

Donation of the Month

Object: Van Winkle Lumber

Catalog #: 2002.43.1

Donor: Curtis Fisher



A block of wood doesn't seem like much to get excited about, but this block is special. The tree it came from once stood on a mountain in eastern Benton County before it was cut down and processed in Peter Van Winkle's lumber mill. For several decades his oxen- and steam-powered mills supplied quality lumber to the growing towns and communities of Benton and Washington counties. His industriousness and vast stands of virgin oak and pine led Peter to boast, "Not one flaw in any piece of timber."

Peter Marselis Van Winkle (1814-1882) was born in New York City. He later moved with his family to Illinois, where his father died when Peter was still young. Left with little formal education and limited prospects, Peter, like many of his generation, went west in search of opportunity. He found it in Fayetteville, Arkansas, where he built sturdy wagons to carry the '49ers to the California gold fields. He also designed a plow able to break the heavy prairie sod of western Benton and Washington Counties. Peter's first wife Ellenora Wilcoxon died at a young age. In 1840 he married Temperance "Tempy" Miller and the couple eventually had twelve children, nine of whom lived to adulthood.

Peter used his profits from the wagon and plow business to go into lumbering in 1850. At first he had a simple oxen-powered sawmill about one mile east of the Van Winkle ferry (about two miles east of today's

Horseshoe Bend Recreation area). In 1858 he moved to a hollow along Little Clifty Creek near War Eagle and built a steam-powered mill. Over the decades his business grew into an empire that stretched over thousands of acres and brought him and his family wealth and prestige. Peter once said, "Only a fool wishes for what he wants. A wise man works for it."

Peter lived in a time when Americans believed that the resources of this continent were virtually boundless. Like his fellow lumberman, he did not worry about conserving the forests. In the pre-Civil War South most people also believed that there was nothing wrong with using the labor of enslaved African-Americans. Peter shared that belief and built his lumber business in part on slave labor. In the Ozarks slaves worked not on huge plantations but on farms, in households, and in industries. In 1850 just over 5% of Benton County's population was African-American; all but one were slaves.

At the outbreak of the Civil War, Peter "owned" over a dozen slaves. Because he considered these human beings to be amongst his most valuable property, he took them to Texas in 1862 when the family fled the fighting in Northwest Arkansas. After the war some of his former slaves, now free men and women, returned with him to Arkansas. Some of the men helped Peter rebuild his home and business even though he could not afford to pay them at first. Presumably they would not have done so had Peter been a harsh master. But these men probably also realized that working for an ambitious man could offer them a chance to get ahead in life.

Upon his return in 1866, Peter found his home and mill destroyed and \$4,000 in buried gold missing. So he started over again, taking advantage of steam power at a time when his neighbors relied on water power to run their saw and grist mills. Peter built three small mills and a large, state-of-the-art lumber mill just north of his home in Van Winkle Hollow. The level of his industrial sophistication belied the notion of the backwards hillbilly.

The mill's large 150-horsepower engine and three enormous boilers were purchased in St. Louis and shipped down the Mississippi River by barge to the Arkansas River. From there they were shipped to Van Buren (Crawford County) and hauled by oxen over the Boston Mountains. "Roads had to be chopped, bridges improvised, camps maintained and food provided for men and oxen." The huge flywheel was cast in sections and shipped by rail to Rolla, Missouri, which was, as Jay B. Iden noted in a 1924 article in the *Fort Smith Times Record*,

. . . the nearest railroad point at that time. Twelve mules were required to haul it down over the mountain roads and there were many tip-overs and bog-downs before it was finally delivered. . . . It was in sections with a hub as large as a locomotive drive wheel. The sections fitted into the hub and were keyed in. When that was accomplished Peter Van Winkle mixed salt, vinegar, and iron turnings and tamped them into the fittings. That started rust and corrosion that fastened all the parts together so firmly they could not be separated. . . . The great fly wheel was so well balanced and had such great force in its momentum that after [the engineer] shut off the steam the force of the revolving fly wheel would keep the machinery in motion long enough to saw one more log.

All this horsepower meant that Peter could run a number of pieces of equipment at one time, including a circular saw, a gang lathe, two planers, two rip saws, one shingle machine, and two molding saws. With its sixty-foot high smokestack, the mill housed equipment not only to saw logs but to make shingles, moldings, balusters, windows, doors, and cabinets. Customers could even buy kit homes, complete with house plans and all the necessary lumber. One such home belonged to Peter's son Robert E. Lee Van Winkle, who was twice elected mayor of Oklahoma City around the turn of the 20th century.

Peter supplied lumber to rebuild not only Northwest Arkansas but parts of neighboring states as well. The props for the lead mines of southwest Missouri came from his mills as well as the lumber to build the Peel House in Bentonville and many of the homes and businesses in Victorian Eureka Springs. After Peter's daughter Mary married John Bell "Jack" Steele, a former turner or lathe operator at the mill, it's likely that Van Winkle lumber was used in the building of Captain Jack's general store in Springdale, now preserved on the grounds of the Shiloh Museum of Ozark History.

Unfortunately Peter's old home, built with "the most perfect boards," was torn down in 1969. The bricks and lumber were sold to Harvey Jones of Jones Truck Lines and used in the construction of the school house and other buildings at Har-Ber Village, a "village of yesteryear," located in Grove, Oklahoma. But Peter's daughter Mary's home, which was patterned after her old homeplace in Van Winkle Hollow, still stands today at 303 Arkansas Street in Rogers. Undoubtedly the lumber for this stately two-story, wood-frame home came from her father's mill.

Around 1874 Peter began sending wagon-loads of lumber to Fayetteville to be used in the construction of Old Main, the University of Arkansas' first permanent building. The builders used local materials because the nearest river port was 60 miles away and the nearest railroad was 150 miles away; Peter's mill was about 30 miles to the north.

During Old Main's 1989-91 renovation, some of Peter's wonderful wood found its way into dumpsters, only to be rescued by carpenters and woodworkers who appreciated its tight grain, thickness, and history. The piece depicted here was removed during the construction of an elevator shaft by the former son-in-law of the donor, Curtis Fisher. It was examined by a University dendrochronologist (from the Greek *dendron*=tree and *chronos*=time) who identified the species as a short leaf pine with a pith (center) date of 1724 and a cutting date of 1874, making the original tree about 132 years old at the time of its felling. Pins were placed in the block to mark the years; single pin: decade, double pins: 50-year mark; and triple pins: the year 1800 (the 1820 pin is missing).

Peter was the first great entrepreneur in Northwest Arkansas history. He built roads to transport his lumber, started a ferry service across the White River, and in 1880 ran his own private telephone line from Fayetteville to the hollow. According to the 1880 U.S. Industrial Census, Peter's mill produced 1,300,000 board feet of lumber a year, worth about \$134,000. Fifteen people, including a few children, worked at the mill between eight and ten hours a day for about six months each year. Daily wages ran between 75 cents and \$2.00.

Peter and his successor, son-in-law J.A.C. Blackburn, continued to run the lumber business with little concern for conservation. When Peter died Blackburn was able to buy out the interests of the other heirs and keep the business together. By 1889 he employed 50 men and owned 17,000 acres of land. No wonder that he was known as "the Lumber King of Northwest Arkansas." Within just a few decades the Van Winkle lands were stripped of marketable timber.

By the early 1900s land that once had been a source of wealth had become a burden. After several failed attempts Blackburn was finally able to sell his thousands of acres of depleted timberland. In 1928 Roscoe Hobbs of the Hobbs Western Tie and Timber Company began purchasing this land, which had begun to renew itself. By the time he died in 1965 Hobbs owned over 14,000 acres, and his will requested that if at all possible, the land should not be sold.

But one 11,644-acre tract was sold to the State of Arkansas in 1979 and the future Hobbs State Park-Conservation Area was born. Thanks to research efforts by Peter's descendants and the Arkansas Archeological Survey, when the park is fully developed the legacy of Peter Van Winkle, his family, and his workers will be preserved and shared at the mill- and home-site trail (opening to the public in 2005) and in an interpretive center. But visitors to the site won't see Peter's legendary flywheel. As Jay B. Iden noted in 1924, "*A few years ago a group of workmen went into the woods about twelve miles southwest of Rogers and with charges of dynamite blew a 24-foot fly wheel into fragments. The fragments were carted away and sold for junk during that period just past [WW I] when old iron was worth a lot of money.*"

CREDITS

"Story of the Old VanWinkle Mill," Jay B. Iden, *Fort Smith Times Record*, reported in the *Springdale News* (1924); "Peter Van Winkle Once Credited With Operating Largest Sawmill in State," *Rogers Daily News* (7-1-1959); "Van Winkle Saw Mills," *Strange Scenes in the Ozarks*, M.E. Oliver (1955); "Some History of the Van Winkle Place at War Eagle," Dorothy Mitchell, in an uncredited publication (October 1969); *The*

Van Winkle Family: Peter Marselis Van Winkle 1814-1882, Marilyn Lerner Hicks (1990); *Preliminary Archeological Investigations at Van Winkle's Mill* (3BE413), Beaver Lake State Park, Benton County, Arkansas: 1997-1999, Jamie C. Brandon, James M. Davidson, Jerry E. Hilliard (8-5-2000); "Van Winkle's Mill: A Nineteenth-Century Sawmill Community in the Arkansas Ozarks," Jamie C. Brandon & Alicia Valentino (2000-2005) on Project Past (www.projectpast.org/vanwinkle); "The Van Winkle Legacy," an exhibit at the Rogers Historical Museum (2005); and "Historical Markers, Old Main," on the University of Arkansas web site (<http://advancement.uark.edu>).