

JACKSON HOLE HISTORICAL SOCIETY & MUSEUM CHRONICLE

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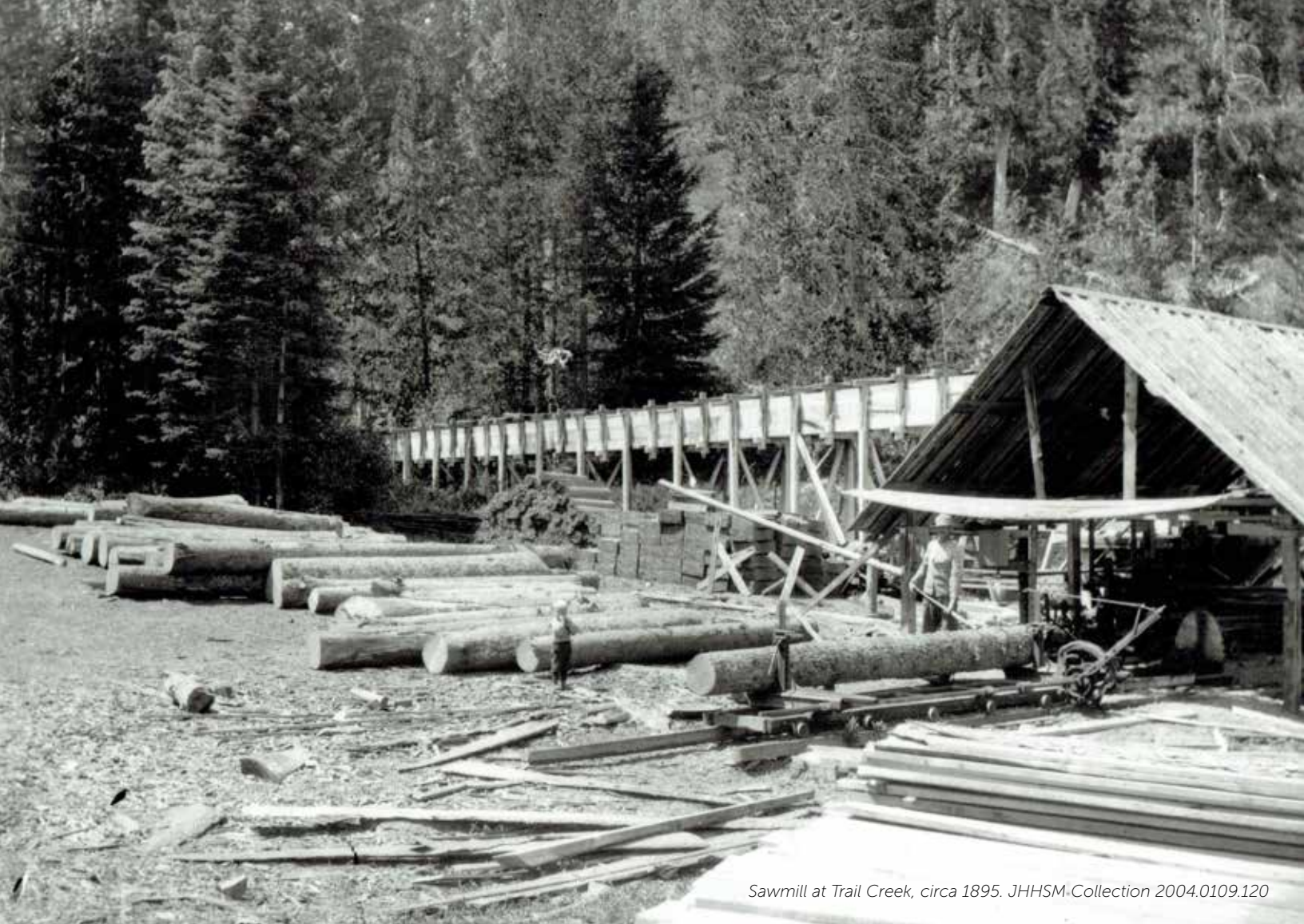
Two men at a local sawmill. JHSM Collection 2011.0048.003.



JACKSON HOLE
HISTORICAL SOCIETY &
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From the Director's Desk	2
Sawmills in Jackson Hole	4
Board Spotlight: Sherry L. Smith	12
Oral History: Mary Hendrick Chambers	13
New Membership Program	14



Sawmill at Trail Creek, circa 1895. JHSM Collection 2004.0109.120

A HISTORY OF EARLY SAWMILLS IN THE JACKSON HOLE VALLEY

BY ROB MURPHY

When Si Ferrin heard that Eph and Jacob Johnson needed a hand getting their new sawmill and boiler over the top of Teton Pass, he and his brother-in-law headed up to help. It was 1902, and Si (Josiah) Ferrin was one of the most industrious men in the Tetons. He was a farmer and rancher on what is now the National Elk Refuge. Using block and tackle to assist the horse teams, they slowly cranked the wagons to the top of the pass and then dragged the heavy machinery down to Wilson. The men transported the equipment out to the mouth of

Curtis canyon, where the Johnson Brothers set up shop.¹ Sawmills were a big part of the foundation of Jackson Hole bringing much-needed resources to the area to support the burgeoning community. The list of sawmill owners in Jackson Hole in the early 20th century includes many of the influential families of the valley: Crabtree, Budge, Kelly, Lundy, Schofield, and more.

Like much of early Jackson Hole history, controversy surrounds the ownership of the first sawmill in the area.

With the sawmill industry thriving in Jackson Hole, local schools began educating students about the future of forestry.

Some sources credit W.J. "Ray" Kelly and say loggers floated logs down the Gros Ventre River to his mill near the town of Kelly that bears his name.² Other evidence shows that William Kelly bought the sawmill and moved it to Kelly from Teton Pass in about 1910.³ An obituary in 1957 claims that future Cowboy Bar owner Ben Goe and his brother George opened the first store and sawmill in Kelly in the early 1900s.⁴ Mose Giltner's sawmill on Teton Pass was working in 1902.⁵ However, available sources do not show that these sawmills operated before 1900.

The best evidence points to Stephen Leek as the first sawmill operator in Jackson Hole. Leek brought a sawmill over the pass from Market Lake, Idaho, in 1891. He set up his sawmill at Mill Creek in the Mosquito Creek drainage and began operation in 1893. Later, in 1907 Leek moved the mill to the bottom of Teton Pass. Leek's son Lester operated a sawmill on Jenny Lake in the 1920s. The Johnson Brothers operation began work in 1902 and, after cutting all the available trees in Curtis Canyon, moved to the Wilson area in 1907.⁶ While Leek's mill opened earlier, the Johnson's had the first large milling enterprise in the valley. Eph Johnson also served as a Mormon Bishop and built a church in Wilson.⁷ Si Ferrin ran an early mill near Cache Creek.

By 1930, at least three sawmills were cutting and milling trees in the Mosquito Creek area, including the Schofield, T.R. Adams, and Johnson operations. Other mills in the Wilson area included the Fox mill near Crater Lake and A.L. Young's sawmill. In 1926, R. C. Lundy brought a sawmill over from Felt, Idaho and set it up in Wilson near the old Johnson site at Trail Creek.⁸ During the early 1930s, the mills in Wilson were producing several 100,000 board feet of lumber annually. Conservation efforts in the northern end of Jackson Hole helped concentrate logging and milling in the Wilson area.

Sawmills in Jackson Hole were many different sizes. They ranged from one-man outfits to small mills making house logs to large commercial operations supplying the early settlers with logs, planking, timbers, and finished lumber. In 1915, the Bircher's sawmill advertised for sale, "... all kinds of lumber...and all kinds of fancy casings, baseboards and mouldings."⁹ (See the ad on page 9.)

The Bircher's sawmill, located behind their roadhouse at Coal Creek, began as a water-powered mill in 1906, later switching to steam power. Another water-powered

sawmill supplied the wood for the first temporary dam at Jackson Lake in 1906-07. Located in Phillips Canyon, this mill, owned by Kaufman and Barker, produced lumber they hauled 33 miles to the dam site at Moran.¹⁰ When the temporary dam failed in 1910 and construction began on the new permanent dam, workers built a sawmill at Moran Bay. The Kaufman and Barker mill continued in business through the 1940s.

With the sawmill industry thriving in Jackson Hole, local schools began educating students about the future of forestry. On a field trip in 1928, Wilson School teachers treated the kids to a day at the base of the pass. They took a sawmill tour and learned about a Forest Service timber sale.¹¹ The following year an essay contest on forestry illustrated the important role of forests and their products in early Jackson Hole.¹² In 1930, Ranges reported that students at Wilson, Teton, and Gros Ventre Schools studied forestry.

Some of the items needed to keep a sawmill running in the early twentieth century included teams of horses with harnesses and a blacksmith outfit for shoeing the horses. Loggers required saws, axes, wedges, cart hooks, chains, logging trucks(carts), and lumber wagons. Knowledge of how to make ax handles in the field and how to sharpen saw teeth or balance a saw blade was invaluable. Additionally, the men needed a sleeping camp and camp cooking outfit.¹³

Logging and hauling were the most expensive parts of the business. The best way to transport logs was downhill on frozen snow. The springtime "corn" snow conditions loved by today's Teton Pass backcountry skiers were perfect for logging and skidding trees to the Wilson mills. Therefore, much of the cutting occurred in late winter and spring, with milling following during the summer.

Several articles in the *Jackson's Hole Courier* describe the difficulties of the sawmill industry. The challenges included access to timber, labor, breakdowns, and fire. Problems getting insurance further complicated the risks of fire. Insurance companies charged Sawmill operators at a rate of twenty percent of their annual production.¹⁴ Therefore, most mill owners chose to rely on luck, water, and fire extinguishers instead. Fire hazards included the steam boiler, sawdust, logs, lumber, and wooden buildings. These hazards increased as sawmills modernized through the early 20th century. Modern machinery, oil, gasoline, kerosene, and diesel engines, improved efficiency but increased fire risk.

Fires destroyed many sawmills in Jackson Hole. The Schofield's Sawmill burned in 1920.¹⁵ The mill was rebuilt and run by Bill, George, and Howard Schofield for 21 years before burning again in 1950.¹⁶ The boilers from this mill are still visible at the base of the History Trail on Teton Pass. (See photos on p. 9.)

The Johnson's Mosquito Creek mill burned in 1939 along with 40,000 board feet of lumber. Enoch Ferrin's Cache Creek mill, equipment, and lumber burned in a September 1942 blaze.¹⁷

Fire also destroyed Carl and Joe Pivik's sawmill (which is pictured below) on Mosquito Creek in July of 1952.



Man at Pivik Sawmill. JHSM Collection 1992.4517.015.



Three unidentified men milling a log at a sawmill with a pile of cut logs and cabin in the background. JHSM Collection

They gave the early residents and the valley's economy a boost while tourism developed, plus provided the materials needed to support more sophisticated construction and a growing community. Sawmills allowed people to make a living, and many admired the rugged lifestyle of the loggers.

The story of the Pivik Sawmill illustrates the challenges of the sawmill industry. It was started by T. R. Adams and operated until being foreclosed and taken over by the Small Business Administration in the early 1940s. Joe Pivik bought the mill from the SBA in 1947.¹⁸ When the uninsured mill burned in 1952, neighbors helped put out the fire.¹⁹ Pivik borrowed money and rebuilt the mill that operated until regulations and market changes put it out of business in the 1980s. Years of environmental clean-up followed, and today a sign that says "Old Sawmill" at the junction of Fall Creek and Mosquito Creek roads marks the site.

The struggle to protect America's forests and still produce all the wood products that people need has shaped the national conservation movement and the Jackson Hole community. In the early 20th century, saving the remaining forests in the U.S. became a priority. Yellowstone Superintendent Horace Albright had this to say, "I contended the country should remain in its virgin

state, that the Snake River and Jackson Lake full of logs and lined with sawmills would ruin the whole country."

During the debate over the establishment of Grand Teton National Park, he argued for protection because Wyoming had plenty of other forests, "...and that this Jackson Hole timber would never be needed."²⁰ Therefore, the mills in Wilson produced lumber from trees on Teton Pass and Mosquito Creek but not from the northern end of the Jackson Hole valley.

In the 1960s and 70s, changes in the sawmill industry affected the business in Jackson Hole. Trucking, large timber sales, and big sawmills became the norm. In 1959, loggers harvested about 2,000,000 board feet of lumber from the Teton National Forest with milling in Jackson, Dubois, and Bondurant. In 1963, the *Jackson Hole News* reported that six sawmills were operating near Jackson.²¹ Changes in the Forest Service's approach to timber sales also affected local mills. A Forest Service policy that sales were to be clear-cut beginning in 1955 favored large operators. By the 1970s, Mosquito Creek became a patchwork of clear-cuts, with most milling taking place in Afton, Wyo.

Sawmills and the lumber industry were cornerstones of Jackson Hole. Environmental concerns, tourism, vacation homes, and recreational opportunities available in the forest led to an end to large-scale logging and milling in the area by the mid-1980s.

However, for nearly 100 years, the sawmills of Jackson Hole ran almost continuously. They gave the early residents and the valley's economy a boost while tourism developed, plus provided the materials needed to support more sophisticated construction and a growing community. Sawmills allowed people to make a living, and many admired the rugged lifestyle of the loggers. Sawmills were even a popular hangout in early Jackson Hole, with dances and socials held in their buildings. Locally milled trees provided wood for homes, barns, fences, and furniture for the residents of early Jackson Hole, which can still be found around the valley today.

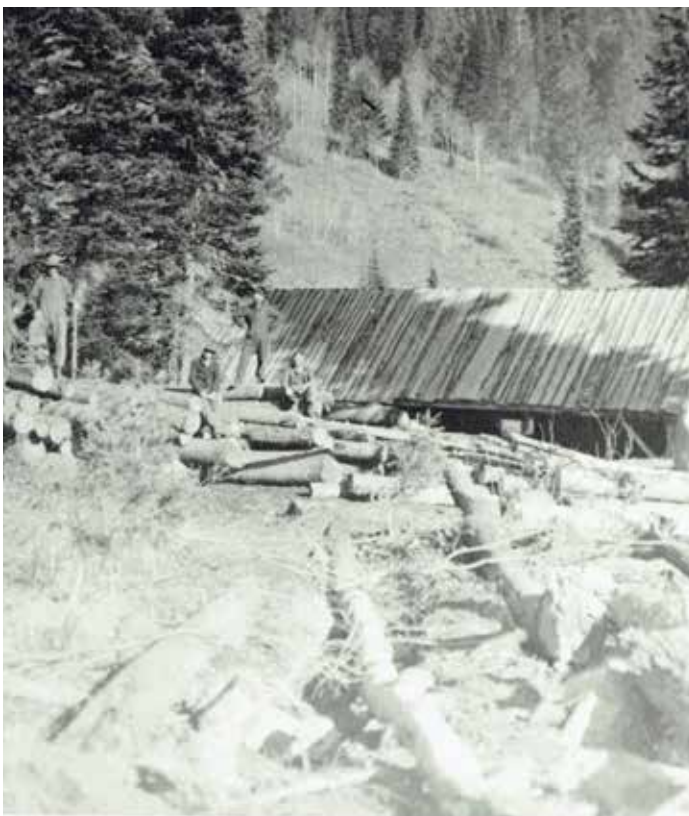
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ABOUT ROB MURPHY

Like many of us, Rob Murphy came to the Jackson Hole valley in the 1980s for the skiing. An avid Nordic skier with a lifelong love of history, he enjoys the many outdoor recreational activities in the area. With a focus on environmental history, Rob received a Master's Degree in History from Arizona State University in 2020. Rob is the father of two children and lives in Wilson.



Charlie Fox sawmill at Wilson, later run by the Schofields. JHSM Howard Schofield Collection 1958.3372.028.



Present-day remains of the Wilson/Schofield sawmill. Photo by Rob Murphy.