

150 years of Oregon industry

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By the time Oregon became a state in 1859, agriculture, fishing, and logging were already established as the region's major industries. The fur trappers who had worked for Pacific Fur and Hudson's Bay Company were settling down on farms in the Willamette Valley, and salmon was replacing the beaver as the new state's most commercial animal. Pioneers had been moving west over the Oregon Trail for almost two decades, fueling the need for lumber to build homes and businesses. Agriculture and fishing fed a steadily increasing population.

The fishermen, timber workers, and farmers of 150 years ago might have a hard time recognizing their jobs today. Tractors and combines have replaced the horse, the plow, and the reaper (if the farmer was lucky enough to have one). In the woods, skidders and skylines have replaced oxen and steam donkeys. And it would be almost impossible to find a commercial fishing boat still relying on wind power.



While making work easier in these labor-intensive industries, technology also brought new dangers to health and safety: noise, chemicals, and powerful heavy machinery. Some industries faced increased risk from the new inventions, while the workplace became slightly safer for others. For example, better weather forecasting and being able to communicate with people on shore were welcome innovations for the fishing industry.

In spite of the changes, these are still among the most dangerous occupations in Oregon. In many cases, only the types of injuries have changed. We can only guess at what some of those early injuries might have been; few records existed until 1914, when Abbot Tinning and Roofing became the first policyholder of the State Industrial Accident Commission, SAIF Corporation's predecessor. Soon after that, the commission had its first claim: a logger making \$1.50 a day working for Spaulding Logging was injured.

In its first annual report, published in 1915, the State Industrial Accident Commission stated that logging and lumber manufacturing claims numbered 1,200, nearly half of the 2,793 workrelated injuries in all industries. Agriculture and dairy farming were responsible for only eight injuries. Of course, in those days it was a rare farmer who hired employees, so many of agriculture's injuries went unreported. And it took a big crew to fall timber.

Agriculture



Although the local tribes did some farming of tobacco, corn, and the camas bulb, they saw no need for extensive agriculture because of the abundant salmon, berries, and other foods that grew naturally. Oregon agriculture took its first leap forward when the Hudson's Bay Company established a large dairy on Sauvie Island (just north of what is now Portland) in the 1820s.

For the next 20 years, there was a slow, steady increase in farming, especially in the Willamette Valley. As the French-Canadians left fur trapping, many took up farming. By the time Oregon was granted statehood, most of the good land in the Willamette Valley was under cultivation in such crops as spearmint, peppermint, flax, and a variety of vegetables.

Oregon's first brewery was founded in 1852, and soon fields of hops were planted throughout Marion and Polk counties. On the south bank of the Columbia, the Hood River Valley became famous for its orchards of apples, pears, and cherries.



East of the Cascades, where water was scarce, farmers began to raise sheep for the area's growing wool industry. Oregon's first mill, Willamette Woolen Mill, opened in Salem in 1857, and the second was founded in Brownsville in 1863. For the next three decades, the industry grew steadily, and the sheep industry became increasingly important. Well into the 20th century, wool was one of Oregon's leading exports, and Portland was the second-largest wool market in the United States.

As farmers moved east, they used irrigation and dryland farming techniques to grow alfalfa, potatoes, barley, oats, corn, and wheat. Many others chose to raise beef, and soon cattle and wheat were replacing sheep in the Eastern Oregon desert. One of the greatest on-the-job risks faced by someone raising sheep at the turn of the century was being shot by a cattle rancher as tension between the two groups escalated.

1840s: Farming and stock-raising replace fur trading in the Willamette Valley economy.

1850s: First fruit tree seeds and the first hazelnut trees are brought to Oregon.

1860s: Cattle drives cross the Cascades to the Willamette Valley. First Oregon wheat is shipped to England.

1870s: The ranges teem with cattle. The first west-to-east cattle drive is made.

1880s: Wheat farming in Eastern Oregon begins to grow rapidly with the completion of the transcontinental railroad through Oregon. De Lafayette Remington, Woodburn, patents a "Rough and Ready" tractor that is able to work in the soft, wet ground of Western Oregon.

1900s: The railroad makes Shaniko one of the world's principal wool markets. Range wars occur between cattle and sheep growers in Eastern Oregon.

1930s: The woolen mills decline. Some public lands are already permanently damaged by overgrazing.

Timber



Logging in Oregon began with an axe, a crosscut saw, and a yoke of oxen. Once a tree had fallen, the log was pulled to the river on a skid road built of poles or floated down a water flume. The river carried the logs to rail yards or sawmills.

One of the first water-powered sawmills in Oregon was built in 1838 on the Chehalem River in

Yamhill County. Two years later, Methodist missionaries built their own sawmill in Salem, which was followed quickly by mills at Willamette Falls in Oregon City and Hunt's Mill east of Astoria. By 1850, dozens of mills were producing lumber and shingles in the Willamette Valley, and lumber was being exported to Hawaii and China.



At first, logs were moved by little more than muscle, water, and gravity. Work became easier, although not necessarily safer, with the invention of the "steam donkey," which consisted of a steam boiler and steam engine connected to a winch. These were mounted on a "donkey sled," which was moved using the winch line. Steam donkeys moved logs from where they fell to an assembly point, and from this assembly point to the river. It wasn't until after World War I that log trucks were commonly seen on Oregon highways.



Danger was inherent in every step of the logging process. Men were crushed by falling trees, burned by steam, tangled in ropes and chains, and they slipped from logs in ponds and rivers. Today, logging is still considered one of the most dangerous occupations in the nation, with 88 deaths reported in 2007.

1840s: Methodist missionaries build a saw and grist mill on Mill Creek.

1850s: Four water-powered mills and the first steampowered mill are in operation. Lumber is traded with China, Hawaii, and Australia.

1870s: There are 173 sawmills in Oregon, 138 of which use water power.

1880s: Heavy logging occurs in the Blue Mountains.

1900s: A period of large-scale logging occurs in the Columbia River Basin.

1920s: Distribution of mills changes from the Columbia River to the margins of the Willamette Valley, Bend, Klamath Falls, Lakeview, and LaGrande.

1930s: The chainsaw is invented.

1947: Oregon has 1,573 lumber mills, turning out more than seven billion board feet that year.

Fishing



The first commercial harvest of salmon took place in 1823, but by 1866, only two commercial fishing boats were operating on the Columbia River. That same year, the first cannery on the river began. Although it was the beaver and its profitable fur that brought commerce to Astoria in 1811, annual salmon runs of more than 10 million fish soon made fishing a major industry.

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Commercial fishing in the Columbia River reached a peak in 1911, and even though the new gasoline-powered engines helped the fishermen range farther in search of fish, including large areas of the Pacific Ocean, the industry began a decline that continued for decades. The last Columbia River cannery closed in 1980.



In spite of better communication and weather forecasting, commercial fishing, like logging, is still one of the most dangerous occupations in the country. Between 2000 and 2006, Oregon's fishing fleet saw 21 fatalities, the majority of which were related to boats capsizing or sinking because of the weather.

One of the best places to learn about the maritime history of the Columbia River and the Pacific Northwest is where it began – in Astoria, at the Columbia River Maritime Museum.

1860s: The first salmon cannery on the lower Columbia begins production, soon followed by many others.

1870s: Salmon becomes Oregon's third most important export, after wheat and flour.

1880s: The first Pacific Northwest salmon hatchery is established in Oregon.

1890s: More than 5,000 people are employed in Columbia River fisheries.

1930s: Early development of the commercial crabbing industry begins.

1950s: The commercial shrimp industry develops in Oregon.

(Original artwork by Anna Magruder, Portland, Oregon; Photos from Salem (Oregon) Public Library, Historic Photograph Collections)