



# THE TOWN THAT WAS

In addition to the saguaros and the scenic wonders, Arizona has a reputation for its many ghost towns. Most of them were built around mining operations. McNary, however, sprang up as a lumber town in the White Mountains, the state's final frontier for harvesting timber.

BY KATHY MONTGOMERY

**C**OMPANIES RELOCATE TO ARIZONA all the time, but it's not often that the company brings an entire town. Yet that's what happened when the Cady Lumber Co. and most of McNary, Louisiana, moved to the White Mountains.

Having clear-cut its Louisiana timberlands, Cady Lumber bought a defunct sawmill in Cooley, on White Mountain Apache Tribe land. In February of 1924, three days after the last log in the Louisiana operation was cut, James McNary and William Cady packed up the entire

operation, along with 500 of the company's employees and their families. In all, about 800 people boarded two long trains bound for Arizona.

"It was quite an adventure," 92-year-old Lew Calhoon told *Arizona Highways* in 1990. "I guess it took us about three days to make the trip. ... The people had lots of baggage with them, household goods, you know, and even their chickens."

The company renamed the Arizona town McNary. Today, McNary is a quiet residential town of about 600 residents,





# MADE OUT OF WOOD

most of them Apache. But in its heyday in the 1950s, it was the economic engine of the White Mountains and a vibrant, multicultural community of more than 3,000, with several churches, a hotel, the area's only hospital and a theater. Its company store was a shopping destination. And while little from those days remains, McNary changed the White Mountains forever, leaving a legacy that extends far beyond the town limits.

**I**NTEREST IN TIMBER CUTTING in the White Mountains began around 1910. Arizona's lumber industry was nearly a half-century old by then and was dominated by two companies — one headquartered in Flagstaff, the other in Williams. With an estimated 10 billion feet of timber, the White Mountains were the state's final frontier for harvesting lumber.

At the time, the White Mountain Apache Tribe had a single sawmill, with just five employees, on tribal land. Superintendent C.W. Crouse believed a large-scale operation would benefit the tribe, providing jobs and proceeds from timber sales. But the idea was slow to take hold. Part

**ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT:**

The Cady Lumber Co. offices are shown in McNary in the mid-1920s, shortly after the company moved to the White Mountains.

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A worker at the McNary mill manages logs in the millpond. This photo likely was made around 1960.

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A truck transports a large stack of ponderosa pine logs through the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests.

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of the problem was that the closest mainline railroad was 75 miles to the north, in Holbrook. In order to be successful, an operator would need to build a railroad into the White Mountains.

It wasn't until after the country entered World War I that the government found a viable bidder: the newly formed Apache Lumber Co., organized by Thomas Pollock of Flagstaff. Pollock and his partner promised to build a sawmill on tribal land and give hiring preference to "industrious and capable" Apaches.





With financing from the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway, Pollock incorporated the Apache Railway Co. and set out to build the railroad. But labor shortages and winter weather delayed the work, and once the line was completed in 1919, a right-of-way dispute created more drama. At one point, a local rancher barricaded the track until Pollock, who was on board, wrote him a check for \$700. Another time, the same rancher flagged down the train and forced passengers off, insisting they pick watermelons for themselves from his patch.

Meanwhile, Pollock built a sawmill and company town at Cooley. Originally named Cluff Cienega after a Mormon bishop, the town was renamed for U.S. Army scout Corydon Cooley, who had moved onto tribal land with his Apache wife in 1886 and built a home and forage station near present-day Hon-Dah. At the railway's dedication, Cooley's son drove the ceremonial final spike.

Pollock and his partners then hired a Milwaukee firm to design what then was the largest, most modern lumber plant in the Southwest, but the war ended before the mill could take advantage of the anticipated demand. Saddled with debt, the mill closed in 1921 and Pollock lost a fortune worth \$8 million. Creditors took charge of the railroad and lumber company, and the Cady Lumber Co. bought its assets two years later for 37 cents on the dollar.

**C**HARTERED AROUND 1913, Cady Lumber bought timberland near Alexandria, Louisiana, but by 1923, the company had depleted its holdings and was looking for new reserves. James McNary, then a bank president, settled on Cooley.

In his autobiography, McNary wrote that William Cady couldn't imagine a lumber operation without the company's employees, so the partners decided to bring nearly the entire town of McNary, Louisiana, with them. Cady built a section of town especially for his Black employees, with "everything

#### ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT:

**Logs fill the millpond at McNary's mill, which by the time of this photo was owned by Southwest Forest Industries.**

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**A view down a McNary street in the 1940s shows the general store (background) and the town's hospital.**

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**Boards from the McNary mill sit in stacks on the loading dock in an undated photo.**

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**Near Big Lake, logs headed for McNary are loaded onto the flatcars of a train around 1960.**

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to make them comfortable and contented," including a Southern café, a boardinghouse and a couple of churches.

Before the company's arrival, about 200 Mormons lived in Cooley. Most of the Louisiana transplants were Black, and McNary wrote that the move created "a good deal of indignation in some quarters." Mostly, things remained peaceful, but not all of the transplants found the move agreeable, either.

"I think those people from down South were really surprised when they got off the trains in the mountains," Calhoon recalled in 1990. He stayed, but others couldn't adjust to the climate and moved back home. They soon were replaced by workers from Louisiana and other Southern states.

Cady Lumber updated the sawmill and built new facilities. Before the Great Depression, the town was bustling. But after the market collapsed, the company went into receivership. Despite the business troubles, McNary boasted that the community never accepted public relief. The company gave employees free rent and credit at the company store. In 1935, McNary bought out Cady's interests and reorganized the company as Southwest Lumber





Mills. By the 1950s, it was the largest contract timber producer in the region.

In an oral history recorded in 2010, McNary's granddaughter, Diane Wilson Butler, described the town. "The front street was what my mother always referred to as Silk Stocking Row," she said, adding that McNary, company officials and the dentist lived there. The mill was "under the hill," and the Black community, called the Quarters, was down a long, bridged area over the millpond. "And then further back and over toward where the highway runs toward Greer now, there was a Mexican-American community," Butler recalled. "The town itself was situated in Apache County, but on the Navajo County side, there was what they called the Indian Village."

That was where Jackie Lavender lived as a child. "There was a big faucet standing in front of the Lutheran church," she says. "People from the Indian camp got their water right there." She recalls walking the long distance to the company store with her mother to pick up her stepfather's wages, paid "by cash in the envelope." Sometime in the 1950s, the mill started paying workers with \$2 bills. "Two-dollar bills were found in every business everywhere," Butler recalled. "I think they were trying to prove a point."

With two stories and a basement, the company store had a long front porch. It contained a grocery store, a drugstore and a soda fountain, and it sold everything from clothing and fabric to boots and saddles. Former residents say they haven't seen anything like it before or since. They also agree that the town was beautiful, with wooden sidewalks, picket fences and well-tended lawns and gardens.

Kim Applegate, whose mother worked as a nurse at the hospital, recalls McNary furnished seeds and checked on the gardens. Her mother, Hattie Crozier, fenced and planted an entire hillside of dahlia bulbs. In another oral history, Crozier said she'd planted about 2,000 bulbs and had so many visitors that she started a log and had them sign in.

IN THE 1950s, Southwest Forest Industries bought the mill and began to automate, shrinking the labor force. By the time Lavender returned in the late 1960s, housing was no longer segregated and all homes had indoor plumbing. The houses in the Quarters had been bulldozed a few years earlier, after the state health department condemned them.

Meanwhile, the White Mountain Apache Tribe built its own lumber mill in Whiteriver, and when McNary's original logging contract expired in 1968, Southwest couldn't negotiate a new contract with the tribe. By the end of the 1970s, the hospital and high school had closed, while the mill employed only about 200 workers. After a 1979 fire, it shut down for good.

Today, only the former bank — now the post office — and a couple of churches remain of the original buildings. Non-Indian employees either moved their homes to neighboring communities or abandoned them. The tribe built new housing where the Indian Village once stood. It demolished the mill and got an Environmental Protection Agency grant to clean up the site. It also shut down the railroad and tore up the tracks. Today, tourists who don't know McNary's history pass through without any idea of what once was there.

But McNary changed the White Mountains. As transportation improved, company employees who wanted to own their homes began settling in Pinetop-Lakeside. James McNary retired to New Mexico, but his daughter, Martha, stayed and played a key role in developing that community. Towns such as Heber grew up around logging camps. And although few Southern transplants are left, their legacy lives on in McNary.

"There are African-American children out of the relationships that were going on back in the day," Lavender says. "I have several African-American grandchildren. But they're all mixed. I have Navajo, I have Hopi, Apache, Pima, Maricopa. Lord knows what else." **AH**