

TIE-HACKERS, TIE-RAFTING, AND THE RAILROAD CROSSTIE INDUSTRY AT ARLINGTON AND JEROME

by John F. Bradbury, Jr

This is a look at the tie industry, once a vibrant part of Phelps County's economy. Six inches by eight inches and eight feet long, the railroad crosstie was nearly an article of currency over much of southern Missouri. The expanding railroad frontier after the Civil War created an insatiable demand for ties. The North American railroad network reached its greatest extent in 1916 with about 250,000 miles of track. Every mile required nearly 2,500-3,500 crossties (as trains got heavier and faster, railroads found it cheaper to add more ties per mile rather than buy heavier rail). In the days before preservation treatment, ties only lasted five to seven years, so track renewal as well as new construction added to the burgeoning market for crossties. During the heyday of the tie industry, Arlington and Jerome became the hub of the trade, not only for Phelps County, but also much of Texas and Pulaski counties due to the unique intersection of rivers and rails. Hundreds of thousands of ties floated down the Big Piney and Gasconade rivers to the landing at Jerome—the headquarters of a host of memorable characters including backwoods tie-rafters with the bark still on them and savvy tie-buyers who made fortunes. The landing at Jerome became so important to the local tie industry that it provoked some legal buccaneering over ownership in a case that ultimately went to the Missouri Supreme Court.

The tie industry in Phelps County peaked about World War One. Afterwards it declined due to a number of factors. By then the North American railroad system began to contract as marginal lines became money-losers and were removed. Railroads increasingly employed preservation treatments (one of the first was a zinc-tannin process dubbed "Burnettizing,"), so ties lasted longer (up to thirty years in some instances); and in Phelps, Pulaski, and Texas counties, the best and most accessible timber had already been cut by two generations of lumbermen and tie-makers. Finally, the Depression bankrupted many railroads and caused most to defer maintenance. The demand for ties fell accordingly, along with prices for them. World War Two revived the markets for all types of wood products, ties included, but it was a different industry by then, with increasing mechanization, less hand work, and fewer laborers. Sawed ties (more uniform in size) had replaced hewed ties, and the railroads now dealt strictly with large timber compa-

nies for their supply of crossties.

Until the widespread availability of portable sawmills about World War Two, nearly all the crossties were hand-hewn (switch ties, up to sixteen feet long, were a different matter). While there were many more-or-less full time hewers, tie-hacking, as it was called, was an auxiliary enterprise for most farm families. It was a significant source of income during the winter, producing cash money for tax and planting seasons. Tie money also provided paying jobs for people with mules or teams, and stakes for young men looking to begin families of their own.

Most merchants in the county stores along the railroad bought crossties, and, taken as trade, ties settled many an account for groceries and sundries. They were but a small part of the trade in country produce at Knobview/Rosati, St. James, and Rolla, but were the major component of the economy of Arlington and Jerome. Those river villages became the local hub of the tie industry because of their advantageous location at the railroad crossing of the Gasconade River. Upstream, the Big Piney and Little Piney rivers flowed into the Gasconade and funneled the ties of much of Texas and Pulaski counties as well as Phelps County to the railroad crossing. Great rafts of ties came downriver guided by a tough breed of lumbermen who took to the rivers as easily as they took to the hills in search of good timber. There was no better landing and tie yard on the upper Gasconade than the one at Jerome, where millions of ties from hundreds of rafts were transferred to boxcars.

There were several components of the industry: tie-hackers produced the crossties in the woods; men who rafted or hauled ties to delivery points (sometimes the same individuals cut and delivered the ties); loading crews, hired by the railroads or contractors to load crossties on railcars; and the local merchants, tie contractors, and inspectors on the business end of the industry.

THE TIE-HACKERS

There seem to be no records available that show it, but the tie industry in Phelps County must have begun in 1859 and 1860 as the South West Branch of the Pacific Railroad built westward to Rolla, where construction stalled until the end of the Civil War. The line was spared extensive damage during the war, but like the other railroads in Missouri, it was worn out and



Albert Emily hacking a tie with a broadaxe. U.S. Forest Service photograph Courtesy of Western Historical Manuscript Collection--Rolla.

bankrupt by 1865. A group of investors led by John Charles Fremont (seen last in Missouri as major general commanding the state before Lincoln relieved him from command) purchased the railroad in 1866 and finished the line to Arlington in 1867, whereupon that company also went bankrupt. It was 1869 before yet a third railroad company finished the bridge over the Gasconade River and built westward toward Springfield. It was 1876 and another bankruptcy before the "Frisco" (St. Louis and San Francisco Railway Company) was created. By that time, surely, the crosstie had become a major part of Phelps County's economy, first for local use, then increasingly for export.

It didn't take much capital expenditure up front to go into the tie business. In the earliest days the timber was free—given away by landowners looking to have land cleared or

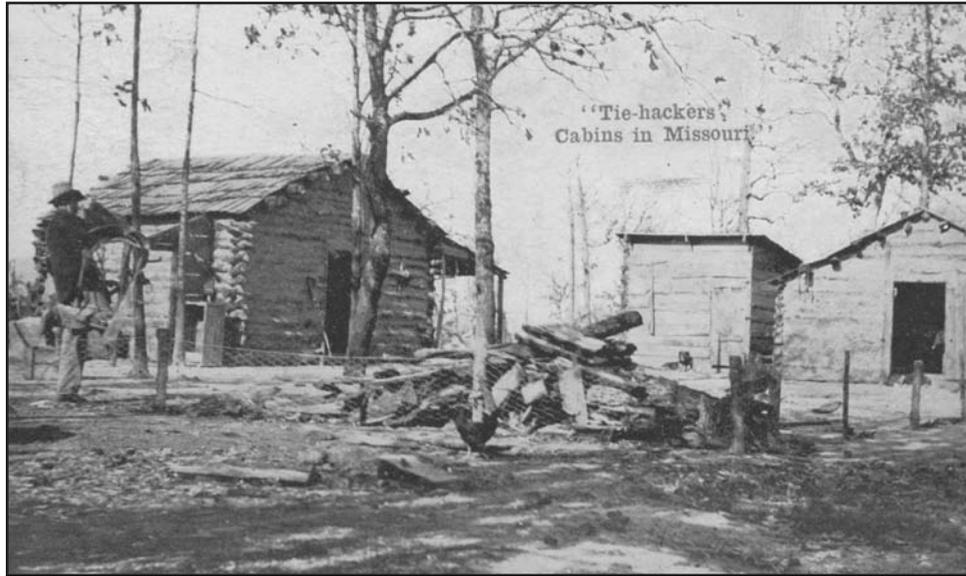
"grandmawed" by hackers from government and railroad lands in the Ozarks. Timber theft, in fact, was a corollary of the tie industry. In the Frisco railroad's first annual report (1877), land commissioner W. H. Coffin complained that the company's lands were being greatly damaged by trespassers who cut ties and floated them down the Gasconade, selling them to the Union Pacific and other western roads. Coffin reported that the company's reward of \$50.00 for reporting illegal tie-hackers had resulted in a few arrests, but timber trespass along the Frisco line remained a problem.

The best trees were those about a foot in diameter (larger size meant more wood to be removed, and there was no money in chips) and tall enough to yield two eight-foot ties without knots or defect. Site selection was important, especially when prices were low. Gathering up tools and mov-

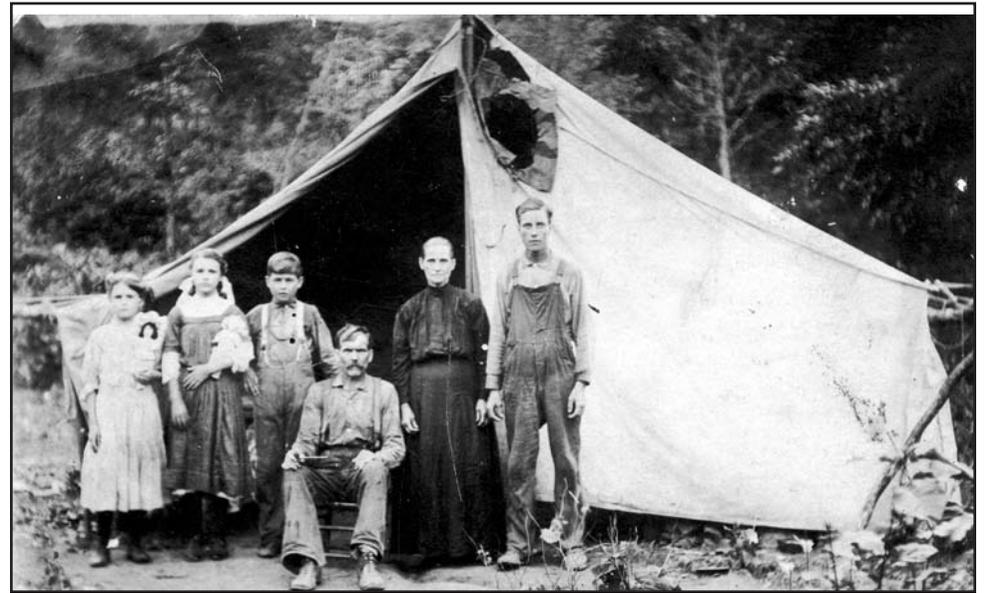
ing from tree to tree wasted time, and getting ties out of the woods to a market was always a major consideration. Pine and oak (white and red) were the preferred species, but the railroads also accepted "kindred" woods such as hickory, black oak, post oak, gum, and elm that had not had much marketable value before the tie industry came along.

The tools were few and commonly available: a crosscut saw, double-bitted axe and broadaxe, files for keeping edges keen, a measuring stick called a tie scantling, and a little coal oil to keep sap and resin from building up

on the blades. Tie-hackers frequently worked in pairs to fell trees with the crosscut saw. It was not unheard of for the woman of the family to take the end of a crosscut saw opposite her husband. After a tree was felled, each hacker worked on his own tie, scoring down its length before removing the bark and chips, called "juggles." In good timber, a tie-hacker could make ten hardwood or fifteen pine ties a day. In later years when tie timber became valuable enough, the owner of the trees got a portion of the proceeds. The general rule of thumb was one-half of the price of the tie to the hacker, another



Most tie-hacker camps were not as upscale as the one shown in this postcard mailed Aug. 2, 1912. Courtesy of John Bradbury.



A family tie camp in the brush near Duke. ca. 1909. (l-r) Mandy Green, Edna Ryno, Jess Green, Joe Green (seated), Nancy Jane Ryno Green, Claude Ryno. Courtesy of Bill Ryno.

er quarter to the man who hauled the tie to the tie yard (as much as half if the circumstances were particularly difficult), and the last one-quarter to the owner of the timber.

There seems to have been a class of fulltime tie-makers along the Pineys and Gasconade by the turn of the nineteenth century. Good tie-hacks could find work about anywhere in southern Missouri in boom times, such as when the Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific built its line across Missouri (the Rock Island crossed the Gasconade at

Freeburg in 1904). Tie buyers couldn't keep up with the escalating demand for ties, and in peak times tie-hackers could pick and choose between various tracts and the types of timber they wanted to work. The *Rolla Herald* carried the advertisement calling for tie-hackers and wood choppers at Arlington in March 1902 (possibly for Rock Island ties), and W. H. Ross at Duke advertised for fifty tie-hackers to cut 4,000 acres of "good timber" along the Piney in November 1910. Tie prices were good enough to tempt a number

1/4 page Bowles Aquarium

1/4 page King Auto Glass

of Piney men to cross over into the Current River watershed in Shannon County in January 1912. Unfortunately, their arrival coincided with a severe cold spell, and the Duke correspondent to the Herald noted that "they are having a cold time camping out."

Depending on the tract, the canvas and log huts were among the crudest shelters seen on the landscape since prehistoric days, or could approach something like permanent quarters as shown in a postcard view of the time. However, no matter whether it was full or part time, on the farm or in distant timber, and in fair weather or foul, tie-hacking was, as the saying went, "a hard way to serve the Lord."

THE RAFTERS

Rafters may be thought of as amphibious lumbermen who both produced the product and transported it to market by water. Lumber rafting has an ancient history and was employed in North America as early as colonial times. Rafters in this area hailed mostly from Texas and Pulaski counties, where railroad ties made up the newest facet of a much older lumber industry on the Big Piney River. Lumbermen began felling trees along the Piney in 1816, working in a neck of shortleaf pine that extended into Texas County (near what became Licking)

TIE MAKERS WANTED.
50 tie makers wanted. 4,000 acres of good timber in Phelps and Pulaski counties. Will pay top prices.
W. H. ROSS,
Big Piney, Mo.

Rolla Weekly Herald, Nov. 24, 1910

from the nearly-solid pine forest in the Current and Black River regions to the southeast. The soft, easily-worked pine was especially desirable for dimensional lumber and finish carpentry at St. Louis, which quadrupled in size from 1820 through 1840, as well as the growing population centers on the Missouri River at St. Charles, the Boonslick region, and, later, the town of Hermann. Pine lumber was also much in demand after the devastating St. Louis fire of 1849. The north-flowing Big Piney River provided the means to get logs and lumber out of the interior Ozarks, and there were abundant springs large enough to power vertical-blade sawmills.

The first lumbermen to work in the forests of the interior Ozarks were men in St. Louis, western St. Louis County, and St. Charles who had come to Missouri from Kentucky during the Spanish colonial period. These frontier entrepreneurs included Alexander and John Baldrige, Josiah H. Burkhart, Thomas Cork, Archibald McDonald,

Sylvester Pattie, Richard Sullens, Jacob Truesdell, and William Walton. Many of them probably knew Daniel Boone and his family back in Kentucky. If they hadn't become acquainted with the Boones earlier, they came to know his son, Daniel Morgan Boone, and other Boone kin in the Missouri militia companies from St. Charles during the War of 1812. They would also have known another legendary frontier figure, Col. William H. Ashley, whose militia unit from Ste. Genevieve and Washington counties served along with the St. Charles militia during the war. Many of these militiamen probably already had long experience developing frontier resources in the fur trade, mining industry, sawmilling business, or learned from their militia comrades. The militia companies provided a cadre of tough, skilled frontiersmen with a good knowledge of the Ozarks and a keen eye for natural resources.

When the war ended in 1815, the former militiamen had connections, capital, and credit enough to begin exploitation of sites already identified. They were perfectly positioned to make the jump to the Big Piney River. By the time Missouri became a state in 1821, opening the floodgates to immigration, the lumber industry on the Piney was already several years old. By the mid-1820s there were six mills

on the river in Texas County. Some of the most prominent early citizens of the region were engaged in the sawmill business by then, including James Bates, John Fourt, and David Lynch of Texas County; Adam, Isaac, and William Bradford of Spring Creek, and Samuel Harrison at the mouth of the Little Piney in Phelps County. Addison Bates, James P. Bates, Solomon King, and Gabriel M. Pike were prominent lumbermen in the 1830s and 1840s. Pike was said to have made more than forty rafting trips to St. Louis before the Civil War, guiding rafts of layered lumber in connected squares (usually sixteen feet square). A trip took forty to eighty days, depending on conditions, and the way back to the Piney was on foot.

The first rafts of pine lumber probably floated down the river in the spring of 1817. Place names on the Big Piney and its tributaries between present-day Licking and Fort Leonard Wood derive from this earliest sawmilling and rafting--at Paddy Creek (misnamed after Sylvester Pattie), Boone Creek (after Daniel Morgan Boone and presumably near his sawmill in 1821), Bald Ridge Creek (misnamed after the Baldrige clan), and Pike's Defeat (an S-turn in the river that caused no end of trouble to Gabe Pike's rafts and still does to inexperienced canoeists today). When the

tie industry began after the Civil War, rafting was already a well-established facet of the lumber trade and the Big Piney a well known avenue to markets. It is not known how large the rafts might have been in the earliest days, but Adam Bradford brought down an immense raft of 100,000 feet of lumber to Vienna in March 1881, and Kauffman & Oatley delivered a raft of 75,000 feet to Arlington in June 1883. James P. Bates, John A. Bell, Kauffman & Oatley, Jim Thompson, Robert Williams, and other Texas County lumbermen floated rafts of pine lumber downriver to Spring Creek, Arlington, and Vienna as late as the turn of the century. However, tie rafts increasingly dominated river traffic.

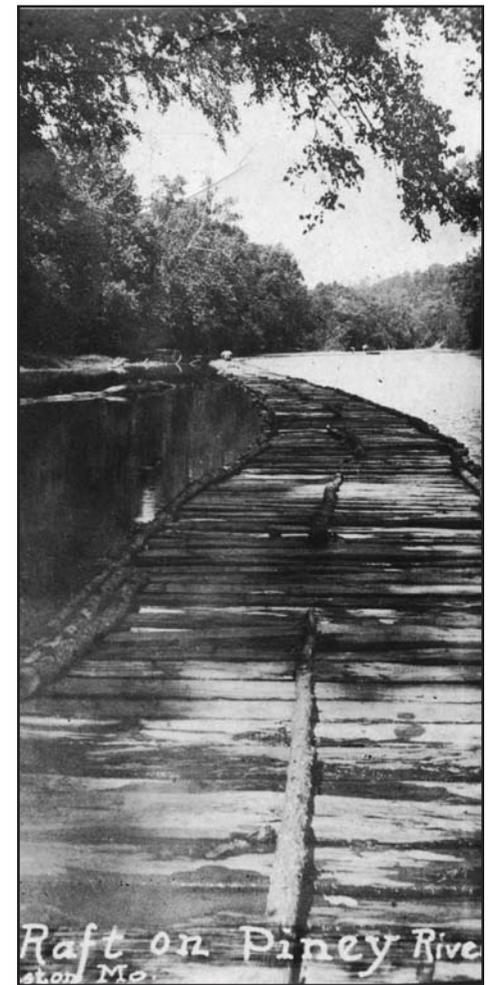
Tie-rafters assembled rafts at the river bank after the ties were hauled to the bank with wagons and teams, or tumbled down bluffs at tie "slides." Several slides along the river are identified on the "Tourist" maps of Phelps, Pulaski, and Texas counties published in the 1930s. Rafters arranged the ties crosswise against the river's current and nailed binders along the edges of the ties to form blocks of about 50-100 ties. The blocks were fastened together with oak saplings or vines, leaving enough space between them for the rafts to curve or "snake" around bends. Smaller blocks at the bow and

stern completed the raft. Rafters steered the front of the raft with "set" poles. Poling off the bottom was preferred—pushing off of slippery rocks could have cold, wet consequences. The "snub" pole provided the raft's brakes. In peak times the riverbed was said to have been scored along its length with the scars of snub poles. A good rafter in the best of conditions could handle 300 ties alone (a raft 8 feet wide and perhaps 250 feet long), but the usual crew for longer rafts seems to have been two or three men. They communicated conditions and directions by hollering, and the shouts of the rafters echoing down the valley let everyone know that a raft was on its way.

Navigation was always a tricky business, especially during high water, and the brakes didn't always work. In fact, the first known reference to tie-rafting in Phelps County newspapers is in the May 27, 1872 *Rolla Weekly Herald*—a report a runaway raft had damaged the railroad bridge at Jerome and delayed trains. No doubt words were exchanged between railroaders and rafters during that episode. The tie industry generated enough river traffic by 1880 that there was interest in "improving" the Gasconade for navigation. A government engineer estimated that 80,000 ties had been rafted to various points along the railroad in

1879, and suggested that the potential increase of that business was a significant argument for improvements (mostly removing snags) costing \$50,000 at seventy-six points along the river.

Some money was spent on the lower Gasconade, but rafters coming down to Arlington and Jerome dealt with the "unimproved" rivers. Even in the best of circumstances, getting rafts downriver was a tough business. Other than kegs of nails, blankets, tents, and provisions piled upon a scaffold to keep them dry, there were no amenities on the rafts for passengers. The men tied up at night, camping on the bank. If they were within walking distance of homesites or near the country stores at Dogtown, Edenville, Hazelton, Newtown, Raftville, Slabtown, and Duke, the rafters might negotiate for a meal or fresh provisions. Otherwise it was bacon and cornmeal and whatever the river provided. They preferred gigging or trot lines from the rafts, but were the acknowledged local experts on river and fishing conditions when the first sportsmen came to fish the Big Piney and Gasconade. Urban sports learned they could hitch rides on rafts, too, but the *St. Louis Globe Democrat's* "Rod & Gun" correspondent advised anglers taking this route that they had better be prepared to swim at any time. The rafters had to be part-



Raft on Piney River
at 101 Mo.
The rafting of plank lumber may have started as early as 1816 on the Big Piney River. Tie-rafting was over by the time this postcard was mailed on July 30, 1930. Courtesy of John Bradbury.



Big Piney rafters John Wesley Wilson, Henry Kohanski, and Robert Wilson, ca. 1900. Western Historical Manuscripts Collection—Rolla.

amphibian in any case--photographs show their feet mostly awash at all times.

Large rafts could be "doubled" (broken into two pieces) past bad bends or obstructions, but they broke up frequently enough anyway at Pike's Defeat on the Big Piney, and Table Rock and Thox Rock on the Gasconade. Devils Elbow on the Piney may have also been named during rafting days, too, but John Whitaker, one of the last of the old-time rafters, claimed the Elbow never caused any problems. Rafts piling up against

obstructions sank under the weight of the ties, forming dangerous jams. The more water-logged the ties became, the more likely the rafters would have to fasten dry sycamore "floaters" to buoy the rafts. Shoals also broke up rafts, scattering ties and lumber all the way down the Piney and Gasconade to Herman. Breakups caused considerable loss to the rafters, who assumed responsibility for their rafts until delivery. In such instances, rafters had no other alternative but to gather and nail up whatever was left of rafts (provided the nails could be salvaged) and con-

tinue downstream.

High water caused the biggest problems, not only in navigation (as in the railroad incident at Jerome), but also to rafts tied up along the banks. The *Rolla New Era* reported in August 1876 the misfortune of Texas County lumberman H. W. Williams, who lost 20,000 board feet of lumber tied up at Arlington to an unexpected freshet. A springtime flood in 1878 (said to have been the biggest since 1844) cost a doctor named Roach a large raft of logs when it could not be stopped at Arlington, and tie rafters lost 600 ties in the same flood. To assist in rafting logs and gathering stray ties after breakups, F. H. Brinkerhoff & Company, lumbermen from Logan, Missouri, who had leased the old Rombauer sawmill at Jerome, built in November 1879 a homemade steam tug that drew only eight inches of water and made ten miles an hour. (The steam tug experiment may not have worked, for it was never mentioned again.) Even men with lengthy experience could be caught off guard. The *Rolla Standard* reported in April 1898 that John Pillman at Spring Creek had lost quite a number of ties waiting to be rafted to Arlington. The same freshet broke up several rafts already on the river and was altogether a costly event. John and Fred Pillman lost several thousand ties to floods in 1909

as well.

Rafting went on year round despite seasonal hazards. Low water and quick winter freezes also caused difficulties beyond personal discomforts, such as the raft of 25,000 feet of lumber that grounded and froze up on the Big Piney at Joe Ousley's in January 1892. Despite the difficulties, rafts got longer and longer. The *Rolla Herald* reported on December 25, 1890 that E. L. Taylor and Lem Stuart had run 513 ties in one strand from Ross's Bluff near Duke to Arlington. It was the largest tie raft in the Big Piney's record at that point and set a new standard. Later, rafts of a thousand ties or more floated down the Big Piney, and they were common on the larger Gasconade.

Rafting on the Little Piney began shortly thereafter, when James Henson and his sons John, James Jr., and Ben, along with Frank "Pipe" Huskey, began nailing together rafts at Yancey Mill. Because of the narrowness of the stream, they nailed the ties together lengthwise with the current. They took the first raft of thirty-eight down to Newburg in 1909, riding back home on the mail hack. Later, they took rafts of 200 or more ties down the Little Piney (as many as 1,000, it is claimed). The last raft from Yancey went downstream in 1927. Rafts also went down Spring Creek in 1919, contracted to the Pillman Brothers.

Rafters were well-known from Licking to Arlington. Among the better known were Perry and Tilden Andres, James P. Bates, Taylor Ballew, Dave, John, and Nathaniel Borders, George Bray, Jim, John, Frank, and Nathan "One Lick" Henson, Ike Heflin, John and Jim King, George Lane, Alzie and William Loughridge, Perry McCowan, George Pape, Mart Riden, D. L. Stuart, Jim and Andy Thompson, and Zina Watts (the brother of Rev. John J. Watts).

As might be expected from their arduous craft, rafters had a reputation for being among the toughest and rowdiest characters in the region. George Bohannon, the only man hanged in Phelps County (for the murder of William Light in 1881) had been a sometime tie-rafter on the Gasconade. As in Bohannon's case, alcohol was frequently involved in their exploits, and a rafter full of cheap whiskey was probably a man to be avoided. Thirst for alcohol caused the deaths of three Big Piney rafters in October 1913 after they obtained several gallons of wood alcohol by express at Rolla. The poisonous drink killed John Jackson, T. J. Jackson, and George Nash near Hazelton in Texas County, and the *Rolla Times* reported that others were deathly ill.

Nathaniel W. "Stub" Borders is the best known of the rafters. Born in 1873



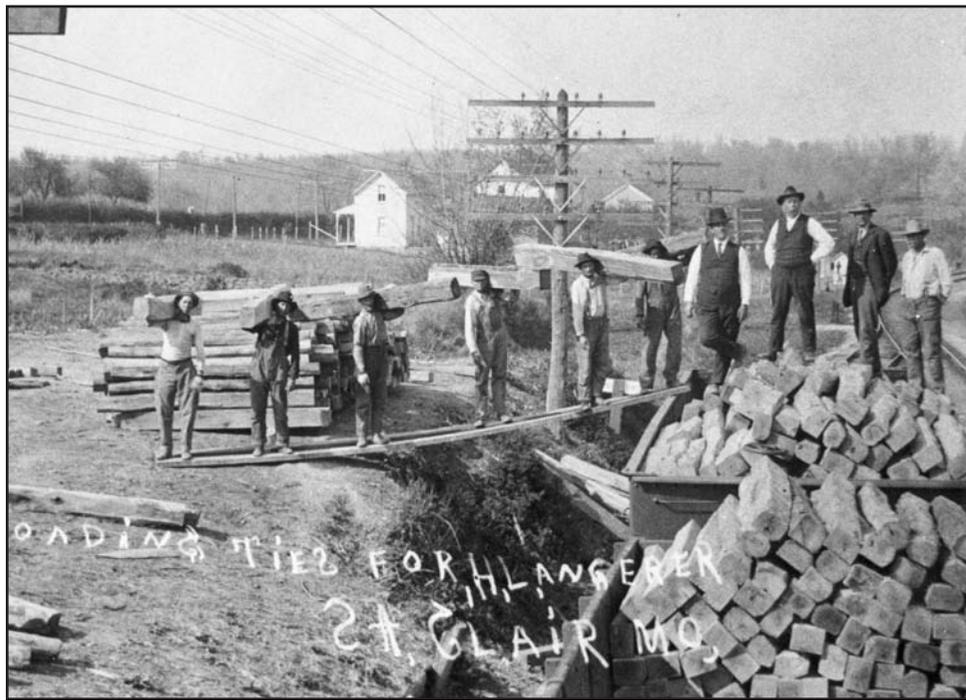
We can only guess at the reason for this picture. Occasion and location unknown. Courtesy of John Bradbury.

in Reynolds County, Missouri, Borders had worked in mines, sawmills, and in the timber before coming to the Big Piney, where his brothers were also tie-hackers and rafters. He lived successively in Texas County, on Bald Ridge Creek in Pulaski County, and at Jerome in Phelps County. Missing his right arm, left eye, and a toe from an acci-

dental dynamite explosion in 1898 and frequently liquored up, Stub was a memorable sight up and down the rivers. Despite the loss of his arm, Borders continued to raft ties and for a time operated a floating saloon at Jerome that was well patronized by rafters. He did a stretch in the state penitentiary (1917-1923) for killing fel-

low rafter Ike Heflin in Texas County, and afterwards had minor skirmishes with the law for assault and carrying a concealed weapon. He continued rafting for the Pillman Brothers, Hobart-Lee, and Abeles & Taussig, and was aboard some of the last rafts brought to Jerome in the 1920s.

Borders was the central character in



Loading ties at the tie yard in St. Clair. Courtesy of the St. Clair Historical Museum.

Clint Arthur's *Backwoodsmen*, published in 1940. Arthur cast Borders as a Gasconade-variety Mike Fink, although Stub and the other rowdy rafters he described seem more half-cottonmouth or copperhead than half-alligator. Like Bill Wilson, the hero in Arthur's other book, *Bushwhacker* (1938), Stub and the rafters were relics of better times and better men to Arthur's way of thinking, even if they were prone to drink, gamble, fight, and, occasionally, kill one another. In 1939, Arthur brought the old-time rafter to Rolla to meet Clair and Bonita Mann of the Phelps County Historical Society. "Nat" Borders was on his best behavior that day, for he wanted Dr. Mann to transcribe and score the "Tie Rafter's Song"—Borders' own composition. Mann called it a "weird kind of a thing" and Bonita thought it sounded like "Indian or South African jungle music," but they managed to record it after Borders sang to them for over an hour. Apparently, Borders also regaled the Manns with a windy tale or two of brawls and breakups, about which the abstemious local historians didn't have much to say. Whatever their artistic merits, Stub's song and his tales recounted in Arthur's *Backwoodsmen* represent the best folk compositions specifically dealing with tie-rafting and the rowdy rafters on the Big Piney and upper Gasconade.

THE TIE YARD AT JEROME

Tie-hackers and rafters got paid on delivery at the yard. Rafters could sell rafts to businessmen including Louis F. Pillman and his sons, John and Fred Pillman (doing business at Spring Creek and Arlington), J. H. Freeman at Newburg, and the Schneider Brothers Tie & Timber Co. at St. James. Railroad buyers also canvassed the neighborhoods for ties, bought them from country merchants, or purchased them as they accumulated in tie yards. Rock Island tie buyer M. S. Mercereau, for

example, shipped 40,000 ties from points between Rolla and Dixon in 1887. The Frisco and Rock Island were the biggest buyers at Jerome, but the Chicago & Alton, the Burlington lines, and other railroads also bought thousands of crossties. The Pillman enterprise was by far the largest local tie operation and was rivaled only by outfits such as the Hobart-Lee Tie Co. out of Springfield and the Abeles & Taussig Tie Co. of St. Louis. First grade ties brought thirty-two cents each at Arlington and Jerome in 1906, but prices skyrocketed to \$1.25 during World War One.

Inspectors at riverside and trackside yards measured ties for size and checked them for defect. Ties with knotholes or rot fetched lower prices, or might not be marketable at all depending upon what the railroads were buying at the time. There was constant rivalry between tie-hackers, tie contractors, and railroad buyers and inspectors. Some inspectors such as Frank Graham and Steuben Plake at Jerome were recognized as honest and fair. Plake may also have been favored for his wife's restaurant that catered to rafters (he had married Joseph Loughridge's daughter). Other inspectors were not so sympathetic to the hard-working tie-hacker, and took every opportunity to grade (and buy) ties low. On the other hand, every tie-hacker knew how to whittle plugs to disguise knotholes, and the tendency for one man's ties to migrate to another man's pile (ties look about the same) led to a system of identification marks stamped on each tie.

When the yards were full, crews loaded ties by hand (actually by shoulder) onto railroad cars—300-400 ties each depending on the length and capacity of the car. Ideally, ties were stacked slightly higher than the railcar floor so they could be carried "downhill." Loading crews consisted of a "header" who upended the ties and "carriers" who loaded them into the

cars. A crew of five could load 300 ties each in three cars per day, and 400 per day per carrier was considered the maximum. It took crews about six hours to complete a shift. Loaders found work wherever ties accumulated, but there was nearly always work at Jerome. Steuben Plake kept twenty men busy for most of 1901 on a contract for L. F. Pillman, and by 1915 supervised the loading of 100,000 ties worth \$40,000 at Jerome for the Hobart-Lee Tie Company. Bound for the Chicago & Alton Railway, the vast number of ties eventually filled 250 cars. Through World War One crews split two or three cents per tie. By World War Two, it was up to ten cents. It was good cash money if a person didn't weaken.

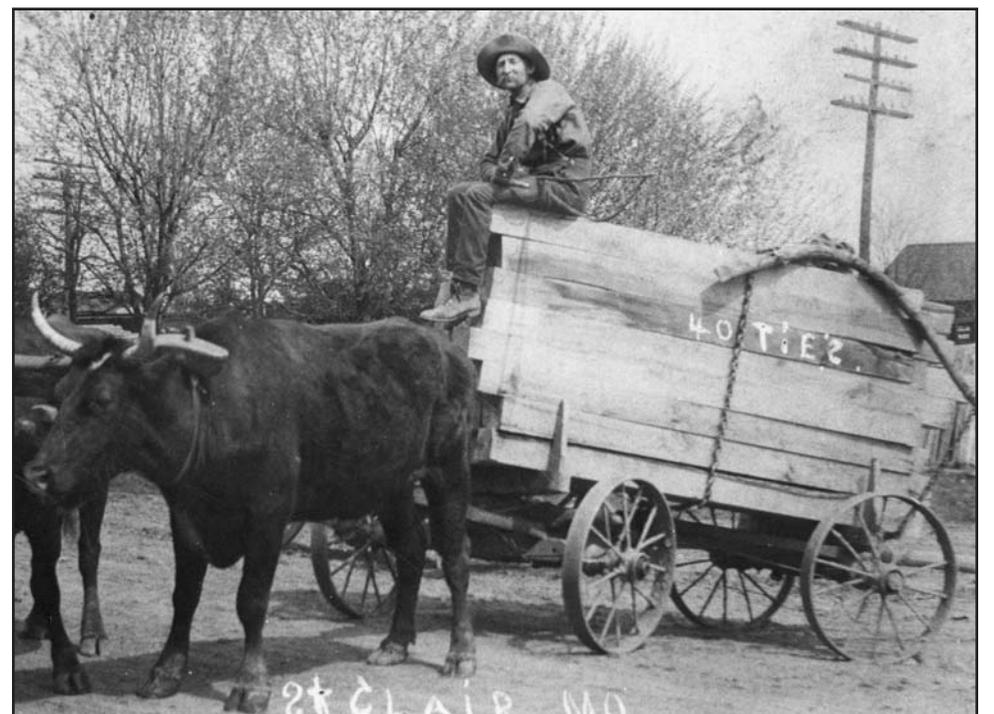
It was on this end of the tie business that Louis F. Pillman made his fortune. In 1883, Pillman moved his mercantile operations from Spring Creek to the mouth of the Little Piney, where he resided first in Samuel Harrison's old cabin before having a house built in Arlington proper. His son, John, stayed behind to buy and forward Big Piney ties to Jerome. By 1890, Pillman controlled most of the river trade in ties, and owned "Pride of the West," one of the earliest gasoline-powered boats (it may have been the first) on the upper Gasconade. Described as "a marvel of speed" at a mile and a half an hour against the current, Pillman used the launch to recover sunken ties and for fishing excursions with his pals. He expanded his mercantile interests to Phillipsburg, Buffalo, and Bolivar thereafter and leased most of his holdings at Arlington. He may have had to retrench at Arlington due to the financial panic of 1893, but resumed the tie business in 1898. In any case, Pillman was said to be the richest man in Phelps County at his death in 1903. His sons Fred and John took over the tie business thereafter.

Pillman's only significant competitor was the John L. Lee Tie Company

(later Hobart-Lee) out of Springfield, which handled most of the Frisco railroad's business. In January 1890, Booker H. Rucker became tie-buyer and resident manager for Hobart-Lee at Arlington and Jerome. A Boone County native, Rucker first came to the river in February 1889, when his father John F. Rucker took a contract to float ties to Hammett & Morrison's tie yards at Gasconade City. They had established camp at Dogtown on the Big Piney when the elder Rucker died of malaria in August 1889, leaving 21-year-old B. H. to complete the contract. The slight young man, a former military academy student and a teetotaler, no less, impressed hard-bitten rafters of Texas County by floating his horse on a raft three miles to Slabtown, and later ran a raft of 1,200 ties 107 miles to the mouth of the Gasconade. One of his greatest exploits came when he and George Pape jumped from the Frisco bridge at Arlington onto a runaway raft that had broken loose unattended in high water. They managed to throw a cable around a sycamore as they floated past, but when the raft pulled the rope taut, the tree toppled over, shivering the raft and dunking Pape and Rucker. Pape didn't swim, but Rucker managed to get him ashore although he lost his watch and money.

There does not seem to have been any love lost between Pillman and Rucker. They were in direct competition for ties on the Big Piney and there had been disputes over the use of the tie yard at Jerome. The simplest solution for Hobart-Lee was to buy out Pillman's tie business and install Rucker as resident manager at Jerome in 1892. Until 1898, when Pillman resumed the tie business and became Hobart-Lee's representative, Rucker was the boss tie man at Jerome.

The money to be made in the tie trade at Arlington and Jerome eventually got so lucrative that it drew the interest of another lumber company and sparked a legal battle over posses-



Hauling ties at St. Clair. Courtesy of the St. Clair Historical Museum

sion of the tie yard in Jerome. In those days the tracks ran northward after crossing the Gasconade. The railroad right-of-way ran parallel to the river and the lower edge of the town of Jerome, leaving strips of land on either side of the tracks for a quarter-mile or so with room for dozens of ranks of ties. The riverbank is low on the Jerome side, with an easy grade up from the landing. The combination of terrain and railroad access made the site at Jerome the best landing for ties from the upper Big Piney to Gascondy near Freeburg on the Gasconade River.

John Imboden of Dixon is the first known to have used the Jerome landing to draw ties from the river and yard them alongside the tracks prior to shipment. He was followed by another tie man named Musgrove (or Musgrave), who sold out to Louis Pillman in 1883. Rafters apparently had used the landing at Jerome freely, but Pillman began to tell people variously that he owned or leased the property and started refusing access to the tie yard from the river. He'd run off B. H. Rucker, Perry Andres, John Rowland, and other tie contractors, and limited use of the landing to his own ties and those he contracted to Hobart-Lee. The business grew to such proportions that Pillman built his own railroad side track strictly for loading ties, stacks of which sometimes

RED OAK TIES WANTED.
 We have arranged to commence buying ties made of Pine, Red Oak, Black Oak and kindred woods, in addition to our White, Post and Burr Oak tie business. For full particulars write or apply to
Crocker Mercantile Co. Crocker, Mo.
C. C. Vickers, Swedeborg, Mo.
M. O. Mitchell, Hancock, “

Reproduction of an advertisement in the *Crocker News*, January 13, 1907.

blocked Main Street and access to the Jerome depot.

No one challenged Pillman's possession of the landing or tie yard at Jerome while he lived. After his death in 1903, his sons (doing business as the Pillman Brothers Tie Company) took over his business and, by arrangement with their mother, Elizabeth Pillman, the brothers continued to use the landing and tie yard and expanded a sand and gravel operation. It turned out,

however, that Louis Pillman had never recorded the land in question or paid taxes on it, and title was not recorded until 1908 by virtue of a purported deed made in 1903 that turned mysteriously up in the hands of Pillman's attorney and executor, J. J. Crites of Rolla. These points came into dispute when the Abeles & Taussig Lumber Company of St. Louis determined to join the tie business at Jerome. Mrs. Pillman sued Robert Abeles in Phelps

County in 1909 over use of the landing and to prevent his company from erecting a tie hoist on the river. The suit was actually between the Pillman Brothers and Abeles & Taussig over control of the tie trade at Jerome.

Somehow Robert Abeles found out about the questionable ownership of the landing at Jerome—one wonders if B. H. Rucker didn't tip him to it—and dredged up William F. Greeley, the ex-U. S. Army officer who originally platted the town of Jerome in 1867. Greeley was a shady character who left Jerome in 1869 after selling a few lots and giving up the rest of his holdings. He next went into business in Marshfield, where he was indicted but acquitted of insurance arson in 1876 or 1877. There was a twenty-year period during which his whereabouts are unknown (a penitentiary somewhere seems possible), but Robert Abeles found him in Boston in March 1910 and got a quit-claim deed from him for whatever interest Greeley might still have had to the tie landing in Jerome. Moreover, Greeley made an affidavit that he had not been in Missouri since the 1880s and declared Pillman's deed, purportedly made out by Greeley in St. Louis and notarized in 1903, a forgery.

In November 1910, Pillman v. Abeles was heard in circuit court in St. Louis and judgment rendered in favor of

The Eyeglass Center

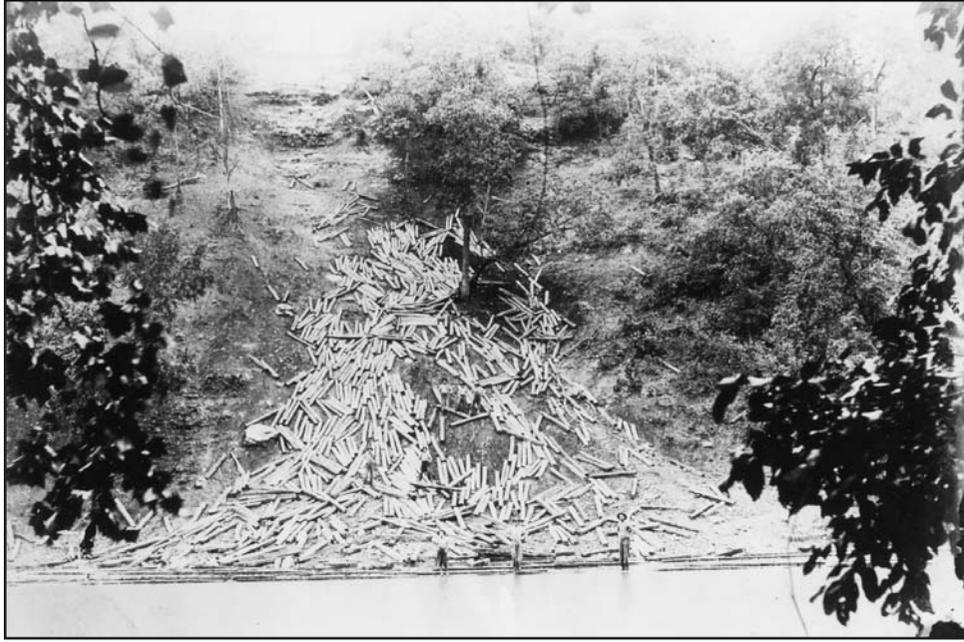
Zeigenbein Farm and Feed

Lepard's Shoes

St. Robert Auto Supply

Business Graphics

Designs from Nature



Tie slide on the Big Piney River in Texas County. Courtesy of Texas County Historical Society.

Mrs. Pillman, based on the Pillmans' undisputed use of the landing for over ten years, and confirmed the title of the Jerome property to her. The case did not end there, however, as Robert Abeles filed an appeal with the Missouri Supreme Court. The legal process ground on for several years as both sides compiled evidence. The result included testimony from nearly everyone associated with the tie trade at Jerome except the late Louis Pillman. The Court considered affidavits by Robert E. Lee, Booker H.

Rucker, Elizabeth Pillman and her sons, Steuben Plake, John A. Graham, Alzie Loughridge, and Berry Hance before rendering its opinion in 1914. The justices reversed the judgment of the lower court based on twelve points of legal error. The Court dismissed any consideration of the forged deed held by the Pillmans (oddly the record contains no testimony from attorney J. J. Crites on the circumstances of the mysterious forgery), but ruled that their claim to continuous and undisputed use of the property for over ten years

was disproven. B. H. Rucker and others had testified that the yard was occasionally empty between loading out and the arrival of the next rafts--it was enough to compromise the Pillman claim. The Supreme Court remanded the case for retrial, but it was a short-lived victory for Robert Abeles. Upon retrial, Mrs. Pillman again won judgment, based on more-or-less continuous possession of the land since the 1898. The family drew ties from the river and yarded ties on the property to the end of the tie-rafting period.

The tie business at Arlington and Jerome barely outlasted the court maneuverings in Pillman v. Abeles. As the trade declined locally in the 1920s, gasoline-powered trucks and better roads lessened the importance of river rafting of ties. Trucks hauling ties from sawmill sites not accessible by river finally ended this century-old epic component of the lumber and tie industry in Phelps County. Clair and Bonita Mann saw tie rafts at Jerome in 1922 (Dr. Mann fished from one), but no one seems to have recorded the date of the last raft. About 1925, the



Picture of 19th century tie raft in 1961, still in alignment, in a clay bank on the Gasconade River near Nagogami Resort. Courtesy of Robert Elgin.

year the first highway bridge spanned the river between Arlington and Jerome, seems to be the best guess. Today the once-disputed site at Jerome is unrecognizable. During World War Two the Frisco undertook a major line change along the Gasconade River that

reduced grades and eliminated the loop that took the tracks between Jerome and the river. The row of homes and summer cabins now facing the Gasconade River below the bridges sit atop the old landing and railroad right-of-way. Highway D now runs

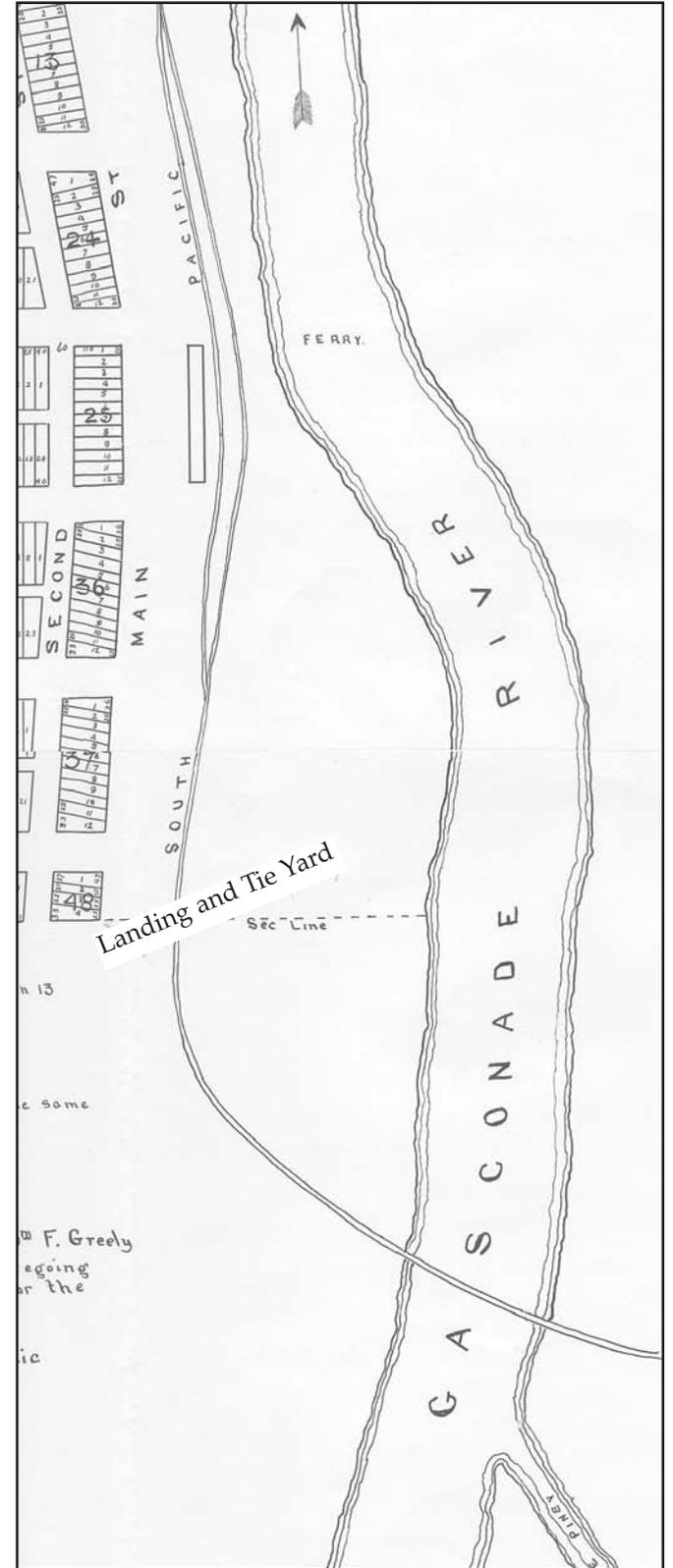
where long stacks of ties once blocked access to the railroad depot.

Despite advancements in metal, composite, and concrete ties, modern railroads still depend on wooden ties. They are larger and heavier now (nine feet long and about 240 pounds each)

and there are more of them in high-speed track--up to 3,700 high-quality ties per mile. Sawmills in Phelps, Pulaski, and Texas counties still cut crossties, and they will be a marketable export from the Ozarks for the foreseeable future.

Missouri Bureau of Labor Statistics

The statistical summaries of the tie trade shown below are extracted from the "Red Books" compiled and published annually by the Missouri Bureau of Labor Statistics beginning in 1891. Listed variously under "surplus products" or "manufacturing," ties made up a large part of the forest products exported from Phelps, Pulaski, and Texas counties, but there were also many carloads of pine lumber, mine props, fence posts, and walnut logs. The numbers for ties are problematical. Some figures are rendered by the number of carloads, but railroad cars got larger during this period and carried more ties. It cannot be determined precisely how many ties were rafted down the Big Piney and Gasconade to the tie yard at Jerome. It must have been a considerable part of the total, but the Frisco had large tie yards at Dixon, Crocker, and other points along the line in northern Pulaski County, and the ties of southern Texas County would have been hauled to yards along the Kansas City, Fort Scott & Memphis Railway (later the Frisco's Memphis line) beginning in the 1880s. There are no totals at all for some years (including the "Panic" year of 1893 when business of all kinds ground to a halt), but there seem to have been very few years when no ties at all were shipped from the three-county area. Considerable as it was on the Big Piney and upper Gasconade region, the trade was dwarfed by the massive forest products industry in the White and Current River areas. Except where noted as carloads, the totals are given in the number of ties exported.



The landing and tie yard at Jerome, in records at the Missouri Supreme Court, Missouri State Archives, Jefferson City.

Phelps County		Pulaski County		Texas County	
1891	176 cars	1891	48 cars	1891	525 cars
1892	59,400 ties	1892	15,200 ties	1892	[not listed]
1894	25,600	1894	150,000	1894	150,000
1897	54,000	1897	8,400	1897	74,880
1899	31,553	1899	13,289	1899	10,442
1900	43,875	1900	28,575	1900	66,825
1901	70,650	1901	36,075	1901	9,450
1902	58,500	1902	27,225	1902	10,900
1903	39,150	1903	7,100	1903	12,925
1904	57,150	1904	13,725	1904	12,000
1905	58,850	1905	21,575	1905	18,000
1906	184,950	1906	112,950	1906	14,200
1907	129,500	1907	149,500	1907	18,000
1908	327,500	1908	175,500	1908	35,000
1909	[not listed]	1909	181,500	1909	17,500
1910	445,000	1910	221,500	1910	36,500
1911	468,500	1911	173,000	1911	27,000
1913	962 cars	1913	372 cars	1913	104 cars
1914	959 cars	1914	362 cars	1914	97 cars
1915	1,004 cars	1915	331 cars	1915	[not listed]

John Bradbury, Jr. is Senior Manuscript Specialist, Western Historical Manuscript Collection—Rolla Branch. He has contributed several articles to the *Gazette* (see "Waynesville Civil War Diaries" (1990), "The Founding of Newburg, 1882-1885" (1991), and "Long Time Coming - The Railroads of Pulaski County" (2002), as well as scores of images from his postcard collection.

SOURCE

The *Rolla Weekly Herald*, *Rolla New Era*, and *Rolla Standard* newspapers contain many references to lumbering, rafting, and the tie industry. The first annual report of the St. Louis and San Francisco Railway Company (1877) is in the Western Historical Manuscript Collection-Rolla. The annual publications of the Missouri Bureau of Labor Statistics are in the Missouri State Archives at Jefferson City, as are the records of the Robert Abeles (appellant) v. Mrs. E. M. Pillman (respondent), in Supreme Court of Missouri, Case No. 16,465.

The county histories published by the Goodspeed Publishing Company in 1889 contain some information on early lumbermen and river rafters. Clair V. and Bonita Mann took up the tie business on May 13, 1950, in the seventeenth of their "Quarter-Hour Broadcasts of Phelps County History" on KTTR Radio. A transcript of the broadcast is in the Mann collection at the UMR Archives. The Mann collection also includes information on Booker H. Rucker's days in the tie business, Nathaniel Borders' "Rafters Song," and a copy of Clint Arthur's *Backwoodsmen* (Boston: Christopher Publishing House, 1940). Cecil King's *History of Yancey Mills* (1996) has information on tie-rafting on the Little Piney. "Rafting down Big Piney," by Tony Shelton, *Crocker News*, June 29, 1972, features John Whitacker's memories of Big Piney rafting. Copies of an annotated map of the Big Piney River by Joe Richardson, II (June 1986), showing place names that figure in rafting history, is in the archives of the Texas County Historical Society at Houston. Steven D. Smith, *Made It in the Timber: A Historic Overview and Context for the Fort Leonard Wood Region, 1800-1940* (Bloomington: Illinois State University, Archaeological Research Center, 1993) deals with the lumber and tie trade in Pulaski County up to the establishment of the military base. Lynn Barnickol's article, "Sleepers Through Time," October 1996, may be seen on the Missouri Department of Conservation's webpage: <http://www.mdc.mo.gov/conmag/1996/10/>