

Lester, Arkansas

Lester was located on Ouachita County Rd #25 at the junction of the former Missouri Pacific Railroad right of way. The community developed around Lester Depot circa 1880—1881 and was named for Josh Lester, a Confederate Veteran, who had located there after the Civil War.

Where Ouachita 25 departs from State Highway 24 is known as Lester Junction. The Lester mill and home sites were about 1 1/2 miles as the crow flies from the Ouachita River. The Gee plantation was located near the river. The timberland of Lester Mill Co., at least a portion of it, is known as Bragg Timber Co. There is a map of Lester & surrounds in OCHS *Quarterly* titled *Ouachita County's Mining Era*, V. 19, No 4, June 1988 (drawn by Benny Riddick).

The St. Louis, Iron Mountain, and Southern Railroad (SLIM & RR) came through Ouachita County in 1881 passing near the home of Josh Lester. A station was located there since it was approximately 8 miles from the terminus in Camden. The railroad required depots and section crews at relatively frequent intervals. Communication was by telegraph and later by railroad message phone. Telegraph remained the more dependable of the two. It would function even when the wire had fallen to the ground. Section crews used hand propelled cars at first then the one cylinder engine driven cars. These could carry the section laborers, tools, water keg and sometimes pulled a second car to carry cross-ties and even a steel rail.

A post office was established at Lester with Vaughn B. Lafferty as postmaster for the first 14 years. Lester Creek was harnessed by Joseph Dempsey to grind corn and saw lumber. Several small steam sawmills operated in the area. The Leonard Bratt Lumber Co. with its own standard gage railroad began in 1897. Dr. Algernon S. Garnett had built a narrow gauge railroad from the SLIM&S RR to clay and lignite deposits in North Ouachita County. A clay washing plant was in operation with its briquettes being shipped to Johns Mansville and Pittsburgh Plate glass Co. by rail. There was soon a one room school. There was a medical doctor in the community. The farms around were every small with one exception owned by the Gee Family, merchants of Camden.

The Gee plantation has been cultivated by slaves before the Civil War. It consisted of about 1200 acres on the Ouachita River. It remained in production until after WWII. It had a legend of \$27,300 in gold coin being buried at Gen. Steele's approach; but never recovered because Mr. Gee had a stroke and thus could not reveal its location. If anyone ever found it they never revealed that fact.

Lester Mill Company was unusual in that it had band saws. Its sawdust conveyor went over the St. Louis, Iron Mountain and Southern Railroad to a pile on the other side of the railroad track. Lester Mill Company's sawmill burned in 1910. The mill railroad continued to operate. Mansfield Hardwood Lumber Co. of Reader was able to use it by travelling over the SLIM& RR to Lester and then into the timberlands.

The Caddo Oil Co. of Shreveport, Louisiana drilled the Lester Mill Co. #1 in 1909, #2 in 1910, and #3 in 1911. Oil was recovered from two of the wells; but no commercial production was established. The discovery of oil at El Dorado and Smackover brought a need for lumber to build derricks (1921). Thus the Lester Mill Co. railroad remained in use.

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The onset of WWI brought on a shortage of railroad cars. Dr. Algernon S. Garnett's death in 1919 closed down Camden Coal, Gas, Clay and Firebrick Co. Lester Station was busy with the railroad traffic associated with the oil boom after 1921. Many Ouachita County citizens found work in the oil fields as they continued to operate small farms. The surnames of some of the families living in and around Lester before the post office closed in 1948 were Barber, Bartlett, Bratt, Brown, Carter, Coleman, Cornell, Dempsey, Dodgen, Dunn, Gee, Green, Jenogan, Jones, Kirsch, Lampkin, Lester, Murphy, Nolan, Nunnally, Ponder, Purifoy, Richardson, Robins, Roll, Sparkman and others.

The Great Depression of 1921 closed Lester Station, but many former citizens returned to farming as they were laid off, particularly by the railroads. The reasoning was that at least they could grow some food. The creeks and streams were heavily fished and wild game had a tough time. The woods were full of small farms. As the war started in Europe, industry began hiring in this country. Many of the railroaders returned to jobs elsewhere. The public schools had been consolidated with Fairview. Passenger train service ended in 1957. The railroad was taken up from Gurdon to Camden in 1999. All the stores (three) are closed now and there is no railroad. There is a blacktop road, REA electricity, telephones, and water from the Camden Water Utility.

Only the concrete foundations of the Lester Mill Co., sawmill and planer remain. The deep Artesian well on the west side of the railroad right-of-way still flows. All the buildings are gone except remnants of the Bartlett house. A barn (old freight house moved from Camden by W. J. Nunnally) remains on the east side of the railroad right-of-way.

Maximo Spurr has returned to the forests. That was where the Camden Coal, Clay, Gas, and Firebrick Co. narrow gauge railroad connected to the St. Louis, Iron Mountain, and Southern Railroad. The concrete foundations and three large vats remain at the site of the steam clay washing plant. The lignite shaft mines have caved in to produce large holes. The company lodge site is Boiling Pot Community. The timberlands were sold to International Paper Co. IPCO sold to various timber companies when they left. Deer clubs have most of the side roads barred. Deer are plentiful now. Coyotes came back with the deer. Bobcats had always frequented the woods. Wild turkeys have returned. Four wheelers roam the woods where some of the earlier citizens distilled corn whiskey. There is very little farming. People live in North Ouachita County; but they don't garden or raise poultry or livestock. Where the land has been clear cut by timber companies, one can appreciate the hills and ravines. Beavers were restocked by the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission after WWII. They created many beaver ponds. The Lester community has returned to the woods.

(Submitted by Dr. R. H. Nunnally, March 25, 2013)