

Prologue

The timber industry, like many other things—settlers, roads, law and order, television, McDonald’s—was late in coming to “Old Crook County.” Old Crook County refers to the area comprised of the current Crook, Deschutes and Jefferson counties, and parts of Wheeler County (see map on following page). The Oregon Legislature made Crook a county on October 24, 1882. At that time, the county was over 7,837 square miles in size (the figure does not include the portion of Crook County that was included in Wheeler County in 1899). In Joseph Gaston’s excellent history of Oregon, *The Centennial History of Oregon, 1811-1912*,¹ Gaston states that “[t]he interior position of the county and a population devoted to live stock production, has not been conducive to much growth or increase in population.” Gaston gives these population figures:

1890:	3,244;
1900:	3,964
	(537 were Indians);
1910:	8,554
	(451 were Indians).

The 1996 population for current Crook County was 15,900, an increase of 12.7% since 1990. The county continues to grow, to the distress of some.

These population figures alone indicate that any growth in a timber industry would have been small. But, as we shall see, the industry did grow.

For those unfamiliar with the history of the area, a brief review of how central Oregon was divided into counties may be helpful. In 1882 when Crook County was split off from Wasco

County, Wasco was a very large county. As Gale Ontko writes in *Thunder Over the Ochoco: Distant Thunder*, Wasco County was

...the largest county the United States has ever known. It included what would become all Oregon counties east of the Cascade summit; all Idaho counties south of the Pan handle; Silver Bow and Ravolli Counties, Montana; Uinta, Fremont and Sweetwater Counties, Wyoming; and the southwest corner of Yellowstone Park....

Wasco County had been created by an act of the legislature on January 11, 1854. That was the same year the federal government prohibited settlement east of the Cascades. The government’s order was issued by the highly efficient Brigadier General John Ellis Wool. Gen. Wool’s order, issued in 1856, read in part:

No emigrants or other whites, except the Hudson’s Bay Company, or persons having ceded rights from the Indians, will be permitted to settle or remain in the Indian country,² or on land not ceded by treaty, confirmed by the Senate, and approved by the President of the United States....

These orders are not, however, to apply to miners engaged in collecting gold at the Colville mines. [No mention was made of the Burnt and Powder River diggings in Shoshoni country, thus barring them from any further activity.] The miners will, however, be notified that, should they interfere with the Indians or their squaws, they will be punished and sent out of the country.³

1. Chicago: The S.J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1912.

2. To Gen. Wool, this meant the entire area of eastern Washington and Oregon.

3. U.S. Documents, Serial 894, pp. 166-68.

Old Crook County

State of Oregon



But Gen. Wool was not the only U.S. Army officer to attempt to keep settlers out of central Oregon. In 1858, Col. Wright, a subordinate of Gen. Wool, issued this order: “No person shall be permitted to settle in Indian country...east of the Deschutes River and south of the Columbia in Oregon Territory.” Orders, such as these, (in this case General Order, Headquarters Department of Pacific, Fort Dalles, Oregon Territory, June 29, 1857) were quite proper for military authority to issue. Both Gen. Wool and Col. Wright were acting within their authority from Congress to insure the safety of the settlers of Oregon.

These restrictive measures were revoked later in 1858 by General William S. Harney, commander of the Department of Oregon stationed at Fort Vancouver.⁴

The legality of these orders did not keep settlers out of the area that became Crook County. But the early entries into the area were more exploratory than settlement. It wasn't until a decade later that the first settlement appeared. The details of these early efforts are described in detail in an interesting book commonly referred to as the *Illustrated History of Central Oregon Embracing Wasco, Sherman, Gilliam, Wheeler, Crook, Lake and Klamath Counties*. Quite a title. The word “illustrated” has been added over time but the official title, as it appears on the book, does not include the work “illustrated.” Several different editions (with slightly different names, all starting with [*Illustrated*] *History of...*) of this book were published at about the same time, (1905). Each edition covers different counties in Oregon, all published by Western Historical Publishing Company of Spokane, Washington.

4. Brimlow, George Francis, *Harney County Oregon and Its Range Land*, Burns, Oregon, Harney County Historical Society; 1980, p. 23.

The word “illustrated” in the title is very misleading. The only illustrations are portraits of prominent people—usually men. The book covering Crook County must weigh ten pounds or more. A copy is available at the Crook County Library. A note in the electronic card catalog says, “This book is shelved in the deposit case and is not suitable for check-out.” The book is also carried by Central Oregon Community College, Eastern Oregon University, Lewis & Clark College, Oregon State University, Southern Oregon University, Western Oregon University, and Willamette University.

The information contained in these books was submitted by people living in those counties so their stories have special significance, and some might say, self-serving narratives.

In reading about the first settlers coming to what became Crook County one may wonder, “Why did they bother?” In 1868 Indians were still a major concern but the pioneers had their eyes on a very important asset of the region: grass for livestock. For additional information on not only the settlement of central Oregon but also the government’s attempt to keep settlers east of the Deschutes River, see Gale Ontko’s *Thunder Over the Ochoco*, Vol. II, *Distant Thunder* (Maverick Publications, Inc.; 1994).

In 1899, February 17th, a small part of Crook County became part of the new Wheeler County. Crook County’s boundaries were not again disturbed until 1914 when the county of Jefferson was established. Then, in 1916, Deschutes county was created. Crook County’s boundaries have not been modified since. The splitting off of Jefferson and Deschutes counties was a very heated situation with much politicking involved. Details of these events can be found elsewhere and will not be repeated here.

By the time the first “commercial sawmill” produced its first lumber in 1867⁵ on Mill Creek, many other lumber operations were well established in Oregon. The *Oregon Blue Book* (an official state directory published by the Oregon Secretary of State’s office), in the “Chronological History of Oregon” section, gives the year 1827 for the first sawmill operation in Oregon. That one being operated by Dr. McLoughlin, probably at Fort Vancouver. In *Starker Forests: The Legacy of T.J. Starker* (Corvallis, Oregon: Starker Forests, Inc., 1991), Jim Fisher writes that “Thomas Mackay erected the first sawmill in the [Oregon] region at Champoeg in 1836.” Joseph Gaston (cited above) writes “1838 – The first sawmill erected by Americans, built on the Chehalem, Yamhill county, by Ewing Young.” Other authors and authorities list other firsts; it gets confusing. Personally, I credit Lewis & Clark with the first sawmill in what is now Oregon. They constructed Fort Clatsop out of large logs and although their process was crude it could be said that they milled the logs into building materials. So, in my book, Captains Lewis and Clark were Oregon’s first lumbermen.

It doesn’t really matter where the first sawmill began operating—either in Oregon generally or Crook County specifically. Evidence is quite strong that for this tale Mill Creek and Ike Swartz get the distinction for Crook County. George Barnes, one of the area’s first settlers, is reported to have said, “[A house] was built on William Smith’s place on Mill Creek, and one in the timber where is now the old Swartz sawmill....” Barnes was describing how the settlers arrived here in the fall of 1867.⁶

The restrictions on settlement didn’t keep settlers out. By the mid-1860s the Willamette Valley had become crowded (by pioneer standards) and people began to look east for new land. This was the first time that American settlement was in an

5. This is the generally accepted year in which Ike Swartz operated his sawmill. Very little is known of the operation and it quickly evolved—through sale and/or partnership—into operations with other names.

6. *An Illustrated History of Central Oregon: Embracing Wasco, Sherman, Gilliam, Wheeler, Crook, Lake and Klamath Counties*. Spokane, Washington: Western Historical Publishing Company, 1905. Page 705.

easterly direction. Before it was always the West which tempted men to move. Now the direction was reversed.

That fall, in 1867, people began to congregate at the confluence of Mill Creek and Ochoco River. Yes, Ochoco *River*. Things today aren't as they once were; that once-upon-a-time river has now become little more than an irrigation ditch. People still living remember the joy of catching large salmon from the Ochoco not far below the Ochoco Ranger Station. But that is another story—one not told here.

Anyway, people started to gather. The early settlers that we know about were Wayne Claypool, William Smith, a Captain White, Raymond Burkhart (and son George), and Elisha Barnes. These were the menfolk; the women had not been brought east—not yet anyway. These men spent the winter working on their land. When spring arrived they took their personal property to Camp Polk (near Sisters, Oregon) and left everything in the care of Captain White. On snowshoes, they crossed the Cascade Mountains to Linn County and their homes. Some would return east, some would not.

Within two weeks of the party's arrival back in Linn County, others set out for the new promised land. Headed east that spring were Ewen Johnson (who became a timberman), William Elkins, George W. Barnes, and an unnamed man—at least his name was no longer remembered in 1905 when the settlement story was written for the *History of Central Oregon*. These men were in for some rough times. Just because the settlers were coming did not mean that the Indians were leaving; they were not. But that too is another story that is told in other books.

By the spring of 1868 the settlers were increasing. Five of the original party of six (Buckhard didn't return) returned to Mill Creek in spite of the on-going Indian problems. To the original Mill Creek settlers were added Albert, Allen, A.O. Belieu, Charles Brotherhead, William S. Clark, John Claypool, John Crabtree, A.B. Fry, Reason Hamlin, Thomas B. James, George H. Judy, George McDowell, James W. McDowell, William McDowell, John Miller, Jack Rose,

James Slater, Edmund R. Veazie, Mr. Vining, Abraham Zell, Richard P. Miller, W.H. Marks, Haley Anderson, Lee Daugherty, Harry Smith, James Lawson and William S. Pickett. These families all lived along Mill Creek; some at the mouth, while others spread out up the valley as far as Wildcat Canyon. The names are listed here because some of them will come up again later.

While settlement was taking place on Mill Creek, the site that was later to become Prineville had, what appears to be, only two settlers: Barney Prine and William C. Pickett. It seems somewhat odd that Mr. Pickett was not living on Mill Creek since, in 1868, he became the Mill Creek community's first school teacher. He must have been an early-day commuter.

It is easy to see where the growth was: Mill Creek, not at what was to become Prineville. This needs to be made clear as too many people assume that Prineville is where it all began and that is not the case.

In researching this material it has been difficult to determine which "fact" is the most correct. Ike Swartz's sawmill, for example, was established anywhere from 1867 to 1870. It isn't really too important which date is the actual date but the attempt here is for as much accuracy as possible.

Of these settlers who you will meet later, one is Captain White. When Sam Compton (about whom you will be reading shortly) came to Prineville in 1867, he was driving the cook wagon for Captain White's wagon train. Is it the same Captain White? It is impossible to tell, but the dates seem right. There appears to be no official record of this wagon train's arrival (as exist for other wagon trains) which originated near the spot now known as Branson, Missouri. This information comes from family records of the Compton family.

This wagon train, unlike most, came directly to Mill Creek from, probably, Fort Boise. It appears that Captain White stayed on and so did Sam Compton.

From the time of Ike Swartz's mill in 1867 until the arrival of the major sawmill companies in the mid-1930s many small operations would dot the forests of Crook County. These early

operations contributed significantly to settlement and in no small measure to the eventual arrival of the larger operations. Had it not been for these pioneering lumbermen there would have been no settlements and with no settlements there would have been no transportation network (as primitive as it was) and without that transportation network the start-up costs of any sawmill operation would have been too great. Lack of transportation would become the primary factor in the slow development of the timber industry in all of central Oregon and especially in Crook County.

Gathering information about these early operations is difficult. This story starts 130 years ago at a time when there was no government and no record-keeping in this part of Oregon. But government would arrive soon enough; too soon for some. In 1850 the Donation Land Claim law was enacted and this law required a survey of the land (another interesting story but one for which there is insufficient space here to relate). Land had to be (or, more accurately, was suppose to be) surveyed before settlers could take possession. But in the back country of the Ochoco that didn't worry the early settlers. They found their spot of heaven and squatted.

It was also in 1850 that mail service between San Francisco and the Columbia River was established but mail service wouldn't reach Mill Creek until 1871.⁷

Although early records are few and there are no individuals living today to testify to the accomplishments of the early timbermen, some information has been gathered and preserved. Upon that meager information this story begins.

It is impossible to know when the first lumber was made in this area yet history has recorded that it was in 1833 that someone in Oregon exported the first timber; it went to China. But here too is a rub: timber can mean logs and it can mean lumber; which was it in this case? Well,

since the first recorded sawmill was built by Dr. John McLaughlin in 1827, it could have been either. It doesn't really matter.

The first lumber here-about was probably produced by the head of some family as building materials for his own homestead. Trees, also known as timber, were felled from man's first entry into this land. As early as the 1840s the military was using logs for stockades yet there is no record of the army's production of *lumber*. Where did the lumber for all those camps and forts that dotted this area come from? The evidence required to answer this question has not been found.

No one now remembers how or why Ike Swartz gets credit for being the first commercial sawmill operator in the area; it doesn't really matter. "The first" has to start somewhere and for this story of the history of the timber industry in parts of central and eastern Oregon, Ike Swartz's 1867 operation gets the designation of FIRST. First doesn't mean ONLY; not for long anyway. Note from the beginning, that there is no record of a whip-saw sawmill existing in Crook County. Swartz's sawmill, as crude as it may have been, was a circle-saw mill.

In 1940 Blanche Hereford, with her husband Earl, moved to a spot on Mill Creek that had known many small sawmills. In the abstract of title that Blanche and Earl received with the property were copies of every document pertaining to ownership of that property from the time it passed from the public domain until it became the Hereford's "Steen Pillar Ranch." From those early documents Blanche put together a story from which the following has been taken.

William B. Marshall, a single man, was the first person to live at the foot of Steen Pillar. He filed on a 160 acre homestead in 1888. He planted a large orchard and some of the trees are still

7. In the same year, postal service was established at Prine (later Prineville). Crook County Historical Society, *The History of Crook County, Oregon*. Dallas, Texas: Taylor Publishing Company, 1981; p. 9.

bearing fruit. The orchard is a lot smaller now as a lot of the trees have died and have been removed.

Mr. Marshall had a lot of goats and they were often seen around and on top of the middle rock of the Steen Pillar complex and the old timers named the middle rock Goat Rock. Goat Springs was also named for Mr. Marshall's goats.

Marshall borrowed money to build a sawmill which stood just down stream from Steen Pillar next to the creek. This was a water-powered mill and could only run when there was ample water in the creek. The saw had only eight teeth. Sam Compton soon bought in with Marshall but they lost the land and the mill through default on a loan that Marshall had brought to the partnership. John Combs bought it and sold land and mill to John Demaris in 1895. Soon Henry Birdsong bought in and he and Demaris were partners in the mill.

On a typical day, early in the morning, the saw was started through a log and then the crew would rush home for breakfast, then hurry back to take the board off the carriage and start the saw through again. For some now unknown reason, the water couldn't be completely shut off so a big stick was wedged against the teeth to stop the saw at the close of the day.

In the summer the lumber would be hauled on wagons to the Shipp & Perry Lumber Yard in Prineville or delivered to a rancher who was doing some building. The winter was the time for logging when there was snow upon which to skid the logs. John Demaris and sons, Jess, Walt, and Bert, and Henry Birdsong and son, Charlie, all helped log. John and Henry both sawed. The younger kids would ride into the woods on the logging sled with their home-made sleds and when the logs were ready for the trip out of the forest the men would fasten an axe in the end of a log and hook the kids' sled ropes over the handle of the axe, providing a nice sleigh ride home.

Henry Birdsong homesteaded 160 acres about 1900, and he was planning on rebuilding the mill as his land was covered with beautiful ponderosa pine trees. Birdsong and Demaris had ordered a steam engine and were waiting for it to arrive at

Shaniko when their mill burned in 1904. Dave Grimes, Claude Wright and Ed Barney hauled the new mill from Shaniko up to the Mill Creek site which was just a short distance up stream from Steen Pillar. Ed Eastman built the new mill. Homer Barney was the sawyer. A chute was built to get the logs from the top of the hill down to the pond. The whole crew was standing at the far edge of the pond to watch the first log come down the chute. The log came down the chute so rapidly that it planed across the pond, and wiped out one of the bunkhouses. It just missed some of the crew and their families. It was here that Jess Demaris was hit by a log from the chute. The chute was finally abandoned; it was just too steep for practical use (people still live on this site).

John Demaris and wife Jane traded their Mill Creek homestead to Arthur J. Decker for his ranch on McKay Creek in 1908. John and his four sons built a sawmill on McKay Creek, near where the boundary of the Ochoco National Forest is today. Decker sold out to W.H. Barney and wife Lela in 1909. William Birdsong and wife Emma also sold their holdings on Mill Creek to W.H. Barney and Ed Barney. All of the Barneys were loggers but they also lost the mill on a debt to Billy King. Art Champion ran the mill for King, then Tom and Lon Smith took over the running of the mill and finally they moved the mill to their father's timber claim at Grizzly in 1917 (you will read about the Smith brothers elsewhere in *Green Gold*).

There were a number of shingle mills in this area in the late 1800's. One was up Shingle Gulch, one at the forks of Mill Creek, and one at Goat Spring. Earl Hereford once told of remembering when the big post was set in place for the shingle mill at Goat Spring and the big tank with a heavy sheet metal bottom to heat the water to put the shingle bolts in to soak overnight. Then the shingle bolts were taken out and set on end to catch the dropping blade.

There was another water-powered mill further downstream. It straddled the creek and was owned by Dick Caudle and Daugherty. Some of the rocks from the cookhouse chimney can still be seen. This is probably the same mill that the

Beelers ran when they lived on Mill Creek. In later years the five Harnden brothers had a mill in this same area only over closer to the current road.

Al Swartz (Ike's brother) had a mill on the Dave Evans place in 1882. Mr. Swartz owned race horses and kept them at the Skip Russell place known as Keystone Ranch. His two jockeys, Sid Houston and Charlie Luster, stayed with Mr. Swartz's daughter and son-in-law at the Russell ranch. The jockeys had been bribed by some fellows in Prineville to throw a race and they didn't do it. Vigilantes, as they called themselves, came to the ranch at night and at gunpoint took the two jockeys to a tree just east of Prineville and hung them, then shot them in the head. They spread the story that the jockeys had been caught stealing horses. The next night Al Swartz was sitting in the Burmeister Saloon with his back towards the window when he was shot from the alley by a man on horseback. Swartz had let it be known that he knew the men who had hung his jockeys.

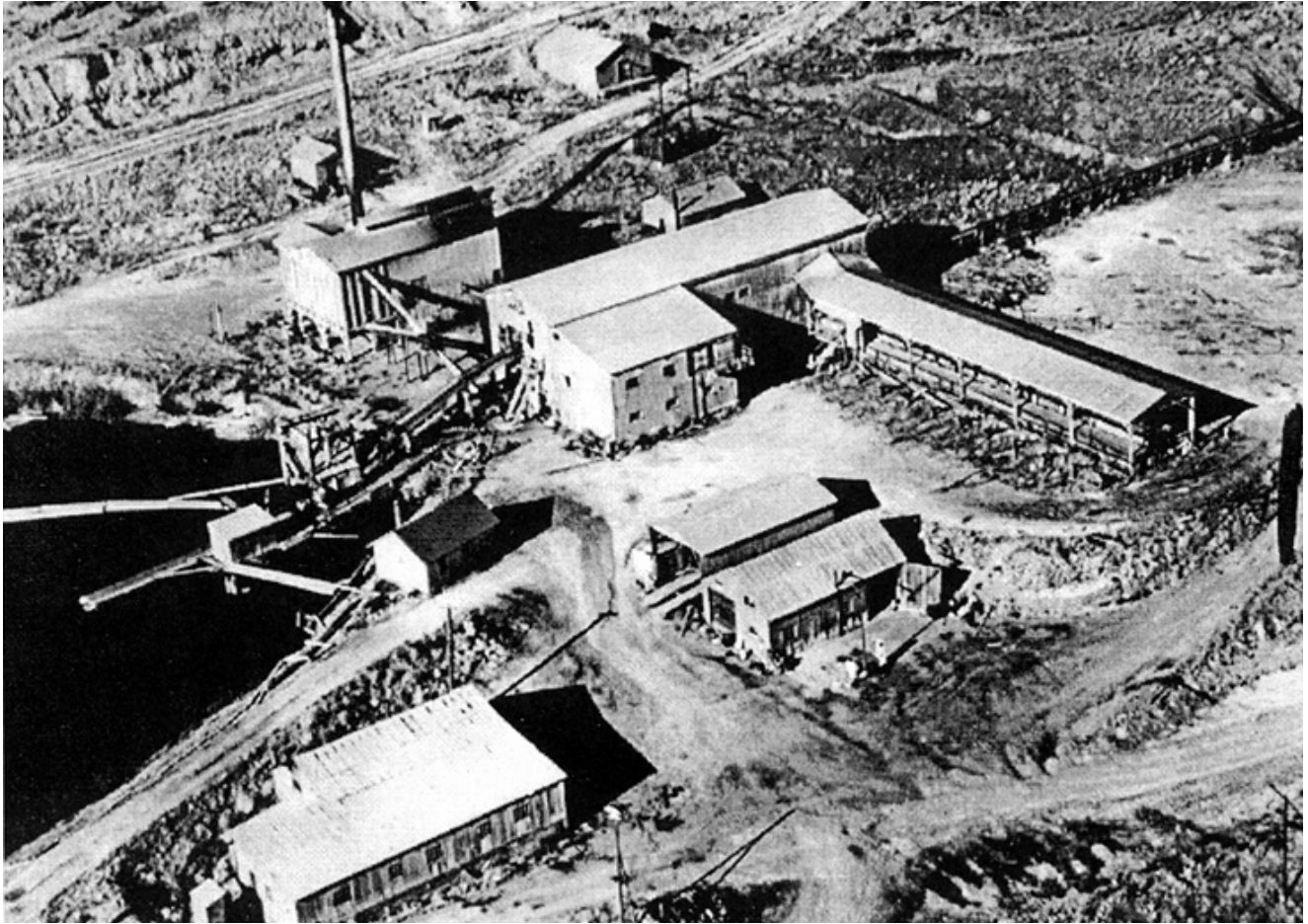
The hanging tree stood for several years. Sid Houston's sister from West Branch (near Mitchell) finally came over and had the tree cut down. More about this lawless period in Crook County's history can be read in Gale Ontko's *Thunder Over the Ochoco* series, Vol. V, *And the Junipers Bore Fruit*.

Steen Pillar is one of Oregon's outstanding landmarks and is probably the most photographed rock in Oregon. It is somewhere between 350 and

390 feet high depending on whose figures you take. Geologists claim that Steen Pillar is a single cooling unit but it is composed of three successive hot avalanche deposits which must have arrived one right after the other. And in the cooling process the vertical contractions split the rock into long slender columns. Millions of years later erosion etched the outcrops into numerous crags of which Steen Pillar is one.

In 1860 Major Enoch Steen of the U.S. Army was ordered to find and open a shorter wagon road from Ft. Dalles (now called The Dalles) to Great Salt Lake. His subordinate, Captain A.J. Smith, and Major Steen left many new names on the map. The road was called Steen & Smith Road. Smith Rock, Steen Mountain and Steen Pillar are some of the places they named. The name Steen was misspelled on several maps but has been corrected on all except Steen Pillar. It's still spelled "Stein's" Pillar.

But Mill Creek was not the only location of early sawmill operations. Later chapters will present what information is available on those operations. In many cases there is not much information to present. In some instances, for example, I can find nothing more than the mention of this or that sawmill. In some of those instances, people still living remember that the sawmill existed but no firm evidence has been found. These operations I will call "the undocumented operations." Their existence is fact but it cannot, at this time, be proven.



Hudspeth Sawmill Company's Bridge Creek sawmill. Date unknown but it must have been after the mill closed in because the pond is devoid of logs and there is no lumber around the sorting shed.



Cutting the "notch". This was once done by axe.