

# Poplar Bluff History

The city of Poplar Bluff, Missouri was named for its beautiful trees, and owes much of its early success to timber. If the train passes through southeast Missouri during daylight hours, you'll be able to see the Black River below the scenic bluff on which the city is situated. In addition to serving as a source of water for the town, the river was important for shipping lumber to markets.

The first Anglo settlers in the region found open meadows and tall trees nourished by the rich river sediments. Trees are an asset on a property today, but to homesteaders who needed to grow food for livestock and large families, these huge trees were enemies. The typical settler would select a home site near a water source, choose a likely spot for a crop field, and set about girdling the standing trees with an ax. Once the leaves fell and sunlight could shine on the ground, corn, wheat and vegetables were planted. It often took years for the family to clear the trunks and stumps for efficient annual plowing.

Once the Poplar Bluff area was settled and small communities formed, people looked toward the remaining trees with enthusiasm. Enormous bald-cypress and water tupelo trees thrived in the lowland swamps. Stands of massive oak, ash and other hardwoods covered the higher elevations, and vast stands of pine were found in the hills to the west of town. Some lumber was transported on the river, but commercial harvest of timber became profitable when railroad lines were constructed in 1872. Logging and related industries boomed in the 1880s and 1890s. In 1907, Poplar Bluff had 57 manufacturing plants, and the county shipped 1.9 million dollars worth of forest products.

Nearly all wood-related jobs were physically strenuous and dangerous. Imagine working one end of a crosscut saw all day, driving oxen to pull logs out of a swamp, hand-hewing railroad ties, or operating machinery in a dusty sawmill. Newspapers of the day were filled with accounts of men killed and maimed on the job, and Poplar Bluff earned a reputation as a tough town.

Mills and factories in Poplar Bluff produced a wide variety of wood products, including fancy veneers, spokes for Model T Fords, shingles, tool handles, and sucker rods for the oil industry. Wooden barrels were in high demand for storage and shipping, and one company in Poplar Bluff became the largest producer of barrel staves in America during the early 1900s .

The town became so prosperous, local leaders invested in a beautification project which is still the pride of Poplar Bluff . In 1913 many streets in the downtown area were paved with bricks to emulate great cities like New York. If they had waited another decade, funds would have been harder to find. By the end of the 1920s, the virgin forest was gone. While various industries have operated in the area since that time, Poplar Bluff's era of booming success has passed. Today many brick streets have been restored and visitors to this quiet, scenic river town may feel as though they've stepped back in time.

## Source(s):

City of Poplar Bluff. (2001). Poplar Bluff Area History. Retrieved January 12, 2011 from <http://poplarbluff.org/history/html/bricks.html>.

Wikipedia. (2011). Poplar Bluff, Missouri. Retrieved January 12, 2011 from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poplar\\_Bluff,\\_Missouri](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poplar_Bluff,_Missouri).

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