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The Timber Industry and its Effects on the Pacific
Northwest

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Since its infancy, the timber industry has had a very strong influence on the Pacific Northwest. The main reason for this, obviously, is that the Northwest is an area rich in exploitable natural resources. It seems only natural that an industry centered on the harvesting, processing, transport, and sale of various wood products would find the area an attractive place in which to do business. Often times because of this, when one mentions "Oregon", a person naturally thinks of timber, and perhaps on another level, the timber industry itself; the two phrases have become practically synonymous. Obviously an industry cannot be so closely associated with a specific region without having a profound impact not only economically, but also socially, culturally, and environmentally as well.

The changes brought about by the timber industry had the largest impact in Oregon's smaller towns and rural communities, places that were not economically diverse. For decades, towns like Coos Bay and Lebanon had their communal sense of identity inextricably linked with the forest products industry. Mills and logging operations were more than just employers; the "mill town" or "timber town" culture became a way of life in these places. Intentional or otherwise, the timber industry provided more than just a living to these people. It also provided a way for whole communities to proudly define themselves and set themselves apart.

The sense of identity and inclusion that lasted for more than 50 years in some of these communities was eventually snatched away with the dramatic collapse of the industry on which that identity was based. There are many reasons behind that collapse. In Lebanon, for example, market forces and corporate decisions were the main causes for the mill closures. In other areas, like the Blue Mountains in Eastern Oregon, historian Nancy Langston argues it was misguided attempts at forest management that eventually destroyed forests and crippled the local timber industry.¹

Unfortunately, environmental historians often times focus much of their energy on how the physical landscape is affected by man's exploitation, and in doing so overlook the effects of that exploitation on communities and individuals. Historian

¹ Nancy Langston, "Environmental History and Restoration in the Western Forests," Journal of the West 38 (1999): 49.

Nancy Wood, for example, is a staunch opponent of clear-cutting because of its powerful negative impact on forest ecosystems.² Forests have been damaged by these practices, often beyond repair, and it is obviously important to recognize that. However, it is also important, perhaps even more so, to recognize and examine the damage done to community stability in areas that were abandoned by timber companies. Damaged forests are not the extent of the timber industry's legacy.

The environmental effects of logging and other timber industry practices on areas of the Pacific Northwest have been vast, and there is no shortage of material concerning those effects. In taking a closer look at those practices and how some historians have viewed them, we can hopefully begin to understand the process and evolution of the industry itself, and how that ongoing evolution has changed the landscape of the Northwest and the lives of the people both directly and indirectly influenced by it. By its very nature the industry is an exploitative one. By examining past policies, and how scholars have viewed those policies, we may be able to achieve a greater understanding of how the timber industry has shaped both the physical and social landscapes of the Pacific Northwest.

Forestry policies of governmental agencies and private industries have undergone significant changes since the early 1900's. During their early years of operation timber companies were less concerned with the impact their actions would have on the habitats they operated in, both at the time and in the future, and more concerned with implementing policies that would insure the highest levels of production for their facilities. In other words, those companies' highest priorities were not the overall health of the forest and acting in a way that might minimize possible long-term negative effects, but quite the contrary. As we shall see, the concerns of the early timber industries in the Pacific Northwest were centered on how to best exploit the forests in order to maximize profits and production. The drive for maximum profits continued through the 1980's. However, when market forces and mismanagement made procuring those profits difficult, some timber corporations, like the one in Lebanon, Oregon, closed plants and began to restructure their organizations, displacing workers and communities in the process.

² Nancy Wood, "Clearcut: A Conservationist Views America's Timber Industry," American West 8 (1971).

To better understand the mindset behind forest policy in the years prior to World War II it is crucial to first understand the attitudes of both policy makers and industrial leaders concerning the value of forests. The prevailing attitude of the day was that forests served little purpose other than producing resources for the betterment of mankind; they had little to no inherent value, but rather existed solely for man's exploitation. Natural forests, and old-growth forests in particular, were considered "inefficient".³ In order to remedy the stagnancy of these areas, agencies like the US Forest Service felt the need to "re-organize" the forests through a strict policy of scientific management. The agency's unyielding philosophy that scientific managers could control the forests and manipulate them in ways that would ensure the desired results, even after it had become increasingly clear that those policies were not only failing, but actually working against Forest Service goals, is what historian Paul Hirt calls the "conspiracy of optimism" that pervaded forestry policy during the last half of the 20th century.⁴

The goals of the Forest Service focused primarily on moving forests quickly toward "regulation". This regulation was the first step toward creating a "sustained yield" that would allow lumbermen to harvest trees at rates equal to their growth, thus providing a perpetual supply of timber.⁵ An old growth forest with mature trees did not produce enough new growth to meet those needs, so in order to move the forests toward sustained yield with vigorous "second growth" timber, old growth forests must be harvested as quickly as possible. Because old growth forests were in a state of equilibrium where the amount of growth was equal to the amount of decay, they were considered wasteful and inefficient. The solution was to replace those old stands with vibrant young forests that were growing faster than they were decaying.⁶

During the years prior to the increased demand for forest products brought about by World War II, there was a relatively small demand for timber, and over-production had caused prices to drop dramatically. Private timberland owners still had bills to pay, however, and even though the market was glutted with too much timber, those

³ Paul W. Hirt, A Conspiracy of Optimism (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 18.

⁴ *Ibid.*, xxxiii.

⁵ Nancy Langston, Forest Dreams, Forest Nightmares (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), 98.

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landowners could not afford to slow production.⁷ Although the technology that would eventually allow loggers to greatly increase their efficiency in the woods, such as gasoline powered chainsaws and army surplus heavy equipment, was not yet available, harvest levels and competition remained high. Old growth forests were the targets of this extraction, and although the Forest Service often threatened to begin regulation of private lands, those threats were eventually silenced when the Second World War changed America's priorities.⁸

In many Oregon towns prior to 1940, lumber mills operated at a furious pace. Historian William Robbins, who has focused much of his attention on the Coos Bay area, tells how "...in 1907 the lumber trade entered a prolonged period of depressed prices and overproduction" because of lower demand and "cut-throat" competition.⁹ These circumstances made turning a profit difficult, and some facilities were forced to cut back production levels or stop operations completely. Largely as a result, Coos Bay and nearby communities, like Gold Beach, faced a very tumultuous future in later decades.

To make matters worse, timber companies showed no concern for the conservation or re-forestation of harvested areas. The reason for this, as Robbins notes, was that "The big profits were in cutting, stripping, and then moving on to the next stand."¹⁰ Because of the great abundance of old growth timber, and the lack of an economic incentive to do so, timber companies saw little need to concern themselves with establishing sustained yield practices. Eventually, however, those companies changed their view on sustained yield, not out of concern for the future of the forests, but as a way to bolster their bottom lines during difficult economic times.¹¹

During the 1920's sustained yield policy was viewed positively by both forest regulators and private industry leaders. According to Robbins, there was widespread belief that sustained yield practices would "...prevent ghost towns and abandoned sawmill communities."¹² Private industry leaders hoped the policy would lower harvesting levels and ease the market strain that had been created by over production,

⁷ William G. Robbins, Hard Times in Paradise: Coos Bay, Oregon, 1850-1986 (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988), 117.

⁸ Ibid., 126.

⁹ Ibid., 48.

¹⁰ Ibid., 126.

¹¹ William G. Robbins, Landscapes of Conflict (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), 150.

¹² Ibid.

thus raising prices. Market forces had coincidentally brought the goals of the Forest Service and private industry together, albeit for different reasons. With the coming of the watershed event of World War II, market forces once again transformed forest policy and caused private industry to lose its enthusiasm for sustained yield once again.

However, Nancy Langston, Professor of Environmental History at the University of Wisconsin, argues that forest policies were shaped less by capitalist forces and more by the unbridled optimism of man's ability to control nature. Langston argues it was largely this attitude that eventually led to the detrimental effects forest management would have on the environment and communities alike. Early foresters had tremendous faith and confidence in their ability to regulate forests and grow trees "as a crop".¹³ Because Forest Service officials were positive they could effectively manage harvested old growth forests into vibrant and productive "second growth" forests, they were not concerned with the speed at which old growth forests were being depleted.¹⁴ What those officials were concerned about, however, was the lack of concern logging companies showed for the harvested areas once the timber had been removed.¹⁵ According to the Forest Service, care must be taken to ensure that those areas would once again become productive forests. If private industry would not cooperate, sustained yield could never become a reality. With the approach of World War II, however, war time demand would make sustained yield much less of a priority for both the Forest Service and private industry.

In Landscapes of Conflict: The Oregon Story 1940-2000, historian William Robbins details the effects of wartime timber production in Oregon. The onset of World War II caused a huge rise in the demand for timber products. The federal government had declared timber an "essential war material", and the flooded market conditions of the 1920's quickly became a thing of the past.¹⁶ Robbins argues that because of this huge increase in demand, controlling harvesting levels through the implementation of sustained yield became a moot point. Private industry no longer needed governmental policy to rein-in over-harvesting; in fact, with the huge economic opportunity presented

¹³ Langston, Forest Dreams, 97.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 116.

¹⁶ Robbins, Landscapes of Conflict, 29.

to them by war time demand, lumber companies now showed very little interest in the implementation of sustained yield practices.¹⁷ According to Robbins, market forces like skyrocketing demand were a major factor in determining forest policy during and after World War II.

The war time boom was aided and accelerated by many factors. Not only had the demand for forest products increased drastically, new technological advances allowed loggers and sawmills to take full advantage of the favorable market conditions. Inventions like the gasoline powered chainsaw and the increasing availability of heavy equipment in the 1940's allowed logging companies to extract timber at once unattainable rates.¹⁸ In addition, a general mindset pervaded the industry and policy makers during the war that made sustained yield policies a very low priority. Timber companies took advantage of the heightened sense of patriotism during the war, using it as an excuse to cut more timber and move sustained yield practices to the back burner; after all, the nation was at war and needed resources -- this was not the time for private industry to concern itself with conservation.¹⁹ Threats of increased regulation, which the Forest Service had made in earlier years, also disappeared during the war.

As the harvesting rate continued to grow, more strain was placed on the Forest Service to increase the amount of federal lands available to timber companies. According to historian Paul Hirt, World War II was a defining moment for the Forest Service. The war, Hirt argues, changed the role of the Forest Service from "...a custodian of the national forests..." to "...a major provider of lumber and pulpwood."²⁰ The post World War II housing boom and the subsequent Cold War kept harvesting levels and the call for the availability of federal timberlands high. Those levels eventually proved to be unsustainable, and even though some forestry experts, like Aldo Leopold, recognized the potential dangers, huge market demand and the unwavering belief in the ability to regulate and manage forests allowed them to proceed unhindered.²¹ Leopold published

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Robbins, Hard Times, 130.

¹⁹ Hirt, xxii.

²⁰ Ibid., 45.

²¹ Hirt, 57

an essay in 1939 warning his colleagues of the dangers of over-manipulating forests to increase harvest levels, but his words of caution fell on deaf ears.²²

In 1955 Thornton T. Munger, the director of the Pacific Northwest Forest Experiment Station published an article concerning forest policy and research. In it he described how policies were shaped and by whom, and outlined the priorities of his department. Munger was charged with directing research facilities that would provide data and guidance the Forest Service would rely on while deciding potential policies. While Munger was more concerned with the ecological effects of logging than private industry leaders, he was also concerned with studies of how to maximize the “production levels” of Oregon’s forests, with the hope of making them more efficient. Munger’s vision of efficiency, however, was the successful implementation of policies that would maximize the amount of timber that could be harvested by private companies.²³

Munger states that “private timberland owners and operators” worked closely with the PNW Station in conceptualizing and implementing new policies.²⁴ As the office itself expanded, more federal money was allocated to, as Munger put it “...put good scientific forestry into effect...” and allow the agency to perform “mill production studies” in order to illustrate “...how to get the most out of logs of all sizes and at what cost.”²⁵ The subtext of these policies, though it may not have been expressly mentioned, was the need to discover how to exploit the forests to maximum levels. Accordingly, research must be done, and forestry policy set, in ways that would ensure exploitation could continue. There was little regard for the overall health of the habitat, at least by conservationist standards, so the flow of profits to timber industries could carry on uninterrupted. For Munger and PNW Station, however, a “healthy” forest was a regulated forest; there was no need to wrestle with questions concerning the inherent value of forests or habitat.

In short, what Munger envisioned were forests that made logging and other timber industry practices both easier and more profitable. As historians Langston and Hirt have noted, however, by changing the landscape in this way, these policies would be

²² Ibid., 42.

²³ Thornton T. Munger, “Fifty Years of Forest Research in the Pacific Northwest,” Oregon Historical Quarterly 56 (1955): 235.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 235-37.

detrimental not only to the forests themselves, but to the communities that were dependent upon timber industry dollars. Those communities, like Lebanon and Coos Bay, among others, found themselves overly reliant on the forest industry. A severe lack of diversity in these local economies made grappling with the inevitable slowdown of timber production all the more difficult. Mill towns like Lebanon had, through no fault of their own, found themselves at the mercy of unpredictable market conditions and corporate managers. When those market conditions became less favorable, and those managers, in turn, decided to restructure and reorganize, it was the community that suffered the consequences.

According to sustained yield philosophy, young (“regulated”) forests could supposedly yield more desirable timber than old (“unregulated”) forests, and could do so indefinitely if properly managed. Because of this, experts like Munger believed the quickest, most efficient way to move toward regulation was to remove “decadent and over-mature” trees in order to clear the way for new ones.²⁶ As Nancy Langston notes, the best way to achieve this goal was for policy makers to entice timber companies to set up operations and begin “construction” of the new forests by first destroying the old ones; unfortunately, this is exactly what happened in the Blue Mountains of eastern Oregon. Langston argues this policy and its practices permanently damaged the forests and were a large reason for the collapse of the local timber industry in the area during the 1980’s.²⁷

In their fervor for forest regulation and profits, timber companies over-harvested old growth timber and destroyed any species of vegetation they believed would compete with the new trees they hoped to grow.²⁸ The unregulated forest needed to be replaced as quickly as possible to make way for the new. Thornton Munger himself stated the urgency of the situation, claiming old growth timber was simply an obstacle that must be removed immediately to alleviate “...the idleness of the great areas of stagnant virgin forest land that are getting no selective cutting treatment whatsoever.”²⁹ The fact that old growth timber was important to both wildlife habitat and overall forest health was entirely inconsequential. There were areas of untouched forestland that were not being

²⁶ Langston, “Environmental History”, 46-7.

²⁷ Langston, *Forest Dreams*, 268.

²⁸ Langston, “Environmental History”, 48-50.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

exploited to the maximum and this was simply unacceptable. Policies were implemented immediately in order to solve this problem. Langston claims that, "...across the 5.5 million acres of public forests of the Blue Mountains, federal foresters focused on liquidating old-growth pine to make a better 'nature'."³⁰

As Langston notes, the overconfidence of Munger and Forest Service personnel was truly extraordinary. She claims policy makers knew these practices would be detrimental to the future health and productive capacity of the forests, but viewed them as a "...reasonable price to pay for getting forests regulated as soon as possible."³¹ Munger and other officials argued the drastic decrease of old-growth resources was a vital first step on the road to regulation. According to Langston, it was this policy - destroying the old to make way for the new - set up by early forestry experts concerned with short-term goals that eventually crippled the timber industry in these areas 50 years later.

It was not only federal forest policy and industrial practices that eventually led to serious problems, however; there were also other forces involved. Robbins explains that because of the nature of the industry, "...isolated, back-country forest communities..." had found themselves at the mercy of financiers and banking institutions located thousands of miles away.³² For example, the corporation that controlled the Lebanon mill at the time of its closure was headquartered on the opposite side of the continent, in Connecticut. Market forces that steered the course of timber companies, and people who made important decisions about how those companies would react to those forces, were detached from the local communities that were greatly affected by the course of those events.³³ Those decision makers were not concerned with dislocated workers, abandoned forests, or the status of wildlife habitat in the area. They were concerned with either finding ways to increase profits, or finding ways to diminish losses. It seems what happened to a community and landscape after it became unprofitable was of little concern.

The plywood mill that opened in Lebanon, Oregon in 1940 and operated there for 45 years is an interesting example of the relationship between local concerns and distant

³⁰ Langston, "Environmental History", 48.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Robbins, Hard Times, 49.

³³ William G. Robbins, Landscapes of Conflict: The Oregon Story, 1940-2000 (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), 77.

management. Between the years of 1941 and 1985, Lebanon's mill changed hands four times, either by being sold outright to new ownership or having its current parent company merge with a bigger conglomerate.³⁴ The biggest and most important of these mergers occurred in 1967, when U.S. Plywood, the current owner of the mill, joined with Champion Paper & Fiber to create the Champion International Corporation, headquartered in Stamford, Connecticut.³⁵ Champion International was just that: international. It had vast timber holdings in the United States, and mills and factories of many different kinds processing forest products in the U.S., Canada, and South America. Lebanon's mill had become one very small part of a huge multi-national operation, and local community stability slipped further down the list of corporate concerns. At the top of that list was, of course, profit. In 1985, when Champion International decided it could no longer get "...a reasonable return on the capital invested in [Champion's] western facilities..." it closed eight processing plants in Oregon, Washington, and California, including the plywood mill in Lebanon.³⁶

In Hard Times in Paradise, which chronicles the tumultuous experiences of another mill town, Coos Bay, Oregon, William Robbins illustrates how the concern for profits always took precedent over community stability: "Business leaders owe their allegiance to stockholders and corporate dividends and pay little attention to the social health of the communities that produce their wealth."³⁷ From this perspective, forests were not the only things the timber industry exploited. When times were good in 'timber towns' lumber corporations projected themselves as great providers and protectors of community interests, both socially and economically. They gave employment and opportunity to many people who would have otherwise been without. They appeared to care about workers and families and local economies. They had a vested, long-term interest in communities where they would operate for years to come. When times got tougher and circumstances less profitable, however, they locked the doors of their mills and skulked out of town, and according to William Robbins, left "...an impoverished

³⁴ "Profile of Champion International," n.d., <www.endgame.org/champion.html> (26 May 2006)

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ "Champion Tells Reasons for Closure," Lebanon Express, 31 January 1985.

³⁷ Robbins, Hard Times, 154.

social and economic environment” in their wake.³⁸ From at least one corporate perspective, however, the history and effects of the industry were anything but negative.

In a book written by Catherine Baldwin and published by Willamette Industries Inc., another influential timber company, titled Making the Most of the Best: Willamette Industries’ Seventy-Five Years, that company’s history is presented from a corporate perspective. In the early years of the company, policy was centered on growth and expansion. Early company leaders focused their energies on the procurement of more land for logging, railroad access, mill-start ups, and recruiting and organizing a labor force. Another important goal was turning Willamette’s facilities into “models of utilization and efficiency”.³⁹ In 1948, Mel Cutler, manager of Willamette’s Foster Mill, claimed that goal had been reached: “Let Chicago meat packers talk about using all but the squeal of the pig. We’re even using the bark of the Douglas fir tree. That’s utilization to the Nth degree. Waste is as obsolete around our plant as the Dodo bird.”⁴⁰

This emphasis on efficiency was not exclusive to mills and logging operations, however; throughout the 1920’s and beyond foresters set strategies they hoped would turn the forests themselves into more efficient and scientific entities. In essence, they set out to take the ‘nature’ out of the forest and turn it into something different altogether. In the eyes of many experts, like Thornton Munger for example, a ‘natural’ forest served little if any purpose and was vastly inferior to an ‘efficient’ one.

Amazingly, there are few instances where Baldwin mentions environmental concerns, and those are done only passing. While it seems like a history published by the company itself would take the opportunity to mention positive forest management, the theme is strangely absent. Even so, the book is written from a very nostalgic point of view, and displays Willamette Industries’ leaders and policies in a very heroic light. The reader is led to believe that company policy, whether it concerned a mill’s operating capacity, land use considerations, railroad contracts, or even mill closures, were implemented not to increase stockholder profits, but to extend opportunities to various

³⁸ Ibid., 168.

³⁹ Catherine A. Baldwin, Making the Most of the Best: Willamette Industries’ Seventy-Five Years (Portland, Oregon: Willamette Industries Inc., 1982), 76.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

communities and potential or current workers.⁴¹ The negative circumstances that often preceded these decisions were also often misrepresented. They were not shown as circumstances brought about by faulty company policy or capitalistic market forces, (though they actually were, more often than not); rather, they were portrayed as simply bad luck or the result of the federal government meddling in timber industry affairs. For instance, Baldwin claims, "Dallas and WVLCO. [two Willamette Industries mills] would have sailed through the Depression in a comparatively good position if it were not for President Franklin D. Roosevelt's recovery program."⁴²

In stark contrast to this viewpoint is that of conservationist Nancy Wood who, in her 1971 article "Clearcut: A Conservationist Views America's Timber Industry", examines the industry's damaging effects on forest ecosystems. Wood argues that past industry policies have not only been detrimental to the trees themselves, which often times failed to grow back even in areas that were replanted, but in other areas as well. For example, in order to secure federal land contracts, timber companies were required to first create an extensive network of logging roads that sometimes traversed back and forth across thousands of acres of forest habitat. Even in areas where reforestation is successful, those roads, which are useless to anyone other than logging companies, will remain. The damage done by clearcutting and road building also effects animal habitat. The plight of salmon is made more difficult due to the increased run-off of sediment into rivers and streams caused by the removal of trees and undergrowth that naturally slow that process.⁴³

Wood also attacks the historically professed philosophy of sustained yield -- the creation of perpetual forests that was a Forest Service standard since the department's very beginning. This philosophy claims that if managed properly, National Forest lands can produce trees for harvesting, indefinitely. Wood, however, notes the dangers within this line of thinking:

The disturbing part of this "trees ad infinitum" philosophy is that two things must happen to achieve it: All the old growth forests must be cut down and new trees planted that must be

⁴¹ Ibid., 35-36.

⁴² Ibid., 34.

⁴³ Nancy Wood, "Clearcut: A Conservationist Views America's Timber Industry," American West 8 (1971): 11.

made to grow no matter what happens to soil, watershed, and wildlife, no matter what the effects of fertilizers and pesticides may prove to have in the long run.⁴⁴

Policy makers and private industries have historically seen the value of forests only in terms of dollars and cents. For them, forests held no intrinsic value but existed only to be exploited. The health of a forest was important only insofar as it related to man's ability to continue that exploitation. In other words, timber companies were only interested in the wellbeing of forests because they depended directly on those forests for economic reasons. Of course, those companies had a very different definition of the word "health" than conservationists. For the timber companies a healthy forest was one that was producing harvestable trees at the present time and also into the foreseeable future. For conservationists, on the other hand, a healthy forest was one that was free from man made encumbrances and left to flourish naturally. Conservationists understand, however, that the exploitation of forested land will continue, but they argue that truly harmful practices, like clearcutting, should be avoided because they come at too great a price.

Wood is not only critical of privately owned timber companies, but also uses the degradation of habitat as an indictment of the Forest Service. Accordingly, Wood accuses the Forest Service of adopting a "...search and destroy..." policy of "...maximum exploitation..."⁴⁵ She argues that the flaws in forest management are not solely a result of bad policies; the problem goes deeper. The philosophical foundation of Forest Service management policy was that "...if there are big trees that can be economically cut, they should be cut."⁴⁶ That core assumption leads inevitably to the adoption and implementation of policies designed to meet that goal. Wood argues that unless activists can effect a change within that core philosophy, forest habitat will continue to be degraded and the overall health of the ecosystem will continue to decline.

The Forest Service policy of maximum exploitation was a blessing to many of Oregon's small towns during the early 1940's. Timber rich areas on the Oregon coast, like Coos Bay, and further inland towns in the Willamette Valley, such as Sweet Home

⁴⁴ Wood., 12.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 14.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 15.

and Lebanon, enjoyed never-before-seen prosperity in the post-war era. The increased demand for forest products and the subsequent arrival of the timber industry transformed the entire town of Lebanon and changed its identity forever.

Prior to the arrival of the plywood mill in 1940, Lebanon's population had been growing consistently. The Great Depression seemed, for a variety of reasons, to have a less pronounced affect on the local economy, so much so that in 1930 the Lebanon Express claimed, "...the Lebanon section is one of the most stable and prosperous communities in the whole United States."⁴⁷ New industries aimed at the large, close, and untapped timber resources of the surrounding area, including various logging and milling activities, helped Lebanon prosper even during this period of global economic instability. As "dustbowl" and other immigrants continued to arrive, housing shortages created increased demand for lumber and other home building materials. An interesting cycle developed: exploitation of timber resources caused an increase in population, which caused a need for more exploitation of timber resources. The steady increase in population in the 1930's may not have been surprising, considering Lebanon's relative immunity to the Great Depression, but it was not until 1940 and the arrival of the new plywood mill that population growth spiked.⁴⁸

At the time of its construction, the Evans Plywood Mill was the largest plywood mill in the world.⁴⁹ Not surprisingly, the work force then in Lebanon did not include the necessary man-power to effectively operate the mill, and hopeful "would be" mill workers began to arrive by the hundreds. As a result, Lebanon's population grew from 2,731 to 5,873 between 1940 and 1950, an astounding 115% increase.⁵⁰ During its first year of operation alone, Evans Plywood employed an impressive 580 people.⁵¹ This rapid influx of new workers and their families stimulated Lebanon's other industries, so much so that there was concern the city itself could not keep up with increased demand.

New homes were being sold faster than they could be built, and city officials realized a large portion of new residential development areas had to be created to make

⁴⁷"Lebanon Bank Reports Show City Prospering," Lebanon Express, 1 October 1930.

⁴⁸ Mary Kathryn Gallagher, City of Lebanon Historic Context Statement, (Linn County Planning Department, Sept. 1994), 187.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

room for even more neighborhoods. In 1941, 40 new homes were built in Lebanon's southwest corner near Walnut Park. These new, pre-fabricated homes were built specifically for mill workers and their families. The Lebanon Express claimed "...this group of homes represents just another permanent and valuable feature of the advent of Lebanon's new Evans Products company plywood mill..."⁵² M.D. Tucker, Vice President of Evans Plywood, made an agreement with the builder to purchase every home in the new addition and rent or sell them to mill employees. Tentative arrangements were also made to begin construction on 20 more homes in the same area following the completion of the original development.

World War II brought increased demand for plywood and other timber products for military use, and Evans Plywood worked at peak capacity to fulfill those needs. In 1944, however, the Evans Corporation sold the mill in what was the first of many management changes, and Evans Plywood became the Cascades Plywood Corporation, headquartered in Portland, Oregon.⁵³ During the later part of the 1940's, the mill enjoyed a very pronounced profitability that manifested itself in the addition of new departments, more workers, and an overall increase in the scale of mill operations.

The most important new development came in 1946, when Cascades Plywood began construction of a new battery separator plant just north of the plywood mill. This new plant would provide "...year round employment..." to 150 additional workers.⁵⁴ Although the battery separator plant was an economic boost to the community initially, it was relatively short-lived. It operated for only nine years, shutting down in 1955 due to the emergence of rubber and synthetic battery separators, which were vastly superior to their wooden counterparts.⁵⁵

Although the mill was expanding under its new managers, changes in day-to-day operations were small. The relationship between the community and the mill, however, underwent some interesting changes with the arrival of the new owners. Between 1944 and 1967, public relations and corporate community involvement increased substantially along with the scope of mill operations. Cascades Plywood helped form Lebanon's

⁵² "\$100,000 in Homes Underway for Employees," Lebanon Express, 13 March 1941.

⁵³ Ibid., 294.

⁵⁴ "Cascades Plywood Corporation picks Lebanon as site of \$300,000 battery separator plant," Lebanon Express, 28 March 1946.

⁵⁵ "No demand for wood battery separators," Lebanon Express, 10 November 1955.

identity; over the next 18 years the corporation shaped the social, economic, and cultural character of the entire community.

In an effort to illustrate its concern for workers, their families, and the community at large, Cascades Plywood portrayed itself as the community's "big brother". If the town was faced with a problem or concern, it could turn to the corporation for advice, encouragement, or even protection. Mill workers were instilled with the belief that they were members of a special community within a community, a place to belong, and, if necessary, seek refuge from outside forces. These "Cascadians", (as they were often referred to in the company newsletter), were led to believe they could rest easy in the belief that their interests were also the interests of the corporation.⁵⁶ No matter what political or economic upheaval might occur, workers could rest assured the mill was concerned for their welfare.

During the 1950's, the Hot Press, a monthly company newsletter, was delivered to workers to further instill this sense of community and corporate concern. Birth and wedding announcements appeared in every issue, along with a special "Personalities" section that highlighted a couple of fellow workers to let others know of the goings on in their lives, vacation plans, and career progress. The company sports teams were also prominently displayed, and the results of athletic competitions with surrounding teams, (many of which were teams sponsored by other timber industry corporations), were posted. "We just like to let the rest of you know how our boys did..." proclaimed the editor in the September, 1956 issue, and in this particular instance the boys did just fine, "thumping" Western Veneer 8-1 on their way to the Lebanon City League softball championship.⁵⁷

Corporate concern did not limit itself to just workers, however. In the April, 1954 edition, a two page editorial titled "Child Safety..." appears to remind workers of around-the-house dangers that should be attended to in order to prevent tragedy.⁵⁸ This article includes an announcement that a week-long Child Safety Program, designed for "workers and their wives" would take place in the coming months, and everyone was encouraged to attend. Just six months later, teachers from the Lebanon School District visited the

⁵⁶ The Cascades Hot Press, Cascades Plywood Corporation (pub.), Oct. 1958.

⁵⁷ The Cascades Hot Press, Cascades Plywood Corporation (pub.), Sept. 1956.

⁵⁸ "Child Safety...", The Cascades Hot Press, Cascades Plywood Corporation (pub.), Oct. 1954.

mill, took a tour, and most likely took a heavy dose of Cascades Plywood indoctrination. The purpose of the visitation, according to the Hot Press, was to "...thoroughly inform the teachers of Lebanon's business and industrial resources, thereby developing a closer working relationship between the school and the community."⁵⁹ Interestingly, the tour was led by the mill's Vice President in charge of operations and production, a duty that hardly seemed to fit his job description. The mill tried to assume the role of arbitrator between the school and the community by displaying a genuine concern for the quality of public education. Exactly how a tour of the plywood mill by a relatively small number of teachers would bring school and community closer together was not mentioned, but the message was clear: the mill cares about the well-being of workers, their families, and the community as a whole.

Workers at the Weyerhaeuser plant in Coos Bay had a similar familial relationship with their employer, at least until timber production slowed and labor relations became strained. One Weyerhaeuser employee considered the plant a "...school for the young and a home for the old...", a place to learn a trade and enjoy job security.⁶⁰ This was undoubtedly true during the boom years of the 1940's and 1950's, and was exactly the kind of image mill managers projected in their respective communities. However, this supposed parental relationship was only fair weather, at best. Concern for the welfare of workers went hand in hand with high profit levels and amiable labor/management relations.

On-the-job safety was another frequently mentioned concern in the Lebanon mill's monthly newsletter. Different divisions of the mill were often pictured receiving their bonuses for winning the inter-company competition for most consecutive days without an on-the-job injury. To raise safety awareness, the Cascades Safety Program created several Safety Commissions in order to "...make Cascades the safest place to work in the Plywood and Battery Separator industries..."⁶¹ In an interesting quote, however, the reason behind corporate concern for worker safety is revealed: "At Cascades, we are fortunate to have three of the finest [nurses] who attempt to keep time

⁵⁹ "Teachers Visit", The Cascades Hot Press, Cascades Plywood Corporation (pub.), Oct. 1954.

⁶⁰ Robbins, Hard Times, 157.

⁶¹ "Safety at Cascades", The Cascades Hot Press, Cascades Plywood Corporation (pub.), Oct. 1952.

lost due to injuries at a minimum.”⁶² Notice, the nurses are not necessarily attempting to keep worker’s injuries to a minimum; rather, they are attempting to keep *lost work time* due to injuries at a minimum. With the numerous safety programs, it is evident that corporate interests are better served when accident levels are kept down, but that concern does not necessarily mean management was concerned with the well being of workers; it means management was concerned with lower production levels that result from “lost time” due to accidents.

Cascades Plywood even managed to connect safety awareness with good politics. In the 1950’s, the company newsletter capitalized on the anti-communist sentiment running wild in the United States, and proclaimed “The purpose of democracy and of accident prevention are interlocked.”⁶³ Just a few sentences later, corporate writers took the liberty of adding to America’s Declaration of Independence, making it read “...his right to life, liberty and the able-bodied pursuit of happiness.”⁶⁴ To add even more to these dramatics, the publisher asked readers to ponder the impossibility of a “National Soviet Safety Council”, or an “annual safety congress and exposition in Moscow”.⁶⁵ This may be an attempt by ownership to lead workers to believe in the superiority of a capitalist economic system, while at the same time drawing a correlation between owner’s and worker’s interests. (Ironically, capitalist market conditions were the driving force behind the eventual closing of the plant.) Perhaps by focusing on a common enemy like communism, workers would feel more loyalty to ownership and concentrate less on the differences that divide labor and management.

In spite of the efforts of the Hot Press, labor/management relations at the mill were sometimes tenuous. In a six month span in 1942-43 alone, just two years after the mill’s opening, there were two strikes. The main issue in both instances was the “...application of seniority rules...”, rules that the worker’s union claimed must be clearly defined and applied before work would resume.⁶⁶ Neither of these strikes lasted more than a week, however, and the 500 striking workers resumed their duties after union

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ “Individuals Count in America”, The Cascades Hot Press, Cascades Plywood Corporation (pub.), June 1953.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ “War Labor Board Asks Union for Immediate Resumption of Work,” Lebanon Express, 14 January 1943.

demands were met. The longest strike, however, came in 1963, one year after Cascades Plywood sold the mill to the U.S. Plywood Corporation.

In June of 1963, 800 workers walked off the job at Lebanon's mill in a lumber strike that eventually spread across the Pacific Northwest and affected more than 19,000 workers and six timber corporations.⁶⁷ Union demands centered on increased wages and an "hours of labor" clause that would keep weekend work both optional and worth overtime pay. Management, however, hoped to include a "seven-day work week" clause in the contract, allowing mill managers to require weekend work from employees at base wages.⁶⁸ After seven weeks of negotiations, the "Big Six", as the timber companies became known, "...further indicated their willingness to restrict their request for the right to schedule seven-day work weeks...", but the strike continued for four more weeks.⁶⁹ Eventually union demands were met, and though workers did not receive the full wage increase originally proposed, the controversial "seven-day work week" clause was taken off the table. On August 17, after eleven weeks, 500 workers returned to their jobs at Lebanon's mill.⁷⁰

From the mid 1960's until the mill's closure in 1985, the "community within the community" in Lebanon flourished. While mill work is far from glamorous, it did offer steady employment at a family wage, and a chance to belong in a place that had, since shortly after the mill began operations, become known as a "mill town". It was not uncommon for three generations of mill workers to be employed at the same time; many workers (like my father) went directly from their high school graduation ceremonies to their nightly shift on the green-chain. Mill work had become a way of life in Lebanon, and the sense of community and solidarity shared by the townspeople was a direct result. In many ways, the mill gave people their identity, and when it was closed that identity was lost.

Champion International Corporation C.E.O. Andrew C. Sigler, leader of the corporation that owned and operated the Lebanon mill between 1967 and 1985, published a letter in the Lebanon Express describing the reasons behind the closures of the Lebanon

⁶⁷ "Plywood Strikes to Idle 19,000 by this Weekend," Lebanon Express, 6 June 1963.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ "Plywood Strike In Seventh Week; No Settlement Seen," Lebanon Express, 18 July 1963.

⁷⁰ "Towering Smoke Signals Return of Graveyard Shift to U.S. Ply," Lebanon Express, 19 August 1963.

mill and eight other processing plants on the west coast. Sigler listed increased competition, relatively higher wages in the western U.S., and high interest rates that stunted the housing market as factors in the decision to close facilities.⁷¹ In addition, the company claimed it faced a "...lack of fee timber to support many western plants..." and "...open market purchases of timber are not a viable alternative."⁷² In the letter, Sigler also admitted that the plywood and veneer markets no longer fit into the company's "long-term strategic plan", and as a result the corporation was moving in new directions. According to Sigler, Champion International would remain in the building products business, but "...at a level that is more in keeping with the scaled-down opportunities the company believes the business offers."⁷³ The sweeping shutdown of these facilities displaced nearly 2000 employees, who were forced to face some "scaled-down opportunities" of their own.

According to the Oregon Employment Division, "Between 1979 and 1991, an estimated 24,700 jobs were lost in the lumber and wood products industry in Oregon..."⁷⁴ The Lebanon mill closure accounted for 560 of those jobs, which was, according to the Lebanon Express, the "...largest single layoff in Linn County during the timber industry's current recession."⁷⁵ The damage to the community, culturally as well economically, was very difficult to overcome. Some workers felt the layoffs were a trick by management that would blow over in a few days. "It looks like it's not a company ploy, either," one said, "They really are going to shut it down."⁷⁶ Regardless of the reasons for the shutdown, there was little doubt of the backlash it would cause for local area businesses and former workers. Some would move to find work elsewhere, others would hold out as long as possible in hopes the mill would re-open, some would face the difficult process of retraining in another industry, but they all had one thing in common -- the mechanism that had for so long given them a sense of belonging and identity, along with a living, had disappeared almost overnight.

⁷¹ "Champion Tells Reasons for Closures," Lebanon Express, 31 January 1985.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Steven E. Daniels, "Re-employment Programs for Dislocated Timber Workers: Lessons from Oregon." Society & Natural Resources 13 (2000): 1.

⁷⁵ "Closure of Champion Mill Hits Town Like Bombshell," Lebanon Express, 15 February 1985.

⁷⁶ "Champion Loss Will Cost Lebanon Millions," Lebanon Express, 31 January 1985.

Along with the closure of the plywood mill came an almost instant severing of the communal ties various mill managers had worked so hard to cement in prior decades. Many workers did not even hear the news of the closure from company representatives, but instead had to hear it on the evening news or from co-workers.⁷⁷ In listing their reasons for the closure, mill owners emphasized the increased competition, trade barriers, and the company's inability to profit from "...short-term timber-cutting contracts with the U.S. Forest Service."⁷⁸ Ownership took little responsibility for the closure, and in spite of the Champion International's "...intensive efforts to cut costs and improve productivity, external economic forces continue to frustrate any immediate prospects for a reasonable return on the capital invested...", the closure was inevitable.⁷⁹ In other words, the fate of the mill, along with the community's stability, was simply out of their hands. In reality, however, the mill closures were the first steps of a restructuring process undertaken by the corporation. While the closure may not have been inevitable, it was a necessary step for Champion International to take in order to pursue higher profits elsewhere.

According to Business Wire, in July 1985, Champion International began a "...program of asset sales to reduce the \$1.2 billion of debt incurred in its late 1984 acquisition of St. Regis Corp. and to focus the company on its core business of pulp and paper manufacturing."⁸⁰ The Lebanon mill closure, along with the closure of seven other plants in the Northwest, was part of this program. Lebanon, along with these other communities, lost its primary employer because corporate managers believed more profit could be made if company capital was re-invested in other areas. In his letter to the Lebanon Express, Champion International C.E.O. Andrew Sigler claimed "Champion's objective is to find buyers [of the plywood mill] who will operate it and provide jobs."⁸¹ And while the Lebanon Express noted "Lebanon residents are anxiously awaiting the announcement that the mill has been sold and will reopen", that never happened.⁸²

⁷⁷ "Workers Irked at the way They Heard the News," Lebanon Express, 31 January 1985.

⁷⁸ "Champion Closes Ply Plant," Lebanon Express, 31 January 1985.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ "Champion Intl. Sells certain building products units to current management in leveraged buyout," Business Wire, 10 July 1985.

⁸¹ "Champion Tells Reasons for Closures," Lebanon Express, 31 January 1985.

⁸² "Mill Sale Near?," Lebanon Express, 21 August 1985.

Since 1985 in Lebanon, the community has been grappling with a feeling of lost identity that is more than just a longing for the “good old days”. The social cohesion that existed as a result of a common workplace and common interests for most of the town’s history was no longer there. Prior to the shutdown, there was a common belief among townspeople that what mattered to the timber industry mattered to them, and to a very large degree, at least from an economic standpoint, that was true. The mill provided a rallying point, something everyone could get behind and support. It functioned with the worker’s interests in mind (at least according to the Hot Press), and gave the impression that it would overcome any obstacles to continue to provide the way of life its workers had become accustomed to. The painful truth, however, is that corporate managers abandoned workers, their families, and the entire community in search of greener pastures.⁸³

After the mill closure there were several articles published in the Lebanon Express concerning the understandably bleak outlook shared by much of the community. In one of these columns, Mayor Bob Smith, pleads for townspeople to “...show pride in our city...”⁸⁴ Smith chastises his readers for projecting a “tacky look”, and claims “...we cannot expect visitors, including visiting industrialists, to be favorably impressed with Lebanon...” until people “...show some pride in living here.”⁸⁵ Perhaps the Mayor was unaware that nearly 600 workers had recently lost their jobs, and were more concerned with losing homes and feeding children than keeping up appearances.

In a Lebanon Express editorial published in March of 1985, the author urges Lebanon citizens to “sell” the community.⁸⁶ The author claims that “...a lot of effort is going on behind the scenes to secure new business and industry to this area”, and that while “...Lebanon is working its way through a transition period...”, the future is bright.⁸⁷ Lebanon residents are advised not believe the gossip that the city’s best days are behind it. The editor also lists several organizations and renovations that have been started to put the city’s best foot forward. The community was, understandably

⁸³ “Champion Tells Reasons For Closure,” Lebanon Express, 31 January 1985.

⁸⁴ “Mayor’s Corner,” Lebanon Express, 7 August 1985.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ “Lebanon citizens need to ‘sell’ community,” 20 March 1985.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

uninspired, and while the newspaper editor was optimistic, no one knew what the future had in store.

Exactly how the Lebanon case and others like it could have been avoided is not exactly clear; perhaps the situation is an inevitable part of the capitalist process. The corporate paternalism that existed in towns like Lebanon and Coos Bay was illusory. Corporate managers were concerned with healthy communities in the same way logging companies were concerned with healthy forests – if communities are kept healthy, they can continue to be exploited. Once those areas are no longer profitable they can be forgotten, and operations can be moved elsewhere. Communities, though certainly not less important, are more resilient than forests, however. Though the rebuilding process may take time, in most cases it can be successful; unfortunately that is not always the case for timberland areas; sometimes they never heal.

Striking a balance between an exploitive industry like timber harvesting, and the management of delicate and slow growing renewable resources, like timber, is obviously problematic. Most would agree, however, that sustained yield and intensive forestry was clearly not the answer. The balancing act between a productive forest, in the economic sense, and environmental conservation is a difficult one that many communities in the Pacific Northwest have struggled with. In his article *Reconciling Rural Communities and Resource Conservation*, University of Washington analyst Kirk Johnson describes some of the difficulties confronting these communities. One of the largest hurdles many communities and their leaders are trying to overcome is a general sense of mistrust concerning environmental groups. Locals are reluctant to open avenues with these groups for fear of losing control of the decision making process, although in reality governmental policy, controllers of capital, and market forces have infinitely more power than local communities.⁸⁸ For many business leaders in these communities, who either directly or indirectly depend on timber industry dollars, the term “environmentalist” carries with it some very negative connotations. Johnson claims that to truly strike a balance, community leaders and conservationist groups must begin a “facilitated

⁸⁸ Kirk Johnson, “Reconciling Rural Communities and Resource Conservation,” *Environment* 35 (1993): 19.

dialogue” in order to “...seek mutually beneficial solutions.”⁸⁹ Of course, in complex issues such as these, this is easier said than done.

The attitude of timber industry communities has seemingly undergone little change concerning environmentalist groups over the last few decades. Up until it was destroyed by fire in 2003, a person could walk into the Cedar Shack Drive-In in Sweet Home, Oregon and enjoy a “Spotted Owl” burger. The increase of environmental awareness and the continuing demise of the timber industry in the latter part of the 19th century provided historians with many opportunities to reexamine past policies and their effects. Environmental controversies in the 1990’s added to the already adversarial relationship between conservationists and timber industry proponents.

While the history of the timber industry and its development is interesting, many historians have instead chosen to study the effects that development has had on the surrounding landscape. Many times the conclusions they draw are very similar; the industry exploited our forests for profit with little regard for the environmental damage caused. The overconfidence of policy makers concerning their ability to scientifically manage nature proved disastrous. Even after it was abundantly clear those efforts were failing, experts believed more intensive management was the answer.⁹⁰ Eventually policy makers would have the wolf of forest management by the ears; they could not control him, nor could they safely let him go. Entire communities were built around an industry that was, because of its own mismanagement, destined to someday burnout and collapse. When that inevitably happened those communities were left to themselves to solve very difficult problems. Even today, many of those communities, as well as the forests themselves, are still struggling through the healing process.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 20.

⁹⁰ Langston, Forest Dreams, 296.

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