

EARLY TIMBER HARVESTING IN THE BLUE MOUNTAINS

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Timber harvest trends for northeastern Oregon and southeastern Washington parallel the pattern of Euro-American settlement for this area. Prior to termination of the “Indian wars” in 1857, the Euro-American population was transient and consisted mostly of trappers, traders, and small settlements of ranchers or missionaries. Most of the early settlements were temporary, and several were destroyed or the residents frightened away during the Indian wars. This situation changed dramatically after gold was discovered.

Mining activity in the lower Columbia River basin began with the discovery of gold on Canal Gulch of Orofino Creek, a tributary of the Clearwater River, by Captain E.D. Pierce in 1860. In early spring of 1861, a miner from Pierce’s party sold \$800 worth of gold dust at Walla Walla and the stampede to the gold fields was on! By May of that year, more than a thousand miners were active in the Pierce City/Orofino area. Lewiston was founded in June of 1861 and it quickly became an important commerce center for resupplying the mines.

The Blue Mountains joined the mining activity when gold was discovered in Griffiths Gulch, located a few miles southwest of Baker City, in the fall of 1861. Other discoveries soon followed, causing a large influx of prospectors and miners in 1862. They established Auburn, Canyon City, Granite, Greenhorn, Sumpter, Susanville and other mining towns; by 1890, Baker, Union, and Grant counties already had a combined population of 23,900 people.

In 1863, as gold mining and prospecting proceeded rapidly in the Powder River valley, several ranches were established in the Umatilla River valley to raise cattle, sheep, and foodstuffs for the miners and prospectors.

Within a year after gold was discovered in the John Day River valley (in June 1862 near Canyon City), an entrepreneur opened a sawmill to provide miners with lumber for their flumes and sluiceways. Early timber cutting to supply the mines with wood products was intense but localized; a turn-of-the-century map of Oregon's forests showed that substantial harvest had already occurred near Sumpter by 1900.

Between the mid-1860s and about 1890, timber harvesting occurred mainly to meet the needs of placer miners and their settlements such as Sumpter or Granite. Timber met a variety of settlement needs, including logs for homes, posts and poles for corrals, and rails for fencing.

Whether timber would be available for the mining industry was a major consideration when the forest reserves and the national forests were being established. Harold Langille, a Forest Inspector who prepared establishment reports for the Chesnimnus, Heppner, and Blue Mountains forest reserves, offers this interesting account of his visit to the mining community of Greenhorn in late 1902 or early 1903:

"Greenhorn was then a mining camp high up in the Blue Mountains. The miners were in a dither due to allegations that if the reserve were established they would be denied all right to cut timber for mine use. At the railhead I boarded an open bobsled stage behind four horses. For hours the horses climbed at a walk, the snow depth increasing with every mile. Snow began to fall, at times so plentifully that only the rumps of the leaders would be seen.

As night came up from the dark canyons we entered a clearing among the lodgepole pines, a row of hummocks on either side. The team was stopped and the driver exclaimed: "Here we are! Mister, just throw your suitcase into that hole and follow it. That's the hotel." Obeying this instruction I slid down the slope of the hummock, landed at the door of a hallway. From the door on the left came a sense of warmth and friendly cheer. Entering I found myself in a barroom that extended the length of the building. Beyond the bar the usual grouping of gaming tables, many men.

The barkeep advanced from the group eyeing me suspiciously. Chilled to numbness I called for a drink of warming liquor. "What might your business be?" the barkeep asked. Those were prohibition days in Oregon; every stranger was eyed as a possible revenue officer. I explained my purpose. "Hey, fellers, come 'ere. Here's the man we been wantin' to see." The group advanced *en masse*. We had one "on the house."

The now genial barkeep forthwith assumed the position of committee on arrangements, announced a meeting. Time, 8 p.m., place the barroom. The program was rendered and emphatically acclaimed. There would be timber for the mines. At 11 o'clock I excused myself to go to bed. "Hell, no," exclaimed my committee on arrangements, "the other gang's waitin' for you across the street!" Two factions in an isolated, snow-covered camp! Crossing the street through a snow tunnel I emerged in another barroom, repeated the same story of salvation, got in bed at 2 a.m. still sober; Greenhorn happy."

Harold D. Langille; "Mostly Division "R" Days", Oregon Historical Quarterly, 1956

Early settlements were often located in river bottoms containing forests of black cottonwood. Since cottonwood was unsuitable for house logs or fence rails, settlers needed access to mountain timber. This situation is described well in an early history of Umatilla and Morrow counties:

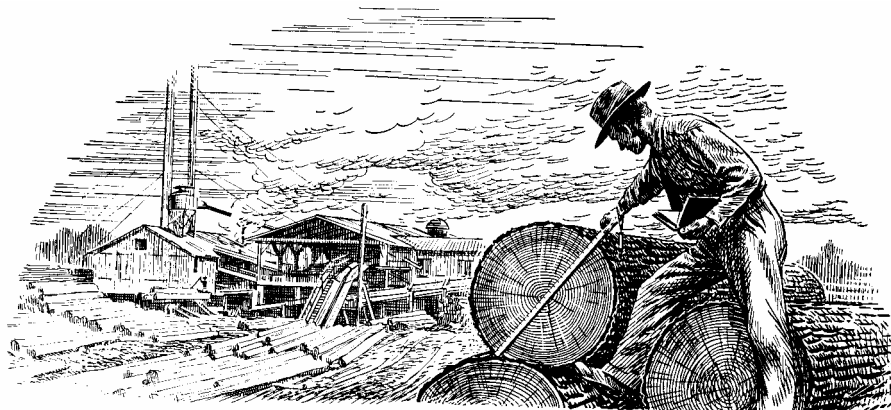
“Every creek has along its banks a growth of balm, birch, hawthorn and willow, or some of these. The timber has been used for fuel, but the greatest part of the wood supply has to be hauled from the Blue mountains, which furnish an abundance of timber, not alone for fuel and fence posts, but for lumber as well. Numerous sawmills have for years been engaged in converting the stately trees of the mountain sides into lumber, and the supply has not yet begun to be exhausted.” (Parsons and Shiach 1902, page 312)

The favorite timber of early pioneers was tamarack or western larch (they called it “tam-brack”) because it was durable (decay resistant), the young trees furnished long, straight poles, and the large trees split easily into the finest rails that ever enclosed a pig pen or garden patch.

As emigrants settled in the fertile river valleys, they were accompanied by herds of cattle and horses that freely roamed the adjoining foothills to graze on bunchgrass. After the settlers began growing grain, they needed even more timber to exclude free-range livestock by fencing their fields, so the road system was extended deeper into the Blue Mountains to access additional larch forest. Several roads in the northern Blue Mountains (Scoggins Ridge and Iron Spring-Clearwater, for example) were developed by 1870-1875 during this early settlement era.

Later, some of these same roads were used to harvest timber for production of railroad ties. Although other species were occasionally used, the resinous, durable woods of ponderosa pine and western larch proved to be ideal for manufacturing railroad ties.

The first commercial timber harvest in the northwestern pine region (eastern Oregon and eastern Washington) began around 1890. Most of the commercial ventures involved traditional businesses such as lumber mills. The first mills were small and could easily be moved to a new site; their locations changed frequently as available timber was depleted. Many early mills were located along streams because they depended on water power to run the circular saw.



Not all harvests were used for lumber – in the late 1800s, large volumes of wood were removed from the Meacham area to generate electricity in Pendleton. Removals to feed the wood-fired

boilers averaged 50,000 cords annually (equivalent to 25 million board feet) for at least half a dozen years.

As the lumber industry in the Blue Mountains began to mature in the early 1900s, a transition often associated with arrival of expertise and capital from the Midwest (Stange, Kinzel, and many others) or from elsewhere in the West (David Eccles from Utah), the mills became much larger, permanent, and they tended to acquire their own timberlands when available.

Some of the larger mills included Oregon Lumber Company (Baker City), Grande Ronde Lumber Company (La Grande), Baker White Pine Lumber Company (Sumpter and Baker City), East Oregon Lumber Company (Enterprise), and several others.

It is interesting to note that even in the early 1900s, cities commonly offered free building sites and, in some cases, cash incentives as they aggressively lured lumber companies to their community, particularly when trying to entice mill owners and their financial capital to relocate from the Lake States.

Lumber mills in the Blue Mountains tended to produce four main products – the better grades of lumber were shipped east where they would be remanufactured into new high-end products, the common lumber grades were used locally for general construction, the poor lumber grades were used to make fruit boxes, and the slab waste was used to make lath.

At least one mill located at Elgin (the Ponderosa Pine Products Company) took a different tack by producing value-added products locally instead of shipping the milled lumber to a plant in the eastern United States – they produced window-shade rollers, ironing boards, wooden toys, boxes of all kinds, handles for kitchen utensils, and slats for window blinds. This product diversification allowed them to remain profitable and viable even during the Great Depression.

When federal forest reserves were created, they initially met with great resistance throughout the West, mainly because of the perception that public administration of forest lands would unduly restrict development. Reserves were often looked on as large areas of little or no value. This was not always true with respect to timberlands, however, and timber speculators often tried to claim them before they could be withdrawn from the public domain.

In at least one instance described by Forest Inspector Harold D. Langille, public forests in the Wallowa Mountains were reserved just barely before a group of timber locators from Minnesota could claim the lands:

“On one occasion a visit to the General Land Office in La Grande, Oregon, disclosed that a carload of timber claim locatees had arrived that morning from Minnesota, taken team to the Wallowa country. Hastily looking over the township maps to plat the timbered area I wired the Secretary asking temporary withdrawal. By the time the would-be locators returned next day the withdrawals had been made. All applications were denied. Presumably the administration lost some votes in Minnesota.”

Harold D. Langille; “Mostly Division “R” Days”, Oregon Historical Quarterly, 1956

Timber harvesting from public lands in the Blue Mountains began soon after forest reserves and national forests were established in the early 1900s. Prior to 1917, national forest timber sales were small ones for local consumption. This changed when the Oregon Lumber Company built a sawmill at Bates (a town-site located near Oregon Highway 7 about 15 miles northeast of Prairie City, Oregon) after it was awarded a 124 million board foot timber sale in 1916. This sale area covered 14,600 acres on the lower Middle Fork of the John Day River, located then in the Whitman National Forest and now in the Malheur National Forest.

Other than the Middle Fork sale, national forest harvests continued at relatively low levels until 1928, when the Edward Hines Lumber Company was awarded a long-term contract for 890 million board feet in the Seneca area. This enormous timber sale, called the Bear Valley Unit, is a good example of the concept that timber was not only a commodity, but it was also used by the federal government as a tool for community development.

In response to informal applications originating from both Grant and Harney counties, the Forest Service cruised and laid out the Bear Valley unit in 1922. The Bear Valley sale was advertised early in 1923 and received no bidders; it was re-advertised with new rates and then subsequently awarded to Fred Herrick in June of 1923. Herrick eventually defaulted after completing few of the required improvements (sawmill, railroads, etc.). After being advertised again, the Bear Valley unit was awarded to the Edward Hines Lumber Company in June of 1928.

As of the late 1920s, the Bear Valley timber sale was the largest ever offered in the Pacific Northwest, and it was probably more widely advertised throughout the United States than any other sale of national forest timber up to that point in time.

The Bear Valley timber sale was designed to extend the Oregon Short Line Railroad from Crane to Burns (30 miles of standard-gauge track), extend the railroad farther by running lines from Burns to Seneca (50 miles), and then develop short branch lines from Seneca out into the timber sale area located in the headwaters of the Silvies River.

It is doubtful that the railroad lines and related developments such as the Hines Lumber Company, or the community of Hines, would have occurred without the Bear Valley timber sale.

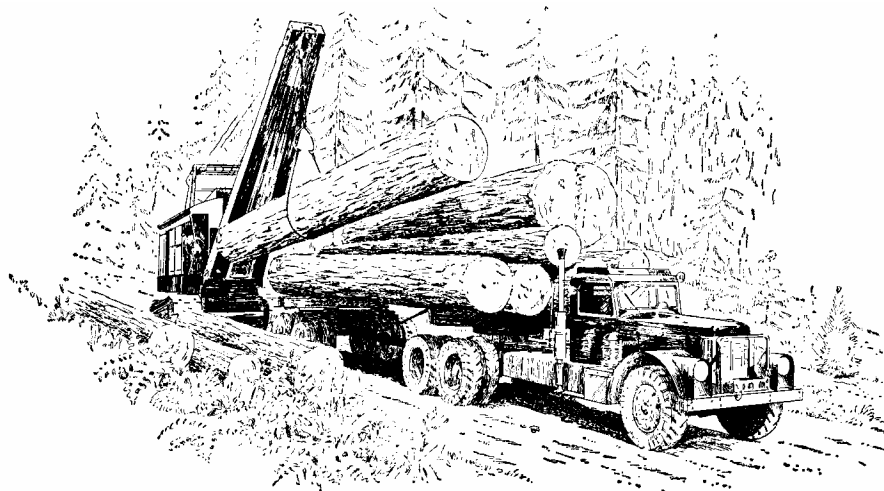
The railroad work associated with the Bear Valley timber sale had an influence on the broader Blue Mountains area. Construction of the Oregon Short Line connecting the Oregon-Washington Railroad and Navigation Company with the Union Pacific Railroad allowed eastern Oregon to enter the national lumber markets for the first time. Prior to this railroad development, all of the pine lumber produced in the Blue Mountains was used for local or regional consumption.

During the late 1930s, another large timber sale comprising more than 221 million board feet was awarded to the Milton Box Company, even though the original applicant had been the Mount Emily Lumber Company of La Grande, Oregon. This sale was the Camas Creek Unit, located in the central Blue Mountains on the North Fork John Day and La Grande Ranger Districts. The Camas Creek sale has an interesting story, which is told in a separate document.

Beginning in the early 1940s, national forest tree harvests increased to meet a heightened demand for wood products during World War II, and to contribute raw materials for new housing. After the war, ponderosa pine and other species were intensively harvested to provide lumber for home construction, including window sash, trim and molding material, and door stock.

Timber harvesting on Blue Mountains national forests began in earnest in the mid 1950s, when most sales were partial cuts where only the most valuable trees were removed. By the mid 1960s, small clearcut sales were made on the north end of the Umatilla National Forest. These early clearcuts now support second-growth stands of mixed conifers that have been thinned several times since the 1970s. Many salvage sales were completed in the mid or late 1970s following a Douglas-fir tussock moth outbreak – this story is described in a separate document.

High levels of timber harvesting occurred on the Blue Mountain national forests from the late 1970s to the late 1980s. But for a variety of reasons, national forest harvest levels declined dramatically (by 72 percent between 1990 and 1995); recent timber harvest levels for the Umatilla National Forest (from the mid 1990s to the present) are the lowest they have been since the mid 1950s.



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