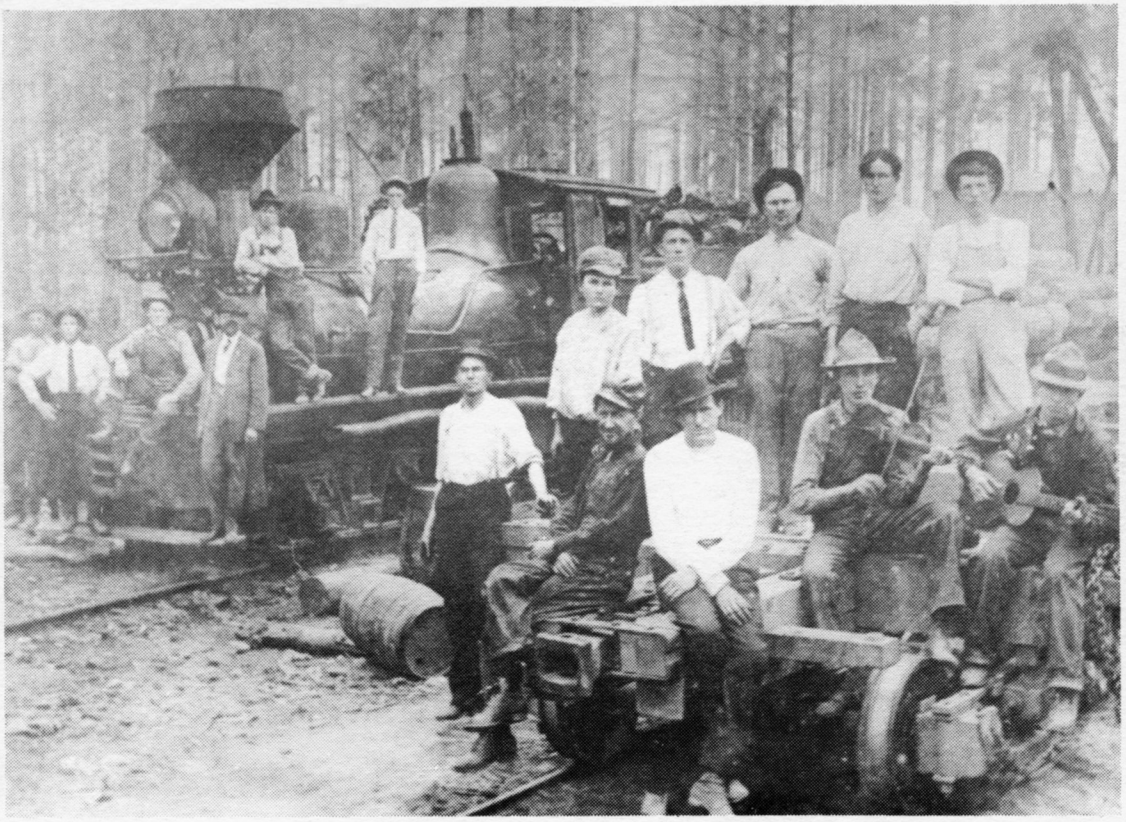
LEGACY

SPRING/SUMMER 1993
FEATURING
VREDENBURGH



THE MAGAZINE OF THE
MONROE COUNTY HERITAGE MUSEUM
MONROEVILLE, ALABAMA

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Vredenburgh as a flourishing town only existed for less than half a century and was an early American experiment in socialism. Today, the community lies in sleep with only 350 inhabitants. As we began to gather information and stories of Vredenburgh, we began to realize how many people's lives had been intertwined in the history of this mill town.

The voices of these people are heard through the writings of Nelle Stinson-Smith and Dayton Russell, who lived in Vredenburgh, and Sue Turner, reporter, author and longtime resident of Buena Vista, who gives us a trained observer's view of "Mr. Pete," the man who created the town.

We invite all our readers to learn even more of Vredenburgh and Monroe County history on Alabama Public Television, which will air a documentary on our county on April 7, 1994.

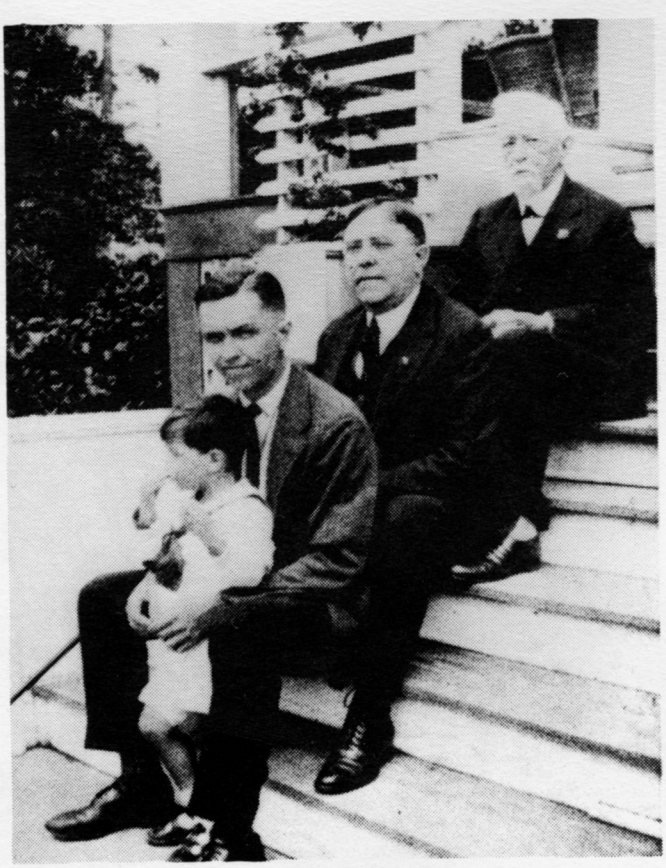
The Monroe County Heritage Museum would also like to announce the restoration of Rikard's Mill on Flat Creek southeast of Vredenburgh. The 1860s grist mill will be operated by the museum and will be open to the public in the early spring of 1994. Anyone with information or photos regarding the mill may contact the museum.

"Legacy" is transforming from a quarterly to a biannual publication due to the publishing costs and the time each issue takes to research. Staff and board agree that quality supplants quantity.

"Monroeville" will be the focus of the last issue for 1993 and will be available in February.

Kathy McCoy Painter

KATHY MCCOY PAINTER



Four generations of Vredenburghs: Peter Vredenburgh Sr., Peter Jr., Peter III and Peter IV.

Individual copy price $5

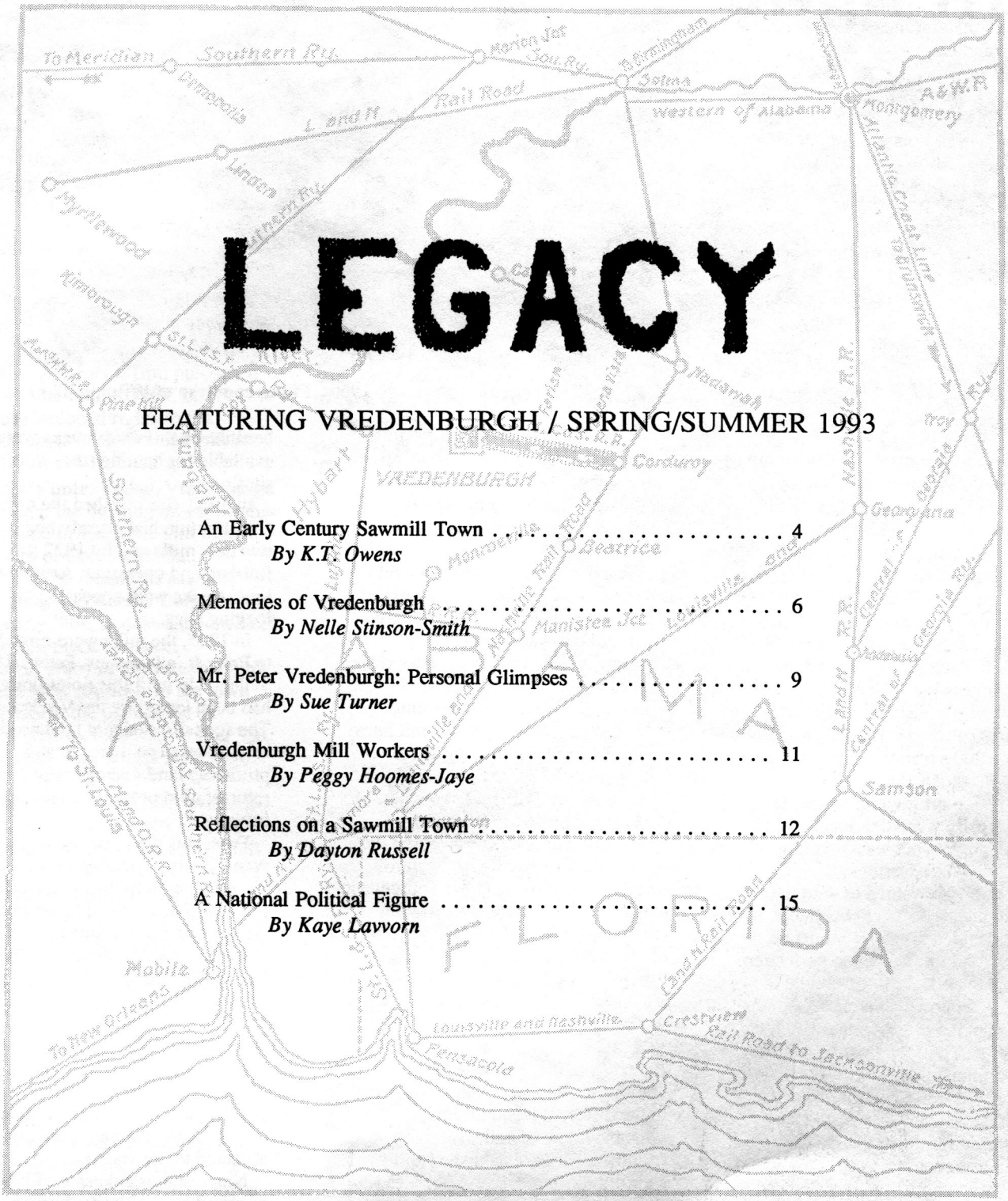
Special thanks to:
K.T. Owens
Joann Pugh
Dayton Russell
Wilmon Timberlands
Sonny Turner
Nelle Stinson-Smith
Charles Schutt, Jr.
Peggy Fuller

Subscribing to "Legacy"

Individuals may subscribe to "Legacy" by joining the museum with a family membership. Send check for $35.00 and subscription to address below.

Cover by Sam Wilde

Photo on cover of Vredenburgh workers, early 1900s, is from the collection of Sue Turner.



LEGACY

FEATURING VREDENBURGH / SPRING/SUMMER 1993

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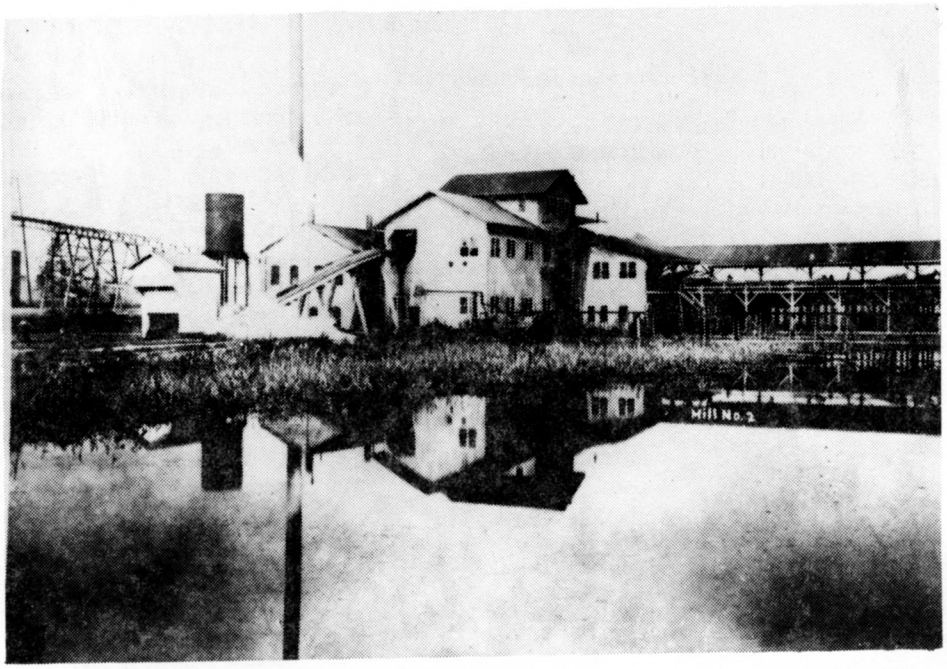
An Early Century Sawmill Town



Mill No. 2 at Vredenburgh, early 1900s. Photo courtesy of Wilmon Timber Co.

By K.T. Owens

Peter Vredenburgh Jr. was 37 years old when he incorporated his sawmill town in 1912. Building began in 1910 with money given to him by his father, Peter Vredenburgh Sr., owner of a lumber business in Illinois.

Peter Sr. wanted his son to make his own fortune and gave him $50,000 to get started in the sawmill business in the South. Peter Jr. first settled in Pine Hill, Ala., sawing and shipping lumber to his family's business in Illinois.

By 1910, Peter Jr. decided to purchase 200 acres of virgin pine south of Camden, Ala., where he built a state-of-the-art sawmill town. He had originally wanted to locate the mill in Camden, but was discouraged by the town's leadership.

Vredenburgh wanted to send the finest lumber possible to his father, so he first decided his village must be designed and landscaped to perfection. He hired a gardener from Mobile to help with the town's layout so that the majority of the original trees could be incorporated into the pristine setting.

Plants indigenous to the area and state were also used. Each house had its own rosebush. The housing was color-coded for the workers. The Vredenburgh home was the only white residential structure and was located to the north of the central park area.

During the summer months college students were hired by the mill to play for the mill's winning baseball team. In order for the players, and also the team, to maintain an amateur status, Peter Jr. had them assigned to office work or minimal sawmill duties so that legally they were noted as mill employees and not professional baseball players.

Summertime also brought weekly dances for the workers, Friday nights for the white workers and Saturday nights for the black workers. Company picnics and short train rides were also part of summertime.

In the early years of harvesting timber, it was necessary that rail lines run to the different logging sites. Heavy trucks capable of loading and hauling virgin timber were not part of the logging business. With the construction of Vredenburgh and the sawmill, a spur line from Corduroy was laid to the town's site. Subsequent lines were then run to the different logging sites from the mill. When an area had been cut and cleared, the rails were then taken up and laid in another area. Mules and men were the main machinery at each site.

Another common sight at logging camps were the workers' families, who lived in boxcars hauled by L&N to the different locations, namely, a movable home on rails. Lifelong friendships were established and stability for the workers' families was secured.

A most interesting account of this early life is recounted in a chronicle written by Nelle Stinson-Smith. Life in the logging camps ended by 1929 because by this date, trucks were available for hauling trees from the sites.

In 1920, fire ravished the mill. Construction had already begun on two new mills and by 1922 they were finished and operating. Around this time, trucks were appearing at various logging sites.

In 1925, the mills were turned over to Peter Jr.'s two sons, Peter III and Sellers. Up until this point timberland had been leased by the Vredenburghs. The sons decided that land needed to be purchased so a proper and profitable land management and reforestation program could be instigated.

From this time, excellent forest management practices were incorporated into the company's policies. There would be no more clear-cutting or burnings; natural reseeding would reforest the land. Conscious management of the wildlife was started. (A few years ago I was privileged to ride over and through some of the wildlife refuge now known as the Wilmon Land Management Reserve area. It was exciting to see and easy to understand why so many people have been attracted to our state.)

Ninety-thousand acres of land were acquired by the Vredenburghs. Additional acreage was added, which brought the total to 104,000 acres. One must remember that after the stock market crash of 1929 and during

the ensuing depression, land sold for $1 per acre. Many workers were laid off during this depression.

In 1931, fire struck again, this time burning the commissary, post office, doctor's office and mill offices. The mills were not touched.

In 1933-34 selective cutting practices were started.

Vredenburgh Alabama Properties, owned by International Paper Company, Scott Paper Company and three brothers-in-law of the duPont family, bought Vredenburgh and the surrounding acreage in 1954. For the first time since 1910, the Vredenburghs no longer owned any of the original property.

Peter Vredenburgh III died in 1956. On April 22, 1962, fire destroyed the sawmills. A Georgia firm purchased the town and mill in 1963. Its purchase included rights to the 104,000 acres of timberland and the 137 houses in Vredenburgh.

Editor's note: Today, Vredenburgh is no longer the bustling mill town that it once was. In 1962, the mill burned. Ben Jones of Columbus, Ga., purchased and rebuilt the sawmill, later selling it to Bendix Corporation. In the early '80s, Bendix auctioned off the sawmill piece by piece.

Since so many of the valuable jobs that held local residents to the town had vanished, the population of Vredenburgh dwindled to around 350, and the once busy streets now seem almost empty.

But even though the mill has long since gone, the philosophy of good forest management did not go with it.

Wilmon Timberlands Inc. now dominates the town of Vredenburgh, and the over seven decades of managing the natural resources in the town's history is one of the many characteristics that led it to become the state's 29th TREASURE Forest in 1976.

Most of the land owned and managed by Wilmon is mixed hardwood and pine, which contributes to both their objectives — timber and wildlife. No burning is allowed.

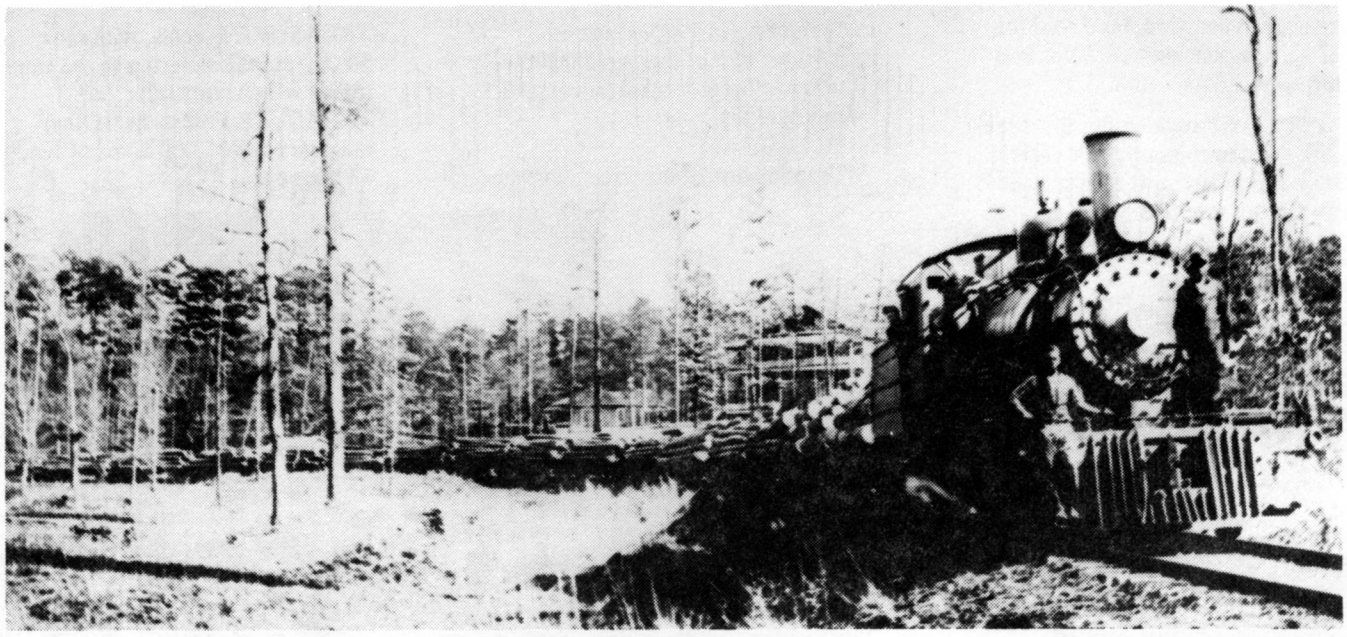
Food trees and plants are left for wildlife, along with provisions made for nesting and breeding areas for game animals.

From 1962 to 1985, a 4,000-acre game sanctuary was managed by Wilmon, but was released for deer and turkey hunting in 1985. Currently, about 80 percent of lands managed by Wilmon has been divided and leased to hunting clubs.

Wilmon is one of the state's largest TREASURE Forests, with over 50,000 acres belonging to the three trusts, which constitute the TREASURE Forest. In all, they manage over 65,000 acres of land in 13 counties.

Peter Vredenburgh and unidentified woman in rose garden at Vredenburgh. Photo courtesy of Wilmon Timber Co.

Main Street, Vredenburgh, in early 1900s. Photo courtesy of Wilmon Timber Co.



Steam engine coming through Vredenburgh. Two-story building behind train was old hotel. From Sue Turner collection.

Memories of Vredenburgh

Editor's note: Nelle Stinson-Smith's chronicles of her life in the Vredenburgh camps provide us with glimpses of a time gone by. Her account has been edited due to space.

By Nelle Stinson-Smith

This is to give a description of the town of Vredenburgh in the 1920s and its logging camps from 1920 to the end of the 1930s.

The information that I did not experience first hand was told to me by my father, Arthur Pate Stinson, born March 22, 1902, in Simpkinsville, Ala.

Vredenburgh Sawmill Company operated a steam engine train on this spur consisting of one passenger coach and one baggage coach which met the land 'n train each morning and afternoon at Corduroy. The line was also used to haul lumber and freight.

At the time that Arthur began employment, the town of Vredenburgh had two large sawmills operating day and night. The center of the community had a large commissary that sold most things anyone would need. In the west side of the commissary was located a soda fountain. The post office was in the same structure with the building having a large porch extending around the north, south and east sides. The railroad tracks ran on the north side of the commissary's porch, and the passengers disembarked or got on the train from here, as well as the baggage and the mail were unloaded and loaded at this location.

The company physician's office and the barber shop were situated just west of the commissary. The business offices were in a structure just east of the commissary. A movie screen was erected between the offices and commissary under a shed with seats arranged in order for the employees to watch, without charge, silent movies twice a week.

There was a covered "filling station" in the middle of the street in front of the commissary.

Since there were few automobiles in the early 1920s, any employee could take an excursion from Vredenburgh to Corduroy and back any Sunday for

Dry goods department of the commissary, early 1900s. Photo courtesy of Wilmon Timber Co.

only 75 cents.

Vredenburgh had a hotel for the single men's living arrangement, and they obtained their meals there in the dining room.

The employees' wages were paid weekly by "metal checks" and U.S. coins and bills. The "metal checks" were struck with "Vredenburgh Sawmill Company," and they were in nickels, dimes, quarters, and half dollars. They could be used to buy items at the commissary.

The married families had homes that were located along dirt streets not far from the commissary.

In the 1930s, there was an elementary school and a common community church. I am not sure when either was first constructed, but by the 1940s, the school closed and all the children were bused to the school in Beatrice. A regular school bus had been provided many years to take all to the nearest school.

Editor's note: Camp No. 4 was located near Sedan and Gullette's Bluff. At this time, Vredenburgh was contracting with the state of Alabama to use convicts to do what work was needed in the woods.

At Camp No. 4, Arthur and Jim Andrews of Uriah were guards and supervisors of the "steel gangs," who were the convicts who laid steel or the railroad tracks into the woods.

Before Alabama and the rest of the country had log trucks and good highways, railroads and steam engine trains were the main method to move felled timber from the forests to the sawmills. There would be a main rail line but "dummy" lines were laid out in the timbered area as far as they were needed and then they could be ripped up and laid elsewhere.

The "steel gang" had to make the railroad beds as level as possible so that loaded trains could pull their loads. The trestles and rails had to be inspected regularly while in use, so there would be no mishap when the train pulled up a hill, went around a bend, over a ravine, streams of water or a marshy place.

Crossties were crudely made with just one side cut flat. It took strength to place the heavy crossties in place, then lay the rails and drive the spikes by hand.

When the timber was harvested in one section the rail tracks were taken up and relaid in a new place, thus the crossties, rails and spikes were carefully saved.

Nelle Stinson-Smith as a child in a Vredenburgh logging camp.

Camp No. 4 kept the convicts at night in a large stockade built of logs about 60 feet long and the windows were crossed each way with iron bars. The men in the woods cut the trees down with crosscut saws and used mules and oxen to pull the logs on a wagon or skidder to the "dummy" rails.

In the fall of 1925, Vredenburgh Sawmill Company went to all free labor. The convicts left Vredenburgh to Corduroy on a flat car and then were placed in a special land 'n passenger coach that Vredenburgh Sawmill Company had leased to take them to Selma, where they were going to be sent to work in the coal mines. The marshal of Vredenburgh, Arthur Stinson, and two men were sent with the convicts to see that they arrived safely in Selma.

Editor's note: According to Monroe County Convict Records between the years 1920-1924, 39 convicts were sentenced to hard labor at Vredenburgh. Five convicts were "white" males, one was "Indian" and two were female "Negroes." The remaining 31 were listed as "Negro."

Their offenses ranged from violation of prohibition law to second-degree manslaughter.

After Vredenburgh Sawmill Company no longer contracted convicts for labor, Arthur Stinson began scaling logs in the woods, plus other ramps beside the "dummy" railroads.

Arthur Stinson, father of Nelle Stinson-Smith.

He was expected to scale the logs the contract loggers had cut as well as the company teams. At this time, he had a large, beautiful, spirited horse that he rode, visiting each log ramp once or twice each day.

He returned to the dining room for lunch and then returned to the woods. In the late afternoon, he would return to the office and calculate the footage of what each crew hauled that day. He also checked the crossties that were cut and hauled by the contract tie cutters.

In the fall of 1928, Vredenburgh Sawmill Camp moved south of McWilliams. This was Camp No. 16. By this time, Vredenburgh did most of

its logging with company teams and discontinued scaling in the woods. They began the practice known as "selective cutting." The men with the crosstie saws cut trees 12 inches in diameter and four feet from the ground.

Arthur did some work marking the trees to be cut on a selective-cutting basis. He also checked the cut logs, as each sawyer had his own identification mark to identify the logs that they cut.

Arthur kept a tally of the cut trees and the marks. The men were paid 10 cents per log, so his tally and the sawyer's tally needed to match at the end of the day.

At all the camps, the main rooms of the houses were box cars. In moving the camp to Camp No. 18, you can gain an idea of the move and how the houses were set up. When the camp was moved to Camp No. 18, one stored all his belongings into the boxcars and the carpenters came and tore apart the partitions.

It was Arthur's crew's job to get the boxcars on the train to be taken to Camp No. 18. His crew used long poles and teams of oxen to roll and pull each boxcar up to the waiting train. (Temporary railway tracks had been laid beside the road through the middle of the camp, which made it easier to get the boxcars to the train.)

The cars were loaded on the flat cars and since the rails were already laid to the new location — Camp No. 18 — all Arthur's crew had to do was unload the boxcars at designated sites and the carpenters were busy putting in the petitions, steps, and porches. The size of the house and the number of boxcars of each family depended upon the number of children in the households.

Our family, being small, had three boxcars. Two boxcars on each side were the bedrooms with a partition between them, which was the living room. At the end of the living room was another partition and this was the dining room. The third boxcar placed across the dining room was the kitchen. We had a front and back porch.

The families living in the camp paid either $1 or $2 a month for house rental and about 50 cents a month for care from the company doctor that made regular visits about twice a week.

For years, as far back as I can remember, Dr. McWilliam of Beatrice, came to the camp. When he retired, a young doctor took his position. Both doctors gave you the prescribed medicine rather than writing out a prescription. They also made home visits if needed. There were no charges for these services.

Each day a black man drove a wagon through the camp selling ice and each lady of the house could buy a block to keep food cool, have iced tea or make freezer ice cream.

Families were segregated by race with the whites living in one area and the blacks living in another.

A short time later, Vredenburgh Sawmill Company began to use trucks to haul the logs to the mill, so Arthur's crew built some bridges and graded roads for trucks.

Among the people who lived in the camp were Ruby Knight Stabler, Leslie Livingston, Carlton Livingston, and I remember the families of Claude Knight, Ernest Livingston, Cleve, Arthur, Hamp, and Bertram Stinson, Lee and Floyd Gulsby, Cary Falkenberry, Alex Snodgrass, Lynam Durant, Frank Manesco, Jessie and Jack Everette, Fritz Bradley, Oran Victory, Gene Dennis, George Maness, George Hobbs, Henry and Eddie Andrews, Frank Burgess, the Sanders, Littles, Camerons, Parnells, Cumbies, Lands, and the Scotts.

Each morning from Monday through Friday, the train whistle was blown at 5 to let the men know it was time to get up. Then at 6 or 6:30 a.m., the whistle blew again, alerting the men that the train would leave in about 15 minutes for the woods.

The majority of the men rode the train on the flat cars to the woods where they would work that day. Then in the afternoon, they rode the train back to the commissary and returned home.

The train had special whistle sounds and numbers of times it was blown, if there were an injury in the woods, the train derailed, or some type of information was needed to be related.

Vredenburgh Sawmill Company was going through some drastic changes, so the Stinsons left the company for other endeavors. Arthur began work with the Alabama State Forestry Service on Feb. 10, 1938. He and his family moved to Midway on March 24, 1938, where the McWilliams Hill Tower was. He worked for the State Forestry Service for 30 years.

Turn-of-the-century train accident — from the Sue Turner collection. Photographer unknown.

Peter Vredenburgh: *Personal Glimpses*

By Sue Turner

Sue Finklea Turner is a fourth generation resident of Buena Vista, which is located approximately five miles southeast of Vredenburgh. Through the years, she has communicated her love of people and the area through her weekly newspaper column in The Monroe Journal and her numerous books.

In 1976, she received an Award of Merit from the Alabama Historical Commission, honoring her historical research and preservation efforts.

Sue Turner at her homestead in Buena Vista, 1970s.

The village children had candy from the store: stick candy, peppermint candy that was striped red and white, and now and then a chocolate drop. But the stick candy was especially good when a hole was poked in the end of a lemon and the lemon juice sucked through the peppermint stick.

The Buena Vista store also had ladyfingers which were cakes with chocolate icing. But there had never been a box of real chocolate candy, a fancy box, like the one Mr. Peter Vredenburgh II brought to the village from Cleveland, Ohio.

Nobody ever invited visitors from faraway places to stay at their house except Mama and Papa. Papa would walk up to a stranger and say, "I'm Ollie Finklea, we're glad to have you visit Buena Vista." That's what he said to Mr. Peter Vredenburgh II, who was building Vredenburgh Saw Mill Company five miles west of the village.

"Doll and I'll put you up at our house, Mr. Vredenburgh," Papa would say. "There's no hotel around here less than 25 miles to Monroeville. We'd be glad to have you in our home."

We were the first to know what was going on. Mr. Vredenburgh said they had to lay out houses for people to live in, build a hotel for visitors, build a big commissary for a store building, and the biggest of all would be the sawmill. He didn't forget to mention there would be a church and a schoolhouse. The black people would have houses on the west side of the mill and white people on the east side. Everything was painted either red or green, and the buildings were made of rough pine lumber cut at the mill.

Carrie often wondered what the difference was between city folks and country folks like her family.

Mama made a big stir getting the company room ready for Mr. Vredenburgh. It seemed so much smaller when Mr. Vredenburgh's fine suitcases were put on the floor.

He was wearing a stiff round hat, he called it a derby, and a wool suit and a white shirt and a tie with a diamond stickpin in it and a big diamond ring on his finger. He made the company room look smaller and the furniture looked cheap and the scatter rag rugs were out of place.

Mama even saw that Papa's haircut looked all wrong. Walter Lindsey had cut it the day before and clipped it up above Papa's ears.

Carrie noticed that whenever Mama walked in the parlor where Mr. Vredenburgh was sitting, he always stood up and kept standing there until she sat down. Then he'd sit down.

At meals in the dining room Carrie watched the way he handled his knife and fork and how he'd cut a piece of ham, then put his knife down and change hands with the fork. It took a great deal of time to get such a little thing done.

Carrie even tried to roll her "r"s like he did. None of the family, not even Mama, who was smart about things, understood him half the time. But then he would laugh at the way the family talked, and his fat, pear-shaped middle would shake all over and his heavy jowls would quiver. Carrie wanted to hide sometimes because she thought he was making fun.

He'd say, "Mrs. Lillie, that boiled backbone is delicious," and pat his

mouth with his napkin. Or he'd say, "This is the tastiest fried chicken I ever ate." And he'd name some big restaurant in New York or England or France when he said Mama's cooking was better. Of course Mama didn't cook anything. She had a cook and a cook's helper and a nurse for the baby, and another nurse for Marion and me to play with. Mama knew that all she had to say was "Doll, I want that," and she got it.

Nobody called Mr. Vredenburgh a "damn Yankee," like they did some Northerners. He was always handing money around for every little thing anybody did for him. Folks in the country liked that.

The candy tree

Carrie thought he must look like a king the way he sat in the chair in the parlor before the fire. Mama and Papa and Charles and Marion and Carrie and even the baby, Ida Nell, the whole family, sat around him.

"Yes, I have a candy tree," he said. "There is nothing in it but candy." He said it like it was real important. He said, "There is a cave inside the trunk of this tree. A very large cave. But it isn't dark down there. It has bright lights all over it," he spread his hands wide and his diamond rings sparkled, "so bright everything is covered in diamonds. The cave goes down into the ground, but it is not dark down there," he stressed, holding his hands up. He shook his head and made his eyes as big as — as — as saucers. "No, it is bright with hundreds of lights, and the walls are lined with sparkling jewels."

At that moment, he was quiet and waited for everybody to listen.

"And it is full of candy! Nothing in it but candy." He looked around to be sure everybody understood that. It seemed like he was through with his story. But then he held up a box, a large sort of flat box with pictures of roses on top of it. "This is a candy box," he said, patting it with his big hand. "The child who guesses what kind of candy is in this box, it is yours."

"Oh!" Carrie cried out. But she didn't know many kinds of candy. Still she couldn't wait. She called out, "Peppermint!" Mr. Vredenburgh shook his head. Carrie's heart fell. "Caramel," Charles guessed. But Mr. Vredenburgh shook his head. Shy Marion, the last to guess, could barely be heard. "Chocolate," she said. She got the box of candy.

Mr. Vredenburgh brings his wife home

When Peter Vredenburgh II had the town well under way, he brought his wife to see her new home. She was a beautiful dark-haired woman with brown eyes. But that wasn't what made her beautiful. She was lovely in every way, thoughtful, kind, interested in everybody, and generous to young people, whom she invited to be with her younger son, Peter III.

Sellers, the older son, had married and joined the company early. We never knew Mrs. Vredenburgh's first name. Mr. Vredenburgh called her "Puss," and that's the only name we ever heard. Mr. Vredenburgh didn't visit us in Buena Vista, but Mrs. Vredenburgh came over on the Vredenburgh train to Buena Vista Crossing, a quarter mile away, and she was met there. Her brother's wife, Lena Hoskins, came with her. Mama was always happy when Mrs. Hoskins came because she played the piano.

My child's vision of Mrs. Hoskins was of her sitting grandly at the piano with a shawl draped over her shoulders. She played the piano well, Mama thought. At the same time, Mrs. Vredenburgh was elegant in a silk dress with a bar pin lined with big diamonds that seemed to spread across her spacious bosom.

They were met at eleven o'clock by Papa's surrey. It was a sad day when Marion, Julia, and Carrie rode on the back of Old Blue and followed the surrey. Marion was in the small child's saddle, Julia was behind her holding on to the saddle, and because Carrie was experienced at horseback riding and Julia was not, Carrie was behind Julia with only Julia to hold to.

They were jogging along slowly. Then the Vredenburgh train blew down the track. Marion flipped the reins and said "Giddap," and Julia, not expecting the horse to trot, was off balance, began to slide, and left Carrie with nothing to hold to.

All three girls slid gently off Old Blue's back into the sandy roadway, right in front of Aunt Phroni's little house. Phroni was Julia's black nurse.

Aunt Phroni did most of the squalling. Carrie's mouth was full of loose teeth and blood. Julia's chin was gashed and bleeding. The scar stayed with her all her life. Marion managed to slow Old Blue as she slid off the saddle with Julia holding to her. The grownups in the surrey were unaware of the spill.

'Shinny and the common laborer'

A common laborer was paid a dollar a day for 11-1/2 hours work in the logging camps and at the sawmill in the 1912 period. Bootleg whiskey cost one dollar a pint at the still and $1.50 delivered by the bootlegger.

Editor's note: Local folklore recalls that Hank Williams Sr. took his first drink of "shinny" at Vredenburgh.

There were 22 young white men, bachelors, living at the Vredenburgh Hotel at one time, with nowhere to go and no amusement in the town.

Scholarship baseball

Baseball was an incentive for the young college graduates to come and work. It was the custom in that period, around 1915 or 1920, for sawmill towns to compete. Mr. Vredenburgh was competitive; he wanted his team to win. He hired college men, during summer vacation, who were baseball material, and especially those who were interested in the baseball leagues for the future.

Grant Willis from Grove Hill went on to represent Alabama in the Rose Bowl and then the Majors. Ed Morris and Sut Jenkins played for Boston in the Majors.

Mr. Vredenburgh put these boys on the payroll for the summer and gave them job titles whether they did constructive work in his mill or office.

On the Fourth of July, 1914, Mr. Vredenburgh made an all-day holiday of it. He had a picnic, a baseball game, and, that night, a dance.

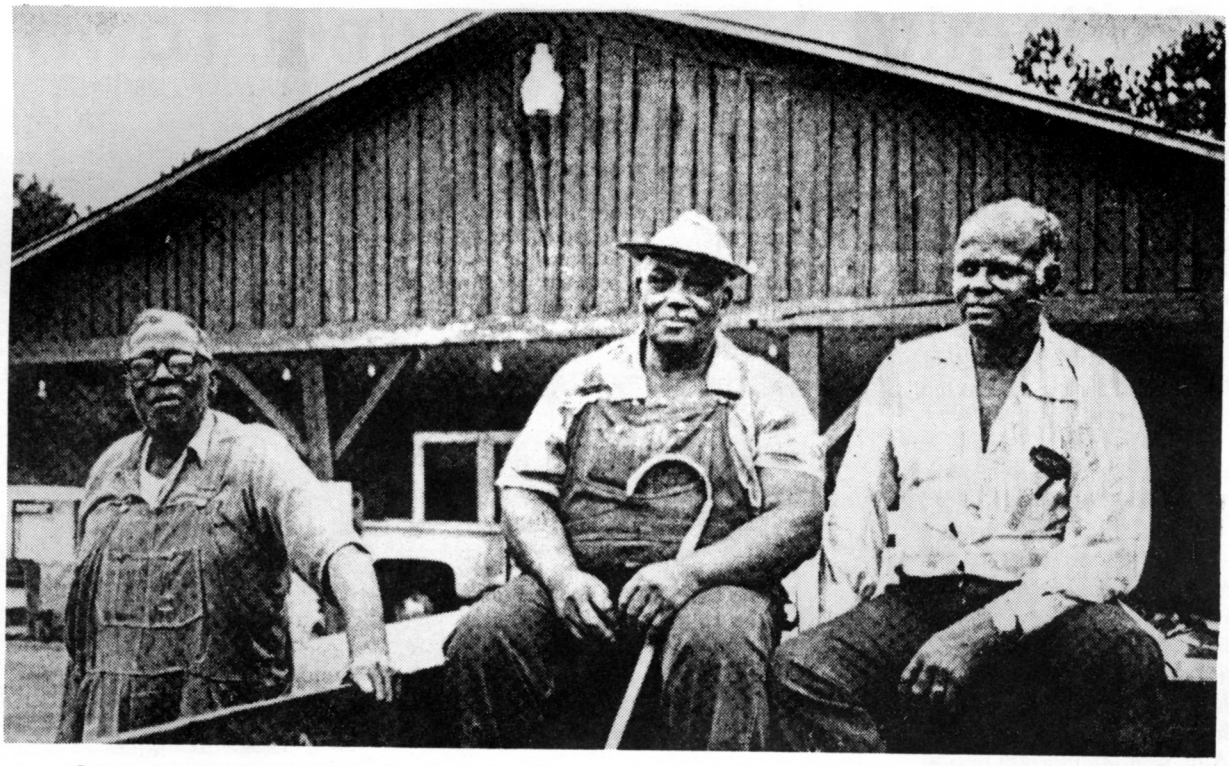
For the dance, he had a bandstand built and decorated with red, white, and blue bunting. He hired a Negro band for the occasion.

Editor's note: According to Sue Turner, W.C. Handy band played on one of these occasions. W.C. Handy is considered "The Father of the Blues" and was from Florence, Ala.

As the sawmill team gained recognition, the college men returned for summer vacation year after year, and Mr. Vredenburgh helped those who needed it to complete their college work.

It was in 1913 that Mr. Vredenburgh took his team to Pensacola, Fla., for a game. He was known as never passing up an opportunity to bet on anything. Mrs. Vredenburgh was with him on the trip

(See GLIMPSES, next page)



Odom, McCants and Middleton (L-R) outside mill commissary. Photo by Peggy Hoomes-Jaye.

Vredenburgh mill workers

This is an excerpt of an article printed from The Monroe Journal written by Peggy Hoomes-Jaye in 1982.

Elmore Middleton, 63, worked at the mill for 46 years and recalled starting work there for 40 cents an hour.

Clarence McCants, 72, worked at the mill for "50 cents a day long back during hard times."

McCants, who worked at the Vredenburgh mill for 58 years, said, "Ain't nobody gonna leave — there ain't no jobs anywhere else either."

Cleve Odom, 76, recalled working for a dollar an hour for 12 hours a day. When asked about the Depression, he said, "It was so rough until I hate to think about it."

Odom said that during the Depression "you worked three hours a day for 70 cents a day — the whistle would blow at 6 every morning and then three hours later at 9."

All three men lived in housing which was deeded to them by the sawmill company several years ago.

"We got us a place of our own, why leave?" Middleton said.

"The only place we're going to is the cemetery," McCants said, with a fixed stare on the nearby mill and a sad look in his eyes.

Glimpses

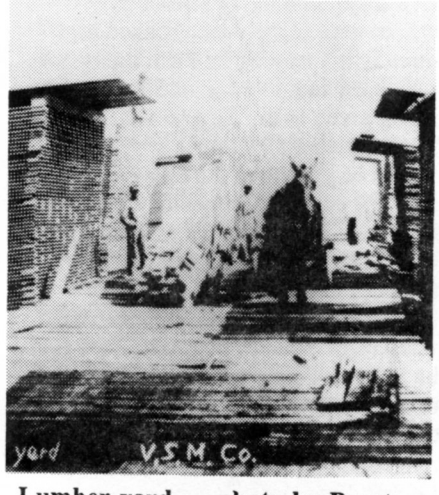
(From previous page)

and they stayed at the San Carlos Hotel. Mrs. Vredenburgh never seemed concerned about anything he did. His wildest exploits did not embarrass her. She told this tale on him later.

A peanut-popcorn vendor attracted his attention at the ball park. He offered to bet the vendor $200 his Vredenburgh team would win the game against the Pensacola team that day. The vendor said he had no cash, opportunity to bet on anything. Mrs. Vredenburgh was with him on the trip and they stayed at the San Carlos Hotel. Mrs. Vredenburgh never but Mr. Vredenburgh offered to take the bet on the vendor's cart and supplies. The Vredenburgh team won the game, and the vendor turned the cart over to Mr. Vredenburgh.

He paid to have the cart delivered to the hotel. And it was just like Peter Vredenburgh II to set up business on a street corner with one of his ever-present servants to sell the wares.

Mrs. Vredenburgh laughed over this little escapade and thought her wealthy husband was very clever. And she approved when he returned the cart and added $100 cash to it as a gift to the vendor.



Lumber yard — photo by Borst.

Reflections on a Sawmill Town

Editor's note: Dayton Russell is a resident of Monroeville. This is an excerpt from his forthcoming autobiography. He is also the author of "Dead Birds Don't Fly."

By Dayton Russell

Vredenburgh, where I lived as a boy, was a large sawmill town nestled amidst tall long-leaf pines, deep in the hills of north Monroe County, Alabama.

On Sundays, with the noisy saws, steam engines and all the other machinery shut down, it seemed like a giant asleep. I remember well the peaceful stillness — how it settled over the vast lumber plant and the residential areas of the town.

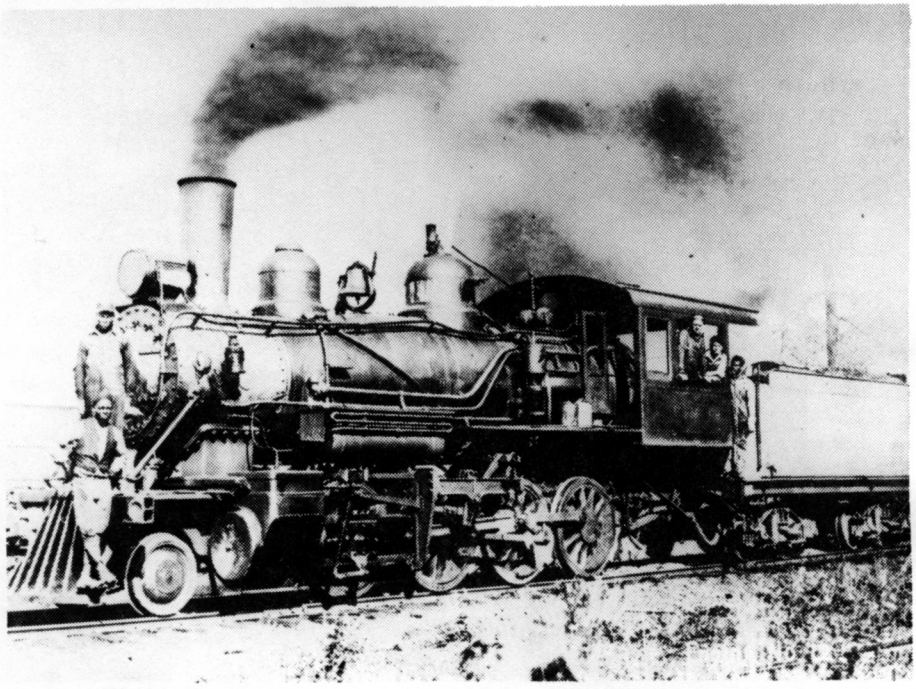
One could see white smoke, instead of the usual black, pouring gently from the huge smokestack on the big sawmill. And, standing upright beside the smokestack would be "Old Betsy" — that's what we called her — the big deep-throated whistle. Four long blasts, echoing for miles around, sounded from it every week-day morning at 4 a.m. to wake the workers who had to be on the job by 6.

Oftentimes, I would be awakened, too, but if it was cold, I'd snuggle back under the covers and go back to sleep.

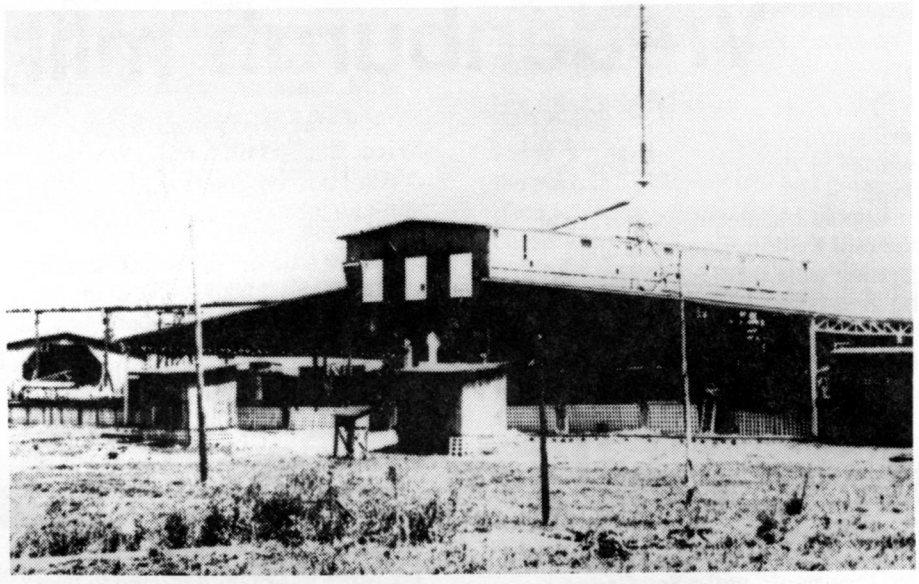
Even now — in my mind — I can see Old No. 12 locomotive, steam oozing from around its drivers, with a long string of cars loaded with virgin pine logs, stretched around the already log-jammed pond, waiting to be unloaded the next morning.

Sometimes we boys, with nothing else to do on Sunday afternoons, would hop on the water-soaked logs already in the pond and roll them under our feet — little, if any, thought being given to the danger. On Sundays, too, the company's mules would be resting in the blackened, sawdust-covered lot behind the big mill after a hard week's work, pulling the heavily-loaded lumber carts around the stacking yards.

Some would be standing forlornly with heads bowed; while others would be lying in the sawdust or maybe rolling over in it, trying to massage their aching backs. While high overhead, we might see, in a cloud-flecked blue sky, a few buzzards



A typical "old Betsy." Photos early 1900s. Notice knickers on black worker on front of train. From the Sue Turner collection.



Planer Mill. Photo by Borst. Photo courtesy of Wilmon Timber Co.

gliding lazily, expectantly, like the vultures they were, hoping one of the mules wouldn't make it for work the next day; and sometimes one didn't.

Some Sundays we'd ride our bikes down the boarded 5-foot-high lumber runway, on which the mules pulled the carts every workday, where fresh kiln-dried lumber was stacked and ready for the planer mill.

The pungent smell of freshly dried pine lumber assailed our nostrils as we crisscrossed over the single pair of railroad tracks from one shed to another — usually on nothing more than 2-by-6 or 2-by-8 boards we'd placed there.

Near the planer-mill up on a hill near the main railroad tracks was the town's only hotel, built there for the convenience of business people and guests who might come in on the company's two-coach passenger and mail train. They accommodated regular boarders, too. Board steps with 2-by-4 handrails led from the tracks

up to the building.

Sometimes we'd see the only day-watchman, with a time clock hanging from his shoulder, sitting on the long porch banister of the company commissary, resting between clock-punching stations.

Dusty streets with hard-packed dirt sidewalks wound through the residential areas of the town. During the hot summer months, the mamas and papas would sit on their porches, waving their palmetto fans steadily back and forth, trying to get some relief from the stifling heat. Boys and girls on the sidewalks, some with their hands clasped loosely behind their backs, shuffled bare feet and dug their toes in the warm sand while gazing nonchalantly up into the sky; nothing to do, just waiting and watching.

A few yards down the street we might see a liver-spotted foxhound lying asleep on the sidewalk under the shade of an overhanging water oak limb.

There were Sundays, too, when we might see him — a lone horseman — the town's reveler, coming from the south, riding fast and reeling from side to side in his saddle, and his horse would always be hot and covered with foamy lather. Faster and faster he'd come, swaying back and forth and side to side, appearing as if he might topple from the saddle at any moment. As he'd come closer and closer, sometimes he'd turn the reins loose, and — always with a bottle in one hand — fling both arms in the air, and, in a thunderous voice, yell, "Raise hell. Peace I do despise!"

Then, as he'd disappear in a cloud of dust, we'd sense that the peaceful spell had been broken. The children would begin running foot races along the sidewalk; the mamas and papas would begin rocking and talking; the old fox hound would stretch himself to his full length and amble off into the nearby woods; the mules would get up off the blackened sawdust, and with loud snorts, clear their nostrils of the sawdust; the buzzards would give up their vigil over the mule lot, flap their wings and fly away into the hills. And we might see an old Model T chug-chugging past the commissary as the day-watchman would get up and continue his rounds.

Unusual experience

I remember once when we had a protracted tent meeting in Vredenburgh. We always had our revivals and protracted meetings under a big tent near the schoolhouse that also served as the Union Church building.

The floor under the big tent was covered liberally with sawdust, and they had benches for us to sit on. My back would get awfully tired during some of those long preaching services. Some of them would last for two hours. At least it seemed that long to me.

The difference in a protracted meeting and a revival was the time. Protracted meetings last as long as the converts and the money — especially the money — keep coming in. Revivals usually last for not more than a week or two.

This particular protracted meeting I went to was a protracted meeting because it had already lasted 3-1/2 weeks when I had my experience.

One night I was sitting up front with some of my friends. I remember two of them were Sludge Hill and Joe Man Williams. Marvin, my brother was also there. We sat up front because that's where the action was, and we didn't want to miss anything.

The music and singing was always good, and we could hear the choir and the organ much better from that position. Well, as most always during revivals, the preacher offered a lot of propositions. I've forgotten exactly what the proposition was on this particular night. I think it was something like this: "Now, all of you people who want to go to heaven and who would like for me to pray that you'll get there, come forward and shake my hand."

That may not be exactly what it was, but it's close enough. Anyway, Mrs. Satterwhite was playing the organ, and the choir and congregation were singing "Bringing in the Sheaves."

The music and singing was good as people came in a long line to shake the preacher's hand. But I became more interested in watching Mrs. Satterwhite play the organ. She was short and stout, and the stool she sat on was round, one that can be adjusted by turning one way or the other depending on whether the organist wants it higher or lower.

Well, the seat didn't quite fit Mrs. Satterwhite because it was smaller than her seat and her legs were not long enough to reach the pedals without her squirming considerably on the seat. So I sat fascinated, watching her as she played, her fat seat overflowing on the round stool, and seeing her flounce around to reach the pedals with her short legs.

She was doing her best, though, and the organ sounded pretty good. In fact, the singing and organ playing soon put me to sleep. I didn't realize I had been to sleep, however, until I noticed that the choir and congregation were singing a different song, "Just as I Am Without One Plea." I noticed, too, that the preacher was still standing on the platform, alone, begging people to come.

He was saying, "Won't you come tonight, tomorrow may be too late." But no one was coming, and I wondered why. They'd been coming by the droves, shaking his hand and going back to their seats. I was wide awake by now, and I got to feeling sort of sorry for that preacher, standing up there with his arms outstretched, begging people to come and no one was coming.

So I says to myself, "Well, if it'll make the preacher feel any better, I'll just go up and shake his hand and come back to my seat." The preacher kept pleading and holding out both hands. "Oh, sinners, won't you come. I just know many of you need to know him better. Won't you come right now as we sing this last verse?"

Before we got halfway through the verse, I got up quickly and went forward to shake his hand. I noticed that he shook my hand rather exuberantly, and patted my shoulder more so than he did any of the others that had been shaking his hand.

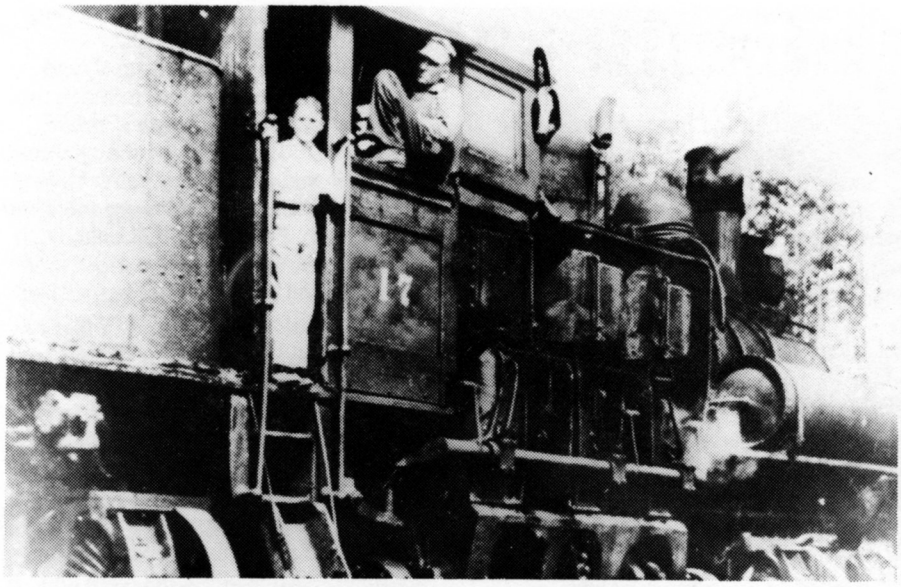
Anyway, as I finished shaking his hand and he had finished patting my back, I turned to go back to my seat; but he took hold of my arm and held me back saying, "Sonny, you just stand right here beside me."

It was then that I realized that I'd made a mistake.

The preacher held up his hand to get the congregation's attention. "Brothers and Sisters, by this young man (I was age 9) coming and shaking my hand, he has accepted Christ as his Savior and has agreed to turn from his wicked ways."

Boy, I thought to myself, he must have already found out about me throwing that rock at old Lady Fowler's dominecker rooster this morning.

"I know many of you are as proud



Unidentified young boy taking a train ride. Photo from Sue Turner collection.

as I am to see this young man make such an important decision and will want to come by and congratulate him for making this courageous choice.''

Well, Mrs. Satterwhite began playing and the choir commenced singing, ''Safe in the Arms of Jesus'' as the congregation started filing by me, shaking my hand, hugging my neck and some, especially the old ladies, kissing me on the cheek.

I saw Mama coming in the line. Maybe she'll rescue me, I thought. But when she got to me she just bent down and hugged and kissed me on the cheek and kept going along with the others.

I knew then that I'd joined the church for sure — and the Methodist Church, at that. Most of my family were Baptists. As it turned out, though, Mama went to the preacher the next day and told him that I didn't know what I was doing, that I really didn't intend to join the church when I went up to shake his hand. She made it all right with him and I remained as yet an unchurched sinner.

Baseball

As a result of the great interest in Mr. Pete's baseball team, the boys of Vredenburgh — those of us who were old enough — also acquired an interest in the game.

Without any equipment, regulation equipment, that is, we tried to play the game, using sticks for bats and stuffed socks for balls, and with no gloves, we started.

Of course, we had no manager either, no one to show us about the game. We sort of made our own rules from watching the company games.

We chose the two team by having one of the two best players throw the bat (or stick) to the other. Wherever he happened to catch the bat the other player placed his hand above his, and on and on until they reached the top of the bat. The player who was able to catch the bat at the very top with no room left for the other player to catch it with a hold, would throw it backward over his shoulder.

He became the one who had first choice of players who were to play on his team. Naturally he'd pick the best first, and the other opposing player would pick the next best and so on until all were chosen.

It was always my luck to be the last one chosen because of my inability to play the game. In spite of my deep desire and determination, I could neither catch nor hit the ball. We had no older person who knew baseball to help us. At least that was one of my excuses. The truth of the matter was that I just didn't have the knack for baseball.

Baseball uniform

I was so anxious to play the game, however, that I figured if I just had a uniform it would make a difference. I was about 9 years of age at the time. I persuaded Mama to make me a uniform (she wasn't hard to persuade because she was always doing things for us beyond the duties of a mother). She used some gray material much like the cloth in regulation uniforms, and even sewed red piping on it in the right places.

''Now,'' I said to myself, ''I'll show them I can play baseball.'' But, you know something? That pretty uniform didn't help one bit. I still couldn't hit nor catch the ball. But I kept trying, even if they did choose me last at every game we played.

My church life

The extent of my church life in Vredenburgh was Sunday School on Sunday, and occasionally preaching on Sunday nights when Mama and Papa took us.

Mr. R.H. ''Ty'' Cobb, manager of Old Man Pete's baseball team, was our Sunday School teacher. (Ty Cobb later became a professional baseball player with the Detroit Tigers.)

His regular job with the company was that of woods superintendent. He had the responsibility of keeping the logs coming to the mill. He was, therefore, in charge of all log locomotives.

Mr. Cobb announced to my Sunday School class one Sunday that the next Sunday we would go on a picnic using one of the locomotives and an empty gondola coal car. Well, as expected, all class members were present the next Sunday. And an extra bonus was the picnic lunch furnished by the company.

Mr. Cobb, as we learned, was quite an influential man with the company. I think one reason was his being such a good manager of the baseball team.

Our picnic was a success in spite of all the coal dust we got on our Sunday clothes and our encounter with a million or so ants. The gondola car we rode in was not a very suitable way for picnickers to travel, either. We couldn't see out of it. The sides were too high, even by standing up, we couldn't see over the sides. So we had nothing to look at as we traveled along but each other and the blackened insides of the coal car.

The site selected for the picnic was not very desirable in other ways besides all the ants. There were no shades trees anywhere and very little grass, and it was pretty well dried up. It hadn't rained in many days and everything was dry, too.

Anyway, we enjoyed the outing and the event did cause an improvement in our attendance at Sunday School. We all liked Mr. Cobb, too, which had much to do with the good attendance.

A National Political Figure

Excerpted from Alabama Life, Spring 1980.

By Kaye Lovvorn

Every four years the lady who calls the roll of the states for each vote taken at the Democratic Convention is noted, but seldom remarked upon, by thousands of watching Alabamians.

Dorothy McElroy Vredenburgh Bush is more famous in the annals of national politics than in those of Alabama. Yet, the first woman to be chosen secretary of any political party in the United States gained her entry into national politics as the Alabama Young Democrats' national committee woman. She had been "born a Democrat" and "interested in politics since [she] could talk."

At Mississippi College for Women, she was involved in college Young Democrat groups. She kept that allegiance following graduation when she came to Alabama to take a secretarial job with Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad Company in Birmingham.

After three years of working with TCIR and spending much of her spare time with Young Democrats' activities, she met Peter Vredenburgh III, from the small town of Vredenburgh in Monroe County. Politics — or, rather, the death of a politician — brought them together.

Vredenburgh was in Birmingham for the funeral of Sen. Will Bankhead. The couple married in December 1940. In 1941, Mrs. Vredenburgh became national committee woman of the Alabama Young Democrats. Later that year, she became assistant secretary of the national organization. In 1943, she moved up to vice president — the highest office a woman could hold in the organization.

In the election year of 1944, the secretary of the National Democratic Party resigned, and two powerful Democrats suggested that the beautiful young woman from Alabama be appointed in his place.

House Speaker Sam Rayburn's dining room was the site of a luncheon to introduce her to the top 50 members of the party. Following that luncheon, Time referred to Mrs. Vredenburgh as the Democrats' "secret weapon."

Not only did she bring youth, charm, and beauty to the office, but she brought a great deal of spunk, political savvy, and a record of grassroots hard work in Democratic causes. To fill that post successfully in an election year would take all of her many assets. And at the same time she took the job with the party office in March, she kept her post with the Young Democrats, becoming acting president in June when the president went into the armed forces.

Peter Vredenburgh III (Peter III married Dorothy after the suicide of his first wife, Lucille Mitter.) Photo courtesy of Wilmon Timber Co.

While her movie star beauty brightened front pages, the 27-year-old Mrs. Vredenburgh did not hesitate to enliven reporters' copy by telling them such things as that one of the nice things about her new job would be all the movies she could see.

Back home in Vredenburgh, it was too far from a theater to go often. She also liked hotel living. Cooking and housecleaning were not, she said, among her favorite activities. (One must doubt, however, that she'd had much recent experience with them, having, after all, married into an extremely wealthy family.) But she did give writers a feminine trait or two to record. In addition to her "brilliant blue eyes," and "naturally wavy" hair, she often carried needlepoint purses which were her own handiwork.

Mrs. Vredenburgh's performance in her first convention — three months after she got the job — earned her the support of the entire 150-member executive committee. She has kept that support. And she has kept her job.

Although her going with the national party on certain issues rather than the folks back home has gotten her criticized and although she considered resigning in 1948 when Alabama pulled out of the convention, her talent for politics and her penchant for being a peacemaker has kept her in the job of secretary of the Democratic Party for 36 years. With each change in party chairmanship, she has offered her resignation, and each time it has been refused.

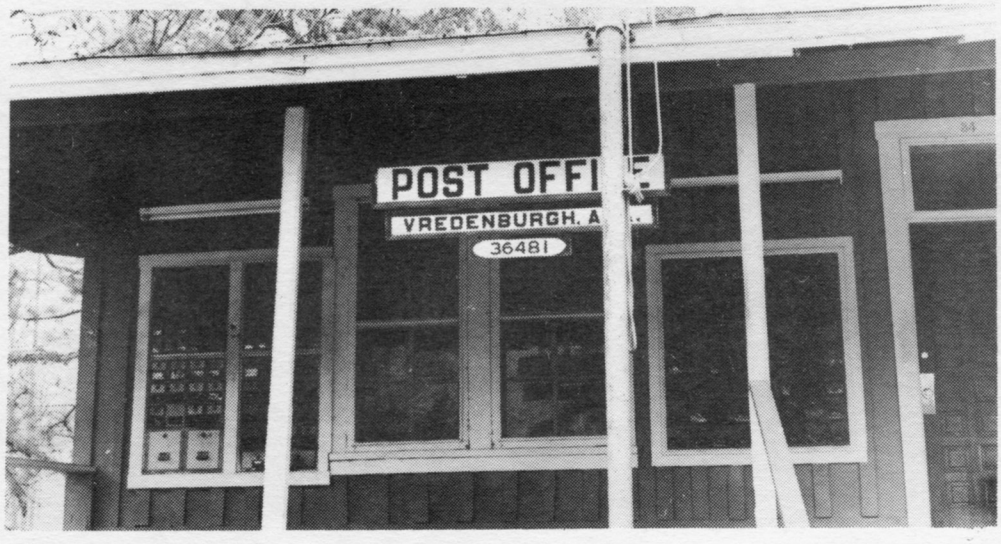
In March 1956, Peter Vredenburgh died while he and his wife were vacationing in Miami. In August she was at her usual post at the Democratic Convention. Her light blue linen dress matched her eyes, reporters observed — and showed up nicely on television — as she called the roll, checked credentials, acted as peacemaker and organizer. As she explained succinctly to The New York Times, "This job helps. It is a fascinating challenge."

Following the death of her husband, Mrs. Vredenburgh was romantically linked by the press to two-time Democratic Presidential nominee Adlai Stevenson. But when she married again in 1962, it was to John W. Bush. The Bushes currently live in Naples, Fla., when she isn't in Washington.

Despite all the assets that would indicate she would be successful if she chose to make a political race of her own, Mrs. Bush never has. She once explained, "I like to help other people win." And she'll be doing that again this summer for her ninth Democratic Convention.

Today ...

Clockwise from right: Sister Rosemary Wrinn instructs creative writing at the St. Joseph Educational Center; Lewis McCants; post office still operating at Vredenburgh. All photos by Anna Thibodeaux, 1991.



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