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Photographs by Leonid Furmansky

Rice's Forest

"How easy it is to forget that much of American history has been defined by trees," Eric Rutkow writes in *American Canopy*.[1] The same is true for Rice University, as timber has been central to the institution's development, thanks to large tracts in Louisiana still owned by the school. On a recent visit to the property, I saw its stewardship firsthand.

Forestry is "one of the few professions where you realize time is passing," Greg Garcia remarked while driving the main Merryville/Singer tract southwest of DeRidder on a clear day last fall.[2] Garcia is Silvicultural Specialist with Larson & McGowin, the company that has managed Rice's forest since 1997. In his truck, he tours me and photographer Leonid Furmansky around plots in various stages of growth. Pine plantations practice crop rotation, so under ideal conditions there are sections at different ages, which provides flexibility in determining when to harvest based on market conditions. Large squares of land begin as open fields with seedlings planted in mounded beds spaced twelve feet on center. The trees grow dense before they're thinned twice over the course of about thirty years. Technology has transformed practices for the better; foresters make management decisions using satellite imagery and GPS systems. Will Brown, Forest Manager with Larson & McGowin, said that for efforts like chemical treatments or fighting fires they can indicate where work is to take place, and pilots can show exactly where they flew by trading GIS shape files.

The land is crossed by paved parish roads, a railroad, and a matrix of unpaved access roads, some still impassable due to recent rains. In the northern part of the property, we inspect a young crop emerging from the sandy soil. Only a few years old, the saplings are nearly as tall as Christmas trees.

Conservation of the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker is critical on the property. If the bird is discovered, a surrounding forty acres must be left uncut to provide habitat. The bird is the only woodpecker that occupies live pines; it excavates cavities, one per bird, and pecks small resin wells, causing gum to flow down the trunk, deterring visits from snakes.[3] In places, artificial birdhouses are installed, and the trunks of nesting trees are marked with bands of white paint. As the sun sinks toward the horizon, we explore a grove from the 1990s, spared for woodpeckers. The tree crowns tower over us, almost touching, while black-eyed Susans bloom across the undergrowth. It's beautiful, and there are mosquitoes everywhere.

After the Civil War, William Marsh Rice purchased about 50,000 acres of longleaf pine forest from the federal government. Previously, the land was inhabited by the Atakapa Ishak Nation and the Coushatta Tribe.[4] The expanse, in southwestern Louisiana's Beauregard Parish, was a "significant portion of his bequest for the establishment of the Rice Institute."[5] The school's leadership formed the Rice Land Lumber Company in February 1911 and promptly authorized the sale of timber rights to the American Lumber Company (ALC), for a sum of $3.7 million dollars—about $108 million today.[6] The transaction provided the funding to create Rice's campus plan and to construct early buildings such as Lovett Hall, Mechanical Laboratory, Herzstein Hall, and Will Rice, Baker, and Hanszen Colleges. There's a balance at play: while this forestland was clear-cut, standard practice at the time, Rice's 300-acre campus was planted with the oaks that have come to define its shaded character.

At the time of this initial logging, the region was caught up in union battles. Now known as the Louisiana-Texas Lumber War of 1911–1912, sawmill workers in towns surrounding the Rice land, seeking better conditions and pay, attempted to unionize through the creation of the Brotherhood of Timber Works. They were opposed, at times violently, by the Southern Lumber Operators' Association, led by businessman John Henry Kirby (the namesake of Houston's Kirby Drive).[7] One skirmish in 1912 left four dead and forty injured in nearby Graybow.[8] In the months after its agreement with Rice, the ALC's mill in nearby Merryville, which likely processed Rice Land Lumber Company's timber, was a site of some union success. After years of conflict, the union was ultimately defeated in 1913.[9]

The land lay dormant until replanting became economically viable in the 1940s due to changes in tax laws.[10] The original forest was predominantly longleaf pine, but this reforestation—the "second forest"—was mostly slash and loblolly. A few seventy-year-old stands are left from that time, but most of the property has been planted and cut over the decades since, a steady-state production cycle. The land's value was enhanced when oil was discovered: 95 percent of the Neale Oil Field is below the property.[11] Drilling rights provided additional funds for postwar construction projects on Rice's campus.[12] Extraction continues, with tanks and pipelines appearing sporadically in the woods.

Other institutions of higher education have benefited from wood-based fortunes. Half of the original endowment for Cornell University came from founder Ezra Cornell's investment in 500,000 acres of pinelands in Wisconsin.[13] But Rice is unique, as it has retained its forest.[14] John D. Lawrence, Managing Director of the Rice Management Company (RMC), said that it's rare to see timber as part of a university endowment's investment portfolio. Brown reflected that timber properties often change hands many times, so it's uncommon to manage land that's been held by the same owner for well over a century.

The next morning, we explore other parts of the property with Garcia and Jerry Weaver, another forester with Larson & McGowin. Hunting licenses are offered as an additional revenue source, so deer stands appear roadside. In one region, as part of the thinning process, a cutter, skidder, and loader work together to clear aisles, cut trees, trim branches, and stack logs. Trees increase in value as they age, from pulpwood to chip-n-saw, sawtimber, and telephone poles. These are midsize cuttings, so they'll likely head for the nearby Packaging Corporation of America mill in DeRidder. One of its major contracts is to produce boxes for Amazon. Your next Prime purchase could arrive in a carton made from Rice lumber grown on Rice land.

While the work is slow and steady, it's not without its risks. In 2020, Hurricane Laura came through, damaging the foresters' office, a cottage from 1949.[15] The storm downed or bent many trees, especially in areas that had just been thinned, as the wind could whip through the openings. A year later, "leaners" remain a regular sight.

This forest has served as an essential but invisible resource for Rice. Today, the RMC invests in a diverse range of asset classes. In FY20, timber comprised about 1 percent of the overall endowment, which is currently $8.1 billion. Lawrence said that returns are proportional to this percentage but aren't significant. Similarly, energy and natural resources comprised 9 percent, but Lawrence said the oil and gas contribution from Rice-owned land isn't meaningful.

Though the forest is well-managed, RMC is also exploring how the land could be utilized differently. Richard R. Johnson, Rice's Executive Director for Sustainability, said that "Rice and RMC are looking carefully at the role that the Rice Land Lumber Company can play in both the university's and the endowment's respective carbon footprints." It may turn out that a different use altogether is advised. Lawrence said that, "in addition to Timber, RMC is considering additional opportunities for the Louisiana acreage, including carbon sequestration projects both above and below ground and solar developments." This may likely be part of larger changes: on February 11, 2022, Rice University announced plans to be carbon neutral by 2030.

Time will tell how this land will be used in the future. Out in Louisiana, Garcia, reflecting on over forty years of forestry work, said, "The forest is a living, breathing thing." So is a university. This is what continues to make Rice a successful and dynamic institution.

Notes

1 Eric Rutkow, *American Canopy* (New York: Scribner, 2012), 5.

2 Rice owns land in four tracts in Louisiana, in addition to a fifth location in Texas.

3 Jerome A. Jackson, "Red-Cockaded Woodpecker," *The Texas Breeding Bird Atlas*, updated 2006, https://txtbba.tamu.edu/species-accounts/red-cockaded-woodpecker/.

4 Native Land Digital, https://native-land.ca/.

5 Christopher Dow, "Forest of Dreams," *Sallyport* 54, no. 1 (Fall 1997): 31, https://hdl.handle.net/1911/99641.

6 Marc Armeña, Racial Geography Project (RGP), presentation, March 2021, https://taskforce.rice.edu/racial-geography-project-research. Armeña's research was particularly helpful when writing this article.

7 James E. Fickle, "The Louisiana-Texas Lumber War of 1911–1912," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, 16, no. 1 (Winter 1975): 61.

8 Fickle, 78.

9 Fickle, 66–67, 83.

10 Dow, 32.

11 Dow, 34.

12 Armeña, RGP.

13 Rutkow, 113.

14 Other schools, including Harvard, Cornell, UC Berkeley, Clemson, Reed College, and Bard College, possess small forests for research and recreation. Dartmouth and Yale use their forests for both recreation and financial sustainability, but they're smaller than Rice's, at about 27,000 and 11,000 acres, respectively.

15 Dow, 32.

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