

Coos Bay

By William G. Robbins

The Coos Bay estuary is a semi-enclosed, elongated series of sloughs and tidewater streams that drains approximately 825 square miles of southern Oregon's rugged Coast Range. For much of its history since the 1850s, the area has been notable for the huge volume of lumber shipped to world markets. The story of the human communities around Coos Bay begins some 10,000 years ago when people first began occupying the estuary's lush marshlands and tidal flats.

Villagers lived in a relatively stable ecosystem for several millennia until a floodtide of Euro-Americans began overrunning the area in the mid-1850s. Those incursions into southwestern Oregon Native homelands led to the forcible removal of most Native people to the newly created Coast Reservation in 1856. Around Coos Bay, however, a few Indian families continued to subsist in remote places. They would eventually participate as wageworkers in the emerging logging and fishing industries.

From 1850 to the present, outside forces and events have directed economic, social, and cultural life on Coos Bay, especially when the long reach of timber capitalists from the Great Lakes states began investing in the region. Mirroring activities elsewhere in the Pacific Northwest, southwestern Oregon's lush timberlands provided an attractive opportunity for investors seeking to profit from the area's natural bounty.

For nearly a century, the coal, timber, and fisheries industries provided a modest living for local workers and good profits for investors. Still, the communities around Coos Bay—Marshfield (renamed Coos Bay in 1944), North Bend, Empire, Charleston, and Eastside—periodically faced economic downturns. With diminished stands of harvestable timber and a troubled salmon and bottom fishery, the promise of those activities began to wear thin in the 1980s. What the Coos Bay communities have experienced since the 1970s is the unraveling of a traditional way of life—the sunset of an era of extractive activity—and disappointing prospects for the future.

A good argument can be made that the large forest-products firms that profited most from southwestern Oregon's timber bounty have also helped accelerate the area's rapid de-industrialization. In that sense, the Coos Bay communities enter the post-industrial twenty-first century largely bereft of the magnificent timber resource that sustained the local economy for more than a century. Although Coos County's population has remained relatively flat since the 1960s, newcomers continue to move to the area, many of them retirees looking for modestly priced real estate.

Another part to the Coos Bay story is the Coquille Indian Tribe, which regained federally recognized status in 1989 and opened The Mill Casino in 1995 (on land purchased from the Weyerhaeuser Company). When the casino made the move from temporary quarters to its newly constructed buildings in 1997, the tribal enterprise began to flourish, offering family-wage jobs with health benefits to fulltime employees. The Coquille Tribe is now an important economic and cultural contributor to the viability of Coos County.

Sources

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