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THE CROWELL AND SPENCER LUMBER COMPANY MACHINE SHOP AT LONG LEAF, LA: WHEN WAS IT BUILT?



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Cover photo:

Interior photograph of a portion of the functioning Machine Shop at Southern Forest Heritage Museum at Long Leaf, LA. (Photo by Jason Rose, Southern Forest Heritage Museum)

Photo credits:

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Abstract:

Machine shops were a critical component of the many thousands of sawmill towns that occupied the South during the early 20th century. These towns were established to harvest the millions of acres of virgin forest made available to lumbermen and investors during the late 1890s and early 1900s by the sale of federal land. Access to this timber was developed by railroad operations—timber was brought to the mill and lumber shipped to markets. The sawmill towns in addition to employment in the mill itself, provided commissaries, medical care, schools, and churches. Machine shops had to be developed to maintain and repair both the steam locomotives and the mill equipment. The machine shop developed by the Crowell and Spencer Lumber Company at Long Leaf, LA, was a prime example of these shops, providing equipment and expertise to repair any locomotive problem. This shop served not only the mill at Long Leaf, but also family-owned mills such as Meridian and Alco. An effort began to research the origin of the mill at Long Leaf and the date it was established. It has been restored to a fully functional operation.

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Everett W. Lueck

The Machine Shop is one of the highlights of a walking tour of the Crowell & Spencer Lumber Company Mill at Long Leaf, LA. Now part of the Southern Forest Heritage Museum, it is working belt driven machinery, where the whirring, clacking, clanking, and spinning excites young and old with its reminder of early 20th century.

When the Museum was created in 1995, there was a great deal of discussion about the age of the machine shop and when it was built. Most people agreed on a post 1913 date for the shop, based on the age of some of the machinery, but uncertainty on the date has remained.

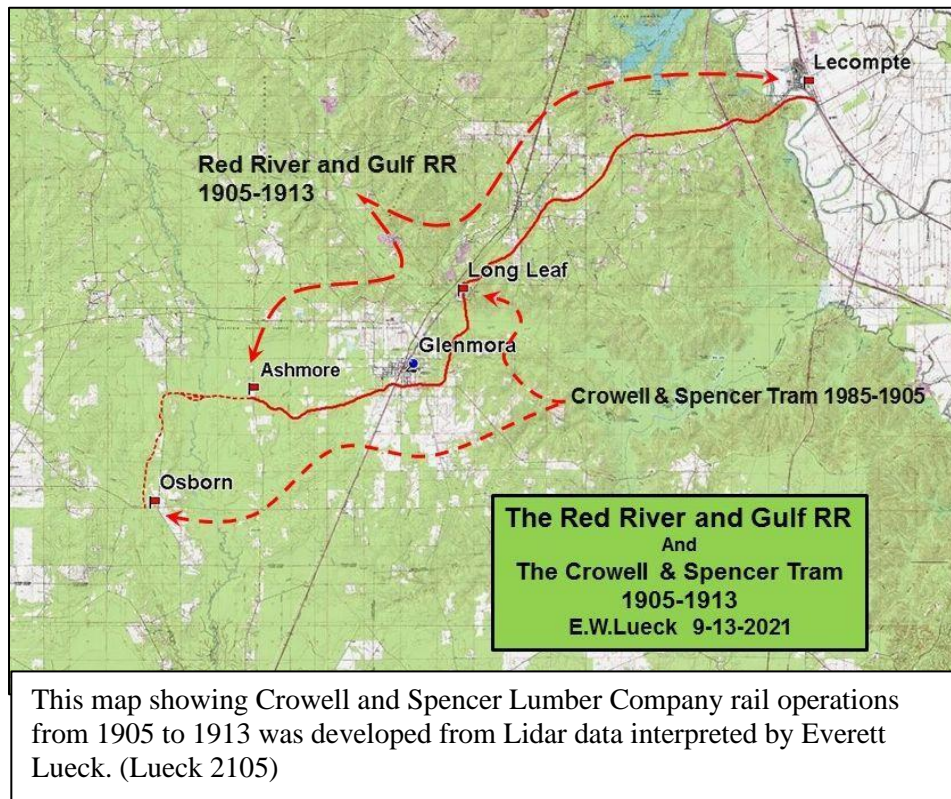
The question is, why after 1913? Why not 1895 or so? Crowell started rail logging in 1895 with an initial tram line to the Ashmore logging camp located at the west end of Ashmore Road in what is now Glenmora, about 9 miles from Long Leaf. Continued extension of the logging tram ended at the community of Osborn, across the Calcasieu River about 18 miles from Long Leaf. Subsequent events and data would indicate that the two shay locomotives that operated over the log tram were maintained, not at Long Leaf, but at Ashmore. But nothing has been uncovered in the Crowell archives or any local newspaper coverage concerning whether a machine shop or engine facility was at either Long Leaf or Ashmore at the time.



Crowell and Spencer locomotive #1 was a Shay Patent geared engine, built in 1895 by the Lima Locomotive Works of Lima, OH. Stamps Crowell took this photo southwest of Long Leaf, LA, in about 1895 with his new Brownie Box camera. (Stamps Crowell photo, Crowell Family Collection, Southern Forest Heritage Museum)

THE SEARCH FOR ANSWERS

In 1905, the Crowell interests decided to build a railroad connecting Long Leaf with Lecompte. It appears that they had a dual, or possibly a triple, motive. First, a connection with the Texas and Pacific, and Southern Pacific railroads at Lecompte would free the Long Leaf mill from being connected only with the St. Louis, Iron Mountain & Southern at Long Leaf. Second, Crowell and Spencer had large timber tracts south of the proposed railroad, between Long Leaf and Lecompte. Third, it was an open secret that the Arkansas Southern (a subsidiary of the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific) was building south from El Dorado, AR through Alexandria and Lecompte, bound for a connection with the New Orleans, Texas, and Mexico line in Eunice. Large amounts of gravel would be needed for ballasting this line, and the best source of gravel would be adjacent to the new railroad at Forest Hill. Thus, Crowell & Spencer built the railroad, and upon its completion, turned it over to their newly incorporated Red River and Gulf Railroad (RR&G).



In later years, in testimony before the Interstate Commerce Commission, both H.A. White, the RR&G general manager, and Stamps Crowell would state that upon completion of the RR&G between Long Leaf and Lecompte in 1906, the log tram west of Long Leaf was taken up and the rails used to build the log spurs south from the RR&G main line. However, the earliest known schedules of the RR&G published in the Official Guide of the Railways in January 1907 show the daily mixed train of the RR&G originating at Ashmore at 7:20 AM, traversing the line from west to east, through Long Leaf, to Lecompte, and returning to Ashmore at 2:15 PM, except on Sunday. This same entry, along with the cryptic notation “will build 35 miles south through St.

Landry Parish, LA” was maintained in every official guide up through July 1913. The second half of that year brought the construction of the Crowell owned Meridian Lumber Co. Mill at Meridian, 12 miles southeast of Long Leaf, the extension of the RR&G from Long Leaf to Meridian, the abandonment of Ashmore, and the removal of the railroad to that point. Also, probably in early 1914, Crowell and Spencer began construction of a log tram which would extend 12 to 15 miles south from a junction with the RR&G at Cocodrie on the line to Meridian.

Not only did the locomotives require maintenance, but the sawmill and other machinery were in a constant need for repair. There were no stores with locomotive and sawmill parts nearby, so everything had to be maintained at the sawmill. The mill had to have the capability to repair anything that broke, and the machine shop provided that resource.

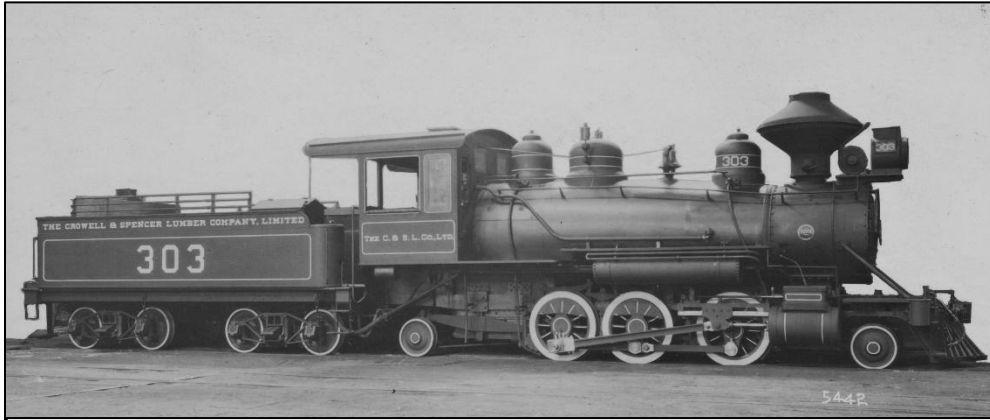
The machine shop was critical to the operation of the sawmill complex and to the operation of the RR&G Railroad. In addition to Long Leaf, the Crowell family developed sawmills at Meridian and Alco (Smith 2007). Long Leaf then became the central operating point for the Crowell Railroad network and its logging network. From the three Crowell shay locomotives, and RR&G 2-6-2 #1, the Crowell operations added two Meridian locomotives, second hand 4-6-0 #101 and brand new 2-6-0 #202. By 1915, two more engines had been added to the fleet, Crowell 2-6-2 #303 and Red River and Gulf 4-6-0 #102. Meridian #101 and RR&G #1 had swapped companies, but just the same there were now 8 engines being maintained out of Long Leaf. Certainly, a large machine shop/engine house was necessary by this time.



Crowell and Spencer engine #303 is seen here dumping logs into the Long Leaf mill pond. The machine shop is to the right in the photo.

The photograph above is of engine #303 dumping logs into the Long Leaf log pond, next to the machine shop. This photo can be conclusively dated between the delivery of #303 in August

1915 and its last run in ICC service in January 1917. Only the machine shop building is in the photo, as the engine house had not yet been built.



This is a photo of Crowell and Spencer engine #303 that served the company mills between August 1915 and September 1944. It ran over the RR&G into Long Leaf between August 1915 and January 1917.

The Baldwin delivery record for RR&G #102 in July 1915 and the delivery record for the #303 in August 1915, as well as an ICC inspection note for RR&G #101 being out of service for repairs in August 1915, are the earliest surviving records from the shop, confirming that it was most likely in existence some time before that.

CONCLUSION

None of this data changes the original belief that the shop was built sometime immediately after 1913, but it does possibly narrow down the date to late 1913 or early 1914 and allows us a greater insight into what was going on in the Crowell timber industry and the necessity for building the machine shop at that time.

CURRENT STATUS

Regardless of its exact establishment date, the Crowell and Spencer Lumber Company built machine shop is now well over 100 years old. It operated for about 55 years, serving the needs of the sawmill town until February 1969 when the sawmill closed, and the town of Long Leaf was dismantled. However, the sawmill complex itself continued in a suspended existence until it was donated in 1994 by the Crowell family to the Southern Forest Heritage Museum and Research Center.



Volunteers Michael Brown, Mike Miller, and Glen Armand use the hydraulic wheel press to remove a wheel from the axle of the Museum's M-4 Rail Passenger Car. (Photo by Jason Rose)

Two Museum volunteers, John Weiss and David Hamilton, began an extensive restoration of the shop. As a result of their efforts, the overhead shaft again turns the belts that power the machines and make the equipment operational. Remarkably, the shop is now used again to repair and restore equipment at the Museum.

REFERENCES

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