

BIOGRAPHY

Ben M. Stevens Jr. was born April 7, 1923 in Richton, Mississippi. He grew up in Richton, attending local schools and graduating valedictorian of the 1940 class of Richton High School. He earned a bachelor's degree from Georgia Tech University in 1948.

Mr. Stevens's college education was interrupted by World War II. He was discharged in 1946 as a first sergeant after serving in the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers in the Pacific theater.

In 1948, Mr. Stevens began a career in his family's timber business, B.M. Stevens Company, which was founded in Perry County in 1867. Mr. Stevens is the family's fourth generation to operate it. He currently is chairman of the board and chief executive officer of the Richton Tie and Timber Company and senior vice president and director of the B.M. Stevens Company.

Other business activities include his current service on the board of directors of Bancorp of Mississippi, Inc, and committee membership for the Bank of Mississippi. He served as chairman of the board of the First Mississippi National Bank from 1984 to 1986, when it merged with the Bank of Mississippi. He had served on that board of directors since 1978.

Mr. Stevens has been active in Mississippi Forestry Association and is currently serving on the board of directors. He is the national director of the American Pulpwood Association and is a member of the Society of American Foresters.

For many years, Mr. Stevens has been active with the Boy Scouts of America and the "Ben M. Stevens Jr. Eagle Scout Class" was named in recognition for his work. In 1993 he received the Pine Burr Area Council's Distinguished Citizen Award. In addition, Mr. Stevens is involved with many civic organizations including the Chamber of Commerce, the Rotary Club, the Hattiesburg Public Library, the Area Development Partnership, and the Forrest County Education Foundation.

Mr. Stevens married Carolyn Ford Stevens, and they have four children: Mrs. Lynn McMullan, Mrs. Mecklin Burris, Mrs. Nanette Mattalino, and Mr. Benjamin Stevens III. They also have nine grandchildren.

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AN ORAL HISTORY

with

MR. BEN STEVENS JR.

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Mr. Ben M Stevens Jr. The interview is being recorded at the offices of the Richton Tie and Timber Company in Petal, Mississippi, on February 22, 1991. The interviewer is Dr. Charles Bolton.

Dr. Bolton: First of all, Mr. Stevens, I want you to thank you on behalf of the university for taking the time today to give us this oral history.

Mr. Stevens: Well, I appreciate that, and we are delighted to have you here. I hope this will be of some benefit both to you and the [interesting] history that I might be able to provide [about] this timber industry, especially for this section of our state.

Dr. Bolton: First I want to start off with some background, your family background First of all can you tell us when and where you were born.

Mr. Stevens: I was born in Richton, Mississippi, which is about twenty miles east of here, on April 7, 1923. At that time families didn't go to the hospital. I was born at home with a local doctor and a [black] nursemaid taking care of me.

Dr. Bolton: Can you tell us a little bit about your family. For instance when did they first come to Mississippi? What did your father do, that kind of thing.

Mr. Stevens: My family is an old family from this section of the state. My great-grandfather, who was Captain Benjamin Stevens, came to this part of the country in the mid-1850s [from Lee, Massachusetts]. His residence was down at Old Augusta which is just across the river from [what is now] New Augusta. His home site is where the [present] Georgia Pacific pulp mill is located. In fact, the Stevens [family] cemetery is still within about a mile of the pulp mill. [There are five generations of the Stevens family buried in the cemetery.] And when [the Leaf River Paper Company was] building that pulp mill, one of the things that they checked with us on was whether or not that cemetery ever flooded. They [wanted to] be sure that wherever they located the pulp mill

it wouldn't be flooded. My great-grandfather started a [country] store in Old Augusta named Ben Stevens Company. It was started in [September of] 1867.

Dr. Bolton: Right after the war.

Mr. Stevens: Right after the war. He was in the timber business also and floated logs down the river to mills in Pascagoula, primarily.

Dr. Bolton: What river would that be?

Mr. Stevens: That would be the Leaf River. His home was almost on the banks of the Leaf River. He had ten children. There were four daughters and six sons. Captain Stevens was in the Civil War. He served under General Nathan Bedford Forrest. My grandfather, William Forrest Stevens, was named for General Bedford Forrest. [Captain Stevens] named his other sons after Confederate generals.

Dr. Bolton: Are there any stories about what he did during the Civil War?

Mr. Stevens: I'm not aware of any of the stories relating to him as far as his war service is concerned. [I do not have his diary, but I can get you a copy for the file.] Most of my knowledge of Captain Stevens, my great-grandfather, came from my father who spent a lot of time with him on his farm. [Captain Stevens] had a [big herd of cattle and] a lot of sheep that roamed the woods. At one time Old Augusta was really the major land-grant location for this section of the United States. And that's how my great-grandfather happened to come down here. [In addition to his farming interest, store, and logging operations, Captain Stevens was also one of the major charter stockholders of the bank that became First National Bank, now Bank of Mississippi. His sons had an interest in or owned several Hattiesburg businesses including the ice plant, electric power plant, coal company and street cars.] In the course of his lifetime, he accumulated about 30,000 acres of timberland which he later sold to, as he called it, the Yankees, when they were trying to come here [to the South]. He thought he got an awfully big price when he sold it.

Dr. Bolton: Would this be one of the big northern companies that was coming down?

Mr. Stevens: He sold it to some of the northern individuals that came in here and bought timberlands, some of [whom] later built sawmills. My father used to spend his summer months down here [in Old Augusta] with his grandfather on the farm. Later my father, after graduating from college, came into the business and [worked] in [the Ben Stevens Store] over at Richton. The store that was started in Old Augusta was moved to Richton in about 1903 or 1904, shortly after the railroad [was built through Richton],

which was then the Gulf and Mobile Railroad going from Mobile up through Richton, on up to Laurel and to Jackson, Tennessee.

Dr. Bolton: So the railroad had bypassed Old Augusta?

Mr. Stevens: The railroad had bypassed Old Augusta and the store moved over to the railroad. It was operated originally by my great-uncle, my father's uncle, a Mr. C.H. Stevens. When he died in the early '20s, my father bought him out and operated it until his death. I'm the fourth generation of my family that's been in [the] operation of that store. We closed the store about two years ago. Interestingly, the railroad about two years ago abandoned that line and moved, and we bought the right-of-way that the railroad owned for about six or eight miles through that section of the county [just south of Richton].

Dr. Bolton: I had read that your father was involved very early with Masonite and the pulpwood industry. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

Mr. Stevens: My father was the first supplier of pulpwood for the Masonite Corporation. He was coming back from Jackson one day and was almost run over by a truck that had some peeled wood on it. Some of the peeled wood fell off in front of him. He stopped to see about things and then asked the guy what he was doing with the wood. He told him a fellow by the name of Mason was trying to make a hardboard out of that particular wood. My dad actually contacted Mr. Mason and a fellow, Mr. Thickens, the operating manager for Mr. Mason. Mr. Mason was a chemist and an engineer. It was after that he began to supply Masonite with timber from what was then cutover land. No one thought that the timber was of any value because the virgin pines had been cut out by the sawmill people. They moved on and left the lands pretty bare except what had just [naturally] re-seeded. The Masonite plant grew and as they grew my father's [timber] operation grew with it.

Dr. Bolton: This would be the Masonite Plant in Laurel?

Mr. Stevens: The Masonite Plant in Laurel. We were shipping them over a 100,000 cords of wood a year. Today we still operate a timber and pulpwood business. I have two brothers, a brother-in-law, my son and my nephew are in our timber operation.

Dr. Bolton: I want to get into that in a little bit about your company today, but before we do that I wanted to ask you about some of your experiences growing up in Perry County. What do you remember about growing up in the '20s and '30s in Perry County?

Mr. Stevens: Well, it was a period of very little money. It was a tough time for families. My family had a very tough go of things, [but we were a very religious and happy family]. We as children were always expected to perform a lot of chores and duties around the house. That's one thing my dad never failed to do for us and that was he always had a job available for us. Even after I got into college, [when I came home, I had to work]. By the same token, we had a very close-knit family. My grandfather and grandmother on my mother's side lived next door to us. I had a very close relationship with my grandfather on my mother's side. He worked with the railroad, and as a result of that they worked on very short hours based on time other people worked. [For example], my father was in the store from about four or five o'clock in the morning until eight and nine at night. In addition to that he operated a farm where he grew cotton and corn and vegetables and things of that nature.

But as a child I had a physical problem in my early life. I was allergic to milk. They didn't know all the things they know today. I almost died because they just didn't know what my problem was. Finally they discovered that I was allergic to milk and put me on goat's milk. We used to keep goats in our backyard and milk them for me to drink. After I got on goat milk I began to develop and grow. My family always had help around the house. We had a black maid that just sort of took care of all of us. If any of us were sick, she'd come stay at the house. We had a black man by the name of Jesse Pickett who performed different kinds of chores around the house.

Dr. Bolton: Would he also work on the farm?

Mr. Stevens: Jesse never worked on the farm. Jesse just worked around the house. He sort of looked out after us [my brothers and me] in a lot of ways. Jesse used to take us and play with us. Actually, because I was sick a lot, I would not eat breakfast for anybody except Jesse. He came by and cooked oatmeal for me in the mornings and [fed me] my breakfast. Jesse was the one who always took care of me.

We lived in a very small house. It had two bedrooms in it and a sleeping porch, dining room and living room. My brother and I, right up to five, six, seven years old, used to sleep out on that sleeping porch; it didn't make any difference whether it was summer or winter. Mother used to make curtains to try to keep the wind from blowing in.

Sometimes it got awful cold. That's the way we slept. I was a child that always woke up very early in the morning. I was and still am a very early riser. Living in a small house, well, I had to just be very careful in the mornings to keep from waking everybody up. I would just lie [awake] in the mornings and pick the wallpaper off the wall. There'd be a big hole in the wallpaper where I'd just lie there in the morning and pick the wallpaper.

Dr. Bolton: What would you and [your] brothers and sisters do for entertainment at that time?

Mr. Stevens: Back then we had to pretty much make our own entertainment. You didn't have games that you could go up to the store and buy, [and] we didn't have any money to [spend on games]. We had to find our own things to play with. Some of the things that we did, we'd go out and go swimming during the summer, we'd go out to a creek. [Beaver Dam Creek, water clear enough to drink and cold enough to give you a chill]. Mother would always take us up there, and she'd sit on the creek bank and read a book while we went swimming. She didn't like for us to go by ourselves. We'd make rubber guns using an old piece of lumber and an inner tube. We'd cut that [car tire] tube out so that we could get a what we called a bullet. Actually, it was the ring of the inner tube. [We'd take a piece of lumber, notch it out, put a string across the top of the notches, stretch the inner tube into each notch with the string under the tube. As you pulled the string, each tube would fly off. rd take the tube, put a string under and pull it back and could shoot somebody with it.] You could shoot that inner tube [the bullet] probably thirty or forty feet if you stretched it [tight] enough. We did the same thing with a slingshot. We made our own slingshots. We'd shoot birds with that, and [my parents] never let us shoot mockingbirds, blue birds, red birds, and robins but we could shoot sparrows. They liked for us to shoot the sparrows. They brought mites and things into the house. We played other things. We'd take horseshoes and pitch horseshoes. We really used the regular shoes from the horses. Then at some points we pitched washers [at a hole in the ground]. At some point some of us were able to find some batteries that had the lead in the battery. We took [the] lead [plates] melted [them] down, [pour the lead into a small round cap and wait for it to cool and harden]. Those lead washers were really a prize to have.

Dr. Bolton: Much better for pitching,

Mr. Stevens: Much better for pitching, that's right

Dr. Bolton: Did you ever go into Hattiesburg when you were a child?

Mr. Stevens: My dad had about four uncles and two aunts in Hattiesburg. We would come and visit them on a regular basis. These would be my grandfather's brothers and sisters. We would come and visit them on Sundays. We didn't come to Hattiesburg to play or anything like that.

Dr. Bolton: Just came visiting?

Mr. Stevens: [We would] just come visit the family. We did all our shopping in Richton out of our own store. We would go to Old Augusta-New Augusta at that time-to visit aunts and uncles over there, and that was always a special treat because they always had a lot of black help around and always had lots of homemade cookies, homemade breads and homemade desserts. That was a real special treat to go visit the aunts, my great-aunts, especially in New Augusta.

Dr. Bolton: What was your early education like? What type of schools did you attend?

Mr. Stevens: I went to Richton High School and graduated from Richton High School.

Dr. Bolton: Was this after the schools were consolidated?

Mr. Stevens: Richton was never a consolidated school. It always operated, and still does today, as a separate school district. Just like the Hattiesburg city schools today is operated as a separate school district. My dad served on the school board and he was also mayor and also chairman of the board of a church, a Methodist church. He was very much interested in the schools because of his children. Very much interested in education, as was his father and my grandfather. My dad went to prep school in Ashville, North Carolina. He graduated from the University of Mississippi. His uncles were all college-educated and [three] of them were lawyers and one of them was a doctor. But the Richton schools provided what was considered a good education back then.

I graduated at Richton High School, valedictorian in my class, and then was accepted at Georgia Tech and then went on to college at Georgia Tech without ever having to take any sort of entrance exam. They just saw the grades. I had not been able to get certain courses that were needed, and I was required to take those courses after I got to the college, math courses that the engineering school required that we didn't have at Richton. But the school was a good school. I played different kinds of sports there. I

was the quarterback on the football team. We went to the regional playoffs. I was on the tennis team. We went to the regional playoffs in that. We used to play tennis directly across the street from the house on a vacant lot, and it was just a clay court. We'd put up a net and go out there and play on a standard-sized court. There were no backstops or anything. The people waiting to play the next round would be chasing balls.

Dr. Bolton: You graduated from high school in the late '30s?

Mr. Stevens: I graduated in 1940. At that time I was just seventeen years old. I graduated in April. I was really sixteen when I graduated. School didn't run very late back then, because people had to work in the summertime to gather the crops and get their crops in.

Dr. Bolton: So I guess you would have been in Georgia Tech during the World War II Years?

Mr. Stevens: Yes, I entered Georgia Tech in the fall of 1940, and while I was there I was taking ROTC at Georgia Tech, and during the war they activated the ROTC units. In my case, I was sent back to Georgia Tech. I say sent back, I was never sent away from the college, from the campus. They set up barracks on the campus, and we had to live in those wooden barracks that were operated by the Army. They continued to send us to school. The war began to develop pretty rapidly in the Pacific, and before I finished they sent me to an engineering school that the Army operated outside of Washington in Virginia. Stayed there a few months and then I was sent out to California to prepare to go to the Pacific Ocean, the Pacific theater of operation. From California I was sent to a place called Oral Bay, New Guinea. I was attached to the 3014th Engineering outfit. I was assigned to the [Sixth] Army headquarters. It was a small unit, less than a hundred people. We did specialized engineering-type work. When I joined the 3014th Engineers, the unit was all packed.

Dr. Bolton: What do you mean packed?

Mr. Stevens: All the equipment was loaded on trucks in boxes, waiting to be shipped into the Philippines. Instead of sending the 3014th, which was the unit I was attached to, they sent the 3016th. That unit was pretty well wiped out at the Battle of Leyte in the Philippines.

Dr. Bolton: One of the biggest naval battles in the war.

Mr. Stevens: Yes, and so I was really fortunate. Before they moved us out to the Philippines, they sent me and one other fellow to school in Brisbane, Australia. We waved good-bye to our cohorts in the Army [as they departed for the Philippines], and we hitched a ride to Australia [on an airplane]. When we got to Brisbane, Australia, the school had been cancelled. The Pacific war was looking very favorable for the U.S. So then we weren't assigned to anyone. The two of us got an apartment in Brisbane, Australia, and lived in town and reported in every day or two to the American Red Cross who was set up there in Brisbane. Later they sent us down to a rest resort and we stayed in a hotel on the beach. Ultimately, we were shipped back to our unit that had arrived in the Philippines. [We joined our old unit at the dock in the Philippines after it was loaded for Japan.] So we wound up in Japan.

Dr. Bolton: After the surrender?

Mr. Stevens: After the surrender. They sent us back to the 3014th Engineers, and we went into Japan and stayed there for almost, I guess, six months. I had accumulated enough points and was sent back home to be discharged. I wound up not having to ever be involved in combat.

Dr. Bolton: Got to see a lot of the world though

Mr. Stevens: I got to see a lot of the world. One of my uncles told me that it looked like to him I just took a tour around the world at the Army's expense. After the war I went back to Georgia Tech to finish school. I was discharged in the early part of 1946. I had just about made up my mind that I wouldn't go back to school. I lacked about another year finishing in electrical engineering. But I had enough of that in the Army.

Dr. Bolton: What did you think about doing instead?

Mr. Stevens: I'd decided I'd just go into business with my dad. Masonite was expanding after the war so he sent me to open up a wood territory from Meridian through Macon and Crawford, Mississippi. That summer I spent a lot of time in Macon, and I decided I wanted to go back to school. I then switched over to industrial management and graduated from Georgia Tech in April of 1948 in industrial management. There's a story about my graduation. I left Atlanta on the tenth of April. On the eleventh of April, I was in Morton, Mississippi, opening up another wood territory for my dad. That was from Forest, Mississippi, across to Jackson, Mississippi. I lived in Morton for a while

when we were opening that territory. We still operate in those areas. We still have operations in the Macon area, the Morton area; we have a big operation up that way.

Dr. Bolton: When you say open a wood territory, what exactly does that entail?

Mr. Stevens: By opening, that meant that you had to go establish yards where you could buy wood and you had to make arrangements with some people to haul it for you, some people to cut it for you. We had to have all that wood peeled. Some of it we would buy already peeled, but a lot of it wasn't, and we would have to pay someone to peel the wood. We would pay them so much a cord to peel the wood.

Dr. Bolton: That would be done by hand?

Mr. Stevens: Most of them took a hoe and straightened [it] out and would use that hoe to peel the wood. Some of those people could do several cords a day. Two and three cords a day, peeling wood. But in opening a territory, we had to find places along the railroad, generally a site along the railroad. And we would have a yard at every other [city along the] railroad. At one point, there were over 150 different locations [that we operated] where we would buy wood. [We paid for the wood on a regular weekly schedule.] [If we were to be in Newton] Friday afternoon at four o'clock, everybody that had hauled wood in for us during the week would have it stacked in a pile in that yard [waiting for us to come by, measure, and pay for the wood]. I would go by and measure the wood. Then I'd give them a check. When I measured [the wood], it was basically [on] a per-cord basis as the method of payment. When you open a territory, you also have to make arrangements for somebody to [load] that wood on the train for you. That was all done by hand. We tried to get it close enough to the track that you wouldn't have to load all of it on to a truck and then load it again on the railroad car.

Dr. Bolton: Would you just get temporary labor to do this?

Mr. Stevens: Most of that was done by people who made a real profession out of that.

Dr. Bolton: Moving around from yard to yard?

Mr. Stevens: Yes.

(Tapes are out of sequence. The interview continues on tape two, side one)

Dr. Bolton: I want to go back just a little bit. What effect did World War? have on-I know you were away then-but what effect [did] that have on the lumber operation of your father?

Mr. Stevens: It increased demand for the pulpwood, for Masonite, because they were making a hardboard that was used in the Army. And as a matter of fact, because of this special board they made, which was used for buildings, temporary shelters, and things of that nature, the Richton Tie and Timber Company through Masonite obtained certain priorities for equipment, like trucks, trucks that you couldn't buy. But because of the special need of the Army for the Masonite board, we were able to get trucks that could be used to haul wood and deliver wood into our yards. I believe we also had one and maybe two employees that were deferred, special employees that were critical for the operation that were deferred from the Army in order to produce the wood. They were people that were basically out in the woods, but they were skilled in getting other people trained to do the work.

And then of course as the war went along they had German prisoners of war that came into the area. There was a camp outside of Richton that had several hundred German prisoners of war. They were used to cut wood and those prisoners of war were handled by the Army, but they worked under the supervision of some of my dad's skilled people. They were required to be paid so much per day. I think that was like about eighty cents a day. I'm not sure.

Dr. Bolton: The government established it?

Mr. Stevens: The government established it. First they started out paying them on a piece-rate basis. Then the government decided that was not the way that it should be handled. And later they came in and said that they had to be paid on an hourly basis. Well, my dad at first refused to work the prisoners on an hourly basis because he wasn't going to turn several hundred [prisoners] loose in the woods cutting wood that he couldn't control in anyway. And some of the prisoners sent him word that if he would continue with [the cutting], that they would guarantee that he would get his money's worth out of it. He decided to go along with the program. [The prisoners] stacked this wood in the woods in what was called pens. And after the war, [my dad] was still cleaning up out of the woods a lot of this timber. He told me that the prisoner of war program that he finally agreed to turned out to be one of the most profitable pieces of business that he ever [had], because they cut more wood than they were really cutting when he was paying them on a

piece-rate basis. But he was getting more than his eighty cents or whatever the rate was per day for the payment he had to make.

Dr. Bolton: They turned out to be good employees

Mr. Stevens: They wanted to be free to work out in the woods because it gave them a lot more freedom than just sitting around a camp or maybe having to do some other type of work that didn't give them the freedom to exercise and move around and just not be hammered over by somebody all the time.

Dr. Bolton: Would somebody be with them there to watch over them?

Mr. Stevens: Yes, of course, the Army had guards that were there. And then we had people that worked with them. One particular man by the name of Commodore Meadows, he's still living, and I've talked to him about it a number of times. But he was one of Richton Tie and Timber Company's supervisors, and he would designate a German prisoner to be a supervisor. That prisoner would be responsible-he would be somebody that could speak some English-and he would be responsible for communicating between our representatives, Richton Tie and Timber Company representatives, and the prisoners. And we'd have two or three supervisors for the whole operation. They weren't there to protect the prisoners. They'd go by and pick them up and get them to the jobs. And then get them back from the job back to the prison. We'd pick them up in a truck and take them out to the job each day.

Dr. Bolton: And bring them back at night?

Mr. Stevens: Bring them back at night. And if some of them began to have problems, if our man would have a problem with one of them, he would report it to the Army and that man may not be allowed to go out and may be put on short rations for a week or more until he had an attitude adjustment. But once they got a few of those nights without much food, well, they became anxious to get back on the wood [cutting] job.

Dr. Bolton: In general, I guess the war helped the industry.

Mr. Stevens: It helped the industry. It helped the pulpwood industry considerably because Masonite did grow then too. They continued to run and their product became much more widely known and used.

Dr. Bolton: I wanted to talk a little more specific about the timber industry since you've been in the business, really since World War II. Maybe we can talk about it in the context of your company here, and beyond that also. For instance, just how you get from standing tree to finished product, and what role your company plays in that. For instance, where do you get your timber from? Do you have your own land? Do you buy it from landowners? How does that work?

Mr. Stevens: Well, in our case we own some of our own lands, but as a rule, that's not where we obtain our major supply. We operate our timberlands just as another separate business and operate the growth of that timber just as you would a crop. But in terms of our pulpwood operation, we handle [over] 200,000 cords of wood a year. In addition to that we handle [several million] feet of saw logs a year. That comes from a lot of different small landowners, because that's basically how the landowner pattern exists in Mississippi. We have foresters that go out and cruise tracts of timber, and we buy it. We maintain an open market at our woodyard, whereby if you wanted to cut something off of your place or wanted to have your neighbor cut something off of your place, he could deliver it to our yard and there's a ready market for that wood. You wouldn't necessarily have to call us about sending a crew out there. If you knew of a crew and you wanted to cut your own timber, then we have an open-gate policy we call it, where you can sell it to us and we've got an established price at each one of these yards.

I mentioned earlier that we had at one time 150 yards. After I came into the business, which was in 1948, we continued to operate on a basis of the small woodyard, [with] hand peeling and a woodyard at each railroad siding, up until the early '50s. Then in the early '50s, we developed what we called concentration yards, large yards. Where we had four or five yards in an area, we [established] a central location and developed one big yard there. We developed the first mechanized yard in the state. That was right here at Hattiesburg. I remember when we bought two machines to handle [unloading] wood trucks. [At our yard], we'd take it from the truck and put it into a yard, peel it, and later put it back on the railroad car with a machine. I bought two of those machines from the specifications. The first time I ever saw them, they were delivered to our woodyard. They were made up in Canada. They later became a very popular piece of equipment.

Dr. Bolton: I guess that one of the biggest changes since World War II is just the level of mechanization in the lumber industry.

Mr. Stevens: Oh, there's no question about that. We now operate about twenty of those major yards. We have since, and the pulp mills have since, gone to tree length, where we

don't necessarily have to cut it into short lengths. By tree length I mean you just cut the tree down and trim the limbs off of it. [The producer delivers it to our yard or, if it's close enough, to a mill.] [Then] we have an arrangement with a mill for a producer that can handle pretty good-sized truckloads to go direct to the mill with it. That eliminates some of the handling that goes into the wood, which means that the producer and the landowner, especially the landowner, is getting a lot more for his timber than he would if it's got to be handled two or three times. Actually when my dad first started out in the pulpwood business, people would give him that old-growth timber, the second-growth timber, because they didn't think that it had any value. They were trying to farm down in this section of the country.

Dr. Bolton: They just wanted to get it off their land?

Mr. Stevens: They wanted to get it off their land. It just interfered with their farming.

Dr. Bolton: I know some companies used what they call the wood dealer system, kind of a middleman between the landowner and company. It sounds like you don't really utilize that.

Mr. Stevens: Yes, that's what we are. We really are a wood dealer.

Dr. Bolton: Oh, you are? Kind of like the middleman

Mr. Stevens: Yes. Some mills, their dealer serves [as] more of a broker than anything else, but in our case we are one of the few people that actually own our own yards. We operate our own yards. We own our own equipment. We have our own forester. There are not many other dealers that do that.

Dr. Bolton: I guess what I was thinking about was the independent wood dealer that goes out and he's kind of a contact between the mill and the landowner. You are kind of like a large version of that concept, of a middleman wood dealer.

Mr. Stevens: We are truly a dealer not a broker because we've got a lot of investment in our operation. In fact we've just put in scales where we are buying wood by weight at nearly every one of our major yards today.

Dr. Bolton: Are all of these yards in south Mississippi or are they throughout the state?

Mr. Stevens: They are mostly in southeast Mississippi. Our most northern yard would be Louisville, Mississippi. We have a yard at Louisville. We have one at Philadelphia. We have a Newton yard. We have a Macon yard. We have a yard at Scooba. We have a yard at Louin. We have a yard at Raleigh. We have a yard at Collins. We have a yard at Magee. We've got a yard at Hattiesburg. We've got one in Richton. We've got one at Vossburg. We've got one at Old Augusta. We've got one outside of Meridian, to the west of Meridian. We've got one at Walnut Grove. I don't know whether I've picked up on all of them, but that's a pretty good representation of the area we cover.

Dr. Bolton: In these yards will you also do the cutting of the wood, I mean, are these sawmills too?

Mr. Stevens: No, these yards are just nothing but concentration yards. That's where we buy this timber that has been cut and delivered to our yards. And at these yards we handle both pine and hardwoods. At most of them now, since we've put in the scales, we can handle it in tree length form, in five-foot-three lengths, and it can be any species. And now relative to the sawmill, we bought a sawmill in 1965 from a Mr. W.H. Clinton and his family.

Dr. Bolton: Where would that be?

Mr. Stevens: That mill is located where we are today here in Petal. And that's why my office is here in Petal. After I graduated from college, I came back to Richton to live. While I was in college I met a girl from Jackson, Mississippi, that was in school at Agnes Scott in Atlanta. So after I came into our business, I first settled in Morton. Of course, Morton was convenient to Jackson when [Nan, who later became my wife] was home from school. In 1950 we were married and moved to Richton. But I came to Hattiesburg in 1965 to buy and operate the Clinton sawmill. In 1969 [we] moved to Hattiesburg, and [we] presently live in Hattiesburg, just a little west of the college. One of the things that made Hattiesburg interesting for us was the school system that Hattiesburg had. We were very much interested in education for our children. We have four children, a son and three daughters. And our oldest daughter went to Richton [grammar school]. In the ninth grade she went to the National Cathedral School in Washington, D.C., and had four years of high school there. She graduated from Millsaps College in Jackson. I'm sort of digressing from your question, but it's fresh on my mind so I will go ahead.

Dr. Bolton: This is a question that I was going to ask you later anyway.

Mr. Stevens: My second daughter went through the ninth grade at Richton, and then she went to school at St. Catherine's, an Episcopal school in Richmond, Virginia, and graduated from there. She later went to Tulane and Sophie Newcomb College and graduated from Sophie Newcomb in creative writing and English. Then later she got a master's degree at Tulane. My third daughter didn't graduate from high school. We moved over here in the fall of '69 for my youngest daughter and my son to enter school in the Hattiesburg public schools. By the time she [my third daughter] was in the eleventh grade, they had the full integration program going, and she felt that her senior year in high school was going to be a waste [of time] for her. [Her school record was excellent.] She convinced us-it was a hard sell that she made on us-but she convinced us that if we would let her go to college and skip her senior year that it was the thing for her to do. We agreed to let her go to MSCW (Mississippi State College for Women, now Mississippi University For Women). She had an outstanding record there [at MSCW], and then went on to graduate from college in three years [from Tulane]. Later [she] got her master's degree from Southern.

My son went to school at Thames Elementary School, then went one year to Beeson Academy which was later, I believe, Hattiesburg Prep or something like that. Then he went one year to Woodward Academy in Atlanta and then graduated from the Selwyn School in Denton, Texas. That was a private school outside of Dallas, Texas. After he graduated from high school, he decided he didn't want to go to college. I told him he was on his own. He went west and learned to ski and worked in restaurants and kept up [cleaned] condominiums and worked at Yellowstone National Park. My middle daughter had worked at Yellowstone National Park for several summers and so he went out in the summer and worked with her in the gift store, as a chauffeur and stuff like that. After he had worked for about three years, he decided to go to college and went on and graduated from Montana State University. He's now in our timber business with us. Of course, that's another story as to where he's going today in the timber business too. He and my nephew and one of our employees are in the process of building a chip plant.

Dr. Bolton: Wood chip?

Mr. Stevens: Wood chip plant. And it will be located at Louisville. They haven't finalized all of their plans yet, but they do have a signed contract from Georgia Pacific for a chip mill to be built at Louisville. It will be about a three or four million dollar investment. I'm not interested at my age in continuing to make an investment like that. But I am interested in seeing family members grow and expand. [I am] encouraging him to [build the plant]. He and my nephew will continue to be responsible for the

management of the Richton Tie and Timber Company, but [the mill] will be just an additional company that they will own themselves and operate.

Dr. Bolton: So this is moving into the fifth generation of the Steven's family

Mr. Stevens: This will be moving into the fifth generation in the timber business, that's right. We're already into the fifth generation operating it, but it's just another phase, just taking it from floating it down the creek to moving it on the railcar to moving it by truck directly from the woods to the mill, and now, we're going to move it in chip form to the mill.

Dr. Bolton: Is there a sixth generation somewhere lurking in the future?

Mr. Stevens: Well, I've got six grandchildren now. Of course, they're all mighty young. I don't know whether any of them are going to be in the business yet or not. None of my sisters' or brothers' grandchildren are in the business.

Dr. Bolton: Just to come back to that other question. How long did you keep the sawmill?

Mr. Stevens: We operated the sawmill from '65 until about 1975. At that point the major companies were getting into the lumber business. There was a Finnish group that was proposing and did build a mill, which is now Georgia Pacific. It was Leaf River, and it was built by a Finnish group. They spent about eleven or twelve million dollars at that time for that sawmill. International Paper Company built a big building at Wiggins. Masonite built a mill here in Hattiesburg. Every time we were competing for something, we were dealing with the major companies, and we concluded that for us to stay in [the sawmill] business it was going to take a tremendous investment which we were not willing to make. We decided to stay with our pulpwood business and let somebody else handle the sawmill operation. We were operating here at Petal, in conjunction with our sawmill business, a building supply business. So we today still operate a building supply business here at Petal.

And an interesting story about our sawmill. Mr. Clinton's family had started this mill, I think, in 1927. He was ready to retire, and I had always wanted to get into the sawmill business. My dad was not interested in [sawmilling], but I had always wanted to get into the sawmill business. I just felt like [a sawmill] was something we needed to do to help take care of all our families. Masonite was interested in us getting into the

sawmill business. We were their biggest supplier for wood. But at that time the chip business from the sawmills were just beginning to develop. They were taking the slabs from the sawmills and chipping them up. The paper companies were beginning to use that raw material. So Masonite was buying chips from Mr. Clinton. [Masonite] also owned about 300,000 acres of land in southeast Mississippi. They wanted to be sure that there was a market for their saw timber. I worked out an arrangement with Masonite where they put up every bit of the money for the sawmill. We didn't put a dime into buying this lumber operation. We agreed to pay them back through the chips [sales], which was the waste from the lumber. And that's how we got into the sawmill business. We worked out an arrangement with the First Mississippi National Bank to finance all of our inventory, so we came into this business with absolutely no experience and not a dime in it. It worked out to be a very successful business for us.

That's really the way we built a lot of our pulpwood yards. Masonite would put up the money for [them], and we would pay them back with wood sales. As a matter of fact, we've just done something similar to this with Georgia Pacific in our Morton yard. They wanted a certain amount of wood out of that territory. They didn't have somebody that they could depend on to supply it to them. And they made us certain financial commitments if we would represent them and supply them out of that area. They guaranteed us a certain sales volume every year from that yard, and we built a nice operation, and we are supplying [wood] to a mill in Louisiana for them.

Dr. Bolton: Do you sell a lot of your wood to in-state mills?

Mr. Stevens: Oh, yes, we sell to in-state and out-of-state mills. The biggest volume that we have is, of course, to Georgia Pacific. Now prior to Georgia Pacific buying out Nakoosa or the Leaf River mill, Leaf River was our biggest customer. But we sell to Crown Zellerbach over in Bogalusa. We sell to Mansville over in Louisiana. We sell to Stone Container in Louisiana. We sell to MacMillan Bloedell in [Pine Hill] Alabama. We sell to Newsprint South up in Grenada and Scott Paper Company in Mobile. International Paper Company at Moss Point. By far the largest volume [of our wood sales] goes to the Georgia Pacific mill, either at New Augusta, Monticello or Port Hudson, Louisiana.

An interesting thing, too, that I failed to mention about the timber industry today is that we have now established what are called thinning crews to take care of planting small plantation timber. That's a mechanized operation. We go in on plantations that are

anywhere from twelve to eighteen years old and take out some of the [trees from] the land.

Dr. Bolton: You don't have to clear-cut it?

Mr. Stevens: We don't have to clear-cut it. Now, the way they usually work is they take out about every fifth row, clear-cut every fifth row, which allows us to get the equipment down through [the forest]. Then we can work on both sides of that row. That is developing into a pretty good operation for us. We have several of those crews. It takes about two hundred and fifty thousand dollars for one of those crews to get set up with skidders and trucks and shears, or mechanical shears on a loader. As we enter the era of the Mississippi pine plantation age wood, we are going to do more and more of that. Another thing that is being done, particularly over on the Tombigbee River, is a lot of wood is moving by barge and a lot of it is moving [in] chips [form]. People are putting in chip mills, just like my son is proposing at Louisville, but they're locating their mills over on the Tombigbee River.

Dr. Bolton: So getting back to using the river transportation that was used a hundred years ago?

Mr. Stevens: Right, and Scott Paper Company has a five-year contract to sell chips out of Mobile, that are brought down the Tombigbee River from the area above Amory into Mobile, and ship it to Japan and China.

(a brief interruption)

Dr. Bolton: Mr. Stevens, I was going to ask you when you were talking about Masonite helping you get established at no cost, I remember you told me earlier when we were talking that you also helped finance people getting into the timber industry. How did that work?

Mr. Stevens: We do very little of it today. But some of these major thinning crews I was just mentioning, we helped some of them. The way we've helped them is we'll work an arrangement through the bank where we would guarantee the loan if they don't make their payments. But we are doing very little of the financing now. It's gotten to the point where the government tries to tie you into too close of an employee relationship if you finance them and exert too much control, so we've gotten out of that pretty much.

But in the early days, the way we financed them, if somebody needed to buy a saw then we would buy the saw for him and let him pay us back so much a week or so much a cord on his saw. We did that with trucks. We would finance people to buy a truck. We would actually buy the truck for him and then turn around and resell it to them and let them pay us so much a week out of their wood [payment]. This is the way we got people started into the business. You've got to remember that when my dad started no one knew how to even cut pulpwood. In fact when he opened the territory north of Laurel, he had to take people from Richton that had experience with cutting wood to show [others] how to cut and peel wood. Of course, when they first started out they were using a crosscut saw. It was all hand work with a crosscut saw for cutting. Later they developed the bow saw which was more or less a one man-type crosscut saw. Now you work the power saws. Then in these thinnings, you are using a mechanically-operated shears, or mechanically-operated saw. It's changed a lot over the last forty something years that I've been in it.

Dr. Bolton: Speaking along that line of changes I guess probably one of the biggest things that's different about the timber industry today is the involvement in timber management and reforestation. A lot of people have pointed to the severance tax as helping encourage reforestation efforts.

Mr. Stevens: Oh, there's no question about the severance taxes really [being] the thing that saved the timber industry. My dad was one of the earlier people in the industry that worked in getting the severance tax established.

Dr. Bolton: Why was the severance tax so important?

Mr. Stevens: The reason all of our timber was cut out by the sawmills was that the boards of supervisors could tax standing timber. If a major lumber company, and a lot of them were foreign owners-by foreign owners I meant from the North-had land and operations [in the South], then the supervisors would just go out in the woods and start taxing [their] timber. Well, the thing [the landowner] would do in order to avoid the tax was go cut the timber off of the land. Then he'd just walk off and leave the land with nothing on it. It was a contest between the taxing people and the lumber people to see who could get there first. If the lumber people got there and got the timber cut, then there was nothing for the taxing people to tax.

Dr. Bolton: They just cut all the value off.

Mr. Stevens: Cut all the value off. The same principle you'd use on your house. If you go tear your house down before the tax assessor gets there, you've got nothing to tax. That's the way the lumber people worked in the timber business. Of course, there was no incentive to replant it because it was such a long-term arrangement.

Dr. Bolton: You'd have to be taxed that whole time?

Mr. Stevens: They'd get their money and leave. They'd just move on to the next county. Then the severance tax came along and that put the tax on the timber at the time that it's cut. Because timber is such a long-term growth crop, you're not taxed on it now until it's served. That's the purpose of the severance tax. Every stick of wood and every cord and every board foot of wood that we sell, we deduct a severance tax from the landowner and that is paid into the state. Now, they're using some of that severance tax money-and that has been encouraged by the industry-to help the small landowner replant his timber. Some of the severance tax money is used through some type of fund-

Dr. Bolton: Funds for replanting?

Mr. Stevens: Replanting and regenerating timber. That goes to the individual; it doesn't go to corporations.

Dr. Bolton: You oftentimes hear people mention that there has been a depletion of southern timber over the years. With it being such a big resource in Mississippi, is that really a problem?

Mr. Stevens: I don't really see it as a problem. We are cutting a lot of timber, but today we are regenerating faster than we are cutting, in my opinion. I haven't looked at the statistics in the last few years. I think we are regenerating, especially in the softwood field, that's pine. Another thing we're doing is we are using super trees, which is a genetically superior tree that grows off faster with a higher quality, more disease-resistant, and that's speeding up growth. We've learned a lot of [new] techniques in planting which speeds up the growth of the timber. For instance, in our own operation just this year we have clear-cut certain blocks of our own lands. We took a helicopter-after it had been cut and dried for several weeks-and with the use of bombs [that] the helicopter dropped, [we] burned that particular block of land. We got all of the trash off of it. Then we came back-and actually before we sent the helicopters in there, we took a great big machine and just ground up those big stumps and things on the land. So when the helicopter came in and burned, we just had a pretty clear piece of property.

Dr. Bolton: It's ready to be planted again.

Mr. Stevens: Ready to be replanted. Then we come in and plant it with super trees. And now then that crop will come on out. We don't have a lot of competition for the nutrients of that soil for the tree, so the tree grows off faster. [The chopping and burning eliminates the competition for nutrients.] At some points we will probably do some sort of chemical release in order to kill some of the competition. Later on we'll come in and thin out some of those trees with one of these thinning operations [in order] to let the trees grow into saw timber. We are, I would think, [from an inventory standpoint] losing some volume in saw timber [stand], particularly in this section of the state because it's a very competitive [section]. Technology [has been] developed to where we are making boards out of chips rather than out of the solid wood. Those boards are proving just as effective as [products from] the solid wood. For instance, plywood is made from a sheet of wood, [peeling sheet from a log]. We have other types of board that compete with plywood that take [use chips from] small trees and chip them up and glue it together and make a product that serves as well as the plywood.

Dr. Bolton: So you're using the whole tree. There's really no waste like there was in earlier years.

Mr. Stevens: There's [very little] waste [from] that tree

Dr. Bolton: I guess what people worry about is any type of urbanization or other economic growth, when it cuts into timberland, and maybe things that you're talking about like that will offset any loss of land that is put in timber.

Mr. Stevens: That's right. [With] the intensive growth that we are doing on these lands, we're getting more per acre growth out of the lands. The timber industry is faced with some very serious problems, especially on the West Coast, and we are beginning to feel some of it down here, with environmentalists that are wanting to protect certain animal species or protect certain areas, and that's taken timberland out of production. So we're going to have to learn to get more [growth] per acre. On the other hand, in this section we are doing less [row crop] farming, and it's going more and more into timberlands [and that helps our timber land acreage.]

Dr. Bolton: Let me turn this over. It's about to run out here

(The interview continues on tape two, side two.)

Dr. Bolton: OK, go right ahead

Mr. Stevens: I can take you right over to our farm in Richton, and where we used to have cattle or cotton or corn or some other type of row crop, we've got it now planted in pine trees, and all of that has taken place within the last ten years. And that's going to be timber that's available. [Timber is now our crop.]

Dr. Bolton: So in this area there's actually new lands being used for timber?

Mr. Stevens: [Yes, this new land is used for growing timber.]

Dr. Bolton: What about the market for southern timber? Is there a big export market? I notice you mentioned the Japanese earlier. Are there other opportunities for southern timber products?

Mr. Stevens: Yes, this Georgia Pacific mill at New Augusta, or Old Augusta, exports probably 60 percent of their pulp to the foreign markets. It's going through the port primarily at Pascagoula, I believe, now. But when we operated our sawmill, we exported a lot of lumber to the Germans and the Japanese. I don't [know] how much lumber is going into [the export] markets now. But I do know that the pulp industry is supplying a lot of pulp and a lot of pulp products into the foreign markets. As I indicated, Scott Paper Company is supplying the raw chips into the Japanese and the Taiwan market.

Dr. Bolton: I guess the inverse of that question is what effect do other countries that produce timber, importing products into this country, have on the timber industry. I guess probably the biggest competitor would be Canada.

Mr. Stevens: That is a problem, and it affects the West Coast [more] than it does down here. We handle West Coast material right here through our building supply operation, [so] the Canadians do present a problem for the lumber industry. But I don't look on it as all that serious. The difference between us and the Canadians is that the government owns the land, and if they need to provide jobs, it doesn't make any difference whether they get anything for the value of the tree, the standing tree. Whereas down here individuals own so much of the land, and we've got to have value for it to justify the

growth of it. But I think the biggest competition that the pulp industry is facing is from the South American markets. They can grow a eucalyptus tree in a third of the time it will take us to grow pine trees. It makes a good pulp, and the labor is cheap. They don't have any environmental problems; their problem is that they don't have the financing it takes to build those big pulp mills. I mean you're looking at hundreds of millions of dollars to build a pulp mill today. You look at countries [like] Brazil and Mexico and all are having problems with financing. They just are not able to get the dollars [for capital investment]. Their governments are not stable enough where somebody else is willing to take the risk [to make the investment].

Dr. Bolton: Are there any other changes that you can think of since you've come into the industry that have been really important or have had a big impact on the southern lumber industry, that I haven't mentioned?

Mr. Stevens: I think we've pretty much covered most of the things that come to mind right offhand. This area, for one, thing, used to be a heavy longleaf pine section of the country. [Today] we are now [planting] more slash and loblolly. The longleaf is a slower growing tree and it's a denser tree. I personally like it, but it doesn't grow off as fast as some of these, like the loblolly and the slash. We are seeing more and more of our timberlands going into other species other than the longleaf. I don't know of anybody that's growing seedlings for planting longleaf pine.

Dr. Bolton: So the nature of the timber is changing?

Mr. Stevens: Right, and of course, years ago everybody [that owned land] used to have wild fires. [People] ran cattle over the woods, and you could expect your timberland to be burned every year, and it may not be the most opportune time for it to burn. It may have young growth coming on, and they'd kill it, [that would be destroyed by the fire]. Today we've got [fire] protection. I can remember that up until, oh, it hadn't been many years, twenty-five years ago or maybe less, that Mississippi didn't have a stock law. You could just let your cattle roam the woods and most [cattle owners] did. Put a brand on their cattle [and turn them loose in the woods]. I know as a child growing up we used to go round up sheep and cattle on different people's farms. They'd bring [the cattle] in once a year, and those they wanted to sell, [they'd cut out from the herd and] sell. They'd put a brand on [young cattle].

Dr. Bolton: A lot of people don't realize that you used to have to fence in the crop you wanted to protect.

Mr. Stevens: That's right.

Dr. Bolton: It was your responsibility to fence any part of your land that you wanted to protect. It was against the law to fence in other parts of your land.

Mr. Stevens: One thing, from a historical standpoint, is that land at one point had no value in this part of the country. We own land that our company bought for fifty cents an acre. I had an uncle that let thirty thousand acres go to the state for taxes. He didn't want to pay the taxes on the land. It's now part of the U.S. Forest Service land in this area. That's how the U.S. Forest Service got land. [It] had no value; no one wanted it. All the timber had been cut. They [the U.S. government] developed the CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps] during the Roosevelt administration. Young boys were provided jobs and a place to stay to go out and plant trees.

Dr. Bolton: Do you remember any of those camps around here?

Mr. Stevens: Oh yes, my brother-in-law worked in one of them. This German prison camp that I was telling you about outside of Richton was formerly an old CCC camp. That's why it was there to begin with. It was a government-operated facility.

Dr. Bolton: Would the CCC camps plant for private landowners? Were they contracted?

Mr. Stevens: I don't recall that they were planting any for private landowners, and private landowners weren't very much interested in growing timber then. [Timber on land just didn't have any value.]

Dr. Bolton: So it was all government lands?

Mr. Stevens: It was all government lands that they were working on. It's only been in recent years you've seen much growing of timber by private landowners. The way the private landowner, and the way we did it in our own business, we didn't go back and plant it. We just let it re-seed itself and try to keep the fire out of it. If you could keep the cattle people from burning your land, then you could eventually develop a pretty good stand of timber. It is only been in recent years that we've started a real planting and cutting program. All of our land is well-stocked, but it was naturally re-seeded by protecting it [from thieves and fire].

Dr. Bolton: I'd like to ask you what you think the big difference is, in social and economic terms, in the timber industry today, say, in [relation to] your father or grandfather's day? I know that's a very open-ended question.

Mr. Stevens: Well, I'm not sure that I understand exactly what your question is.

Dr. Bolton: Some people have described the older timber industry as having a very profound but fleeting economic and social impact on the area. And I don't get that impression that, that is exactly what the timber industry is today.

Mr. Stevens: I can understand the rationale that some people make that it was a fleeting industry. The older lumber people did come in and they cut the timber and they moved on to the next place with their sawmill operation. But by the same token many of those people have remained in this section of the state. You can look at Hattiesburg and Laurel especially. Those people that made the money out of the lumber and the timber business have made substantial economic and social and artistic contributions to the area. An illustration: the Lauren Rogers Museum at Laurel is an outgrowth of an old lumber family. You can look at some of the things right here in Hattiesburg that have been performed by some of the old lumber families. The Tatum family is an illustration. They continue to make a very definite impact on the economic life of this area. So while a lot of them cut the timber and got out of the business, [many] remained in the area and used their wealth to make social and economic progress for the area, and they're still doing it.

Dr. Bolton: So that characterization which people often make, you would say, has been kind of overblown, in talking about this area.

Mr. Stevens: It's overblown except for the fact that they did rape the land. They did rape the land. They raped the land, because it was a matter of them doing it or the tax people taking it away from them. So they [cut the timber] and just let the land go.

I have a brother whose wife's family owns about a hundred thousand acres over in Louisiana. They didn't want to sell the land, but all the timber had been cut off of it, and the family got split [over the management]. They could hardly get money for the taxes. In Louisiana you lose the minerals after a ten-year period [if you don't own the surface] .They wanted to maintain the mineral interests so they, in effect, gave a hundred-year lease to a company just to be able to maintain the interest in the minerals.

They weren't interested in the timberland. They made a bad deal based on today's environment. But then the land just had no value for them.

Our company now owns about sixteen thousand acres of land, and we are doing a very intensive management program on it. We are using the very best forestry practice to get it into production. We are land people; we like the land. But at the same time, when you look at other investments from a family standpoint, there are better places to put your money. That's going to be a problem from the small landowner's standpoint or the independent landowner's standpoint. There are just too many other opportunities for your money [investments] other than in the timberlands.

Dr. Bolton: It seems like it would be hard, too, for a small landowner. Like you're saying, it just might be better to let some big corporation that's involved, like Georgia Pacific or one of these, come in and buy your land rather than you have to worry about managing it.

Mr. Stevens: That's true, but you've also seen these pulp mills take that same attitude. As long as they can get the timber grown by somebody else, they don't want to own the land. When Leaf River built this mill at New Augusta and put six or seven hundred million dollars in it, they didn't own any land other than the mill site. They came down here with an idea that they were going to buy their [fiber needs] from private landowners

Dr. Bolton: And they probably liked that situation?

Mr. Stevens: They liked that situation. Masonite sold off all of their land. They spun the operating part of their company from their land and put all of their land up for sale. Leaf River bought part of the land in certain counties as a protective situation, but that wasn't the basis for their original investment. [The buy came after the mill had been constructed.] They didn't need it to make their original [investment] decision. They took the position that for the several hundred million dollars that they were going to put in land [to support the mill], they could build another plant. The [new] plant was going to earn more money for them [give a greater return to the shareholders] than the land was. [The fiber supply could be purchased from private land owners.]

Dr. Bolton: And they also wouldn't have the trouble of managing the land

Mr. Stevens: That's right.

Dr. Bolton: I wanted to ask you if there were any unusual or interesting experiences you could recall either during your years in the timber industry or from growing up, your father's work in the timber industry? Anything that stands out in your mind.

Mr. Stevens: Well, you know, I mentioned [that] when I finished college, I went straight from college [one day] to buying wood at Morton the next day. I had left this girl by the name of Nan Ford in Atlanta at Agnes Scott. I made my schedule work out so that I finished paying off [for wood] on Friday afternoon in Forest, Mississippi. I'd come in there to Forrest and measure, [and pay for wood while wearing] dirty boots and dirty clothes. Then I would go by a [Gulf Oil] filling station after I finished. About once a month I'd [change my clothes and] drive to Atlanta, leaving four or five o'clock in the afternoon to go to Atlanta to see Nan. I'd change clothes in that filling station. I'd get out my suit and tie and be ready to go to drive to Atlanta.

Dr. Bolton: This was before the day of interstates too.

Mr. Stevens: This was before the day of interstates, and driving from Birmingham to Atlanta was really a suicide trip. But, you know, it didn't make much difference what time of day or night I left or what time I got there, except that at a girl's school back then, they were very restricted as to what time of day they could get off the campus and what time you had to be back. I always tried to arrange it so I'd get the maximum time [to see her] while I was in Atlanta. I'd drive back on Monday morning and start back [on] the job at Morton.

Some of the interesting experiences that I had was testifying before some of the House and Senate Labor subcommittees.

Dr. Bolton: When was this?

Mr. Stevens: This would have been, I guess, late '50s or early '60s

Dr. Bolton: What were you testifying about?

Mr. Stevens: At one point, the pulpwood industry had what was called a twelve-man exemption. That meant that if anybody worked less than twelve men [in the woods, the operator] did not come under the wage and hour laws. That permitted the small businessman to run without being tied up with red tape, [paying hourly rates, et cetera]. The government felt like the industry was using this method to keep down their

employment [wages and] keep wood prices cheaper. There was a movement on the part of the [federal] government to get that twelve-man exemption eliminated. And this was at the time, and I said in the late '50s or early '60s, you can identify it with John Kennedy on the Senate Labor Committee at that time.

Dr. Bolton: It must have been the late '50s then.

Mr. Stevens: OK. Elliott Roosevelt may have been chairman of the House Labor Committee. But I was asked and my dad was asked on different occasions to go testify. This was all done under the direction of International Paper Company, Masonite Corporation and some of the major paper companies throughout the Southeast. It wasn't just Mississippi. It was all throughout the Southeast. It was not so much of a problem on the West Coast, because they were dealing with a lot bigger [trees] and bigger landowners. Here we were dealing with just small [trees and] small landowners. You couldn't mechanize. You couldn't go out and mechanize those operations, see. [At that time machinery was not available to do the work.]

Dr. Bolton: Did they want to count the landowners as being employees of the companies?

Mr. Stevens: That's right. That's what they were trying to do. Not necessarily the landowners but the people that went out there with the small trucks. A couple of men and a hand saw, a bow saw [and a truck, maybe a farm tractor].

Dr. Bolton: People that would be hauling it to your yards.

Mr. Stevens: Right. They were trying to tie them [the workers] in as employees of somebody, particularly the mills. That's who they wanted [to be responsible for taxes and insurance in addition to the twelve-man exemption]. And in addition to that, you were having increases coming up in the wage and hour payments. [Some members of Congress wanted wood workers to be treated the same as factory workers. In addition, if workers were treated as factory labor, the industry could be easily unionized.] And some of the sawmill people [operators] especially were concerned about that [the increase in wages]. The sawmill business used to be such a highly labor intensified [industry]. Hell, you had people rolling logs with a peavy; that's a [hand] tool that was used back then to move the log.

Dr. Bolton: A peavy?

Mr. Stevens: Yes, a log turner if you want to call it that. Then, you know, hauling the slabs, they'd drag the slabs off. [The industry] didn't have a lot of the mechanization. You'd have people riding the carriage on a sawmill, who would set the blocks so you'd see how wide and how big the lumber was to be cut. It was just a lot of labor, and the sawmills were concerned about the continued increase in the minimum wage. A lot of these congressmen didn't understand how the [southern] industry operated. We would go up there to explain just exactly how we operated. I think I still [have] some statements around somewhere that I made before some of those congressional committees. One of the more interesting was down here in New Orleans. Roosevelt brought his House Labor Committee to New Orleans.

Dr. Bolton: This would have been earlier now.

Mr. Stevens: Now, I'm talking about Elliott Roosevelt. This is the son of the president.

Dr. Bolton: Right, the House, OK.

Mr. Stevens: Elliott Roosevelt was the son of the president. He brought his committee to New Orleans. We all gathered down there from all over the southeast to testify. My dad testified, and we brought blocks of wood in to show him what the average diameter size of a piece of pulpwood was. It was really an eye opener for him, because he came from the West Coast. He was [from] out in California. All he could identify with was those great big redwood trees. He couldn't understand why we had to have so many people and couldn't handle the timber with machinery, [the same as] they were handling it out on the West Coast. When we brought that into him, he had a whole new different concept about [our problem]. Of course, they had people in the Congress, I remember one congressman particularly that was on the committee that I testified before, was a fellow named Pucinski. He was Polish.

Dr. Bolton: What state was he from?

Mr. Stevens: He was from Chicago. He represented the labor interests. He didn't care [about the problems of] the southern timber industry. He was making a play for the labor unions [in his district]. He gave us a really tough time. There was never any way to convince him that we had a different problem or a different set of rules down here. [He thought] everybody should be tied in with the unions, somehow, paid on an hourly basis [and unionized] so that somebody could be responsible for that person.

Dr. Bolton: That really wouldn't fit necessarily in the southern context. I guess even the people who worked in the sawmills never were unionized.

Mr. Stevens: You didn't have much unionization back then. Very little unionization. I guess Masonite was unionized and they would be one of the few plants that was unionized [in this section]. The sawmills generally were not unionized.

Dr. Bolton: Was there ever any labor unrest or anything like that, say, in the sawmills back in---

Mr. Stevens: I can't recall of any of the major sawmills in this area that had any labor unrest. Now, in the pulp industry we did have some labor unrest in it a number of years ago. That was probably in the '60s. Masonite operated a yard at their Laurel mill. They did not work it [buy wood] through a dealer. They worked it by just buying from anybody [who came to the Laurel plant yard with a load of wood], just like I would. The haulers became disgruntled with Masonite. They set up picket lines outside of the Masonite woodyard.

Dr. Bolton: What were they disgruntled about?

Mr. Stevens: They were disgruntled about the way Masonite was paying, the amount they were paying for the wood, and the way they were measuring the wood. They set up picket lines outside of the Masonite woodyard. They were trying to shut down the Laurel plant because they [the wood haulers] were taking the position that they were a union. They had taken the position that the people working inside of the mill who were union members shouldn't cross their picket lines. It developed into a pretty serious situation. Through our Hattiesburg and Richton yards, we supplied wood to help keep the mill running. [The haulers from Laurel] came down and set up some picket lines on the railroad tracks leading into our yards [and asked] that the train crews [not] cross their picket lines. Ultimately Masonite worked out their problem up there. But in doing so they shut down their operation of buying wood, except through dealers. If they struck my yard [Richton Tie and Lumber Yard] at Hattiesburg that didn't affect Masonite a bit. All it did was just hit Ben Stevens. [Masonite could buy wood from some other dealers.]

We never did have any labor unrest in our operation. Never have had any labor unrest. I've never had an attempt, at any of my operations, to be unionized. Some of these people that organized up at Masonite, [after Masonite stopped buying at the Laurel mill],

they came down here to Hattiesburg [yard]. Occasionally they would become disgruntled about something. You had one or two of them that still wanted to represent what they called, I've forgotten what the name of the-let's see, it was a pulpwood organization, but their headquarters was at Moselle. The fellow that was head of it was Fred Walters. He started hauling into our yards here, and occasionally Fred would want to fuss about something we had done, fuss about the scale, fuss about the price or fuss about something that the man at the yard had done. Everytime he would want to meet I'd say, "Fred, are you coming in here to file a complaint about something that [we] did or are you coming in here to file a complaint representing the union? Now, if you're representing the union, I'm not meeting with you. If you're representing a complaint as an independent hauler that concerns something that our people have done that you are unhappy about at our yard, then I'm ready to talk to you about it." And he and I got along fine. I never met with him as a union representative. One time he brought about eight or ten people in here [to this office] with him. Before the meeting ever started I asked, "Is this a union meeting or is this some haulers that want to talk about the problem [at our yard]?" It never was a union meeting. [They never admitted that I was meeting with union representatives]. We never did have any problem with any of them.

We had an operation [in Mobile] delivering wood [to] Scott Paper Company out of the Mobile area. The union down in Mobile, it was a Carpenters and Joiners Union, tried to organize the pulpwood producers in the [Mobile], Alabama area. And they [the union] brought a lawsuit against Scott Paper Company and all of their dealers to try to show that the dealers were the employees of the mills. We had a hearing down there [in Mobile] before a Labor Department hearing officer. The hearing was so big that they had to move it out into one of the hotels, a conference room. There were enough attorneys down there representing the mills from all over the South to really confuse the issue before that one Labor hearing officer.

Dr. Bolton: What year was this in, do you remember?

Mr. Stevens: I can't remember what year it was. I could look up the record, but I don't recall what year it was. We used an attorney by the name of M.M. Roberts, who the stadium is named for over here [at Southern]. The American Pulpwood Association had had some relationship with an attorney by the name of Jack Parson, who is still in Wiggins and practices in Wiggins and is familiar with the timber industry. They asked us if we would let Jack represent us also [along with Mr. Roberts]. I agreed to take Jack down there at our expense to represent us, but he was really working in conjunction with the American Pulpwood Association. At any rate, what that Carpenters and Joiners

Union was trying to do, was to prove that all of the people that sold wood to Scott Paper Company were the employees of Scott. Well, it turned out that Union Camp, Weyerhaeuser, and International Paper Company, all of the major companies, were selling some wood to Scott.

Dr. Bolton: They would have been employees, too.

Mr. Stevens: So what confused the ball was how were you going to make Weyerhaeuser, which was several times bigger than Scott, an employee of Scott Paper Company. Ultimately, the thing got so confused down there that the Labor attorney just [took] it under advisement, and nothing ever came out of it. Now, one significant thing did come out of it. Fred Walters, [whom] I was telling you about who was selling wood to us-we couldn't have written a script any better, but we had nothing to do with it I want to assure you-he showed up at the hearing with his attorney and his people saying that their union was the legal representative of the pulpwood [industry] and not the Carpenters and Joiners Union. So that further confused the issue. [The industry could not have written a better script because Fred's position further confused the hearing officer.]

Dr. Bolton: There was internal squabbling about who---

Mr. Stevens: Who had the authority to represent [the wood producers].

Dr. Bolton: It seems like it [the timber industry] is so decentralized that from labor's standpoint, it would be very difficult to organize because any wood producer would be selling to several different places.

Mr. Stevens: That's right. He is, he's selling to several different places

Dr. Bolton: I know we've talked a lot about the timber industry. You might tell us anything else you think might be important about other aspects of your career beyond the timber industry. That's also a very broad question. But anything that you think is important that you would like to add.

Mr. Stevens: I've had a very interesting business career. I've been involved in a lot of different things. I guess one of the most significant things in recent years I have been involved in is the First Mississippi National Bank. Starting in the early '80s, '82 and then especially in 1984, the First Mississippi National Bank was having financial

problems. The comptroller of the currency was making some pretty serious demands on the directors and the officers of the bank about the way the bank was being managed, and the bank was being run. At one point the situation got so critical that there was a run on the bank, and it looked like at one point the bank was going to actually fold, go under.

Dr. Bolton: What caused the run? Was this all made public?

Mr. Stevens: It was all made public. The bank had to take about a fifteen million charge-off for [bad] loans, which left them in a very low capital position. The people that had money in the bank just got scared. We had a board meeting and the president, the chairman, and the chief operating officer resigned from their positions. The question came up [before the directors] of who now are we going to hire to run the bank. There was a man by the name of Don Calfee who was serving as a vice-president down in [the] Hattiesburg [division]. I believe he was a vice-president, may have been executive vice-president. I'm not sure of his title. But anyway, the board elected him to serve as the acting president of the bank.

Then we started to adjourn the meeting and Gordon White, who [was] president of the Hattiesburg division and a member of the advisory board of the bank, said we just had to have somebody to serve as chairman of the board. The board went around the room talking about who should be the chairman of the board. Dr. Aubrey Lucas and several others on that board pointed the finger at me, and I told them that I couldn't do it. I hadn't had any banking experience. Finally they said, "Well, let's take a break." We took a break, and they asked me on the outside if I would agree to serve. I told them I couldn't serve I had too much else to do. We went back in [to the board room] and talked about it some more and then finally came back and [someone] said, "You've just got to serve." Aubrey Lucas told me to go call my wife. I went to the phone, and I don't know why I did this, I guess I was stalling for time. But I went to the phone and called my wife and asked her what she thought. She wanted me to come home and talk about it. I told her they wanted an answer right now, and she said, "I'll support whatever decision you make." When I went back out [into the room full of directors] I told them I couldn't do it. We took another break, and Dr. Richard Clark and Dr. Lucas and Lowery Woodall and two or three of the officers told me that if I'd agree [to serve as chairman] for three months, they'd have somebody to replace me. I agreed to do it for three months, and it turned out to be a bigger problem than we all thought. I wound up serving nearly three years.

We took a bank that the stock was paying no dividends [to its shareholders]. The value of the stock had gone down considerably. There was very little market for it [the stock]. The stock was trading in the range of anywhere from five dollars to ten dollars a share. We merged it into the Bank of Mississippi for a stock that was paying a dividend at a value of thirty-three dollars a share. There [were] a lot of ramifications to that story, and that's almost a history book in itself that somebody should explore. But that's been one of the more interesting [business] experiences that I had.

I worked with the Stewart Gammill and L.O. Crosby family in a lawsuit they had with the St. Regis Paper Company. They had a company called L.O. Crosby, et al. Lynn Gammill and her brother, Osborne Crosby, who lived out in Palo Alto, California, were the two principal owners of the property, the Crosby land [over a hundred thousand acres of timber land]. It was under lease to St. Regis Paper Company. There was a question about how the management of that property was being handled. [The Gammill and Crosby families] didn't feel like it was being properly managed. At any rate, a lawsuit developed out of it through L.O. Crosby, et al. Each member of the family was appointed one outside director. I was outside director for the Stewart Gammill family. That's Mr. and Mrs. Gammill.

Dr. Bolton: That's L.O. Crosby's daughter, Lynn Gammill?

Mr. Stevens: L.G. Crosby Jr.'s, daughter.

Dr. Bolton: Right.

Mr. Stevens: Then his son, L.a. Crosby-I guess he would be the third-in Palo Alto and his wife appointed a guy by the name of Jim Faddeman, who was with the business school at Southern California, I believe. He was with one of the California universities out there. This lawsuit lasted for probably two and a half to three years.

Dr. Bolton: What was the problem with the management of the land?

Mr. Stevens: The management [problem] was that St. Regis was not regenerating it [the land] fast enough to provide [the] kind of income that the property was supposed to be providing to them. The suit, after substantial legal fees and substantial time on our part and the St. Regis people's part, [was settled]. The president of the St. Regis people called Osborne Crosby to come to New York and meet with him without lawyers. Osborne Crosby, Stewart Gammill and I met with the St. Regis president, and [the St.

Regis president] ultimately just said, "If we'll just give you back your property, will you be satisfied?" Of course, they would have been satisfied with a lot less than that. But that's what ultimately happened. It was a very interesting experience. As a side note to that, I was going into New York, flew in there, and we were staying at the Pierre Hotel.

Dr. Bolton: I'm about to run out. Let me stop this.

(The interview continues on tape one, side two),

Dr. Bolton: Go right ahead with the story about New York.

Mr. Stevens: This is related to going into New York to meet with the St. Regis Paper president. Our headquarters was the Pierre Hotel in New York, which of course was one of the top hotels in New York. As I got off [the plane], I tried to see about some sort of transportation going in. I noticed that there was a bus going in [to the city], a car they called it, going in. I asked the person at the desk if it was going to the Pierre, and they said, "Yes." I said, "Well, put me down for it." I waited a while and the transportation didn't show up. Finally, there was another couple standing there, and I said, "Are y'all going to the Pierre?" And they said, "Yes." I said, "Well, if this bus doesn't come on in a minute, let's just share a cab and go in together." That was fine with them. So about that time the bus came up, and it was loaded with baggage. The other couple got in the back and I had to get up on a little old jump seat up next to the driver. And I said [to the driver], "Is the Pierre your first stop?" He said, "That's my only stop." So I thought that was great and we rode and rode, crossed over Fifth Avenue, which is the avenue that the hotel is located on, and I thought, well, he knows where he's going and maybe I don't. We wound up at the New York Pier. Everybody on that bus except me was going on a cruise. Of course, we all had a big laugh about my southern accent, going to the Pierre Hotel and [ending] up at the New York Pier.

Dr. Bolton: I wanted to get you to add anything else that you would like to bring out that we haven't talked about today.

Mr. Stevens: Well, Charles, I think without going back and sort of reviewing some files of mine, I think we've pretty well covered it. As you well know, the timber industries have played a tremendous part in the development of this part of our state, and today it's one of the two or three largest industries in the state. At one time I made a survey in the Hattiesburg area, and at that time nearly 40 percent of the industry was associated [in] some way with the timber industry. You had Hercules that was using the stumps and you

had sawmills and you had building supply businesses. It still plays a big part in our section of the country, and I foresee it continuing to grow and be a major part of the economic growth of Mississippi. I think that the opportunities [in the industry] are still there. The timber industry has been good to my family. It has provided a lot of jobs for a lot of people that worked [for us]. Today we probably buy wood, in the course of a year, from over [five] thousand different people. We have to fill out government forms on all of them and send them 1099 forms and have to be sure that they are covered with insurance. It's a lot different from what it was [when I started], but it's still a growing business, and I see a bright future.

Dr. Bolton: At this point we'll conclude the interview. Let me thank you again for taking time out this morning to talk to us.