Having grown up on timber industry, Bogalusa looks toward diversification

In 18 years of working from Fire Station No. 2, Capt. Michael Hemphill of the Bogalusa Fire Department has seen the comings and goings of many of his friends.

That's because Fire Station No. 2 is right across the street from the gate of the Gaylord Container Corp., the paper mill through which the lifeblood of Bogalusa has flowed and through which employees pass daily going to and from work.

"It's a small town; everybody knows everybody here," said Hemphill. "You don't have any strangers. Basically, you can stand out here and everybody who pulls out of this paper mill, you know them. There's a lot of good people in this town. A lot of people I've known all my life. I love this town. I have no problems with it. There's a lot of business people and working people struggling to make ends, but if they had a choice, they would like to live in Bogalusa, because they like it."

A member of the fire department for 23 years, Hemphill was born and reared in Bogalusa. He's also chairman of the Firemen's Association and in charge of the funding committee for the town's Diamond Jubilee this summer.

Hemphill said a lot of people retire to Bogalusa, many of them from "the" mill or other surrounding timber industries. But the slowdown in the economy has caused younger residents to seek jobs elsewhere. His own children work part-time in Hammond and Baton Rouge while attending school.

"The younger people," said Hemphill, "when they graduate from the local high school here and go to college at LSU, Southeastern, Poplarville (Mississippi) or wherever they go to college, very few of them find a job in this area when they graduate from college. That's why our community's census is down so much."

Figures on Bogalusa's population show 16,237 within the city limits as of July 1, 1988, according to the Research Division, College of Administration and Business, Louisiana Tech University. That's a decrease of almost 200 from 1987 and almost 700 since the 1980 census. However, most Washington Parish residents live outside any city limits.

The research has 46,596 people living in the parish, and Bogalusa is by far the largest city around.

Bogalusa's economy has always been tied to the timber industry, in particular the paper mill. In fact, the town grew up around the mill that in the 1930s was one of the largest in the world. Originally known as the Great Southern Lumber Mill, it spanned 32 years and billions of feet of lumber cut and processed. Before Great Southern Lumber went out of business in 1958, more than $100 million had been spent in the area, according to Louisiana: A Guide to the State.

"The waste from the saw logs is what started the original sawmill," said Hemphill. "As the timber played out, they decided to use some of the waste product from the sawmill and make paper out of it — that's how our paper mill started. The paper stayed, and we lost the big sawmills."

The paper mill has continued to operate through ownership changes. It was taken over in 1938 by the Gaylord Corp., which has also run a box plant continuously in Bogalusa since 1928, expanding in 1941 and coming under control of the Crown Zellerbach corporation in 1955 when Gaylord merged with Crown Zellerbach. In 1986, Gaylord once again became a separate company, which now operates the mill.

At the height of the mill's operations in the '60s, more than 2,000 people were employed, but the history of the mill through the three decades from the '50s through the '70s is one of emotional upheaval as well as industrial change. News stories from the files of the Morning Advocate tell of strikes, civil rights actions, expansions and layoffs. Things have never been static at the plant, but with an expansion costing $160 million currently in progress, the mood in Bogalusa is decidedly improving.

Figures from the Industrial Development Foundation of Bogalusa show 855 working at the plant (including the box plant). On Tuesday, Richard Troop, manager for all of Gaylord's mills, is scheduled to be in Bogalusa to discuss the future of the plant and the expansion.

Hemphill added that the town is looking for other industry, with the industrial park north of the city.

"There are three plants operating in the industrial park at this time, and hopefully that will grow into an area that will employ some of our citizens so they won't have to leave and find employment elsewhere."

Hemphill was happiest discussing the 75th anniversary, Diamond Jubilee, of Bogalusa coming up the week of July 4. Bogalusa was incorporated as a city on that date in 1914, and the town, which has always gone out in a big way for the Fourth, will do it even bigger this time.

"We're going to have one of the biggest Diamond Jubilee festivals around," said Hemphill.

C.P. Verger, mayor of Bogalusa from 1979-1983, is in charge of the Jubilee, which will be held June 28-July 4, with activities ranging from rides, games and food to a four-night historical pageant depicting the history of Bogalusa. At 9:30 a.m. on July 4, Verger said, "we'll have a big, big parade, and then one of the greatest shows Bogalusa has ever had."

That date also will be the 50th anniversary of the Paper Queen, with all previous paper queens invited. The celebration will end with fireworks and birthday cakes.

"We just plan on having a tremendous celebration," said Verger. He added that a hospitality center will be set up at the YWCA for out-of-town visitors to get information on Bogalusa and the celebration.

Pointing our way out of town on a map in the station house, Hemphill made sure we had all we needed and urged us to drive carefully.

"And come back to see us — Bogalusa's a good place."