

An Interview with the late Mr. Clarence Hebert Concerning the Development of Westfir, Oregon Conducted by Chuck Lowman

Mr. Clarence Hebert has been a member of the Upper-Willamette community since his birth here in 1902. His knowledge of the growth of Westfir is first-hand, as he personally watched the town grow from the very first. The history of the town that is contained in the following pages is Mr. Hebert's account of its history as taken from an interview with him.

The material, which is contained in these pages, comes from a tape-recorded interview with Mr. Hebert in May 1965. All explanatory matter interjected by the author is enclosed within parentheses. The following is Mr. Hebert's description of the growth and development of the town of Westfir.

The first excavation on the town was for the construction of the mill, which is still in operation on its original site. (This is the present Hines Lumber Company mill.) This was begun in 1922. In 1923, while the land was being cleared for the "lower" mill that is still in operation, an "upper" mill was constructed on the river above the town where the Hines unloader now stands. (The unloader is the mechanism, which transfers the logs from the trucks into the millpond at the Hines mill.) It's (the upper mill) purpose was to cut the timbers and lumber that would be used for the construction of the lower mill. This was a much smaller mill than the one that stands now. It burned in 1924. When the upper mill burned, the lower mill was not yet finished, and the owners of the mill had to buy additional lumber to finish the construction of the lower mill. The upper mill and the lower mill was owned and built by the Western Lumber Company under the ownership of Mr. George Kelly.

The mill system in Westfir has worked under four different names. These are: (1) Western Lumber Company, (2) West Fir Lumber Company, (3) Blythe and Company, and (4) Hines Lumber Company. The present owner, Hines, purchased the mill in 1945. Housing was started immediately when construction of the mills began in 1922. Before the construction of the mills began, the town that is now Westfir did not exist. In fact, before they started excavating for the mill there was nothing there. The railroad had been in this area since 1910-1911. A cookhouse for employees of the mill was built as the lower mill was built from the timbers cut in the upper mill. It was located on the same side of the river as the mill, near what is now the peeler and in an area that is now used for decking plywood cores. The total time of the construction of the mill was three years from 1922 until 1925. In 1925 most of the construction was completed with the exception of such equipment as the planer. In 1925 the mill began operation- just sawing. During the construction of the mill and the houses in the town, a post office was built across the main road from the present site of the Hines main office where there is now a parking lot. On that site were built a post office and a store. A barbershop was built on the same side of the street on the next block up toward where the Gillespe's Market stands. A house now stands on the corner where the barbershop was. The Westfir church that still stands in the central part of town was built about 1933-1934. Where the Community Center (town recreation building near the grade school) is now, was built the first grade school was torn down and the grade school buildings which are now in use were built in 1935. A lot of the building of the town went on after 1935.

Loggers Row and Hemlock (common names for sections of the town) and much of the uptown area houses were constructed by the company that owned the mill after 1935. The building of the town went on slowly for a period of several years.

Mr. Bill Ferrin who fell to his death from the top of the upper dam before it was destroyed. Mr. Ferrin died in 1933. At the time he was superintendent and inspecting the dam to decide what should be done with it after it was no longer necessary. Where the lower dam now stands was built a dam which made the upper dam useless, so plans were being made to destroy it. Mr. Ferrin fell through the shell of the dam to his death. The purpose of the upper dam appears to be to hold logs for the upper mill when it was in operation. Eventually the dam was blown up in 1933 or 1934.

For logging purpose, there was a railroad built by the company up the North Fork River. It was a rough track, but was the usual type of train track. During the time the train was in operation, a so-called "incline" was also in operation. The incline was to let the logs from the mountainside along the river. This was the method by which Camp Three and the area behind High Prairie were logged. The logs were taken from Camp Three to the top of the incline where they were let down by the cable cars on tracks to the level of the railroad which then took them to the mill. This was at its height of use during the years of 1930-1931. The incline itself consisted up the track up the side of the mountain with a double track up the mountain half way – in the middle. As the logs were loaded at the top they were being unloaded at the bottom. Then, the weight of the logs at the top was aloud to push the loaded car load down the hill, and the two cars which passed at the center were both hooked by cable to a large drum at the top, so as the loaded car came down, its weight pulled the empty one to the top to be loaded. The machine at the top of the incline was called the "snubber." It was a steam-driven engine, which served as the actual power supply and the breaking system for the incline. Once in a while they would lose a load of logs and they would go clear in and bury themselves in they river way below.

About 1931, all of the area near the incline had been harvest for trees, so logging continued then on up the river. The train up the North Fork was used up into the 1940 before it was abandoned and torn out and a road was put in. The incline was used for three or four years before it was finally out of use. As the logging progressed up the North Fork, camps were formed for the logging crews to stay in while they worked. Camp Three was located near High Prairie. Camp Five was built on this side of Brock Cabin and stood until just a few years ago.

Brock cabin was a homestead of a man named Brock who lived up the North Fork with his family years before the mill came to Westfir. Mr. Brock took a wagon up over Huckleberry Mountain many years before any roads or even trains were in this area. During the early days, logging was confined more or less to near the river somewhat near the train, which hauled the logs to the mill.

When the mill first went into operation, many of its employees were housed in little "shacks" which were temporary living quarters until something more permanent could be built for them. Then, by the 1940's a large dormitory was located on the same side of the river as the mill a little upstream from the Mill Bridge. It was directly across the river from the old Westfir store.

When the mill first started operation, a Mr. Fritz Ramsdell was the first superintendent under Kelly, the owner of the mill. Fritz Ramsdell, captain Starbird, and Jack Guish were the ones who built the upper dam.

The town was called Westfir, and before the West Fir Lumber Company came into being. Even back when the Western Lumber Company was in operation, the town was called Westfir. The theory of how the town got its name was that when the near-by town took the name of Oakridge, people on the other side of town in response, called their town West because it was west of Oakridge, and Fir because that was the most common tree there. So, from that came the name of Westfir.

A Mr. Templeton had the first store in Westfir. Silent movies came to the town of Westfir thanks to the town's show hall and dance hall which was built early in the construction of the town and was torn down after 1950. It was built around the years of 1926 – 1928.

Such men as Claude Jones, who still resides in Oakridge, Clyde R. Sites, and Joe Landis, manned the early Forest Service stations. The hall, (showhall) was built exactly across the road from where Gillespie's Market now stands, up against the side of the mountain. The location of the showhall is where a house now stands.

The early doctor's office was located where the Westfir Fire Department is now housed. When the clinic was built in Oakridge, the Westfir doctor's office was abandoned and changed into a fire hall. One of the early, but definitely not the first of the doctors in Westfir doctor's office was Dr. Joe Benson, who was in the town around the year 1932. His house burned later and killed some of his family. The companies that owned the mill during the early years of the town belonged to an association known as P.H.A. - Pacific Hospital Association, which provided for the care of the employees, but not their families. All necessary bills by employees were taken care of by the association. Mr. Larwood has knowledge of this.

There was a Forest Service station located right in the town where the Westfir Beauty Salon now stands. This history, because the men who ran it came from the Forest Service station in Oakridge which started some years earlier. Tack Larwood and Claude Jones would have information on this. This station was eventually torn down and the Forest Service headquarters was moved to Oakridge. Several houses are still there below Hemlock where some Forest Service employees lived. A man by the name of Louie Neff lived in one of those houses for some time. He was a Forest Service scaler for the mill. After the station in Westfir was torn down, the control went to the Oakridge station.

Where the Community Service is now located is the site of the original grade school. It was a large, square, four-room wooden building. When the number of students outgrew the school building, the town began to construct the school building units that still stand as the grade school. This was done in 1935. Louise Strite has information on that. He lived in town then where the grade school buildings are now and had to move when it was decided to build the grade school there. He lived about where the sixth grade and office units are now.

The original road between Oakridge and Lowell went over the hill on what is now called the Golf Course road, through the town of Westfir, across the mill bridge, down through the middle of the mill, through Hemlock, and down the north side of the river to Lowell. But, then they built the mill, it took up that road, and they built that new one on the other side of the river from the up-town area to Hemlock. In 1923-1924, they (the company) built the old covered bridge across the river at Hemlock. Then, when the road from Eugene was built (the road we travel now), the Hemlock Bridge was connected to it by way of a road from Hemlock to the Bernard Bridge at Hell's Gate. (Hell's Gate is the common name for the bridge and the area around the Bernard Bridge, which is located between Westfir and the road to Eugene.) The road from the Mill Bridge to Hemlock was built to go around the mill. The main road (to Eugene) was in large part built by Slate's outfit and another group of road builders. Slate came this way as far as Lookout Point. The road to Oakridge through Hell's Gate from Eugene was completed about 1935. Sometime in 1935, the road over the pass was being built. The crews that built it were paid 55 cents per hour. Mr. Larwood has information on that. The road from the Hemlock Bridge to the Bernard Bridge at Hell's Gate was built about 1935, also. Before that, the only way between Oakridge and Westfir was the old road that is now known as that Golf Course road.

Mrs. Clarence Stuart was one of the earliest postmistresses in Westfir. In the early store that was built, the upstairs contained several rooms that were rented out. The first little post office was built by John Long on the uptown end of the same block where the old store was, then when the store was built, a new post office was built adjoining the store, and the old one was torn down. Next to the store and the post office was built a pool hall.

The area that is now Westridge and the Westfir High School grounds was just the ground for an old farmhouse owned by the people by the name of Holland. During the early years of the town, also, there was a little winding road through what is now known as LaDuke road. To get to that side of the river for many years after the founding of the town of Westfir, the people had to cross the river by boat to get to the little winding road there. People by the name of Minnick later built a gas station in the area that is now the High School grounds – along the road. Minnicks also had a home there. The Bernard Bridge at Hell's Gate was built around 1934, and the road from Oakridge to Lowell was built around 1935, because that was the reason Mr. McAttee built a store where it still stands – to be on the highway when it first came in. The Hell's Gate Cabins were put in shortly after the highway was, but the exact year is hard to tell.

The railroad first came to this area in 1910-1911. While the railroad bridge and tunnel were being constructed. A railroad camp for the workers was established where the town of Westfir is now. At that time, the crews had a barn for the horses they used, located where the showhall was later and across the street from where Gillespie's Market is now. The country road department later torn the barn down and burned it when the road went through there. The cookhouse and the barn were the only remaining buildings standing just before the mill came in – and they were torn down then. These buildings were torn down and the road repaired in the spring of 1922, and the mill came in that fall. The houses that are known as being in the area above the tracks were put in very early in the life of the town. Some of these were very early houses, but some of the newer ones were built about 1935 with many of the other houses on the town. Bill McMahon occupied the two oldest houses above the tracks, which was near the tracks on the opposite side of the road from the tunnel. The rest of the houses in that area were built from the tunnel. The

rest of the houses in that area were built many years later. The McMahon house burned down, and he moved on up the valley. Harley Cain owned the other house, and they moved it toward Westfir more when the town began to grow.

The bridge that now goes across the river at the mill is not the original bridge there. That bridges the third bridge to be built for the Lowell- Oakridge road. It was washed out and another, higher one was built. In 1940, that second bridge went out and the present one was built, much higher than the ones before it. When the bridge went out in 1940, it took the pipe for the town water supply with it. The first bridge went out in 1924 and was washed out in 1925, one year later. Tack Larwood could tell the date that the second dam went out. (The second dam went out in 1925.) Then, the third dam went out in the winter of 1964, and the dam that is newly constructed there is the forth dam to be built there.

Several years after the mill began, a ferry was built to cross the river down-river from Hemlock. This was about where the Forest Service tree farm is now. This ferry the men who were working on the road across the river, from the old road to where they were working. During the building of the road, several of the workers were drowned there, (at the ferry), and one man named Olson was drowned and wasn't found until many years later on a sand bar way down the river. In 1933, many people forded the river below Lookout Point and hit the road that had been constructed that far by Slate's outfit, then they had a good road the rest of the way into Eugene.

The old cold-deck for the mill was not where it was now behind the unloader, but instead, it was across the river from where the unloader is. It was a larger three-tire cold-deck. The logs were dumped off the trains into the river and then a continuous-line high lead picked them out of the water and placed them on the cold-deck. The machinery for this high lead was on the unloader side of the river. This stacking equipment for the cold-deck was run then by Bill McMahon.

The railroad up the North Fork ran from Westfir up to Camp Five, about twenty miles, before it was finally torn down. The present road up the North Fork follows the railroad track exactly in the railroad bed up to Camp Five. Before the train track got to Camp Five, supplies for the camp had been trucked in by going up over the old High Prairie road and then down into the North Fork valley. The town of Oakridge was started before Westfir, but when the mill came in, the size of the towns equalized somewhat. Later though, when the Pope and the Talbot mill came to Oakridge, the town of Oakridge became much larger than Westfir. This was about 1947; Oakridge has always been a little bigger than Westfir.

There was a railroad depot in Westfir for many years, ran by Oscar Fredrickson. The railroad was extended to Oakridge in 1911. The Westfir depot went in when the own and mill did about 1922. The tunnel from Westfir to Oakridge was built during the years 1910-1911. The tunnel was dug from both ends at the same time with horse-drawn carts carrying the dirt and rock out of the tunnel as it was dug. The railroad just ran to Oakridge until 1925 when it went on over the pass.

Two of the teachers in the first old grade school were Mrs. Clarence Hebert, my wife, and Mrs. Gerimonti. They taught there about 1929- 1932. That grade school was built in about 1923. The first office for the mill was right down near the mill, on the opposite side of the river from where

it is now. Then in about 1926, a new office was built, and it still is in use across the river from the mill. The George Kelly that started the mill here is the same Kelly that owned a part of Booth-Kelly in the lower valley.

UPDATE 1997

By DEAN LOWMAN

Since the previous pages were written many changes have happened to the village of Westfir. In 1967 the Westridge and Oakridge school districts were consolidated. The loss of the school was quite a blow as many of its activities tied the community together.

The interdenominational church was soon discontinued because each faith had built their own church in Oakridge.

In 1977 Hines closed the plant in Westfir and sold to an investment company who eventually sold most of the real estate to various parties. The Golf Course was purchased by a group of local men who continued to operate the course and still do today. The Store and several homes were sold to an investor who at one time played football at the U of O and also professionally. The Store was rented and operated for a while but soon closed and is not being used at the present time.

The dam on the river was removed in August of 1994 and caused another problem for the town. The water intake pipe had been placed at the upper end of the lake created by the Dam and when it was removed the water level dropped below the level needed.

The first dam built beside the plant included a water turbine to provide lights for the plant. Soon electric lines extended to homes in the townsite and more generating power was needed. The plant that produced steam to power the mill was fitted with a steam turbine so there was an abundance of electric power. A line was built over the tunnel and into Oakridge and many homes there had electricity for the first time.

This was during the great depression years when the mill was operating only part time. When an order for lumber was received the powerhouse would blink the lights twice at 8pm to let employees know they should come to work the next morning to process the order. At this time there were very few phones in area. One was in Croner's Drug Store in Oakridge and one in the Mill Office in Westfir. As I recall this method of communication was in use when I came to the area in 1934 as a JR in Oakridge High School. Soon after this the mill began operating full time.

At this time it was also a sight to watch the Salmon migration. It seemed the river was full of fish as they worked their way up the ladder beside the dam. Whole families would gather by the riverbanks in the evening to watch. Every dam that was built had a fish ladder to allow passage for the Salmon. When the Lookout Point Dam was completed in the late 1950's it was not equipped with a ladder so the Salmon gathered in holding pens and trucked around the Dam but this did not prove successful.

As one can see many problems confront the town of Westfir. Many people could be solved by financial income but revenue sources are very limited.

CONCLUSION

When George Kelly came to this area to build a sawmill and eventually a settlement called Westfir he had encouragement from the forest service, as there was a need for wood products during the post World War one era. Many things made of steel today were made of wood then. He planned a 100-year cycle in which the mill would be the size needed to process the North Fork water shed timber, and then the process could start again. After W.W. 2 the demand for wood was again strong so this same area was opened to other mill operators until the inter watershed timber was soon gone.

Perhaps there should not have been a Westfir. By today's guidelines it would not be possible, however many facts can be found to argue either way.

In the fifty years of operation the Westfir plant produced wood for many things such as homes, bridges, churches, railroad cars and even cross-arms which hold your phone lines. It provided to as many as five hundred employees whose families were reared and educated over the years in the 1 through 12 Westfir School District.

The operation of the mill did cause some pollution, nothing dangerous or long lasting, mostly bark from the logs as they were dumped from the river and into the mill. The river runs through Westfir now pure enough to use for drinking water.

The Aufderheide scenic route begins in Westfir and goes up through the area cut during the mill operations and it contains more green trees per acre than one would find in an old growth forest. The Forest Service is making plans to thin some of these areas near Westfir, as the trees are large enough to harvest.

This seems to provide that Mr. Kelly's plan to use trees as a renewable recourse is necessary if we are to continue to use the products that trees produce.

In closing I should mention some of the people who made life in Westfir more pleasant over the years. The manager of the mill who also managed the townsite provided materials when a church was built and again when a gymnasium was needed for the school. The town's people provided Labor for these and many other projects. Early on, Mr. A. E. Gerimonti, who was Office manager, donated time and effort for the community. Before a Bank came to the area in 1947 he would have cash sent in on a train and he set up a booth in the Westfir store to cash the payroll checks. He would also barbecue a beef for a picnic sponsored by the owner of the mill. This was held at Blue Forest Park, were games were organized for the children and swimming was available at the natural pool there. The interest in swimming led to installing a wooden frame about twenty feet the frame was then lowered into the river by putting gravel on the floor. In this pool and any natural pool along the river Audrey Rockwell taught most every child growing up in Westfir to swim. She now devotes most of her time heading up the senior citizens program

and many unpaid hours on their behalf. Also the elected officials who guided Westfir over the past twenty years and did the best they could with difficult situations.