

Whelen Springs

Many towns in Clark County and the surrounding area have origins in the forest products industry. One such town in the southern part of the county is Whelen Springs. Cutting trees and sawing the logs into lumber was an important local enterprise almost from the beginning of the settlement of Arkansas, and through the years, timber products have continued to be a pillar of the Clark County area's economy.

Development of the Whelen Springs community began in 1881 with the construction of a sawmill. Completed by the Southern Lumber Company in 1882, the mill had a capacity of 25,000 board feet per day. The company purchased some 5,000 acres of timberland as a source of wood and initially hired more than fifty people. The enterprise served as the first of many forest products related businesses to operate in the town.

In 1884, another mill opened south of Whelen Springs, and operated there until the timber supply in the immediate area was cut. Then, in about 1900, the same location became the site of the Missouri Mill, operated by Lemuel "Pete" Sparkman, a native of the area. Sparkman eventually closed this mill and built another in Dallas County, at a place that eventually became known as "Sparkman."

J.A. Barringer built a water-powered mill in 1885. After a fire there, he built another facility about a mile north of Whelen Springs. His company operated mills in south Arkansas and northern Louisiana during the early twentieth century, retaining its timberlands in Clark County. The company later opened a new mill at the site north of Whelen Springs, which was among the area's first to utilize non-polluting equipment while producing pine lumber, chips for paper mills, and bark for mulch.

Many other timber-related enterprises followed. For example, in 1910, Will Eakin built a sawmill, gristmill, and cotton gin, all powered by the same steam engine. In the 1920s, the McDonald Brothers Lumber Company built a large hardwood mill. Guy Chappell ran a hickory mill. W.T. Frizzell cut cypress shingles at his mill. Henry Keys ran a sawmill that cut rough pine lumber. In more recent years, only one sawmill remained, under the auspices of the International Paper Company. It was formerly a part of the J.A. Barringer and Sons operation.

Other milestones occurred as the town grew. For example, the Whelen Springs Post Office was established February 23, 1882, about the same time the first town's first mill became operational. And later, Whelen Springs was officially incorporated as a town in 1916.

In 1915 a two-story schoolhouse was built in Whelen Springs, replacing a much smaller one-room structure. The new building was constructed using an orange-red brick manufactured locally in J.A. Barringer's brickyard and trimmed with white stone. The school sat at the top of a well-drained area, surrounded by a pine forest. The new facility became the pride of the community. Years later, in 1959, the Whelen Springs School consolidated with Gurdon.

Today, Whelen Springs no longer serves as home to large commercial enterprises—a post office, town hall, and fire station function as centers of activity for the community.

