A unique cotton press long ago

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Some seventy-five years ago, give or take a dozen, John Wetherill of Grand Chering built one of the earliest cotton gins in this area. Information concerning this gin is exceedingly scanty; most likely, it was quite similar to others throughout the South at the time, and if so, it was probably operated by horsepower first. Later, Mr. Wetherill installed a small steam engine to operate the saws, but it is likely that he used the horse-driven press to the last.

The accompanying illustration shows the type of press in common use up to the beginning of this century. Old drawings and photographs show a wide variety of types, as is to be expected, but the fundamental principles do not differ. A strong wooden box set within heavy uprights, and a massive plate of timbers driven by a huge wooden screw were the essentials.

The box, which stood on end, was ten or twelve feet in height; the other two dimensions were 50 inches by 24 inches usually. The completed bale measured about five feet, by two and a half, by two feet. The wider sides of the box were hinged at the bottom, and the narrower sides were held in place by large wooden wedges.

My Grandfather Hollister—Gus Hollister—was a carpenter in his day, and a good one. A small, dark, wiry man—a perfectionist—it took him twice as long to do a job as it would have anyone else, but when he was finished the work was perfect and destined to endure. Uncle John engaged him in the project. Building the box itself would be a comparatively simple job for any carpenter worthy of the name, but turning out the screw itself was another matter. Yet Grandpa Hollister, using only the ordinary carpenter's tools which were available in his day, accomplished it. He selected a young pin oak tree of the right diameter—20 inches or so—and felled it. Then with drawknife, foot adze, plane, and chisel, he turned out the screw. The screw worked in a large wooden nut, and this he made too, again using oak for his material. This nut was made in two sections which were later bolted together.

Attached to the bottom of the screw, below the nut, was the heavy wooden plate which fit just inside the box. When the screw was turned, the plate moved up or down as occasion required and pressed the lint into bales.

In operation, the screw was run to the top, the sides of the box were let down, and the bagging for the bale spread over them. They were then raised into place and secured. Lint cotton was dumped in at the top as it came from the gin. Naturally, a ladder or a pair of stairs, (not shown in the drawing) would be required for the man carrying the basket of lint to reach the top. Another man was stationed within the box to tramp the cotton down with his feet as it was dumped. Luckily most of the ginning was done in winter when it was cool; that could have been a most disagreeable job on a hot August day. From time to time the man in the box would climb out, and then the screw was run down in order to press the cotton together as compactly as possible. This operation would be repeated several times before the bale was completed.

The final step was in tying the bale; at first ordinary rope was used for this purpose, and later heavy wire was tried. Both proving something less than satisfactory, the flat strip of iron now in common use was finally adopted.

The drawing shows that the upper end of the screw ended in a roofed enclosure; when not in use, the screw was let down to the bottom of the box, and the entire structure was thus protected from the weather.

The projecting arms on either side of the roof were used for turning the screw, and could be operated by hand or by horse. Most likely, when the heavy work of baling was in progress, a horse would be needed on each of the arms.

Although the whole set-up appears crude to anyone familiar with the powerful modern presses, yet the contraption was effective enough and worked quite well. And if Uncle John's home-made press could turn out only six or eight bales a day, still that was enough; his gin itself would not gin more than that either.