THE WAY WE WERE
By GASPAR J. "BUDDY" STALL

Bogalusa: product of a dream

CHARLES AND Frank Goodyear of Pennsylvania were born of parents of modest means. Through hard work and shrewd business dealings, they became successful and extremely wealthy in the coal and lumber business in New York.

In the early 1900s, they could see the end of the lumber supply in New York and considered retiring with their vast fortunes. But 6 percent interest on their money wasn't good enough. Both had sons in college and wanted to have something for them to do when they graduated.

Extensive research showed that there were vast timberlands in the deep South, a virgin forest yet untapped. At first they decided to buy the timberlands and hold them for future sale. But their thoughts were with their sons. They decided to go ahead and complete the project.

And what an undertaking it turned out to be. It was a $15 million investment, building the largest sawmill in the world, complete with its own railroad, the New Orleans Great Northern, to haul the timber to market. The estimated production of the mill was set at one million board feet per day.

The two brothers were to be the principal shareholders in the venture, with $9 million in stock. Additional stock was to be held by Hamlins and Crarys, Pennsylvania capitalists, and Charles I. James, scion of an aristocratic Maryland family.

On March 8, 1905, the Goodyeas sent $1.25 million to S. D. Lacey and Co. with an order to start looking for land.

Later that year, the Goodyeas arrived at the St. Charles Hotel in New Orleans. They came to look over the area to be sure the site would be well above flood level.

With them was Will Sullivan, manager of the proposed facility, James, as a financial backer, Jim Lacey, agent hired to buy the land, J. F. Coleman, civil engineer, and Tom Pigott and Jim Whalen, timber estimators and surveyors.

The party crossed Lake Pontchartrain by ferryboat and combed the entire area, including land in Mississippi. A spot in Mississippi called Ten Mile was seriously considered, but Mississippi laws were unfavorable to corporations and the site was crossed from the list.

In early September, the party camped for the night on Bogue Lusa Creek.

"This is my idea of paradise," said Will Sullivan. "There is enough timber here to keep a sawmill operating day and night for 25 years."

It was decided that this would be the site of the city and sawmill that was to become the largest in the world. The
town was to be called Bogalusa, after the Indian words Bogue Lusa, meaning Black Water.

Whalen and Pigott stayed behind after the rest of the party left and started surveying the new site.

Bogalusa was the first sawmill town ever planned and laid out so it would not dry up and blow away when the timber ran out. It was even to have a golf course called Magic City South.

Within five months, construction began on both the new city and the mill. The first building to go up on Bogue Lusa Creek was called Barney Castle for Sullivan, the Irish superintendent.

A large number of workers on the mill were Italian immigrants. The lynching of a black caused great tension between blacks and whites. Bogalusa became a very violent town for some time.

To handle the explosive situation, a tough police force was formed. A 250-pound muscle-bound Italian was hired to quell any disturbances within the Italian section. He was very tough and carried two guns at all times.

By the end of 1906, work was ahead of schedule. The population in Bogalusa was 8,000. The first passenger train came to town. The following week, the circus arrived and a short time later, the first Model T Ford. Bogalusa and the Great Southern Lumber Co. were on their way.

Work was nearing completion. The Corliss high pressure steam engine was being fitted with the biggest leather belt ever manufactured. It took the hides of 720 steers to fabricate it.

Word went out that Nov. 15, 1907, would be the starting date for Great Southern Lumber. But the panic of 1907 had just begun and a telegram was sent: “Do not start up until notified.”

The panic was followed by a business depression, causing further delay.

Finally, in the fall of 1908, Sullivan was called to a board meeting in New York and asked, “How soon can you start the mill?” “Two weeks,” he replied.

Sullivan got a little carried away with his promise. It was not until six weeks later that Ben Sellers sawed the first log.

Many dignitaries were present for this historic moment, but the Goodyears, who conceived and financed the largest sawmill in the world, were conspicuous in their absence. Frank had died before the project was completed and Charles, president of Great Southern Lumber, was not well enough to travel.

Great Southern Lumber produced the predicted one million board feet per day. Its market place was the world, with up to 100 carloads of lumber being shipped daily. Through the New Orleans port, lumber from Great Southern Lumber went to Japan, Germany, England and many other parts of the world.

Sullivan was right in almost all of his predictions except one. The forest was more plentiful than he thought. He said enough lumber was available for 25 years, but he missed it by five years. The last log was cut in April 1938. It was cut by the same man, Sellers, who sawed the first log in the fall of 1908.

The Goodyear brothers, whose original goal was to give their sons jobs after college, realized their dream. Both of their sons joined the company, eventually running it. And Sullivan, the manager, realized his dream, too; he became the first mayor of Bogalusa, and when the lumber finally ran out, Bogalusa remained a thriving company called The Magic City of the South.

After the original company had been bought and sold several times, with several name changes over the years, what had once been Great Southern Lumber was eventually purchased in 1955 by Crown Zellerbach Corp.