

Centralia Sawmill

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The Centralia sawmill site is now on Chassahowitzka Wildlife Management Area. It was a short-lived logging town to harvest 15,000 acres of monster red Tidewater Cypress trees from the Gulf's edge. To drive to Centralia, travel CR 476 west and take Centralia Road. When you reach US 19 you are "downtown" Centralia (Post Office open June 10, 1910 till December 11, 1922).

Known locally as the Central Cypress Company, (J. C.) Turner Lumber Company moved here from Michigan by way of Donna, Louisiana and Coleman, Florida where they owned previous mills. About 1200 laborers and their families and support, numbering another 300, occupied the "boom town". Loggers, sawyers, skidders, thirty-six millwrights, blacksmiths, planers, mechanics, expert builders, surveyors, foreman, quarter bosses, trail-cutters, lumber inspectors, and craftsmen of many specialties came and left with the mill. Workers hailed from Scotland, Ireland, Germany, France, Italy, Finland, Canada and most U.S. states. Fifty sponge diving Greeks moved up from Tarpon Springs and were superb lumber stackers.

One thousand board feet of cut cypress contains 309 gallons of water that had to be sun-dried over two or more years before heading to the planing mill to become shingles, laths and construction lumber and/or onto the Northern Tampa Railroad for shipping to Irvington, NY from Port Tampa. The drying yard was 160 acres with stacks to 15 feet high. Powered by four large steam boilers, two band saws cut 40 foot timber on one line and shorter logs on a second. Up to 18 miles of narrow-gauged railroad trams were built into the swamps to the West and Northwest of the mill. Steam skidders moved the cut logs to the railroad cars and they were transported and dumped into a mill pond 155 feet from the double band saws. Cypress logs were pulled up out of a mill pond by steam powered chains. After being cut at the saws they were moved onto the "green chain" where they progressed towards the drying

area via the same mechanism. The final leg was fueled by mule power and wagons on a board runway and the lumber was stacked for drying.

Town amenities included Flicker Palace, the picture show; Hungry None Restaurant; Mrs. George Varn's Hotel; a bakery; Dr. Johnson, M. D., on-site; Dr. Heddick, visiting dentist from Brooksville monthly; one church for both Protestants and Catholics which also served as the school; and fresh vegetable and beef from local Annutaliga growers (Mr. Morris and Jess Lisk) bought by George Gamble, who ran a Commissary/General Store. Gamble's was stocked with the volume of four railroad cars of merchandise. His first building was 100 foot by 50 foot and he soon expanded with an additional 100 foot by 40 foot space, both 17 feet high.

Merchandise was packed on shelves to the ceiling and rolling ladders were incorporated to pull down goods, both food stuffs and dry goods and the most current fashions. His store fed and clothed communities from miles around, including Wiscon, Norman, Freeman at Tooke Lake, Oak Grove, Coon Wallow, Chassahowitzka and Annutaliga Hammock. It was larger than stores in Tampa and Jacksonville, the largest city in Florida at this time. Bob Butler wrote in about 1972, "It was not out the ordinary to see one hundred barrels of flour, twenty barrels of sugar, ten barrels of grits, ten barrels of meal, one hundred cases of tomatoes and corn, ten bags of lima and navy beans, fifty bags of potatoes, five hundred cases of soft drinks and ten forty-five pound cans of oil sausages from the grocery department. In addition the store carried a complete line of dry goods, clothing, shoes, caps and hats for work and every day use. Another complete line was of 'Sunday-go-to-meeting' attire all in the latest mode, high buttoned shoes, bustles, derby hats and spats." Gamble's was open for business 15 hours a day and supplied the cracker barrels for the evening get-to-gathers for the men to "chew the fat" over the day's lumber output, which had the capacity to number 100,000 board feet from the double-banded raw timber sawmill operation.

The largest cypress taken had to be dynamite blasted to reduce the stump end to manageable size. It provided 5,476 board feet in 1912. The top twenty feet log

was displayed on a railroad car for several weeks and is now a favorite photo to depict days gone by in Hernando County.