

My Buckeye State

Thirty-four years ago, as a newly-admitted lawyer with a hope to live abroad, I took a job with Procter & Gamble. Over some months spent in Germany after college, I had noticed with native pride the P&G products – toothpaste, shampoo, detergent -- that could be found bearing the Moon and Stars on German store shelves. Surely, landing a job with P&G offered a more than reasonable prospect of making a living abroad with a US law license.

On my first day on the job I was told I would be supporting *not* international consumer brands, but what P&G called its “Industrial Divisions.” They were, and still are, to the extent they still exist, little-recognized parts of what Club members usually call the “Soap Works.” These operations showed a P&G aspiring to be like the hog-butcher who sells “everything but the oink.” They comprised three distinct units. One was a business making and selling tank cars of fat-based chemicals like glycerin – products that traced to by-products of soap-making.

Another unit sold variants of P&G products for use by businesses like restaurants and hotel chains. That offered good margins, and a sort of subsidized sampling of P&G products to travelers. This unit had an august title: “Foodservice and Lodging Products.” Like most parts of P&G, it went by its acronym: “FS&LP,” in this case. However, it had the signal distinction of being better known by a moniker inspired both by the products and by the look of the acronym. After all, “FS&LP” was an acronym that didn’t flow. Years before my arrival, some wag had graced the group with what became its *de facto* name. “Foodservice and Lodging Products?” “FS&LP?” What to call it in everyday speaking and writing? In retrospect, the answer was brilliant to the point of inevitability. “FS&LP” was known to all as “Flop and Slop.”

The third and biggest part of the Industrial Divisions, operating in the main as “The Buckeye Cellulose Corporation,” was the remnant of what had started as a chain of cottonseed crushing mills built throughout the US cotton belt. A type of early vertical integration, these mills supplied cottonseed oil for soaps and Crisco. The brand name “Crisco,” in fact, is a shortening (if you will) of the phrase “crystallized cottonseed oil.” “Crisco.”

It turns out that cottonseeds carry bits of fuzz that stay stuck to the seed hulls even after ginning. That fuzz, called linters, is almost pure cellulose, and wonderful for making paper and plastics. Thus, the Soap Works became a cotton linter pulp company as well. After World War II, its technologists found ways to make similar pulp out of pine, and the Company also got into the wood pulp business. To support that, it bought over half a million acres in north Florida, where loblolly pines would grow in only eighteen years to harvestable size.

Wood pulp mills were built in Foley, Florida, and on the Flint River in Oglethorpe, Georgia. Literary Club members will infer with their typical acuity that the mills were not in major metropolitan areas. A rite of passage for new lawyers to the Industrial Divisions was to visit these mills.

For Foley, that meant flying to Tallahassee, renting a car and driving an hour to Perry. I'd been advised by my boss and clients that a meeting with the plant's local counsel was essential. Fred Brett, the Radar O'Reilly of the Foley Mill, told me in a pre-visit phone call that local counsel Ronnie was "a big man." Any question whether this was metaphor was resolved on being introduced to Ronnie. He was an enormous man, and the roundest human being I've ever seen. Of course, to meet the lawyer from the headquarters, he had to wear a suit, even on a muggy north-Florida September day. Sweat poured from him. I thought the man was melting.

Ronnie soon proposed that we adjourn to a notable local restaurant known as Ray Deal's. He drove to a small concrete block building at an isolated crossroads. The place bore no sign. He knocked at the door, a speak-easy grill opened and closed, and we were admitted. Only later did it strike me: we had been given, and passed, a pigmentation check.

Ray's was an oyster house. Mom shucked. Ray regaled. Ronnie ordered four dozen. He was half-way through them, when Ray proposed "How about a little pogo music?" A reluctant young waitress brought out a stick with a tambourine and other percussives attached, and began thumping it on the floor. Ray sang. Ronnie slurped. I had a dozen oysters and an epiphany: I wasn't in Ohio any more.

The following day offered my introduction to the mill. Long before I saw it, I smelled it. Acrid, penetrating, unabating. I soon had a horrific headache. The locals acknowledged the reek, but seemed immune, and dubbed it "the smell of money."

Although Foley was then less than thirty years old, it *seemed* prehistoric, like something from the Age of Titans. Whatever William Blake meant by “dark satanic mills,” his image was outdone by Foley. The mill’s first process was gigantic and mechanical – “debarking” incoming timber. Whole logs were conveyed three stories up into a huge perforated cylinder. The cylinder turned, logs were tossed like nothing. They smashed together. Their bark came off, and rained down into heaps.

Much of my first job was advising the “Wood Procurement” group that made sure there were logs to feed the maws of debarkers. There was no other group like them at P&G. Its members often had forestry degrees, not MBA’s. They spent their time in the woods, not in brand budget meetings. To their Buckeye colleagues, they were known as “the woodchucks.”

In north Florida, the woodchucks looked after land comprising most of Taylor County – so much land, in fact, that they exercised quasi-governmental offices. They leased and permitted the land for a hodgepodge of uses, like church leases, beekeeping permits, and mud-bogging permits. The last allowed locals to dig a pit on Company land, half-fill it with water, and hold contests to see whose pickup could go farthest through the muck.

The most common permits were hunting permits. These granted local hunt clubs exclusive hunting rights on parcels covering almost all the Buckeye land. Overseeing this was Fred Brett. Like the fictional Radar, he had in fact been a corporal in the Korean War, and kept what could have been chaos running smoothly.

I asked Fred on my orientation why Buckeye went to the trouble of dividing all that land into exclusive hunting preserves. His explanation was clear. Grant a hunt club exclusive rights, and its members take perfect care of “their” land. They won’t set up their deer stands by driving spikes into trees – spikes that could turn into shrapnel if the trees wound up at the Buckeye sawmill. They’ll watch out for anything unusual, including fires. On the other hand, if Buckeye didn’t grant hunting permits, those would-be helpful hunters could be inspired to become *practicing* arsonists.

Fire was such a concern that Buckeye had a couple of small spotter planes to look out for it. For pilot safety, a few emergency landing strips were carved into the Buckeye woods. Now, consider what remote, private landing strips near the Gulf of Mexico might *possibly* be used for. Legend was that a skeleton had been found chained to a tree near one of the Buckeye strips. I never did discover if that was more than legend.

Unlike the Foley mill, Buckeye's Flint River, Georgia, pulp mill lacked Company-owned land to supply its wood. Its woodchucks therefore had to scour the area, setting up timber leases, and buying standing timber (which they always called "stumpage") from local landowners. Georgia Pacific also had a mill in the region, so competition for stumpage was hot. Since the statute of limitations has now run, I can relay the advice that a senior lawyer gave me on the key issue I'd face at Flint River: "You get some good ol' boys out in the woods, of course there'll be some bid-rigging. Keep it to a minimum." I came to know that within P&G, this was the sort of advice called "clear and actionable counsel."

The route to my Flint River orientation was a flight to Atlanta, and a drive in a rental car either down I-75 through Macon, or down a somewhat shorter state route to Americus. I chose the latter. Before the sun set, I passed dozens of unpainted shacks along the road. They looked straight out of Walker Evans's photos of Depression-Era sharecropping. After nightfall, I saw a fire up ahead. There was no other light to be seen but my headlights. "Please God," I thought, "Don't let that fire be a cross." It wasn't – but no one was ever happier to pull into Americus, Georgia.

My introduction to the Georgia clientele was dicier than the oyster lunch in Florida. I was picked up in Americus in a Buckeye company car by Dennis, a senior wood buyer. We drove to the mill. Dennis tested the new lawyer:

"Paul, do you hunt?"

I wasn't a shotgunner at the time, so the answer was "No, I don't hunt."

"Do you fish?"

"No, I can't say that I do."

"Follow SEC football?"

I knew what "SEC" stood for, but couldn't name many teams, so that was another "No." Client relations were headed south, and they had started in southern Georgia.

I don't know if Dennis took pity on me, or was himself desperate, but he threw a lifeline:

"Paul, do you like beer?"

“I love beer.”

“Good!”

Dennis had timed the last question to the approach to a convenience-store. He pulled into its lot, went in, and came out with a six-pack of Bud. We headed down the road. He popped a can, and handed me one. Decision time: do I violate state law, and *countless* company policies, or come across as the twit lawyer from the home office? I’ve never had a colder Bud.

Despite my severe lack of worthwhile pursuits, in time I seemed to get along with the Buckeye clients, particularly the woodchucks. After I had worked with Dennis a few months, he revealed a possible reason:

“Paul, you’re about the *slowest* talkin’ Yankee we’ve ever had down here.”

Of course, I took this as praise. So I had a shock months later, as my most memorable Buckeye day unfolded. I was in the back of a Buckeye car, bumping down a dirt farm-road near Montezuma, Georgia. Two woodchucks were up front. Janice was driving. Dave rode shotgun. Janice invited me to appreciate a very fine stand of pine. Then Dave screamed:

“Skid it! Skid it!”

Janice slammed the brakes. The car crunched to a stop. Janice and Dave turned to look through the rear windshield. I looked back, and saw nothing to cause a skidding stop.

“Did I get ‘im?” Janice asked. “Nah, he’s still moving,” said Dave. He added, “I’ve got some medicine for ‘im!” He pulled a slab-sided semiautomatic from the glove box. He jumped from the car, and pulled the pistol’s slide to chamber a round.

My thought-reaction was natural: “Cue the banjos. I’m going to die. They’ll never find my body.” I sat in the car. Two shots cracked behind it. Since none was at me, I figured getting out could be safe. I did, to see Janice and Dave standing over the remains of a very big rattlesnake, that had had a very bad day.

As I said in beginning, I joined P&G hoping to experience other cultures. At Buckeye, I did. And it was some medicine for me.