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Logging and Sawmills: Rabun's First Industry

When regulations were few and natural resources were abundant, lumber companies began to buy land in Rabun County for its old growth timber. They purchased vast tracts of land for \$1 to \$2 per acre from poor mountain farmers who were easily duped into selling at rock bottom prices. Large-scale logging started in 1901 when Andrew Gennett purchased thousands of acres along the Chattooga River. Conservation was not a major consideration in those days and logging companies created an environmental disaster as mountainsides were clear-cut.

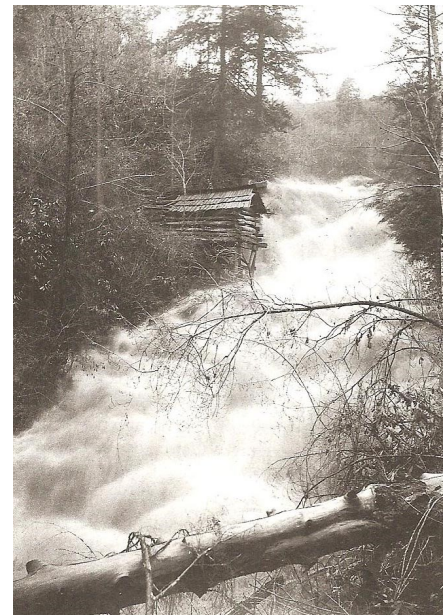


The timber along the Chattooga River was the first to be logged in Rabun by Gennett Lumber Company. Logs were floated down the river to their sawmill in Madison, S.C. Teams of oxen were used to pull the logs into and out of the river. Hooked poles called peavies were used to roll logs in the river.

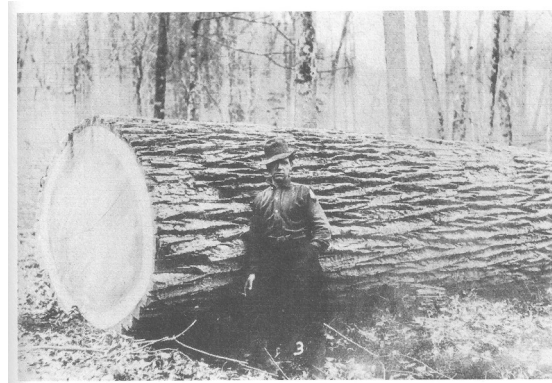


*Loggers using oxen to
move a large chestnut log*

The old growth timber was first harvested without power equipment. It could take three pairs of oxen to pull one huge log. One logger told "Foxfire" whether mules or oxen were used, "From the time the log started out of the woods' til it got to the railroad sidin', it would take about three weeks."



Splash dams were built across mountain streams to back up water for carrying hundreds of cut trees. When these temporary dams were dynamited, enormous floods swept the trees down the mountain, severely eroding the mountainsides. Fish and wildlife populations were devastated.



Morse Lumber Company built a spur rail line to their thousands of acres of timber along the Tallulah River. The Tallulah Falls Railroad carried many hundreds of rail cars of lumber products each year from Rabun County. At one time there were dozens of sawmills in Rabun County to manufacture lumber from the raw materials logged on Rabun's mountainsides. In 1934 alone, 100 cars of railroad cross-ties were shipped. Other products included telephone poles, sewing machine tops, and wood for golf clubs.



After the U.S. Forest Service bought up land in Rabun County, sawmills began to purchase timber from the government. During the 1920s, an internal combustion engine was used to power sawmills. By 1939, Clayton Lumber Company used two large steam boilers to run the machinery which produced 25,000 board feet per day.

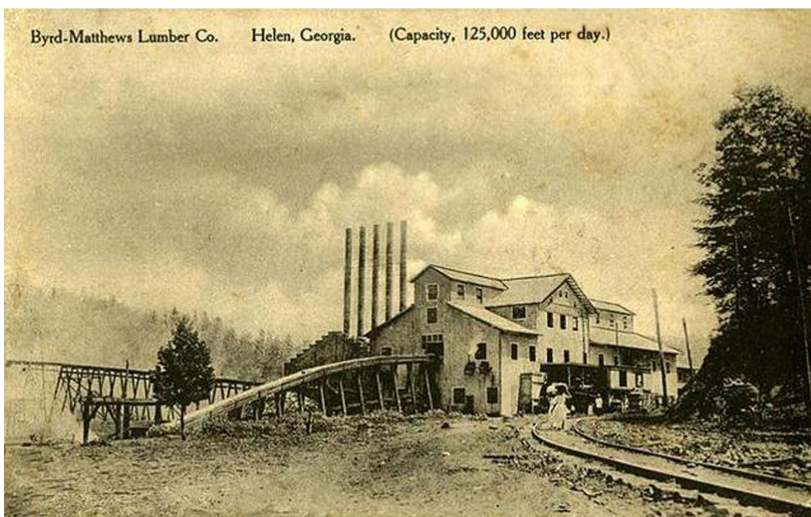


Clear-cut Forest in Rabun County, early 1900s

A sawmill built by the Byrd-Matthews Company vividly illustrates the magnitude of what was happening. Located in Robertstown in nearby White County, this sawmill was the largest east of the Mississippi. At its peak in 1917, the mill cut 125,000 board-feet or 24 miles of timber every day.

Beginning in 1911, the Weeks Act authorized the United States Forest Service to purchase clear-cut land for reforestation, controlling soil erosion and maintaining navigable waterways. These land sales formed the genesis of the Nantahala National Forest, which later was subdivided into the Chattahoochee National Forest that today encompasses about two-thirds of Rabun County and much of northeast Georgia. Reforestation efforts began in earnest in the 1930s when the Civilian Conservation Corps enlisted young men to work on conservation projects. Clear-cutting was disallowed by the Forest Service in the 1980s.

Byrd-Matthews Lumber Co. Helen, Georgia. (Capacity, 125,000 feet per day.)



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- Please visit our museum and research library on Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays from 11:00 until 3:00.
- Group tours by appointment



The most visible legacy of industrial-scale logging in Rabun County is the Chattahoochee National Forest. Over a century since the economic value of Rabun's old-growth forests was first realized, the largely new-growth forests which surround us are no less valuable.

