

History of Old Fort, articles from the past!

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North Carolina Emergency Relief Administration

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OLD FORT TANNERY

Establishment of Tannery at Old Fort to Restore Stranded Community

Old Fort, McDowell County, since 1902 had been a leather making town and community. The only industries of the town were the Union Tanning Company and the Old Fort Extract Plant, which together employed approximately 375 persons.

In 1931, the large tannery was so badly damaged by fire that the company ceased tanning operations, throwing approximately 225 men out of work. The following year the Old Fort Extract Plant ceased production, adding 125 more to the unemployed population of the immediate section. The closing of these two plants assumed the proportions of major catastrophes, not only to those directly involved but to every member of the community--banker, merchant, laborer and the local government. Practically the entire community was prostrated and Old Fort was left with a stranded population, people without any means of meeting their normal obligations and with little hope of any renewed industrial activities. A discouraged and helpless attitude developed among the people throughout the entire community. No cash crops such as tobacco, cotton or wheat are grown in the surrounding country and the farmers had depended largely on the sale of bark and chestnut wood to the Union Tanning Company which used the vegetable process in tanning. Almost the entire population became dependent on ERA for support.

This situation presented a very serious problem which the ERA endeavored to meet by developing a program looking toward permanent employment of persons around Old Fort.

During the drought cattle program, the 48,000 hides of cattle processed by ERA, salted and placed in storage in the state, offered the opportunity to reestablish in Old Fort the industry for which the people were trained.

It was first planned to establish a tannery through the Rural Rehabilitation Corporation for processing these hides and a work room for making the finished material into harness for Rural Rehabilitation clients' work-stock, and leather garments for relief clients with the view of converting these plants into a coöperative tannery and leather garment shop owned by the people.

In February, 1934, after a thorough investigation of all available buildings and building sites, the Rural Rehabilitation Corporation purchased a building for \$5,000.00, which, with remodeling and additions, would provide adequate facilities for the industry.

Alterations and additions were made by the N. C. ERA Works Division and the plant equipped for the manufacture of chrome leathers.

As hides are a perishable commodity, it was necessary to have the plant ready to begin operations before warm weather. Early in May, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration set the deadline for starting tanning operations as June 1. At this time, the plant consisted of only one main building without floor or roof, and not a machine in place. Completed plans had been made for a drying room, chemical storage room and supply room but no work had been done. Three shifts of men were employed and the work was carried on 24 hours per day, seven days per week. Technical specialists and engineers were secured by the State ERA to supervise the work.

On May 29, three days before the deadline set by FERA, the first hides were put in pickle and the tannery started actual operation. The cost to ERA in materials, labor, equipment, and installation of equipment was \$36,496.23. About the middle of May, two weeks before the plant was completed, the second stipulation of the FERA was that all of the 48,000 hides should be converted into pickled stock not later than January 1, 1936. The plant had not been designed originally to handle production even near the figure necessary to meet this stipulation. In order, therefore, to provide a margin of safety to take care of possible shut-downs, breakdowns, etc., and to insure completion of the pickling on or before the date set, soaking was started at the rate of 400 hides per day. All beam house operations, except fleshing, were done by hand, thus employing a maximum of labor all of which was assigned to the project by the McDowell County ERA office in Marion. These operations included the trimming of raw hides preparatory to the soaking, the handling daily from one lime vat to the next, scraping off the hair on the beam, fleshing, washing, batting and pickling. The project employed about 130 men during this period.

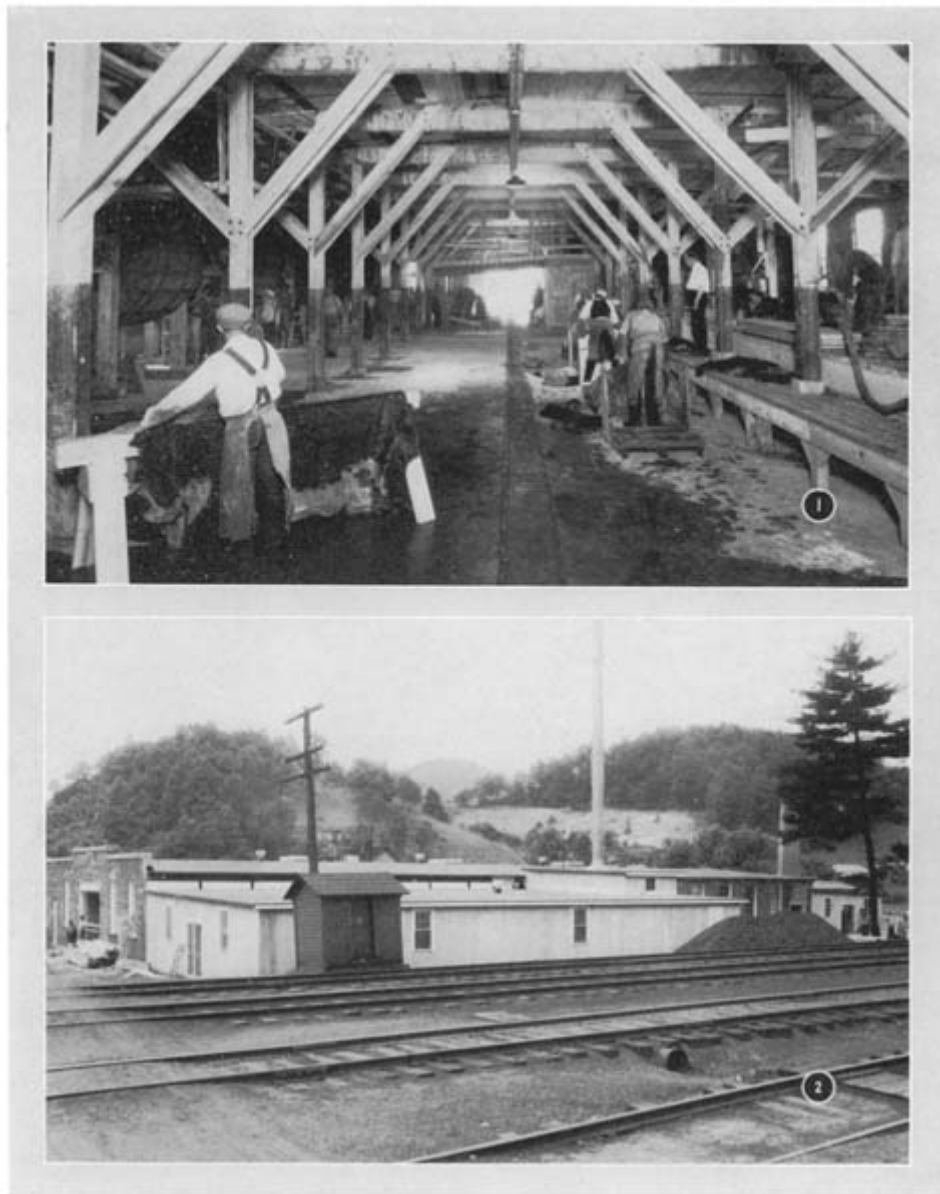
Because of the necessity of breaking in men and the resultant difficulty in handling production to meet the schedule, the plant was at first operated on two eight-hour shifts per day. Many of the men had had previous tanning experience in the old plant, and although they had never worked in a chrome tannery, they formed the nucleus around which the production force was built.

By August 1 it was found that one eight-hour shift could maintain production at the necessary level and the night crew was changed to a day crew to handle the tanning, coloring and finishing operations which follow the pickling. This arrangement allowed practically all the men to continue work. By mid-September it was apparent that all stock would be in pickling condition before January 1, and soaking was reduced to 200 hides per day. The number of labor hours was reduced accordingly, the plant employing almost as many men as before but fewer hours being given each.

When the ERA work program was closed on November 18, an exception was made for the tannery to continue work until all hides were pickled and in condition for storage. The last hide

was put in pickle on November 26, thus meeting the second condition imposed by the FERA more than 30 days before the deadline of January 31.

As indicated above, the first production consideration was the conversion of raw to pickled stock in a given time. Little attention was at first given to processing any finished leather. The normal capacity of the plant being not more than 150 hides per day, it is obvious that all working space would be in use if the production in the beam house was almost normal.



(1) *Interior of the ERA Tannery at Old Fort, McDowell County.* (2) *Exterior of ERA Tannery at Old Fort, McDowell County.*

Tanning and finishing were started in August and a continuous flow of finished leather came through the plant from then on. Since November 26, the entire space has been devoted entirely to

pickling stock. Production has been at the rate of 150 sides (half hides) of grain garment leather, 150 splits (the under side of each hide), and 25 sides of chrome re-tan harness leather per day. The plant was closed on January 9, 1936.

APPRAISAL OF PICKLED AND FINISHED HIDES

Value of stock finished hides (estimate):	
Grain sides 55,897 sq. ft. at 13c	\$ 7,266.61
Grain sides 14,184 sq. ft. at 13c	1,843.92
Split sides 49,994 sq. ft. at 5c	2,499.70
	\$ 11,610.23
Value of stock of pickled hides (estimate):	
Grain sides 77,592 × 125 sq. ft. = 969,900 sq. ft. at 7c	\$ 67,893.00
Split sides 62,496 × 5 sq. ft. = 312,480 sq. ft. at 2c	6,249.60
Pickled hide TOTAL	\$ 74,142.60
Value of chemical stock	\$ 8,303.12

When the drought cattle were purchased through the Federal Surplus Corporation, the FERA agreed that the finished hides would not be sold on the open markets. Due to the discontinuance of the Emergency Relief Program, the plans for making these hides into harness for rural rehabilitation clients and garments for relief clients could not be carried out. At the time this report goes to press, plans are under way to transfer the entire project to the Rural Rehabilitation Corporation in order that the original plans may be continued.

The project has served many purposes. It has not only provided employment and trained men in jobs which require skill and experience, but it has also been the means of maintaining the self-respect and the financial integrity of the whole community. Many have been able to pay their taxes and save their homes since this plant has been in operation. The ordinary necessities of life, such as food, clothing, and shelter, which had become luxuries, have been adequately provided. It is to be hoped that some arrangement can be made to continue the operations of the tannery on which the future of Old Fort and the community so largely depends.

FIRST AID AT OLD FORT TANNERY

While the majority of accidents occurring in tanneries result from causes common to all industries, there are several hazards that seem to be particular to the leather tanning industry. From the time the hides are received until the finished leather is shipped, conditions are encountered which may be a source of injury or a menace to the health of workers. Dangerous moving machinery, such as paddle wheels, unhairing machines, fleshing machines, splitting machines, roller jacks, etc., are used. Then there are the ever present hazards from slippery floors, chemicals, vats, etc.

With the exception of supervisors, many of those employed at the Old Fort Tannery had never had previous experience in this line of work. These men were employed because they needed the work, and, during their training period especially, were menaces, from an accident standpoint, to themselves as well as their fellow workers. It was obvious, therefore, that a large number of accidents, both minor and major, could be expected. The Safety Department gave careful attention to the guarding of all machinery, belts, etc., but inasmuch as this could prevent at best only a small part of the expected injuries, other precautions were necessary.

Every cut or abrasion received in handling, trimming or splitting hides is very likely to result in a serious infection unless prompt and efficient first aid is provided. Considering these facts, the Safety Department considered it necessary to operate a very complete First Aid Station at the Old Fort Tannery.

Under the supervision of the Supervisory Nurse for the Safety Department, the Old Fort First Aid Station was opened on June 1, 1935. A small, but modern building was erected next to the tannery building, and two registered nurses were placed in charge, one for each of the two shifts worked. This building was divided into two rooms. The front room was used to treat the minor cuts and scratches, while the rear room, equipped with toilet facilities, sterilizers, hot and cold water, basins, cot, and all necessary first aid material and medicines for relief of minor ailments, was used for the treatment of the more serious cases.

During the time the Old Fort Tannery operated, a total of 94,873 man-hours was reported. A total of 520 injuries was treated at the First Aid Station and 683 additional dressings were made. It is interesting to note that only three injuries were referred to physicians for treatment. This speaks well for the type of first aid rendered at the station. It is also an interesting fact that, although injuries received in handling hides are subject to serious infection, not a single day was lost from this cause.

Of the 520 injuries reported, only two resulted in the loss of time beyond the shift on which the injury occurred. This gives the tannery a frequency of 21.1, which, considering the existing hazards and the fact that employees were not trained in the work they were doing, is indeed an excellent record.

Not only were the nurses engaged in First Aid work, but each employee was carefully studied from a health and mental standpoint with relation to the particular work he was engaged in. In a number of cases it was found necessary to change the work some employees were doing so they would not be a menace, from an injury standpoint, to fellow workers or the individual himself. A safety and health card was kept on each employee, and physical defects, if any, noted and carefully watched. If an employee had several accidents in a short period of time, an investigation was held to ascertain whether or not he could do better and safer work in some other part of the plant. If so, an immediate transfer was made.

It is felt that the small necessary expense of the Old Fort First Aid Station was more than justified, as shown from the above record.