

Thorn Brothers Sawmill

Snow Mountain: 1937-1939

It probably isn't stretching the truth if one says that every sawmill operation is unique. But the Thorn Brothers Sawmill operated in a way that no other sawmill did and that uniqueness was that ranchers brought in the logs they wanted sawed into lumber then when the lumber was ready the same ranchers hauled the lumber away.

Although this unique way of operation was sometimes put aside for the more conventional operation, it was the norm rather than the exception.

The Thorn Sawmill was located on Snow Mountain in Grant County at Township 19S, Range 26E, Section 5. This was near Boundary Spring. Almost no evidence of the mill remains today but in the fall of 2002 my sister-in-law, Dottie Morisette, with her trusty metal detector, found enough material to convince me that she had pinned down the exact site. That site *is just about* where it is indicated on some older maps.

I first learned that this operation had existed from my brother, Bill. He asked me one day if I had ever heard of a mill named Thorn and I said that I hadn't. Our Dad had pointed out the site to Bill on a hunting trip many years ago. After talking with Bill, who knew nothing more about the mill than its location, I added the operation to my growing list. Now the problem became that of finding someone who could tell me about the operation.

My first recourse was the Prineville telephone book. I found a couple of listings for Thorn but when I called and posed my questions the person on the other end sort of assumed that I was some sort of crazy person.

Eventually I did locate a woman in Madras who had been married to a Thorn and she offered to "ask around" and see if she could come up with some information. In the end Dorothy Griffin could offer no help. But I don't give up easily.

In the spring of 1996, Bill and I went on an exploring trip to Snow Mountain with the express purpose of locating the Thorn site. We found the map location with no trouble but couldn't find any rubble that would suggest a sawmill operation. We, unlike Bill's wife, didn't have a metal detector with us.

Suffering a little disappointment we trudged on to the Ellingson sawmill site on the South Fork of the John Day River. I had been to that site before and wanted to show it to Bill. After spending some time walking the Ellingson site we headed up Forest Road 58 towards Rager Ranger Station.

The forest was in full bloom and had never looked more beautiful. We were looking at the forest as "civilians," and not lumbermen. From a lumberman's point of view one could see quite a lot "wrong" with the forest (like no large trees). And I still didn't know anything about the Thorn Sawmill. That was about to change.

Because I had identified quite a few sawmill operations near Paulina, someone suggested that I talk with John Sharp. I called John and made an appointment to visit him at his horse facility out the Madras Highway just over the Jefferson County line.

John is an amazing man and a wonderful story-teller but what really caught my attention was when John mentioned that, as a young man, he had worked at a mill on Snow Mountain run by Hank Thorn and Calvin Sherman (where the "brothers" part of the name came from I never did

determine). John Sharp is the only person I've found that knows anything about the Thorn Brothers Sawmill. He knew quite a lot.

But let me tell you a little about John before I get into the sawmill business. John is still breaking horses today at age 90+. John's techniques have something in common with the now famous "horse whisperer", Monty Roberts (*The Man Who Listens to Horses*).¹ John's techniques are different but also very gentle. I watched John take a horse fresh off the Warm Springs Indian Reservation and "tame" it within just a few minutes.

Not to give any of John's techniques away, I'll just say he employs a long 'stick' of bamboo.

John was born in 1914 on the Choctaw Reservation in Oklahoma. He first came to Oregon in 1932 but returned to Oklahoma to finish school. He returned to the Paulina Country in 1934 and has been in Central Oregon ever since.

Most of John's life has been involved with ranching, his own or other people's. But as a young man he spent a few months working at the Thorn Sawmill.

When I asked John if he could give me the years the sawmill was in operation he reminded me that it was quite some time ago and he had been only a kid. We did manage to pin down the years 1937 to 1939, but those dates are only rough estimates.

In those years, individuals could acquire timber, up to 10,000 board feet (bf), free from the government. Ranchers harvested the trees and brought them to the Thorn Sawmill which operated without a pond.

The plant was, as most were at the time, a single circular saw. The size of the saw limited the logs to about 2½ feet in diameter. Mark Durgan had a little crawler tractor for skidding logs. The logs were skidded to a spot on a little hill above what amounted to the carriage and were then rolled down the gentle slope and onto the carriage.

Earl Laughlin had a little Chevrolet truck into which he put a second transmission to give the rig sufficient power to haul lumber. It was this truck that John Sharp drove when it was discovered he didn't weigh enough to be on either end of a misery whip.

John tells this story:

A very interesting little incident happened while I was hauling this lumber out. As I say, this little truck had all the power in the world cause it had 2 transmissions just like they've got in the big trucks now with the extra brownie [sic] or whatever they wanted to call them. But this just had 2 ordinary transmissions in it. And you put it down those two and it would just crawl along. But it was so short-wheel based and you got 16 foot lumber on it, if you gave it a little bit of gas, it would rear up going up the hill and stand on its tail.

Earl was a pretty heavy man so he'd come and get up on the front end of the truck and pull it back down to the ground and I'd get up over the hill. The truck didn't have any breaks either, so I missed a gear going up the hill and down the hill I'd come. Oh no, it was exciting. I was headed right back into that sawmill and Calvin and Earl was both right back in there and their ol' eyes got as big as a saucer, you know.

Anyway, I thought there was a road going down and we was camped down below the mill so I wheeled her around and down that road I started. And I looked down and there was tent town and I though "Oh, I'll wipe out everything down there." There was a cabin that we did our cooking in and we called it the cook shack. So, I saw this big saw dust pile so I bent her around and I backed into this saw dust pile. And it just set there and teetered. And I was setting on 3 wheels when it quit, there was one front wheel off the ground.

1. A fictionalized version of someone like Monty is Nicholas Evans' *The Horse Whisperer* which was made into a popular movie starring Robert Redford.

Earl and Calvin came charging around there and Calvin said, “Well, one thing about it. That boy was thinking all the time.”

After cutting the logs into lumber, men moved the lumber away from the mill and stacked it for air drying; no kilns for this operation. There were about nine or ten men working at the mill. There was a cook and cook shack and probably some shacks for sleeping but not a real “logging camp” as we usually think of them.

Because of the altitude, the mill operated only during the brief summer months. Snow probably covered the ground for at least half the year if not longer in those days.

Something else that might have been unique about the Thorn Sawmill: they cleared the sawdust chute by sending the camp dog sliding down the thing. The dog's weight caused him to slide the length of the chute whereas the light (and damp) sawdust often hung up before reaching the burn pile.



The open burn piles, here and elsewhere, burned all summer yet I've found no evidence that they ever were the cause of fires in the forest. An interesting fact in itself.

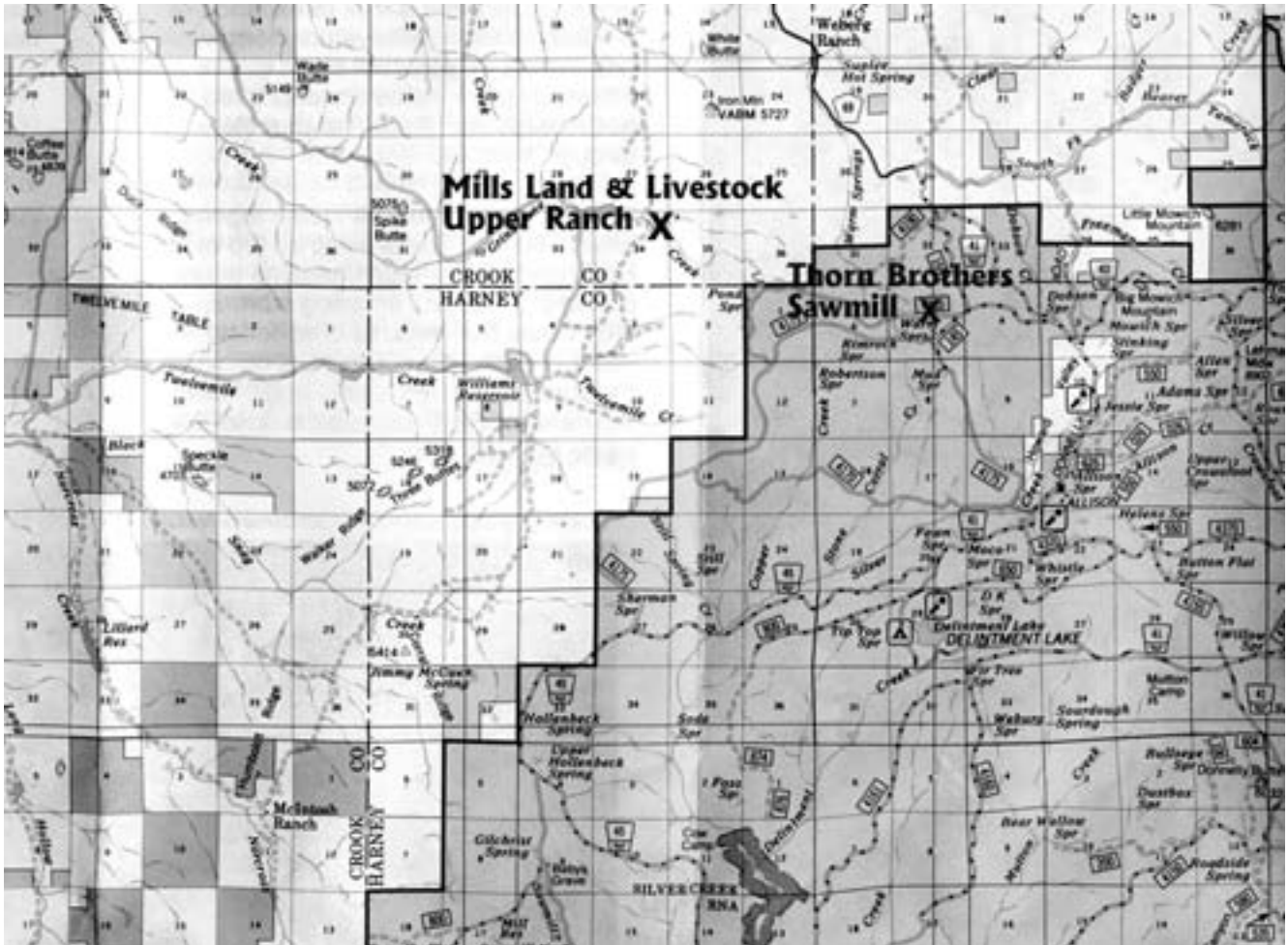
John had lots of other stories and I must have sat listening to him for some three hours. I went back for a repeat visit some weeks later to fill in some details. When you ask John a question you don't get an answer, you get a story—and he's an expert at telling them.

John also worked around some of the mills in Paulina but most of the details of those days are no longer present in his memory. Sadly, I haven't found any one that does remember those Paulina operations.

The day Bill and I visited the Thorn Brothers Sawmill site was a beautiful summer day, actually, it was the Fourth of July. The forest was bright green with lots of wild flowers. We both remarked that the grass seemed greener in July than usual; don't remember the drought conditions that year—seems like there have been more drought years since my return in 1988 than not.

Bill and I were also impressed with how clear of underbrush this part of the Snow Mountain Ranger District forest was. This part of the forest was more park-like than what we were use to seeing in the Ochoco & Maury mountain portions of the Ochoco National Forest.

Our visit was before Bill's wife used her metal detector to confirm the mill site's location. All we found was this old vehicle door. Could this have been the door on the truck that John Sharp had such fun with?



Please forgive my lack of skill in creating good maps. The confinement to B&W doesn't help matters.

Many of you are familiar with Delintment Lake (I've never been there!) so are familiar with this part of Snow Mountain. Years ago Bill, Mom, and I were at Pond Springs (speaking of natural beauty). On this trip we were seeing how close we could get to the Mills Land & Livestock Company's upper ranch without getting shot. I had been warned, after being denied permission to visit the ranch's site, that there was a naked "Squaw" that patrolled the GI Ranch's property wearing nothing but boots & holstered guns.

From Pond Springs we could see the ranch complex down near the eastern edge of the Grindstone Creek reservoir. The ranch buildings have not been used since Hudspeth bought the ranch from Bob Sartain in 1945, who had bought the upper ranch from my Mother's uncle, Orrin Mills.¹ Bill is nine years younger than I and never had the pleasure of spending hunting season and summers there. My sister, Joan, and I still recall the fun we had and the trouble we produced. The most frightened I've ever been is one late afternoon when Uncle Orrin took me with him up into the timber on Snow Mountain to visit his sheep herder, Joe Hoover, in his small tent.

It had become dark and I had to do my business. Uncle wouldn't come with me and the dark was terrifying so I wet my pants and bawled for hours while Orrin and Joe made fun of me. Uncle Orrin loved to tease.

1. The 30,000+ acre ranch had been divided between Orrin & his brother, Darrell, upon the death of the ranch's pioneer founder, Ike Mills. The stories I could tell about that man...



AMERICAN PINE PRODUCTS

You're Invited

OPEN HOUSE

Thursday, June 15, 1995

For Thirty-six years, **AMERICAN PINE PRODUCTS** has served this community both as a major employer of our people and as an innovative leader in wood remanufacturing. This summer, we are celebrating our first anniversary as a unit of **HUTTIG SASH AND DOOR**, the largest Distributor of Moulding and Millwork in the United States.

We'd like to share our enthusiasm with you by opening our facility for guided tours (45-60 min.) as follows:

GENERAL PUBLIC
8:40 a.m. through 10:40 a.m. and
12:00 p.m. through 3:15 p.m.

CHAMBER MEMBERS
"After Hours" event
2:00 p.m. through 3:15 p.m. and
4:30 p.m. through 7:00 p.m.

Please join us under the tent near our main entrance (North on McKay Rd.) for introductions, refreshments, and a most interesting tour.

This is no "run of the mill" event!

One big log. No information on where this came from or the date of the photo.

At left, reproduction of *Central Oregonian* advertisement when American Pine Products hosted their open house.