

Pioneer Settlement on Coos Bay

by Kenn Oberrecht



Early white settlers on Coos Bay had a saying: "When the tide's out, the table's set." The quaint aphorism might lead some to believe that the bounty of the bay is what had attracted

those first pioneers, as it had the Indians and perhaps earlier prehistoric humans before them. Such was not entirely the case.

On January 23, 1852, the Captain Lincoln, a coastal steamer out of San Francisco, wrecked on the North Spit, near the mouth of Coos Bay. The ship had been sent to provision military outposts in the Oregon Territory. Soldiers and the shipwrecked crew made it to shore and camped in the dunes. They salvaged as much of the wreckage and stores as they could, met the local Indians, and explored the bay.

During the summer of 1853, members of the Coos Bay Commercial Company found promising coal seams in the bay area and staked 19 coal-mining claims.

Two of the dragoons from the Captain Lincoln and a group of pioneers from the lower Umpqua became the first white settlers on Coos Bay in 1853, after the Coos Bay Commercial Company established Empire City, six miles above the Coos Bay Bar. By August, the town was divided into lots and was a tent city of 50 men. The first white women and children arrived that autumn.

During the summer of 1853, members of the Coos Bay Commercial Company found promising coal seams in the bay area and staked 19 coal-mining claims. Mining began the following year, but the original claim filers lacked the knowledge and resources to make the mines work. It would require regular shipping, capital investment, mining equipment, rail

cars, trestles, bunkers, and more. In short, it would take the wherewithal of wealthy men and outside investors.

In 1856, the first sawmills began operating on Coos Bay. Henry Luse built his mill at Empire City; Asa Simpson located his near the big bend on the bay. Two years later, Simpson built a shipyard next to his sawmill, and so began another industry.

Meanwhile, homesteaders cleared land around the bay and up its tributaries. They dug ditches, built dikes, constructed tide gates, and transformed marshes into agricultural land.

Sawmills burgeoned like mushrooms in the woods around the bay. Loggers soon had the lands near the mills denuded and began moving farther into the hills in their attempts to feed the mills that loaded the ships that hauled wood south to lumber-starved San Francisco.

Meanwhile, homesteaders cleared land around the bay and up its tributaries. They dug ditches, built dikes, constructed tide gates, and transformed marshes into agricultural land.

Boomtowns sprang up and died or were absorbed into the larger communities. By the turn of the century, Marshfield was a town of 1,500 people. Boats and ships crowded the bay. Coastal steamers made regularly scheduled runs between Portland and Coos Bay and from San Francisco to Coos Bay. Coal steamers made 20 trips a month over the bar, and they were outnumbered by lumber ships. The industrial era had dawned.

Certainly, abundant fish and game, moderate climate, vast lands, and readily available building materials were enticements to the early pioneers. But it took the promise of wealth and opportunity for exploitation to draw large numbers of settlers to the bay area. It also took some missed opportunities, failed plans, catastrophes, and a smattering of good luck to keep their early dream from becoming our later nightmare. Coos Bay did not become the second San Francisco, as so many thought it would.

~ ~ ~