

Johnson-Albriton

Combs Flat; 1926-1930

If you've ever driven out the Post-Paulina Highway southeast of Prineville, you've crossed Combs Flat. I can understand why the area was named for James Parker Combs, but it is more difficult to understand why it was ever thought to be "flat." While it may be more flat than the surrounding hills, the land is anything but flat.

Nonetheless, the Combs Flat area is where Emil Johnson and his partner Albriton (first name not known) built a sawmill around 1926.¹ By the time the mill ceased operations around 1930, Albriton had left the area. These two men are something of a mystery as their names do not appear in any official records. It is known that Johnson, after closing the mill at Combs Flat, moved to the Sisters area where he established another sawmill.

Lyrle Breese-Moore and her brother, Jyrle (Jerry) Breese, remember living at Combs Flat. Lyrle taught school at the sawmill's school so there is no doubt that the sawmill and the small community that sprung up around it, existed.

I've been to the site of the Johnson sawmill. There isn't much left to see but there is no doubt that a sawmill existed. The site is located on the edge of the timber not far from the highway at about milepost 12, almost directly across the road from the Breese home place. Some few months



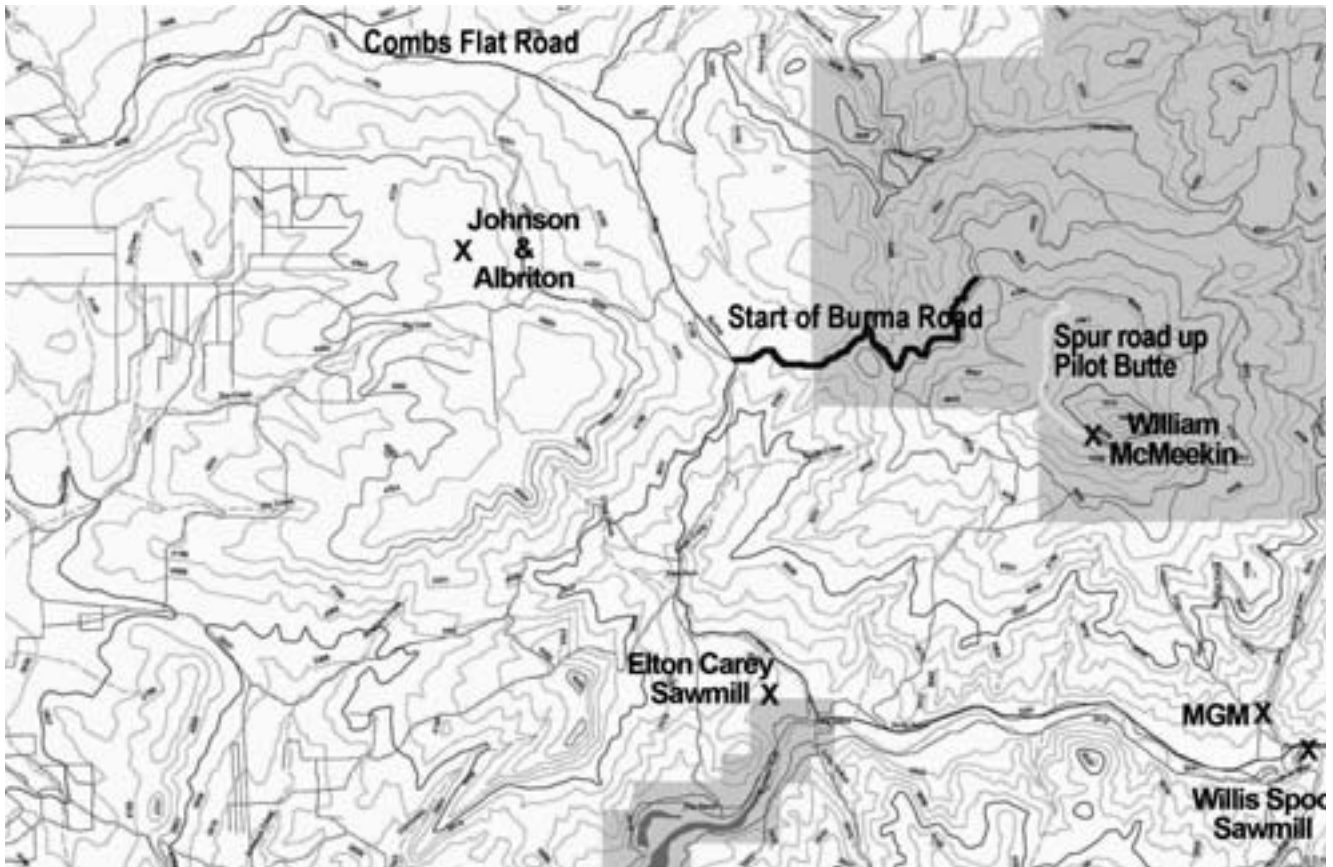
This is the only photograph of the Johnson-Albriton sawmill to exist, courtesy of the A.R. Bowman Memorial Museum. Date unknown.

before my visit to the site the Breeses had knocked down some of the remaining buildings at the mill site as they had become a hazard. The original mill pond has been modified and now serves as a stock pond.

The mill was built on land belonging to the Breese family. The timber on that land, however, was owned by the Oregon & Western Colonization Company. Back in those days, timber was seen as more of a liability, especially to ranchers, and the Breeses were glad to see the trees go.

Johnson's mill wasn't a large operation even by the standards of that time but it wasn't a stump-jumping operation either. The mill was

1. Gathering factual information for this operation has been all but impossible. Narrative information comes from interviews with Lyrle Breese-Moore and Jyrle Breese. One bit of documentary evidence comes from Irene Helms' book, *School Days of Old Crook County*. On page 164 appears information provided by Edna Grimes-Demaris who tells of her memories of the Johnson Sawmill. In none of the "official records" of the times (voting records, tax records, census records, etc.) could I find the name Emil Johnson. Yet I don't doubt that this mill existed. After quitting the operation at Combs Flat, Emil Johnson went to Sisters and started a mill there. The name of Albriton has come to light only in the early months of 2005.



This map segment shows the location of the Johnson-Albriton mill. The mill site is about 1.5 miles west of the highway. Other sawmill sites also shown, as is “MGM”, where I live up Wickiup Canyon. One party from the “Lost Wagon Train of 1845” came up Wickiup Canyon, crossed the summit, coming down on Ochoco Creek about where the old Keystone Ranch was located. From there to Prineville was a snap.

steam powered but the source of that power is not known. A gasoline “donkey” was used to pull logs from the woods to the mill but skidding with horses was also done. Some logs were loaded on horse-drawn wagons and pulled to the mill. The saw was of the circular variety. Lumber was stacked on dollies and rolled to the drying yard by manpower.

The drying yard was the source of two fires. While a considerable amount of lumber was lost in these fires the mill was not damaged.

At times the logs were drug by horses to a point where they were loaded on a wagon—usually no more than two logs to the load. To get the

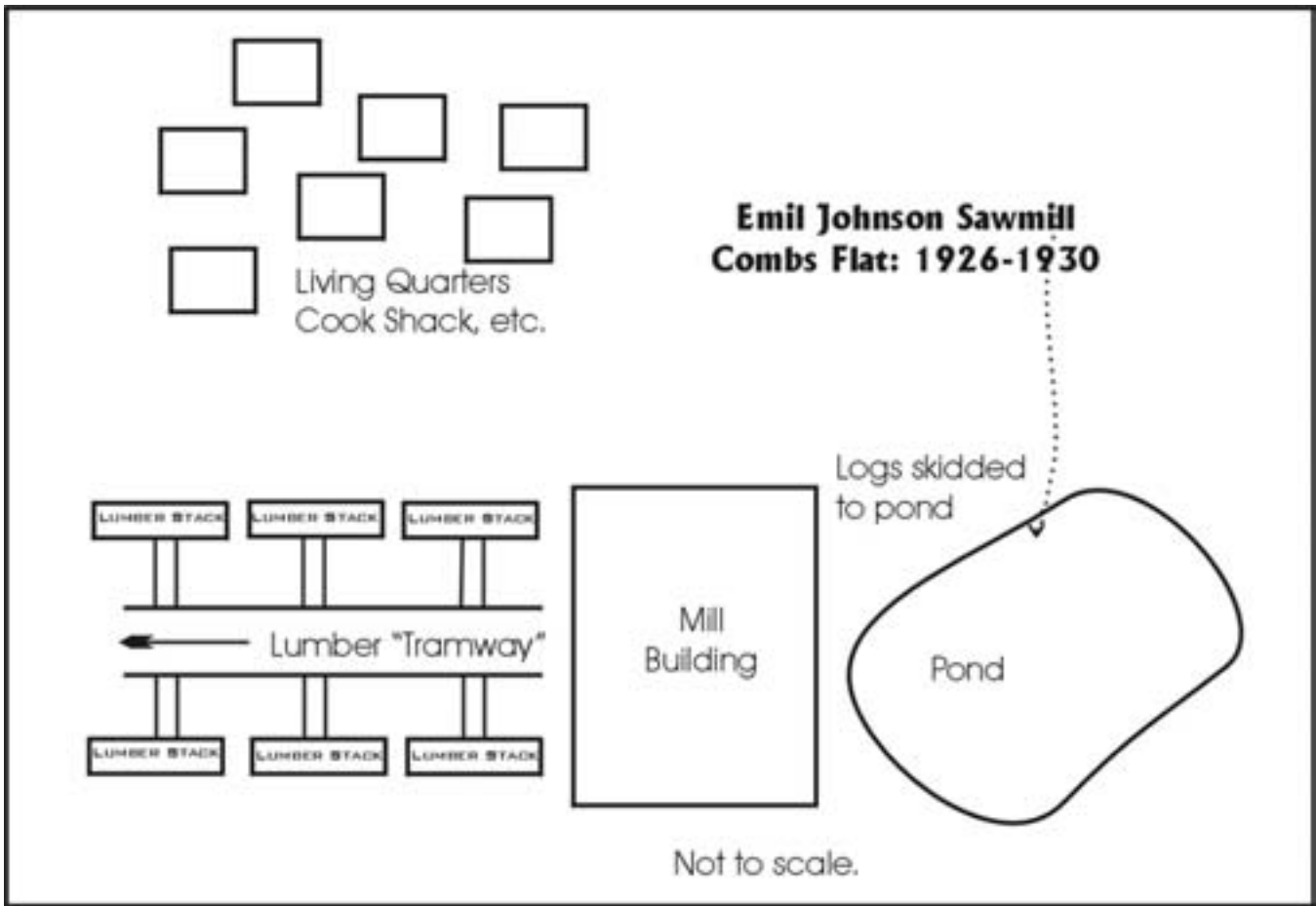
logs onto the wagon a dirt ramp was built just the right height to allow the logs to be hauled up the ramp and onto the wagons.

There were some good trees in this area but not of the size found further east. The soil here didn’t support the large trees for which the Ochoco National Forest became known.²

Around the mill site sprang a small community. Workers were able to obtain rough lumber from the sawmill and built their own shelter—usually a one- or two-room cabin. Jerry Breese remembered,

I think most of the [families] got some lumber at the mill and just put up a house. They did have separate rooms but they

2. At this time, the land now known as the Ochoco National Forest was known as the Blue Mountain Forest Reserve (West). The land at Combs Flat was outside this reserve.



This layout has been created from the descriptions given by Lyrle & Jyrle Breese. There are inadequate remains to reconstruct the actual layout of the site.

weren't very big. Just about enough for a kitchen and bedroom. Mr. Johnson had a nice house and it kind of sat up a little ways [apart from the other houses]. This was put right in an old orchard. The [old ranch] house was still there. They cleaned it out and one of the fellows lived in that house. There were a few trees, a few apples now

and then. They weren't too many scattered around, they were just kind of one place. There was a spring and they didn't have any problem with water.

...There must have been 10 or 12 [houses there], something like that. One family I know had a larger house because they kind of fed some of the mill workers....

The [single men] lived in separate shacks. There was one or two couples there that fed the men, kind of a boarding house



At left, you see the Johnson-Albriton pond as it is today, used for watering livestock. Photo taken on a dark summer day in 1997. After exploring this site, my hosts wanted to show me a McMeekin site on Pilot Butte but just as we started up the mountain a cloud burst chased us back to paved roads.

deal. Only there were no rooms to stay in. The big house that Johnson lived in was back up on the hill a little bit so it could overlook the rest of the outfit.

There was probably 6 or 7 people who worked in the logging end of it. There must have been 7 or 8 people in the mill. So there would be 12 to 14 [total].

This meant quite a few children. It was probably one of the sawmill families that got the idea to build their own school at the mill. The Combs Flat school was only a few miles away but only two of the children attending there didn't live at the mill. So a school house was built and Lyrle Breese became the first teacher. That was the winter of 1926. (The new school was built during the Christmas vacation period.) The school at Combs Flat continued to operate for two more years, then ceased operations.

By the early 1930's (exact date unknown) Johnson had cut all of the available timber. It was time to move on. The mill ceased operations and the equipment was sold. Some of the equipment was moved to the Skip Russell's Keystone Ranch. Mr. Russell might have used the equipment some before it was sold to Jim Johnson further up Ochoco Creek. Unfortunately, no production figures can be located for this operation.

Searching for Sawmill Sites

On Sunday, June 23, 1996, John and Lynne Breese guided me around 7,800 acres of very interesting countryside. Both are very knowledgeable not only about their land but also all that grows on it. To make the story short—but not nearly as interesting as the event—I'll trim my report down to mill site information only.

First, we sought out the Johnson-Albriton sawmill site. John can remember when the old buildings were visible. They have been knocked down for safety reasons.

But there can be no doubt that this was a mill site. The mill pond has been transformed a bit but still sits in the original place. Beams of the mill structure are still visible and the original logging



This item of rubble sits very close to the pond and may have been where the logs entered the mill. Other piles of rubble revealed that the operation was more extensive that existing information suggests. Between Prineville and Post this is "high country," not the summit but high enough to support snow longer than the lower lands.

road is still in use. This site is located about 1¾ miles west of the Paulina Highway in Township 15 S, Range 17 E, Section 27 (midway on the line which separates Sect. 27 from 34).

After leaving the Johnson site our goal was the William McMeekin sawmill on Pilot Butte. To get there, you have to go down the Burma Road. But John and his assistant, Dennis, had to lay out a new logging road first, a spur off Burma Road.

Lynne and I followed along as John and Dennis, who admittedly knows everything about everything, laid out the new road. Lynne provided a running narrative in response to my continuous question, "What is this?"

After about an hour we resumed our tour. By now it was raining heavily and as we drove the road began to show signs of surface flooding. We decided to make our next stop on the run. John pointed to a clearing just yards off the road and said, "That's the McMeekin mill site there."

There isn't anything left to verify that; some small evidence of a sawdust pile maybe. McMeekin was involved in several sawmill operations yet little has been found concerning either the man or his operations.

At about 2:30 PM we cut short our tour. John and Lynne stayed in the forest to plant some brush and I made a dash for home, a dry computer, and a glass of dark red wine. Mill site locating wears a fellow down!

Another Day of Discovering sawmill sites

While I'm talking about field trips looking for mill sites, let me tell you about such a trip I took on the day before I first meet the Breeses.

Saturday, June 22nd was one of the year's (1996 best days of that spring, quite different from the day with the Breeses. After several days of rain, Saturday was one of those days that Willamette Valley people only dream about.

Jerry and Eloise Brummer gathered together members of the McKenzie and Hamilton families and set out for Grizzly. There were thirteen people in the group, fitting into three vehicles. The intent of the trip was to explore the Hamilton family homestead, check out some Grizzly sawmill sites and see if anything was left of the Demaris-McKenzie sawmill sites (of which there were three).

The tour route went towards Madras on U.S. Highway 26; the far more adventurous route over Grizzly was left for another day. Many tales—all true—were told. These tales helped this writer become familiar with at least three families: Brummer, McKenzie and Hamilton. Here in The Best Place on Earth you find the best people on earth and those good people are well represented in these three families.

The first stop was at the ranch of Galen and Cindy Wunsch. Jerry, as our guide, had made previous arrangements for the group to pass on the



The Hamilton-Frohnhofer house as it stood in a beautiful meadow on Cook Creek, 1996.

private property. We drove up Cook Creek until there was no more road and then we walked, not a far distance, to the Hamilton homestead site. What an impressive location! Until you realize that this family lived here without electricity, running water or telephone.

Mr. Hamilton, as I recall, worked in one of the Grizzly sawmills. The site provides ample evidence of the buildings that once occupied this place. Smoke house, granary, barn, and privy can still be identified. The house (two stories and not small) was moved over two hills into the Coon Creek meadow to the Henry and Anna Frohnhofer homestead. (Don't ask when; I don't remember).

Edna Ellsworth³ had several humorous stories about life on the homestead. As great as it was, she doesn't want to move back.

Edna, Ann McKenzie, Eloise Brummer, and I walked the route over the hills that the house may have taken; not an easy route for a house, but not difficult for us. We beat the vehicles to the Frohnhofer homestead by about 10 minutes and were the first to enter the old house.

3. Her mother was a Hamilton.



Left, the mill's smoke stack lies across Cook Creek, which isn't very wide. The other rubble in the photo is probably parts of the main mill structure. The creek runs left to right and you may not be able to distinguish it here. Right: the cookhouse where Anna fed the mill's crew. Most of the men—but not all—lived at Grizzly so “bachelor's quarters” were available. Anna Frohnhoffer had been a “lady of the night” until Henry rescued her in Seattle.

As we approached the house there was visible evidence of the Frohnhoffer mill. The smoke-stack, although not upright, was there as are some of the original beams. Coon Creek now passes directly under the mill site but Edna remembers that the creek was further north when the mill was in operation.

Ruins of the cook house, bunkhouse and other outbuildings are still visible. On the north slope of the hills on the south side of the creek is the

door to the cellar. Hank Frohnhoffer, many suspect, kept a cache of cash inside. Both Prineville and Madras banks were too far and, besides, why put your money in a far-off bank when you can hide it in the cellar.

Much picture taking went on and Edna was able to tell us details about every room of the house and how Anna and Hank changed the original Hamilton house. The house is about 100 years old and it has not escaped the careless intruder; it has seen better days. Its condition did not detract from the awe it generated; awe for the hard life of the pioneer.

We left the Frohnhoffer place and headed back down Cook Creek. Since sightseeing makes one hungry we found the perfect picnic spot and had lunch. Stories flew! Can you picture 13 people from three families (not counting in-laws and me) all competing for “air time”? It was delightful and entertaining.

After lunch we returned to the Wunsch ranch and headed east up Willow Creek. Now we realized that we had passed Samuel Compton's Willow Creek home site just before getting to the Wunsch ranch. Compton's homestead and his Coon Creek sawmill site were above the Hamilton place but we didn't get that far north.



One of the three Demaris-McKenzie mill sites. Location not determined.

For the next hour or so we passed through the lush Willow Creek valley. Because of this year's heavy rains the meadows were grass-covered. But the dirt is clay and if you look straight down you realize that the grass doesn't grow close together, unlike the hay fields of, say, McKay Creek or Mill Creek. Nonetheless, the beauty of flower, brush, bird and sky was abundant. The road left something to be desired.

The very rain that produced so much lushness also produced ruts of significant

proportions. The un-named, un-numbered road eventually brought us to what some remember as the A-Y (Alexander-Yawkey Lumber Company) Road. This road runs, if you're careful, from Prineville (up Allen Creek) to Ashwood.

Just about a mile up the A-Y Road from where Boque Creek empties into Allen Creek is the location of the Walt Demaris-Ernest McKenzie sawmill site. There is now no evidence that any operation ever occupied this spot.



Earlier in this chapter you read that when the Johnson-Albritton mill closed the equipment travelled to two other sites. One was the Keystone Ranch for Skip Russell. Next the equipment went east on Ochoco Creek and became the Jim Johnson sawmill. Jim's sawmill operated for only a short time but here the history of the equipment is lost.



Photographs from the collection of Velora Grubb, Jim Johnson's step-daughter.

MARTIN GABRIO MORISETTE

Some distance down Allen Creek was the site of the second Demaris-McKenzie mill. The mill, like so many others, was moved to “follow the timber.” Maxine McKenzie remembers the steep log slide that guided the logs down the mountain; dangerous business, logging.

The third and final D-M mill site was on McKay Creek just west of the national forest boundary. This third mill was to be the end of the

D-M sawmill business. The mill had been in operation less than two weeks when it burned. The insurance company required a full two weeks of operations before insurance coverage would become effective. Demaris and Mckenzie lost everything.

Circa 1938, a young Ochoco Lumber Company grows up. Photographer unknown. Sent to me by someone on the Internet.

