

Big Log Lumber Company

Big Log Creek (near Ashwood);
1920s-1940s
(exact dates unknown)

The history of the Big Log Lumber Company is, like many of the timber operations covered here, difficult to trace, but in this case I have a good, first-hand source. Nonetheless, written records are few; memories are vague.

A newspaper article that appeared in an issue of the *Madras Pioneer* during the year 1925, gives a starting point. At some time during that year, according to the newspaper article—which consists of about three sentences—Sam Compton and Martin Nichol passed through Madras on their way to Ashwood to buy the George Telfer sawmill.

George Martin Telfer was this writer's maternal great grandfather. Land records for Jefferson County do not show a land transaction involving George Telfer until 1924. Telfer oral family history suggests that the Telfer clan did not come to Jefferson County until the mid-1920s. Yet, several surviving family members remember the sawmill but not when or how it got started. My mother, Cora Peck-Morisette, remembers playing in the large (at least to a young child) sawdust pile at the mill. Other family members (Raymond Crowley and his brother Bill) remember that the mill existed but recall no details.

The mill was not located in Ashwood but about 15 miles southeast of the town. It was not on Trout Creek, yet it is often referred to as the Trout Creek Sawmill. The exact location is at the confluence of Big Log Creek and Dutchman Creek. These streams meet just short of Trout Creek.

During the summer of 1998 my brother and I tried to locate the site. Because the operation had been a substantial one (under the ownership of Martin Nichol) I assumed that there would be

some evidence that it had existed. Some years earlier—and I have not been able to determine the year—a serious flash flood came down the draw in which the mill was located and swept everything away—including the serious sawdust pile that several people remember. The land is currently (1999) owned by D.R. Johnson.

A Nichol family descendant (Maxine Potter-Iverson of Bend) showed me photographs of the site. This was not an insubstantial operation. Unfortunately, what I was shown were only photocopies and they were not suitable for publication.¹ (Yet, how I wish I had kept a copy!) No other photographs have been located.

Sam Compton's oral family history frequently mentions Sam's involvement in the "Trout Creek Sawmill" but it does not mention a partnership with Martin Nichol. The Nichol oral family history does not mention Sam Compton. Because of Sam's several activities at Grizzly I'm beginning to believe that he was not in partnership with Martin Nichol.

At some unknown time in the past, Robert Potter, (Martin's grandson), wrote a few paragraphs about small sawmills. Robert wrote this piece because of his connection with the small sawmill located at the High Desert Museum south of Bend. Here is Robert's piece in full:

These recollections of small mill operations are based on actual experience. My grandfather [Martin Fredrick Nichol] owned a small sawmill on the upper Friday Ranch about 15 miles south of Ashwood. Granddad operated the mill from the late 1920's to the mid 1940's using methods that were very similar to the small mill that has just been reconstructed on the [High

1. Like a fool, I didn't make copies of the copies. The woman in Portland who has the actual photographs ignores all attempts to communicate. I understand she is a "deep sea diver" and travels the world over to work.

Desert] Museum grounds. The original Lazinka mill [the mill at the Museum] was operational in the late 1800's to the early 1900's.

Unfortunately, Granddad was not a businessman. He accepted pigs and calves in partial payment for lumber. One of the mines even paid him a flask of mercury to settle the debt for mining timbers. Because of such business practices he just about went broke. One summer vacation my job was to pull the lumber on the green chain and to fire the boiler.

Small mills of the early 20th century were driven by either steam or gasoline. The power source turned a main pulley which was attached to a secondary pulley by a leather belt. The secondary pulley turned a shaft connected to numerous other pulleys and belts which ran the entire mill.

Logs sixteen feet in length were hauled in by trucks and wagons. They were dumped on the mill deck, a slightly sloped area of ground. A millworker used a peavy (a six-foot long wooden staff with metal point and swinging hook) to roll one log at a time onto the carriage from the pile positioned next to it. The carriage was a long cable-operated platform with stakes along the sides. Attached to the stakes were sliding hooks called dogs, each with a sharp metal point. The dogs were adjusted to accommodate the diameter of the log and the points were driven in by a millworker using a sledge hammer. The lever of the carriage was then moved by hand releasing the gears and the apparatus moved the secured log forward into the main head saw. This large circular saw, with insert teeth, cut the log into boards an inch or more thick in increments of 1/4 inch. (Lumber from pine logs was usually cut one to two inches thick in 1/4 inch increments). A series of moving rollers called the rollcase transferred the board to the edger. Saws in

the edger-series cut the board into lumber four inches to twelve inches wide and straightened the edges. (Some small mills cut logs into railroad ties and mining timber).

From the edger the lumber went to the green chain which was a continuous chain run by pulleys and a belt. As the moving chain carried the lumber sideways, a millworker pushed and pulled the boards and sorted them by size (width and thickness) into the proper stack. After this operation the sorted lumber was transported to the drying yard where it was stacked in sixteen-foot squares with four stickers (boards 6 inches by 16 feet) between each layer to provide an air space.

When the lumber was dry enough it was transported to the planer. The function of the planer was to smooth the four sides of a board. A piece of lumber was unloaded by hand from the transport vehicle and placed on a moving guide that carried it to the blades of the planer. Once smoothed, the finished piece was sorted to grade which reflected the value and use of the lumber. A high grade was suitable for finish work in a home; a low grade was best used to build a pig pen.

Robert Potter, like so many of the men that could shed light on the history of the timber industry, is no longer living.

Another timberman no longer living, Jack Wilkinson, was the only person that I've met throughout the course of research for this book that actually knew Martin Nichol.² On one of my several trips to visit Jack, knowing that he had met Mr. Nichol, I asked him to tell me the story of that meeting. Here is what he said to me:

I had been past the old Nichol mill several times but this time was unusual. My surveying crew and I had been working on

2. Jack had been the senior forester for Alexander-Yawkey Lumber Company. For reasons that Jack never explained, he stayed in Prineville when the sawmill ceased operations. Jack was a character and my times with him were always a chuckle. He always offered me a "snort" even though our meetings were at 10 AM. Jack's daughter, Ann, was a classmate of mine.

the Alexander-Yawkey Lumber Company's land and the truck we were using developed a problem—I don't remember now what it was. I remembered that the Nichol mill site was not far and decided that we should try to make it that far.

We finally got down there by picking our way over old wagon roads. It took us half a day to get down there in the old Chevy pickup. One of the fellows with us was a pretty good mechanic. He said, "Jack, I smell something funny. We better check the motor or something and see what that smell is."

So we got out and checked. The motor was all right. We could see a little smoke coming out from the left front wheel. A bearing had gone out; front wheel bearing. So we looked across at an old shed and decided to just let the pickup sit there and go see if there's anything in the old shed. There were two old Chevy trucks in there, believe it or not. This mechanic said, "They're not much older than the one we're driving. Let's take a wheel off and see if we can get a bearing out of there that will work on our rig." Sure enough, it did. We put it on and it worked fine.

There were some tools—not too many—and these two old trucks in this shed. I can't remember what else was around and I don't remember seeing any mill equipment. We looked through the old house. It was in pretty good shape. But the mice and rats had made a mess of it. We had to develop roads and get our surveying done and drive our property lines. It took half a day to drive from town out there and we never had time to do anything else. We had to turn right around and come back.

So we decided to bring our sleeping bags and some brooms and mops and food and grub and we'll just stay here. We got us each an old army cot so we could get off the floor—we didn't want the mice crawling over us. So we did that. We got water out of the creek in buckets and sloshed the place. Cleaned it all up so it was livable. We

could catch all the fish we wanted. This was on another trip, not the time we fixed the truck. We camped here about two weeks off and on. We didn't stay two weeks straight because we had to get back. This was around 1942 or something like that. I'm not sure of the exact year.

The building we camped in was definitely a house. There were at least three rooms on the ground floor and I think there was an upstairs. I knew this was the Nichol mill because it was marked on the map that I had. Nichol's Mill. It was the only mill in that part of the country anyway.

One day, just about 5 o'clock, an old car comes up the road from Ashwood. The road came up from Ashwood up to Trout Creek. Someone knocked on the door. We opened the door and there was an old fellow standing there and he said, "What are you doing in my house?"

"Who are you?" I said.

"I'm Mr. Nichol."

I dam near fainted. I said, "Well, I'll tell you what. The place seemed abandoned and we're doing a lot of surveying and laying out roads." I told him who I was and who I worked for and so on. He finally calmed down and came in. I said, "We're just about to have dinner, why don't you stay and have dinner with us?"

He said, "Okay." I had some booze with me and we had a drink and everything was fine. We got to talking about his experiences in the early days. He used to supply lumber for the ranchers down on Trout Creek. Pridays and McDowells [or did he say McDonalds] the sheep people. And there was a mine up there; Horse Heaven mines.³ He said, "By the way, there's an old logging truck up Big Log Creek, way up the head of it, not the head of it but quite a ways up. Across the line into the Forest Service. We left it up there. The motor went haywire or something. It's just sitting up there."

3. One of my Mother's maternal uncles fell down the Horse Heaven Mine mine shaft and was killed. This was sometime in the late 1920s.

So one day we drove up there. Sure enough, there it was an old yellow International truck with hard rubber tires and log bunks on it. Later on there was a Forest Service timber sale over in that area. The truck is no longer there. That is a story too.

I'll tell you how it happened. The Forest Service had a timber sale just across the line from our property line [Alexander-Yawkey]. Part of that was on part of the sale. I told Roy Soltz, who used to work for Alexander-Yawkey before he went to work for Hudspeth, about that old truck. Hudspeth, by the way, got this timber sale. I told Roy when they got down logging in there and got a road in there to load the old truck on a flatbed and bring it into town. They overhauled the motor and the truck was in a Timber Carnival parade. I don't remember what year it was. I should have glommed onto that thing myself and I was sorry I didn't.

Here is some more about Nichol. He must have been in his 80's. He said that this was his last trip to the mill. He just wanted to come back and have a last look. We invited him to spend the night with us but he said that he was going to stay with some people down below that he knew. I think the McDowells, the sheep people probably. He was quite a character.

So the life of the Big Log Lumber Company was something like 20 years. There is no record of the amount of lumber produced or any records to show where Mr. Nichol got his timber. But any operation that lasts 20 years deserves remembering.

Robert Potter said that Martin Nichol wasn't much of a business man. Martin Nichol and Sam Compton had that in common. Since these two men went to Ashwood together back in 1925 and Potter recalls that Nichol owned the mill from "the late 20s," maybe—just maybe—Sam Compton did work the site for a few years. It doesn't really matter and while it might be nice if all the facts could be pinned down, they can't. What is known is that Martin Nichol and Sam Compton were timbermen for most of their lives.

One tidbit of information can be added to the above. It comes from Edna Sawyer-Ellsworth. Edna, although a child, remembers that in the summer of 1925 she visited a mill site and that it belonged to Martin Nichol. It may, she says, have also belonged to Sam Compton. On the day that Edna visited the mill Hank Frohnhoffer was also present, complicating ownership details a bit as the Compton oral family history repeatedly refers to the Compton-Frohnhoffer mill on "Trout Creek, near Ashwood." Edna remembers:

There was the cookhouse where Sam and his wife and Maude [Sam's daughter, with whom I had the pleasure of visiting at her home in Bend] lived in the little two-room cabin that we stayed in and there was a bunkhouse where the other men slept. Mrs. Compton cooked for all the men. All the cooking was done at the cookhouse. There was one other shed, or shack, down by the creek.

My uncle and aunt drove over there in the old Model-T to take a look to see where we were going to live. Nichol weren't there. The Comptons weren't there. No one was there that day. My cousin and I, being kids, we ran off down to this other shed to see what was in this other little house. We came back telling my uncle and aunt, "Ooh, there's something down there in barrels and it sure smells good!" Well, they shushed us and told us never bring that up. "Don't you ever say anything to anybody about that." So afterwards it went through my mind what it was. It was their moonshine business down there.

That summer they sawed quite a bit of timber. I don't remember who was logging. But it was horse logged. I don't remember who the men were unless it was Fergie Smith. That was some of the older Smiths that were older than me. Fergie Smith I think was the logger.

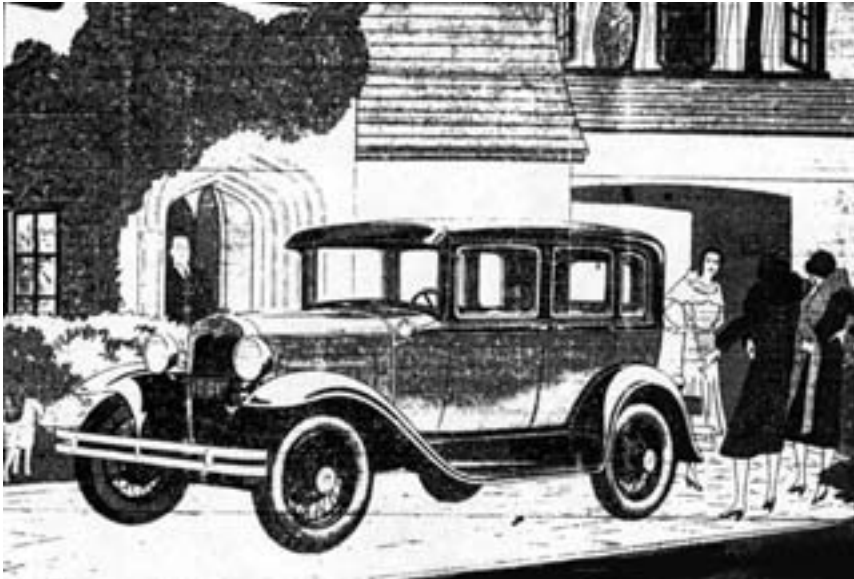
The mill site was right in the bottom of a canyon. And for a long time the old buildings were intact. But in the '60s something, a flood probably, washed everything away. The last time I was down through there we had to come through a gate and just shortly

GREEN GOLD

after you get through this gate that's where the camp was. A fence was put up after we were there. But it was quite a little creek through there when I was a child because us kids used to fish, we'd catch little fish in this little creek. And the old cook shack sat with its back to the creek and was up kinda high. The mill sat next to it. But now you couldn't even find where the old sawdust

pile was. Out there I don't think any of the sawdust was ever burned. The piles just sat there until the flood washed them away.

So ends the story of the Big Log Lumber Company, the details forever lost. Of the several families that were involved—Telfer, Compton, Nichol, and anyone else—only Martin Nichol is *known* to have owned the company.



Automobile advertisement from one of the timber journals. This is for a 1930 Ford.



A former Hudspeth logging site, logged probably in early 1980s. Township 16S, Range 25E, Section 24, NE corner. Greg Ontko took me logging one day. He wanted to show me the good, the bad, and the ugly. Greg prides himself in being a good logger; his respect for the land comes before he considers the bottom line. He has fired skidder operators that tore bark from a healthy tree as they passed.

My day in the woods with Greg was at the height of fire season so logging operations stopped around noon. While eating logger lunch, Greg asked if I would like to see some old mill sites on the way back to town. “Absolutely,” I replied.

So we were off into the woods on trails not fit for covered wagons. A couple miles south of our starting point we left the truck and hiked hundreds of yards deeper into the timber. Below is a photo of what we found:



Our best “detecting” work concluded that this had been a Bird-song sawmill of long, long ago. We found no evidence of machinery but this heap of rubble was not made by axe or stone. No evidence of anyone living here either.

If a stranger came upon this pile, only part of which you see here, I wonder what they would think?

A disappointment for me was my inability to get the facts on the Bernard Sawmill at Sunflower Flat. Greg introduced me to this on our day of logging trip. Of all the old mill sites I’ve visited this one has the largest log pond of all—and can be seen from a FS road. This mill site also had more machinery parts still in place than any other derelict mill site I found. So why did I not report this mill?

Only when Zeb Jacobson’s mom married Andy Bernard was I able to talk with someone with both knowledge and willingness to share the details.



Clara and Andy Bernard have sold the Suplee ranch and moved to town. Now I can get “the rest of the story.” But space limitations kept it from this edition.