

## THE LEE SAWMILL

As soon as Tired Iron of the Ozarks was established in 1992 there was interest in having a sawmill for exhibition at our shows. In the minutes of the October 18, 1994, meeting, comments were made alerting the membership of sawmills for sale. Bob Phillips knew of one for \$1,000 and Victor Franco said he could see about one available at a cheaper price.

Then, in the minutes of the meeting on January 16, 1996, President Glenn Smith mentioned news that the United Way of Gentry would give Tired Iron \$1,868 for "the express purpose of purchasing a sawmill and rope-making machines." Glenn, along with Dale Draper, located a sawmill belonging to Mrs. Reva Lee, the widow of Roy Lee of Siloam Springs, Arkansas. He had owned and operated the mill for several years. At the meeting, Ken Dixon made the motion to buy the sawmill for \$1500 and Jerry Friend seconded it. The motion carried. Lynn Barnica, Ken Dixon, Dale Draper, Mark Dixon, Clarence Wooley, Glenn Smith, and Loy Sullivan were designated to move the mill and set it up at the Rose of Sharon show grounds.

Sawmills such as this one were and still are scattered around our region. Sources for information included Mike Smith, who bought and traded for lumber for decades from Mr. Lee; Mr. Frank Lee, son of Roy Lee (VFW commander of post 1674); and Tired Iron members. Much information was gained. Notably, it was learned that Mr. Lee had purchased this mill in 1958 from Mr. George McCartney. It, at the time, was located near Falling Springs (now called Natural Falls) about five miles west of West Siloam Springs, Oklahoma, on what is now called Old Highway 33 just off multi-lane Highway 412, which did not exist at the time the mill was purchased. In its years of service, anytime a more convenient location was located the mill would be moved.

One of the first places that timber was cut was on the Illinois River in Oklahoma at the Anglin Fishing Camp. Timber was cut on shares. At that time, there was a team of mules (Jack and Tobe) that would drag the logs out of the hollows. Some of the lumber that was cut was used to construct the cabins at the fishing camp. When that job was completed, Mr. Lee moved to what is now called Flint Ridge in Oklahoma to cut timber for the use of pallets and crossties or anything he could sell the timber for to provide for his family. To harvest the timber, Mr. Lee cut many of the logging roads which are now the actual streets in Flint Ridge.

In time, the mill was moved two or three miles to just past the historical Hildebrand grist mill, which is still located on Flint Creek today. Incidentally, that grist mill was built about 1845 to serve the needs of local citizens. It operated through the Civil War and provided meal for both armies. And too, the mill played important roles in the Indian Nation which encompasses it. The current building was erected in 1907. The Lee sawmill's new location was in a ravine just after the local road started uphill toward

Colcord, Oklahoma. There were 1000's of feet of 2 x 2s cut for a company called Stockade Fencing west of Decatur on Spavinaw Creek.

Anytime it became more convenient to relocate to a better work site the mill was moved. The mill would be moved two or three times more before it was set up on what became its more permanent location on Sawmill Road just off Arkansas Highway 59. At this time, Mr. Lee would truck the timber he purchased to the sawmill on Sawmill Road. The site was about three miles south of Siloam Springs, Arkansas. Sawmill Road was the location of the mill when Tired Iron bought it.

Mike Smith (not a member but a friend and supporter of Tired Iron) as a builder in Northeast Oklahoma and Northwest Arkansas, was a regular customer in the 1960s and 1970s for lumber sawed by the Lee mill. It has been mentioned that he used it in many projects and also stockpiled lumber. Mr. Lee, when he came across fine logs of cherry, walnut, and white oak, would cut them into slabs of different thicknesses to be dressed to fit a particular job when needed. Mr. Lee did this for his regular customers outside the pallet business.

Disturbingly, Mike Smith's chicken house storage burned resulting in thousands of board feet of the finest lumber being lost. Mr. Lee would operate the mill from 1958 until near his death in 1994. Mr. Frank Lee said his father had used several power systems for the mill. He remembers the mill got its power from time to time from a Buick, a flat-head Ford, and an industrial engine. Mrs. Lee, who passed away in 2009, saw to the memory of her husband in requesting that Tired Iron keep his life and work alive by keeping the mill operating.

At Tired Iron there was lots of excitement concerning the possession of a sawmill. The meeting minutes of February 20, 1996, recorded a statement that they were "making an effort to have the sawmill on display even if not running." Even though Rose of Sharon was the private property of one of the members, a pavilion type structure was built over the mill. Anthony Hartfield arranged for trusses from Adams Truss of Gentry. The mill was soon sawing logs for the delight of our members and of the visitors at our shows.

When Tired Iron purchased 17 1/2 acres at 13344 Taylor Orchard Road, Gentry, AR, on February 14, 2003, the sawmill and shed had to be moved to the new location, where it continues operation. Thanks go out to all the friends and members who have played roles in establishing and operating the Lee Mill at our shows. Countless people have visited the sawmill and observed its operation.



Carl Wood Sawing at Rose of Sharon on July 8, 2000



Building the Sawmill Shed at Tired Iron March 7, 2005

(If anyone knows more or different information about the sawmill, please contact me at [morrison40@cox.net](mailto:morrison40@cox.net))