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Ernest Lyons' Column:
**Memories of
Early Forests
In This Area**

MOST OF THE virgin longleaf yellow pines in this part of Florida were logged off from 1918 to 1928. They were magnificent trees, some towering to 60 ft. Where the big pines prevailed there was almost no undergrowth, just a forest floor carpeted with pine needles and giant cones.

THE BIG STANDS were practically immune to the ravages of fire. There simply wasn't enough undergrowth to send the flames high enough to reach viable limbs and branches. But the lumberman's crosscut saw was a different matter.

THIS IS NOT to say that all of today's Martin and St. Lucie counties was tall yellow pine country. The big pines did not favor high water tables. They were most abundant on the high ground along the North and South Forks of the St. Lucie. There were scattered strands on high ridges in western Martin County and dense forests between Indiantown and Okeechobee.

THREE BIG MILLS operated in the area at that time. One of the largest was at Rio, with a logging railroad which ran from there across the North Fork at about the site of the present Port St. Lucie bridge over the river. Another mill, which left a giant pile of sawdust, was located on the upper North Fork about half a mile west of the present mouth of C-24, then called Cane Slough Creek. There was a giant lumber and turpentine operation at Sherman west of Indiantown.

BY THE TIME the Florida Boom collapsed in 1928, there were not enough big trees left to make it worthwhile to operate large mills and the bottom had fallen out of lumber prices.

THEN BEGAN the era of the small "hit and run" portable saw mills. These gathered in the few big trees overlooked because they were in dense hammocks and so hard to get out that the effort had not been worth the trouble.

THE SMALL operators cut anything big enough to saw a two-by-four from. Timber leasing was often overlooked entirely. If leasing was observed, the usual practice was to lease a quarter section and then timber the sections around it on all sides.

BY THE EARLY 1940s, the county was practically denuded of pines bigger than three or four inches in diameter. It was a scraggly, ugly country, its natural beauty demolished shamefully. There has been a remarkable recovery in the past 34 years, but the pines of any size that you see now are mostly second growth and will never equal the old virgin forests.

THE ONLY evidence of the former forests in most of the county is pitch pine stumps, and in recent years most of these have been removed and shipped off to make resin, turpentine and dynamite.

I SAW the virgin yellow pine forests up the North Fork and they are a marvelous sight to remember. They were the haunt of the huge Florida fox squirrels, big as cats — black, black and white, grey and reddish. When the big pines went, fox squirrels became scarce.

SOME OF the tallest pines, especially near lakes and along the river, had stick nests of bald eagles in their crowns. One over near the south end of Mile Lake, had a pair of the most aggressive eagles I ever saw, especially when there were newly hatched eaglets up above. I discovered it was not safe to come within a few hundred feet of that tree without being dive-bombed in turn by Ma and Pa.

WILD TURKEYS used to stroll single file through the tall pine forests, as also did sandhill cranes.

ERNEST LYONS' COLUMN:

*'Lighter Knots'
A Blessing in
The Early Days*

WHEN I SEE those squatty stump-pulling tractors hunching down over the old pitch pine stumps in our South Florida woods, yanking them out to be sent off to make dynamite, dyes, resin, tar and turpentine, I wonder if the day will come when a man won't be able to find a piece of "lighter" to make a fire.

AN ABUNDANCE of "lighter knots," as the Crackers called them, was one of the blessings laid down by Nature in this part of the country. There was an added sense of security to living where there was plenty of wood, available just for the toting.

A MAN could stay warm when the coldest "blue Northers" blew; he could cook with the least effort, sometimes becoming as smudged as his pots in the process. Pitch pine was a blessing like the mullet in the rivers; with the one you need never to be cold and with the other never hungry.

IN EARLY STUART every Monday the pine knots boiled and bubbled away under the black wash pots in just about every back yard; there weren't any laundries, laundromats or washing machines except those big pots heated by flaming fat pine. Unprotesting womanpower operated the scrub-boards and the wringers. Talk about emancipation!

I KNOW they're messy, but I like pitch pine fires. We've had one going, off and on, in our fireplace in the living room now ever since the big freeze of mid-December, sending out tongues of orange red flame, pungent smells, tarry smoke and messy soot—but still I like it.

A PITCH PINE fire has a nostalgic effect upon me; it makes me dream and remember . . . I am of a sudden transported back to the nights I used to go spearing on the river. In the afternoon I would find a patch of woods along the shore and chop up a skiff load of lighter knots, chips and kindling. Then I would rig a big fire basket at the end of an iron pipe extended from the bow.

AFTER GOOD DARK, I would start out poling down the shoreline, with the red fireball flaming ahead, illuminating everything for twenty or thirty feet around, bubbling, hissing and smoking, but furnishing the finest sort of "seeing light." I don't know how many flounders I used to average on those expeditions but I remember following through one flood tide and putting forty on the fish house scales. You saw so much more than flounders; the blue crabs, barracuda, needlefish, channel bass, sea trout and snook, mesmerized by the light, and you heard the thunder of the mullet schools frightened by its glow.

SOMETIMES the darned fool mullet would get fuddled and come crashing in against the sides of the boat or even land in it in their panicky confusion.

PITCH PINE is practically imperishable. No one knows for how many years or through how many hurricanes some of the remaining pitch pine patriarchs have stood without change, holding in storage a warmth that the sun poured down fifty? one hundred? or two hundred years ago?

EVERY ONE of them was once a sort of "green fire in the forest," coming out of the sand as a bushy tassel of pungent green pine needles, expanding into a sapling rubbed by deer, growing, branching and re-branching into "a right smart tree" until, at last, there it towered, seventy feet in the air, a home for fox squirrels, a stick nest of eagles in its crotch.

WHAT TALES those old patriarch pines could tell of bands of Seminoles passing under them, of blue-coated soldiers in the Seminole War, of surveyors and hunters but mostly, I suppose, of ordinary, routine things that must make up the lives of trees as they do the lives of men: woodpeckers hammering away, owls, grey herons, turkeys and buzzards using them as roosting spots and launching platforms, coons, wildcats and maybe even a panther or so climbing them.

AND THE LONG, long days that they did nothing except suck up the water and the nutrients through their roots deep down in the ground, and lifted their arms to the sky with those magical tips of green chlorophyll in their needles to suck in the energy of the distant sun.

WHEN SOME PINE trees die, they go through the marvelous transformation of a Pharaoh mummifying himself and all his experiences. They crystallize the sunlight of their thousands of days with an ever-enduring composite of pitch that penetrates their roots, their trunks and the tips of their branches, as if to say: "I am going to stand here as a statue to everything I have ever been." They do their own embalming.

DURING the Great Depression of the 1930's, Mr. Hildebrand of Palm City built the Log Cabin in Memorial Park of the trunks of venerable pitch pines that he sawed, hewed, transported and placed. There were men in those days. Emilio Cabre, a Spanish stone mason and artist, father of the present Cabre clan, built a massive stone fireplace there, where pitch pine could boil and bubble and keep men warm. As an added touch, he decorated the mantel with some most artistic ornaments in chiseled stone, but, when there was a slight argument about paying for the extras, he took a couple of days on his own time and chiseled them off. He was proud. He did it without making an extra charge for erasing it.

o e THROW ON another lighter knot; I hate to see the naval stores folks and the powder people get them all.