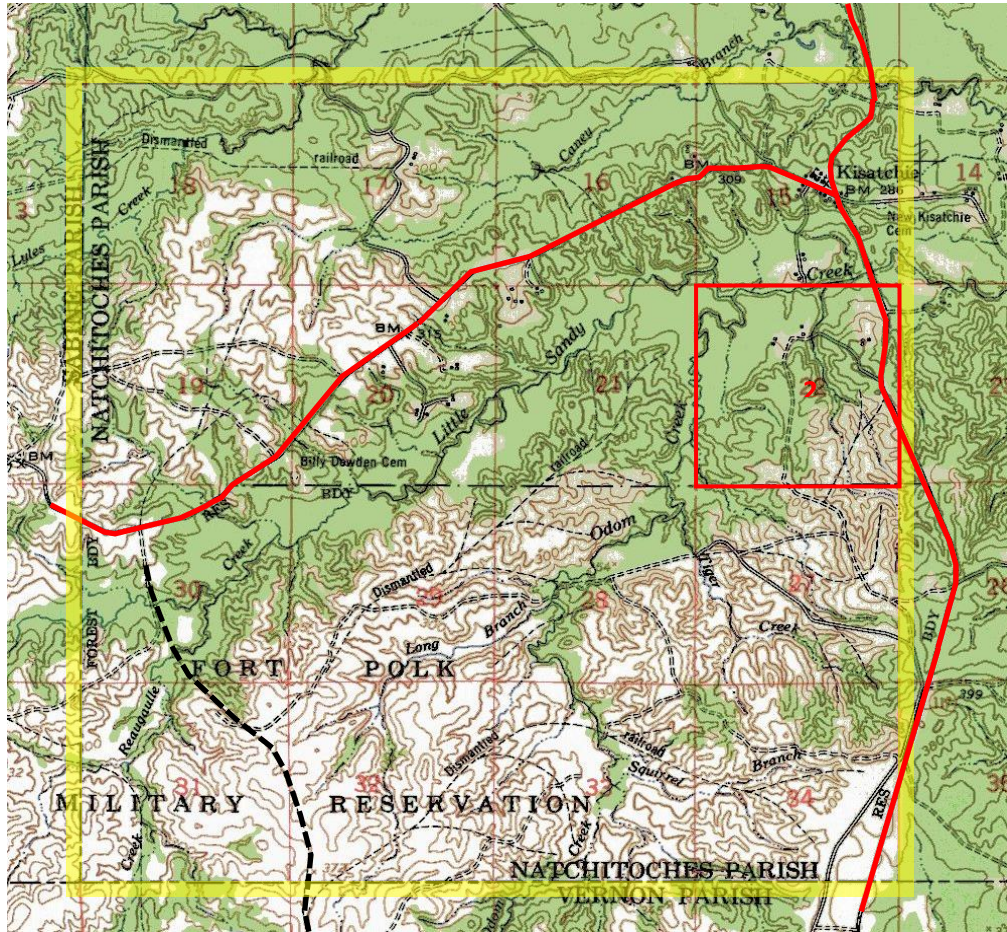
The name Alco resulted from the abbreviation from Alexandria Lumber Company which was created in 1907 in Pineville in conjunction with W.D. and J. K. Wadley (Smith 2007). When the timber was depleted in 1920, the mill was moved to Vernon Parish and the town formed was named Alco (Alexandria Lumber Company). When the mill at Meridian burned in 1928, the Meridian bought out Wadley's interest and moved many of the workers from Meridian to Alco and shipped all of Meridian's timber there.

In early 1935, managers of the Meridian Lumber Company made plans to cut one of the last two remaining large timber stands from the Alco purchase of 1928. Known as the Kisatchie Woods, the tract consisted of 14 square miles of pine timber located southwest of the Kisatchie school in Natchitoches Parish. Access to the timber was over the Crowell & Spencer railroad west of Kurthwood and north over a rebuilt portion of the Vernon Parish Lumber Co tram road.

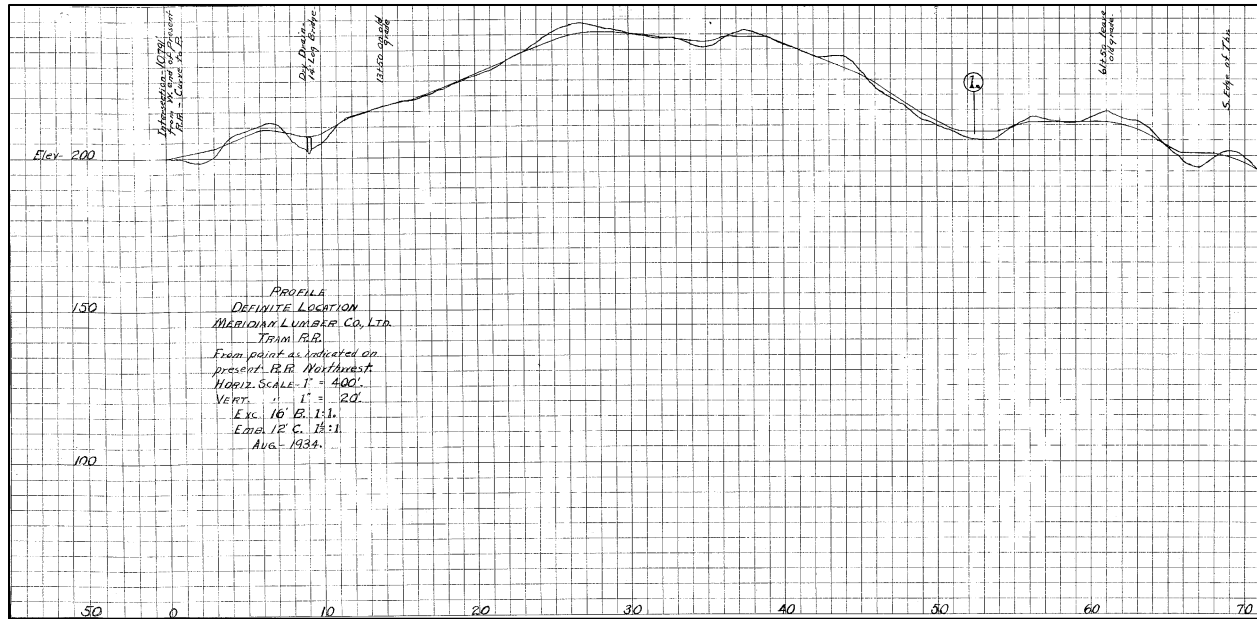
Beyond the end of the tram road, Meridian sent out their surveyors to establish a main tram line into the timber.



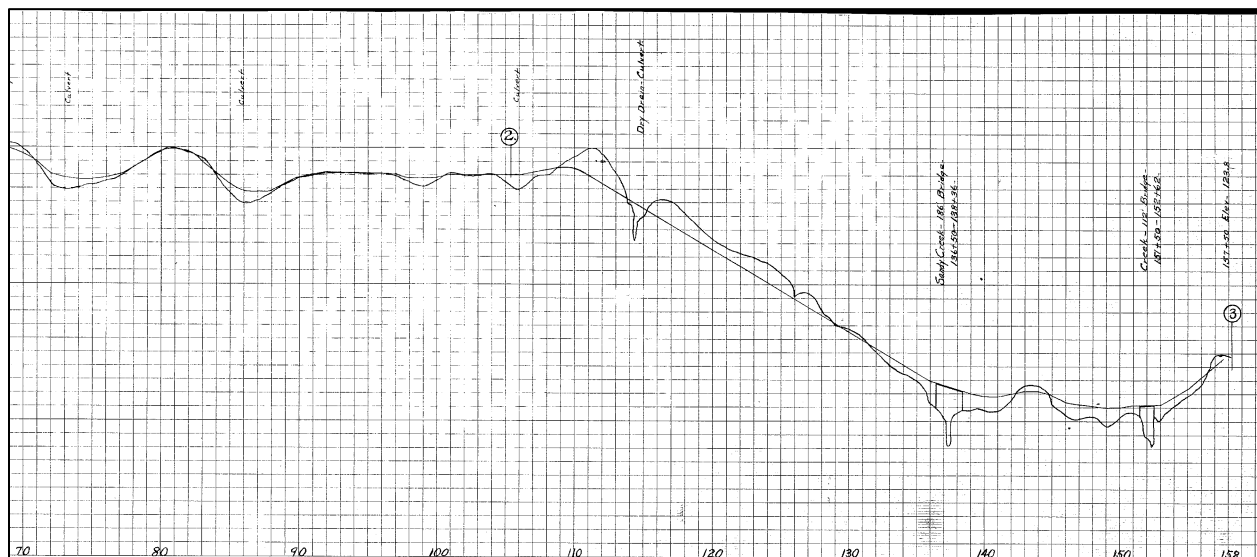
Outline of the Kisatchie Woods follows from a 1956 topo map. Most of this is now part of Fort Polk. Former LA Hwy 39 is now LA 117 and is the north-south road in red. LA 118 runs west from the community of Kisatchie. The north half of the railroad profile in the next slides is the dashed black line. Section 22, where Gerhart shot the photos, is highlighted in red.



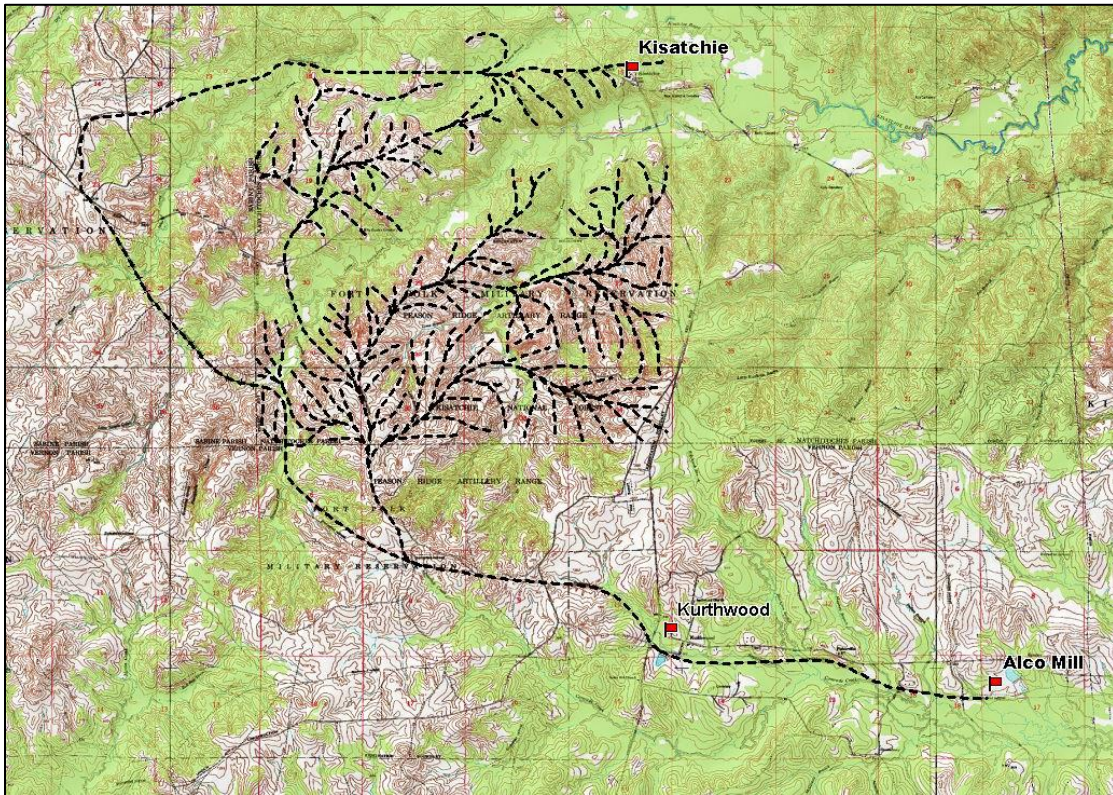
This is the line profile that the surveyors laid out. This part of the line was on the old Vernon Parish Lumber Company tram road. It has a rise and fall of about 45 feet in less than a mile, with a maximum grade of just over 1.5 percent. Not bad, all in all, for that rough country.



This is the second part of the woods tram, the black line on the topo map. While the first mile was easy, the second mile going into the timber, well, maybe not so easy. It seems that the best that the locating engineer could do was this 3000-foot long 3.2 percent grade and it was against loads, coming up out of the bottom land of Little Sandy Creek. Crowell surveyors were used to momentum grade where you had a downgrade to gather speed to make the upgrade run, but you could not do that here. This was simply going to be one hard slog to make it to the top. They would need one tough locomotive to do the job.



And this was just the initial line into the Kisatchie Woods. Many miles of track would be graded, ties and rail laid, and then picked up and moved again to get the job done. When the last rails had been picked up, and the logs milled at Alco, the railroad network would look like the map below, every bit of it steep grades and sharp curves.



Meridian did have an engine sitting in the Alco engine house that would be perfect for the job. Well, sort of perfect. Big Meridian 2-8-0 engine #206 had only run for 7 years, and it had 35,700 pounds of tractive effort, more than enough for the job. The only problem was that #206 had been made for the main line, with 60# rail, and curves no sharper than 12 degrees, but worst of all it weighed 145,000 pounds on its four driving axles, or a whopping 35,300 pounds per axle. Last, it had no trailing truck to ease it into curves backing up, which made it derailment prone backing up on uneven rails. The light 45-pound woods rail simply could not keep the engine on the rails. Clearly the #206 was not going to be the answer that 3 percent grade.



What Meridian needed was a geared locomotive and not just any geared locomotive. They needed a Shay. And not just any Shay but a bigger Shay than they had ever owned before. Every Crowell company had owned at least one Shay, so they knew what they wanted and needed. Meridian's people looked at the two Peavy-Wilson Lumber Company Shays in Peason where Peavy-Wilson was in the process of shutting down. But although they were bigger than anything that any of the Crowell companies had owned before in the way of Shays, they were still too small. Fortunately, just down the road at Leesville, the Weber-King Lumber Co. owned a heavier, more robust Shay. Also, they too, were in the process of coming to the end of their operations and looking for a buyer.



Built by Lima in 1924, Weber-King's Shay #112 weighed in at about 150,000 pounds loaded but spreading that weight over 6 axles gave the engine an axle load of only 25,000 pounds but its power made it the second most powerful in the Crowell fleet, after the #206. Clearly the #112 was ideal for the job at hand.

In the next photo, we see the only photograph ever taken of the #112 in service. Taken photographer Tommy Kohara on a hot July 16, 1937, day, this photo shows the rough life that #112 had undergone in its brief 13-year existence. Gone is the beautiful wood cab with its fitted doors and windows of polished oak. In its place is a plain steel, very utilitarian cab, and the doors are gone. The huge Radley and Hunter stack has also been replaced with a more standardized diamond stack similar to those worn by RR&G #102 when it was new. Whether or not this was the work of the Crowell shopmen in Long Leaf, or it had been done by Weber-King, is not known at this time, but the fact that long retired Crowell tiny Shay #1, in dead storage at Long Leaf Junction suddenly sported a huge new Radley and Hunter stack, identical to that taken off the #112, may be a clue.

At any rate, the photo of the #112 working the Kisatchie Woods, with one of Meridian's McGiffert loaders is still a remarkable view of a Louisiana logging locomotive at work. Meridian Lumber Co. Shay #112 works south of Kisatchie (Tommy Kohara photo taken July 16, 1937).



After shooting engine #112 at the head of the log train, photographer Kohara moved down the train to shoot this shot of one of Meridian's three McGiffert log loaders working with the empty cars being pulled through from behind and loaded in front.



The proximity of the Meridian operation to Louisiana highway 39 (now LA 117) made it easy for the photographers to access. Kohara made another trip to photograph the Meridian log skidder at work on July 2, 1938.



The most complete photo study of the Meridian, or any Crowell, logging operation was on the west end of the Red River and Gulf Railroad. It was done by U.S. Forest Service forester George A. Gerhart, on March 3, 1939. Stationed at several location across the South and Puerto Rico, he meticulously documented his activities with a diary cross referenced to hundreds of his personally taken photographs, a technique that he would continue throughout his career. While assigned to the Kisatchie National Forest he made a series of photographs of the Meridian Lumber logging operation in the Kisatchie Woods. Let us see through the eyes of George Gerhart as his photos start with a look at the virgin Kisatchie Woods itself, and then follows the work of the skidder crew, the skidder, the log train, and finally ends at the Alco sawmill.

This photo is of the virgin Long Leaf pine forest in the Kisatchie Woods. Notice the almost total lack of ground cover other than grass and pine needles.



Another photo showing the virgin longleaf pine forest in the Kisatchie Woods.



Men of the skidder crew watch from a safe distance as the skidder works. Sharp eyes can see the cable between the trees in the foreground, and other cables scattered throughout the photo. Working the skidder was hazardous duty.



A close up of the skidder at work and the cabling involved. Notice the idler car stacked with chains, blocks, and tools. Meridian had three skidders at the time.



Taking in the scene from a distance, photographer Gerhart captured the entire skidder train at work. Meridian engine #303 pushes a series of log cars used as idlers and the skidder itself as it moves back into the cut over timber.



Walking away from the skidding operations, Gerhart shot one last look back at #303 and the skidder. The topography is not exactly flat here! The raw and temporary nature of the railroad is quite evident in the minimal fill, light weight, 45-pound rail and untreated ties without tie plates or ballast. At the same time, the pride of the Meridian track crews is obvious, in that the tie ends are all squared up and the alignment and level of the track is excellent.



Gerhart's final shot before leaving the logging area was of the rail spurs with the logs skidded into position for the McGiffert log loader. The raw spots by the railroad are left from the butt end of the logs as they are skidded into position for loading.



Gerhart then drove to Kurthwood and turned east to Alco for this final, unusual shot of the Alco Mill. Taken facing east, rather than the usual shots facing west, this shot shows the mill with its four stacks in the far distance, with the planer mill and finished lumber shed on the right.



CLOSING THOUGHTS

Life in sawmill towns of the early 20th century was difficult: long hours, hard work, and few benefits. But it was sawmill towns that brought both white and black families into the mainstream of the developing industrial age (Barnett and Lueck 2020). Photos of the lumbering industry is typically of the sawmill facilities. This paper provides a rare look at the logging portion of the lumbering effort and gives an appreciation of the equipment decisions that had to be made. Not just any locomotive would be ideal for the tract of timber being harvested. There were a multitude of decisions that had to be made to maintain a successful and profitable operation.

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