

The importance of Sawmills and Logging in the 1800s

By Jesse Downing

Logging in the early 1800s had a major role in American expansion as it was the main supply line for resources and helped shape the land into what it's like today. As the early Americans began their journey west they saw forests as obstacles that needed to be cut down in order to make farmland and resources. They started this process by felling the trees and sending them to a sawmill. This then started in a temporary shelter and later established in a more permanent facility usually located on the edge of a river or stream. Sawmills were the solution for cutting planks in a faster and more efficient way. Without a mill logs were cut using a large two person saw, the log would rest on a tall platform or a hole was dug and the log was cut vertically and the process was repeated to all sides.

Late 18th century sawmills were mainly powered by water wheels located on the edge of rivers which was spun by a mill pond created by a dam built across the river. The introduction of steam powered engines in the 19th century opened up a variety of new possibilities including rail road transportation for logs and lumber and the possibility of building mills away from a source of water, scraps of lumber could be used as fuel for the engine and efficiency was increased but the cost to run the mills increased as well. These steam engines were usually located outside the main facility in a shed or barn.

Mills were usually the first businesses in new settlements as they were needed to supply resources for the construction of other necessities. The sawmills locations soon became populated with settlers as they would try to settle as close to the mill as

possible for the ease of materials. These small settlements would soon grow into major cities and towns that would last until modern day.

As populations grew demand, for lumber grew and millers usually found themselves running out of trees for lumber on their own properties. In this case they could hire settlers upstream or even up state to log their properties in the winter and send the logs down to the mill in spring. Upon arrival at their assigned forest, loggers would first fell the trees in the area and limb them. Then they would send the lumber to the mill by way of horse or team of oxen, or the lumber would be floated down stream by log drivers who would float down and prevent the logs from jamming up in the river and causing a sort of dam and to ensure that they get to their destination. Upon arrival at the mill, the logs were debarked and one side of the log was cut. This would become the bottom. This was repeated to all sides than it was cut into cants, rough pieces for further cutting. These cants are then sent through the mill again to be cut into shape and length. They are then dried via air dry or kilns a heated chamber and sent where they are needed.

Logging and sawmills were very essential to westward expansion as they were the main supply line for most tools, houses, wagons and many other objects. Without sawmills the California Gold Rush would have come way later or never happened at all and the West would probably be far less populated and we would still be living in log cabins and taking days at a time to cut up logs for materials.