

## **The Abaco logging story - Wilson City to Snake Cay**

Part I Wilson City, Abaco to Pine Ridge, Grand Bahama

Published 15 Jan 2009

Part 2 Riding Point, Grand Bahama

Published 15 Feb 2009

Part 3 Snake Cay, Abaco, Subject to additions

### **Part I - Wilson City through Pine Ridge**

The Bahamas is not noted for its pine trees. However, four of the major islands have substantial stands of pine which have been harvested for lumber, mine props and pulpwood. New Providence has a dense human population and small forested areas so the pine woods there were not an economic factor. However, the trees on Abaco, Andros and Grand Bahama are a natural resource and were extensively harvested in the last century. The logging industry was little publicized but a major element of The Bahamas economy for the first seventy years of the last century.

The Caribbean pine is closely related to the pine trees of South Florida although considered a separate species. The trees are very slow growing yielding very dense wood - logs actually sink rather than float. Many of the older homes on Abaco are built of Abaco pine harvested and milled in one of the lumber camps that dotted Abaco in the first half of the 1900s. The Pieces of Eight house on Elbow Cay was built in the early 1970s by an Englishman using the last of the available native pine lumber which he purchased in Nassau and Andros.

The tree's slow growth is evident in the trees we see now as they have not been harvested since the mid 1960s. Forty years have passed; yet finding a large pine tree is rare. There are some fine examples of virgin forest on Little Abaco which we believe was never logged. The tree's slow growth is due to a lack of soil and marginal growing conditions. The island limestone foundation does not allow a taproot to grow and the trees develop an extensive, flat root system.

The extensive lumbering operation at Wilson City generally gets credit as the first in the industry and was established in 1905. However, we have been told of an earlier lumbering operation at Witches Point prior to the Bahamas Timber Company at Wilson City.

The 100-year timbering lease held by Bahamas Timber Company morphed through different names and owners on the three islands with forests: the Abaco Lumber Company, National Container Corporation and lastly, Owens-Illinois of the Bahamas operating at Snake Cay on Abaco and winding up operations on Andros in 1972.

Wilson City was on the Abaco headland opposite the north end of Lynyard Cay, just inside North Bar Channel. The Wilson City mill operated until about 1915. It was a modern operation for its time and had a rail system with steam engines to bring the logs to the mill. The community even had the first ice plant in The Bahamas, electricity and a tennis court. Amateur Sunday afternoon archeologists still enjoy roaming the Wilson City area as there are rusted locomotives and foundations of mills and buildings scattered through the area. At low tide, the off-shore stone cairns are visible which supported the railroad track over the water and formed the log pond.

After the operation closed at Wilson City about 1915, lumbering resumed at Norman's Castle sometime after

World War I ended. It was on the west coast of Abaco between Treasure Cay and Cooper's town. Once again there was a rail system and steam locomotives that brought the logs to the mill. The Norman's Castle mill relied on horses to bring the logs out of the woods to the rail sidings. There are no references to horses being used earlier at Wilson City.

After the Norman's Castle harvest, there were portable mills at several locations on the west side of Abaco, all south of Marsh Harbour - Cornwall, three different Millvilles, and finally Cross Harbour which closed in 1943. These later mills used tractors rather than horses for hauling the logs out of the woods. According to Captain Leonard Thompson, the horses used at Norman's Castle were turned loose to fend for themselves, probably being the predecessors of the horses still in the area. He lived in the lumber camp there in his youth.

Abaco temporarily lost its lumbering industry in 1944 when Abaco Lumber Company moved its operation to Pine Ridge, Grand Bahama. This was near the present Freeport which did not exist then. Shipping was done from the north shore of Grand Bahama. The lumber company had been bought by Wallace Groves, who eventually developed Freeport. Timber was milled in the sawmill but a main export was pit-props sent to England. These were used to prop up mine ceilings and smaller diameter trees were suitable.

A Bahamian freight boat, the Donald Roberts, was used by the Pine Ridge operation for trips to Nassau for groceries and other supplies. It often returned from Nassau or Florida with an automobile across the gunnel's on the foredeck.

In 1956 the National Container Corporation, an American company, bought Abaco Lumber Company. A year later Owens-Illinois acquired National Container. The operation was moved from Pine Ridge to Riding Point about 40 miles east and on the north shore. The end use of the wood changed as Owens-Illinois cut the pine trees into eight foot lengths and shipped them to their container-board plant in Jacksonville, Florida, for converting to pulp. Smaller trees can be harvested for pulp than the size required by sawmills for dimensional lumber. The pulp from the Bahama trees was made into container-board, the inside and outside sheets of corrugated cardboard.

Since pulpwood was the desired product and could be harvested by newer methods, much of the Pine Ridge equipment was left behind in the move to Riding Point. The use of the narrow-gauge steam locomotive came to an end. Moving the residential aspects to The Gap, as the new village at Riding Point was called, was a major operation. Many of the employees followed the operation to Riding Point and The Gap while a few left the lumbering business and joined the various elements of the developing Freeport operation which Wallace Groves began to develop in the mid to late 1950s.

Part II will present the change from sawmills to pulpwood and the use of newer harvesting methods.

- END PART ONE, Part 1 Published 15 Jan 2009

Footnote to part I - The written history on the Wilson City lumber mill has extensive references to their use of

narrow gauge railroads. Reference to horses first shows up in different accounts related to the Norman's Castle sawmill operation. However, we have recently learned that our amateur archaeologists frequently uncover horseshoes when exploring the Wilson City ruins. This is strong evidence that horses were an integral part of the Wilson City operation. We are also told that small horse shoes are often found at the sites of the sisal plantations. This implies that horses, donkeys or ponies were used by these earlier settlers.

## PART TWO - Riding Point, Grand Bahama Published 15 Feb 2009

The move from Pine Ridge to Riding Point in 1956 by National Container Corporation, the new owners of the Abaco Lumber Company, consisted mainly of moving people and their houses. A construction camp had been established at Riding Point with the arrival of four railroad cars forming the nucleus of a construction camp. These four cars consisted of a complete kitchen and dining facility, a car with bunks three or four high for workmen, a car with four compartments for supervisory staff and the cook. A fourth car served as a construction office.

Heavy equipment was brought from Jacksonville and the dock was built with steel sheet piling. The causeway was extended from the woods to the dock over an extended lowland area. The Gap, an inland housing area, was prepared for the workers.

The larger trees had been harvested several years earlier for dimensional lumber leaving smaller trees. Moving easterly from Pine ridge to north Riding Point brought the operation to that part of the forest that had a few extra years of growth since the past harvest. Smaller trees were acceptable as the logs would be ground into pulp for making cardboard.

The houses of the workers and the supervisory staff were brought from Pine Ridge to the new settlement three or four miles inland from the Riding Point dock. The village contained a school, church, government nurse, a bar and an outdoor screen where movies were shown several times a week.

The largest settlement on Grand Bahama was at West End, 70 miles away at the western end of the island where the airport and the Butlin Hotel was located. It was later known as the Jack Tar Hotel.

It was a long and arduous ride to West End and not unusual for cars and trucks to carry two spare tires. The road was not paved for the first 40 miles from Riding Point to Freeport then a narrow paved road continued about 30 more miles to West End. Rumors of a weekend convention at the hotel by teachers or nurses would send the loggers to the other end of the island, usually in vain. The ride home in the pre-dawn hours was dusty, rough and weary but the constant potholes kept drivers awake. There were no attractions in Freeport during this period as it was only a construction camp intent on dredging the harbour.

Some of the trucks and other machinery of the Pine Ridge operation were used by the new company, but its harvesting methods were much newer and more aggressive. The railroad was a relic of the past as harvesting the logs now used trucks and tractors exclusively. However, the railroads left their mark into the

1960s. Since many roads followed the original railroad track, flat tires from railroad spikes were common.

Mammoth forklifts made by the R G LeTourneau company in Texas were diesel-electric powered and operated by a panel of switches. These stackers, as they were called, removed the pallets from the trucks at the dock, stacked them orderly, and loaded the barge.

With extensions on their forks, they picked up entire houses for moving to the next location. The Ferguson house in Spring City, Abaco, is an original house moved from Pine Ridge, then to the Gap and finally to its present location in Spring City. It was destroyed by a fire in ● ●

Off-road Mack trucks, pulling two trailers in tandem totaling 80 tons, replaced the narrow gauge railroads. The new owners brought a huge self-contained barge with a machine shop, warehouse and two 500 KW generators. It was berthed at the Riding Point dock.

Another innovation was the arrival in late 1956 of the Hudson River steamboat, the Robert Fulton. This had been purchased earlier in New York and brought to Jacksonville where it was stripped of her steam engine, the side-paddle wheels, other gear and converted into a floating management center for the timber operation. It contained a substantial supermarket which drew customers from Freeport and beyond. It was three more years, December 1959, when Freeport got a supermarket.

Groceries, supplies and equipment came from Jacksonville to Riding Point every six days on the empty pulpwood barge which operated around the clock. It was unloaded and reloaded whenever it arrived, whether day or night. The ocean tug LINDEN brought the barge onto the Little Bahama bank close to Mangrove Cay, north of Freeport. Two small shallow draft tugs then took the tow, bringing the barge to the Riding Point dock.

The dock was the hub of the operation with the residential Robert Fulton on one side and the stackers emptying and loading the barge on the other side. Shoppers vied for space by the store as the trucks and stackers maneuvered the pallets of pulpwood on the dock. Shoppers came from settlements all over the island to get a variety of frozen meats, produce, ice cream, clothing, dry goods, and notions. Orders were taken for furniture which would arrive several weeks later.

In addition to the store, the Fulton's first deck contained a small but well equipped clinic. Dr. Gottlieb, the company doctor for the Abaco Lumber Company in Pine Ridge, came to Riding Point once a week. The government nurse living in the Gap worked in the Robert Fulton clinic during the week either by herself or assisting Dr. Gottlieb. Evans Cottman came to Riding Point in his Green Cross sailboat when Dr. Gottlieb took a vacation.

The third or top deck had 12 small apartments, one and two bedroom, for married employees..

The middle deck was the heart of the boat. Eight rooms were available at the stern for single U.S. employees who were fed in a company kitchen. Meals were served at 6 am, 12 noon and 6 pm. A large office area was in the forward part of the ship. Outside the kitchen was a small members club which opened for half an hour before supper when the men came in from work. It sold cold beer and bottles of liquor. Movies were shown several times a week in a small lounge. These came on the barge from

Jacksonville and were shown also on the outdoor screen at the Gap.

The wood cutting was managed by seasoned foresters and loggers from the National Container logging operation in Tomahawk, Wisconsin. The railroad cars mentioned earlier came from the Tomahawk operation.

An important component of the operation was a road construction crew with Caterpillar D8 tractors and a road grader. Some old railway paths could be expanded but many miles of new roads were built.

Earlier logging operations took all that was useful leaving the smaller trees. However, the new forestry managers left the best trees as seed stock for new growth in the harvested forest. Five trees per acre were chosen by a marking crew for natural re-seeding. The occasional large tree seen in the forest today may be one of these original seed trees.

Cutting crews of seven or eight men were assigned a block of trees to harvest. A two men team with a chain saw cut the trees in the forest. A small tractor assigned to their team pulled or skidded the full length trees to a roadside landing where other team members cut the logs into 8 foot lengths. These were then stacked in long rows four feet tall down the side of the road. Wood scalers measured and recorded the cut wood and submitted the crew's production to the office for payment. The money was divided evenly among the 7 or 8 man crew. Friday afternoon was organized mayhem as the men came for their pay and their women came for groceries and other supplies.

A huge trailer was configured as a bus and could hold about 300 men. It carried the workers into the forest in the predawn hours and back home late in the afternoon. During the day it made trips from Lake City to the dock for women and children to shop or visit the doctor. On Saturdays it was full of women, children and their groceries.

The cutter's lunch in the woods was interesting and varied. Each cutting crew usually started the morning with a small fire for their cooking pot. Each man took something to contribute to the pot which simmered all morning. At noon the contents were shared.

A hapless racoon would occasionally scamper up a pine tree to escape. However, his perch was no match for eight men with a chain saw and a tractor at their disposal. The preferred method was to get a larger tractor and clear a circle around the tree. This ensured that where ever it fell was in a clear spot. The racoon was butchered on the spot and added to the lunch pot.

During the height of the operation there were over 200 chain saws being used in the woods. Three portable repair shops followed the cutters and kept their saws in top shape.

Large off-road Mack tractor-trucks pulled two trailers in tandem with each trailer holding a 38 ton pallet or rack of pulpwood about 12 feet tall. The logging roads were designed so the trucks looped in and out of the woods without having to back up. They would stop at a landing where a crane with a clamshell bucket loaded the wood onto the pallets.

Then the truck and two trailers brought the load to the dock at 45 miles per hour. Each truck had a recording device giving the truck speed and other operating

information for maintenance personnel. We do not recall any highway accidents with these heavy rigs. There was no pavement but the roads were well maintained and smooth. However, getting caught on the highway behind one of these was a driving burden. If the breeze kept the dust storm off the oncoming lane, you might be able to see and pass the truck. If the prevailing breeze blew the dust cloud over the other lane you were better off remaining well behind as you could not even see the truck causing the dust storm.

On arriving at the dock, the huge forklifts, 75-feet long and with six-foot tires, lifted the pallets off the trailers and arranged them neatly waiting for the barge from Jacksonville. Empty pallets were put on the trailers and the trucks went back into the woods for another load.

In 1958 Owens-Illinois acquired all of National Container's pulpwood operations in the states which included vast forest lands, logging operations and several pulpwood mills. This acquisition included the Bahama operation.

As the end of the Grand Bahama operation approached, construction crews began preparing the new site at Snake Cay on Abaco which part III of this series will present.

## ● End Part II

### ● Logging part III - Snake Cay, Abaco

(Not yet published, subject to additions and revision. Bullets show areas for review.)

The cutting operation came to a close on Grand Bahama in the fall of 1959. A year-long construction project at Snake Cay, Abaco, had been begun a year earlier in preparation for the move to Abaco. The four railroad cars used at Riding Point had been sent previously to Snake Cay and again served as the advance camp and administrative center until the Robert Fulton arrived in late-December.

The Snake Cay dock was enclosed with sheet-steel piling, a road crossed Tuggy's Cay and continued across the shallow marles to connect with the main island. Roads were pushed through the woods and hills were cut so the logging trucks with their 80 ton load had a smooth flat trip to the dock. The roads were well maintained to minimize equipment maintenance.

All the houses in the Gap on Grand Bahama were moved to Abaco. The Bahamian staff were settled in Spring City, mid-way between Snake Cay and Marsh Harbour. The wood cutters and their families were settled in Lake City, about ten miles south of Snake Cay. This woodcutters were predominately of Turks Island origin who were recruited much earlier specifically for the wood cutting operation. No Haitian staff were used on Grand Bahama or initially on Abaco.

Most of the Owens-Illinois employees on Grand Bahama were brought to Abaco with a few remaining in Freeport to work for the expanding port operations. Many of the Bahamians moving to Spring City were of Abaco origin, having left Milleville in South Abaco for Pine Ridge on Grand Bahama in 1943. They were glad to return to their native island. The Bahamian workers were truck and tractor operators, mechanics, store and office staff.

A few of the original houses from Pine Ridge on Grand

Bahama can still be found (2011) in Spring City. Many of the houses on the circular road in Spring City were built in 1965 or 1966 by Owen Illinois for the staff of their sugar project. These houses were subsequently acquired by government and later sold individually to the occupants. Some of the newer houses seen in Spring City were privately built in subsequent years. Driving through Spring City's old section will disclose a few of the original houses brought from Pine Ridge.

- The original 1910 railroad right-of-way from Wilson City made a large northerly curve that ended near Marsh Harbour. It can still be seen as the abandoned dirt road going south from the airport roundabout. Remnants of this road can also be seen to the west between Spring City houses and the abandoned Spring City water pumping station.

The Water Corporation now serves Spring City with a pipeline from the Marsh Harbour well-field and the original pump house is abandoned. Spring City is named for this small blue hole now under the floor of the pump house. The Wilson City steam locomotives would refill their water tank here. The paved road into the current BEC diesel powered electric plant at Wilson City also follows the original railroad right-of-way.

A low cost housing initiative by government in late 2008 added 100 or more houses to Spring City.

Hundreds employees and their dependents lived in Lake City which included a church, government nurse and school once headed by Patrick Bethel. This site is now vacant and overgrown. It can be found near the Casuarina Point turn-off about 20 miles south of Marsh Harbour. The westerly road to the Casuarina Point dump uses the Lake City entrance. It is named for the nearby waterway leading to the western marles.

Owens Illinois is often mentioned as initiating the Haitian migration to Abaco but this is not true. Haitian immigrants began arriving on many Bahamian islands in small numbers during the mid and late 1950s. Evidence suggests they were recruited in the mid 1950s for work on the 3,000 acre S & M farm which was the successor to the farming operation began by Mr. J. B. Crockett located south of Spring City.

- Move ● Residents in the nearby settlements of Marsh Harbour, Hope Town and Man-O-War welcomed the Snake Cay newcomers and particularly the huge grocery store they brought to supply their work force.. Most of the petty-shops in the area came to the company store to buy fresh produce, meat and dairy products to re-sell in their own shops. Ice cream was now a readily available treat. ●

The logging operation was expanding its production and a second barge and ocean-going tug had been bought which doubled the volume of wood going to Jacksonville. This required an expanded labour force.

The availability of the Haitians in the early 60s was taken advantage of by Owens Illinois as the cutting operation expanded. The Haitians were willing to work in the woods and were paid comparable wages to other workers. Campbell Town, named after a popular logging supervisor, Alan Campbell, was established as the Haitian village. A French-Canadian logging supervisor, Hercules Quirion, was hired to work with them. His Canadian

relatives were amused by his newly acquired Haitian accent. The road to this abandoned site is close to the new landfill on the Snake Cay road.

Within a few years the main road was extended north to Treasure Cay and eventually connected with government's road connecting Cooper's Town and Crown Haven. Owens Illinois did not build any roads beyond the forest around the Treasure Cay airport. The road in the southern forest stopped short of Sandy Point. Seabreeze Construction Company extended the road into Sandy Point in 1966 or 1967 after Hurricane Betsy. Cherokee was the only settlement on Abaco proper without an access road. Its road came in the mid-80s with the expansion of Batelco's microwave telephone system.

- move ● Besides opening Abaco with a road network, another boost to Abaco's economy came from the weekly payroll earned by over 500 employees. The farm begun by J.B. Crockett employed Marsh Harbour people but this seasonal payroll did not compare with the amount put into circulation by the pulpwood employees and their steady wages.

The Owens Illinois boost to Abaco's economy encouraged two banks to open branches in Marsh Harbour. Personal from Barclays Bank and the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce both arrived on Abaco to open their branches during the same week in October 1959, Barclays Bank opened in the present (2009) Mangoes boutique building, originally being the second-home residence of Capt. Leonard Thompson. The Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce, CIBC opened on the Front Street in Lucian Stratton's building beside his house. By the time the Robert Fulton was demolished in 1966, City Meat at Nassau had opened a supermarket in Marsh Harbour at the foot of the shopping complex headed by Scotia Bank. It was the first of several grocery stores to succumb by fire.

The arrival of the pulpwood project at Snake Cay was one of several developments which brought rapid change to Abaco in the interval between 1957 and 1960. The Marsh Harbour airport was open in 1958 with Albury's Ferry beginning operation in 1959. Marsh Harbour got Abaco's first voice telephone in 1958. All previous wireless communication was by telegraph. The Crockett farm was bought and expanded in 1958 by S and M Farms, Scott and Mattson. (● Matheson?) Commissioner Gerrassimos was the last official to occupy the government complex in Hope Town as all government departments were moved to Marsh Harbour in 1960. The Great Abaco Hotel, subsequently the Abaco Beach Resort, opened in 1960. Treasure Cay and North Abaco were connected to Marsh Harbour by road in December 1962.

The lumbering operation on Abaco continued until 1966 when the logging operation moved to Andros. The Robert Fulton was too fragile to be moved and was destroyed as required by the Bahamian government. It was first burned, then bulldozed with the debris carried into the woods near the Snake Cay shore line. The metal remains of this boat were removed by scrap metal scavengers in 2011.

When the pulpwood operation moved to Andros many of its Abaco improvements and assets were left behind. Included were roads, a dock with 14 houses nearby and

the Spring City settlement. Looking for a way to utilize these assets, the company began a sugar operation with 20,000 acres under cultivation. The 99 year logging license, which was due to expire in 1999, was exchanged with government for a lease on 20,000 acres of interior land to be prepared and cultivated for a sugar project.

A modern sugar mill was constructed which produced sugar for two years. That operation closed in 1970 when world sugar prices collapsed from 20 cents a pound to 2 cents and a U.S. quota for 50,000 tons of Bahamian sugar was withdrawn. Seven years later, the closed sugar mill was sold in 1977 to a group who dismantled it and shipped it to Columbia.

The logging operation finished in 1974 on Andros. In 1978 all remaining Bahamian property, assets and licenses held by Owens Illinois, were acquired by government closing a chapter of Bahamian history. The 20,000 acres cleared for sugar fields now became available by lease from government for various agricultural projects.

The Owens Illinois legacy remains in several ways. A major benefit that we take for granted today is the extensive network of primary and secondary roads which opened the island. The first road connected Snake Cay to Marsh Harbour, then to Treasure Cay and on to Blackwood.

Government is now looking at the forest as a renewable resource which may again be harvested. The pine forest also plays an important role in maintaining the fresh water lens under the larger land areas. The Abaco pine barrens may again play a role in our economy.

End part 3