



# The Wiregrass Telegraph

*Promoting Educational Excellence in U. S. History!*

**Treeless  
Edition**  
Vol 1, #2  
SEP 22, 2003

## The Ecology of South Georgia

### Longleaf Pine, Wiregrass and the Gopher Tortoise

Here's a question for your history students – how are the forests of the southern coastal plains different than they were 150 years ago? They look the same – I mean, a pine tree is a pine tree, right? Just because they're now planted in rows and harvested like corn only means that we're doing things better than Mother Nature and making progress, doesn't it? Well, not exactly.

Not all pine trees are created equal – what you see in those rows is slash and loblolly pine. They make great wood chips and grow quickly but are very vulnerable to fire, insects and disease. Generally, their very porous and sappy wood isn't good for anything except making newsprint and chipboard. But it wasn't always like it is now – when the first large settlement of the region we live in occurred after the Civil War, the land was covered with old growth longleaf pine. When it was totally cut off in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in the space of one generation, an entire ecology died along with it. The nation at the turn of the past century was built with southern pine.



Old growth Longleaf pine (you'll hear old-timers call it yellow pine also) comes as close to the definition of the king of woods as one could find. It grows straight, tall and with no knots – its wood is impervious to rot and termites, is aromatic and for its weight is literally as strong as steel. When used for furniture and flooring it becomes more beautiful over the years, turning dark amber with red tones – if you're a Southerner who prizes family antiques, chances are that you have a few pieces made of "heart pine".



The longleaf forests of 150 years ago looked totally different than what we see today. The forest floor was clear of undergrowth because yearly fires set by lightning strikes kept it clean. An entire ecological system relied on these fires for survival. The longleafs were impervious and the wiregrass carpet under the trees used the very quick and hot fires to regenerate. Longleaf pine cones seeded when the hot fires popped



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them open. And the slower moving animals such as the gopher tortoise and indigo snake lived in burrows unreachable by the fire. Compare that vision to the rows of slash pine choked with undergrowth that burn completely during a summer forest fire and remember that replanting those trees with mechanized equipment totally destroys the habitat for the indigenous animals.



Longleaf seedlings evolved the ability to withstand fires and regenerate quickly. They first grow extremely long taproots over a 10-12 years period and then can sustain rapid upward growth that puts the tree's crown out of the reach of fires.

This ecological system took millions of years to evolve and within a few generations, man has totally changed everything. The great majority of animals that sheltered in the longleaf forests are now endangered or extinct. Today old growth longleaf forests only exist in a very few places in our region. Military bases such as

Ft Stewart, GA and Eglin Air Force Base, FL have the largest tracts; the Tall Timbers Research Station and several hunting preserves in the Thomasville-Tallahassee area have smaller stands. Since a return to the original state would require 300-500 years for nature to re-establish, no one alive today will ever see the longleaf forests of yesteryear, even we if started now.

From 1870 to 1930, 130 million acres of old growth longleaf forest was cut. With that change, the way of life of an entire southern culture changed. The turpentine industry disappeared and population shifted to towns or left the area completely – the entire sociology of the wiregrass region from GA to TX changed completely.

As we move into QCCs that emphasize more modern history, we will have chances to explore the subjects like this that make history more relevant to our students.



### **Question for Next Week:**

Recently, GEN Wesley Clark announced his candidacy for President. Recall that GEN George McClellan back in Civil War days became a candidate for President in 1864 after Lincoln relieved him of command of the Army of the Potomac. Are Wes and Little Mac alike – different? How does the situation compare? Until next time.....