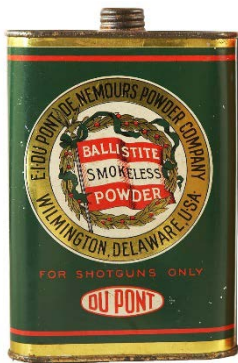


Celebrating Clay County History: The Dupont's Camphor Farm at Waller

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A little community known as Waller once was home to E.I. DuPont's 12,000-acre camphor farm. Waller was located near the present-day intersection of SR 16 and SR 21, near Camp Blanding. Camphor is a white crystalline substance with an aromatic smell and bitter taste, occurring in certain essential oils. Obtained especially from the wood and bark of the camphor tree, camphor was and is used as a liniment and mild topical analgesic in medicine, as a plasticizer, and as an insect repellent. E.I. DuPont de Nemours and Company, commonly referred to as just DuPont, was an American company founded in 1802 in Delaware.

By 1916, there were 400 acres planted with mature camphor trees and another 350 acres of seedlings. By 1919, camphor trees were planted on 2,000 acres. Each year acreage was expanded. One can imagine that no one living or working in Waller ever had a stuffy nose.



Camphor was also an essential ingredient in gunpowder and fireworks. Alfred Nobel's 1877 explosive creation of Ballistite, also known as smokeless gunpowder, required camphor. His formula contained 10% camphor, along with nitroglycerine and collodion. Camphor stabilized the explosives against decomposition and spontaneous explosions.

The trouble, previous to this decade, was Japan controlled the world market on camphor. In 1919, the US imported over a million dollars' worth of camphor. WWI created a huge demand for gunpowder and the price rose to \$3.75 a pound. The solution was to grow trees in Florida and produce our own camphor supply. The *cinnamomum camphora* trees from Taiwan were first introduced to Florida in 1875 as an ornamental. It escaped cultivation and spread all over Florida. Just try to cut down a sapling and see how quickly it grows back. It is an invasive species, just like so many other plants and animals in Florida. The trees even had their own special pest, the camphora thrip. When the bug threatened the camphor farms in Clay and Putnam counties, a dust up at the legislature occurred caused by the opposition to aid being given to farms who were in a battle against the bugs.

The trees at the DuPont farm were not allowed to grow tall because of the inconvenience in harvesting. It took about six years for a tree to grow large enough to use for camphor production. DuPont's process for camphor production was to clip the leaves and twigs from the trees then put them through a distilling process. The leaves and twigs are put into a retort over boiling water. As the camphor vaporizes, it is then cooled to accelerate crystallization. This produced about one pound of camphor from every 100 pounds of twigs and leaves. Not very efficient, but it was the only way at the time.

Almost as soon as DuPont got the Waller plant ready, a process for producing synthetic camphor was invented. In 1921, DuPont's chemists made synthetic camphor from the turpentine of Southern pine stumps. The price of camphor plunged and Clay County was left with acres and acres of a beautiful but invasive tree.



The final product –camphor.



Camphor flaker machine, Dupont's New Jersey factory. 1941.



"Campho" brand products - common in family medicine cabinets.



A mature, very beautiful camphor tree specimen can be seen at the Historic Triangle. My kids have told me this tree is also good for climbing.