

## Nels S. Nelson

**Winlock: 1907-1932**  
**Dutch Flat: 1932-1943**

In the Preface of *Glimpses of Wheeler County's Past: An Early History of North Central Oregon*, editor F. Smith Fussner remarked, "It has been almost three quarters of a century since the last attempt was made to publish some part of the history of Wheeler County." That was in 1975; another quarter century—and more—has now passed. In 1975, there was a "Historical Commission" operating in Wheeler County; no such commission is operating today.

On the outside of the book's back cover the publisher wrote, "More thinly populated than when it was founded in 1899, this remote Eastern Oregon county retains many of the traditions of the Old West." And so it continues today.

Wheeler County's role in the timber industry in central Oregon, considering the county's small population, was quite significant. Over the years, there have been some 54 sawmills that operated in that county—mostly in the vicinity of Mitchell but in far-flung locations too

Mitchell area, .....	26;
Richmond, .....	10;
Spray, .....	8;
Winlock, .....	6
...other places, other mills...	

Some were small; some were big.

For two reasons, then, this writer is taking some liberty with copyright laws. The first reason is that it is assumed that the 1975 Historical Commission's main goal was to publish history; members of the commission are no longer living. Second, the information presented here is found in no other source save the book mentioned, which is out of print and almost impossible to find.

If the Historical Commission were asked I suspect that they would gladly grant permission for the following material to be included here.

Nels Nelson's first sawmill in Wheeler County was located near Winlock, a place few people outside of Wheeler County have ever heard of. Winlock, today, isn't on the way to anywhere so it is hard to describe its location. Two miles east of Service Creek, along Oregon Highway 19 on the John Day River, there is a road to the north with a small sign saying "Winlock." The site is about 9 miles up Alder Creek. No evidence that a community once thrived exists today and no evidence of Nelson's mill remains. This was once timber country and Mr. Nelson made use of that fact. Here is the story of the Nelson sawmill as told by Clarence Nelson, a contributor to *Glimpses of Wheeler County's Past*. The story is reproduced here in its entirety with only minor changes to bring the facts up to date.<sup>1</sup>

In the year 1906, N.S. Nelson, a sawmill operator from Western Oregon, started out in search of a new location in Eastern Oregon. He came to the small community of Winlock in Wheeler County, where he bought up several modest tracts of timber from the farmers and landowners.

Winlock was located at the south edge of a large belt of timber, mostly ponderosa pine, red fir, tamarack, and some white fir, the latter two having very little value at that time. The timber was owned or controlled mainly by the Forest Service, a few homesteaders and a few timber claim owners.

1. The basic information is supplemented with Clarence Nelson's entry in *The History of Wheeler County Oregon*, copyright held by *The Times-Journal*, Condon, Oregon. The book was printed by the Taylor Publishing Company of Dallas, Texas; 1983.

After spending a few days around Winlock and getting acquainted with the people, Nelson returned to the valley and began making plans for the move to his new location.

He went to Portland where he bought machinery for his mill and had it shipped to Condon [the railhead at the time]. From there it was moved to Winlock by local farmers with horse teams and wagons. There were no automobiles or trucks at that time. Roads were poorly kept due to the lack of money.

On September 14, 1906, Nelson, with his wife and three children, Jessie, Charlie, and Clarence, left Portland by train, arriving in Condon later that day. That same evening they took the four-horse stage for Fossil, where they spent the night. Early next morning they boarded the two-horse mail stage driven by Melvin Ritchie and were soon on their way to Winlock, arriving there late that afternoon.

There were only a few families in the Winlock area at that time, namely, the Harve Akins, August Schunkds, Martin Johnsons, Peter Hartmans, Bill Beardens, Charlie Bransons, Raleigh Wilkes, and Thurst Wilkes, and a few more who lived farther away.

There was no industry of any kind at that time and money was almost a dream, as jobs were few and the people of the neighborhood had little to sell. Most of the ranches were in the 160-acre class and were pretty well covered with timber and brush. The average acreage under cultivation ran about 20 to 40 acres per ranch and produced mainly grain, hay and wheat and barley and some rye. A local steam-powered threshing outfit moved from ranch to ranch and did the threshing, mostly with exchange labor among the farmers.

Almost every ranch had a good orchard that produced enough apples, pears, prunes, cherries, and peaches for home use and some to sell to outsiders. Each rancher had a few head of cattle to sell each year, bringing in enough to pay taxes and keep the family in clothing and other things that could not be produced at home.

Each family canned and dried its year's supply of fruits and vegetables, raised its own pork, made large containers of lard and sausage and always had enough chickens and eggs to provide for the family. A fair-sized patch of potatoes was one of the main essentials, with generally a few left over to sell.

The nearest doctor was located in Fossil. Instead of sick or injured persons being taken to him, he came to them by horseback or by driving a team and buggy. His average charge was about one dollar per mile or \$25 for a trip to Winlock. Babies were born at home with a local midwife in attendance.

Telephone service was limited as there was only one line extending from Fossil to Spray by way of Winlock, and very few ranchers had a telephone. In case of an emergency they had to ride many miles on horseback to make a phone call.

About the first of October [1906], Nelson's machinery began arriving at the new mill site and soon was being installed on foundations and framework made of logs, as there was no lumber available. The first order for lumber to be sawed in the new mill was for the dam in the river above Spray.<sup>2</sup> Lumber sold for \$9 per thousand feet, and dressed beef and pork could be bought for 9 cents per pound.

Winlock had one of the old-time one-room schoolhouses with windows down each side and a woodshed across the rear of the building. There was a large heating stove near the center of the schoolroom and a galvanized water pail and dipper on a bench in one corner. Everyone drank from the pail of water—which was carried from a spring about 150 yards away. The seats and desks were homemade and all fastened together, with two pupils in each seat.

“Town ball” was the main sport in suitable weather. The ball was made from wool yarn raveled [sic] from old socks or sweaters; the bats were made of small poles or a flat piece of lumber.

2. This must be a reference to Alder Creek. It would not have been possible to dam the John Day and even if it were, it would have been impossible to lift the water from the river's elevation to that of the mill site. The trip up Alder Creek from the river is a constant—and not an insignificant one—climb.



In early April of 2000, I made the drive from the John Day River up Alder Creek to Winlock (right where Alder Creek, flowing from the northeast, is met by an unnamed stream); nothing other than a mature tree marks the spot today. The exact site of Nelson's first mill is no longer known. The second site at Winlock was about 1.5 miles northwest of Winlock (as the crow flies). Taking the road east at Winlock I worked my way back to Spray. The country—the geography—took me by surprise. I was totally unprepared for the large meadow lands that are nestled among the scattered hills. The road, now paved, in Nelson's time, was one of the factors that limited travel. Today, the area is under ownership of several productive-looking ranches. The timber that Nelson so prized has been logged or burned, a forest fire destroying many acres of timberland in 1990s.

One of the most exciting events in the early summer was watching a band of Celilo or Warm Springs Indians as they passed by with their Indian ponies, many of which were carrying heavy packs of tents, bedding, or food. These Indians spent most of the summer at the Notch and similar campsites, where the women dug cowse [sic] and other roots and dried them for winter food. The men hunted deer and fished in the nearby creeks, and rode around the neighborhood buying deer hides and selling the deerskin gloves that the squaws had made. Later in the summer they trailed back to the Cascade Moun-

tains for huckleberry picking, and then to Celilo for fall and winter salmon fishing in the Columbia River.

In the fall of 1907, a United Artisans lodge was organized in Winlock and the old schoolhouse was used as a meeting place until the next year when a new lodge hall was built. This hall was used for public dances and various meetings, including church services. A few years later a grange was organized and was well attended until people began moving away, causing the charter to be surrendered.

About 1910, a young Missourian named Bob Turner came to Nelson's mill to be the fireman and engineer.<sup>3</sup> He disliked the idea of staying in the bunk house with other men so he erected a building of his own with living and sleeping quarters in the back and a confectionery and card room in the front. He stocked a nice variety of candy, lunch goods, tobacco, and so forth—all of which attracted most of the young men in the neighborhood on weekends and dance nights. About two years later, Turner sold his business to Eddie Mathews, who in turn constructed a larger building beside the county road and put in a stock of groceries, confections, etc. He also was successful in getting a Winlock Post Office, which was located in a portion of the front of the building.

Soon after this a Nazarene Church was built by a young minister named Davis. About 1911 or 1912, a new two-room school was constructed, which soon had fifty-two students in attendance.

Some two years later came a German merchant named John C. "Paddy" Meyers, who put up a nice store building and stocked it with groceries, men's shoes, overalls, nails and the like. Sometime later the Mathews store, now owned by Al Howden, was burned and everything lost, including the post office. After this was lost, a man named James T. Burton came in and erected another building and was appointed the new postmaster. [As mentioned earlier, nothing remains of these buildings to suggest a thriving community.]

Within a few months, Archie Boyce came to Winlock and built a blacksmith shop, doing general repair as well as horse shoeing.

Then came Ben Glenn and O.P. Bunker, who built a new flour mill and installed machinery known as the Midget Marvel. The mill was powered by a large threshing [machine] engine.<sup>4</sup> This mill burned two or three years later and was replaced with all new machinery and a crude

oil-burning engine. Later the mill was sold to Amos Hawes and Charlie Austin who moved it into Spray, where it burned some months later. [Remember, this was a flour mill, not a saw mill.]

About 1910 to 1914, people looking for new lives came in and filed on homesteads, mostly on the ridge south of Winlock. In a short time more than twenty claims had been filed. The lack of money and farming equipment—and in some cases poor management—worked a hardship. Within a few years most of the homesteaders were gone and the land was being used mostly for grazing by a few larger ranchers.

About this time an experienced surveyor and timber cruiser named Lewis D.W. Shelton, for whom Shelton Park<sup>5</sup> was later named, came to Wheeler County. His headquarters were at the Hubble Ranch, then owned by Elmer Mathews. From there he took to the woods in search of the best stands of timber to be bought up for the old Kinzua Lumber Company of Warren, Pennsylvania. The Kinzua Corporation later came in and built the mill and town of Kinzua, Oregon.<sup>6</sup> E.D. Wetmore and two or three of his men came to Nelson's Mill and spent some time on the lumber yard, checking the quality and appearance of the lumber sawed from the surrounding timber.

Winlock eventually was in need of a better cemetery and in 1914 the people of the community were called together to make plans for one. A committee, appointed to go ahead with the plans, purchased 2.1 acres of land from Harve Akin. The land was soon cleared of small bull pine trees and brush, was fenced sheep tight, and then staked out in lots. There has been about one burial a year in the last sixty years.

Many times the snow began falling in November and by January everyone was using a team and sleigh for transportation. In February 1916, the snow was sixty inches deep in the Notch Meadow, and frozen piles of ice and snow

3. From this information we can conclude that Nelson's mill was steam operated.

4. Threshing machines were common means of powering early sawmills. Archie Ream's mill near Drake Creek in the Maury Mountains southeast of Prineville used such a machine. Charlie Jackson's first sawmill on Badger Creek (south of Mitchell), used a steam tractor, the power source being quite similar to that of a threshing machine.

5. A Wheeler County park.

6. Regrettably, I have chosen to not write the story of Kinzua here. That operations merits a book all its own.

were still in evidence in early June. Ice was known to be six to eight inches thick on the mill pond in early November, when the mill had to close down because the logs were frozen too hard to be sawed.

In 1913, Nelson's saw mill was moved from Winlock to a new location about two miles farther up the mountain. It was operated at that location until 1927, when it was moved to Dutch Flat, west of Service Creek. After losing the small payroll, Winlock began feeling the effects and started slipping backward. Paddy Myers' store was torched in the winter of 1931 by three young men and a woman. The men served time in the state penitentiary and the woman lost the post office that she was in charge of. Soon after this, a new mail route was established between Winlock and Spray.

Paddy Myers died a few months later and Winlock was left without a store of any kind. N.S. Nelson died in 1933 and was buried in the local cemetery that he helped establish.<sup>7</sup> Some time later the Winlock school was closed and a small bus was run to Spray with the few pupils that were left in the district.

By 1927, Nelson had cut all the available timber around Winlock. Knowing his Winlock timber would not last, Nelson had been acquiring more timber around Dutch Flat so the operation was moved to be close to the Dutch Flat timber. The mill continued to operate until 1943 when it mill was sold. It is not known to whom the mill was sold or what happened following the sale.

After the sale of the mill, Clarence and his family moved to Spray where he worked for the Midstate sawmill and did carpentry work. He helped build fifty-seven different buildings in La Grande, Monument, Mitchell, Dayville, Fossil and Condon.

And so the story of Nelson's sawmill ends. It troubles this writer that he cannot tell you more because there is more to tell. The mill's relocation to Dutch Flat, west of Service Creek, was not the end of the mill but that is where the story will end. No photographs of Nelson's mills can be located. Clarence Nelson is no longer living.

#### **A visit to the scene of the Hash Rock fire.**



7. By this time, Nels's two sons, Charlie and Clarence, were working in the mill. Upon Nels's death, Clarence took charge.



**Hawkins Brothers' sawmill on Duncan Creek, 1898-1904. Below, hauling the lumber nearly 25 miles to Prineville. Here the "lumber train" is stopped at the Blevins Place, so said June Belevins some years ago when she told me about those early days.**

