

**From Pioneer to Working Poor: Labor and Poverty in the Lost
Town Of Boston, Oregon**

by

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Dissertation Abstract

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The mid-Willamette Valley saw a settlement boom in the 1850s. One town founded during this period was Boston, in Linn County, Oregon. In this small community, a flour mill was established, and a farm community was built. Boston Flouring Mills changed hands, and names, multiple times, degrading from the height of milling technology to a quaint relic over the course of its operation, which lasted 150 years. The employees were farm boys and day laborers unable to make a living on their own land. Markets shifted, tastes changes, and wheat crops migrated out of the area. The mill evolved into a feed mill. As livestock needs waned it was reinvented again as a power plant. By 2006, the mill became something new: a monument to pioneer exceptionalism. But the story of the mill stretches beyond pioneer nostalgia.

The history of Boston Mills illustrates that the promise of Willamette Valley settlement was never its reality. The mythology of the landscape as an American Eden outlived everyone that tried to survive there. This microhistory follows the workers and owners of Boston Mills over multiple generations to highlight systemic economic hardships of this community. Over the course of 150 years, Boston was destroyed by railroads, economic downturns, federal handwringing, and fickle international markets. The men and women that lived in this community came to represent the generational impact of rural working poverty. In a landscape promising financial freedom through free agricultural land, the men and women of Boston were trapped in systems of working poverty with only brief respites of prosperity. This is their story.

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Equally important were those outside of academia. Oregon State Parks and Recreation staff including Christy Sweet, Tom Parsons, and Terra Kemper reminded me daily why I love history. Terra taught me how to operate a steam donkey and made sure I didn't impale myself on historic saws. Her dedication to sharing history was inspiring. Tom showed me how to ride a counterbalance manlift without launching myself through the ceiling. He also taught me how to talk to kids about history in a way that was honest and fun. Christy gave me the gift of an untouched archive and freedom to explore historic spaces throughout the state. I was fortunate to work alongside them all.

Finally, I would like to thank those closest to me. I have become a very boring person. I rant about wheat exchange prices. I am more interested in the gossip of a long dead miller than current events. I have turned down vacations and drives and dog walks so that I could take another look at census reports. Despite this, those closest to me have been consistently supportive. So enormous thanks to Monika, Tut, Keith, Allen, Peggy, Sam, Annie, and Hank. You are my family, and I share any successes with you all.

I dedicate this, and all things, to those I love

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INTRODUCTION

Oregon is neatly dissected into three areas by mountain ranges: the Pacific coast, the Willamette Valley, and the arid expanse of Eastern Oregon. Early White population growth in Oregon focused largely on the Willamette Valley; its fertile soils encouraged farmers and industrialists to settle. These settlers first built communities in and around Fort Vancouver and then stretched south from the Columbia River, along the Willamette River. White settlement in Linn County, located in the mid-Willamette Valley, began in earnest in the 1850s, around the time California and Southern Oregon were experiencing their own population booms due to mining. Guarantees of free land under the Donation Land Claim Act encouraged settlement in less populated areas, and trade with mining communities farther south made such settlement momentarily lucrative. New routes across eastern Oregon and into the mid-Willamette Valley increased settlement, and communities were quickly platted. The community of Boston, Oregon, was one beneficiary of these circumstances.

The center of Boston was a flour mill that was established to aid the booming wheat trade of the 1850s. Boston Flouring Mills changed hands, and names, multiple times, degrading from the height of milling technology to a quaint relic over the course of its operation, which lasted 150 years. But it was always a small-scale operation, averaging about a dozen employees, mostly farm boys and day laborers unable to make a living on their own land. Markets shifted, tastes changes, and wheat crops migrated to Eastern Oregon and the Great Plains. The mill evolved into a feed mill. As livestock needs waned it was reinvented again as a power plant. By 2006, the mill became something new: a monument to pioneer exceptionalism. The mill and land surrounding it

was purchased by the state of Oregon to tell the story of Boston, a community that existed on maps for less than twenty years but lived on through nostalgia narratives of early settlement and scattered farmhouses. Unlike Western boom towns where the population vacated to the next claim, the people remained in Boston long after the town disappeared. Through the mill, stories of the men and women who made their homes and worked their days within this phantom community come into focus. In a landscape promising financial freedom through free agricultural land, the men and women of Boston were instead trapped in systems of working poverty with only brief respites of prosperity. From the mill's construction in 1858 until its final days in 1987 the impact of economic inequity is woven into every story. But the popular history of Boston, a glossy image of the rural Willamette Valley pioneer, is quite different. The myth of Boston contends that heroic pioneers tamed the wilderness, built farms that thrived on republicanism and family values, and held firm to the ideals of American agriculture. This narrative, built by the first generation of White settlement and reenforced decade after decade, clung to the area. The story of Boston is pioneer nostalgia; the truth of Boston is a grim indictment of rural agriculture.

That Oregon State Parks chose to save a small-scale mill in the middle of what is now rye grass country hints at the narrative power of Boston. While Willamette Valley agriculture hasn't been the topic of much recent scholarship, the story of Willamette Valley White settlement is at the forefront of area museums, genealogy clubs, remembrance societies, and it's a key component of elementary school curricula. The Oregon Trail and resulting settlement in Linn County is the cornerstone of Oregon's mythology. Museum professionals in these communities refer to it as the "quilt and

bonnet show," a nostalgia-laden morality play that is so intrinsic to Oregon history that museums are required to retell it for each generation. The decision to save Boston Mills came from this local urge. Descendents of the Thompson family and Shedd residents spent twenty years advocating for the protection of the mill. As the mill became an economic liability for its owners, the desire to turn it into a museum grew. Oregon State Parks and Recreation, in a fit of parks expansion, took the bait.¹

Oregon State Parks chose to protect this site for two reasons. The first was the power of Willamette Valley rurality in nostalgia narratives, a chance at a state-sanctioned quilt-and-bonnet show. It was an Oregon origin story sanded smooth of its rough edges. More importantly, however, was the land that came with the mill. The state wanted the Calapooia River; a waterway that was dammed and diverted for over a century. Through acquisition of the mill's water rights, the river could run unobstructed again. It was happenstance as much as history that led to the protection and preservation of this particular site. But it also presents an opportunity for historians. With the land, Oregon State Parks also received all mill equipment, records, and objects. The building, archives, and artifacts left at the mill create a rich history of labor from the beginnings of settlement through the 1980s. While the goal of this collection was to maintain the narrative of pioneer exceptionalism, the collection is also uniquely suited to unearth the stories of laborers, and poverty, in Boston. Wage workers are easily traced through timecards, unemployment records, oral histories, graffiti, and newspaper accounts. While the records favor mill owners, the workers were able to leave their mark in unexpected

¹ For information on this period of parks history, see Marin Elizabeth Aurand and Marc James Carpenter, *"So the Future Will Have a Place": The First Century of Oregon State Parks*, with Oregon State Parks and Recreation Department (Oregon Parks and Recreation Department, 2022).

ways. These collections serve to highlight a population in Oregon that is too often obscured: the working poor.

In my first term at the University of Oregon, Marsha Weisiger, a member of my dissertation committee, urged new graduate students to stand in the place that they study. It is the only way, she argued, to fully understand what happened there. I took this advice a bit further by living and working at Thompsons Mills as its historian. My familiarity with the collection comes from the two years I spent cataloguing objects and leading tours for mill visitors. For six months out of the year, I walked to work in tall boots because the lowland area around the mill flooded in the rainy season. This was the same environment that forced early settlers up into the buttes. In the fall, low fog obscured the mill building from the road. The weather made the floorboards damp and gummy. Each day, the machinery was turned on to impress visitors. It was a fraction of the equipment that would be running in the mill's heyday. Still, the building shook violently as the grinders spit out feed. Chutes and pulleys whizzed overhead. I worked in what was the original mill building, feeling the rush of the mill race beneath my feet. My desk was next to Bud Kronsteiner's corner, one of the last mill workers, discussed in Chapter 4. I sorted the desperate letters of Charles Thompson to his brother John over Sophia's estate, discussed in Chapter 3. I lived on the Farwell land claim, my commute was the same short distance that Ed Farwell staggered, after being shot, as detailed in Chapter 2. And just below my feet was the original Donation Land Claim of Americus Savage, one of earliest White settlers, discussed in Chapter 1. The stories stacked up on top of each other, like bags of grain.

The narrative thread linking these artifacts and archives is one of rural destitution passed from one generation to the next. Settler poverty is an important facet of Western settlement in the mid-nineteenth century that is too often ignored. The majority of Boston residents were forced to sell their property or work off the farm by the second generation of settlement.² The third generation was often destitute. Farmhouses built in 1900 were abandoned along the roadside only a few decades later. This directly contradicts not only pioneer boosterism, but the academic understanding of the settler era within Oregon that includes an assumed prosperity tied to land acquisition. The promised fortunes that lured populations to Oregon and caused incredible violence toward Indigenous peoples never materialized. The difference between the narrative of settler success and the realities of immediate and prolonged poverty in settler communities can be used to add nuance not only to early Oregon history, but also to other communities with a similar origins. If my work is relevant beyond the farmlands of Oregon, it is in this notion that settler colonialism was not only violent, but also often unprofitable for settler communities.

My work is reliant on the intersections of labor and agricultural history. Agricultural history in the United States is itself reliant on the intersection of multiple fields of study and works to combat the notion that rural America is a conservative monolith.³ In addition to political and economic work on the nature of agriculture, recent

² This has been understood since Ray Allen Billington's classic *Westward Expansion* and, later, Patricia Limerick's *The Legacy of Conquest*, both of which noted that most Western farms failed to prove up or went bust, and by writers like Hamlin Garland and Willa Cather, who drew on their own family experiences. However, historians rarely focused on the lived experience of failed agriculturalists

³ Much of my research utilizes the intersection of labor and agricultural history, found in works like William C. Pratt, "Farmers, Communists, and the FBI in the Upper Midwest," *Agricultural History* 63, no. 3 (1989): 61–80; Chris Maier, "The Farmers' Fight for Representation: Third-Party Politics in South Dakota, 1889?1918," *Great Plains Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (2014): 143–62; Pratt, "Farmers, Communists, and

studies have honored the role of marginalized populations in rural enterprise including the unpaid role of women in farming, the uneven impact of rural aid for Black farmers in the American South, and the role of Mexican farmers and ranchers in the American West.⁴ But much of the recent scholarship on farming and farm industry is focused on the American Midwest and the South. While what occurred in Oregon differs from Midwest agriculture due to the early availability of free land, late 19th century fights over railroad monopolies, shifting markets, and the fickle wheat trade were universal throughout the United States. Despite these universalities, the ecology and cultural differences in the United States often requires a localized approach to rural history.⁵ In the same vein, recent community-based labor history has allowed for a more nuanced understanding of the culture of labor, especially in the study of gender.⁶ Specifically

the FBI in the Upper Midwest”; Larry Remele, “‘God Helps Those Who Help Themselves’: The Farmers Alliance and Dakota Statehood,” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 37, no. 4 (1987): 22–33; Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision*, 1 edition (Oxford University Press, 2007); Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History*, 1st edition (Basic Books, 1995).

⁴ Melissa Walker, *All We Knew Was to Farm: Rural Women in the Upcountry South, 1919-1941*, Edition Unstated (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002); Katherine Jellison, *Entitled to Power: Farm Women and Technology, 1913-1963*, First Edition (The University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Mary C. Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm: Women, Community, and the Foundations of Agribusiness in the Midwest, 1900-1940* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).

⁵ For examples of largescale agricultural histories, see John T. Schlebecker, *Whereby We Thrive: A History of American Farming, 1607-1972* (Iowa State University Press, 1975); Willard W. Cochrane, *The Development of American Agriculture: A Historical Analysis*, NED-New edition, Second (University of Minnesota Press, 1993), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.cttsjt9>; John Opie, *The Law of the Land: Two Hundred Years of American Farmland Policy* (U of Nebraska Press, 1994). Gilbert C. Fite, *Cotton Fields No More: Southern Agriculture 1865 - 1980* (University Press of Kentucky, 1984); Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture*, First Edition (University of California Press, 1998). For transnational histories of agriculture, see Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History*, 1 edition (Knopf, 2014); John Soluri, *Banana Cultures: Agriculture, Consumption, and Environmental Change in Honduras and the United States*, annotated edition edition (University of Texas Press, 2006).

⁶ For examples of the creation of culture within labor structures see: Jefferson R. Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class*, First printing, edition (The New Press, 2010); Chantal Norrgard, *Seasons of Change: Labor, Treaty Rights, and Ojibwe Nationhood*, 1 edition (The University of North Carolina Press, 2014); Polly Reed Myers, *Capitalist Family Values: Gender, Work, and Corporate*

relevant is how gender and community identity is intrinsically tied to labor. Discussions of agriculture in the context of tenant farming and the importance of itinerant labor is also key to understanding Boston.⁷ The work of agriculture, labor, and gender historians is referenced here.

While early Oregon historians had a fanatic obsession with early settlement and agriculture, most recent scholarship has, rightfully, focused on those excluded in those narratives. Current discussions of early settlement focus on inherent violence of Oregon's early history. I am indebted to those scholars that have worked to recategorize early settlement as era of violence and displacement and center the stories of Kalapuyan peoples.⁸ The most relevant work of an Oregon historian on White settlement is Peter Boag. His recent work, *Pioneering Death*, examines patricide within a nineteenth century rural family in Linn County, a short distance from Boston. His own acknowledgement of

Culture at Boeing (University of Nebraska Press, 2015). For examples of the intersection of labor and gender see: Matthew Basso et al., *Across the Great Divide: Cultures of Manhood in the American West*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2001); Christopher Herbert, *Gold Rush Manliness: Race and Gender on the Pacific Slope* (University of Washington Press, 2018); Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton University Press, 2003); Alice Kessler-Harris, *Gendering Labor History*, 1 edition (University of Illinois Press, 2006).

⁷ James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*, 25th anniversary edition (Oxford University Press, 2004); Frank Tobias Higbie, *Indispensable Outcasts: Hobo Workers and Community in the American Midwest, 1880-1930*, First Edition (University of Illinois Press, 2003).

⁸ These are some recent examples of re-centering early settlement stories: David G. Lewis and Greg Robinson, *Tribal Histories of the Willamette Valley* (Ooligan Press, 2023); Marc James Carpenter, "Pioneer Problems: Wanton Murder, Indian War Veterans, and Oregon's Violent History," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 121, no. 2 (2020): 156–85; Mathias D. Bergmann, "'We Should Lose Much by Their Absence': The Centrality of Chinookans and Kalapuyans to Life in Frontier Oregon," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 109, no. 1 (2008): 34–59; Matthew Dennis, "Natives and Pioneers: Death and the Settling and Unsettling of Oregon," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 115, no. 3 (2014): 282–97, JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.5403/oregonhistq.115.3.0282>; David G. Lewis, "Four Deaths: The Near Destruction of Western Oregon Tribes and Native Lifeways, Removal to the Reservation, and Erasure from History," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 115, no. 3 (2014): 414–37, <https://doi.org/10.5403/oregonhistq.115.3.0414>.

the mercurial nature of tenant farming in the late nineteenth century dovetails with my study of the severe impact of world markets on early settlement. He also adeptly analyzes the cultural power of the early settlement mythology on the second generation of Oregon farmers.⁹

I've expanded on the work of Peter Boag by moving beyond the nineteenth century. The unease that Boag identified among Linn County tenant farmers in the late nineteenth century reverberated in subsequent generations as more families sank into poverty. The class and cultural systems that were formed in early settlement had an enormous impact on how poor farmers reacted to federal involvement and economic downturns in the twentieth century. At the same time, federal initiatives echo the rhetoric vilifying poor farmers in the previous century. Notions of masculinity and manhood that would frame the murders at the epicenter of Boag's work is also present in Boston, as men who were brought up on tales of prosperity were thrown into unprofitable wage labor positions. Boag and I agree that the myth of the pioneer had far-reaching and catastrophic consequences. While Boag focuses on a single generation, I believe that in Boston, as in other localities, the full impact of poverty can be understood only through a generational study. Rural economies and the mythologies of rural exceptionalism were passed from father to son.

⁹ For key works in Oregon history, see Carl Abbott, *Portland in Three Centuries: The Place and the People* (Oregon State University Press, 2011); Katherine G. Morrissey, *Mental Territories: Mapping the Inland Empire*, 1 edition (Cornell University Press, 1997); Richard White, *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River*, First Thus Used edition (Hill and Wang, 1996). William A. Bowen, *The Willamette Valley: Migration and Settlement on the Oregon Frontier*, First Edition (Univ of Washington Pr, 1978); Peter Boag, *Pioneering Death: The Violence of Boyhood in Turn-of-the-Century Oregon* (University of Washington Press, 2022); Peter Boag, *Environment and Experience: Settlement Culture in Nineteenth-Century Oregon* (University of California Press, 1992), <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=21556>.

At its center, my study of Boston Mills is a microhistory. Microhistory in its current iteration was widely considered to originate in Europe in the 1970s. Focused on a small subject or source, early microhistory attempted to 1) unearth the causes of a slight anomaly or "something that does not fit" and 2) make visible historical subjects that stood invisible in larger narratives of the nation state.¹⁰ Historians in the United States have long participated in the field of microhistory, even if they are not formally defined as such.¹¹ Initial responses to microhistory were mixed, with critics not seeing value in stories that did not connect clearly to a larger national history. Recently, however, microhistory has caused significantly less anxiety within academia, as sweeping national histories fell out of fashion and small local and cultural histories proved more adept at widening historical subjects.¹² While academic historians debated and defined the relevance of microhistory, public historians have rejoiced in the possibilities of a local history or biography.

On the distinction between microhistory and public history, one historian argued that a microhistory's goal is to connect a local story to a broader understanding of a period of time while public historians are caught in up the minutiae of a specific location without interest in broader implications.¹³ I would argue instead that it is museums and public historians that operate at the front lines of disseminating complex national

¹⁰ Matti Peltonen, "Clues, Margins, and Monads: The Micro-Macro Link in Historical Research," *History and Theory* 40, no. 3 (2001): 347–59; Carlo Ginzburg et al., "Microhistory: Two or Three Things That I Know about It," *Critical Inquiry* 20, no. 1 (1993): 10–35.

¹¹ Jill Lepore, "Historians Who Love Too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography," *Journal of American History* 88, no. 1 (2001): 129–44, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2674921>.

¹² Sebouh David Aslanian et al., "How Size Matters: The Question of Scale in History," *The American Historical Review* 118, no. 5 (2013): 1430–72. SPACE

¹³ Nicole Etcheson, "Introduction: Local History, National Contexts: Exploring Microhistory in Henderson, Kentucky," *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 113, no. 4 (2015): 591–600.

narratives using a local stories. Freed from the confines of academia, public historians are able to embrace the tenants of microhistory to convey the importance of community storytelling. At their worst, these public microhistories are unfounded dramatizations and hero worship. But at their best, public historians connect a broad public to history through the familiar beats of their own family or town.

As a public historian, my work falls somewhere between scholarly discourse and anecdotal yarn. An important goal of this study is to reconsider how public history spaces, like a historic mill, might be recontextualized to convey a complex story. The collection that forms the backbone of my research was built to lionize the pioneer era of Oregon. It focuses almost exclusively on mill owners and wealthy farmers. And, in tours and school programs, the mill is largely devoid of complex narratives of Oregon identity. It is the quintessential quilt-and-bonnet show. When I began my research, I wanted to see what other stories could be wrung out from this type of collection. Can a flour mill teach the public about complex agricultural systems? Can a flour mill humanize the working poor? Or is a pioneer mill always just a pioneer mill? I hope that this work inspires public historians and museum professionals to reconsider their own collections. What stories lurk within quilt-and-bonnet collections?

The story of Boston is short; the town existed for only two decades on maps, but the story of the mill, and the story recounted here, includes the generations-long fallout of rural settlement. The first chapter highlights the original White settlements of Boston through four men who created the community. In these biographies of early settlers, the push and pull of nineteenth century migration is framed in the context of rural poverty. These families came into Oregon looking for financial solvency and, through their own

writings and those of their descendants, created a narrative of early settlement centered on both perseverance and prosperity. The myth that was created in this first era of Boston would work to obscure the working poverty that was inherent in early settlement, as wage labor and tenant farming became entrenched in Willamette Valley agricultural systems.

The second chapter highlights an abrupt shift in the Willamette Valley with the arrival of the train and, with it, access to world markets. As fortunes were promised, rural Oregonians grappled with this newfound connection to urban spaces, and what that would mean to their communities. Federally sanctioned overinvestment in agriculture, especially wheat, placed mortgages on farms freely acquired the generation before. The unease of the era is showcased in the families of Boston, as sons chafed at rural limitations and daughters stretched outside the bounds of gendered roles. During this period, the mythology of the quaint rural landscape faltered. National endeavors to industrialize farms threatened to demolish not only the supposed self-sufficiency of the rural farmer, but also notions of rural exceptionalism that had taken root in the Willamette Valley.

The third chapter follows the inevitable collapse of the agricultural industry in the Willamette Valley beginning in the 1920s. As farms were foreclosed on, national hand wringing over the "rural problem" threatened social norms built in Oregon over the last decades. In Boston, battles within the mill owner's family exposed how market volatility shattered the wealth of the previous decade. At the same time, farmers, financially injured, lashed out at the mill's water rights. Local frustrations were only amplified federally, as Depression-era assistance programs were unable to secure a middle-class standard of living for rural America. As farms were on the brink of collapse, Linn County

residents renewed their interest in the lost pioneer era to connect their stories back to a supposed period of prosperity.

The final chapter signals the end of small-scale family farming in Boston, a long death that stretched from the postwar era and into the 1980s. Donation Land Claim settlements, now a century old, were sold and consolidated. At the same time, the mythologies of rural simplicity gained traction through television and popular media. These popular narratives encouraged voyeuristic interest in rural America at the same time it was dissolving in Boston. Rye grass replaced wheat, and communities that were built on rural industry languished. In this modern era, rural communities disappeared almost entirely into the myth of the pioneer. Communities like Boston were treated as quaint relics, and the mill, after a century and a half of constant production, ceased operation. That the mill would be resurrected as a state park in 2006 is a strange epilogue to Boston, a lasting monument to a town that couldn't survive.

For those few that still farm the Donation Land Claims of their ancestors, the distance between parents, grandparents, and great grandparents is small. While I have maintained a chronology, many of the oral histories of this area are very quick to dismantle generational differences by absorbing their ancestry into their own life narratives. I have honored this understanding of place and family by providing, when appropriate, longer genealogies of workers. These connections were important to the people who lived in Boston, and so they are important here. The story of poverty is rarely neatly contained within a single family, or a single generation. Instead, in the lost town of Boston, the wounds of one generation are the scars on the next.

CHAPTER 1: CREATING PLACE AND PURPOSE

Introduction

Studying early Oregon settlement requires grappling with the popular histories of the pioneer. Luckily, it's a simple enough story. It starts with an arduous journey across the barren and hostile west. It ends with a farm, a family, and crops to sustain and enrich the landscape. This story was born from the reminiscences of early settlers and passed down during reunion picnics, public talks, newspaper articles, and early scholarly publications. Numerous historical societies in Oregon, including the Oregon Historical Society, trace their founding to the protection and preservation of this story, even as cracks began to form.¹⁴ In Linn County, the annual pioneer picnic continues to be an intrinsic component of mythologizing the Willamette Valley settler long after the pioneer was dead and buried. Recent work in early settlement rightly repositions our focus, overwriting the story of heroic settlement for more nuanced interpretations of the devastation of tribal communities and ecosystems through the lens of settler colonialism.¹⁵ White settlement is repositioned as an event that was more hostile than heroic. However, those who live in the community that was once Boston still share stories their grandparents told them, and these stories have weight. Many families in the vicinity of Boston proudly note that they are a fourth or fifth generation Oregonian and

¹⁴ L.L. Haskin et al., *Pioneer Stories of Linn County, Oregon*: W.P.A. Interviews by Leslie L. Haskin Et Al, vol. 1-3, *Pioneer Stories of Linn County, Oregon*: W.P.A. Interviews by Leslie L. Haskin and Others (Linn-Benton Gen. Services, 1984); Peter Boag, *Pioneering Death: The Violence of Boyhood in Turn-of-the-Century Oregon* (University of Washington Press, 2022).

¹⁵ For example, see Carpenter, "Pioneer Problems"; Matthew Dennis, "Natives and Pioneers: Death and the Settling and Unsettling of Oregon"; Bergmann, "We Should Lose Much by Their Absence"; Lewis and Robinson, *Tribal Histories of the Willamette Valley*;

they still crowd into Brownsville for pioneer reenactments, just as their ancestors did a century before. The realities of Oregon settlement and the myth that formed around it contributed to the history of labor in Boston. The realities of working poverty, ingrained at the moment of settlement, were obscured by the mythology of the triumphant pioneer. Ties to community and history caused families to remain on unprofitable land, and stories of the individualistic yeoman farmer obscured the real needs of poverty-stricken rural communities.

For the men who made up Boston, there was no prosperity built into the end of their journey. Instead, poverty, depression, and the precariousness of wage-based manual labor was at the forefront of early settlement. The most successful among them were the ones who lived in the area only a short while. For those who stayed, volatile markets would be passed down with their land to succeeding generations. These families came to Oregon because they had exhausted the options available to them in the Midwest and because lands never legally ceded were suddenly free to White settlers. They crowded the buttes along the Calapooia River and hoped that one day the land they claimed would support generations yet to come. It was the myth they were sold, and it was the myth they would sell to their children. But the community of Boston, the stage route stop, the post office, and the platted city map, were extremely short-lived. The first Boston mill is built in 1858. The town was completely abandoned by 1871 when a rail stop was located less than two miles to the west, at Shedd's Station. The mill, tied to the Calapooia River for power, was the only building that remained.

In the history of White settlement in the nineteenth century Willamette Valley, four consistent themes emerge. First, rural poverty and poorly paid wage labor was

present at every moment of Boston's history. Second, while the Willamette Valley is heralded as a Pacific Eden to new settlers, the area around Boston was ill suited for the types of Midwestern farming that dominated early settlement and did not translate to economic stability. In fact, of the families of Boston, it was uncommon for any wealth to pass from one generation to the next. Third, the mythology of the pioneer created in the East and carried west was wrapped in a falsehood of economic egalitarianism. That mythology pervaded popular understandings of the early settlement period and was harmful to the residents who remained in the area. It created a dedication to lands that were unprofitable, and it obscured the very real poverty that grew out of free land settlement programs. In the case of Boston, pride of place built on generational mythologies obscured the dire conditions of communities. And finally, the narratives that White settlers told each other deliberately hid realities of Indigenous settlement. In building a narrative of inevitability to White conquest, Boston residents first had to eliminate the peoples that occupied those lands, both in recollections and through state sanctioned thefts of land.

In 1850, when Boston was settled, fewer than one thousand people lived in Linn County, Oregon. The area that would become Boston was eighty miles from Oregon City, considered the terminus of the Oregon Trail, and farther still from Portland, which would become a commercial center in the next decade. The majority of families that settled between 1850 and 1860 in this part of Oregon Territory were farmers looking for land to claim. The Willamette Valley had a reputation throughout the county as a fertile, temperate valley, ideal for the type of agriculture that Midwestern farmers participated in. Once they arrived in Oregon Territory, they would come to define Oregon identity for the

next century, but the story of the first settlers of Boston started on the east coast, when poverty-stricken families looked for a path forward. The legacies of Americus Savage, Richard Farwell, Richard Finley, and P.V Crawford were tied to Boston. To understand the community that they built, it is important to first understand why they migrated.

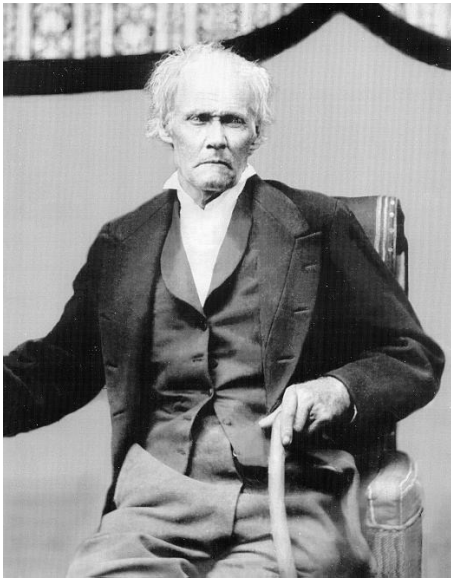


Figure 1.1
Richard Finley, first mill owner, Thompsons Mills Historic Collection

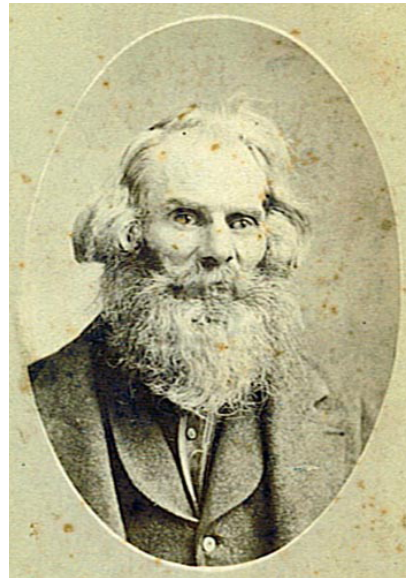


Figure 1.2
Americus Savage, early Boston settler
Thompsons Mills Historic Collection



Figure 1.3
Richard Farwell, right
Thompsons Mills Historic Collection



Figure 1.4
P.V Crawford and his wife
Thompsons Mills Historic Collection

An American Eden: The Push to the Oregon Trail

Americus Savage was the original owner of the land that would become Boston Mills. He was born in Kingsfield, Maine in 1815 and grew up a staunch Democrat from a humble background. His two brothers died when he was just seventeen and, shortly thereafter, his father died after a long bout with consumption. When his father died, Savage became the head of the household, working to support his nine remaining siblings and mother. He worked seven days a week chopping wood and clearing and sowing fields on the family's property. In the winters he worked in the lumber swamp at thirteen dollars a month. Of his childhood, Savage wrote, "I grew up in that cold lumber country. My parents were poor but honest. I was raised to [illegible] lumbering and working in sawmills."¹⁶ In 1820, Kingsfield had a population of around four hundred people and powered mills using water from the Carrabassett River. While agricultural lands were available in this part of Maine, the Savage family likely had a small subsistence farm with income coming from lumbering. It was work that Savage detested, and his later writing would focus on the evils of this forced dependency, namely the inequity of wage labor.

Savage's political leanings, a focus of much of his archive, were formed during this period, at the height of Jacksonian fervor. Savage was fourteen years old when Andrew Jackson took office, and his brothers and father died during his presidency. This formative period saw Savage grappling with his family's position within the American capitalist system. He likely responded well to the homespun politicking of Andrew

¹⁶ Americus Savage Papers, Collection of Tiffany Petters, ancestry.com, accessed 2021

Jackson. Jacksonian democracy purported to protect the farmer and laborer by limiting government assistance to those market interests that would exploit them. Wealthy landholders and corporate entities were easy targets for Jackson, and his condemnation of the current system appealed to the working poor, like Americus Savage, who were unable to secure stability for their families, even during periods of supposed economic abundance.¹⁷ The benefactors of the Market Revolution and the bankers who propped them up were an easy enemy for Savage's Maine family, who were too far removed from economic centers to benefit directly in the budding market economy.¹⁸

The reason for Savage's decision to leave Maine remains unknown. He was twenty-two years old when the Panic of 1837 reverberated through New England industries and created a precarious situation for wage laborers like Savage. Jackson's policies did little to stabilize volatile markets, and the Panic of 1837 followed by an economic depression hit economically fragile families the hardest.¹⁹ Already financially precarious, these economic downturns may have encouraged Savage to look west. His situation was not uncommon during this period. American poverty in the 1820s and 1830s was a constant presence in the minds of those without abundant wealth. In the absence of social safety nets, a family's fortunes could change in a matter of years, from self-sufficiency to abject poverty. While churches or charitable organizations offered relief, the sheer whiplash of economic fortunes during the 1820s and 1830s planted seeds

¹⁷ Harry L. Watson, "Andrew Jackson's Populism," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 76, no. 3 (2017): 218–39.

¹⁸ Watson, "Andrew Jackson's Populism."

¹⁹ William H. Siles et al., "Quiet Desperation: A Personal View of the Panic of 1837," *New York History* 67, no. 1 (1986): 89–92.

of unrest among laborers who were able and willing to work, but could not gain enough footing to support their families.²⁰ In the discourse on poverty during this period, those in need of assistance were split between deserving and undeserving. White women, children, and the infirmed were considered deserving poor, individuals that were entitled to assistance. Able-bodied men that were employed but unable to support their families were also often deserving of aid, though the aid was directed to their families. Single men or men without jobs were considered undeserving and not eligible for assistance outside of work camps. This distinction serves as a quiet acknowledgment in the dangers of a capitalist economy. It was understood that wages were sometimes inadequate. Working poverty defined Savage's early adulthood.

Unequal access to financial stability existed since the earliest days of the republic, despite contemporary claims that impoverished populations were the result of a rigid European class system. Popular discourse argued that class distinctions were irrelevant during the revolutionary period because of the opportunities for upward mobility for White men. More recent scholarship, however, acknowledges that there is "a disjuncture between the mythology of boundless opportunity and the reality of arduous labor and persistent poverty."²¹ Just as with the mythologies that would surround westward expansion in language of abundance and equality, the early settlement of the United States was similarly obscured by myths that were divorced from the realities of the

²⁰ Zoltán Vajda, "'The Greatest of All Gamblers Is the Farmer': Thomas Jefferson's Republican Conception of White Poverty in the Early Republic," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 132, no. 2 (2024): 75–106.

²¹ Seth Rockman, "Class and the History of Working People in the Early Republic," *Journal of the Early Republic* 25, no. 4 (2005): 527–35.

working poor. Historians of the early republic note that "early republic capitalism operated with a kind of contingency that meant some people could be rich and powerful because other people could be rendered poor and powerless."²²

Americus Savage was, through the early deaths of his father and brother, rendered poor and powerless. Savage did not speak highly of his young adulthood and, perhaps as an escape, he married a neighbor, Mary Thompson, and started off on his own. They settled briefly in Illinois from at least 1845-1850, where four of their children were born. The 1850 census lists real estate valued at \$600 for the Savage family. There was a mix of real estate in this area, with farms worth two or three times that of the Savage homestead and some neighbors owning considerably less land.²³ During this period, farmland in Maine would cost about \$13 per acre, compared with land values in more populated New England and mid-Atlantic regions land prices, which were closer to \$30 dollars per acre. An 1843 treatise on settling Illinois claimed unimproved land was available at \$1.25 per acre, sold cheaply to encourage settlement. Savage's farm was likely midsize, with buildings and improvements. It was considerably larger than land available to him in Maine during the same period. While the family was not as wealthy as some neighbors, they were still making do. It is unclear whether Savage was also working as a laborer during this period. He would write that land ownership and the self-sufficiency it provided were paramount to economic stability.

²² Rockman, "Class and the History of Working People in the Early Republic," 532.

²³ "New England Real Estate Values, 1850-1930" Agricultural Farm Values Decennial Report, United States Census Bureau. <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1930/agriculture-farm-values/farm-values-ch01.pdf>

The yeoman ethos that guided Savage's quest for larger tracts of land in the Midwest was already showing its age in the decades leading up to largescale westward migration. The yeoman farmer ethos predated the work of Thomas Jefferson, but the concept was popularized when he singled out the yeoman or subsistence farmer as the cornerstone of the American landscape due in part to their self-sufficiency. Jefferson proclaimed in 1785 that America was different because of a universal "happiness" among the population, an awareness that everyone could flourish. This was largely due to the availability of land, land that Jefferson would work to expand during his presidency. The draw of the yeoman farmer was their independence and immunity from world market forces. But this immunity was another myth of American settlement. By the 1810s, when Americus Savage was born, Jefferson noted that farmer participation in markets was a viable means of maintaining "republican virtue". He also acknowledged that this would result in potential poverty in instances of market downturns. Two decades later, as Americus Savage was moving into the Midwest, Jefferson wrote that "the greatest of all gamblers is the farmer." Faced with his own declining economic situation, the Virginia planter acknowledged that capitalism placed farmers on the brink of destitution at all times, especially if they took on debt to increase production. That this would later happen to the Savage family and neighboring farms, then, is no surprise. While yeoman farmer rhetoric was prolific into the twentieth century, the bloom was off the rose even before the industrial revolution.²⁴ Despite treatises on American exceptionalism, a majority written or endorsed by Jefferson himself, poverty and, in the case of Savage, working poverty was very much a component of this period. While the itinerant poor, or

²⁴ Vajda, "'The Greatest of All Gamblers Is the Farmer.'"

wandering beggars, as Jefferson termed them, were far more common in Europe, individuals and families that relied on charitable aid were in the earliest American settlements. The volatility of markets for farmers and the subsequent industrial revolution only increased this sense of precariousness for laborers and subsistence farmers in the following decades.

In addition to poverty and, more alarming to Jefferson, working poverty in the early United States, the violent removal of Indigenous peoples by white settlers also increased in the United States during this period.²⁵ Both of these factors would impact Americus Savage. Settlers' ideology of violence, which resulted in cheap available land for settlement, was already well rooted prior to the acquisition of Oregon Territory. These two factors gave Savage both motive and means for his emigration. As lands became available in frontier spaces, families like the Savages moved. For Americus Savage, this would drive him, in 1851, to Boston, Oregon.

Richard Finley, the first proprietor of Boston Mills, was also drawn to Boston. Finley was born in 1814. His family was Scotch Irish and emigrated to Virginia during the colonial period. Finley saw the same economic uncertainty during the 1830s and developed a distrust of the federal government and unfettered southern sympathies. Finley's father was an early pioneer to Tennessee, where Richard was born. When he was still a teenager, his family moved again, this time to Missouri. Like Savage, Finley's family moved farther and farther west to acquire more acreage. It is unclear if his parents farmed in Missouri, but records indicate that Richard Finley worked in mines as a

²⁵ Jeffrey Ostler, "Locating Settler Colonialism in Early American History," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 76, no. 3 (2019): 443–50, <https://doi.org/10.5309/willmaryquar.76.3.0443>.

laborer. When he was still a young man, he fell into a mine shaft and broke his leg in two places.²⁶ He would never fully recover from this injury, which gave him a distinct limp and made hunting, farming, or any other physical exertions hard.²⁷ Finley married, and the couple settled on a Missouri farm close to his wife's family, the Kirks. In 1846, the Kirks decided to move again to Oregon. Richard and Polly Ann Finley followed along.²⁸

The story of Richard Farwell is quite similar to that of Finley and Savage. Richard Farwell was born in New Hampshire in 1822, the youngest of the first generation of Oregon pioneers. His father, Moors, received a education in Massachusetts and trained as a doctor. He relocated his family to Illinois, when Richard was around seventeen. Dr. Farwell was in ill health and unable to continue with his occupation, leaving his children, mostly grown, to fend for themselves in the Midwest. Richard Farwell married when he was twenty-five years old. Unlike Savage and Finley, Farwell first went to the California goldmines. According to family records, he returned to Illinois with \$4,000, four times the value of his father's land.²⁹ He stayed only long enough to collect his young family and return West, this time to Oregon.

²⁶ Eliza Finley Bandon says that the mine was in Wisconsin, and Andrew Kirk agrees that it was Wisconsin (WPA Volume 3 pg.12) while George Finley claims the mill was in Missouri, see Everett Earle Standard, "Pictures of Pioneers of Linn County," Albany Daily Democrat, January 1, 1922

²⁷ W.P.A. Interviews by Leslie L. Haskin Et Al, vol. 1-4, Pioneer Stories of Linn County, Oregon: W.P.A. Interviews by Leslie L. Haskin and Others (Linn-Benton Gen. Services, 1984); More information on Finley's injury can be found in "The Part my Grandparents Played in Making Oregon History," Finley Papers, Linn County Historical Museum, Brownsville, OR.

²⁸ L.L. Haskin, N.L. Williamson, and Or.) Linn Genealogical Society (Albany, Pioneer Stories of Linn County, Oregon: W.P.A. Interviews by Leslie L. Haskin Et Al, vol. Volume 1, Pioneer Stories of Linn County, Oregon: W.P.A. Interviews by Leslie L. Haskin and Others (Linn-Benton Gen. Services, 1984), 51

²⁹ "Death of Richard Farwell," *Albany Democrat*, December 1, 1899; L.L. Haskin et al., Pioneer Stories of Linn County, Oregon: W.P.A. Interviews by Leslie L. Haskin Et Al, vol. 2, Pioneer Stories of Linn County, Oregon: W.P.A. Interviews by Leslie L. Haskin and Others (Linn-Benton Gen. Services, 1984).

P.V Crawford, another Boston settler, was more established than Savage, Finley, and Farwell, but also chose to move west to provide more stability for his family. Crawford was born in the Midwest in 1814. As an adult, he settled on a small farm in Illinois. His son remembered cholera epidemics in 1848 and 1850 as the impetus to move out of the area. Crawford was also concerned about the opportunities available to his sons, who seemed to spend their days betting on marbles instead of bettering themselves. The family first moved to Indiana, where they heard promising reports from Oregon. P.V Crawford, according to his son, was "born with a desire to rove."³⁰

Poverty likely moved these four families to the Midwest, and frontier boosterism encouraged them to continue the journey. In recalling early settlement more than a century later, a local historian described the motivations of early settlers: "they came here to get away from a new type of slavery that was gripping New England - the slavery of industrialism."³¹ Poverty was one guiding force, popular culture was another. While Finley, Crawford, Farwell, and Savage were coming into adulthood, there was a keen interest in the frontier, both as a place of economic expansion and as an American ideal. Politics of the 1820s and 1830s were "particularly Westernized" with individuals like Davy Crockett worming their way into public consciousness. In popular culture, "the frontier" was a sort of hypermasculine landscape of possibility. Notions of the frontier filled the same role in the 1820s that the Revolutionary War filled for a previous generations. It became a defining American identity, even for those that would never set

³⁰ Crawford Papers, Linn County Historical Museum, Brownsville, OR.

³¹ Floyd C. Mullen, *The Land of Linn; an Historical Account of Linn County, Oregon* (Printed by Dalton's Print, 1971).

foot in a frontier landscape. The West, according to popular consciousness, politicians, and cultural touchpoints, was the future. One need only survey the rhetoric around presidential candidates and their proximity to log cabins to see this shift in American identity away from Eastern aristocracy.³² Families unable to afford self-sufficiency in the East and Midwest saw westward expansion as a great equalizer for the American farmer.

Organizations throughout the United States took up the banner of westward migration. The American Society for Encouraging the Settlement of Oregon Territory was organized in 1829, and other similar initiatives existed throughout the United States.³³ The American Society was the brainchild of a Boston booster enamored with stories of Lewis and Clark and concerned that Oregon Territory could become a British stronghold. In addition to recruiting settlers, the Society also lobbied Congress for settlement funds or free land. While these early initiatives did not immediately yield large settlements, missionary trips in the 1830s continued conversations on emigration. By 1843, more than one thousand people used the Oregon Trail in what was termed the "Great Emigration." During this period, there was a glut of information on Oregon Territory passed through newspapers, letters, and public presentations. According to boosters, Oregon Territory was an American land of milk and honey, which would offer wealth for those brave enough to make the journey. The St. Louis *New Era* published a long letter on opportunities available for new settlement in Oregon, republished from the *National Intelligencer*, and likely circulated throughout the country. The author wrote, "In short

³² M. J. Heale, "The Role of the Frontier in Jacksonian Politics: David Crockett and the Myth of the Self-Made Man," *The Western Historical Quarterly* 4, no. 4 (1973): 405–23, <https://doi.org/10.2307/967284>.

³³ E. N. Feltsgog, Parkman : *The Oregon Trail* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), 20.

the Wallamet Valley is a terrestrial paradise." He diplomatically referred to the rains in the spring season as merely "dews." The soil was rich, the weather mild and, most importantly, the land was free.³⁴ The resulting influx of American settlers led to the Oregon Treaty of 1846, in which James K. Polk secured exclusive rights to Oregon Territory, while the British maintained Vancouver Island.

These population relocations were simultaneously encouraged and regulated by a strong federal government. Government officials used land politics to control settlement. This control was designed to secure rights to the land without overtaxing the limited financial and military resources of the United States. Early settlement into the Old Northwest and Louisiana Territories were strategically slow, with a "full on this side" mentality, meaning that areas should be fully populated before moving west. This limited full speed expansion. The California gold rush and Oregon Trail settlement push changed the speed of migration, with settlers flooding new lands on the Pacific Coast before the Midwest and Great Plains had been fully settled. The movement of peoples into Oregon seemed more urgent and frenetic than the slow march into the Old Northwest. Men like Savage, Finley, Farwell, and Crawford were swept up in this migration fervor. Within only a few years of one another, Finley, Crawford, Farwell, and Savage all joined the wagon trains west. They all had small Midwestern farms that were not lucrative enough to encourage long-term settlement. They were all middle aged with young families. They all spent their childhoods in varying degrees of poverty. And they were all open to emigration.

³⁴ This letter was reprinted in "*Migration to and Settlement of Oregon*," The Quarterly of the Oregon Historical Society 4, no. 4 (1903): 399–409.

The idea that the settlement of the American West would be a great equalizer, a pressure release for corrupted eastern cities, was well trod in newspapers. Americus Savage recycled these opinions in his own reminiscences. By 1850, the free western land long promised by the federal government became a reality in Oregon Territory through the Donation Land Claim Act. This was Oregon's second free land scheme, following Oregon Territory's Organic Act, passed in 1843, which promised 640 acres of free land to each married couple in Oregon. The Donation Land Claim Act legitimized previous settlements, and, for those White men that arrived in the second wave of Oregon settlement, between 1850 and 1855, 320 acres was offered. This was a precursor to the more well-known Homestead Act, passed in 1862, to encourage western settlement on a larger geographic scale. The Homestead Act distributed 96 million acres to over 300,000 people, an expansionist enterprise that flooded the American West with settlements³⁵ While the Donation Land Claim Act was more localized, it was hugely impactful to the settlement of the Willamette Vally.

Legacy and the Oregon Trail

The Farwell, Savage, Finley, and Crawford families all crossed the Oregon Trail within five years of one another, part of a mass influx into Oregon Territory that began in 1843 and continued through the 1850s. Messaging to "Go West" was spread through dime novels, political propaganda, and travelogues on the untamed frontier. And in this

³⁵ Paul Frymer, "'A Rush and a Push and the Land Is Ours': Territorial Expansion, Land Policy, and U.S. State Formation," *Perspectives on Politics* 12, no. 1 (2014): 119–44.

blizzard of western boosterism, the promise of Oregon was highlighted.³⁶ Oregon settlement during this period came from the north and the south almost simultaneously. Northern settlers coming from the Oregon Trail moved south as land around Oregon City, the original terminus of the trail, was claimed. New emigrant trails, like the Applegate Trail established in 1846, allowed for more dispersed settlement through southern Oregon and the mid-Willamette Valley. Miners from northern California travelled into southern Oregon for new claims, or, as mining proved less lucrative, moved up from the less agricultural friendly southern Oregon into the Willamette Valley. In the 1850s, another supposed shortcut of the Oregon Trail fed settlers directly into the mid-Willamette Valley and settlement boomed in Eugene and the surrounding areas. While Oregon's populations in 1850 were still sparse, settlers were coming into the area from all directions, changing the demographics, professions, and socioeconomic standing of what would become Linn County.

Richard Farwell and Richard Finley's journeys across the Plains were sparsely recorded. When the journey was mentioned, it was in oral histories well after settlement. Richard Farwell came to Oregon shortly after he returned from California.³⁷ The journey took five months, and the head of the wagon train, Captain Shedd, kept a diary.³⁸ There are only sparse mentions of the Farwell family, noting at one point that "R Farwell and H Farlow killed a Buffalo and we had a feed of a shower of rain & hail. Buffalo meat

³⁶ Roy Marvin Robbins, "Horace Greeley: Land Reform and Unemployment, 1837-1862," *Agricultural History* 7, no. 1 (1933): 18-41.

³⁷ "Death of Richard Farwell," *Albany Democrat*, December 1, 1899; Haskin et al., *Pioneer Stories of Linn County, Oregon*: W.P.A. Interviews by Leslie L. Haskin Et Al, vol. 2.

³⁸ Richard Finley Collection, Linn County Historical Museum, Brownsville, Oregon.

cooked with the excrement of buffalos." At the end of Shedd's diary, expenses for each family were noted; Farwell stocked up on whiskey on two separate occasions.³⁹ No journals survive from Finley's wagon train. He arrived in Oregon in 1847, following his wife's family, the Kirks, to Oregon.^{40 41}

While Finley and Farwell left no record, Crawford and Savage both kept journals or, in the case of Americus Savage, wrote extensively about his journey after his arrival in Oregon. Trail diaries are prolific in Oregon museum collections. Some trail diaries were reprinted in the Oregon Historical Quarterly. This activity was part of Oregon mythmaking. Historian David Wrobel has said that "memories... are not just recollected or reproduced: they are constructed, even invented."⁴² This is often the case in Oregon Trail reminiscences and certainly true in the case of Savage's diary. While there is no date to confirm when the diary was kept, it lacks the monotony of a travelogue written during the voyage. Savage likely recounted his trail story to solidify his pioneer bonafides upon his arrival.

The journal of Americus Savage is useful less for the details of his journey and more for the philosophies of early settlement that he inscribed. He used this valuable record to create an American morality play under the guise of a trail diary. In his journal, Americus and Mary, the poor working farm family, faced off against the morally and physically weak well-to-do travelers who cared more for property than life. Savage's

³⁹ Journal of Solon Shedd, 1852. http://www.oregonpioneers.com/SolonShedd_diary.pdf

⁴⁰ For information on familial relationships and wagon trains, see Bowen, *The Willamette Valley*, 24.

⁴¹ Everett Earle Standard, "Pictures of Pioneers of Linn County," Albany Daily Democrat, January 1, 1922

⁴² David M. Wrobel, *Promised Lands: Promotion, Memory, and the Creation of the American West*, First edition (University Press of Kansas, 2002), 13.

childhood outrage at monied classes is apparent in his writing. His Oregon Trail company began with sixteen “able bodied” men and an unknown number of women and children. Savage was elected captain, due, he believed, to his natural ability to lead. The arc of the overland narrative is a familiar one to any dime novel enthusiast. First, the company asserted rights to lands that they did not own. Savage drew a racial line between the virtuous White settler, again played exclusively by Americus Savage and his wife, and the conniving Pawnee or Sioux nations who were, according to the conventions of his narrative, outside the bounds of civilization. They were literally and figuratively in the shadows of this narrative. Instead of highlighting the dangers of the trail, Savage focused on the wealthy White members of his party. They, Savage believed, were the real threat to Western migration. The wealthy men he travelled with were distinguished as “those with horses” and more expansive provisions, but lacking in bravery, or, in some instances, basic common sense. Savage implied that their wealth contributed to their cowardice, a threat to his democratic egalitarianism. He contrasted these men with his own devoted wife who rose to the occasion on the trail as the protector of family.⁴³

In the climax of his story, Savage recommended the formation of a guard to protect both people and property. There was a hint of hostilities in the area, but the suggestion was struck down. The propertied men, those with horses, called any guard an act of cowardice. Savage remembered that “one old man in particular said he could kill all the Indians in the road with his broad sword.” Savage, respecting the democratic nature of his company, agreed to honor the vote. He also continued to warn of trouble,

⁴³ George A. Thompson and F. Janet Thompson “*A Genealogical History of Freeman, Maine 1796-1938*” Vol 3 p. 359-369.

which Dr. Simmons, noted as the member of the party with the finest bridle, refused to take heed.⁴⁴ The horses were soon taken, and Simmons whined that the party must stop to rescue them. Savage wrote, "I turned a square front to him and said, 'Mr. Simmons, go and kill your Indians with your broad sword. We are going to Oregon.'" In a different dangerous situation, Savage found the "brave braggers" hiding behind camp.⁴⁵ While he and his wife, who was pregnant at the time, were willing to protect the community, these men were literally and figuratively hiding behind their wealth. It is likely that neither scene ever took place, but the retelling offers a glimpse into Savage's belief system, his distrust of accumulated wealth, and his own inflated righteousness. Savage viewed the real risk to Oregon settlement coming from the wealthy easterner. He feared the re-creation of a rigid class system that drove his own family into a precarious financial situation. To Savage, the men who made up his party were a liability to the yeoman farmer ethos that he believed was the only hope for Oregon.

Americus Savage saw the journey west as a way to shed the weight of Eastern markets and Eastern wealth. P.V Crawford saw Oregon as an opportunity to create an ideal landscape of technology and enlightenment. Of the four early settlers, Crawford was likely the most financially secure and the most optimistic for the country's future. He went on the trail in part for the novelty of it. Crawford cited his desire to "see more of the world than I had seen" as his reason for joining an 1851 wagon train to the Willamette Valley. Like Americus Savage, Crawford was mesmerized by the land available. He also

⁴⁴ There is no known familial connection between this Dr. Simmons, and William Simmons, who is discussed in Chapter 2

⁴⁵ George A. Thompson and F. Janet Thompson "*A Genealogical History of Freeman, Maine 1796-1938*" Vol 3 p. 359-369.

believed the world was at the beginning of amazing growth and progress. An opportunity to settle Oregon Territory was an opportunity to contribute to this moment and to hopefully insure generational wealth for his family. His son remembers a similar fervor that drove his father west,

On this little farm we had scarcely become settled when Oregon attracted his attention by the literature then circulated about it amongst people, especially those of the western states. ... Gold had been discovered in great quantities in California a year or so (1848) before the day of which I speak, and those acquaintances who had gone to and returned from the gold fields gave vastness of the far away land, 'where rolled the mighty Oregon and heard no sound save her own dashings.'"⁴⁶

Crawford's family joined a wagon train in March of 1851.⁴⁷ He kept a diary very different from the heavy-handed treatise of Americus Savage. Crawford was awestruck by the sites and the daily inconveniences of camp life. The bison were harder to kill than expected, the water clearer than Crawford could have imagined, and the camp was much dirtier. But aside from a child's broken leg, the threats seem to stay on the periphery of this train, possibly because Crawford's company contained 26 wagons at its largest point.⁴⁸ E. J Crawford, P.V Crawford's son, was a child on the overland trail. He saw both the strength of his father and his foolishness. The journey, E.J believed, was a peculiar and reckless choice.

Men in our early day were heroic even to the verge of falling within the bounds of foolhardiness, to take their loved ones in such unprotected and defenseless vehicles as we had come the 'plains across'... I say of them, they were brave and deserve more than they won. But the prize at the end of the race was not of the value to warrant such a risk of life and such a loss of time.

⁴⁶ Crawford Papers, Linn County Historical Museum, Brownsville, OR.

⁴⁷ Haskin et al., Pioneer Stories of Linn County, Oregon: W.P.A. Interviews by Leslie L. Haskin Et Al, 1:93.

⁴⁸ Crawford Papers, Linn County Historical Museum, Brownsville, OR.

E.J was specifically discussing the risk of Native peoples on the wagon trains, but the monetary risks, it turned out, were far greater.

Crawford's son remembers his father as extremely even tempered during the journey. He "preserved his good nature and did not become excited, irritated or vexed." which gave them the impression that he was "spiritless or dull." A ruminating intellectual, Crawford lacked the emotional swings of both Finley and Savage, who were quick to violence. He was, instead, a philosophical man who wrote that he had "no place in his mind for the superstitions of the age." Unlike Americus Savage who believed himself haunted by his deceased family, Crawford was dismissive of ghosts, spirits, or any other superstition that was not based in reason or fact. He faced his travels and his new home with a sort of detached optimism. He focused on the hope that reason would overtake the barbarous tendencies of man in this new era.⁴⁹

Popular culture came to embrace Frederick Jackson Turner's belief in the "savagery vs. civilization" view of westward expansion that aligned with the Savage diary at the close of the nineteenth century. But it is important to note that in 1850, opinions of the first generation of western settlers, especially those that were reliant on free land for solvency, were largely unkind.⁵⁰ British bureaucrats in Oregon Territory kept a close eye on American migration, reporting with disdain as new settlers arrived. Individuals who stumbled into the Willamette Valley were starved and feeble, without the means to pay their debts and without the intelligence to find their way. One British

⁴⁹ Crawford Papers, Linn County Historical Museum, Brownsville, OR.

⁵⁰ Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*, New Ed edition (Harvard University Press, 2007).

bureaucrat described Willamette Valley settlers as "men of desperate character and fortune" who were "quick to asserting their imaginary rights" to the land.⁵¹ American writers were also derogatory towards early settlers, notably Francis Parkman in his serialized recollections of his own Oregon Trail journey. An intellectual from New England, Parkman was interested in "a summer's romantic rambles" without the seriousness of permanent settlement. He set out on the Oregon Trail as a vacation.⁵² Parkman's recollections of the journey went through multiple reprints. A serialized version appeared in *Knickerbocker Magazine*, published between 1847-1849. This version offered his most uncensored take on his fellow travelers. On the whole, Parkman saw the emigrants as clumsy and ragged.⁵³ He surmised that the United States was lucky to be rid of them. Echoing the sentiment of British bureaucrats, Parkman saw no merit in the individuals he encountered on the trail.

In later scholarship, the journey to Oregon would be used as a marker of pioneer credentials. Scholar Thomas Condon argued at the turn of the twentieth century that the wagon journey cleansed the Oregon population, weeding out the disreputable characters. Savage's diary leans into this notion. The trail was a proving ground, legitimizing men that worked the land, and punishing the bankers and merchants that took advantage of farmers. Crawford's reminiscences see Oregon as the next evolution in American history, an opportunity for equality that could not occur in the settled East. But the less

⁵¹ Frederick Merk, *The Oregon Question: Essays in Anglo-American Diplomacy and Politics*, First Edition (Belknap Press / Harvard University Press, 1967), 246.

⁵² Feltskog, Parkman, 5a.

⁵³ Feltskog, Parkman, 36a.

magnanimous views of early Oregon settlement were more factually correct. Oregon settlers were poor men hoping to create a life better than the one they left. The society that they created in Oregon was not a study in economic egalitarianism. In fact, it would take less than a generation for working poverty to creep into new settlement. The free lands that lured four families to Oregon could not promise economic stability.

Early Settlement in Linn County

The Donation Land Claim Act promised free and available land for anyone that settled in Oregon Territory. But the lands were already settled by Kalapuyan peoples, who had used the area around the Calapooia River for generations. On the land that would become the town of Boston, this long history of Kalapuyan settlement was etched into the landscape. Between Albany and Eugene, there are 450 known Kalapuyan mound sites, with a concentration of 125 mounds along the Calapooia River and in the vicinity of Boston.⁵⁴ According to one archeologist, the mounds along the Calapooia River signify the growing sedentary nature of Kalapuyan peoples in the pre-settlement period, with the tendency to return to previously occupied camps for seasonal food production. No architectural features were discovered in any excavated mounds, but a wide variety of tools and refuse management suggest that the sites were reused year after year. One mound, located in the vicinity of Shedd, showed evidence of ovens, food storage areas, antler and rock tools, pipes and beads, and burial sites. These mound sites, combined with

⁵⁴ Bill R. Roulette, M.A., RPA, *Baby Pyramids Along the Calapooia River: Mound Sites in Kalapuyan Prehistory* (Applied Archaeological Research, n.d.).

data suggesting a population increase between 4000 and 3000 B.P suggest permanent inhabited sites in the Willamette Valley.⁵⁵

In addition to the Kalapuyan mound sites still visible along the Calapooia, Kalapuyan settlement also altered the landscape. Generations of controlled burns in the valley created fertile grasslands throughout Linn County. Fire was used as a hunting aid and for plant cultivation. Burns cleared underbrush, which stimulated production of acorns, nuts, and fruits. The soil conditions at the start of White settlement were then ideal for farming communities. But, as monocropping by settlers became commonplace in Linn County, the nutrients of the soil depleted, leaving subsequent generations unable to match the first abundant crop yields of Linn County settlement.

The long history of Kalapuyan settlement in the Willamette Valley was either ignored, derided as an inconvenience, or invisible to early White residents. Eliza Finley Brandon, the daughter of Richard Finley, remembered a large number of Kalapuyan peoples around Crawfordsville, where her father first settled. Born around 1848, Eliza may remember the period immediately before removal, or the populations that remained in the area following removal.⁵⁶ She recalled only that they ate camas, raw or dried. Settlers in Linn County remember food scarcity for Native communities once lands were plowed under for wheat and settled. White notions of ownership quickly led to notions of theft, with Linn County residents ready to protect what they believed was their property.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Lewis and Robinson, *Tribal Histories of the Willamette Valley*; Bill R. Roulette, M.A., RPA, *Baby Pyramids Along the Calapooia River: Mound Sites in Kalapuyan Prehistory*.

⁵⁶ Haskin et al., *Pioneer Stories of Linn County, Oregon*: W.P.A. Interviews by Leslie L. Haskin Et Al, 1:49.

⁵⁷ Haskin et al., *Pioneer Stories of Linn County, Oregon*: W.P.A. Interviews by Leslie L. Haskin Et Al, vol. 2.

Two oral histories explicitly mention Kalapuyan settlement in Boston. Its omission from other histories may be due in part to the timing of settlement in this portion of the Willamette Valley, which largely took place after 1850. Anthropologist David Lewis argues that Kalapuya populations had not yet rebounded from disease during the period of White settlement during this period. This population decline may contribute to sparse records of Kalapuyan populations in Boston. The removal of Native populations to the Grande Ronde reservation took place only five years later. While some Kalapuyan peoples, like Eliza Young, known as "Indian Eliza", were able to remain in Linn County, in the vicinity of Brownsville, there is no record to indicate that Kalapuyan communities remained in the area near Boston and Shedd.⁵⁸ Neil Farwell recalled his father, Richard Farwell, seeing sweat lodges in Boston during the earliest days of settlement. An interview with Nellie Morgan Githens, recalled her grandfather, Miller Morgan, a Boston settler, also seeing sweat lodges. Her grandfather had the "trustworthy Indians" watch his homestead when he travelled his grain up to Oregon City.⁵⁹

The same economic opportunity that created communities like Boston in the Willamette Valley accelerated violence toward Oregon's indigenous peoples. As settler violence in Southern Oregon erupted into what would be collectively known as the Rogue River Wars, Linn County residents willingly resorted to violence against Kalapuyan peoples. One-sided treaties in 1855, the result of fears associated with the Rogue River Wars, removed Kalapuyan peoples from their lands in the Willamette Valley

⁵⁸ Lewis and Robinson, *Tribal Histories of the Willamette Valley*.

⁵⁹ Haskin et al., *Pioneer Stories of Linn County, Oregon: W.P.A. Interviews by Leslie L. Haskin Et Al*, vol. 2.

to the Grand Ronde reservation, where inadequate resources and poor living conditions continued a policy of genocide. By the time of the mill was constructed in 1858, the landscape had transformed from grasslands to wheat fields, and White settler violence and forced removals recreated the landscape as a White space.

In 1850, more than 6,000 individuals emigrated into Oregon, with settlement tracking south along the Willamette Valley. Polk, Linn, and Lane Counties saw large population surges during this period, mostly centered around agricultural work, with dispersed settlement and small community centers. In Linn County, the population grew from 994 to 6,772 between 1850 and 1860. Populations continued to grow with the arrival of the train in the next decade.⁶⁰ The impact of Donation Land Claims (DLC), especially in the more sparsely populated mid-Willamette Valley, was immediately felt. The impact of DLC policies was so profound that Linn County, where Boston was located, was named after Lewis F. Linn, a senator from Missouri and vocal advocate for land claim settlements as early as 1843.

Of the four families that would settle in Boston, Richard Finley arrived in Linn County first. He would also become the most famous through the remembrance writings of his children and grandchildren. Because of the injury he suffered while mining, Richard Finley didn't come to Oregon to homestead like Americus Savage and Richard Farwell. Instead, he used his DLC to claim riverfront acreage and build his first mill near settlements in Crawfordsville, twenty miles from Boston. The closest place to grind grain during this era was Champoege, nearly 70 miles north of Brownsville and farther still for

⁶⁰ Oregon Population Tables, 1860. United States Census Bureau.
<https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1860/population/1860a-29.pdf>

those in communities on the outskirts of what would become Linn County. Given the influx of both settlers and miners into the area, Finley seized on the opportunity to establish a mill.⁶¹ He was aided by his wife's family, and the Kirk-Finley alliance was strongly felt in the area around Brownsville, where they claimed land.

Flour mills appeared in Oregon as early as 1835 near Fort Vancouver.⁶² Before 1840, there were four known flour mills in Oregon. By 1850 there were nineteen mills. By 1860, that number more than doubled. When Finley first settled near Brownsville in 1847, the Willamette Valley was already known for its wheat trade. The crop, brought to Oregon by Hudson's Bay Company, was a form of currency in the Far West. Oregon wheat crops travelled to Russian outposts in Alaska as early as 1839. Wheat could even be used as legal tender for a brief period under the territorial government.⁶³ The prolific wheat crop in the early nineteenth century solidified the Willamette Valley as an American Eden, encouraging the migration of small-scale wheat farmers from the Midwest. The increasing reliance on the wheat trade in Oregon would have lasting consequences for the soil and the men who worked in the fields.

Many of these mills were financed through California gold proceeds or by wealthy Oregon residents who did not have any interest in homesteading but saw the potential for investing in industries for a growing population. While reminiscences focus on subsistence agriculture, commercial farming was very much a part of early Willamette

⁶¹ Finley Papers, Linn County Historical Museum, Brownsville, OR.

⁶² David W. Clarke, "Legacies of Wheat: Pioneer Flour Mills in Western Oregon," *Material Culture* 24, no. 2 (1992): 1–27, JSTOR.

⁶³ Hill, D. D. and E. R. Jackman. "They Broke the Trail." Oregon Wheat Commission, 1960.

Valley settlement.⁶⁴ In fact, during the heyday of mining in southern Oregon and California, Oregon wheat could sell for as much as six dollars per bushel, a price that wouldn't be seen again in the United States until 2011.⁶⁵ While Northern California mining camps were more than 500 miles away from Linn County, it was still cheaper to travel for Oregon wheat than buy wheat grown in California. Spanish missions that grew wheat in the 1830s were abandoned after the Mexican Secularization Act of 1833 and mission property was reclaimed as ranchland. This, combined with the sudden and unexpected arrival of miners in California, caused food prices to skyrocket. A barrel of flour could cost as much as \$400 in parts of California during this period.

Mining populations present at Finley's first mill complicated the mythology of the Oregon pioneer. While the Oregon Trail aimed to resettle young farm families, mining populations were largely unmarried men, both ethnically and economically diverse, and numbered around 300,000 people during the height of the gold rush.⁶⁶ As the California and Southern Oregon gold rushes of the 1840s and 1850s increased populations, Willamette Valley wheat was all the more lucrative. Miners in Jackson County, including Chinese laborers as early as 1855, came into the Willamette Valley with its dense population of farmers and mills, for provisions.⁶⁷ Flour mills allowed farmers to enter

⁶⁴ Schwantes, *The Pacific Northwest*, 166.

⁶⁵ Schwantes, *The Pacific Northwest*, 166.

⁶⁶ Herbert, *Gold Rush Manliness*; Susan Lee Johnson, *Roaring Camp: The Social World of the California Gold Rush*, 1st edition (W W Norton & Co Inc, 2000). ; Frymer, "A Rush and a Push and the Land Is Ours."

⁶⁷ Jeffrey M. LaLande, "Sojourners in Search of Gold: Hydraulic Mining Techniques of the Chinese on the Oregon Frontier," *IA. The Journal of the Society for Industrial Archeology* 11, no. 1 (1985): 29–52.

into this market economy with ease. So, as communities were settled, the need for mills, and the water that could power them, became integral.

For access to waterpower, early Linn County communities followed the contours of the Calapooia River. Woolen mills, sawmills, and flour mills would be at the epicenter of these settlements. Given their importance, it is no surprise that Richard Finley, the pioneer miller, is at the epicenter of pioneer stories.⁶⁸ He was also known for his cutthroat approach to settlement. Finley's first mill was located along the Calapooia on a piece of land that included natural waterfalls, a milling necessity. However, that land was claimed by a relative of the Courtney family, Mr. MacAlaster. He had not yet improved on the land, so legal claim could be argued if MacAlaster were to put up a fight. Donation Land Claim settlement had to be improved within a year and for four years following settlement to legitimize the claim. Finley took his chances and began his own improvements, hoping to usurp the MacAlaster claim. What happened when MacAlaster returned is of some debate in available sources. According to Finley's daughter Eliza, Finley happened to have an ax in hand because he was clearing land. When MacAlaster approached, he merely took a defensive posture. This was enough to scare MacAlaster, he never returned to the area. In 1922, George Finley, Richard's son, suggested Finley perhaps threatened MacAlaster and that Mr. Blakely, a neighbor

⁶⁸ Thomas Condon, "The Process of Selection in Oregon Pioneer Settlement," *The Quarterly of the Oregon Historical Society* 1, no. 1 (1900): 60–65; William Wallace Scott, *The Oregon Pioneer* (1916); Peter Boag, "Death and Oregon's Settler Generation: Connecting Parricide, Agricultural Decline, and Dying Pioneers at the Turn of the Twentieth Century," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 115, no. 3 (2014): 344–79, JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.5403/oregonhistq.115.3.0344>.

interested in a mill near the growing town of Brownsville, backed up Finley's claim to the land.⁶⁹

Another informant recalled something a bit more sinister. John McKercher, who purchased Finley's first mill in the 1930s, told a WPA interviewer "it was as rank an incident of claim jumping as could well have happened." When MacAlaster confronted Finley on the property, Finley threatened him with an ax. MacAlaster left to get assistance from the Courtney family and Finley rallied citizens from Brownsville. Both makeshift armies came to the property and, seeing that "bloodshed was inevitable" both sides withdrew. While the legalities of Donation Land Claim settlements may side with Finley because the land was not improved, Leslie Haskin, historian and WPA interviewer, argued that, in other instances, individuals were given a full year to start improvements to the land. Haskin notes that those friendly to the Finley narrative were the only ones that remained in the area, so the story of Finley as the hero of the pioneer community gained traction.⁷⁰ Whatever happened, all sources agree that the Courtney family held a grudge against the Finley family for some time.⁷¹

Finley completed his first mill on the Calapooia River in 1847, ten years before construction of Boston Mills. The building itself was not large; his daughter remembers it as only 15 feet square, but the benefit to the community was immediately felt. Possibly more important than the structure, Finley also obtained the first water rights on the river.

⁶⁹ Everett Earle Standard, "Pictures of Pioneers of Linn County," Albany Daily Democrat, January 1, 1922

⁷⁰ L.L. Haskin, N.L. Williamson, and Or.) Linn Genealogical Society (Albany, Pioneer Stories of Linn County, Oregon: W.P.A. Interviews by Leslie L. Haskin Et Al, vol. 3, Pioneer Stories of Linn County, Oregon: W.P.A. Interviews by Leslie L. Haskin and Others (Linn-Benton Gen. Services, 1984), 12.

⁷¹ Haskin et al., Pioneer Stories of Linn County, Oregon: W.P.A. Interviews by Leslie L. Haskin Et Al, 1:47.

Reminiscences suggest that Finley decided to "oil the deal" with a quart of whiskey to make sure that water rights would be obtained.⁷² According to recollections, the same day the mill ground its first flour, Finley was on a horse to the California mines, which he saw as a quick way to settle construction debts.⁷³ Sometime between his return and 1861, Finley built a larger mill in the same location, just in time to watch the first destroyed in the 1861-1862 floods.⁷⁴ The mill, once its debts were paid, supported Finley's family well. Miners came into Brownsville from southern Oregon for provisions which Richard Finley was happy to supply. Milling was a smart financial bet for Finley, who would essentially hold the monopoly on ground grains in this area. The mill also provided wage labor opportunities for new settlers who could not support their families off the land or did not have land claims, a reality for a larger number of settlers after 1855.

Farmers were dependent on the miller and vice versa for the harvesting and manufacture of flour. In the coming generation this dependence would only grow, as farmers relied on wage labor to supplement their disappointing crop yields. While most stories of early settlement focused on self-sufficient farming, Finley's mill in Crawfordsville and subsequent mill in Boston depended on the wage labor of early settlers who needed more financial aid than their farm could provide, or settlers who were unable to secure land. Often individuals would farm the portion of land they could

⁷² Doris Guntersen, "Thompsons Flouring Mill Marks Site Where Community Boomed" Albany Democrat Herald December 27, 1960

⁷³ Haskin et al., Pioneer Stories of Linn County, Oregon: W.P.A. Interviews by Leslie L. Haskin Et Al, 1:47.

⁷⁴ By the time that mill was destroyed it had already been decommissioned to serve as a hog house.

manage, significantly less than the full acreage claimed. These individuals would then fill labor positions, like those available at the mill.

One early wage laborer in the mills was Jesse Barr. His son, Silas, remembered that his father, a miller by trade, worked for Finley in the Crawfordsville mill, a working relationship that continued even after Barr obtained his own land near Sweet Home. "He would go down and work for Finley every fall until the first rush of new wheat had been ground."⁷⁵ W.R Kirk, known as Riley, was another early worker for Finley. He didn't have a horse so he would walk to the mill site, seven miles from his homestead. Kirk would stay for the week and then hunt for deer on the way back home to feed his family. In addition to any paid workers, Polly Ann Finley, Richard's wife, provided the unpaid labor of cooking for all workers who were brought in to harvest timber for mill buildings, as well as the regular mill workers.⁷⁶

As social strata were forming between land holders and laborers, social distinctions were also forming between the settler families of the Willamette Valley, even those dependent on wage labor, and the young male mining populations from the south. Over time, Portland would begin to differentiate itself from San Francisco in booster literature based on the supposed staid respectability of Oregon settlers, compared to the transient labor, vice, and racial mixing associated with mining settlements. These distinctions were already apparent in the earliest recollections of Linn County. Residents were eager for the gold coming up from California, but were less inclined to socialize with the people who mined it. The stigma against miners and their bawdy behavior was

⁷⁵ Haskin et al., *Pioneer Stories of Linn County, Oregon*: W.P.A. Interviews by Leslie L. Haskin Et Al, 1:19.

⁷⁶ Haskin et al., *Pioneer Stories of Linn County, Oregon*: W.P.A. Interviews by Leslie L. Haskin Et Al, 1:50.

regular newspaper fodder in Oregon, whether or not the reputation was earned.⁷⁷ During construction of the second mill building in Crawfordsville, Richard's wife, Polly Ann, was adamant that they could not live adjacent to the mill anymore. According to Finley's daughter, Polly Ann was concerned that the rough sorts hanging around the mill waiting for their wheat to be ground, mostly miners, would have a negative impact on her daughters. She may have spoken from personal experience. Polly Ann was married to Finley when she was only 13; Finley was a miner twice her age. Alexander Kirk remembered that Polly Ann cried on the night of her wedding because she had to "sleep with a strange man."⁷⁸ It seems Polly Ann was hoping to spare her daughters a similar matrimonial fate.⁷⁹

Polly Ann's distrust of the mining community suggests that there was already a hierarchy of workers among the settler class. Transient miners were seen as less moral than those settled farmers, and in some instances, less worthy of scarce flour resources. The fact that Finley, Farwell, and other residents of Linn County were gold rush miners was irrelevant. While the miners themselves may have been eyed with suspicion, Crawfordsville settlers were enamored with the sight of gold dust, and Polly Ann, who was in charge of paying Finley's debts while he was in California, would regularly show

⁷⁷ For more information on masculinity in mining communities see Herbert, *Gold Rush Manliness*.

⁷⁸ Kirk's recounting is not entirely accurate. He claims that Richard Finley married Polly Ann in Oregon, but they were wed in Platte County Missouri in 1841, see Haskin et al., *Pioneer Stories of Linn County, Oregon*: W.P.A. Interviews by Leslie L. Haskin Et Al, 3:11.

⁷⁹ Polly Ann died in 1866 during childbirth, she was only 39 years old and was buried with her stillborn twins.⁷⁹ She had given birth to 11 children during her lifetime, the first two while she was still a teenager.⁷⁹ Finley notebook newspaper clipping Calapooia country "The Finley Cemetery" by Patricia Hoy Hainline --- LCHM archive 1pg.164

⁷⁹ Finley Papers, Linn County Historical Museum, Brownsville, OR.

off the dust, pouring it into the hands of eager onlookers. Finley's own role in the work of mining, like his disability from an injury, were downplayed as minor impairments, eclipsed by his larger role in the community as that of an entrepreneur. His successful mill in Crawfordsville led to partnerships with other leading families, relationships he solidified in marriages as his daughter came of age.

The First Settlements of Boston

As Finley was building his first mills in Crawfordsville, Americus Savage was arriving on the land that would become Boston. When Savage arrived in Oregon, his family was without any savings and possessed only one yoke of livestock. Crossing by ferry at the Dalles put the family into debt that would need to be repaid. But Savage, like other settlers of his era, attempted to showcase the promise in his situation. He wrote "I found myself in a new country with new prospects, in my prime with a stout heart, and a willing mind ready to do all I could for the welfare of my little family and my Mary."⁸⁰ Unwilling to settle in the subpar lands still available in the northern portion of the Willamette Valley, Savage heard that prospects were better 80 miles south. So, instead of taking a job at a Portland sawmill to repay his debts and recreate his life in Maine, Savage took twelve days to get to an area twelve miles south of Albany along the Calapooia River, to a tract of land he decided to claim. On a cold Christmas Day in 1851, Savage brought his family to a hastily constructed cabin where they would take a meal on an overturned box. Remembering his journey West, Savage remarked that this humble

⁸⁰ George A. Thompson and F. Janet Thompson "A Genealogical History of Freeman, Maine 1796-1938" Vol 3 p. 359-369.

meal would be one of the happiest days of his life, second only to the day he wed his wife.⁸¹ This cabin was the sole dwelling on the land that would become Boston.⁸² He wrote, "I shall never forget the looks of five pairs of bright eyes when I told them we would now stop traveling, I hoped as long as I lived. I believed we were in good country and I was satisfied." That satisfaction was short-lived.

Americus Savage entered into a region firmly shaped in the image of a Midwestern town, where a large number of Linn County settlers emigrated from. On the 1850 census, almost half of emigrants into the Willamette Valley were from the Midwest.⁸³ At the time, twelve thousand people resided in the Willamette Valley, an average of three people per square mile. This early settlement was young and male, with three men for every two women.⁸⁴ In Linn County specifically, 295 men were under 21 years old, while 269 were 21 and older. No residents were foreign-born.⁸⁵ But census data does little to describe the types of families that were included in early settlement. By the time of the Savage journey in the 1850s, Historian William Bowen wrote, "where heavily armed, disciplined parties had once hardly dared to travel, unprepared fools could now

⁸¹ George A. Thompson and F. Janet Thompson "A Genealogical History of Freeman, Maine 1796-1938" Vol 3 p. 359-369. The site of this cabin within Savage's claim is debated. It may have been on the site of the mill, or southeast of the mill along the Calapooia River. See Julie M. Schablitsky, Ph.D., *A Redware Jar for Every Table: The Archaeology of the Simmons House and Boston Town Thompson Mills State Heritage Site, Linn County, Oregon* (University of Oregon Museum of Natural and Cultural History, 2007).

⁸² George A. Thompson and F. Janet Thompson "A Genealogical History of Freeman, Maine 1796-1938" Vol 3 p. 359-369.

⁸³ Bowen, *The Willamette Valley*, 25. Specifically, 45% of migrants came from Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, Wisconsin, Arkansas, Iowa, and Missouri

⁸⁴ Bowen, *The Willamette Valley*, 4.

⁸⁵ Bowen, *The Willamette Valley*, 14.

survive."⁸⁶ While the Oregon Trail was still no-doubt dangerous, largely due to disease, the Oregon trail was well mapped and populated in the years before the Savage journey, meaning that young families and less experienced travelers could now easily come to Oregon.⁸⁷ For the most part, these were farming families, attracted by the large acreage and reports of exceptionally fertile soils. Infrastructure was also established, if not robust, in Oregon during this period. In Linn County, small communities were established along the Calapooia River, including Brownsville and, with settlers arriving in 1846 and the town being officially platted in 1852.⁸⁸ Finley's mill in Crawfordsville was also well established by this point. But the land around the Calapooia was not as advertised. Savage only stayed on his original claim for a few years before the frequent flooding, flooding that would continue to plague the area, drove him seek out higher ground.⁸⁹

The young Farwell family arrived about a year after Americus Savage and chose lands that abutted the original Savage claim. This tract of land remained in the Farwell family for 150 years. At the time of the 1860 census, the Farwell homestead included Richard, his wife, and five children. Also living on the property was a day laborer, David Foreman, who helped with the land while the Farwell children were too young for farming chores. Farwell's wealth was listed as almost entirely in his property. Known for breeding fine racing horses and an unwavering Christian faith, Richard Farwell lived until 1899, long enough to see the construction of the first mill at Boston, the second mill,

⁸⁶ Bowen, *The Willamette Valley*, 11.

⁸⁷ Bowen, *The Willamette Valley*, 22.

⁸⁸ Information taken from the tombstone of Columbus Savage, Shedd Oregon.

⁸⁹ Haskin et al., *Pioneer Stories of Linn County, Oregon: W.P.A. Interviews by Leslie L. Haskin Et Al*, vol. 1.

and a series of owners pass through the property. The Farwell family survived though small-scale farming and breeding horses during the first generation. Richard Farwell's children relied on wage labor.

Savage and Farwell, both farmers, were soon joined by Finley and P.V Crawford, both industrialists. Around the time Finley was constructing a second mill in Crawfordsville, he was forming alliances to build yet another mill. Brownsville built its own flour mill on the Calapooia in 1859, no doubt cutting into the profits for Finley's original Crawfordsville mill, which might explain his interest in a new mill in Boston.⁹⁰ For his new venture, Finley purchased three and a half acres for the mill from Americus and Mary Savage in 1858 for fifty dollars.⁹¹ The land that Savage sold was prone to flooding, and, without any buttes on the property, there was no place to safely build or farm. Savage was likely eager to offload it, and more eager still to see a mill built so close to his other claim.⁹²

Finley also took on a business partner, P.V Crawford. Crawford was in many ways Finley's opposite. Finley was a rough-around-the-edges old miner, a Southern Democrat, and not afraid of a little whiskey. Philemon Vawter Crawford was a cautious men, a

⁹⁰ Peter Boag, *Pioneering Death: The Violence of Boyhood in Turn-of-the-Century Oregon* (University of Washington Press, 2022), 129.

⁹¹ Margason, Marcia. Interviewed by Martin Thompson, October 24, 1984. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.; Margaret Standish Carey and Patricia Hoy Hainline, Shedd: Linn County's Early Dairy Center and Memories of Boston (Calapooia Publications, 1978). Marcia Margason remembers hearing that the land was donated by Savage, rather than Finley purchasing the land. No other records, however, suggest that this was the case.

⁹² Title Transfer, Box 99 Folder 30, Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Marcia Margason claimed in an oral history that the Savage land was donated to Finley. While Savage would benefit from the construction of a mill in Boston, primary sources confirm that the land was in fact sold.

devoted teetotaler, and a staunch Republican. Contemporaries would remember that "[Finley] and PV Crawford were just like brothers" meaning that they argued regularly and loudly about politics to the point that it seemed as though blood would be shed. But they still respected one another enough to form a successful milling partnership that elevated their status in Linn County.

Crawford first settled on the upper Calapooia River, an area that was eventually named Crawfordsville, in 1854. According to acquaintances, Crawford was immediately pleased with the Willamette Valley and took up a Donation Land Claim. He recalled in his diary, "When we arrived in Oregon we found the Willamette Valley more than we looked for, and all we could desire, and we are yet, after 29 years residence here, satisfied that there is no more favorable spot on earth."⁹³ Crawford had experience as a machinist and millwright, so he quickly opened a sawmill and carding mill using the Calapooia River for power.⁹⁴ Finley, also living in Crawfordsville, was impressed by Crawford's skills, even if he was vexed by his politics, and they formed a partnership to construct Boston Mills around 1858.⁹⁵

Possibly due to the sale of his property to Richard Finley, Savage was among the wealthier residents of the area by 1860. He had \$5,830 in real estate and \$1,830 claimed as his personal estate.⁹⁶ By comparison, P.V Crawford claimed just \$200 in real estate and \$2,488 in his personal estate. A neighbor to Savage and day laborer with no land in

⁹³ Crawford Papers, Linn County Historical Museum, Brownsville, OR.

⁹⁴ Haskin et al., Pioneer Stories of Linn County, Oregon: W.P.A. Interviews by Leslie L. Haskin Et Al, 1:93.

⁹⁵ Haskin et al., Pioneer Stories of Linn County, Oregon: W.P.A. Interviews by Leslie L. Haskin Et Al, 1:92.

⁹⁶ The National Archives in Washington D.C.; Record Group: Records of the Bureau of the Census; Record Group Number: 29; Series Number: M653; Residence Date: 1860; Home in 1860: Linn, Oregon; Roll: M653_1055; Page: 302; Family History Library Film: 805055

his name claimed only a \$1,400 estate. Richard Farwell had a \$3,840 in real estate and only \$444 in his personal estate. Savage's estate was besting his landholding neighbors and significantly better than that of a day laborer without land to speak of.⁹⁷ For a brief moment, Savage's move to Oregon gave him the financial security he had been seeking.

For the Boston mill, Finley entered into business with P.V Crawford and Alex Brandon, a Crawfordsville resident. Eliza, Finley's daughter, was married to Alex Brandon's brother, which certainly helped to keep Finley's mill wealth in the family. Finley held half interest in the enterprise while Bandon and Crawford split the other half. Finley and Company also bought water rights from the Elder family, neighbors to the Savages, to build dams, a millrace, and use of the water for \$75.⁹⁸ One of the first workers in the Boston mill was Cyrus Vawter, a miller and Finley's other son-in-law.⁹⁹ This mill, like those in Crawfordsville, relied on nearby farmers to supply it with grain. The majority of business would have been conducted with farmers within a half day's journey, as California milling grew to accommodate mining populations following the booms of the 1840s and 1850s.

P.V Crawford's son E.J remembers helping with the mill, which called him away from his studies for a brief period. "I chalked, scored, and helped generally until we

⁹⁷ The National Archives in Washington D.C.; Record Group: Records of the Bureau of the Census; Record Group Number: 29; Series Number: M653; Residence Date: 1860; Home in 1860: Linn, Oregon; Roll: M653_1055; Page: 302; Family History Library Film: 805055

⁹⁸ Financial Papers, Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR

⁹⁹ Haskin et al., Pioneer Stories of Linn County, Oregon: W.P.A. Interviews by Leslie L. Haskin Et Al, 1:48.; L.L. Haskin et al., Pioneer Stories of Linn County, Oregon: W.P.A. Interviews by Leslie L. Haskin Et Al, Pioneer Stories of Linn County, Oregon: W.P.A. Interviews by Leslie L. Haskin and Others (Linn-Benton Gen. Services, 1984), 4:15.

began sawing the lumber, when I went into the mill and, as tail sawer took my lessons in the making of lumber."¹⁰⁰ Stories of father and son working together in the mill at Boston would become commonplace in subsequent generations. E.J valued this brief period of labor. "When work of building dams, digging ditches etc. began, we moved from our mountain home to Boston, where father bought a small piece of fine bottom land and built a house. The mill building took all summer and fall and I learned much of my trade there."¹⁰¹ P.V Crawford is listed on the 1860 census in the vicinity of Boston, between the homesteads of Richard Farwell and Americus Savage. He moved on by the time of the next census, back to a quiet life in Crawfordsville. Beyond a census and deeds, he left no archive in Boston. However, the hand-hewn beams that his son shaped and carried remain at the center of the mill's production floor. These beams are the oldest artifact that still remains. The mill was built, and then, in the years that followed, a town grew next to it.

Farmers plowed under the remains of Boston shortly after the train arrived in Shedd's Station, two miles to the south. But oral histories and an 1878 map hint at what Boston may have been. The town was platted in 1861 by H.J.C Averill and consisted of 11 blocks, each with eight lots. An application for the post office in Boston listed 32 residents.¹⁰² There was a public square to the south of what is now Boston Mill Road, and the mill sat at the northeast corner of the platted town. Contemporaries recalled a

¹⁰⁰ Crawford Papers, Linn County Historical Museum, Brownsville, OR. Oral histories claim that Cyrus Vawter was also involved in the mill at Boston, though he was listed as living in Brownsville at the 1860 census and he died in 1864 meaning that any involvement would have been short lived.

¹⁰¹ Crawford Papers, Linn County Historical Museum, Brownsville, OR.

¹⁰² Haskin et al., Pioneer Stories of Linn County, Oregon: W.P.A. Interviews by Leslie L. Haskin Et Al, vol. 1.

wool carding mill next to or on the opposite bank of the Calapooia River, one or two blacksmith shops, a saloon, a harness shop and two general stores. The low population of the town suggests that these would have been small businesses, possibly run out of the home rather than standalone buildings. Only a handful of names that were not associated with the Boston Mills appear in records. Annani Lewis appears in the historic record for Boston and then in Shedd's Station, where he moved his business after 1871. Annani, sometimes just referred to as "A Jew" in recollections, was a merchant. An 1881 advertisement for his Shedd store noted that he carried dress goods, clothing, and groceries, and his prices were cheaper than in Albany.¹⁰³ He likely ran a similar general store in Boston.¹⁰⁴

Recreation centered on the racetrack just outside of town. Horse racing was a favorite pastime of both the Savage and Farwell families.¹⁰⁵ A.B Callaway remembered his father buying a racehorse at a meet just outside Boston for the handsome price of \$3,000, which turned out to be decent investment.¹⁰⁶ Ida Brasfield, interviewed in the 1930s, claimed to have attended school in Boston, at the Independent Schoolhouse, District 37. She said that the building itself was on the Farwell claim and that it was also the location of the Methodist church, which was part of the "Calapooia Circuit" of preachers. The blacksmith shops, possibly also located on the Farwell claim, may have fashioned tooling for the first Boston mill.

¹⁰³ "Home and Abroad" Albany Democrat, October 28, 1881.

¹⁰⁴ "News" Albany Democrat, April 28, 1899.

¹⁰⁵ Haskin et al., Pioneer Stories of Linn County, Oregon: W.P.A. Interviews by Leslie L. Haskin Et Al, 1:40.

¹⁰⁶ Haskin et al., Pioneer Stories of Linn County, Oregon: W.P.A. Interviews by Leslie L. Haskin Et Al, 1:73.

The 1870 census listed 13 dwellings in the community of Boston and 55 people. While Savage and Farwell hoped that Boston could compete with Albany for the county seat, the town's growth was stymied even before the arrival of the train, never reaching beyond those early settlements. During archeological digs, the only remarkable item found was on the land that was once owned by P.V Crawford. Pieces of locally made redware pots and fragments of a writing slate were located, and these items could be dated to the Boston era. Scattered shards amount to a faint whisper of a community, the scant artifacts discovered were as insignificant as the town. The construction of Shedd's Station and the coming of the train in 1871 lured the tiny settlement of Boston down the road, houses and all. The Farwells, Elders, Finleys, and Savages remained on their claims, and the town of Boston was plowed back into the earth.¹⁰⁷

Mythologies and Realities of Early Settlement

The facts surrounding early settlement point to hardship; farmers like Americus Savage were suffering financially by 1870. The Farwell claim was lucrative at first, but they sold much of their original claim by the turn of the century. Despite the documented degradation of economic stability in Boston, reminiscences tell a different story. Recollections of this period recall the heyday of the pioneer. While these sepia-toned reminiscences hold no weight with historians, they do define how later generations viewed their ancestors and their own role in the community. The most extensive re-imagining of these early settlers was undertaken by the Finley family. Richard Finley's

¹⁰⁷ Julie M. Schablitsky, Ph.D., *A Redware Jar for Every Table: The Archaeology of the Simmons House and Boston Town Thompson Mills State Heritage Site, Linn County, Oregon* (University of Oregon Museum of Natural and Cultural History, 2007).

daughter, son, and grandson worked to keep the Finley mythology intact despite his lifetime of contradictions. He was a god-fearing man but refused to close his mill on Sundays.¹⁰⁸ He was a friend to all while also usurping land claims. He was a shrewd businessman who never demanded payment. George Finley, Richard Finley's youngest son, regularly spoke of Finley as a man above reproach. He was someone who persevered despite great disabilities, and someone who fought for his successes. In the 1940s, Richard Chism Finley, Richard's grandson, took on the family chore of establishing the Finley legacy in Oregon settlement. Many stories are rehashed from the oral history of Eliza or the editorials by George Finley, but there is one change.

Grandson Richard focused on Grandfather Richard's desire to outrun progress and settle the virgin landscape of the West. He wrote, "[My grandfather] did not want to be overtaken by civilization and modern improvements until he had definitely found the land of his choice." Richard Finley was no longer bringing modernity to the people of Oregon, he was running from it. Also in this retelling, Richard Finley is linked for the first time to Dr. John McLoughlin with a claim that Finley worked for the famed settler in Oregon City prior to settling in Linn County. While this is not necessarily a fabrication, it is striking that this was not mentioned in any of the numerous biographies written on Finley prior to this point. Richard Finley left no archive, only the buildings that he helped to create and the children who would come to define his legacy. Unlike Americus Savage, the first settler in Boston, whose copious writings would freeze his legacy in amber,

¹⁰⁸ Finley Papers, Linn County Historical Museum, Brownsville, OR.

Richard Finley was able to be reborn in subsequent generations, his heroics altered to suit the settler ideal of the moment.¹⁰⁹

Richard Finley's involvement in the industrialization of the Willamette Valley region became an extension of his pioneer persona, sanitized from Finley's own overt capitalism to present mill work as an almost philanthropic endeavor. Upon his death, Finley's obituary noted that Finley's mills were not a money-making scheme, but rather a means of aiding those new arrivals from the overland trail, who could get flour without money from the altruistic Richard Finley. His son noted something similar, writing,

Mr. Samuel Glass told me that the first time he ever met father he came from Jackson County, where he and his brother Robert were mining, to purchase flour. Father told him that he could not sell him flour, for he must keep his flour to sell to the poor immigrants who were settling into this country without money.

According to locals, Finley ran his mill day and night to help these "poor immigrant" settlers. Finley's son wrote that his father was never required to lock the doors due to the "high character of the early pioneers." While the miners could pay, the newspaper boasted, Finley would always choose to help the families and settlers over the more morally ambiguous mining classes. This philanthropic persona is likely embellished. In the 1860 census Finley listed his property value at \$17,000 and his personal estate at \$3,470, a startling amount of wealth amassed over a short period of time. He certainly earned enough from the poor farmers to invest in more mills, including a sawmill in

¹⁰⁹ The Part my Grandparents Played in Making Oregon History" Richard Chism Finley (LCHM archive 1pg.186)

Crawfordsville, while also supporting his family.¹¹⁰ Finley's legacy, like Savage trail diary, were designed to lionize early settlement, while obscuring settlement facts.

Mythologies were also developed to dismiss the role of Kalapuyan people on the landscape, now the home of the venerated pioneer. The Kalapuyan mounds were of immediate fascination to White settlers. Early archeologists and relic hunters wrongly assumed that the mounds of the Willamette Valley could not be connected to the supposedly extinct races of Native peoples encountered during the settlement period. Some of the earliest scholarly reports on the mounds stated that it was far more likely that the mounds were created by tribal cultures from Siberia, rather than those people removed from the area to the Grande Ronde reservation. Among the scholars perpetuating this myth was J.B Horner, who was convinced, like his contemporaries, that the mounds, which he called "baby pyramids" were constructed by a long-extinct race of peoples. An article published in the *Oregon Historical Quarterly* argued that the mounds were most likely created by peoples originating from Asia or Japan, and "have no connection with any of the races now occupying that region."¹¹¹

It took until 1941 and the work of William S. Laughlin for archeologists to rightfully attribute the mounds to the Kalapuyan peoples, after nearly a century of claims that the Willamette Valley tribes lacked the sophistication to create mounds of this size.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Finley Papers, Linn County Historical Museum, Brownsville, OR.; 1860 United States Federal Census. NARA microfilm publication M653, 1,438 rolls. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.

¹¹¹ George William Wright, "The Origin of the Prehistoric Mounds of Oregon," *The Quarterly of the Oregon Historical Society* 23, no. 2 (1922): 87, JSTOR.

¹¹² William S. Laughlin, "Excavations in the Calapuya Mounds of the Willamette Valley; Oregon," *American Antiquity* 7, no. 2 (1941): 147–55, <https://doi.org/10.2307/276062>.

By the time Laughlin published work on the mounds, many sites had been carelessly excavated by treasure seekers and amateur archeologists, who unapologetically destroyed gravesites and removed remains. This archeological erasure was two-fold, first through the ignorant assumption that the mound builders had exotic origins and second through the physical destruction of mounds. In 1870, the landscape had been altered drastically. Rolling wheat fields replaced Native landscapes. Mounds were carelessly tilled, the only sign of their existence a color difference in the soil. In discussing early settler relationships with Native peoples, historian Nathan Douthit wrote dryly that "euro-Americans' pursuit of Manifest Destiny in the nineteenth century left no room for Indians to continue their way of life unchallenged."¹¹³ While this is an oversimplification, the notion of inevitability was echoed in pioneer nostalgia narratives and a facet of settler colonialism in the American West. Specifically, rather than a dominant society working to incorporate and consequently subjugate a colonized people, settlers in a settler colonial framework aim to "disposes, displace and destroy indigenous peoples rather than exploit them for their labor."¹¹⁴

Within settler colonialism, the notion of the frontier is critical. It allows the invasions and subsequent genocides to occur. It becomes a settlement rallying cry and then a justification for what occurs during settlement. The immediate and violent removal of Kalapuyan peoples from the Willamette Valley was a calculated decision of the settler society. While the mid-Willamette Valley would not see the same warfare as Southern

¹¹³ Nathan Douthit, *Uncertain Encounters: Indians and Whites at Peace and War in Southern Oregon, 1820s-1860s* (Oregon State University Press, 2002), 1.

¹¹⁴ Alex Trimble Young and Lorenzo Veracini, "'If I Am Native to Anything': Settler Colonial Studies and Western American Literature," *Western American Literature* 52, no. 1 (2017): 4.

Oregon, Linn County residents were equally invested in the complete removal of native peoples from the land. This seemed, to White settlement, the natural progression of the civilizing forces overtaking Oregon Territory.¹¹⁵ The goal of Linn County residents was to violently create what never existed: a virgin landscape. But the mounds would prove to be more lasting in the landscape than the wheat fields that replaced them. Unfortunately, so would the desecration of these sites, with an article in the *Lebanon Express* featuring stolen human remains and the erroneous claim that the mounds were built by a "mystery race" appearing in 1970. The relic hunter featured was E.H Margason, a descendent of Americus Savage.¹¹⁶

Bury Me Deep: The Legacy of Settlement

In the decades following settlement, both Finley and Crawford moved on to other industrial pursuits. Farwell and Savage, however, were tied to the land that they claimed. They would be the first in a long line of failed farmers. For all the promise and politicking that surrounded the benefits of Donation Land Claims, farming remained a fickle occupation. Americus Savage was not immediately destitute. Newspapers suggest that Savage was, at first, a respected member of this growing community. He was an active Freemason a vocal member of the democratic party, and until the years leading to his death, moderately successful in farming.¹¹⁷ For his first decade in Oregon, Savage

¹¹⁵ Lewis and Robinson, *Tribal Histories of the Willamette Valley*, 65–66.

¹¹⁶ "Mound Builders: The Mystery Race of the Calapooia" *The Lebanon Express*, July 24, 1970.

¹¹⁷ For examples of his work with the Democratic party see *Weekly Oregon Statesmen*, April 19, 1859; Margason, Marcia. Interviewed by Martin Thompson, October 24, 1984. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File; "The Good Templars' Pic-Nic," *Albany Democrat*, May 25, 1867 ; Black Republican Convention in Old Linn," *Weekly Oregon Statesman*, May 11, 1858

held tight to the hope he had as he crossed into the territory for the first time, creating a new beginning with his wife and small children. He was regularly engaged in the betterment of this portion of Oregon. In 1868, Savage wrote to the county clerk suggesting that the county work to create rangeland along the coastal range to encourage "bona fide settlers"—by this he means White settlers—to raise cattle. This would, in turn, create more tax revenue for Linn County.¹¹⁸ In 1870, Savage was mentioned in the *Albany Democrat* for showing his proud and high-spirited stallions, implying success in horse breeding.¹¹⁹

Financially, however, Savage's luck was stagnant. In the 1870 census, Americus did not list any money in his personal estate but valued his land at \$6,000.¹²⁰ This would become common among the first generation of settlers; land was valued highly, but there was little capital to make improvements. Farmers often plowed only part of their land claim, unable to maintain the large acreage of a donation land claim. Hiring help was complicated by sparse populations. Farwell had a hired man during this period, but census records suggest he was the only Boston resident who could afford a laborer. Savage, like many of his neighbors, languished as a farmer. Shortly after the 1870 census, Savage left Linn County for Eastern Oregon, hoping again to be saved through migration. He was reportedly looking into investment opportunities, but the abandonment of his lands in Boston soured his relationship with his children, and reports indicate that he was estranged from his wife Mary, the woman who had stood beside him for all of his

¹¹⁸ "Unsurveyed Lands," *Corvallis Gazette-Times*, January 30, 1869

¹¹⁹ "Recapitulation," *Albany Democrat*, September 30, 1870.

¹²⁰ 1870 U.S. Census, Population Schedules; Sand Ridge Precinct, Linn, Oregon.

happiest days. He spent three years traversing Washington Territory and then returning east to Illinois, Ohio, and even Maine, the place of his birth. Whatever he was hoping to find, he came back to Linn County empty handed in 1874. He stayed only a year before heading East again. His family blamed this unsettled wandering on alcoholism, which “stuck to him closer than a brother.”¹²¹ While this was certainly part of Savage's issue, his desire to secure funds and stability became an obsession, alienating him from his family. Upon his return to Oregon, his family commented that he seemed in good spirits and better health.

On a quiet morning in August, Americus Savage woke early with a sense of resolve, something that he was chasing for the last decade. He dressed, left his home, and walked through an orchard on the Savage land claim, a large portion of which was supposed to be the seed of a new town along the Calapooia River known as Boston. He knew the land well; he had arrived in Oregon two decades prior and raised his family along the river. In the dusky morning, he would lie down on the grass among the fruit trees, put a gun to his head, and pull the trigger.¹²² The death was instant. His suicide note was found and, in accordance with his wishes, published in local papers to quell any gossip or confusion regarding his actions. This was the final missive of a man that dreamed of a new life in Oregon and then, through what he saw as own failings, watched it slip away.

¹²¹ "Suicide", The Albany Register, August 25, 1876

¹²² Kristine Deacon, "Thompson's Mills and the Lost Town of Boston: Oregon's Newest State Heritage Site Celebrates Its Ten-Year Anniversary," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 115, no. 1 (2014): 106–21, JSTOR.

Suicide, studied most thoroughly among men during this period, was of great interest to nineteenth century psychologists. It was linked in large part to modernity. There was a fear among intellectuals regarding the impacts of industrialization on the mind and an assumption that suicide would be most common in urban center. But, while think pieces of the era highlighted urban ties to suicide, data collected in Europe and the United States did not show a strong distinction in the number of suicides in urban versus rural spaces. Instead, it was the moralizing notion of the superiority of the rural landscape that created a medical field dedicated to proving the growth of societal ills in urban spaces and defining these spaces with psychological differences. Any analysis of suicide during this period was tied to sentimental visions of the family and to an ambivalence toward social change.¹²³

So, what would nineteenth century psychologists have made of Americus Savage? They would likely blame alcoholism, the same thing that Savage's family blamed for his erratic behavior in the decade before his death. But Savage's suicide note suggests that his depression was due at least in part to his failure to thrive in what was assumed to be the promised land for the yeoman farmer. He wrote:

I have travelled and hoped to lay my body down away from troubling my friends, but there is no other place so dear to me as the old place in Oregon. If I had killed myself five years ago when I was first tempted, it would have been better, as I then foresaw and predicated. Before I sold my land, I chose death then rather than to sell. No one will ever know my feelings at that time. But I could not die and could not then consent to take my own life.¹²⁴

¹²³ Howard I. Kushner, "Suicide, Gender, and the Fear of Modernity in Nineteenth-Century Medical and Social Thought," *Journal of Social History* 26, no. 3 (1993): 461. ; Kushner, "Suicide, Gender, and the Fear of Modernity in Nineteenth-Century Medical and Social Thought," 464.

¹²⁴ "Suicide", *The Albany Register*, August 25, 1876; "Distressing Suicide," *The Oregon Cultivator*, August 24, 1876

His failures as a landowner, as a productive member of society, and as a husband and father, seemed to weigh on him even more than his love of drink.

Memories of those first years in Oregon drove him home, but his land was gone, and with it, any hope of a productive livelihood in his old age. The decision to commit suicide then, likely felt like the only recourse he had. The crux of Americus Savage's suicide note was his fear that he was no longer useful as a man, specifically as a provider. He writes pointedly that he was "past labor." The carefully constructed persona Savage created in writing was threatened by alcoholism, and no number of cross-county journeys could revive the feeling of hopefulness that he felt on Christmas Day, 1851. He wrote, "I have endured all the hardships that mortal man is allotted to endure for these 55 years and yet I have no say when I will leave and my mortal sufferings be at an end."¹²⁵

Americus Savage made it known to his family and friends that he held no debts, and he held no grudges. His distrust of banks, lenders, and markets followed him to the grave. He wrote that he was thankful that he didn't die of consumption, the disease that took his father when Americus was only seventeen years old. Then he carefully detailed his wishes. "I want no coffin; wrap me in my blanket, lay me in the vault and cover me up. I do not wish for my grave to cast a shadow over the grave of any one. Let it be hid from mortal sight, and be forever forgotten. Bury me Deep." Against the final wishes he so carefully laid out, a tombstone was added to the Savage grave, and then a wrought iron fence to protect the resting place, perhaps when the land passed out of Savage family ownership. The rest of his family is buried a short distance away. The Savage donation

¹²⁵ Americus Savage Papers, Collection of Tiffany Petters, ancestry.com, accessed 2021

land claim has changed hands a number of times, but this waist-high fence is still visible from where the main street of Boston would have been. Boston was already dead and buried at the moment of Savage's death. A rail line running West of the Boston townsite shifted the community from the edge of the Calapooia and down to Shedd's Station, now Shedd, Oregon. The idealism that Savage had on Christmas Day 1851 and the idealism with which Boston was platted were both proven foolhardy by that day in August. All that remained of the Savage family is a tombstone that casts an unwanted shadow on Savage Butte.

Savage's story could be viewed as an individualized failing. Perhaps it was. But it also points to a common thread among early families. Given the opportunity of a Donation Land Claim, Savage believed that Oregon would offer ease for his family. After the poverty of his early life, the idea of largescale land ownership in the fertile Willamette Valley must have felt heaven-sent. But the land's inherent value did not necessarily translate to financial solvency. Whether Savage drank his money or languished as a farmer, it took only twenty years for him to lose whatever he'd amassed as an Oregon resident. This story would repeat for other Boston families in the coming decades.

Conclusion: Creating Community

The families that settled in Oregon Territory in the mid-nineteenth century hoped to realize the promise of the yeoman farmer. For Richard Farwell and Americus Savage, this meant farming a large land claim that would provide stability for future generations. For Crawford and Finley, this meant supporting and profiting from farming after early

settlement. In subsequent generations, as farms collapsed and communities were abandoned, the mythology of the pioneer survived. The first White settlers of Oregon were lionized as their descendants suffered poverty in the rural Willamette Valley. These mythologies purposefully obscured the very real inequities built into the Donation Land Claim system. Wage laborers during early settlement, like Cyrus Vawter, were ignored, and the violent displacement of Native peoples was obscured. Americus Savage's suicide was the most visible moment of honesty, a look at the financial and personal limitations of early settlement.

Today, children learn about this period of history in fourth grade, visiting museums and historic sites like Boston Mills, and they are unlikely to encounter the story again as adults. While recent scholastic requirements in Oregon schools mandate the inclusion of Indigenous history, a nuanced understanding of the implications of settler colonialism in the American West is unlikely to trickle down to fourth grade reading materials. In Oregon, pioneer falsehoods still hold more weight in communities than the monographs that academic elites bicker over in conference rooms and lecture halls. To the horror of academic historians everywhere, children will put on calico bonnets, load pretend wagons, learn how to mill flour, and write reports on the brave settler taming the Wild West.

But the stories are just that: stories. Richard Finley was not the industrialist savior of Crawfordsville; he was a thief. Americus Savage was not a rugged individualist; he was a failed farmer. And, as E.J Crawford said in 1920, the risk of western settlement was very rarely worth the reward. Boston residents worked hard to build the myth of inevitability, that the land was given to them by divine promise, and

that land would insure the wealth of future generations. But all of the men who came into Boston during this period were in various states of poverty upon their arrival. If they owned land, it was not profitable. They came across the Plains because they were running out of options. Americus Savage was a sawmill laborer. Richard Finley was reliant on his wife's family. Both P.V Crawford and Richard Farwell left modest homes in the Midwest for the prospect of something larger. For the community of Boston, free land was a necessity to settlers. But, instead of creating lasting wealth, the acreage offered under the Donation Land Claim Act would tie families to land that was unsuitable for farming, especially farming wheat. As the train connected men to far-off markets, the limitations of that land would become more apparent. In the decades that followed, residents of Boston would grapple with what it means to be descendants of a generation of people who were never what they seemed.

In the 1990s, community members, spearheaded by the Boston Mill Preservation Society, pitched the idea to save the historic Boston mill for future generations. The plan included rebuilding Boston, the community surrounding the mill, as it was in 1860 when Finley, Crawford, and Brandon milled some of the first flour. It would be a big undertaking, considering there were no clear indications that a town had ever existed. When Oregon State Parks and Recreation purchased the property, they consented to an archeological dig in the rough location of Boston, an effort to see if the town's disappearance was total. The dig was fruitless. Years of agricultural work along this part of the Calapooia River churned anything related to the Boston era to the point that it had no research value. Archeologists could not find foundations, roads, or footings within the area that pointed to homes or business. Boston, aside from the mill, was entirely erased.

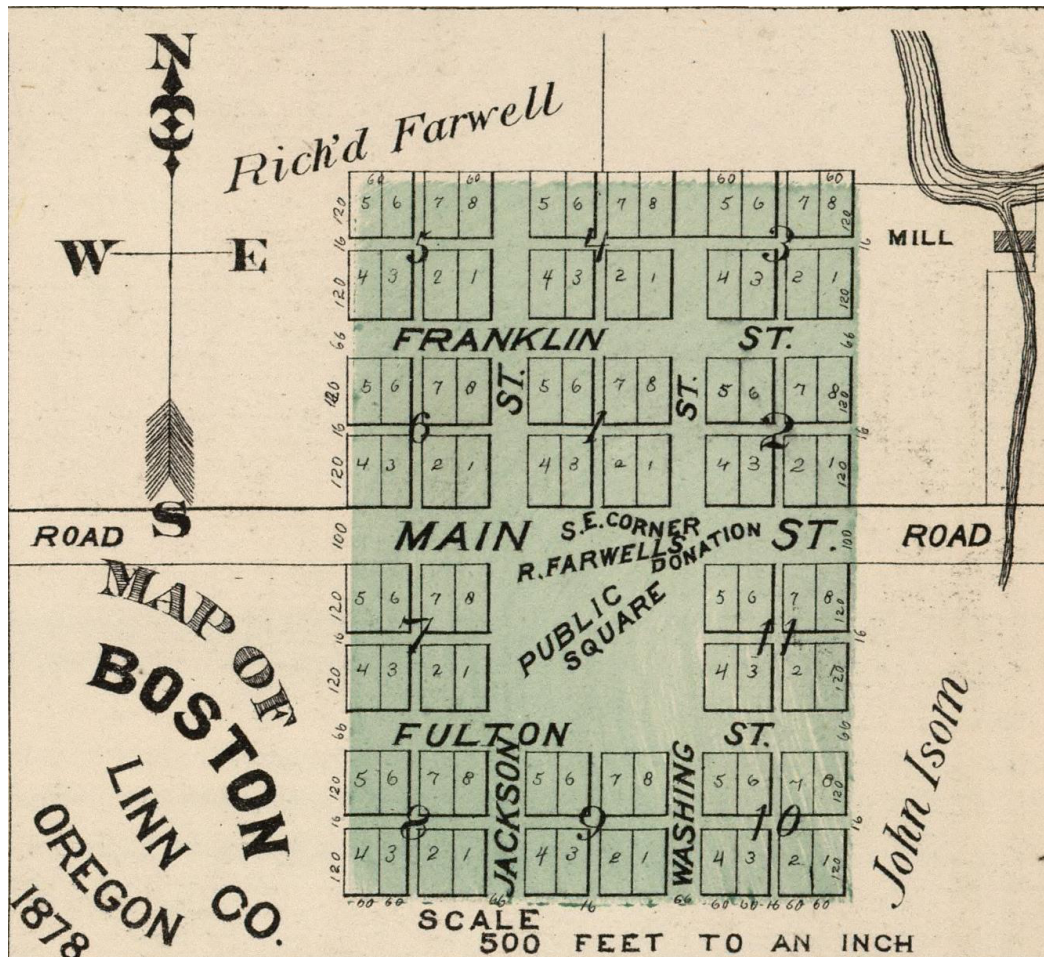


Figure 1.5 - Boston, Oregon 1878. The community disappeared before the map was published.
 Historical Atlas Map of Marion & Linn Counties Oregon

CHAPTER 2: FROM CENTER TO PERIPHERY (1859 - 1917)

Introduction

As the first White settlers of Linn County passed away, rapid change was on the horizon. The arrival of the railroad in the Willamette Valley linked Boston to national and international commerce, forcing a small milling town to operate at the whims of foreign trade. This change was catastrophic for farmers who overinvested and overextended themselves. Promises of abundant wealth led farmers to mortgage property once freely given and overinvest in machinery to cash in on a booming market. When the windfall didn't materialize, they felt betrayed. They were stymied by railroads, wheat exchanges, and market volatility. However, as they agitated for more regulations, federal officials began to suggest that rural struggles were internal, that rural communities would need to elevate themselves, rather than depend on subsidies from the federal government. Families like the Farwells and Elders held firm to their Donation Land Claims and tried to eke out a living, while recently immigrated Martin Thompson worked to modernize the Boston mill and increase his industry's reach.¹²⁶

The very real economic threat to rural America was linked to a more intellectual anxiety. Social scientists, historians, and rural boosters of the early twentieth century held rural America as an ideal, contrasted with the old-world social decay of urban centers. A chorus of intellectuals instilled outsized importance to rural identity. The ideal of the yeoman farmer was still immensely popular in the rural West, with rural advocates seeing

¹²⁶ For an overview of farming during this period see; Opie, *The Law of the Land*; Douglas R. Hurt, *Problems of Plenty: The American Farmer in the Twentieth Century* (Ivan R. Dee, 2002); Deborah Fitzgerald, *Every Farm a Factory: The Industrial Ideal in American Agriculture* (Yale University Press, 2010); Boag, *Pioneering Death* (University of Washington Press, 2022).

farmers as "the chosen people of God."¹²⁷ While the industrial revolution and the growth of markets following the Civil War de-emphasized the role of the rural landscapes, fears of urban vice, immigration, and the supposed closing of the West shifted eyes again to rural communities. This focus led to governmental programs, academic treatises, and policy shifts meant to strengthen rural spaces by educating rural people, just as these rural spaces were placed into complex world markets that forced them beyond subsistence farming. As farmers agitated for more financial assurances, the public's view of rural spaces became less magnanimous, beginning an anti-rural shift that would only strengthen in the coming decades.¹²⁸ Federal involvement, or non-involvement, in rural spaces would define the history of Oregon beginning in this period. National conversations about the "rural problem" would have a direct, sometimes fatal, impact on communities in Oregon.

That the Willamette Valley became dependent on far-off markets was not just a change in economic situations and federal outlook, but also a challenge to Oregon's homegrown rural identity. While wheat exports were a part of the Pacific Northwest's British territories from early settlement, the introduction of market economics into the fickle wheat growing industry in the mid-Willamette Valley challenged the assumed superiority of Oregon's farming class by forcing their reliance on railroads, governmental aid, and commodity markets. Pioneer nostalgia narratives always relied on self-sufficiency with a shade of anti-government rhetoric. The inability to compete, let alone

¹²⁷ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Annotated edition, ed. Frank Shuffelton (Penguin Classics, 1998).

¹²⁸ David B. Danbom, *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America*, Revisiting Rural America (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 67.

thrive, on this larger stage was a source of great concern among Oregon farmers. The need for federal regulations and subsidies was equally troubling. These economic anxieties were coupled with fear over the influence of outsiders on their communities. The supposedly morally just and God-fearing Oregonian was being introduced to new entertainments, consumer cultures, and notions about gender and sexuality. If rural farms were the backbone of American, and Oregonian, culture, the failure of farms threatened something larger than finances. The exodus of young men and women from these rural spaces only increased this general anxiety that what was built, economically and culturally, by a previous generation was slipping away. Progressive movements and Populism nipped at the heels of the self-made man and pioneer farmer, creating a unique blend of identities that shaped the Boston Mill area into the beginning of the twentieth century.

"Nothing was Saved": The End of Boston

News of a fire at Boston Mills reached Eugene on the first of November 1862 and was reported in the *Morning Oregonian* seven days later. The cause of the fire was suspected to be an adjacent or possibly attached woolen mill that kept a fire to dry wool. Of more interest to the *Morning Oregonian*, however, was that 1,500 pounds of wool and an unknown amount of wheat stored at the mill by local farmers was lost. "Nothing was saved. Of course the loss will be large."¹²⁹ Despite the destruction of the mill, there was still hope that the town of Boston would continue to grow, and so the mill was rebuilt in

¹²⁹ "Fire," *The Weekly Oregonian*, November 8, 1862.

the same location, by the same families, and in roughly the same style. In reminiscences of this period, the fire was mentioned—some neighbors even suspected arson—but any financial fallout from the fire faded from memory and was not passed on to the next generation of Linn County residents.¹³⁰ Instead, it was the loss of the community of Boston a decade later that dominated recollections.

That loss was not from fire or flood. It was the arrival of the railroad less than two miles to the west of Boston that dismantled the town, leaving only the second iteration of Boston Mills at the original townsite. The train arrived in 1871, and by November of that year, the Boston post office was discontinued, signaling the end.¹³¹ The Farwell and Savage families remained, while those without large land holdings moved, houses and all, to Shedd's Station, a town started on donated land by Captain Shedd, who led the Farwell wagon train twenty years before. What was left of Boston, then, was the mill and the work.

I recent immigrant, William Simmons, began his involvement with the mill shortly after it was rebuilt in the 1860s. He bought the Brandon and Crawford mill shares and became the latest partner to the famed Dick Finley, who likely left Simmons to manage day-to-day operations. Simmons was born in Surrey, England and emigrated to the United States in 1856. He was an "itty bitty" man with whiskers, according to neighbors.¹³² He came into the Willamette Valley shortly after arriving in the United

¹³⁰ "Fire," *The Weekly Oregonian*, November 8, 1862.

¹³¹ For information on the construction of the Oregon-California railroad, see John Tilson Ganoe, "The History of the Oregon and California Railroad," *The Quarterly of the Oregon Historical Society* 25, no. 3 (1924): 236–83.; "Shedds" *The Albany Register*, November 18, 1871.

¹³² Margason, Marcia. Interviewed by Martin Thompson, October 24, 1984. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

States and married Mary Ann Stewart in 1859. This was Mary's second marriage. Shortly before meeting Simmons, Mary filed for divorce due to abandonment. Family stories suggest that her first husband was searching for fortune in California and never returned, leaving Mary in Oregon with five children.¹³³ Mary and William had no children of their own, but neighbors referred to the couple as Uncle Billy and Aunt Mary, terms of familial endearment.¹³⁴ The Simmons tenure would bridge the moment before and after the arrival of the rail. Instead of investing heavily in new markets, however, Simmons ran the mill as his predecessors had, as a small community industry, grinding grain for immediate neighbors. It would take the arrival of Martin Thompson in the 1890s to reorient the mill from Boston to the wider world. There are no records to indicate much about the mill during this period; the only newspaper mention was a report that W. Rudd, a mill customer, fell into one of the hoppers. The injury wasn't nearly as bad as the *Oregonian* would have people believe, the reporter assured his readers.¹³⁵

¹³³ Records of the Bureau of the Census; Record Group Number: 29; Series Number: M432; Residence Date: 1850; Home in 1850: Pine, Allegheny, Pennsylvania; Roll: 744; Page: 347b; The National Archives in Washington D.C.; Record Group: Records of the Bureau of the Census; Record Group Number: 29; Series Number: M653; Residence Date: 1860; Home in 1860: Springfield, Lane, Oregon; Roll: M653_1055; Page: 284;

¹³⁴ Margason, Marcia. Interviewed by Martin Thompson, October 24, 1984. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File. At the time of their marriage, Mrs. Simmons was ten years William's senior.

¹³⁵ "Shedd" *Albany Democrat*, October 21, 1887



*Figure 2.1 - Simmons home with Thompson family pictured c. 1900
Thompsons Mills Historic Collection*

A 2007 archeological dig attempted to locate more information on the Simmons period by excavating in the area of their home, which was located on mill property. A single photograph of the Simmons house shows a simple farmhouse covered in vegetation with an elevated board serving as a walkway through the yard. It was abandoned when a new home was built in 1904. There was no evidence of fire or accidental destruction of the home. In fact, some of the wood from the Simmons home was reused for the garage at the mill, still standing and in use. The door of the garage, likely taken from the Simmons home, has the names of members of the Simmons family and possibly workers during this period written in pencil.¹³⁶ Objects found at the site and dated to Simmons occupancy of the area were only fragments. Food containers, glass,

¹³⁶ Tour of Thompsons Mills State Heritage Site, 2021.

and stoneware hinted to a residence. Lead shot hinted at the rural nature of the land, and fragments of slate pencils suggest school-aged children, possibly the Thompsons, who lived in the home after the Simmons family left. Decorative ceramic with patterns in blue, white, and red were also at the site. More utilitarian but no less beautiful were a collection of earthenware pot pieces, reddish-brown in color and glazed. The finished product shimmered from flecks of mica. The archeological report notes that the fingerprint of the glazer, identified as Barnett Ramsey, a local potter, can be seen on the finished product. The simplistic goods and reuse of lumber suggest a family of modest means, still experiencing the limited resources and consumer goods available to Boston residents prior to the railroad's construction.¹³⁷ Judging from this archeological site and scant records, the Simmons mill period is largely a continuation of the early settler mode of small-scale farming and local industry that punctuated the 1850s and 1860s.

Running the mill in the Simmons era, just like those before, was a family affair. William and his wife split their time between Boston and Eugene between 1862 and 1897 leaving Mary's children, by then adults, to run the mill in their absence. The majority of labor at the mill during this period was performed by Simmons or his relatives, with busy milling seasons bringing in short-term laborers from neighboring farms. The Simmons home was steps from the mill, allowing the occupant to keep an eye on water levels and production. This also allowed women to participate, in a marginal way, in the labor of the mill. Just as Polly Ann Finley was required to feed the miners waiting to have their flour ground, Mary served treats to children who accompanied their fathers to Boston. The

¹³⁷ Schablitsky, Julie M. *A Redware Jar on Every Table: Archeology of the Simmons House and Boston Town*. University of Oregon Museum of Natural and Cultural History, 2007.

worker and family graffiti on the Simmons door is a simple illustration of the mill's connection to the miller's home and the rural community-driven nature of the work done. The mill was always a commercial enterprise, but the market during this period was local. All of the wheat ground was brought in by wagon, all from within a few miles. Simmons and a handful of workers could have handled the bulk of the labor, while Mary would have helped with livestock, cooking, and household chores typical of a farm family. The space between the labor of women and the labor of men was a few short steps, and the distance between where wheat was grown and where it was ground was no more than a half day's journey. Boston Mills during this period was a community enterprise, a resource for local farmers to grind grain for their families and small-scale commerce. But those days were numbered. With the coming of the train, the town of Boston was dismantled, and the country was at the start of something new.

The town that replaced Boston was first known as Shedd's Station, then Shedd's, and then simply Shedd. It was one of numerous communities that developed as the railroad spliced through western Oregon. The Oregon and California (O&C) Railroad connected Portland and the Willamette Valley to California, though financial shortcomings would delay the completion of the line. The O&C was the brainchild of Ben Holladay, described by historians as the personification of the "ruthless, uninhibited spirit of capitalism of the nineteenth century."¹³⁸ Holladay made his money in stagecoach lines, strategically forming monopolies by any means necessary. This cutthroat ideology extended to his rail enterprise; he was able to secure funds from far flung investors and acquire land rights for his rail line through federal support. Holladay's machinations

¹³⁸ Schwantes, *The Pacific Northwest*, 152.

would eventually exhaust his resources, and Henry Villard took over control of the line before its promised terminus in California was built.

The importance of railroads in the American West cannot be overstated in the years following the Civil War. The resulting changes to immigration, transportation, and the conveyance of information between far flung points in the United States were immediate. For areas in the Willamette Valley, once limited by the speed of a wagon or stagecoach, the arrival of the train allowed for speed of movement that was unheard of in previous eras. In the next decade, Portland would be connected to the rest of the country via the Northern Pacific line, shrinking the length of a cross-country journey to Oregon from five months to five days. This would spur new settlement throughout the state.¹³⁹ The rail line also increased investor interest in the Pacific Northwest, with more money pumped into existing industries and increased commerce and banking. If the Willamette Valley was considered remote before, that serene isolation was over.¹⁴⁰

A brief history of the O&C, written in 1924, heralded the importance of the railroad's construction, not simply as a means to convey commodities, but also as an opportunity to increase communication and, by extension, solidarity between far flung communities.¹⁴¹ While the corruption of railroads would vex farmers in the coming decades, initial responses to the Oregon and California line were positive, if apprehensive. An Albany newspaper detailed the death of an elderly cow that was unable

¹³⁹ Carl Abbott, "From Urban Frontier to Metropolitan Region: Oregon's Cities from 1870 to 2008," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 110, no. 1 (2009): 74–95.

¹⁴⁰ Schwantes, *The Pacific Northwest*, 146.

¹⁴¹ Ganoe, "The History of the Oregon and California Railroad."

to vacate the tracks, which farmers feared might become a common occurrence. Below the cow's death notice was a report on 100,000 bushels of wheat arriving in Albany over the last week.¹⁴² Those 100,000 bushels of wheat had the opportunity, or the misfortune, to compete in large economic markets, not just local commerce. Wheat was now internationally commodified and traveled from the fields of Boston to Asia, Europe, and throughout the United States. Boston farmers were suddenly dependent on decisions made on Wall Street or Capitol Hill.¹⁴³

Towns in rural areas would live and die by rail stops. Boston died, and Shedd was born. But, despite claims that it was growing to a respectable size, Shedd never challenged the larger Linn County communities of Brownsville or Albany. An 1875 article in the *Albany Register* boasted that Shedd had numerous amenities and "no saloon." The reporter believed that "its natural resources, when properly understood and appreciated, will make it what it ought to be, a thriving, healthy, little town."¹⁴⁴ Two years later, a Portland correspondent visited Shedd to note its progress. While the town on the whole entered a period of "staid respectability," they were noticeably annoyed at the lack of sidewalks, complaining that "locomotion in the winter season approximates to a hybrid style of navigation not essential to the happiness or well-being of either residents or visitors." They were impressed by the church, the temperance society, and other markers of nineteenth century established communities, but declined to explore further, writing

¹⁴² "Paragrams," *Albany Register*, September 16, 1871.

¹⁴³ Schwantes, *The Pacific Northwest*, 159.

¹⁴⁴ "Shedd," *The Albany Register*, February 19, 1875.

"the mud was too thick for our propellers, and we couldn't call."¹⁴⁵ Shedd was more established than Boston, but it would be a mistake to paint it as thriving economic center.

The railroad's arrival encouraged settlement, which was in large part spearheaded by rail agents and state initiatives. While booster publications in previous generations focused on how best to travel the arduous Oregon Trail, railroad boosters publicized the new ease with which families could settle in the American West. Thousands of settlement publications were sent, free of charge, to individuals interested in immigrating. These, combined with newspaper advertisements, appeared worldwide, allowing easy access to settlement information in even the most far-flung communities. The Oregon Immigration Commission issued five different pamphlets in German to potential settlers, as one example.¹⁴⁶ Railroads sold land at discounted rates and offer special fares for families.¹⁴⁷ The draw for the Willamette Valley in the 1870s was the fertile landscape and the cheap, though no longer free, land still available. While the majority of new settlement centered around urban areas, individuals from small Midwest farm communities looked to areas in the Willamette Valley to recreate the lifestyle they left behind, but with more economic opportunities.

Booster publications echoed dueling western identities, which David Wrobel called "the hope for a post-frontier future in the West, followed later by a longing for the frontier past."¹⁴⁸ These dueling narratives originated both internally within the

¹⁴⁵ "Editorial Correspondence," *The New Northwest*, March 29, 1878.

¹⁴⁶ Schwantes, *The Pacific Northwest*, 186.

¹⁴⁷ Schwantes, *The Pacific Northwest*, 161.

¹⁴⁸ Wrobel, *Promised Lands*, 1.

community and externally through governmental agencies, benevolent societies, railroads, and agricultural interests.¹⁴⁹ In forward-looking publications, migration into the area was an economic concern, with the landscape and its settlement serving as a commodity to be sold. For those within communities, like state and local chambers of commerce, increases in population would allow for local economic improvements and community influence. In 1878, the same year that a newspaperman visited Shedd, an atlas of Linn and Marion Counties highlighted the booming economy and fertile lands still available along this part of the Willamette Valley.¹⁵⁰ The atlas highlighted the "never-failing agricultural prosperity of the country." The population of Shedd, now seven years old, was about fifty persons, probably not much larger than Boston had been. But the article assured its reader that the fine farms and houses "give the neighborhood quite a prosperous appearance." Shedd would never live up to expectations. Its population would never get higher than three hundred, even during the wheat boom.¹⁵¹ Promoters, Wrobel asserted, "hurriedly raced toward the future, often announcing its presence before it had actually arrived."¹⁵² Or, they spent their energies "asserting what could not be disproved."¹⁵³

¹⁴⁹ Wrobel, *Promised Lands*, 6.

¹⁵⁰ Williams, Edgar. 1878. "Historical Atlas Map Of Marion & Linn Counties Oregon. Compiled, Drawn And Published From Personal Examinations And Actual Surveys By Edgar Williams & Co. San Francisco, California. 1878." San Francisco: Edgar Williams & Co.

¹⁵¹ Donald G. Holtgrieve, "The Effects of the Railroads On Small Town Population Changes: Linn County, Oregon," *Yearbook of the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers* 35 (1973): 87–102, JSTOR.

¹⁵² Wrobel, *Promised Lands*, 2.

¹⁵³ Wrobel, *Promised Lands*, 5.

The "longing for a frontier past" that was a component of Booster ideologies during this period dovetailed with the myth of the pioneer, especially in Linn County. The annual Linn County pioneer picnic, first held in 1887, holds the distinction of being the longest running pioneer heritage event in the state. Unlike cultural historian Henry Nash Smith's definition of a myth—a story that is retold to unite society—"the agrarian myth became a myth in the sense that it was false because few Americans believed it. Yet storytellers continued to tell the tale as a ritualized rhetorical exercise."¹⁵⁴ While Boston families like the Savages were forced to sell their land to survive, the community still held firmly to the mythology of their ancestors, holding pioneer picnics and writing articles on the "last pioneer" as the generation passed away. Statewide, pioneer enthusiasts and historians formed the Oregon Pioneer Association 1873 and the Oregon Historical Society in 1898, at the height of the change brought about by the railroad in Oregon. The anxieties of modernity were quelled with a backwards-looking mythology. Traits like vigor, intelligence, and morality were ascribed to the passing pioneer generation, and those traits were bequeathed to Oregon, protecting subsequent generations from falling prey to the vice associated with the modern era.¹⁵⁵ Residents came to rely more on this mythologized ancestry as wheat markets challenged their livelihoods and federal rural advocates turned their backs on the yeoman farmer.

¹⁵⁴ Smith, *Virgin Land*. Thomas A. Woods, *Knights of the Plow: Oliver H. Kelley and the Origins of the Grange in Republican Ideology*, First Edition (Iowa State Pr, 1990), 20.

¹⁵⁵ Peter Boag and Peter G. Boag, *Pioneering Death: The Violence of Boyhood in Turn-of-the-Century Oregon* (University of Washington Press, 2022).

Faced with waning social influence due to changing agricultural markets, rural farmers inscribed value into their lives by linking themselves to a long history of triumphant White settlement. An 1897 announcement appeared in the *Albany Democrat*, inviting the community to that year's pioneer picnic. "The sons and daughters of pioneers are invited to assist in commemorating the deeds of courage, adventure, and hardships of the early pioneers."¹⁵⁶ The obsession of Linn County residents with the venerated pioneer emerged as a response to the "air of decay" that settled around the decline of the rural economy and rural ethos of earlier eras. In essence, pioneers were dying, and with them, the optimism that had permeated the landscape waned. Decedents, boosters, and community members searched for meaning in the passing of a generation and, by proxy, meaning for their own lives.¹⁵⁷

Martin Thompson and International Markets

The railroad changed the modes in which new emigrants travelled, and the potential for growth, but, more importantly and impactfully, the rail line changed how agricultural products could move from the Willamette Valley to metropolitan areas. Economic uncertainties that came in on the rail line would spur a change in the rural ethos, moving farmers away from self-sufficiency and towards a belief that rural communities, and rural farmers specifically, were owed assistance to maintain their lifestyle, a lifestyle that was firmly rooted in the yeoman farmer past. Population changes, lifestyle changes, and economic changes all came with the railroad. This newfound

¹⁵⁶ "Pioneer Picnic," *Albany Democrat*, May 28, 1897

¹⁵⁷ Boag, *Pioneering Death* (University of Washington Press, 2022), 124.

linkage caused rural communities like Shedd to renegotiate their relationship to the world and redefine the legacy of their ancestors.

In 1891, Martin Thompson entered into a partnership with William Simmons. Volguard Martin Thompson, was born in Germany and became a naturalized citizen in 1874.¹⁵⁸ In later years, Ott Thompson, Martin's son, claimed pioneer status for his family simply because he owned and operated a pioneer mill, but according to the guidelines of the Linn County Pioneer Association, Martin and Sophia Thompson missed the Oregon pioneer era by a few decades. The Thompson family arrived by rail, Martin was in his mid 50s and Sophia in her 40s when they settled in Boston. Martin, like Dick Finley, was known for his mechanical aptitude more than his farming acumen. He worked in various industrial occupations throughout the Pacific Northwest, including power production at Husum, Washington, and milling in Champoeg, Oregon, before moving to Shedd and forming a partnership with Simmons. The Simmons-Thompson partnership lasted six years, before ill health forced Simmons to retirement on August 27, 1897.¹⁵⁹ Six years later, he was committed to the state asylum where he died. Newspapers speculated that Simmons was driven to madness from grief; his wife died the same year.

The first generation of migrants into the area were largely born in the United States. Both Simmons and Thompson came during the largescale international immigration of the late nineteenth century. Germans were the largest group of foreign-born Oregon residents on the 1910 census. This early wave of immigration was

¹⁵⁸ Citizenship Certificate, 1874. Box 79, Folder 65. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR.

¹⁵⁹ Margaret Standish Carey and Patricia Hoy Hainline, *Shedd: Linn County's Early Dairy Center and Memories of Boston* (Calapooia Publications, 1978), 11.

considered favorable among residents, with German and English work ethic and philosophies held in high regard in the Midwest, where many families settled first.¹⁶⁰ German society at the time was economically and culturally similar to the United States. Rural agrarianism, middle class standing, a strong male head of household, and a morality centered on the nuclear family were familiar facets of both cultures and made assimilation easier than it was for subsequent migrating populations. While Midwestern communities developed German enclaves, the sparsely populated mid-Willamette Valley created more heterogenous communities in which families like the Thompsons were absorbed into native-born White farming communities.¹⁶¹

During this period ethnic and racial animosity in the Shedd area was reserved for Chinese laborers. At the same time the rail line brought in a fair number of German settlers, rail and farm labor brought a number of Chinese workers into the Willamette Valley. While the Thompsons were welcomed, Chinese immigrants in the area faced racism and violence. While there is no record of Chinese settlement in the vicinity of Shedd, Albany's population during this period did include Chinese immigrants who worked in railroad construction, farming, and milling.¹⁶² Instances of violence, usually

¹⁶⁰ German immigration in the 18th century was not universally viewed as favorable, with Benjamin Franklin describing German immigration into Pennsylvania as creating a "colony of Aliens." See Jason E. Pierce, *Making the White Man's West: Whiteness and the Creation of the American West*, 1st edition (University Press of Colorado, 2016).

¹⁶¹ Danbom, *Born in the Country* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 94.; Klaus J. Bade, "From Emigration to Immigration: The German Experience in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," *Central European History* 28, no. 4 (1995): 507–35.; Michael J. Churgin, "Mass Exodus: The Response of the United States," *The International Migration Review* 30, no. 1 (1996): 310–24.; James M. Bergquist, "German Communities in American Cities: An Interpretation of the Nineteenth-Century Experience," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 4, no. 1 (1984): 9–30.

¹⁶² The head from a small Buddhist statue was found in the millrace at Thompsons Mills while the race was drained for maintenance in 2016, but the object may not date to this era. The item was catalogued as is part of the Thompsons Mills artifact collection.

young White men aggressing against Chinese men, were not uncommon in Albany newspapers. In 1878, a Chinese man was shot in the leg and robbed while walking along the railroad tracks south of Albany.¹⁶³ A 1885 attack occurred in the home of Chinese man within the city limits of Albany, when two young men entered his home and struck his repeatedly with an iron.¹⁶⁴ Ten years later, young men were arrested after throwing rocks at a Chinese man and his team of horses.¹⁶⁵ Racially motivated violence during this period was a logical consequence of the rhetoric of the "White Man's West," which espoused Western settlement, despite its visible racial diversity, was a White refuge from a rapidly diversifying country.¹⁶⁶ It was the Thompsons' Whiteness that allowed for their migration and settlement in a community that was growing increasingly wary of outsiders.

German and English immigrants were held as an ideal, contrasted to those that were coming to the United States in the 1920s, which would trigger federal immigration restrictions.¹⁶⁷ Reflecting on German immigration in the nineteenth century, a 1922 article noted that, "the German carried with him to this interior his same patient and laborious habits which distinguished him in his native country. He is a peaceable, liberty loving citizen, and a judicious husbandman." Booster publications and rail advertisements

¹⁶³ "Out of Luck" Albany Democrat, April 26, 1878.

¹⁶⁴ "Hoodlums on the Rampage," Albany Democrat, May 1, 1885

¹⁶⁵ "Jotting About Town" Albany Weekly Herald, April 19, 1894.

¹⁶⁶ For more on how the West's notions of Whiteness were created, see Pierce, *Making the White Man's West*.

¹⁶⁷ Jacob W. Myers, "The Beginning of the German Immigration in the Middle West," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society (1908-1984)* 15, no. 3/4 (1922): 592-99.

touting settlement reflected this immigration hierarchy, attempting to encourage Northern European settlement into western farming communities like Shedd.¹⁶⁸ The West, then, was entirely open to the Thompson family, and aside from the requirements of naturalization, there is no suggestion that their status as foreign-born had any impact on the family's ability to thrive in Linn County. Aside from what their grandchildren remembered as thick accents, Martin and Sophia created a household largely devoid of homages to their German heritage. The sole exception was a picture of the Kaiser, which hung prominently on the first floor of their home until World War I.¹⁶⁹

The mill during Thompson's tenure was an extensive operation compared to the homespun milling of Uncle Billy Simmons. Ledger books only offer limited information on the business during this period. Martin's spending habits, however, hint that business was going well. Seven years after Martin took over the mill as sole proprietor, he built a home to replace the modest Simmons farmhouse.¹⁷⁰ Martin chose to build a Queen Anne style house toward what would become Boston Mill Road, just as Richard Farwell had done a few years before with his new farmhouse. Both of the original Farwell and Simmons homes, built in the 1850s and 1860s, were set back from the road with the assumption that Boston's shops and a village square would fill in the empty fields. When the railroad arrived in 1871, the platted town of Boston was abandoned for Shedd, and

¹⁶⁸ Pierce, *Making the White Man's West*, 173.

¹⁶⁹ Townsend, Sylva and Ronald, interview by Martin Thompson, September 17, 1984. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

¹⁷⁰ Margason, Marcia. Interviewed by Martin Thompson, October 24, 1984. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.; Townsend, Sylva and Ronald, interview by Martin Thompson, September 17, 1984. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

homes were reoriented to face Boston Mill Road, the main artery that connected the mill to the train station. The Queen Anne house grew over time to accommodate different families, but even in its original incarnation, it was eye catching. The dainty woodwork along the front porch hinted at wealth and elegance, while large front windows allowed neighbors a glimpse into the well-appointed parlor. An article, published after the style fell out of fashion, called Queen Anne homes "overornamental buildings that more resembled doll house or candy houses of Christmas-tree fame" but went on to say that "some are almost beautiful." That Martin Thompson would pick such a distinct style for his family's home is illustrative of the flamboyant ways in which he chose to spend his money. Queen Anne homes, usually larger than a typical farmhouse, were fairly common in cities like Eugene and Portland during this period, but they were far less common in rural areas.¹⁷¹ The Thompson home stood in stark contrast to the mill building, with a hand-hewn frame and rough board planks for siding. The home that Martin built for his family heralded fashion; the mill oozed pragmatism.

¹⁷¹ Edward B. Allen, "The Queen Anne Cottage: A Study in American Architecture," *The Art World* 3, no. 4 (1918): 346, <https://doi.org/10.2307/25588306>.



*Figure 2.2 - Thompson Mill House, circa 1904
image courtesy Oregon State Parks and Recreation*

Sylva, Martin's granddaughter, remembered that visiting neighbors were shocked by the tall ceilings in their family home, something that the farmhouses in the area didn't have. One year before the house was completed, Martin Thompson brought electricity to the mill with the help of waterpower and a dynamo. It would be three decades before power came to the rest of the area with Depression-era rural electrification programs.¹⁷² Electricity, a brand-new home, automobiles, and changes to the mill infrastructure signaled a new approach, far from the rural industrialism of the first mill. While William Simmons continued to operate the mill as a community industry, Martin Thompson expanded to connect his product to larger markets. The resulting cash flow was invested

¹⁷² Richard Hirsh, "Shedding New Light on Rural Electrification: The Neglected Story of Successful Efforts to Power Up Farms in the 1920s and 1930s," *Agricultural History* 92, no. 3 (2018): 296–327.; Townsend, Robert and Martin Thompson, Interview by Doug Crispin, December 29, 2004. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File

in homes, new technology, and automobiles. During his tenure, flour milled in the abandoned town of Boston would reach Liverpool and compete at the World's Fair. Growing the business meant wealth for his family, and Martin Thompson embraced the consumerism available to him, just as he would embrace new mill technologies to compete in an international market.

By the time Martin Thompson moved his family out of the Simmons farmhouse in 1904, the pioneer generation was passing on to what one obituary termed the "great majority." Americus Savage had been dead for twenty-eight years, Richard Finley died in 1882, P.V Crawford died in 1901, and Richard Farwell, the feisty and fleet footed red headed pioneer, died in 1899. The rural ethos that built up around these early settlers, while still highly valued, no longer described the settlement of the area. Thompson hadn't travelled by wagon train and had no desires to rush for California gold, though there was mention of him taking goats to the Klondike rush to make a quick buck.¹⁷³ He was, first and foremost, a businessman, not a pioneer. While this outlook wasn't new—all former mill owners were driven by profit—Martin's entrepreneur ethos was not couched in terms of frontier betterment. Instead, Martin Thompson searched for ways to modernize a very old industry for a rapidly growing, and lucrative, market. While his family would eventually rely on pioneer nostalgia to sell their product, Martin Thompson singularly focused on looking forward to new technologies and outward to new markets. As the milling business grew, Thompson relied on the low-paid labor of his neighbors, especially those unable to hold on to their farms. As the wheat trade became globalized, farming became more volatile, and wage labor became a necessity for failed farmers.

¹⁷³ "Journal X-Rays" *The Capital Journal*, August 28, 1897.

The Rise and Fall of the Wheat Empire

Wheat was a key agricultural product from early settlement, but new connections to foreign markets increased agricultural production throughout the American West and Great Plains. Agricultural production on the whole between 1870-1900 doubled in size in the United States. Markets were growing and lands that had been passed over in earlier eras as unfarmable were being settled and worked into production throughout the Great Plains. Wheat production in the United States grew from 254 million to 599 million bushels during this period.¹⁷⁴ In Oregon, wheat was the most grown crop, with over 878,000 acres dedicated to wheat in 1900. Statewide, farming acreage grew from 25,530 in 1890 to 35,837 in 1900, a 40 percent increase, with increases mostly seen in eastern Oregon. But statewide farm statistics can obscure the region-specific anxieties that farmers were facing during this period. Instead of a booming rural economy, the extremely mercurial nature of the industry took its toll on Shedd residents.

When the train arrived in Shedd, wheat became the main topic of conversation among farmers. In 1874, an article in the *Oregon Cultivator*, a short-lived Grange publication, attempted to answer the big question on farmers' minds: can anyone really make a living on wheat? The article details the cost per acre on a wheat farm, with expenses for hired men and boarding, seeding and sowing, equipment maintenance, and taxes, which totaled \$13.94 per acre. Depending on yields and pricing, a farm could make between \$1.00 to \$4.51 in profits per acre, or lose as much as \$6.45 per acre, an

¹⁷⁴ Danbom, *Born in the Country* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 132.

illustration of just how unpredictable the wheat business was. These numbers didn't include freight charges or storage, which would only add more uncertainty to profit margins. So, could a farmer come out ahead? The answer was yes, but only under the best circumstances. First, he must own his land; purchasing or renting land would be too costly. Second, he must have the equipment, both horses and machinery, needed for farming. And finally, a family of boys old enough to work would be a requirement on a profitable farm. Without these components secured, even during a favorable market, wheat was unlikely to support a family in 1874.¹⁷⁵ The newfound promise of success in international wheat markets fell short of the aspirational writing of booster publications. Martin Thompson's purchase of consumer goods, investment in a new home, and improvements to the mill building suggest that his business was good. He was able to acquire wheat at low prices and sell flour for a considerable profit. In contrast, the economic outlook of his Donation Land Claim neighbors was significantly dimmer.

Thus, the promise of the yeoman farmer, working and providing for his family from his own land, was already waning for the second generation in Linn County. In the 1850s, White settlers were able to claim 320 acres of land as a single man and 640 acres if married. The majority of the families that settled around Boston Mill claimed these large tracts of land. By 1900, the size of farms had already shrunk considerably. This quick reversal of fortunes was caused by a number of factors. First, family sizes during this period were large, and land was sometimes divided among siblings.¹⁷⁶ Second, large land claims acquired during the 1850s in Linn County contained acreage that was

¹⁷⁵ "Editor Cultivator," *The Oregon Cultivator*, February 3, 1876

¹⁷⁶ Boag, *Pioneering Death* (University of Washington Press, 2022).

inaccessible or unusable, with buttes, floodplains, and other irregularities. Third, the land in this part of Linn County had poor environmental conditions to grow wheat. Farmers know that wheat, specifically, doesn't like to get its feet wet. The Calapooia watershed, as Americus Savage discovered, was unpredictable in terms of moisture. Finally, a lack of resources to hire men to assist with the laborious work of maintaining large acreage cut into potential profit and caused land selloffs. When the second generation was unable to purchase land, many moved out of the region, and farmers had to compete for limited available labor. The mill could hire farmers and laborers during slower farm seasons, but harvest and seeding periods were busy on all farms, and laborers would have abundant options for work. Rural agriculture had stratified into what historian David E. Hamilton termed "two agricultures." The farmers in the area of Boston were largely "marginal farm owners," who "labored on farms too small and soils too infertile to maintain a decent standard of living." These farmers, ubiquitous in Shedd, were urged at the turn of the century to invest heavily in their farms. But in an attempt to cash in, they overextended. The second class were commercial farm owners, which existed in smaller numbers around Shedd. They were still impacted by market fluctuations but had the capital for land improvements and increased mechanization. Commercialization would grow exponentially in the coming decade¹⁷⁷

Farm issues were exacerbated when wheat yields, especially in the Willamette Valley, began stagnating. Oregon wheat production moved into Eastern Oregon and Washington, which was connected to Portland via rail in 1883. By 1899, one half of all

¹⁷⁷ David E. Hamilton, *From New Day to New Deal: American Farm Policy from Hoover to Roosevelt, 1928-1933* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 9.

wheat produced in Oregon was produced in the northeastern part of the state. Larger fields, irrigation, and the use of the latest in machinery made wheat in Eastern Oregon easier and more efficient to grow. The wheat varieties that grew in the dry climate were also easier to bake with.¹⁷⁸ Boosters and scientists hoped that scientific methods for intensive farming could close the gap between eastern and western Oregon and make up for the lack of land availability. Instead, advances in machinery and seed varieties increased farmer's dependence on technological and agricultural support, creating a secondary industry of mechanizing agricultural lands and forcing farmers into debt.¹⁷⁹ While boosters touted wheat farming at the turn of the century, farmers already knew that it was not a guaranteed crop in this area. Still, men were told to remain in the wheat business, with the potential for immense profits dangled in front of rural farmers, just out of reach.

Wheat production in Linn County did increase by 250 percent when the train arrived and doubled again in the next decade.¹⁸⁰ But even by 1872, only a year after the train came to Shedd, newspapers and farm advocates warned farmers that wheat prices were likely to fall. The year prior, wheat in Linn County briefly sold for a staggering \$2.20 per bushel, well above the national average of \$1.25. The next year, wheat hit a low of 60 cents per bushel, even as national prices remained high. Wheat prices in Albany fell to an all-time low of 42 cents per bushel in 1899, crippling farms that were still

¹⁷⁸ James F. Shepherd, "The Development of Wheat Production in the Pacific Northwest," *Agricultural History* 49, no. 1 (1975): 258–71.; Margason, Marcia. Interviewed by Martin Thompson, October 24, 1984. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

¹⁷⁹ L. H. Bailey, *The Country-Life Movement in the United States* (Wentworth Press, 2016), 7.

¹⁸⁰ Mary K. Gallagher, Historic Context Statement: The Barns of Linn County, 1845-1945, 1997. Linn County Planning Department.

reeling from bank closures and economic panics of the previous decade. Over the next decade, prices would continue to fluctuate wildly, based on anything from local weather patterns to farming practices in the Middle East. One miller interviewed for his opinion said, "A rise in price depended upon so many things all of which were more or less uncertain that any attempt to express an opinion now must be mere guesswork."¹⁸¹

Despite these fluctuations, farmers held out hope that the market would somehow stabilize. In 1884, wheat production in the county surpassed one million bushels and supported ten flour mills, including Boston Mills. To encourage this growth, booster literature downplayed the risks of wheat, and farmers were encouraged to invest in their farms. The *Oregon Cultivator* urged Linn County farmers to plant more wheat to protect themselves from the market uncertainty of other crops. "To prevent their pinching us to hurt, each farmer should put in a few extra acres of wheat. This will do more to remedy hard times than any amount of grumbling."¹⁸² Trying to encourage farmers, Albany newspapers published the most impressive yields from area farmers, like L.B Luper's thirty-four bushels per acre in 1890. But these numbers, if they were true, were anomalous. Wheat yields in the Willamette Valley were stagnant through the 1920s, except under the most favorable circumstances.¹⁸³

G.A Westgate, publishing in 1905, urged farmers not to abandon wheat in its entirety, fearing that the economic implications for the region would be profound. "You may have your cabbages, your strawberries, your potatoes, your hops, your livestock, and

¹⁸¹ "The Wheat Crop: The Prospects for the Future", *Albany Democrat*, June 24, 1881.

¹⁸² "Editor Cultivator," *Oregon Cultivator*, April 13, 1876.

¹⁸³ "Big Yield," *Albany Democrat*, August 15, 1890.

a reasonable quantity of wheat also." Westgate's argument was that wheat prices were more stable, as wheat was a universally needed product. More importantly, a lack of wheat would be dire to millers, like the Thompson family, who were some of the first settlers of the region. "Unless more wheat is presented at the mills for grinding, millers would about as well tie their millstones about their necks and cast into the deep."

Westgate saw the end of the wheat trade, which he considered "kind forever," as the death of the commercial certitude that dominated Willamette Valley settlement. "The alphabet is the beginning of learning, so is wheat as a staple the foundation of Western Oregon's agricultural destiny."¹⁸⁴ But the truth was that the Willamette Valley was environmentally ill-suited for wheat production. The wheat infrastructure was, by 1900, so well established that removing farmers from the wheat trade could cause cascading failures in ancillary industries, like milling. And so, even as farmers failed to thrive, they were still encouraged to plant more and more wheat.

The fragile nature of Willamette Valley farm income during the 1890s can be seen in taxable real estate numbers. Between 1892 and 1895, taxable real estate shrank by 22 percent and delinquent taxes increased by 47 percent.¹⁸⁵ For farmers, a single bad season could cost them their farms. In 1899, grain warehouses refused to take in damp wheat resulting from late rains, so it fell to the farmers to either dry their wheat or sell it at a loss. Lacking outbuildings to dry wheat, most farmers lost the harvest's profits.¹⁸⁶ Farms

¹⁸⁴ *Albany Democrat* March 30, 1905

¹⁸⁵ Boag, *Pioneering Death* (University of Washington Press, 2022), 104.

¹⁸⁶ "Condition of Crops," *Albany Herald* September 7, 1899.

in Linn County were also shrinking. In 1880, the average farm size was 271 acres. By 1920 farms averaged 155 acres.¹⁸⁷ Rural advocates claimed that shrinking farm sizes only highlighted improved farming practices. But a survey of wheat yields in Linn County suggest that wheat yields held steady at an average of twenty to twenty-five bushels per acre from 1880 through 1925, with poor weather conditions resulting in even lower yields. Shrinking farm sizes then were most likely due to farmers selling portions of land to pay for improvements.

Farmers during this period were extremely susceptible to the "three Ms: markets, middlemen, and money."¹⁸⁸ The risks for farmers were higher still during this period, because the federal government offered no safety nets for those farmers who over-extended or under-performed. At the same time, commercialization of rural areas brought consumer goods and products into the countryside that had been previously unattainable, increasing the need for regular incomes. Farmers who, in previous decades, were largely self-sufficient or reliable only on local economies, now looked to Portland not only to buy their wheat, but also to provide consumer goods. This resulted in a staggering increase in mortgaged farms at the turn of the century. In 1910, one third of all farms owned in Linn County carried a mortgage; by 1925, the number rose to nearly one half. In addition to owners mortgaging their farms, one-fourth of farms were rented, either for cash or sharecropping, which was the highest percentage of rented farms in the Willamette Valley in 1890.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁷ Report of the Linn County Oregon Farm and Outlook Conference. Albany, Oregon, March, 1956.

¹⁸⁸ Danbom, *Born in the Country* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 134.

¹⁸⁹ Boag, *Pioneering Death* (University of Washington Press, 2022), 115.

On the front page of the *Albany Democrat*, farmers were warned not to take on debt, with editorials as early as 1882 lamenting that holding a mortgage would hobble the industry.¹⁹⁰ Unfortunately for Linn County farmers, taking on loans for improvements or equipment was not optional. Renting was also a necessary evil. An editorial published in 1882 and signed by "A Granger" illustrated the quandary of the sharecropper in Linn County. He wrote, "My trouble is this: I am in doubt as to how much of my time and labor is my own." He went on to detail his expenses, one third of his crop to the farm owner, with more money borrowed to afford implements to improve the land, leaving him with nothing left of his profits to buy a farm of his own.¹⁹¹ For those who rented land, this would be a familiar narrative. A 1905 article in the *Albany Democrat* noted that agriculturalists clinging to wheat have taken up a lost cause. Diversification of crops, specifically moving to livestock and dairies in addition to fruits, would give farmers in Linn County some immunity to poor crop performance. But these new industries had a short shelf life. They were harder to transport to faraway markets and would change how the land was managed. If farmers wanted to participate in larger markets and see even the potential for large profit, wheat was the only viable option during this period.

Families that farmed in Linn County in the 1850s remembered a very different economic situation. George McCoy moved away from the area and came back for a visit. He regaled new Linn County residents with stories of the prosperous early settlement era when, he recalled, wheat could sell at as much as five dollars a bushel to meet the needs

¹⁹⁰ "Plain Talk on Plain Subjects by a Plain Chap: Running in Debt," *Albany Democrat*, October 27, 1882.

¹⁹¹ "A Query?" *Albany Democrat*, November 17, 1882.

of miners coming up from California. McCoy usually sold his wheat for three dollars minimum.¹⁹² While it may be an over-exaggeration, farmers at the turn of the century looked back on the supposed prosperity of early eras and wondered if there was anything that could be done to return to that. When the train came to Shedd, there was hope that the area would thrive. For Martin Thompson, it did. The railroad allowed him easy access to wheat and a wider market for Thompson flour. The wheat trade fed the mill, but, more importantly, the wheat trade's volatility gave Martin Thompson a workforce. Men and women on mortgaged farms needed to take on supplementary work to help their families. The mill allowed laborers to come and go based on the seasonality on farms, making it an ideal job for farmers still hoping to stay on their land. But as farmers sold off their land, men and women began to look outside of rural spaces to make a living.

"Difference Between Living and Getting a Living:" Workers in Boston

Landowners at the turn of the century were wringing their hands over wheat prices in Liverpool, but for those men who didn't own land, life remained local. Especially for young men at the turn of the century, this meant wage labor employment, either to supplement or replace farming income. Martin Thompson's four sons were all required to work for the family until they were twenty-one years old, even if they were married, to contribute to the family business.¹⁹³ Records indicate that Henry Thompson, who was twenty-seven at the time, was paid \$1.00 a day in around 1907 to work at the

¹⁹² "Oakville," *Albany Democrat*, November 25, 1910.

¹⁹³ Thompson, Martin. Interviewed by Doug Crispin, August 24, 2004. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

mill.¹⁹⁴ Martin's son Charles, who had a physical and mental aversion to the dust of the flour mill, counted down the days until he could abandon the family business.¹⁹⁵ Both boys chafed under the restrictions laid out by their father and, as soon as they were able, struck out on their own. Ott and Leo Thompson, in contrast, worked directly under their father with the assumption that they would inherit the mill and the wealth that it seemed to supply.

In addition to the work of his children, Martin employed young men without adequate wealth to purchase land and farmers during slow periods on the farm. While records on the thoughts and feelings of rural laborers are sparse during this period, men and women begin to appear in mill records around 1906. The ledger recorded both wages and payment for grain, sometimes not distinguishing a customer from a laborer. On the whole, workers during this era were local to Shedd and had recently completed their schooling. Informal hiring practices meant that farmers or children of farmers could come to the property for work as other chores allowed. Their involvement with the mill was sporadic and, in the case of some, extremely brief. For example, the Farwell family, due to the proximity of their land, appeared fairly regularly in ledger books. The money to be earned was not adequate to be their sole wage. Tracing the lives of these early mill laborers illustrates both the necessity of wage labor for survival among the second generation of Shedd residents and the limitations of that labor as a means of financial support. While this period is considered the heyday of rural economies, wealth

¹⁹⁴ Martin Thompson Record Book, 1890. Box 99 Folder 65. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR.

¹⁹⁵ Thompson, Martin. Interviewed by Doug Crispin, August 24, 2004. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

accumulation within Shedd was rare in the lead-up to World War I. The workers recorded in the mill's ledger books illustrate the precarious economic situation of Shedd families.

For those who did not own land, occupations were extremely limited. Miller Morgan, the second generation of his family born in Oregon, was listed as an employee around 1907, making \$1.50 per day. At the time, Miller was seventeen years old and living in Shedd with his father, James, who was born in Linn County around 1851. James' father took up a land claim at Saddle Butte in the 1850s. The story of the family closely aligns with that of the Crawfords, Finleys and Farwells. They sold horses, rushed for gold in California, and settled first in Polk County before moving farther south, probably for a better land claim. James gave his son the name of his own father, Miller, just as his father had given James the name of his father. The legacy passed from one generation to the next, just as the land would pass.

Miller's father James lived on the family's land claim at the time of the 1880 census. By 1900, James moved to mortgaged property in the vicinity of Shedd. James' father likely willed the Donation Land Claim to another branch of the family or parceled it out, forcing James to strike out on his own. All three generations of the Morgan family conducted business with Boston Mills, selling wheat to fund household and agricultural expenses. In 1912, J.A Morgan received a check from Ott Thompson, likely in exchange for grain, totaling \$120.00. He also received a check for sixteen dollars around the same time, an amount that could reasonably be wages earned. At the time of James' death in 1916, Lebanon newspapers noted his pioneer legacy with the often-used proclamation, "One of the First White Children Born in the Willamette Valley."¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁶ "Native Son, 69, Is Dead," *Oregonian*, October 21, 1916.

James' son Miller had no claim to the land settled by his grandfather, and his father never owned a piece of property outright. In addition, the farm itself was not the source of sustained wealth that the elder Miller Morgan may have hoped, leaving no monetary inheritance to speak of for future generations. Farms settled in the 1850s were beginning to experience crop yield declines from decades of intensive farming. To support himself, young Miller went to work at the mill as a young man, not yet eighteen, possibly working alongside his father. It is unclear how long he stayed at the mill, but by 1910 he relocated to Portland, living at a boarding house and working as a stenographer.¹⁹⁷ By 1911, Morgan was married with a child on the way and a few years later he was back in Albany, working in sales for a wholesale flour and seed company. The Great Depression hit the family hard, and by 1935 Miller and his wife defaulted on their mortgage and relocated to California to start anew, just as his grandfather had done. Any wealth the Donation Land Claim may have provided for the first generation was dissolved by the third.

The Morgan family's narrative repeated throughout Boston as decedents of early settlers and more recent immigrants into the community dealt with similar economic hardships in the period leading up to World War I. Carl Halverson lived near the Morgan family and also went into mill work under Martin Thompson. He was still a teenager when he worked six days a week for the mill during August, the hottest part of the year.¹⁹⁸ The rate per day was \$1.50, comparable to the national average wage of farm

¹⁹⁷ *1910 United States Federal Census Year: 1910; Census Place: Shedd, Linn, Oregon; Roll: T624_1283; Page: 1b; Enumeration District: 0191; FHL microfilm: 1375296*

¹⁹⁸ Record Box, undated. Box 99 Folder 65. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. The page itself is undated, but was probably around 1900

laborers around the same period, but significantly less than mining or skilled labor positions available in Oregon at the time.¹⁹⁹ Carl, unlike Miller, did not come from a pioneer family; his parents were both born in Norway, part of the second wave of migration that would bring Martin Thompson into Linn County. Halverson's father worked as a shoemaker, and his brothers were day laborers and harness makers, though their work was sporadic.²⁰⁰ Carl's work at the mill was short-lived. By 1913 he was working as an agent for the Southern Pacific railroad in Tangent, a short distance from Shedd. The marriage was acrimonious and ended on charges of cruelty only a few years later. In 1917, Halverson joined the Navy as a musician first class. On his return he married again and settled in Portland, then Sacramento, working an array of jobs in the service industry or as a laborer until his death in 1964. Another Halverson family member would work at the mill for almost her entire life. Laura Halverson, born in 1889, married Otto Thompson in 1908, when she was nineteen years old, and Otto was twenty-four. After the marriage, Laura moved into the Queen Anne house with Otto, his siblings, and his parents. She would live in this house for the rest of her life, managing children, boarders, workers, and her mercurial husband. She was described as kind, if somewhat fragile. Laura, unlike her brothers, was able to elevate her economic status through marriage. While the mill did not afford Laura a life of leisure, she was one of the

¹⁹⁹ “Workers of the Nation; an Encyclopedia of the Occupations of the American People and a Record of Business, Professional and Industrial Achievement at the ... v.2.” Accessed November 26, 2023. <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015002738212?urlappend=%3Bseq=609>.

²⁰⁰ 1900 United States Federal Census Year: 1900; Census Place: Shedd, Linn, Oregon; Page: 12; Enumeration District: 0046; FHL microfilm: 1241348

wealthier women in Shedd. Her brother, however, was unable to find a career in Boston. He left the community rather than attempting a volatile farming existence.

Unable to reasonably pass the land from one generation to the next, and without a strong commercial center in Shedd for those without land, young men were pushed into wage labor positions and often moved out of the area to larger towns or cities to earn a reasonable wage. Lands settled in the 1850s were already seeing a largescale exodus by the beginning of the twentieth century, especially among young men and women. By 1900, Albany, once the fourth largest city in the state of Oregon, had fallen to ninth.²⁰¹ In 1870, the census reported more individuals working in non-farming industries than in farming industries for the first time in the United States. The number would continue to drop. By 1910, only one third of the population of the United States worked in an agricultural enterprise.²⁰² Rural populations were similarly shrinking, from 63.9 percent in 1890 to 53.7 percent in 1910. This decline would continue through the early twentieth century.²⁰³

This was a terrifying statistic for the United States, which, through both nostalgia and economics, had touted the importance of farming since early settlement. While many men moved to urban centers, Oregon also offered men the option of transient labor in timber or mining industries. These economic opportunities came with their own risks, but skilled extractive industry positions could prove more lucrative than farming.²⁰⁴ For

²⁰¹ Abbott, "From Urban Frontier to Metropolitan Region."

²⁰² Bailey, *The Country-Life Movement in the United States*, 3.

²⁰³ Bailey, *The Country-Life Movement in the United States*, 13.

²⁰⁴ William G. Robbins, *Colony and Empire: The Capitalist Transformation of the American West*, Revised edition (University Press of Kansas, 1994), 152.

men like Carl Halverson and Morgan Miller, Shedd couldn't compete with more lucrative positions elsewhere, especially when owning land was out of reach. Articles on rural decline blamed a change in outlook among younger rural people, aching for more than just the economic opportunities available on the farm. The *Oregon Cultivator* urged fathers to think about how their children viewed the rural life and their prospects for the future. "If the American farmer wishes to keep his children near him, he must learn the difference between living and getting a living... A young man or a young woman, raised to the point where they apprehend the difference between living and getting a living, can never be satisfied with the latter alone."²⁰⁵ Whether young men were fleeing of their own free will, or being pushed by lack of economic opportunity, anxieties continued to grow among rural advocates.

A later generation of young mill workers would recall summer mill jobs during high school teaching them a valuable lesson. They learned what they didn't want to do for a living. For all of the mechanization that came at the beginning of the twentieth century, the labor was still intense in flour mills, and the wage was insufficient. For men who wanted to stay on the land that their fathers and grandfathers settled, the mill served a valuable purpose, grinding grain and employing members of the community that needed work. The real money, however, was concentrated within the Thompson family. It was during the beginning of the twentieth century that the mill laborer and the mill owner started to occupy different social strata, a gap that would widen during World War I. While William Simmons and previous mill owners were about as financially secure as

²⁰⁵ "Social Life on the Farm" *Oregon Cultivator*; October 26, 1876.

their farming neighbors, the Thompson family was visibly different. When neighbors were interviewed about the Thompsons, a culture of abundance was described, with new cars, radios, and electric lights gleaming from the parlor. While the Thompson children were expected to labor next to hired men, the class distinction was apparent to everyone in town.

The Workings of the Mill

During this period, the mill grew and expanded to meet larger markets, increasing Boston flour's ability to compete with larger mills. The labor of men was still integral to the mill's successes, but mechanization allowed Martin to accumulate wealth that Billy Simmons couldn't. Martin paid attention to the workings of the mill in new ways, with Martin's hand-drawn schematics interspersed with ledger pages. With the ability to ship flour greater distances, the building was required to process more. Martin focused on how to increase yields without requiring extensive manpower. This required an intimate knowledge of the machinery, complex systems of moving and sorting product, and new technologies, like electricity, to ease the labor burden. The systems that Martin Thompson developed in 1900 would define the types of labor performed in Boston for the next century. Mill buildings, from their earliest incarnations in the United States, relied on gravity.²⁰⁶ Grain was conveyed to the top of the building using augers and then sorted, routed, and processed as it moved down from room to room, eventually ending at the sacking station to be packaged for sale. This automation-through-gravity was the

²⁰⁶ For information on milling technology, see David B. Danbom, "Flour Power: The Significance of Flour Milling at the Falls," *Minnesota History* 58, no. 5/6 (2003): 269–85, JSTOR.

necessary skeleton of Thompsons Mills, and the building itself contorted to house it. The grain moved down, following a maze of wooden chutes and tin-cup elevators, but the power started below the floor and moved up. When the mill gates were open, water ran through the mill race—at its peak the flow rate was 846,000 gallons per minute—and the turbines, the heart of power generation, would groan to a start. The water turned the turbines, which in turn moved wheels and pulleys throughout the building, powered by buffalo hide belts. Working in the building was noisy, dusty, and dangerous. Workers would need to be on alert so that they would not be caught by machinery.

The men at the mill handled the work that couldn't be automated. Stacking bags, sewing flour sacks, loading and unloading wagons, and mending equipment was the work that Martin Thompson would hire for. The number of men in the building depended on the amount of product to be processed. In an 1892 photograph of the mill, there are two men on a wagon with canvas sacks and another wagon in the loading area. Two men in white coats stand to one side, probably workers, the first image of workers at the mill. During this period, necessary staff would have been small, except during harvest periods. During the fall, when this image was likely taken, the mill could have operated with only a handful of men to monitor the machinery and sack flour.



Figure 2.3 - Thompsons Mills circa 1892, Thompsons Mills Historic Collection

In 1896, Simmons and Thompson changed the mill's name from Boston Mills to Boston Roller Mills, advertising the state-of-the-art roller mill technology that was installed to modernize a system that was now more than three decades old. This was the first substantial change in how the mill operated since its construction. Instead of wheat being ground between two large carved mill stones, the wheat was crushed between ribbed rollers, considered a more modern and efficient way of processing grain. Original Boston Roller Mill flour sacks from this period were discovered at the mill house, used as wallpaper backing. "Boston Roller Mills" is boldly printed on top of the bags in swirling script above an illustration of a young woman looking coyly over her shoulder. These may have been the first branded flour sacks used at the mill, another modern touch to distinguish Boston flour from other brands. By this point, the name of the mill was the only remaining mention of the town of Boston.

Switching to roller technology changed the mill's product considerably. Rollers would get clogged if the germ was still attached to the wheat, so Boston brand flour was, after this point, no longer whole wheat.²⁰⁷ Debates over the health benefits of "stone ground" flour were immediate and continue to this day, but under Thompson, speed and efficiency dictated how the mill would be run. What were likely the original carved millstones were found in 2004 during building renovations, propping up some of the flooring in the old barn.²⁰⁸ These millstones travelled by ship around South America to San Francisco. From there, the stone would have travelled by wagon or stage to the Willamette Valley.²⁰⁹ A millstone was, by far, the most important component of the original mill. But Martin Thompson saw no value in old technology, and so it, and any other obsolete equipment, was repurposed, buried, or sold off to the highest bidder.

The machines, like the roller mill, were purchased, but the means of powering them were handmade from parts and pieces strewn across multiple outbuilding and sheds. Much of the early twentieth-century equipment is still in the mill, abandoned in place as newer technology was added. Old knob and tube electric wiring dating to the turn of the century powered some lights, and carbon tetrachloride fire extinguishers dating to the early 1900s hung on the hand-hewn beams that P.V Crawford's son fashioned in the 1860s. Old machines, too heavy to easily move, stayed in the building with the power to them cut. They would stand silent while newer machines would clank and grind

²⁰⁷ David W. Clarke, "Legacies of Wheat: Pioneer Flour Mills in Western Oregon," *Material Culture* 24, no. 2 (1992): 1–27.

²⁰⁸ Sprenger, Ross, interviewed by Sarah Scott, July 21, 2004. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

²⁰⁹ Clarke, "Legacies of Wheat."

alongside them. Just as the families remained in Boston, generation to generation, the machines remained, building on what came before.

While this rural example of mechanization pales in comparison to the machines that dominated industrial centers, the workings of the mill renegotiated the distinction between jobs that could be mechanized and those that required worker input. The regularity of the machines forced men, otherwise used to the autonomy of farm labor, into a consistent rhythm, one that was dependent on the speed of turbines below their feet. These innovations of systemization that P.V Crawford would hail as the next great American revolution were viewed with equal regularity as the beginning of a dehumanizing march into the future. Historian Alan Trachtenberg noted that "the image of the machine, like the image of the West, proved to be a complex symbol, increasingly charged with contradictory meanings and implications."²¹⁰ Among workers, there was the hope of modernity mixed with the dread of factory labor. Most men during this period worked at the mill only as a financial necessity, carrying them through slow months of farming or as a means to launch into adulthood elsewhere. As economic downturns due to unpredictable markets became commonplace in the twentieth century, jobs at the mill became one of the only ways to remain in the community. The fact that these changes in how labor could be performed coincided with severe economic downturns created a destabilizing force within rural America, a force that would manifest in all facets of rural life. Was mechanization a way to save the rural way of life, or the beginning of the end?

¹⁷¹ Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age*, First Edition (Hill and Wang, 2007).

Federal Pontification and Farmer Action

The rural exodus of workers, mercurial agricultural prices, and poverty-stricken rural communities defined this era of Boston. But the struggles in the mid-Willamette Valley were echoed in farming communities throughout the United States, so much so that federal initiatives were funded to end the supposed rural crisis. But rather than offer direct aid, federal initiatives focused on the betterment of farmers with minimal input from the farmers themselves. The Country Life Movement, one program borne out of these anxieties, was a federal initiative meant to strengthen rural life both economically and culturally. Viewing farmers as unacceptably dependent on urban centers and foreign markets and also falling behind in terms of education and culture, the Country Life Movement believed that education and the scientific management of farming would be enough to even the playing field between rural and urban enterprise.²¹¹ Urban agriculturalists who administered Country Life programs focused on education. This included extension services available to farmers, data gathering on the rural experience, and funded studies of crop management. Country Life, and other similar elevation programs, did not address inequities in resources, rail monopolies, or price stabilization, issues that would be key in farmer-led activism.

The Country Life movement was not borne out of farmers' anxieties, but the concerns of rural leadership, urban educators, and, at its apex in 1908, the President of the United States.²¹² Hope that improved farming would lead to economic opportunity and that economic opportunity would encourage rural settlement drove County Life

²¹¹ Bailey, *The Country-Life Movement in the United States*.

²¹² Bailey, *The Country-Life Movement in the United States*, 16.

advocates, but governmental officials during this period stopped short of federal aid or regulations that would provide assurances to farmers. What the Country Life Movement reinforced was the importance of rural farming to American identity, even as the economic benefits were faltering. Like a continued focus on the pioneer mythology of the early settlement period, the national discourse on the value of rurality encouraged families to remain in precarious economic conditions through propaganda, rather than aid. The concern among rural advocates was that, in this new United States, rural communities would slip from their yeomen farmer heights to become a backwater appendage to urban markets, forced into a role of dependency, rather than the epicenter of American exceptionalism.²¹³ The paternalistic and often patronizing Country Life Movement placed the onus on the rural community to "modernize" and embrace civilized pursuits, rather than acknowledging that volatile agricultural markets were more to blame than the lack of telephones and libraries in rural communities. This view of rural life as culturally anemic would continue into the twentieth century, as bureaucrats debated the deficiencies of rural communities under the guise of the Country Life Movement and similar organizations.

While organizations like Country Life relied on outsiders' assumptions of rural life, organizations like the Grange, a national organization with an Oregon branch established in 1873, were a collective of local rural farmers working to improve the life of farmers and ranchers through education and advocacy. Country Life advocates viewed organizations like the Grange with skepticism. They assumed that rural people lacked an understanding of the modern world, so rather than engage with their own shortcomings,

²¹³ Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America*, 115.

they retreated to the "soft side" of life, demanding federal subsidies. Lashing out at entities like the federal government and railroads was merely an effort to downplay their own failings and fears as farming became more commercialized. Modern historians, however, see the Grange as a radical organization drawing inspiration both from Jeffersonian republicanism and "aggressive liberalism of the Jacksonian period." Organizations like the Grange prove a willingness of rural men to engage with large-scale commercialization and advocate for their rights within these modern spaces. Farmers were not hiding in the "soft side" of yeoman farming. They were, through the Grange, advocating for equitable terms to compete as commercial farmers.

One farmer, advocating for change, wrote, "Portland has us hemmed in and we are almost entirely at the mercy of a few firms there who control charters of vessels in which grain is carried to market."²¹⁴ Anger at corrupt urban systems was commonplace among farmers, especially as the urban/rural divide increased. Contemporary newspaper articles highlighted the anti-farmer sentiment among urban, specifically eastern, populations. When food shortages occurred or prices surged, urban populations looked to the American farmer as the cause. In 1910, the *Albany Weekly Herald* referenced an article on food prices and the erroneous assumption that farmers were withholding wheat from markets to bloat profits. Anti-farmer feelings led to calls to remove tariff protections during this period, a policy that would have disastrous impact on rural communities.²¹⁵ It was this type of discourse that made farmer activism so prolific during this period, as more and more farms collapsed. In Oregon, the Grange advocated for river

²¹⁴ "The Wheat Crop," *Albany Democrat* June 24, 1881.

²¹⁵ "Equality Not Reached Yet," *Albany Weekly Herald*, May 13, 1910.

improvements, cooperative trade, reduced shipping rates, and cooperative gristmills and warehouses, which would allow farmers to hold products in storage to ride out depressed prices.²¹⁶ In 1918, the local Grange advocated for a minimum wheat rate of \$2.50 per bushel, piggybacking on federal initiatives discussed in Chapter 3.²¹⁷ The Grange, Farmers Alliance and Oregon's Populist Party were strong proponents of federal aid to assist farmers and regulate shipping. But the victories of the Populist movement in Oregon did little to alleviate the issues of the Willamette Valley farmer. Cooperative pricing and Grange advocacy in newspapers helped spotlight farm issues, but federal policy shifts were not forthcoming. This early demand for federal involvement that would be realized during World War I was the antithesis of an earlier notion of self-sufficiency touted by pioneers, like Americus Savage, but a necessary shift in farm commerce and a shift that farmers were savvy enough to fight for.²¹⁸

A common framing for Oregon during this period among historians was that of the city and colony, where communities such as Shedd fed the commercial hunger of metropolitan Portland, whose docks were piled high with the products produced at the far reaches of the state. This framework makes sense, certainly, as commercial systems created unavoidable dependencies, often at the long-term detriment to rural communities. William Robbins argues, rightfully, that these towns at the periphery must be considered in conversation with the web of commerce that they form. And while world markets

²¹⁶ Boag, *Pioneering Death* (University of Washington Press, 2022), 109.

²¹⁷ "Resolution Passed Saturday: Will be Presented to the Commercial Club," *Albany Democrat*, April 19, 1918.

²¹⁸ Boag, *Pioneering Death* (University of Washington Press, 2022), 110.

would certainly factor into the day-to-day actions of those in Shedd, it would be erroneous to assume that Shedd residents acted exclusively as a piece of a larger global enterprise. The rural ethos, specifically the Oregon rural ethos, built from pioneer nostalgia, yeoman farming exceptionalism, and a dim but ever-present hope in wealth and abundance, was as influential to Shedd residents as the pricing of wheat on the Liverpool markets.²¹⁹ Connections to the land kept families in the community, toiling on unproductive land, to honor the labor of their fathers. Some families did move out and away, but many current residents can trace their lineage to Donation Land Claims. Americus Savage and P.V Crawford both argued that there was no finer place than the buttes around Boston. So, their families stayed, and worked, and continued to grow the narrative of the selfless pioneer, even as their own crops failed. Future-facing boosterism and immigration worked in tandem with pioneer nostalgia and reverence for a passing generation. With that nostalgia front of mind, farmers battled world markets and engaged in political activism to fight against what they viewed as a threat to their community.²²⁰ Economic unease and social unease only increased dependence on these mythologies, and these mythologies, in turn, dictated how Shedd residents navigated deviations.

"Author of the Girl's Ruin": Ella May Thompson Shoots Ed Farwell

Martin Thompson was uninterested in pioneer mythologies, even as he lived and worked at a pioneer mill. He was forward looking, working to increase the reach of the mill through technology, publicity, and the strategic use of the rail lines. To this end,

²¹⁹ Robbins, *Colony and Empire*.

²²⁰ Wrobel, *Promised Lands*, 3.

Thompson appeared regularly in Albany newspapers; his business dealings, advertisements, trips, and new purchases were listed often. While his family was accepted into the neighborhood, they were not above reproach when financial or moral dealings ran contrary to community standards. This was immediately apparent when news of his unwed daughter's pregnancy was announced in local papers. Ella Thompsons's dalliances stood to upset the familial balance of previous eras. If Mary Savage was the prototypical pioneer mother, Ella Thompson would come to personify, if not the twentieth century New Woman, at least the fears of what women would become. Ella's affair occurred at the height of rural anxieties over economics, rural out-migration, and the changing relationship to urban markets and modernity. This anxiety led to Ella Thompon's exile.

Little is known about Ella Thompson's life before 1896. She was the eldest child of Martin and Sophia, born before they moved West. She was likely a helper to her mother, tending to her younger siblings and perhaps, like Polly Ann Finley, expected to socialize with and feed mill workers and customers. She moved with the family to the Pacific Northwest, settling first in Husum, Washington, and then moving into Oregon. No records indicate that she ever travelled from her home in Boston once her father purchased the mill, or that she received more than about an eighth grade education, just like her brothers. While her family enjoyed a middle-class lifestyle, Ella was far removed from the bourgeoisie women of more urban area and lacked avenues that would have been available with more education or in a larger community. Ella's anonymity abruptly ended in 1896 with the headline, "Shot Her Betrayer." The report detailed Ella's sordid link to Ed Farwell, the heir to an old pioneer family land claim. At the time of the incident, Ella

Thompson was around twenty-two years old, Ed was thirty-six. The Farwell family and Thompson family, separated only by a fence on the west side of the mill property, were likely well acquainted. Farwell men appear in the earliest ledger books as workers and customers. Their involvement in the mill continued through to the 1980s. When Ed Farwell was accused of being the "author of the girl's ruin," neighbors in Shedd's Station did not seem terribly surprised.

On the night of October 14, 1896, Ella asked to see Ed at the woodshed on mill property. Ed walked over to find Ella with a cheap 38 caliber revolver. It seems that Ella was about six months pregnant, Ed was the father, and she wanted to know what he intended to do about it. According to newspaper accounts, he was unwilling to marry her and, judging by what happened next, Ella was not pleased. She took three shots at Ed, with one bullet hitting him in the back, a second grazing his shoulder, and a third missing him entirely. The injuries imply that Ed was, understandably, running from Ella as she took her shots. Ed, injured but not mortally wounded, was treated by Dr. Jayne and Dr. G.W Maston in town. He conveyed what happened and Ella was brought into custody, along with the firearm.²²¹ It was the poor quality of the weapon that likely saved Ed's life, onlookers observed. Ella was released to her father after he and another neighbor posted bail.

²²¹ One newspaper article published at the end of October 1896 suggested that Martin Thompson intended to take blame for the shooting, claiming that he was hiding in the woodshed during the altercation. The reporter didn't think much of the story, as "certainly Farwell knows who did the shooting." For the complete article, see "A Gentleman from Shedd," Albany Democrat, October 30, 1896.

While Ed denied paternity, the town was convinced not only that he was the father, but also that Ella was perhaps not morally right, but certainly justified in her response. A grand jury was called but no charges were brought, and Ella did not spend a moment in jail. Even still, Ella's pregnancy and its aftermath was salacious enough to be reported multiple times in the weeks following. Ella and Ed's dalliances were quickly folded into larger narratives of the dangers facing young women during this period. Shedd residents had sympathy for Ella, but Albany newspapers did not. Ella's moral failings were indicative of largescale societal degradation, and her judgement came from the same anxieties about rural life that dominated this period. The men were leaving the farm, wheat prices were volatile, and women, who were once the guidepost for rural morality, were shooting their lovers. There was no official punishment of Ella Thompson, but her child was quietly adopted, and she moved away from Shedd, never to return. Whether this was her choice, or the choice of her father, Ella Thompson paid for her moral faltering for the rest of her life. Just as the County Life Movement latched onto population decline as the end of rurality, residents of Linn County saw the changing roles of women as a troubling signpost, an infusion of urban decay into staid rural society. While the coming of the train is rightfully discussed largely in relation to markets and commerce, this sudden rural connection to urban spaces caused more subtle changes to how rural communities functioned. The resultant hand wringing over the morality of women did not coincide with an actual increase in sexual promiscuity. But it was another avenue to channel anxieties over rural identity.

Fears of corrupted women seemed to ride in on the train. Twenty years before Ella shot Ed, the *Albany Register* reported that the O & E rail was completed all the way to

Harrisburg, south of Shedd, and that it would arrive in Eugene shortly. Right above this rail update was a report of a woman arrested in Albany for public drunkenness, the first arrest of its kind in Albany.²²² These two unrelated news pieces signaled a change in the landscape of Linn County, the connection to larger markets brought with it a real or perceived loss of innocence, specifically the innocence of women. Twenty years later, this anxiety had only grown as connections strengthened between rural and urban spaces on an international level. An 1895 article in the *Lebanon Express* highlighted the rural preoccupation with the "New Woman," an individual that, through their autonomy, had essentially unsexed themselves.²²³ Professor Shorey, of Portland, gave a public program that was recounted in newspapers the next day. He did not espouse the evils of equality; he believed that women were equal to men both intellectually and socially, even though their spheres of influence differed. Instead, he shared with the audience a grave concern; women wearing bloomers, a custom brought to the United States from foreign lands. Shorey worried that bloomers were the first in a multitude of ways that a New Woman may remove themselves from the designation of the "fairer sex." While this is a trivial example, these types of missives circulating in rural spaces highlight the worry of Linn County residents that opening themselves to urban areas would fundamentally alter notions of rural womanhood. Bloomers, Shorey pointed out, came to the United States from Europe, following the same commercial channels that connected wheat farmers to Liverpool markets.

²²² "Paragram," *The Albany Register*, September 16, 1871.

²²³ New Woman is a term coined by Henry James, the New Woman was young, unmarried and had the habit of defying social norms in the name of modernity.²²³ The New Woman was middle or upper middle class and urban, either geographically or in spirit.

The *Oregon Cultivator* dedicated pages to the importance of the "womanly" aspects of the fairer sex, especially in rural communities, hoping to downplay these urban influences. The *Cultivator* highlighted the important role of motherhood on raising God-fearing and morally righteous future generations. The unstated goal was to recreate the mythologized pioneer mother. It also urged readers to take pity on lost women, presumed to be those who had strayed from moral propriety, and return them to the community bosom as you would a lost child to its mother.²²⁴ Another article detailed a likely fictitious meeting between an upright young man and a woman who was led astray.

It is exemplified every day in some of the walks of life that unfortunate woman, who may in an hour of weakness and temptation, have descended from the plane of purity, find little sympathy or encouragement in their endeavors to regain their lost positions in society."²²⁵

The Country Life Movement at the turn of the century was formed to solve rural issues broadly, but it was equally preoccupied with rural women. Instead of placing blame on urban influence, Country Life advocates blamed an emaciated rural culture. Made up largely of urban intellectuals, the movement was convinced that rural communities for women bred isolation and loneliness. This, combined with a lack of educational opportunities and available cultural outlets, made women in small agricultural communities despondent and more likely to abandon their roles as wife and mother for urban spaces.²²⁶ These twin beliefs, that urban amoral behavior was newly available to

²²⁴ "Woman Needed," *Oregon Cultivator*, July 13, 1876.

²²⁵ "How Kind Words Lift Up the Fallen," *Oregon Cultivator*, May 18, 1876.

²¹⁹ Bailey, *The Country-Life Movement in the United States*, 120.

women and that rural women were uniquely susceptible to these temptations, fueled discussions of women in Linn County during this period.

In addition to concerns over rural moral purity, there was a pervasive narrative of purity culture during Ella's young adulthood. Regulation of humanity's baser instincts was a Victorian preoccupation. It dominated legislation, volunteer activities, medical discourse, and speeches from the pulpit. It was an unchallenged maxim during this period that "moderation and self-control were the key to a healthy life."²²⁷ The height of this type of legislation during this period was the Comstock Law, aimed at the protection of children by preventing the sale and transmission of information related to abortion, birth control, or other, loosely defined, obscenities.²²⁸ Anthony Comstock famously described children as a glass of clear water, and any challenge to pure living as a "drop of ink." However small, this impurity was impossible to remove.²²⁹ Sexual vice became an unstoppable societal preoccupation at the end of the nineteenth century. And, while a certain amount of deviance was, not condoned, but expected among men, women were told repeatedly and from all angles that their role was to maintain purity for overall cultural wellbeing. As Ella's belly grew, no doubt these messages ran through her mind.

After the shooting, reporters asked William and Mary Simmons, still partial owners of the mill, for their impressions on Ella's situation. They offered no comment, at least not publicly. Mrs. Simmons was a dues paying member of the American Female

²²⁷ Lawrence M. Friedman, *Crime And Punishment In American History* (Basic Books, 1994), 129.

²²⁸ Leigh Ann Wheeler, *Against Obscenity: Reform and the Politics of Womanhood in America, 1873–1935* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 10.

²²⁹ Friedman, *Crime And Punishment In American History*, 132.

Guardian Society, a benevolent society based out of New York whose mission was to give aid to fallen women, those who might have been involved in prostitution or any business of ill repute.²³⁰ According to sources, Simmons proudly hung her membership certificate on the wall in her home in Boston.²³¹ In addition, given Mrs. Simmon's own abandonment by her first husband, one wonders if she would have offered a sympathetic ear to Ella. Equally likely, the Simmons family might have reacted with annoyance that their name was linked, in business at least, to the sort of family that would act in such a way. Mrs. Simmon's support for fallen urban women may not have translated into empathy for the young woman next door. Ella's removal from Shedd showcased the consequences of stepping outside of idealized womanhood in rural spaces. Her singular act of documented autonomy, shooting Ed Farwell, forced her from the community in which she was raised and required her to move, willingly or not, from rural Oregon. While Ed Farwell's shooting could be considered nothing more than a lover's quarrel, historians of crime and criminality have argued that "crime is a window through which to view broader changes transforming societies."²³² In the case of Ella Thompson and Ed Farwell, the changing rural landscape was very much a character in the aftermath of the shooting. Farmers who were losing their grip on cultural supremacy, in addition to

²³⁰ For more information on reform movement geared toward women during this period, see Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America*, Reprint edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986),

²³¹ Margaret Standish Carey and Patricia Hoy Hainline, *Shedd: Linn County's Early Dairy Center and Memories of Boston*, 11.

²³² Susan Sessions Rugh, "Civilizing the Countryside: Class, Gender, and Crime in Nineteenth-Century Rural Illinois," *Agricultural History* 76, no. 1 (2002): 60.

economic prosperity, lashed out at changing notions of womanhood. The community fought to preserve the sanctity of family as everything else seemed to be slipping away.

Ella and Ed did not face the issue head-on until the matter could no longer be avoided. Perhaps Ella had hoped, until this point, that she could conceal the pregnancy. It is equally likely that Ed decided at this late date that he would not marry her as he initially promised. Whatever brought her to pull a gun on Ed Farwell, Ella felt she was out of options. According to family stories, she was sent away for the remainder of her pregnancy, possibly to an asylum or home for unwed mothers. Ella's commitment would have seemed entirely reasonable to the Thompson family. The fact that Ella was sexually active, unmarried, and chose to shoot her lover played into the already well-established concerns about female hysteria brought about by immoral behavior and sexual deviance. The baby, named Dell Hinson, was born in January of 1897 and adopted by Fred and Cora Hinson of Springfield.²³³

This somewhat anticlimactic ending to the story did not stop editorials from sharing their own opinions on the matter. One article, published under the heading "Saturday Night Thoughts" wrote,

"If under a promise of marriage the young woman permitted liberties which resulted as reported perhaps the young man got only what he deserved. At the same time put it down emphatically that neither promise of marriage nor anything else is a justification for anything of the kind. A young woman from the very start should assert her womanhood and permit nothing that leads up to serious situations. Draw a line and never step beyond it."²³⁴

²³³ Birth Records, 1842-1902, 191 Oregon State Archives; Salem, Oregon.

²³⁴"Saturday Night Thoughts," *Albany Democrat*, October 16, 1896.

Ella's predicament, made public by her volatile reaction, was held up as an example of the dangers of acting on sexual urges outside of the confines of marriage. While the article notes that Ed should have been held responsible for the child, it was Ella's stumbling that was found to be the more egregious sin. Ella's life continued tragically. She was married twice, and had another child, but lived in near-poverty. She died in 1927 at the age of only fifty-two. Her mother paid for her burial, as her immediate family could not afford the expense. There are only two items tied to Ella Thompson in the mill's historic collection. The first is a blurry photograph of Ella, standing in front of the Simmons house with her siblings. Ella would never live in the Queen Anne home Martin constructed for his family. By the time Martin Thompson cashed in on the international wheat markets, his eldest living daughter had already been sent away. The second item is a schoolbook that was likely used by all of the Thompson children. On the inside cover, in looping script, a young Miss Ella May Thompson practiced signing her name over and over again.²³⁵

And then there was Ed Farwell. According to the *Albany Democrat*, his recovery took about three weeks and then he returned home. Ed never left the family's Donation Land Claim, spending the rest of his days next to the Thompson home. He had nearly a dozen children with his wife Mabel, and his middle son, Neil Farwell, worked for the mill for his entire adult life. Ed also worked at the mill: he was listed on the payroll throughout the 1910s. What is striking about the story of Ella Thompson was the speed with which she was removed from the community and the speed with which Ed was accepted back into it. Ed's labor, both on the farm and at the mill, had become an

²³⁵ Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Object Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR.

important commodity as men continued to leave the area. That, and his pioneer heritage, made him impervious to continued scorn. Neighbors thought Ella was right to shoot him but didn't feel the need to punish him any further. When asked in an oral history about Ella, Marcia Margason requested that the recorder be turned off, likely to share the story of her pregnancy and the shooting. When the recorder was turned on again, she simply said "everyone felt sorry for her...they never treated her right, that was a whole thing."²³⁶ Whether Marcia was speaking about her family, Ed Farwell, or the community in its entirety is unclear.

While Ella was left to forge her own path away from her family following the birth of her son, her child would have a long relationship with the mill. Records related to the Hinson adoption do not exist. Prior to 1900, adoptions were private and largely unregulated, creating a "chaotic child-placing landscape."²³⁷ Whatever the circumstances of his adoption, Dell was given the gift of a stable home in Springfield.²³⁸ He returned to the area of Boston in 1915, when he was about seventeen years old, to work at Thompson's Mills. The same month there was another notable worker at the mill: Ed Farwell, Dell's supposed father. Dell left no records on how he perceived his biological father, but one can imagine that in a town this small, Ed and Dell had both surely heard of

²³⁶ Margason, Marcia. Interviewed by Martin Thompson, October 24, 1984. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

²³⁷ It was only during the Progressive Era when organizations like the Children's Bureau, established by Congress in 1912, attempted to regulate a previously private system of adoption. By the 1930s, when systems like Social Security made formalized kinship networks more important, adoptive families would go through the legalistic ways to legitimize adoption. For more information, see Ellen Herman, *Kinship by Design: A History of Adoption in the Modern United States* (University of Chicago Press, 2008).

²³⁸ Herman, *Kinship by Design*.

each other. Perhaps, over a meal at the mill house, they scrutinized the other's face for signs of resemblance.

Heir to the Empire: Leo Emil Thompson and Otto Mulke Thompson

The year 1896 was not kind to the reputation of Martin Thompson or Boston Mills. An advertisement that ran from September through November in 1896 hinted at a different type of gossip coming from Boston. "In order to correct false reports we would state we give 40 lbs. of flour, in exchange for one bushel first-class clean red and white wheat and less flour for second grade. We have put in a large turbine and can do some good chopping for 1-10th bushel." These "false reports" were not in local newspapers, but one can assume that the mill's exchange rates and possibly the quality of their roller milled flour was under scrutiny alongside Martin's daughter's marksmanship.

Billy Simmons sold Martin his shares to the mill in 1897, only a year after the business's reputation took a hit. The mill was transferred again to Martin's wife and sons upon Martin's death in 1910. Charles, John, and Henry Thompson each received \$10,000 after Martin's death, proceeds from the sale of the Husum power plant, another family enterprise.²³⁹ With his \$10,000, Charlie bought a farm in Monroe, Oregon. He quickly discovered that he was not much of a farmer, just like he wasn't much of a mill worker, and he relocated to Portland. John moved south to Los Angeles and Henry headed to the Midwest. Two sons remained in Shedd, Otto (known as Ott or O.M) and Leo. Instead of money, they inherited Boston Roller Mills, entering into a partnership with their mother.

²³⁹ Thompson, Martin. Interviewed by Doug Crispin, August 24, 2004. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

They all lived together, with Ott's young family, at the mill house. On the 1910 census, it looked as though Martin had already determined how his sons would split the business. Leo was listed as a teamster, running wheat and flour deliveries. Ott, like Martin, was a miller.²⁴⁰ Once the paperwork was signed to solidify the partnership, the name was changed to Thompson Bros., signaling hope for a long alliance between Leo and Ott. It lasted only three years.

Leo's body was found in the evening on December 19, 1913. Ott had assumed that he was still at the mill working, and it was only as it neared dinner time that anyone thought to check. In a storage barn on the mill property Ott found Leo hanging with a noose around his neck. Ott never spoke openly about his brother after that night. Once the body was removed, he tore the shed down piece by piece, unable to bear the thought of stepping into it again. Newspapers noted that the scene was meticulously planned: the rope was an inch thick and the platform that he jumped from prevented the ability to regain his footing. Leo was twenty-six years old. Eunice Thompson, Ott's daughter, was warned by her mother never to mention Uncle Leo to her father because he very nearly lost his mind when it happened, and the family had been afraid that Ott would die from the grief.²⁴¹

Marcia Margason remembered Leo Thompson as very kind, but also quite shy. A surviving photograph shows a young man with clean shaven face. He and his brother Ott

²⁴⁰ 1910 United States Federal Census Year: 1910; Census Place: Shedd, Linn, Oregon; Roll: T624_1283; Page: 1b; Enumeration District: 0191; FHL microfilm: 1375296

²⁴¹ Arthur, Eunice and Robert Arthur, Interview by Sarah Scott, July, 27 2004. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

had big ears, a family trait. But Ott is pictured in a suit slightly too large at the shoulders. He has a curl to his short hair and dark bushy eyebrows over an angular nose. Leo's features are more delicate, his lips thin and drawn, his tie sitting slightly crooked, his shoulders broad but sloped downward. Those who knew him said that he didn't look much like the rest of the family. The only records Leo left were the signed partnership records for Thompson Bros. Mill, a short will, and a few notes he wrote to his brother Charles about the poor weather in Shedd, as the roads became impassable from mud. Aside from the standard fatigue that everyone shares during an Oregon winter, the tone of these letters is conversational.

Newspaper accounts of the suicide suggested that Leo was despondent over poor health, though health issues were never mentioned by those who knew the family.²⁴² When Marcia Margason was asked why he might have killed himself, she said that it would be "kind of bad if I told you." She then requested that the tape recorder be turned off, and whatever she said was not recorded. Earlier in the interview, Marcia was not one to spare details. She spoke freely of Americus Savage's alcoholism and death, the fact that Ott was a "littler stinker," and all the women in Shedd that she believed had "gotten fleshy" in their old age. But she wouldn't speak of Ella's troubles on the record, and she was careful in her words about Leo. The standard family narrative is that he was depressed over a love affair.²⁴³ Some neighbors recall that it was a love affair with a man that drove Leo to that desperate act in 1913. There is no concrete evidence either way, but

²⁴² "Shedd Mill Man Takes Own Life," *Albany Democrat*, December 23, 1913.

²⁴³ Arthur, Eunice and Robert Arthur, Interview by Sarah Scott, July, 27 2004. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

Leo would have known that the family, and the community, had little room for empathy if he veered into any kind of non-standard romantic relationship given the swift exile of his sister. Sophia, having only just buried her husband, buried Leo in a local cemetery and the brief partnership of brothers that Martin carefully crafted before his passing dissolved.

The community happenings for that December in 1913 were sparse. The Shedd social scene was quiet, aside from a few out-of-town visitors and some business appointments. Business records for the mill were equally silent on the issue of Leo. On the day that his suicide was reported, the *Albany Democrat* was focused on unease in Mexico and a call for "clearer understanding" between farmers and merchants throughout the county. The Grangers called for an increase in soil analysis and scientific farming methods, as the Willamette Valley sank behind Eastern Oregon in terms of production. While Leo's suicide was reported in papers, the issue was largely devoid of commentary. No confessions, justifications, or absolution was offered.

Leo wrote a will before his death, leaving his portion of the mill to Myrle, Ott's young son, instead of his other brothers. Ott petitioned to be placed in charge of Myrle's interests until he turned twenty-one, a legal document that he was very careful to enforce. Now it was the job of Ott Thompson and his aging mother to guide the Boston mill through the twentieth century. And so, Ott got to work. Just as his father brought in roller mills, a technology that allowed for more high-speed milling, and electrification to allow for more complex machinery, Ott also chose to rely on improving the mill infrastructure to move the business forward. He built a new garage for mill trucks in 1912 and a warehouse two years later along with minor building improvements.

But most striking were the fifty-foot silos that could hold 50,000 bushels of wheat added to the front of the mill in 1917.²⁴⁴ Replacing a wooden storage structure, these poured concrete silos were brand new technology, and certainly new to Linn County. Aside from the practicalities of secure wheat storage, the silos were also visually striking. The mill had grown over time, but the structure, the whitewashed siding, and the clapboard walls, looked similar to the original Finley mill of 1858. The silos were something new. They could be seen from the road and surrounding farms. Ott used those white silos to advertise Thompsons brand flour, and the Valley Rose and Red Delicious logos became a cultural touchpoint for generations of Shedd residents. Ott was ready to take full advantage of the wheat boom that World War I would bring, but his changing fortunes painted a target on his back, with his brothers and his neighbors all taking aim.

²⁴⁴ J. Fred Stillwell, "Know your Linn County- Boston People Move to Shedd," *Greater Oregon*, September 27, 1935.



Figure 2.4 - First photograph of silos, circa 1920 *Thompsons Mills Historic Collection*

Conclusion

The end of the community of Boston was the beginning of the community's link to external markets, immigration, and a movement toward modernizing. Martin Thompson came to Oregon as an industrialist, like Richard Finley before him. Thompson had the benefit of the market economy, stretching the reach of Boston Roller Mills far beyond the Linn County markets of an earlier era. But it was not just wheat markets that arrived on the train. Booster literature touting the Linn County landscape and a growing divide between the semi-subsistence agriculture of the 1850s and 1860s and the large-scale commercial farming that would overtake Linn County in the twentieth century had their start here.

With this immense change came federal initiatives and grassroots organizing designed to save rural life from the crushing blows of an industrializing world. Everything, from the way soil was tilled to how women were educated, came under scrutiny. Newspaper articles were full of hand wringing over the future of the area as the promised population booms never materialized in Shedd. Shedd residents were equally nervous, both wary of far-off markets and also unable to maintain wealth as subsistence farmers. Economic anxieties heightened social anxieties, as the roles of rural men and women were changing. Fears of young men being lured to cities and young women participating in immoral behaviors were reported alongside mentions of political movements to advocate for regulation of rails. Men that were drawn to Oregon precisely because it was removed from bureaucratic oversight and the sins of urban environments now agitated for protections and involvement in metropolitan markets.

Pioneer nostalgia was a dominant theme throughout Oregon during this period, but the descendants of this lauded generation were faltering. Second generation Shedd residents were brought up on a story of prosperity that they would never see. New residents of Linn County, brought into Oregon by booster promises that didn't materialize, had to choose to stay and work on unproductive fields, toss their hats into dangerous wheat speculation games, or move along. Many young men and women chose the latter. Those that stayed would see their community under attack as the agricultural boom of World War I caused many to bet their farms and lose.

CHAPTER 3: WEALTH AND THE WORKERS (1917-1940)

Introduction

Ott's grandchildren relayed a story that their mother once told them. Ott benefited greatly during World War I. Prices for American exports of wheat went up slightly in 1914 and spiked in 1917, when the United States officially entered the war. When British farms couldn't meet European needs and the importation of Russian wheat was halted, American farmers benefitted.²⁴⁵ But the equally sudden collapse of wheat prices in the 1920s had taken a toll on Ott's plans for his twilight years. One morning he left the home that his father built and walked to the mill race with a shotgun. His wife, Laura, watched from the window as she finished the morning's dishes. Ott sat at the edge of the mill race, looking at the water that built his fortune, for hours. He was nearly forty years old with four children to support. He knew the mill business, but the work was hard. His brother, his business partner, had been dead for more than a decade, his mother was elderly and needed care. The successes and failures of the family business were now his alone. In good times, Ott dreamed of an early retirement with his wife, but he'd overextended himself. Laura watched Ott through the window, his hand resting on the shotgun, his mind wandering through his options. And then he stood back up and walked home, never speaking of the incident with his wife or his young children. Ott Thompson recovered somewhat financially, but he would work until the day he died at the age of eighty-one.²⁴⁶

²⁴⁵ Hurt, *Problems of Plenty*, 36.

²⁴⁶ Children of Eunice Thompson, Interview by Marin Aurand, July 2021. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

Ott Thompson's near suicide was due, in part, to the mercurial nature of rural capitalism during this period. The 1920s and 1930s in Linn County was a continuation of the slow demise of farm communities. The attempted largescale commercialization of agriculture, the consolidation of land, and a lacking infrastructure that could not support small-scale farming left farmers and the businesses and industries that supported them in turmoil. The late nineteenth century dealt with the arrival of trains, the decline of rural populations, and changes to rural life in a modern era. The early twentieth century felt equally frenetic, with large economic booms, catastrophic busts, and changes to how labor would be performed and by whom. This is a story of desperation for those who were unable to manage the unpredictability of agriculture.²⁴⁷ Farms mortgaged in the 1920s were running the risk of foreclosure only a decade later. Farming collapses would reverberate through the community, and Thompsons Mills was not immune. If, in the late-nineteenth century, the mill increasingly oriented toward global markets, the early-twentieth century would only continue this trend, leaving the mill and neighboring farmers more and more vulnerable to worldwide economies just as the local role of mills in the community of Shedd diminished. Fights over water rights highlighted the growing animosity between farmers and mill owners, which only grew as economic disparities and rifts through federal initiatives became more pronounced.

During this period, the importance of the mill shifted. The product it milled, once sourced and sold locally, became less essential to locals than the jobs it provided. With the failure of local farms, more men and women became dependent on wage labor, and

²⁴⁷ Douglas R. Hurt, *Problems of Plenty: The American Farmer in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002), i.

the mill house was filled with workers. These rural men and women became career mill workers, staying at their jobs for multiple decades, rather than using mill work as a stopgap to supplement farm income. At the same time, the labor of women, labor that was a key component of the farm economy since early settlement, was discounted as rural life advocates looked for ways to return agricultural communities to a place of honor through misguided attempts to remove women from the drudgery of manual labor. While the Country Life movement of previous decades re-conceived the work of women as a science, women's manual labor during the Great Depression was viewed as a sign of poverty. That women needed to work, and that the work was in fields, was a sign of degeneracy. Modernizing urban Americans increasingly viewed rural Americans with skepticism, a trend that started during agricultural organizing of the late nineteenth century and only increased during the Great Depression. By 1940, rural farmers were no longer lauded in public consciousness. They were antiquated, unable to evolve to meet the needs of a modernizing world without federal subsidies.

By 1940, the mill and the community that surrounded it changed. Subsistence agriculture, waning by 1910, would all but die in the 1930s. The loans taken out during the wheat boom would force families off of their land during the Great Depression. Men were more likely to work in wage labor positions than on farms. Farmers plowed under wheat fields in favor of a new cash crop, rye grass. Ott Thompson, once considered a friend to area farmers, was now an enemy. As more and more men became dependent on mill work, wealth disparities were thrown into sharp focus. The farmers turned on Ott, and the country turned on the farmers. Rural nostalgia morphed into caricature, and Linn County residents clung to a distant past to find meaning.

Short-term Gains, Long-term Losses

Ott Thompson built his silos in 1917 hoping to continue the legacy his father started. Martin helped move his family into a place of financial security, but Ott was aiming even higher. The white concrete silos were taller than the mill itself, peeking out over the trees and advertising Thompson goods for decades to come. And Ott's investment was wise; the Great War was very good for the farming business. Nationwide, farm income increased from \$7.5 billion annually in the early 1910s to \$17.7 billion in 1919.²⁴⁸ The same windfall was present at the mill, with a boom that mirrored national trends. A 1919 accounting page highlighted business growth during and following World War I. At the beginning of that year, assets totaled \$63,445.00, an amount that nearly doubled to \$102,107.04 by the end of the year. The biggest gains were in accounts with balances due, from \$6,900 to 20,955.89. Raw materials on hand, mostly grains, went from \$35,670 to \$68,790.73. Ott Thompson was not the only one that banked on the wheat market in the 1910s. Between 1909 and 1919, the acreage of wheat in Linn County more than doubled from 25,188 to 52,636.²⁴⁹ Despite farmer's complaints at the turn of the century that wheat was a losing bet, farmers re-committed to the crop as market prices rose globally and populations rose nationally.

Ott's willingness to house raw materials was due to the federal government's decision to guarantee wheat and flour prices beginning with the Food Control Act.²⁵⁰ The

²⁴⁸ Hurt, *Problems of Plenty*, 37.

²⁴⁹ United States Department of Agriculture Bureau of Chemistry and Soils, *Soil Survey of Linn County, Oregon*. by A.E Kocher, E.J Carpenter, and W.G Harper, Number 25 Series 1924.

²⁵⁰ Gladys L. Baker, *Century of Service. The First 100 Years of The United States Department of Agriculture* (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1963), 93.

Food Control Act was a way for the federal government to encourage production of goods, like wheat, by guaranteeing a minimum price that farmers could expect. Beginning in 1918, the price of wheat was guaranteed at \$2.20 per bushel. Wheat prices were already on the rise, with one study noting that in primary markets, wheat had gone as high as \$3.00 a bushel with wild price fluctuations starting as early as 1917. By comparison, wheat prices per bushel from 1882-1915 averaged about 79 cents per bushel nationwide; in Linn County, the average was lower, at 64 cents.²⁵¹ The federal government stepped in not only to stimulate wheat production, but also to stabilize pricing in the United States and take some of the risk out of notoriously volatile markets during wartime. The result was felt immediately for wheat farmers. They were no longer subject to the whims of the markets, and so more wheat was grown in the United States in 1918, calculated at 921 million bushels that year. The Grain Corporation, a funded government entity, had the buying power to keep even this unprecedented harvest at the guaranteed price. Wheat and flour was then supplied to Allied governments, who agreed to do business with the Grain Corporation. Federal involvement would lessen following World War I only to increase again through the Great Depression, but this period of growth solidified farmers' dependency on and expectation of federal regulation.²⁵²

This boom encouraged farmers, yet again, to focus their energies on a single crop, wheat, offering little incentive to farm with more diversified yields. Farmers in Linn County already saw decreasing yields due to monocropping beginning in the 1890s, but

²⁵¹ Bliss Isely, "The Case History of Wheat," *The Atlantic*, May 1, 1940, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1940/05/the-case-history-of-wheat/654263/>.

²⁵² Hurt, *Problems of Plenty*, i.

continued to push their land to the limit, with a singular focus on cash crops. Similar policies would decimate landscapes in the American South and Midwest, but even in the fertile Willamette Valley, crop yields suffered at the turn of the century and continuing through the 1920s. Corn, rye, oats, and barley yields all declined in the United States during this period in favor of wheat. When the war ended in 1918, the federal government agreed to honor to price guarantee through the 1919-1920 growing season, even though grain production in other parts of the world would inevitably challenge the cost of grain worldwide. On January 1, 1920, the Wheat Guarantee Act expired, and wheat was again traded on the exchange. Prices returned to prewar amounts, falling even more during the Great Depression.²⁵³ For farmers who invested in wheat despite misgivings about the crop dating back to the 1870s, this drop was catastrophic. Just as the arrival of the train in previous decades changed the ways in which farmers did business, now it was federal involvement in wheat pricing that changed the landscape of agriculture in and around Boston. Nationwide, farmers would loudly agitate for the federal government to regulate freight prices and farming and to increase farmers' access to credit and mortgages as mechanization required more capital for small scale farmers to compete.²⁵⁴ Policies formed during this era created "nothing less than a sense of entitlement" among farmers through the late twentieth century.²⁵⁵ But even the brief heavy hand of federal

²⁵³ Wilfred Eldred, "The Wheat and Flour Trade Under Food Administration Control: 1917-18," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 33, no. 1 (1918): 1-70, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1885009>.

²⁵⁴ Hurt, *Problems of Plenty*, x.

²⁵⁵ Hurt, *Problems of Plenty*, x.

involvement could not stabilize the mercurial nature of agriculture during the 1920s and the Coolidge administration was unwilling to commit to largescale reforms.²⁵⁶

A 1922 letter from the IRS to Ott Thompson noted that in the calendar year of 1919, \$105,439.17 was deducted from the cost of goods sold, suggesting a huge increase in business compared to the Finley or even Simmons eras when the market for Boston flour was hyper-local.²⁵⁷ The year 1920 continued to trend up for Thompson Bros Flouring Mills, again seeing an increase in raw materials on hand, but the net worth of the company at the end of that year was calculated at 19,513.82, with actual in-the-bank profits listed at 1,354.62. That year, around the time locals recall the mill running twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, labor expenses totaled \$7,748. At a rate of pay of 1.50 per day, the mill paid for 5,165 days of labor, which could have been as many as 14 employees year-round.²⁵⁸ Local farmer Yates Sherer recalled that Ott borrowed heavily to be able to invest in wheat and workers during this period.²⁵⁹ These investments did not yield long-term benefits. A 1923 handwritten balance sheet notes that the mill and Shedd warehouse operations had approximately \$28,000 in assets, which included \$500.00 in the bank. The same sheet notes loans given to the mill totaling \$23,000.²⁶⁰ It can be

²⁵⁶ Hurt, *Problems of Plenty*, xi.

²⁵⁷ Letter to the Internal Revenue Service from Otto Thompson, May 13, 1922. Box 79 Folder 97. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR.

²⁵⁸ Balance sheet, January 1920. Box 79 Folder 93, Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. It is more likely that the mill relied on high staff numbers during harvest periods and then moved to a smaller crew in the winter months.

²⁵⁹ Sherer, Yates, interview by Sarah Scott, July 21, 2004. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

²⁶⁰ Invoice, January 1923, Box 79 Folder 92. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR.

assumed that, by this year, the bubble had fully burst in Boston. While Eunice's children assumed that it was the Great Depression that destroyed Ott's finances, it is more likely that his march to the mill race with a shotgun in his hand happened sometime after the end of the Wheat Guarantee Act in 1920. Sherer heard about Ott's troubles over wheat prices years later. Sherer was born in 1918, but the collapse of wheat was catastrophic enough that farmers still shared stories in the following decades. "[Farmers] were caught in an awful bind... it ... near broke everybody connected with grain."²⁶¹

The downturn in wheat prices only highlighted the dangers of the types of farming that had been espoused by federal rural advocates and farm scientists in the previous decades. Farmers were encouraged to specialize in a single crop, decreasing their own role in subsistence farming. By 1920, farmers produced only 40 percent of the food they consumed. This number would continue to decline during the twentieth century. Farmers now required cash for groceries and other consumer goods, like automobiles, which thirty percent of farmers owned by 1920.²⁶² Reliance on consumer goods, in turn, caused farmers to take on loans and even mortgage their property to modernize their farm and support their family. On the whole, farmers ignored the risks of a post-war dip in wheat prices and depression of the agricultural economy.²⁶³ Whether this was ignorance or necessity on the part of the farmers, the results were the same. For small scale farmers, those without a significant amount of capital, loans and mortgages

²⁶¹ Sherer, Yates, interview by Sarah Scott, July 21, 2004. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

²⁶² Hurt, *Problems of Plenty*, 42.

²⁶³ Hurt, *Problems of Plenty*, 43.

taken out during the lofty days of 1919 would drown farmers after the war. Nearly one half of farms in Linn County were mortgaged by 1925 and farm values fell from \$33,592,695 to \$31,270,294.²⁶⁴ Making matters worse, nonfarm prices, like consumer goods, did not decline, catching farmers in a price squeeze. They were making less and spending more. Farmers in the 1920s had only two thirds of the purchasing power that they had in 1913. For the most part, farmers didn't make gains during the war; they came out worse off than they were at the start.²⁶⁵

Ott noted the eerie quiet in Shedd in April of 1928. "It is very [quiet] here among the farmers as it is [too] wet to seed and they aren't inclined to buy or sell until conditions improve."²⁶⁶ In May of 1928 Ott writes again, "no grain moving."²⁶⁷ Market fluctuations, over-farmed soil conditions, and global wheat production re-entering the market changed the way that Shedd farmers were making their money, and the situation wouldn't improve in the next decade. The McNary-Haugen plan, presented to Congress between 1924 and 1928 and sponsored by Oregon senator Charles McNary, was meant to stall the precipitous fall of agricultural buying power by stabilizing market pricing for agricultural commodities. But by the time the plan worked its way through Congress, governmental

²⁶⁴ Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. *United States Census of Agriculture* Prepared under the supervision of William Lane Austin, 1927. United States Government Printing Office, Washington; Hurt, *Problems of Plenty*, 27.

²⁶⁵ Hurt, *Problems of Plenty*, 44. The Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) hoped to decrease agricultural surplus and, as a result, stabilize prices and improve the buying power of farm families. The program was short-lived, in 1936 the Supreme Court declared it unconstitutional and an overstep of federal authority to spend tax income.

²⁶⁶ Letter from Otto Thompson to C.P Thompson, April 21, 1923. Box 79 Folder 106. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR.

²⁶⁷ Letter from Otto Thompson to C.P Thompson, May 17, 1928. Box 79 Folder 106. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR.

interest in federal oversight of markets waned, and President Coolidge vetoed the bill twice. It would take the Great Depression to revitalize federal incentive to protect farmers.²⁶⁸ The catastrophic decline of wheat markets was a national issue that manifested in local tragedies. Farmers in Shedd who were told to modernize to compete in global markets lost the land that had passed to them from the settlement era. At the mill, the remaining Thompsons brothers turned on each other, wondering what was left of Martin Thompson's legacy.

He Can "Paddle his Own Canoe": The Fight Over Sophia's Estate

As Ott was picking up the pieces of his tattered wheat empire in the mid-to-late 1920s, Sophia Thompson, the matriarch of the Thompson family, died at the age of seventy-four. Ott's family does not remember a terrible amount of warmth from Sophia, but, for Ott, she had been the longest business partner he had. None of his surviving siblings had significant involvement with the mill during this period. His brother Charles lived in Portland, John had gone into business for himself in Los Angeles, and Henry settled in the Midwest. But after Sophia's death, letters from Charles and John poured in with questions and judgements related to Ott's business dealings. They wanted a piece of the fortune amassed in the 1910s. Perhaps the Thompson brothers looked in on the mill in the booming year of 1919, when grain was piled high and workers swarmed, sacking flour as fast as they could to meet the unseen demand of warring European nations. Maybe the Thompson boys hadn't noticed the slowing off of traffic as the 1920s wore on. Ott's battle with his brothers over Sophia's estate is a microcosm of the larger confusions

²⁶⁸Hurt, *Problems of Plenty*, 59.

between those outside rural communities and those enmeshed in the agricultural economy. Rural communities were drowning due to compounding disasters, but from the outside, it seemed as though farmers just foolishly squandered their money.

The inevitable collapse of Ott's wheat empire tore the family apart and the estate dispute lasted for decades. Sophia's personal furnishings and two stock shares totaled \$173.50. Her one third share of the mill property, now forty-four acres, was valued at \$333.33. These figures, plus her share in non-liquid mill assets, totaled \$19,884.67. The bulk of her estate, then, was tied to the mill and not easily split among the brothers. John Thompson contested these figures immediately upon receiving them. Surely the mill was worth more, given the improvements on the land. John demanded a re-count and assurances that Sophia's personal items had not been taken into Ott's possession without proper acknowledgement. Ott was asked to prove that his bed, his children's dressers, and the clothes on his back belonged to him alone.

In July of 1928, John wrote to Laura, Ott's wife, having not received a reply from Ott. This letter is the most candid discussion of what happened to Ott's fortune after 1920. He wrote,

Now I have always tried to help him and have on two occasions kept him in business when he was on the verge of being pushed out. You know what effect his former trouble had on his health when he lost all of Mothers money by over investing in Wheat and he blamed [me] for not telling him but I did not like to interfere in their business when not asked.

John claimed again at the end of the letter that Sophia never received her share of the earnings at the mill. John painted Ott as a shortsighted, or possibly greedy, businessman, an easy judgement to make in hindsight. He again brought up Ott's poor health and said, "I know he got a hard jolt when he lost his and Mothers money on wheat some years ago,

but he should not expect her to pay all his losses."²⁶⁹ According to John, Ott "gambled" \$10,000 on wheat and another \$5,000 for building improvements. In writing to Charles, John suggested that at this point, Ott can "paddle his own canoe." Whatever the truth of Ott Thompson's financial situation, the familial relationships between Ott and his brothers bankrupted by 1929.

While the estate battle would eventually be resolved, the brothers never reconciled. Charles Thompson and his family went to visit John in 1960. Charles's grandson remembers that Ott was a topic of conversation, with John remarking that he was going to "need the rights to the Calapooia where he was going." Eunice Thompson said that her father never discussed what happened, and her mother would say only that it was a family matter that happened long ago.²⁷⁰ John Thompson held enough of a grudge against Otto that he brought it up one final time in his will, drafted in 1960. He wrote, "I have some interests in my Mothers estate in Linn County Oregon. I do not expect too much from this source as my Brother there has been integrating some property to his own." Sophia Thompson had been dead for thirty-two years.²⁷¹

²⁶⁹ J.T Thompson to Laura Thompson, July 1, 1928. Box 79 Folder 106. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR.; Don Margason, neighbor and occasional employee of the mill, recalled Ott putting all of his money in Laura's name and then declaring bankruptcy. If this was the case, the estate battle never confirmed it. See: Margason, Donald, interview by Sarah Scott, July 23, 2004. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File; Thompson, Martin, interview by Doug Crispin and Sarah Scott, August 24, 2004. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

²⁷⁰ Thompson, Eunice and Robert Arthur, Interview by Sarah Scott, July, 27 2004. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

²⁷¹ Last Will and Testament of John Thompson, March 8, 1960. Box 79 Folder 121 Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR.

This family squabble is indicative of the difference between expectations and reality when it came to profits in the Willamette Valley in the period surrounding World War I. To the outside observer, this was the heyday for the American farmer. The train had connected men to markets, mechanization allowed for at least the opportunity for increased crop yields, and large swathes of land, previously arid and unfarmable, entered into the agricultural landscape. Wheat prices were guaranteed, banks pumped money into rural communities, and demand remained quite high. But Ott's situation illustrates that these facts, while true, obscured the amount of capital that was required to remain competitive in larger and larger markets. Increases in staff, mill expansions, and technological upgrades all cost Ott dearly. When wheat prices were no longer held at an inflated price, loans came due, and Ott had to liquidate what he could to pay them. Farmers who chose to expand faced similar issues in the period following World War I. This, plus the decades of depressed prices prior to World War I, pushed Linn County to the brink.

The notion of "two agricultures," the split between subsistence or small family farms and commercial enterprises, came more into focus during this period. As farmers lost their land following World War I, farmers better able to weather the storm bought it. The number of farmers in Linn County started to decrease while farms grew larger. The Thompson family fight over a long dead fortune highlights not only how quick fortunes changed during the 1920s, but how the on-the-ground plight of farming communities was obscured in complex exchange rates and credit reporting. Farmers looked irresponsible or ignorant, rather than beholden to a broken agricultural system that could not support rural communities. Mortgaged land and bankruptcies did not force the federal government to

act during the Coolidge era, despite the decades-long assurances that rural agriculture was the backbone of American society. Instead, the federal government that created the Country Life movement to re-invest in the rural ethos now looked askance at farmers who seemed to have their hand out.

"Peasant Inertia": Failures of Rural America

These changing sympathies toward farmers would have policy and cultural impacts on rural Willamette Valley communities. As economic depressions and cultural irrelevance reframed the rural experience, farmers in Boston turned again to the story of their ancestors, the pioneers, to solidify their identities and worth. This place-based identity formation kept families on whatever land they retained even as it became unproductive. This would, in turn, place more men in positions of dependence on low-paid wage labor. At the same time, changing notions of the value of rural populations impacted what federal aid was available to farmers, which, in turn, impacted the financial health of communities like Shedd. This seemingly abrupt change from heralding rural men and women as a national backbone to disparaging farmers and farming communities could have been caused by a number of factors. In the Upper Midwest, populist and farmer advocacy was tainted by accusations of communism and anti-American sentiment at the beginning of World War I. The failures of scientific farming to stabilize pricing and the lack of progress on County Life initiatives only added to frustrations among intellectuals looking at rural issues. In the Midwest, anti-German sentiment stemming from the war created rural animosity. As farmers continued to loudly advocate for

subsidies, price stabilization, and collective pricing under Hoover and Roosevelt, patience wore thin.²⁷²

John Thompson blamed his brother's lack of business sense for the mill's failure to thrive. Writing from urban Los Angeles, he might have looked at Shedd as a quaint, if backward, hamlet that was thrust into world markets without enough savvy to compete. When faced with the ability to better their economic situation, Shedd farmers bungled the enterprise. The subsequent collapse of rural communities was no surprise. Sociologists and historians of the 1920s were similarly convinced that the collapse of rural markets was due, in large part, to the men and women within the community. With a mix of inevitability and remorse, historians through the 1970s agreed with Ott's brother John Thompson when they tried to perform an autopsy on the deceased society. James Shideler wrote in 1973 that "rural people were conservative and tradition-minded, heirs to the peasant inertia of their old-world ancestors."²⁷³ It was no wonder, he continued, that these simple people were crushed under the weight of the Gatsby-style decadence of the 1920s. It was inevitable, "in the competitions between polarized rural and urban worlds, the rural was fated to lose because it was disadvantaged economically and socially."²⁷⁴ Quoting novels, psychologists, and Country Life Bulletins, Shideler echoes Richard Hofstadter and earlier historians in lamenting the death of the rural man while only

²⁷² Cletus E. Daniel, "Wobblies on the Farm: The IWW in the Yakima Valley," *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 65, no. 4 (1974): 166–75, JSTOR. ; Lowell K. Dyson, "Radical Farm Organizations and Periodicals in America, 1920-1960," *Agricultural History* 45, no. 2 (1971): 111–20. William C Pratt, *Observations from My Life with Farm Movements in the Upper Midwest*, 2014.

²⁷³ James H. Shideler, "'Flappers and Philosophers,' and Farmers: Rural-Urban Tensions of the Twenties," *Agricultural History* 47, no. 4 (1973): 286.

²⁷⁴ Shideler, "'Flappers and Philosophers,' and Farmers," 289.

mentioning in passing the lack of aid or regulatory actions that allowed agricultural markets to decimate farmers.

These historians parroted the intellectual discourse surrounding rural people in the early twentieth century. In 1917, L. L. Bernard published "The Theory on Rural Attitudes" in the *American Journal of Sociology*. He began by making it clear that the deficiencies of rural people did not seem to be the result of a biological difference. Their brains, by all accounts, had the same "neural organization." Therefore, the obvious limitations of this class of people must be environmental. Bernard listed the common traits of the "rural attitude" that would need to be trained out of farmers before they could hope to succeed in the modern world. Among these traits are a disregard for the scientific method, conservatism, "emotional intensity with consequent high suggestibility," an inability to comprehend distinctions in humor or sentiment, and a superstitious nature.²⁷⁵ These traits meant that farmers approached their labor in an unscientific and "artless" manner, in which "conventional thinking has been liberally mixed with superstition" which leads to "occupational psychosis."²⁷⁶ According to Shideler, the isolation of rural community intensified this incompetence and limits a farmer's ability to elevate their thinking. The farmer is also suspicious of neighbors and urban spaces, lacking any regular association with either. This makes any type of teamwork or communal activity impossible, "he fails in teamwork because his mind is not trained in it."²⁷⁷ He is also lazy in his free time, likely to be found napping in his field, drinking heavily, or gambling. Whatever free time

²⁷⁵ L. L. Bernard, "A Theory of Rural Attitudes," *American Journal of Sociology* 22, no. 5 (1917): 631.

²⁷⁶ Bernard, "A Theory of Rural Attitudes," 632.

²⁷⁷ Bernard, "A Theory of Rural Attitudes," 635–37.

he has, it is "poorly employed." In this way, the farmer is similar, Bernard argues, to recently immigrated urban populations working in factories.

In 1923, Carl Taylor published his article "The Rise of the Rural Problem," fighting against the popular notion that rural America was somehow irreparably broken. While he saw the depopulation of rural areas, he also noted that agricultural yields were higher than ever.²⁷⁸ While he does agree with his contemporaries that rural populations had a lack of understanding of complexities of economic systems, he also believed that rural farmers were increasingly aware that "industrialization, urbanization or something else has developed an economic regime which fails to remunerate them adequately for their goods and labors."²⁷⁹ While the rural condition was of great interest to sociologists dating back to the 1880s, the tone shifted from one of fear to one of disdain. Instead of lamenting the decline of an honorable yeoman existence, sociologists wondered if farmers were even able to exist successfully in a modernizing world, or if the decline of rural populations was possibly a blessing for twentieth century America.

Intellectuals during this period were grappling with the seeming failures of initiatives like the Country Life Movement. While mechanization and scientific farming had gained traction in communities, larger efforts to stem rural degradation stagnated, and economically, farmers were in rapid decline. As a result, rural Americans moved from "paragon to problem."²⁸⁰ Rather than examining farm failures as a systemic failing

²⁷⁸ Carl Taylor, "The Rise of the Rural Problem," *The Journal of Social Forces* 2, no. 1 (1923): 29, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3005173>.

²⁷⁹ Taylor, "The Rise of the Rural Problem," 30.

²⁸⁰ David B. Danbom, *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

due to volatile markets, intellectual discourse blamed the people. Personal failings of the farmers due to superstition, a lack of education, and laziness were recorded in governmental documents as the reason for this abrupt downfall. This would have a direct impact on farm aid moving out of World War I and towards the Great Depression. The decision of Calvin Coolidge to veto the McNary-Haugen Act and the failure of other federal initiatives to materialize came from conservative economic policies, but may have, in part, been a response to the waning interest among intellectuals in helping rural farmers during the 1920s. Federal initiatives under Theodore Roosevelt did very little to halt the mass exodus of rural communities, and the failure of farmers to benefit from the Wheat Guarantee Act hinted that perhaps rural populations couldn't be saved.

Linn County reminiscences tell a more nuanced story. Economic turmoil was very much a part of the community of Shedd, especially during the last gasps of the wheat boom. This, in turn, caused continuing population declines as young men and women looked elsewhere for economic stability. Mechanization and consumer culture created a debtor class, and monocropping diminished subsistence farming, which had allowed previous generations to weather depressions. Sociologists saw this move away from self-sufficiency as a sign of progress, opening rural people to the wide array of consumer goods available. But, while this was touted as an efficiency, it served to increased dependencies that would lead to increased debts during economic downturns.²⁸¹

As rural economics floundered and national conversations centered on the backwards and vanishing rural experience, popular culture turned on the lauded yeoman farmer, even as Oregonians erected statues to him. In popular culture, rural men were

²⁸¹ Taylor, "The Rise of the Rural Problem," 32–33.

portrayed as yokels, and rural women were viewed as either ignorant or promiscuous, or both, as illustrated in "farmer's daughter" jokes and similar bawdy humor popular during this period. The "hillbilly" or "yokel" persona that was once geographically limited to the American South was now, through radio and newspapers in the 1920s, making its way into public consciousness. The National Barn Dance Party, a radio show that was especially popular in rural areas, used the caricature of the hillbilly to sell country music.²⁸² The Great Migration out of the rural American South served to spread these caricatures. By the 1930s, at the height of the Great Depression, the hillbilly had replaced the valiant yeoman farmer as the quintessential rural stereotype. After decades of nationwide panic over the fate of rural America, the men and women outside of cities were becoming the butt of jokes.²⁸³ Rural identity was being attacked from all sides, justifiably or not.

The population of Shedd was not superstitious or uneducated. They did not, as one article suggested, plant their wheat by the light of the full moon. Instead, Shedd residents were industrious, loyal to place, and aware of how to advocate for themselves and their communities. This period of turmoil and the national discourses on rural failings only strengthened Linn County's residents' dependence on the myth of the pioneer. In the 1930s, Leslie Haskin, a local author and historian, was tasked with interviewing the first families of Linn County settlement as part of a long-ranging WPA oral history project.

²⁸² Anthony Harkins, "The Significance of 'Hillbilly' in Early Country Music, 1924 - 1945," *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 2, no. 2 (1996): 315. ; Steve Craig, "'The More They Listen, the More They Buy' Radio and the Modernizing of Rural America, 1930-1939," *Agricultural History* 80, no. 1 (2006): 1-16.

²⁸³ For more information on the creation of the Hillbilly mythology, see Anthony Harkins, *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon* (Oxford University Press, 2005). and Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora*.

Interviewees, the sons and daughters of pioneers, had lived through the agricultural collapse of the 1920s and sat in the middle of the economic collapse of the Great Depression. In the rose-colored reminiscences captured by Hawkins, the pioneer generation stood unflappable. Some succeeded, some made do, but the overarching theme of dozens of oral histories was that the pioneer generation was full of resolve, honored their community, and worked to make Oregon into the Eden of the United States. The Great Depression, the age of the respondents, and the decades-long movement to commit the pioneer to sainthood colored these interviews. But perhaps more importantly, the tumultuous first decades of the twentieth century could easily lead individuals to long for a bucolic earlier era, or at least the sepia toned recollections of it. Periods of rapid change can often lead to backlash and increases in nostalgia.²⁸⁴ While technological advances linked Linn County to the far reaches of the world, it doomed Linn County to the whims of market volatility. Increased consumerism in the 1920s created a community of debtors, and mechanization favored largescale single-crop farmers, killing the yeoman farmer ethos that was the dream of all Donation Land Claims. It is no wonder that Linn County was more inclined to look backwards than forward.

Pioneer remembrance societies and reunion picnics sought to remind the population who truly created Oregon Territory. In 1925, a crowd came into Brownsville; newspapers said that it was the largest turnout the Pioneer Picnic had ever seen. Folks from throughout Linn County came to celebrate the pioneer generation and reminiscence. The mid-1920's saw the death of another generation of pioneers: this time it was the children of the original settlers "passing on to the great majority," to borrow a phrase

²⁸⁴ Walker, *All We Knew Was to Farm*, 7.

from their obituaries. The *Albany Democrat* wrote that this would give "tribute to the pioneers of this section of the state who crossed the plains to Oregon and [built] the [foundation] of the present civilization."²⁸⁵ As many as six thousand people filled the park in Brownsville for the celebration, where the Shedd Band performed. Reports of the event called it a homecoming for families who had moved from the farms of Linn County.²⁸⁶ More families would be forced to move on in the coming decades, as farmers were dealt another catastrophic blow.

Hoping for a New Deal: Farmers and FDR

Seismic shifts in agricultural work and farming in the 1920s created a rural working class that was wholly different from class structures that developed in more urban areas. Rural class, especially in the rural south, was a mix of cultural and economic factors before the industrialization of agriculture. As agriculture became more commercial and institutional, class fluidity disappeared, and economic disparities more rigidly dictated social strata.²⁸⁷

"Ever more dependent on impersonal institutions and national and international markets, entangled in a web of dependent relationships, and tied to an unstable industrial economy, farmers desired new ordering systems to expand their control of the farm economy; but the clash of agrarian, interest-group, and modernizing values and the conflicting ideals of independent yeomanry, anti statism, and national efficiency made agriculture's search for order particularly difficult."²⁸⁸

²⁸⁵ "Pioneer Picnic Ready to Open," *Albany Democrat*, June 18, 1925.

²⁸⁶ "Record Crowd Takes Part in Annual Pioneer Picnic," *Albany Democrat*, June 25, 1925.

²⁸⁷ Walker, *All We Knew Was to Farm*.

²⁸⁸ Hamilton, *From New Day to New Deal*, 5.

In Oregon, this "search for order" would pit farmers, especially small-scale farmers, against mill owners and other established industries that were once viewed as rural partners. In Oregon, Populist animosities toward rail lines and freight pricing hadn't extended to small scale milling at the turn of the century. Community mills were able to hold firm to the notion that they were community partners prior to World War I. But Ott's short-lived successes in 1918 created long-lasting animosities within the community, especially as rural farmers sank again into economic uncertainty. While railroad interests were looked at with skepticism a generation before, now millers were being attacked as anti-farmer. New federal initiatives meant to provide much needed aid only exacerbated this animosity.

Nationally, nearly a decade of economic despair for American farmers had forced the hand of newly sworn-in Herbert Hoover to take a more active role in stabilizing crop prices, even though these policies proved ineffective. Hoover, a hero of food relief in Belgium, spent his childhood in the Willamette Valley. In fact, a young "Bert" Hoover, working for his uncle, signed as a witness to a land deed administered to Martin Thompson in 1894. After his inauguration, the nation watched Hoover with interest, hoping that farm policies would usher in what Hoover called a "New Day" for the American farmer. By the late 1920s, farmers were left with a surplus of crops caused both by the intensive farming during World War I and new industrialized methods of farming that were widely encouraged by scientific farming advocates in previous decades. Surpluses rapidly depressed prices. By the 1930s, the dire situation on American farms led farm advocates to lobby for quick relief, fearing a "revolution in the countryside."²⁸⁹

²⁸⁹ Theodore Saloutos, *The American Farmer and the New Deal*, (Iowa State Pr, 1982), 43.

Nationally, the fall of agriculture was precipitous. Farm incomes fell by half between 1929 and 1932, land values dropped by half, and household incomes shrank by two thirds.²⁹⁰ Issues facing farmers varied in specifics based on region—sharecropping in the American South and soil erosion in the Great Plains created unique circumstances for farmers—but the catastrophic drop in pricing for major crops was a universal issue.²⁹¹ These downturns were certainly felt in Linn County, even if newspapers during this period put on a brave face. A 1931 notice encouraged stores to continue advertising, "Is it really an economic condition or is it just fear and lack of confidence... Business in most Linn County stores is about as usual."²⁹² Another article noted in 1932 that "the depression is petering out, to use an old-fashioned phrase. It will go like it came, as a thief in the night."²⁹³

Hoover's administration put their faith in cooperatives, which would set prices and manage surpluses to avoid flooding markets. Through cooperatives, farmers would be able to effectively participate in twentieth century economic systems while also retaining control over their own industries. The Agricultural Marketing Act, signed by Hoover in 1929, called for the formation of the Farm Relief Board that would assist in the creation of cooperatives, but this initiative lacked the teeth to encourage compliance.²⁹⁴

²⁹⁰ Paul Conkin, *A Revolution Down on the Farm: The Transformation of American Agriculture since 1929*, 1st edition (University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 61.

²⁹¹ For information on regional issues facing rural farmers, see Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora*. Worster, *Dust Bowl*.

²⁹² "What is this Depression Anyway?" *Albany Democrat-Herald*, August 15, 1931.

²⁹³ "Is the Depression Petering Out?" *The Lebanon Express*, September 2, 1932.

²⁹⁴ Saloutos, *The American Farmer and the New Deal*, 30.; Hamilton, *From New Day to New Deal*, 6.

Overall, farmers in Linn County were hesitant to participate in any attempts at cooperative pricing administered by the farm relief board. One article, published in 1930, urged farmers to reconsider,

Agriculture is not in a bad way in Linn County, relatively speaking. There are farmers who are making money and offering no complaints. There are others who assert that they are not making money but who oppose all attempts made to help them.

The article pushed farmers to reconsider their stance, because "organization is the solution to the ills of agriculture."²⁹⁵ The Depression was in full force by the time Hoover was running for a second term, with economic recovery at the epicenter of the campaign. While the federal government could avoid massive farm programs under Coolidge, Hoover did not have that luxury. The failure of cooperatives in 1929 left both Hoover and Franklin Roosevelt to offer new solutions to the "farmer problem." FDR, like Theodore Roosevelt, had a soft spot for a version of rural life, described as a "predilection for an arcadian 'return to rural living' as a panacea for a condition of national depression."²⁹⁶ While the nineteenth century yeoman farmer mythos appealed to FDR, it would be largescale commercial farmers who would benefit most from New Deal programs.²⁹⁷

Franklin Roosevelt was briefed on numerous contradictory and convoluted schemes to stabilize prices and assist farmers. One advisor, after receiving information on an equalization fee proposal, admitted to Roosevelt that he was unfamiliar with the plan, loosely based on the failed McNary-Haugen Bill. He wrote to Roosevelt, "if you think of

²⁹⁵ "Agriculture is Not in a Bad Way," *Albany Democrat-Herald*, February 13, 1930.

²⁹⁶ Gertrude Almy Slichter, "Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Farm Problem, 1929-1932," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 43, no. 2 (1956): 242, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1902685>.

²⁹⁷ Saloutos, *The American Farmer and the New Deal*, xv.

it you might explain to me in words of one syllable what it is all about. At the moment it gives me a headache." A voluntary domestic allotment plan drew the most attention and support in the fall of 1932 and would be incorporated into the New Deal early in the Roosevelt administration.²⁹⁸ Linn County farmers, like Roosevelt's aids, were flummoxed by these ever-changing schemes for aid. In December of 1932, a cartoon was published in the *Albany Democrat Herald* to help farmers get on board with allotments. Essentially, farmers who agreed to limit wheat production to that amount needed domestically would receive an "adjustment fee" of 39 cents per bushel on top of the market price for wheat. In the cartoon, a happy farmer declares, "Less wheat more money." But where was this adjustment fee coming from? Special taxes would be levied on producers, like millers, and then distributed by the federal government. This tax would be 42 cents a bushel, with 3 cents used to cover administration of the program. In the cartoon, the miller reaches sadly into his pocket when Uncle Sam presents him with a bill.²⁹⁹ If there was a point where the miller and the farmer were on the same side in farm relief, New Deal initiatives made the distinction between the grower and the manufacturer extremely clear. One would be taxed to line the other's pockets.

FDR's election kicked off a flurry of new legislation for farmers. The Domestic Allotment Plan was administered by Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA). In addition to encouraging less production, the federal government would have the ability to rent farmlands to remove them from production. Legislation passed in May of 1933 also included the ability to refinance farm debts, which would have been of particular interest

²⁹⁸ Slichter, "Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Farm Problem, 1929-1932."

²⁹⁹ "Here's ABC of New 'Allotment Plan' For Farm Aid," *Albany Democrat-Herald*, Dec 27, 1932.

to farmers in Linn County who had moved on from wheat.³⁰⁰ In addition, loans for farming equipment, seed, and other essentials were granted to farmers under this federal aid package. Unlike earlier plans that aimed to decrease surplus by utilizing foreign markets, Roosevelt's initiatives handled the surplus at the source, eliminating excess production.³⁰¹ Guaranteeing farmers an adjustment fee increased rural support for the program, though concern over potential price increases in consumer goods made some wary. While proponents of the bill assured consumers that the price of flour would only increase slightly, advertisements in the coming year warned shoppers to buy flour while they could, before the prices leaped up in response to the tax. One advertisement that appeared two weeks after FDR's inauguration said "you can look for higher food prices as the president's farm relief measures get under way. Lay in a supply today at these Low Rock Bottom Prices."³⁰²

The *Oregon Tax Payer*, a short-lived Albany newspaper, enthusiastically listed programs from Roosevelt's first 100 days, admitting that he may have been voted into office due to his "smiling cheerfulness" and the desperation of the voters, but recent legislation proved promising for the future.³⁰³ The Oregon Extension Service announced that they would be disseminating information on available relief to local farmers, as an effort to insure that those in need of aid would be directed to it quickly and with minimal red tape. Linn County wheat farmers agreed to participate in the federal allotment by July

³⁰⁰ "Farm Relief is Made Federal Law," *Albany Democrat-Herald*, May 12, 1933.

³⁰¹ "3 Plans Combined in Farm Relief Program," *Albany Democrat-Herald*, March 17, 1933.

³⁰² "Advertisement" *The Lebanon Express*, March 23, 1933.

³⁰³ "Special Session of Seventy-Third Congress Sets Record for Action," *Oregon Tax Payer*, May 1, 1933.

of 1933, and Thompsons Mills, as a producer, was required to pay the associated tax on wheat.³⁰⁴ In 1934, 1,700 farms reported wheat, totaling approximately 14,000 acres, one-quarter of Linn County farms.³⁰⁵ The *Lebanon Express* voiced sadness that farm relief hadn't gone far enough for local farmers. While there were programs for the wheat, cotton, hog, and cattle farmers, farmers equally hit by sagging markets in smaller industries were without allotment plans.

We have often wondered just who a congressman thinks of when he speaks of 'the farmer'. The romantic ideal of "the" farmer may be center around the prairies of Nebraska, or Kansas, or it may take shape about the cotton growers of Georgia, or the corn belt of Illinois.³⁰⁶

Oregon farmers, the article continued, were left to fend for themselves.

Despite feelings to the contrary, FDR's policies did impact all farm families, even those outside the wheat industry. Linn County's Farm Debt Adjustment Committee was established in January of 1934.³⁰⁷ Farmers who overextended themselves during the boom cycle of the 1920s were offered options meant to save farms. Unlike the allotment plan, this program was open to all farmers. Still one fourth of farmers during the Great Depression nationwide declared bankruptcy, though the number would have doubled without aid offered during the Roosevelt administration.³⁰⁸ Many of the failed farmers were small scale tenant farmers or sharecroppers, who, especially in the American South,

³⁰⁴ "Apportionment of Aid Chief Factor in Farm Relief Plan," *Albany Democrat-Herald*, Jul 3, 1933.

³⁰⁵ Farm Products and Related Statistics, Bureau of Agricultural Economics, United States Department of Agriculture.

³⁰⁶ "Farm Relief a Difficult Problem," *The Lebanon Express*, April 27, 1933.

³⁰⁷ "Linn Farm Debt Board Elects," *Albany Democrat-Herald*, January 25, 1934.

³⁰⁸ Conkin, *A Revolution Down on the Farm*, 51.

were unlikely to have federal access to aid. Programs failed these farmers, specifically in the American South, because "programs were built around commodities instead of people." Interest was in stabilizing the economic situation of rural farmers, not necessarily keeping farmers on the land.³⁰⁹

A 1936 report on the economic conditions of rural farmers in Oregon highlighted the economic disparity between fulltime farmers, those who rely solely on their land, and part-time farmers, or subsistence farmers, who also had off-farm labor to contribute to the family economy. On average, fulltime farmers saw an income of \$1,200 versus parttime farmers at \$2,142. Part time farming became an ideal scenario for many federal officials seeking to solve the over-farming of rural communities. Some officials went farther still, advocating for the resettlement of urban individuals to spaces outside of cities where they could have small plots of land to farm enough to feed their families.³¹⁰ After decades of advocacy for larger and more professionalized farms, federal officials now advocated for something more similar to the subsistence agriculture that dominated the Willamette Valley prior to the arrival of the train.

In Linn County and elsewhere in the United States, "part time farming" had been a key aspect of life since early settlement; farmers were largely unable to support themselves fully off of their land and would work in the off-season to supplement their income. But, as farm prices dwindled and rural wages remained stagnant, part time farming lost its appeal and populations dwindled. In November of 1934, reports

³⁰⁹ Jess Gilbert, *Planning Democracy: Agrarian Intellectuals and the Intended New Deal* (Yale University Press, 2015).

³¹⁰ "Survey Compares Part-Time Farms, and Relief Farms," *Albany Democrat-Herald*, July 21, 1936; Saloutos, *The American Farmer and the New Deal*, 156.

suggested that farm hands in the majority of Oregon communities saw an increase in wages, though "it may be hard to convince a lot of rural workers."³¹¹ In 1935, farmers complained that they did not have enough hired hands for farm work. In response, the Linn County Relief Agency denied men without dependents aid, in hopes that cutting benefits would encourage them to take farm labor positions within the community.³¹² In 1939, *Greater Oregon* wrote,

"Here in Linn County, many families have been taken off of relief and starvation by moving them to small farms or by securing work for husband and wife on a large farm... in most cases the wages they receive are small, but the problem of a place to live, the food, water, wood and light supply has been taken care of."

Families who were once promised that they would live off the land as a Jeffersonian ideal were now obliged, men and women both, to labor on the fields of their neighbors.

In 1935, opposition to farm subsidies mounted from the American public, who saw farmers receiving a disproportionate amount of aid.³¹³ Political winds had changed, and New Dealers were under scrutiny. Oregon senator Charles McNary, a vice-presidential nominee said, "The farmers - all the people - are entitled to a better deal than the New Deal." He accused Roosevelt of using farm families as "guinea pigs for experiments toward the perfect regimented state." He argued that the New Deal amounted to socialism, and federal programs appeased farmers with money to consent to this federal overreach. For Linn County farmers, the New Deal offered a degree of solace, but the small family farm could not be saved.

³¹¹ "Gehlhar Backs Oregon Farmers," *Greater Oregon*, February 9, 1934.

³¹² "Relief Work is Restricted," *Albany Democrat-Herald*, March 19, 1935.

³¹³ Saloutos, *The American Farmer and the New Deal*, 124.

Soreheads and the Great Depression

Federal involvement in farming after a decade of depressed prices and market upheavals created social and economic divides between farmers and rural industry. These divides only widened as farmers continued to suffer through the 1930s and industries, like the mill, were more able to bounce back. While Ott lost a great deal in the 1920s, the business rebounded enough to keep the Thompson family comfortable, if not wealthy, during the Great Depression. Ott gave up on the dream of an early retirement, but the Thompsons were in a better financial position than the majority of their neighbors. Don Margason, a neighbor and descendent by marriage of Americus Savage, remembers going to school with Eunice Thompson, Ott's daughter. The class size was small, but Eunice stood out even in the most crowded room. Even in her eighties, when she was interviewed about her father, she could flash a sly smile that would demand the whole room's attention. Margason thought about asking her for a date, but the Depression hadn't been kind to his family, and he knew that he couldn't overcome that economic difference, certainly not in high school. He remembered looking at Ott's new Buick parked in the driveway and knowing intrinsically that he was poor, and she wasn't.³¹⁴ His family had an old crank Model T and any trip to Albany cost 38 cents in gasoline, so trips outside of Shedd were only out of necessity.³¹⁵ When Don told Eunice that he wanted to ask her out years later, she said that he ought to have asked, oblivious to the class structure that had

³¹⁴ "Shedd," *Albany Democrat-Herald*, May 23, 1935.

³¹⁵ Margason, Donald, interview by Sarah Scott, July 23, 2004. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

formed in Boston, separating the Margasons from the Thompsons.³¹⁶ Information on the mill's financial situation during this period is sparse. A 1939 ledger book lists gross sales at \$226,922.61, a respectable sum and a large increase from 1920. But net profits in that year were only \$7,462.85, less than half of the net profits during the wheat boom.

Ott's expenditures during this period were clearly visible to neighbors. Ott and Laura added on to the Queen Ann home to have space not only for their now six children, but also for a steady stream of boarders, men and women who worked in the house or at the mill and stayed with the family.³¹⁷ Ott also took on multiple expansion projects at the mill, expanding the mill race in 1934, building an annex and a complete third floor to the main building, adding a concrete foundation to the basement, and building a new office. In 1934, Ott was employing as many as twenty-five men and operated the mill sixteen hours a day.³¹⁸ This burst of construction during the 1930s could have been a way to hide money owed to Sophia's estate as that battle was still raging. Or perhaps Ott was taking advantage of the labor surplus during the Depression years. As the mill grew at all sides, the neighborhood surely noticed. At the time of the 1930 census, out of all of the families that had homes in what was once Boston, Ott Thompson was one of only three families that owned a radio, a small signifier of growing economic inequity. For the majority of

³¹⁶ Margason, Donald, interview by Sarah Scott, July 23, 2004. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

³¹⁷ Townsend, Sylva and Ronald, interview by Martin Thompson, September 17, 1984. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

³¹⁸ "Real Farm Relief," *Greater Oregon*, July 20, 1934; "Thompson's Flouring Mills," *Greater Oregon*, October 5, 1934.

farms in Shedd, electricity was still five years away, and, when it arrived, farmers would be expected to help dig ditches to defray the costs.³¹⁹

Eunice Thompson didn't feel the Depression like Don Margason. When she sat for an interview, Eunice believed that the Depression didn't hit farmers like it did in the cities. She remembered always having plenty to eat. In actuality, Eunice was shielded from the worst of the downturns by Ott Thompson and the nature of his business.³²⁰ People and animals had to eat, and so the mill kept producing flour and feed.³²¹ The family, despite the downturn in wheat markets, were able to take a vacation to Yellowstone in 1931, regularly visit local hot springs and tour California.³²² While the Thompsons thrived, other residents remember the absolute poverty that hit Shedd. The community maintained its small population and handful of shops, but the farming community was showing signs of the Depression. The year 1930 was the first in which more farms in Oregon were mortgaged than owned outright. The number of farms in Linn County during this period shrank from 3,308 to 3,074 in the five years between 1925 and 1930. Farm values also decreased, from \$10,000 in 1930 down to \$6,000 by 1935. The rural farm population of Linn County in 1930 was over 12,000, with the rural non-farm

³¹⁹ Pugh, Helen and Paul, interview by Valsala Manaloor, January 12, 2017. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

³²⁰ Thompson, Eunice and Robert Arthur, Interview by Sarah Scott, July, 27 2004. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

³²¹ Thompson, Martin. Interviewed by Doug Crispin, August 24, 2004. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

³²² Pugh, George, interview by Valsala Manaloor, October 2, 2005. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.; "Shedd," *Albany Democrat-Herald*, July 10, 1931

population a bit more than 7,000 individuals.³²³ The population of Linn County a decade before was roughly the same; rather than following the growth rates of the 1920s, Linn County was stagnant, as some moved on and others moved in.³²⁴

Don Margason remembered farmers coming to the mill to work off debts. Ott allowed men to shop at the mill, which now had a selection of groceries, on credit, but they were not allowed to carry debts for long. He also made sure that anyone working for him ate at the house, a privilege he charged for, essentially making the men work off their bill plus a little interest.³²⁵ Marcia Margason, Donald's mother, formed a band with her children during the Depression, touring local communities and playing in churches and halls to make money that supplemented what they could grow themselves. Those interviewed who were children during the Depression remembered their mothers, as a cost saving measure, re-using flour sack fabric from Thompsons Mills to sew slips and play clothes. One resident remembers dances where boys would spin the girls to see if they had on "Valley Rose" or "Red Delicious" underwear, two well-known Thompson brands.³²⁶ The gap between residents of Boston and the mill family widened during the prosperity of the 1910s and continued to grow even after wheat markets collapsed. The

³²³ US Census Bureau, "1930 Census: Volume 3. Population, Reports by States," Census.Gov, accessed February 19, 2024, <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1932/dec/1930a-vol-03-population.html>.

³²⁴ Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920 Bulletin, Population: Oregon. Bureau of the Census, Department of Commerce, Washington DC.

³²⁵ Margason, Donald, interview by Sarah Scott, July 23, 2004. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

³²⁶ Thompson-Barron, Patricia and Annabelle Foster, interview by Sarah Scott, August 3, 2004. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

children of Ott Thompson remembered radios, electric lights, and brand-new Buicks while other community members were put to work or made to go hungry.

This isn't to suggest that the Thompson family was ostracized due to this growing class divide. Ott and Laura were well respected and regular church attendees. But there was a power imbalance that crept into Shedd consciousness, an imbalance highlighted in the taxation of processors to aid farmers. The most visible friction was nearly a century in the making and centered on the Calapooia River. Water rights for a portion of the Calapooia River were originally purchased by Richard Finley and guaranteed by the Territorial Government.³²⁷ Water rights were always a contentious issue, but the lowlands along the Calapooia brought specific challenges. Both too much and too little water caused damage to adjacent farms. Eunice Thompson remembered that the farmers were always mad at her father about water and that would be a regular topic of Shedd gossip.³²⁸ Ron Townsend, a worker and son-in-law of Ott's, remembered having to dig out old water right records to show to the courts on more than one occasion. Ott's tight-fisted control of the Calapooia might have been obnoxious, but it was perfectly legal.

A diverted water system off the Calapooia known as the Sodom ditch was created around the time of early settlement, when farmers wanted to minimize flooded fields. These farmers plowed the ditch to divert water away from crops, rather than as an irrigation ditch. When the waterway was dammed, Sodom ditch morphed into a means for Boston mill owners to control the flow of water into the mill race. The ditch took

³²⁷ Water Rights Deed, November 9, 1858 Box 99 Folder 29. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR.

³²⁸ Arthur, Eunice and Robert Arthur, Interview by Sarah Scott, July, 27 2004. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File

regular maintenance to re-dig and was deepened and widened over time, changing the nature of the land, and impacting the surrounding farms. The area around Sodom ditch could be flooded, dried out, or, when the dam was in place, the Calapooia River could overflow the banks and flood nearby fields. Ron Townsend remembered that it would be around the Fourth of July that workers would fill sacks with gravel and put them along Sodom ditch to form a wall and move any water from the ditch into Calapooia and then into the millrace.³²⁹ Damming the ditch allowed the mill to operate but prevented reliable irrigation for neighboring farms. The Calapooia had to have the amount of water as guaranteed in the original water rights secured by Richard Finley, which meant that no farmers could use the river system below that point as a means of cheap irrigation.³³⁰

Flooding fields along the Calapooia was not a new problem. Americus Savage gave up his land to Finley for the original mill because it was unsuitable for farming. But the mill's operation during the prosperous days of the 1910s, the economic downturn of agricultural markets, and growing inequities even among landowners exacerbated longstanding water issues in Boston. In addition, the mill, once a neighborhood necessity, was no longer the asset it once was among residents. Transporting grain to mills in Albany and Corvallis had grown easier and, for small-scale processing, farmers could use gas powered motors to build their own mills by the 1920s.³³¹ These changing conditions highlighted the inconveniences of the Thompson water rights. Once the mill

³²⁹ Townsend, Sylva and Ronald, interview by Martin Thompson, September 17, 1984. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

³³⁰ Townsend, Sylva and Ronald, interview by Martin Thompson, September 17, 1984. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

³³¹ McPherson, Hector, interview by Sarah Scott, July 20, 2004. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

moved from a community asset to a community liability, agitation over water became more vocal, especially since town gossip, stoked by his brothers' complaints, suggested that Ott Thompson was sitting on a fortune

In 1934, farmers, or at least one disgruntled farmer, fought back against Ott's water empire. A notice to Ott Thompson in 1930 stated that Oregon law required dams to have "sufficient and unobstructed fishways." While Ott Thompson endeavored to comply, he claimed that his dams were regularly tampered with. On August 9, 1934, a state inspector fined the mill for closing their fishways and speculated that this closure was designed to increase the water running through the mill race. The closure resulted in dead fish below the dam.³³² The Thompsons, Ott and his son Myrle, who was now of age and able to assist in mill business, contested the claim and believed that this was the result of sabotage. They contracted the William J. Burns International Detective Agency to investigate. According to Ott, people had been trespassing on the property and "reporting petty matters" to game wardens. The resulting negative publicity was going to hurt business, and so Ott wanted to identify the "soreheads" that were causing the issues. This letter kicked off one of the more bizarre interludes in mill history, an alcohol-fueled investigation of Shedd residents. In addition to nabbing the saboteur, the report pulled back the curtain on life in Shedd during the height of the Great Depression.

The investigation began on September 4, 1934, and would cost the Thompsons ten dollars a day plus expenses. The detective, listed as S-20 in reports, but otherwise unnamed, first met with the Thompsons in Shedd. In 1922, the Pacific Highway, the

³³² Report of the William J. Burns Detective Agency, August 30, 1934. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR.; "State Orders Fishway Open at Shedd Mill," *Albany Democrat-Herald*, August 9, 1934.

main road running from Portland through Shedd and south to Eugene was paved, but roads leading out to farms were largely unimproved. A 1935 booster article for Shedd highlighted the Shedd community club, the school facilities, a large Methodist church, a modern grocery and general store, and well-appointed bank.³³³ But the community hadn't grown much beyond its 1871 beginnings. In fact, booster articles in 1878 listed the same amenities; the only real addition to the town was a pool hall, first mentioned in 1929 when it was under construction.³³⁴ The pool hall was located on the main street of Shedd, next to the barbershop and alongside the Methodist church and a general store. The Shedd precinct, including the town of Shedd and what was once Boston, had a population of 414 people, split almost exactly down the middle between men and women, with 319 people working in agriculture. In 1934, the population of the community of Shedd was around 125. The majority of people in the precinct, then, were outside town, scattered on large land holdings, either as boarders or owners.

To find the individual responsible for tampering with the dam, it was determined that the detective needed to gain the confidence of Mr. Freerksen, who knew everyone in town. Freerksen was a lawyer, a real estate agent, and a drunk. His mother was also a dear friend of Sophia Thompson; they spoke German together when the Thompsons first moved to Boston years ago. The Thompsons believed that Mr. Freerksen might be behind the dam tampering, or, if he wasn't, he knew who was. The next day the detective went to the barbershop and established his cover: he was a man looking to buy a farm on behalf

³³³ "Know Your Linn County", *Greater Oregon* September 27, 1935.

³³⁴ "Shedd" Albany Democrat-Herald, March 19, 1929. The pool hall burned down a decade later, Mr. Quintell was no longer the owner.

of his father-in-law. The barber told him about a farm for sale and then mentioned that a local farmer, Quintell, was pumping water from a local creek to use in irrigation. The detective met with Quintell later that day and immediately pegged him as a suspicious character.

Mr. Quintell appears only briefly in newspaper records. He is listed as a largescale onion and seed farmer and advertised his wares in local newspapers. Quintell employed as many as twenty-five individuals on his farm and the farm itself was one hundred and ten acres, smaller than the average farm size during this period.³³⁵ Beyond these advertisements, no mention of Quintell's life or arrival in Shedd survive. He does not appear on any census records, suggesting that his time in Linn County was short-lived. Quintell confided to the detective that water was hard to come by in the summer months. Because both Quintell and Freerksen were drinking men, the detective decided that getting the men properly drunk would be the best way get more information.

Luckily for the detective, when he called on Freerksen the next morning, Freerksen was already a few drinks in. Freerksen let slip that Quintell had multiple pumps in the Calapooia for irrigation and that Ott Thompson had somehow "squirmed around" so that he didn't pay the usual fees for using water for the mill. The detective, not wanting to zero in on Quintell exclusively, travelled to the Troutman residence, another local farmer, inquiring about the availability of water, and, as Mr. Troutman wasn't home, he spoke with Mrs. Troutman. She confirmed that the mill has a "queer arrangement" regarding the water, that they could have as much as they need and the farmers are left with the remainder. The next day Freerksen was sober and not as chatty

³³⁵ "Harvest Starts on 60 Acres Onions," *Greater Oregon*, September 1, 1933.

as the day prior, but Quintell started talking. He said that it was the dams put up along Sodom Ditch that were the problem. They were closed during the winter, diverting more water to the mill and flooding all of the farms up the river. But Quintell wasn't worried, the neighbors were going to do something and they "had Thompson by the leg."

The detective then stopped at farms along the river, including Mr. Pollard's place. Pollard gave an opposite account to the water issues, saying that there wasn't an issue until a few years ago and that he blames Quintell, "a bullheaded foreigner" for trying to stir up trouble among the neighbors. Another farmer, Mr. Roberts, said that he didn't know much about the water issue, but that "Thompson was not very well liked by some of the people up the river." Believing he had exhausted his sources, the detective closed the investigation. His final report fingered Quintell and his employee and bartender Fritz as the ones behind the dam tampering, possibly with the help of the perpetually inebriated Freerksen. During an interview years later, Ronald Townsend mentioned a farmer that "moved up from California," likely Quintell, who was "real trouble to deal with" when it came to irrigation and water rights on the Calapooia.³³⁶

This private investigation illustrates the changing relationship of the mill with the farmers who surrounded it. When Finley started the milling business nearly a century before, small scale subsistence farmers were clamoring for the ability to gain access to quick and cheap milled wheat. Finley was lauded as a pioneer hero, and the water rights

³³⁶ Townsend, Sylva and Ronald, interview by Martin Thompson, September 17, 1984. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File; Shortly after the visit from the detective, Freerksen moved to Albany, perhaps to escape what had become quite a reputation. In April of 1934 he was fined \$15 for public drunkenness after he walked into a police station asking officers for help in finding his hat, which was on his head at the time. There is no record of Ott perusing the issue with Quintell, and Quintell does not appear in the 1940 census.

granted to him were viewed as a community good. Old pioneers remembered the Finley days in Crawfordsville and the time before the mills, when wheat was coarsely ground by hand. But by 1934, the world was becoming electric, and the miller and farmer were just as likely to be at odds as they were to be in alliance in Boston. Local farmers would still conduct business, buy groceries, and socialize with Ott Thompson, but the community-level need for a flour mill had diminished. And as that relationship was challenged, the allowances that were made to millers over water rights and wheat pricing started to seem outlandish. Quintell was perhaps the most overt opponent of the mill, but he certainly wasn't the only one among the farmers along Boston Mill Road to challenge Ott Thompson within their community. By 1930, Thompson had a reputation for stealing grain by leaving trap doors open or putting a foot on the scale, providing farmers with less grain than they were owed. By the 1940s, oral histories mention farmers weighing loads before they came to the mill because of Ott's reputation.

Ott's business dealings hurt community relationships, but also wheat and grain, the key input of Thompson's Mills, had ebbed in local importance. Quintell grew onions. Other farmers raised cows. But the largest agriculture shift during this period was the introduction of rye grass as a cash crop. Rye grass was first mentioned as a replacement for the dwindling interest in wheat in the 1920s. Easy to grow in wet weather and poor soil, rye grass sold for 4 cents per pound, and the market for it was solid.³³⁷ In 1930, a report stated that rye grass could bring \$25 an acre profit.³³⁸ A 1931 article noted that

³³⁷ "Ten Tons of Ryegrass Seed in One Shipment," *The Lebanon Express*, August 29, 1928.

³³⁸ "Rye Grass Brings \$25 an Acre Profit," *Greater Oregon*, August 1, 1930.

"any person who sells rye grass seed for anything less than 3 cents a pound is being played for a sucker."³³⁹ By 1933, newspapers reported that the area between Albany and Eugene grew the most rye grass in the United States.³⁴⁰ The price had grown to 5 cents per pound, and 500-800 pounds could be grown on an acre. As a comparison, in 1933, a bushel of wheat sunk to around 30 cents a bushel.³⁴¹ Wheat yields would vary drastically, but national averages suggest that raising rye grass over wheat in the 1930s would double or even quadruple profits for Linn County farmers. Ott Thompson, a savvy if unscrupulous businessman, saw these changes in the agricultural landscape and built a warehouse in Shedd to process and store rye grass, hoping to maintain a commercial foothold in Shedd, even if wheat didn't.³⁴² The rye grass trade would become paramount in the next decade.

Remembrances of the Great Depression in Shedd fall into two categories. The first, a glossy image of the self-reliant farmer, immune to the boom and bust cycle of markets. In this narrative, the community rallied together during a dark economic period to play baseball and have a swim at the mill race on hot summer evenings. Recollections of the mill during this period highlight these bucolic pastimes as an example of the "simple life" of Boston, one that held a distinct link to the pioneer era of self-reliance and

³³⁹ "Rye Grass Seed," *Albany Democrat-Herald*, August 3, 1931.

³⁴⁰ "Rye Grass Prospects Good," *Greater Oregon*, August 25, 1933.

³⁴¹ "The Wheat Situation" Bureau of Agricultural Economics, United States Department of Agriculture. November, 1941.

³⁴² Thompsons Mills States Heritage Site Cultural Landscape Plans, February 2010. Oregon Parks and Recreation Department, <https://www.oregon.gov/oprd/PRP/Documents/PLA-Thompsons-Cult-Land-Plan.pdf>

a strong community ethos. This version of Boston appeared regularly in reminiscences and newspapers in the 1920s and 1930s.³⁴³ Shedd residents who were children during the Great Depression were most likely to recall these stories. They could remember the diving board Ott installed over the mill race and running through the fields during the summer or playing in the warehouse during the colder months.

A darker image of rural Oregon came through interviews with the older generation and firsthand accounts of the period. The Margason family watched with a mix of awe and frustration as the Thompson family illuminated their electric lights. Mr. Quintell snuck onto mill property to sabotage the fish dam in the middle of the night, convinced that Ott Thompson was a threat to his business. Men, midday, were huddled in the town's pool hall, drunk and scheming to pull one over on old Ott Thompson, complaining about him constantly tipping the scales.³⁴⁴ In both versions of 1930s Linn County, the community was being buffeted by circumstances beyond their control. Land prices were falling, agricultural markets were changing, and property once owned outright now belonged to the bank. Whether memories of the period were polished to a nostalgic sheen or retold with their tarnish intact depended largely on how the story ended for each Shedd resident. Quintell and Margason both highlight the growing divide between the haves and have nots, a distinction that began in the 1920s and grew in subsequent decades. Thompsons Mills was no longer a community enterprise, and Ott]was an employer, a capitalist, and a cheat, certainly not a lauded pioneer.

³⁴³ Arthur, Eunice and Robert Arthur, Interview by Sarah Scott, July, 27 2004. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

³⁴⁴ Private Investigators Report, Box 79 Folder 106. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR

Changing Labor for Farm Women

As class distinctions formalized in the 1930s, gendered labor, once fluid in rural industry with women assisting in stereotypical male work in fields, was challenged. The labor of women became a signifier of poverty in rural spaces, and middle-class women were encouraged to take on a more urban ideal of separate spheres. Handwringing on rural women was pervasive at the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. Questions over morality, vice, and the urban exodus were all part of the discourse. Country Life advocates urged women to stay on the farm as home makers, encouraging the same scientific rigor in housekeeping that they demanded from farmers during the same period. Meanwhile, the same advocates viewed women like Ella Thompson with disgust, a sign that loose morality of urban centers had entered rural communities. The role of women as moral beacons. was imperative, farm advocates believed, to the success of rural America. But women at the turn of the century were also part of the farm economy, aiding their husbands in some aspects of farming, feeding and housing boarders, and selling farm goods.

By the 1930s, as more women entered the workforce, rural life advocates viewed farm labor of women with skepticism. Farm labor from women signified poverty. Advocates for the elevation of women urged less labor, especially labor on farms, to preserve the sphere of men. This discordant view of laboring women, that it was considered simultaneously necessary and a detriment to the natural order of the home, showcases the rigid gender and class distinction that developed by the 1930s. Consumerism, technology, and the commercialization of farming was supposed to

elevate middle class women from the drudgery of a previous era. While the work of most women in Shedd remained the same, rural advocates began to dictate which women were permitted to participate in work outside the home. Just as class became more rigidly defined in this period, the roles of women, at least in national dialogue, were being reinforced.

As the subsistence farming ideal of previous generations was downplayed in favor of the business or commercial farm, women lost their footing. Middle class women were no longer integral to the labor of rural communities, and working women were viewed with skepticism. Sociologists during this period claimed, without adequate data, that "farm women have greatly increased... suicide and insanity rates because of the loneliness of farm life."³⁴⁵ Mrs. Quintell, the beleaguered wife of the man assumed responsible for the destruction of the mill dams, met with the private detective at her home while her husband recovered from a night of drinking. After the liquor was passed, Mrs. Quintell confessed that she'd rather be in California. Shedd was a lonely place for her, and she didn't have any friends in town. While Shedd booster publications touted the abundant social clubs and activities, Mrs. Quintell, for one reason or another, did not have access to Shedd's social scene. The prosperity of her husband's farm and his part ownership of the pool hall likely kept him away from home. Social norms would have kept Mrs. Quintell from participating in farm labor. There is no suggestion that the couple had children, and so there was nothing left for Mrs. Quintell to do.

³⁴⁵ Taylor, "The Rise of the Rural Problem," 31.

Following World War I, reformers "wanted women to become full-time modern homemakers and companions who created a domestic haven for farm businessmen."³⁴⁶ Women, the federal government believed, were responsible for the elevation of their households, which would in turn elevate the business of farming. Farmers, farm advocates decided, would need to pull their socks up and, through good business practices and markets, stabilize the market themselves.³⁴⁷ This meant reasserting gendered roles that had blurred at the beginning of the twentieth century, when women were more hands-on in farming families. Economically and socially isolated, women like Mrs. Quintell were told that they were an integral component of their family's successes while simultaneously having their labor marginalized. In addition, rural life advocates, federal officials, and booster publications boasted that the lives of rural women were on the cusp of vast improvement. The drudgery of housework was being lifted through training and technology, and women could focus on self-improvement and family matters. If women became consumers of home technology, the ennui of those like Mrs. Quintell would be immediately eliminated. In reality, the importance of women's labor, especially family farm labor, was downplayed, but the work itself continued.

During this period, industrial capitalism butted up against family-based labor.³⁴⁸ Farm women were connected to farming through their husbands but they were also producers in their own right, contributing to productive farm labor either by working in

³⁴⁶ Jellison, *Entitled to Power*, 27.

³⁴⁷ For more information on reform movements related to rural women see Joan M. Jensen, ed., *With These Hands: Women Working on the Land*, First Edition (The Feminist Press at CUNY, 1993).

³⁴⁸ Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm*, 3.

the fields, feeding workers, or selling domestically produced goods.³⁴⁹ Unlike middle class urban families in which family income was earned outside the home, rural areas blurred the lines between the male provider role and a female dominated sphere of domesticity. During the 1920s and 1930s the role of women in farming households stayed largely the same, but this role was scrutinized in a new way by federal reformers and women's clubs. Pushes to professionalize the farm through mechanization and scientific management pushed women like Mrs. Quintell to the sidelines while also weakening the dependency that farmers had on their communities. Historian Mary Neth writes,

In order to change rural production patterns, the circles surrounding the farmer... had to be removed, leaving the farmer and the nuclear family isolated but prosperous, practicing modern agricultural production techniques and buying middle-class consumer goods. Agricultural institutions used gender hierarchy to promote class stratification and to weaken rural neighborhood ties.³⁵⁰

These weakened neighborhood ties were visible in Thompsons Mills history, as farmers became less reliant on the mill, using their own technology or transportation networks to remove the need for localized milling. Farmer complaints over water rights and price gouging highlight these frayed neighborhood networks by the 1930s. Mrs. Quintell's isolation from her community is another examples of these fraying ties.

As neighborhood ties were weakened, so too were the roles of women in the commercial side of farming through re-affirmed gender hierarchies. This hierarchy was a means of separating and, in do so, diminishing, the role of women within rural economies. Men were outward facing, tied to the business of farming, while women

³⁴⁹ Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm*, 1.

³⁵⁰ Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm*, 4.

were forced to accept the subordinate role of homemakers.³⁵¹ Challenges to masculinity through economic declines likely contributed to this push to subjugate women, and, in doing so, reassert male dominance over his household, even as his role as provider was challenged. But these initiatives to "elevate" women made their worlds that much smaller. This shift began with the commercialization of farming during the railroad era, but farming collapses and consolidations only sped up this process of isolation.

The solution to the ennui of women like Mrs. Quintell, reformers believed, was not unsexing themselves in the marketplace or the fields, but rather technology. A key component of New Deal programs was electrifying rural communities. Mail order catalogues, rail connections to urban areas, automobiles, and the radio all reinforced the notion of consumption as a rural necessity, removing self-sufficiency on the rural farm and making families more dependent on cash economies.³⁵² Consumer goods would supposedly eliminate some of the drudgery of housework while also providing opportunities for cultural growth. Women, as household managers, became dependent consumers.³⁵³ ³⁵⁴ The introduction of the radio would highlight, not actual differences between rural and urban, but the popular culture notions of what a rural farmer was, with one journalist writing, "All the difference in the world exists between him who walks the solid pavement and him who trudges through murky roads."³⁵⁵ But inventions meant to

³⁵¹ Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm*, 215.

³⁵² Jellison, *Entitled to Power*, 55.

³⁵³ Jellison, *Entitled to Power*, 42.

³⁵⁴ Randall Patnode, "'What These People Need Is Radio': New Technology, the Press, and Otherness in 1920s America," *Technology and Culture* 44, no. 2 (2003): 288.

³⁵⁵ Alfred N. Goldsmith and Austin C. Lescarbouras, *This Thing Called Broadcasting*, 258-1=259, as quoted in Patnode, "What These People Need Is Radio," 294.

connect farms and expand the horizons for farm wives like Mrs. Quintell were rarely used or out of reach to those in Linn County. The Pugh family remembered electricity reaching Shedd area farms around 1935, decades after a dynamo was installed at the mill to provide the Thompsons with power.³⁵⁶ Similar modern home conveniences were considered luxuries to be purchased through discretionary income, not necessities. And rural farmers during the 1930s were unlikely to have the discretionary income.³⁵⁷³⁵⁸

Modern consumer conveniences were one component of elevating the rural experience, providing training and scientific language to the work of homemaking was the second. Like extension services and agricultural trainings for men during this period, another New Deal initiative, women were encouraged through manuals, academic courses, and various organizations to treat the work they did with the same rigor and efficiencies that, it was believed, were necessary for modern farming.³⁵⁹ This was a continuation of Country Life programs, but leaned more heavily into idea of subservience and "women's work" platitudes. At the same time, organizations like the General Federation of Women's Clubs (GFWC) encouraged women to stay home, believing that industrial and office labor was a detriment to womanhood. Training young women in the

³⁵⁶ Pugh, Helen and Paul, interview by Valsala Manaloor, November 2, 2005. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

³⁵⁷ Jellison, *Entitled to Power*, 40.

³⁵⁸ Jellison, *Entitled to Power*, 35.

³⁵⁹ Sarah Stage and Virginia B. Vincenti, eds., *Rethinking Home Economics: Women and the History of a Profession* (Cornell University Press, 1997).

skills of home economics was therefore, "salvation through scientific investigation and cooperation."³⁶⁰

For rural women, this brand of middle-class uplift was at best misguided and at worst offensive.³⁶¹ The GFWC and other urban benevolent societies refused to acknowledge rural women's roles in production in rural economies. Rural relief agencies were adamant that the shared labor of farming families was a perversion, furthering isolating rural women from their urban counterparts. While participation in consumer markets and technology expanded the world of rural women in very real ways, agribusiness also restricted the role of women within their home and communities.³⁶² The labor of women was derided from all angles, whether it happened in the farm or the factory. Still, the number of women working in the United States grew. In 1930, approximately eighteen percent of women in the United States were employed outside of the home, doubling the number of working women counted in 1870.

Women were told not to work, but that was not a reality for most families in the 1930s. In Oregon specifically, employed women rose from 2.8 percent in 1870 to 21 percent in 1930. The majority of these women would find themselves in clerical, domestic, or teaching professions. A 1922 advertisement in the *Albany Evening Herald* advertised Nemo corsets, ideal for a working woman whose job "requires physical exertion."³⁶³ A 1933 advertisement told women to "keep well and hold your job" by using

³⁶⁰ Stage and Vincenti, *Rethinking Home Economics*, 84.

³⁶¹ Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm*, 134.

³⁶² Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm*, 18.

³⁶³ "Advertisement - Nemo Corsets," *Albany Evening Herald*, August 5, 1922.

Lydia E. Pinkman's tablets during menstruation.³⁶⁴ In terms of growth, office work for women increased over four hundred percent between 1910 and 1930.³⁶⁵ Fears over women taking on work outside the house, the labor needs of rural women on the farm, and increased needs for cash to participate in consumer economies placed women during this period in a precarious situation. Farm labor or labor outside the home, as an example, increased dramatically from the 1920s, a trend that would continue in subsequent decades.³⁶⁶ While reformers wanted women to focus their energies on modernizing the household, their own desires and the economic needs of their families were pushing them into labor positions. And, while government officials claimed that the World War I "succeeded in breaking down many imaginary barriers that had existed since time immemorial in the minds of people of all classes" this was not the case for rural farm women.³⁶⁷

National trends and reformist initiatives did not necessarily impact the farms in Boston, but these attacks on women's labor added to feelings of isolation. Women continued to work, both on and off the farm, especially women whose families were suffering economically. Linn County newspapers actually encouraged women to work alongside their husbands as farm laborers during the height of the Great Depression. A

³⁶⁴ Working Women: Keep Well and Hold Your Job," *Albany Democrat-Herald*, April 6, 1933.

³⁶⁵ 1930 Census: Volume 5. General Report on Occupations. United States Department of Commerce. Volume 5. United States Government Printing Office, 1933.
<https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1933/dec/1930a-vol-05-occupations.html>

³⁶⁶ Harms, Teresa and Jonathan Gershuny, "85 Years of US Rural Women's Time Use," *Centre for Time Use Research, University of Oxford*, May 2014.

³⁶⁷ The Occupational Progress of Women 1910-1930, United States Department of Labor. Bulletin of the Women's Bureau, Number 104.
https://fraser.stlouisfed.org/files/docs/publications/women/b0104_dolwb_1933.pdf

1933 article mentions that, on Quintell's farm, twenty-five men and women were employed. A 1936 article notes that "Mrs. Glen Williams and daughter, Doris, and Mrs. Vern Williams commenced Monday to help harvest a commercial crop of onions" on the Quintell farm.³⁶⁸ Also contrary to federal initiatives, the labor of women in Linn County was lauded in the 1930s as a means of lessening the burden of support for men, who, without the work of women, would be expected to care for their sisters and maiden aunts. One article argued that men wouldn't want the work given to women, and, by letting women earn their own money, they are more able to buy goods and support male-dominated industries.

Likewise, the labor of women, both paid and unpaid, was integral to the work of Thompsons Mills. In addition to the general upkeep of a property that included a home, livestock, orchards, and a garden, the mill also acted as a boarding house for longtime mill workers and a cafeteria for workers who were willing to pay. Supper was cooked, plated, and cleaned by Ott Thompson's wife, Ott's daughters, and any paid staff that worked alongside them. Laura Halverson joined the family in 1908. She immediately moved into the Thompson household with the family patriarch, Martin Thompson, his dour wife Sophia, Ott's mournful brother Leo, and Henry Schultz, a mill worker. Family recollections of Laura note that she suffered under the demanding nature of her mother-in-law, possibly the result of Sophia's German upbringing. After the death of Martin Thompson and as Sophia aged, hired women were brought into the home to help with household chores and the business of feeding mill workers and boarders, reinforcing the impression of income disparity between the Thompsons and their neighbors. Laura

³⁶⁸ "Oakville," *Albany Democrat-Herald*, August 20, 1936.

managed household labor in addition to her responsibilities as wife and mother. Like Mrs. Quintell, the work of her husband was intimately tied to her own obligations.

Electrification came early to the mill house. This, along with Laura's ability to hire out some of the more arduous household tasks, gave Laura more freedom than her rural neighbors. The fact that Laura and Ott were reliant on electricity and hired help was not a means of elevating Laura from the drudgery of rural women's work, but rather a method of commodifying Laura's labor into the economics of the mill. By allowing boarders and charging for meals, which required hired help to manage, Ott was able to profit off of the home, pulling Laura's labor into the larger labor of the mill while still defining clear distinctions between the roles of men and women.³⁶⁹

Laura left no archive and is only sporadically mentioned in oral histories, but the presence of Laura and her daughters was found in archeological sites excavated by Oregon State Parks archeologists behind the mill building, the location of a trash heap. Interspersed with tools and scrap metal were consumer goods marketed to and used by women. Items like a silver mirror and a jar of cold cream hint at a feminine presence on the property. These mass-produced items date to the 1920s-1940s. Inside the mill house, wallpaper was refreshed regularly, backed with flour sacks. Workers and residents remember the home, the long table that could seat ten to twelve workers, and a pass through between the dining room and the kitchen, where women would have worked to feed and clean up after workers. Women were even highlighted in mill marketing materials. Oregon Maid pastry flour bags showed a woman with a modern bob hairstyle wearing traditional black and white maid garb surrounded by a golden wreath of wheat.

³⁶⁹ Jellison, *Entitled to Power*, xxi.

Thompson's Best Blended Flour sacks showed an elderly women holding a loaf of bread. These two renderings, the young, modern, attractive working woman, and the matronly housewife, captured the dueling notions of rural womanhood that were forming during this period.



Figure 3.1 - Two flour sacks, circa 1930 Thompsons Mills Historic Collection

Despite national hand wringing over the labor of women, the mill was dependent on it. Women from farming families depended on work to support their families. Laura's household staff rotated regularly, and, because they were not mill laborers, they do not always appear in ledger books. Don Margason and other workers remembered Madeline Karpinski, who helped Laura cook for workers in the 1930s. She is listed as a lodger and servant at the family residence in the 1930 census when she was twenty-three years old. Her parents migrated from Poland, settling in Lebanon in 1910. Madeline, like other young women in Linn County, likely took on employment to ease the financial burden on her family, which included seven siblings. But her family was not suffering to the same level as those in Boston; her father owned his farm outright, never taking on a mortgage.

Madeline's obituary mentions her time working at the mill, which may have started as soon as she was eighteen and continued until she was married in October of 1937. Her role was described as, "caring for the Thompson's children and cooking for the household, including the work crew at the mill."³⁷⁰ Other women that worked in the Thompson home are mentioned briefly in newspapers, often due to an injury they suffered. Effie Brock worked at the mill house in 1923 and suffered severe burns after spilling gravy on her hand.³⁷¹ Gertrude Goeman was injured by the electric clothes wringer.³⁷² These women fell into two categories, young women working before marriage, or older women looking to supplement the income of their family, usually necessary due to the lack of good farmland for their husbands to farm. Mrs. Lavera Yocum and her husband Bill, for example, both worked at the mill. Bill was a laborer, making \$510 a year in 1940, while his wife made \$210.³⁷³

The work of women at the mill was not limited to household labor. Women worked as bookkeepers as far back as mill records go. This continued into the 1930s, with Ott reliant on the labor of women for handling all accounting for an increasingly complex business. Alta McKean appears in the payroll book throughout 1936 and 1937. Alta was born in Lyndon, Kansas, in March of 1913; her parents moved the family to

³⁷⁰ "Wedding", *Albany Democrat-Herald*, October 4, 1937; Madeline H. Bender, *Corvallis Gazette-Times*, July 26, 2003.

³⁷¹ "Freshman Class at Shedd High School is Given Initiation," *Albany Daily Democrat*, October 10, 1923.

³⁷² "Churches at Shedd Plan to Combine in Christmas Program," *Albany Daily Democrat*, December 12, 1922.

³⁷³ 1940 United States Federal Census [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., Year: 1940; Census Place: Albany, Linn, Oregon; Roll: m-t0627-03371; Page: 7B; Enumeration District: 22-8; "Shedd Minister Holds Tillamook Services," *Albany Democrat-Herald*, August 17, 1939.

Oregon between 1916 and 1920, at the height of the wheat boom. Alta travelled alone in 1933 to Oakland, California, where she attended business school. Upon her return she secured a job at Thompson's Mills doing office work and bookkeeping. In 1937, she was living away from her family in an apartment building in Shedd and then, in the same year, she moved back to California.³⁷⁴ Unlike Madeline, Alta continued working after she was married, working as a credit manager for a retailer while she and her husband boarded at a lodging house.³⁷⁵ Mabel McDonald, another office worker, was thirty-five years old in 1940. She was born in Colorado, one of six children, and had a high school education. Her parents, from Scotland, immigrated in 1900; her father was a farmer on a rented parcel in Colorado in 1910. Unmarried, she worked at the mill as the bookkeeper, making \$1,200 a year. Mabel's education level allowed her more freedom to participate in the consumer economy of the 1930s and gave her significantly more options than were available to women like Mrs. Quintell. But at the same time, the collapse of middle-class farming enterprises meant that she would need to work to contribute money to her family for her entire life.

Office work, like that performed by Mabel, was exclusively the work of women during this era, and the production floor was the space of men. Early architecture made the office wholly separate from the mill itself, but even as the office was annexed onto the rest of the building, the mill floor was male-only. One peculiar building feature made this abundantly clear. Until midcentury, there was no bathroom inside the mill, but there

³⁷⁴ "Shedd," *Greater Oregon*, June 18, 1937.

³⁷⁵ 1950 United States Federal Census [database online]. Year: 1940; Census Place: Madera, Madera, California; Roll: m-t0627-00260; Page: 174; Enumeration District: 20-7

was a trap door in the middle of the production area that, according to workers, was used by men to urinate directly into the mill race.³⁷⁶ Some gentlemen remember that the mill bathroom, once one was built, was home to a fair share of pinup posters. The production floor was a male dominated space, both due to the type of labor required on the mill floor and the built environment that Martin and Ott Thompson created.

In addition to paid labor, Ott also counted on his daughters to assist at the mill. Sylva Thompson remembered having to prop the office phone on a ledge near the millrace so that she could answer it on Saturdays when Mrs. Clark, the office girl, was off.³⁷⁷ Eunice Thompson also started working for her father around the age of fourteen. The summer after Eunice graduated from high school, Ott told her that she was going to be the "second woman" in the kitchen so that he didn't have to hire help. She said that summer was the hardest she worked in her life. One day she was responsible for feeding twenty workers and canning sixty-six quarts of peaches; it took from 6 a.m. to 11 p.m. to get it all finished.³⁷⁸ While technology was supposedly lessening the load of women in rural areas, Eunice's experience suggests quite the opposite. Middle class women, like Laura Thompson, were able to absolve themselves of some of the labor through hiring help, but the work itself remained arduous. This discordant view of laboring women, that it was considered simultaneously necessary and a detriment to the natural order of the home, showcases the rigid class distinctions that developed by the 1930s. Middle class

³⁷⁶ Eventually an enclosed stall with a toilet was added to the floor, but this toilet too was plumbed directly into the millrace.

³⁷⁷ Townsend, Sylva and Ronald, interview by Martin Thompson, September 17, 1984. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

³⁷⁸ Arthur, Eunice and Robert Arthur, Interview by Sarah Scott, July, 27 2004. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

women, the wives of successful farm owners, like Mrs. Quintell and Mrs. Thompson, were being removed from farm labor positions while working class women, those without land or familial support, were expected to labor immediately when they came of age.

"A Part of the Machine": Career Mill Workers

Rural labor was under scrutiny during the Great Depression, as farm failures changed the ways in which rural families lived. Unlike the Simmons and Martin Thompson eras, in which the work was largely performed by family with temporary work from farmers, the 1920s and 1930s saw career laborers at the mill who had no other source of income. These workers lived with the Thompson family or nearby, on small tracts of land that were unable to support farms. Some of these men likely overextended themselves during the boom years of the 1910s. Others may have been slowly selling off their lands and could no longer farm or never had land. These workers were dependent on Ott Thompson in a way that previous generations hadn't been. The neighborly mill of Richard Finley was now stratified, with laborers making meager wages while Ott Thompson and his family were able to amass wealth. Before this point, workers were seasonal and largely filled by local farmers. While there were some workers who appeared with regularity in previous decades, the majority of the work was seasonal and sporadic, with men gaining the majority of their income from farms. As the mill increased labor needs with the wheat boom, more longtime laborers were hired. While the mill continued to be a reliable means of a paycheck during the hardest moments of the Great Depression, and provided well for the Thompson family, it was a far cry from the nonstop

operations only two decades before. A 1933 article noted that this stymied business would, like it always did, grow with the seasons.³⁷⁹ Ott was well known, if not well liked, among the community.³⁸⁰

Henry McDowell was an employee and boarder at the Thompson home. He was born in Crawfordsville to a farm family around 1882. He completed the eighth grade and then likely began working for his father. Eunice Thompson remembered that he "wore his hair wild." His 1918 draft card lists his occupation as Bridge Carpenter, Gang Number 3, for the Southern Pacific Railroad. His residence was listed as the Hotel Lebanon, a boarding house not far from Shedd. McDowell doesn't appear on the 1910 census, suggesting that he was still moving from job to job, rather than settling down long enough to be counted. But according to his obituary, he never left Linn County. Shortly after he filled out his draft registration cards, McDowell signed on as boarder and worker at Thompsons Mills. He is listed on the 1920 census as a teamster, in charge of hauling goods and making deliveries for the mill, a job that Leo Thompson once held. He was one of four workers lodging at the mill that year. Alta Smith, just eighteen years old, was listed as a "hired girl". Fletcher McGee also worked as a teamster, and Elza J. Smith was listed as a laborer. Fletcher and Elza were both in their twenties while Henry was thirty-seven. In July of 1920, McDowell was paid \$78.00, the most of the eleven employees

³⁷⁹ "Thompson Mills Grind Flour for Farmers in Increasingly Big Area," *Albany Democrat-Herald*, October 31, 1933.

³⁸⁰ Townsend, Sylva and Ronald, interview by Martin Thompson, September 17, 1984. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

listed on this ledger page except for G.B Thompson, no relation to Ott Thompson, who made \$98.00 during the same period.³⁸¹

In the 1930 census, Alta, Fletcher, and Elza had moved along, but Henry remained. In their place was Fred Ossenbrink, described as a stoic German and Thompson family acquaintance. Newspapers note that Ossenbrink worked first for a cousin of Ott's. Fred was thirty-four, Henry forty-seven. According to Fred's German birth records, he was the illegitimate child of Eberhard Ossenbrink and Regine Buschman and came to the United States when he was seventeen. Fred lived with the family for thirty years, retiring from full time work in 1961. In late 1930s, Fred was making \$3.00 to \$4.00 a day. By the 1960s, his rate had increased to around \$12.00 a day, assuming no overtime.³⁸² Eunice Thompson said that Fred felt the need to leave the millhouse when Ott remarried following Laura's death in 1958.³⁸³ Eunice and her sister Dorothy both remembered living in the house with Fred and Henry, the stoic German and the wild haired farm boy. Eunice recalled that Henry could not stand Fred, to the point that they didn't speak for years.³⁸⁴ Henry's distain did not spread to the Thompson children. Dorothy and Eunice, the youngest of Ott's children, were spoiled by Henry, and his fondness for them extended after his death, when he left what savings and possessions he

³⁸¹ G.B was not immediate family of Ott Thompson. He may have been distantly relations, or a member of the other Thompson family that lived in Linn County and appeared on records during this period.

³⁸² Payroll Records, 1969, Box 74 Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR; Payroll and Ledgers, 1939, Box 81 Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR

³⁸³ Allen, Seymour and Bob Allen, interview by Sarah Scott, August 10, 2004. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

³⁸⁴ Arthur, Eunice and Robert Arthur, Interview by Sarah Scott, July, 27 2004. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

had to the two girls. Henry left mill work by the time of the 1940 census. According to Yates Sherer, Myrle didn't like Henry but Ott couldn't fire him, since Ott had borrowed money from Henry during the downturns of the 1920s. Henry bragged that he couldn't be fired and "the Thompsons got tired of it." So, Ott wrote him a check for the full amount owed and told him to go.³⁸⁵ Henry bought a small home in Halsey and lived off of his savings or some other form of income that he chose not to disclose to the census taker. Six years later he was dead. The written record he left behind consists of brief mentions in mill ledgers, an assortment of cashed checks that he may have left in the mill house, a letter from his brother, a bank statement, and a check for a chauffeur's license as well as the license itself.³⁸⁶ Fred left nothing.

In 1934, there were ten men employed at the mill, with more as needed for busier seasons.³⁸⁷ The men that worked at the mill during this period left mementos throughout the building: graffiti on the walls, a discarded bottle of Kist soda, circa 1927, tossed into the millrace, and miscellaneous tools, like a wooden Henry Disston and Sons level, sitting on a bench, as though a worker had only briefly misplaced it, but covered with six decades of dust. These artifacts suggest a working culture that was somewhat relaxed, and, in the case of the level, a place of constant construction. Larger items, like a Fairbanks scale, highlighted stricter regulation put in place in the 1920s. Scales were, by this point, regularly inspected for accuracy and likely came by train from dealers in

³⁸⁵ Sherer, Yates, interview by Sarah Scott, July 21, 2004. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

³⁸⁶ Chafferers License, September 6, 1922. Box 109 Folder 12. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR.

³⁸⁷ One newspaper article noted that Ott was employing as many as 25 individuals at the mill, though that cannot be confirmed with payroll records. See "Boston Mills," *Greater Oregon*, July 20, 1934.

Portland, part of the "industrial web" that professionalized rural industries like milling. Haphazard calculations written on wooden beams ran alongside more modern machinery, just as the modernity of 1930s rural America snuck in around the edges of the mill community.

Ross Sprenger worked at the mill off and on, starting in the 1930s. His family's name appears in ledger books two decades before that. His father sawed wood for the mill and also did business there; he grew wheat on a farm not far from Boston. In those early years, Ross Sprenger remembered helping his father cut wood and getting a free lunch at the mill house while the workers were charged 25 cents. When Ross was old enough to be on the payroll, he cleaned sacks, loaded trucks, and handled other odd jobs ideal for a young worker. Sprenger walked to the mill house for supper, sometimes the dining table was full of more than ten workers, and he had to wait. Madeline Karpinski was serving the meals in those years. He guessed that in the 1930s there may have been as many as fifteen men working at a time during the busier seasons. Some would have been men with families, others were young, like Sprenger. In 2004 he was brought into the mill to sit for an interview. In his eighties, Ross hid his thin white hair under a baseball cap tilted to one side. A pair of red suspenders held up his blue jeans. He walked through the mill slowly and when he was asked to remember dates or names, he would look downward and close his eyes, trying to travel back in time.

As he wandered the mill, he remembered a piece of cardboard hanging next to the mixer. The cardboard had the recipe of pancake mix, a Thompsons Mills product, and next to each item was a hole. Once a worker added an ingredient into the mixer, they stuck a pencil in the hole so that they knew exactly where they were in the recipe. The

recipe hung on the wall for 40 years. Throughout the mill were thrifty fixes like that cardboard recipe. Old oil cans were flattened and used for roofing. Worn out belts were mended and spliced back together. Tallies, recipes, and customer names were penciled on the walls. Very few things were removed from the building. When he was asked about the work Ross just shrugged, the work was just work as far as he was concerned, nothing interesting came to mind.

The Sprenger family had lived in the area for nearly a century when Ross took a mill job. Ross's grandfather came to Oregon when he was a year old and settled only about a mile and a half from the site of the mill in 1852.³⁸⁸ His grandfather was one of the folks in the area that drove a team and plow to create the beginnings of Sodom Ditch. Ross's grandfather was also one of the farmers that utilized the mill in its earliest days to grind grain that grew on his claim. The relationship continued all the way to the Ott Thompson era, when Ross remembers selling his own grain harvest to Ott's mill, but the prices Ott paid for grain depended on who was selling. Ross's father made ten dollars more per ton than Ross did because Ross was just a kid, too young to know when he was getting swindled.³⁸⁹

Workers at the mill around 1907 could expect wages around \$1.00 per day. By 1915, workers were making closer to \$1.50 while skilled workers, such as bookkeepers, were making \$2.00. By the 1930s, the men at the mill were making around \$3.00 a day.

³⁸⁸ Sprenger, Ross, interviewed by Sarah Scott, July 21, 2004. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

³⁸⁹ Sprenger, Ross, interviewed by Sarah Scott, July 21, 2004. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File. For more examples of Ott's dubious mill practices, see Margason, Donald, interview by Sarah Scott, July 23, 2004. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

From this rate, the cost of the meal, somewhere from 25 to 75 cents, would be subtracted. According to labor statistics, manufacturing positions like those at the mill paid, on average, \$21.53 per week for a 40-hour work week in 1937, or around \$4.30 per day. The mill during this period was paying 70 percent of the national average for a similar position. Locally, the mill was one of the lower paid positions that an unskilled laborer in Linn County could have during this period. Manufacturing positions for durable goods, like sawmills, paid about five dollars more per week on average.³⁹⁰

Most of those interviewed about this period mentioned Max Elder and Neil Farwell, men who spent their adult lives working at the mill. Both the Farwell and Elder families were regular employees at Thompsons Mills, supplementing the income from their Donation Land Claims and paying down debts they likely incurred in the 1920s. They would both be considered "part time" or possibly hobby farmers; there is no suggestion that commercial agriculture supported either family in the decades preceding the Great Depression. The Elder family were neighbors to the Savages; Robert Elder got into an altercation with Americas Savage over wild hogs, so the story goes. Robert Elder was also one of the settlers who sold Richard Fineley water rights to the Calapooia. The Elders came south to the area around Shedd in the 1860s, where Robert M. Elder would claim acreage for himself and his wife. A history of Shedd claims that Elder's wife died on the way to the land claim, but Robert Elder carried her corpse down the Willamette Valley so that he would not be denied the larger claim allowed married men. After his arrival, he married again and travelled between Boston and Lake County, Oregon, taking part in mining in addition to homesteading. Family sources suggest that his wife left

³⁹⁰ Monthly Labor Review, 1931. United States Department of Labor, Government Printing Office, 1932.

Robert and her children, frustrated by his constant travel and the hardships of early settlement. Existing records are inconclusive. By 1870, Robert had remarried yet again. Robert's third wife gave birth to Dudley Elder in 1873. He was one of as many as seventeen children that would be born to Robert Elder.³⁹¹

The Elder family did not prosper in the years following settlement. The Donation Land Claim settled by Robert Elder was mortgaged before he died, a debt that threatened his children's rights to the land. Some of Elder's children, like Dudley, stayed local to the area; others, like Robert E. Lee Elder, left the Willamette Valley to work in the mines in Arizona, a potentially lucrative but volatile profession. He died after a short illness at the age of twenty-eight. By the time of the 1930 census, the Elder family members that stayed in the vicinity of Boston were renting land that their father once owned.³⁹²

Tenancy was not necessarily considered a negative among farming communities, but it did imply transience and, on the whole, tenant farmers had a lower quality of life than their land-owning neighbors.³⁹³

Dudley worked as a butcher according to the 1910 census. In 1920 he had taken up farming, perhaps hoping to cash in on the wheat boom. But neither profession was lucrative and his sons were sent to the mill to work. Charles Elder, the third generation of the Boston Elders, appeared on the Thompson Mills ledger starting around in August of 1912, when he was thirteen years old. He made a dollar a day, likely cleaning sacks or

³⁹¹ Profile of Robert Elder (1822- 1882), Ancestry Member Tree; accessed 2023

³⁹² 1930 United States Federal Census Year: 1930; Census Place: Shedd, Linn, Oregon; Page: 1A; Enumeration District: 0043; FHL microfilm: 2341681

³⁹³ Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm*, 76.

sweeping floors. On the same ledger page, there were charges for a telephone and painting supplies for the mill and a new pair of boots for one of the Thompson boys.³⁹⁴ In 1916, Leon, Charles' brother, worked at the mill in June, making 50 cents. He was only ten years old. Max Elder, one of the longest tenured mill employees, started working at the mill around the same time and continued at the mill until 1962, when he was in his fifties.

Henry McDowell drove one truck to collect and deliver grain throughout the Willamette Valley. The other driver was probably Neil Farwell, the son of Edward Farwell, who was shot by Ella Thompson in 1897. Ed never moved from the family homestead. His son Neil was born about a decade after Ella Thompson shot his father. Neil told a reporter that he was the "middle one" of the children, all crowded into the farmhouse that his grandfather, Richard Farwell, built. Neil was born upstairs and never ventured far, living and working for his entire life in the remains of Boston.³⁹⁵ When he started out at the mill, he was a sacker, the same job that Don Margason remembers as his first. The role of the sacker was to fill and sew bags and was usually given to the youngest members of the crew. He would also occasionally fix the turbines or wheels, a feat that required hanging under the mill building, a job best left to the young and foolish. The building was over seventy years old when Neil Farwell walked in as a young man. It had become a warehouse of old parts and pieces piled in sheds and workshops, no doubt dating back to the first days of Brandon, Crawford, and Finley, who cobbled together

³⁹⁴ Ledger Book, 1911-1920, Box 99 Folder 2. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR.

³⁹⁵ "Boston Mill Resident Shares Memories of Historic Site," *Albany Democrat-Herald*, April 21, 1994.

scraps of metal, mill burrs, and hand-hewn wood. Even pieces from the old McKercher Mill, another Finley establishment demolished in 1949, would make their way to Boston for a new life. Eventually Neil graduated to truck driving, a job he held for the rest of his working life. In 1937, his pay rate was listed at \$3.00 a day.³⁹⁶

These men and women were some of the wage laborers that signified a change in Thompsons Mills workers. Rather than the temporary or occasional work of farmers that supplemented the work performed by the mill family, as in the Simmons and Martin Thompson eras, the 1930s saw workers who would stay in wage labor positions year-round. In some instances, these men spent decades at the mill, working at below average wages. For men like Elder and Farwell, this position allowed them to remain in their community, near or on the Donation Land Claims that their ancestors settled. For possibly the first time in the mill's history, unskilled laborers were attempting to support their families on income they received from the mill, but the wages were inadequate to the task. The small-scale farming collapses of the 1930s would not just remove farmers from their land, it would force those farmers and the children of farmers to take on work that could not support them. For these families, the end of the Depression did very little to ease the financial burden. Stagnant wages at the mill only hardened the class stratifications that formed in the 1920s and 1930s.

³⁹⁶ Payroll Records, 1933-1948, Box 81. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR.

Conclusion: A Town without Flour

Between 1850 and 1930, the population of Linn County had grown from 2,000 people to over 20,000 but the majority of that growth was centered in more populated areas like Albany. Shedd did see a growth spike in 1880, with the coming of the train, but after that period, the area saw no significant change. The population in Shedd was 138 people in 1890 and in 1940, it was exactly the same.³⁹⁷ The lack of well-paying unskilled labor positions no doubt hindered growth. Families, like the Elders, lost their land to the banks. The Margasons were forced to, quite literally, sing for their supper to survive the Great Depression. Small farms in the next decades would be subsumed by larger commercial enterprises, creating increasing wealth disparity among Shedd residents. And while the Thompson family socialized with other residents, animosities borne out of the Great Depression and a growing obsolescence of milling would continue to grow. The mill was no longer a community necessity, and so it was now open to criticism. Ott's business practices, contested water rights to the Calapooia, and the aging facilities chipped away at the mill's reputation, even if it retained a certain amount of financial stability.

Cracks were forming in the business as early as 1931. An article published in *Greater Oregon* touted the modern and clean facilities at Thompsons Mills while imploring women to use Delicious Flour because "every woman owes it to herself and her family." The article goes on to detail the sanitary conditions of the mill and the sealed packages of flour that it produced. This claim stands in contrast to the view of the building itself, functional but certainly not sealed from pests. Sylva Thompson admitted

³⁹⁷ The Effects of the Railroads on Small Town Population Changes: Linn County, Oregon Donald G. Holtgrieve Yearbook of the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers, Vol. 35 (1973), pp. 87-102

that catching mice in the silos was a regular family chore. The tone of the article, more of an advertisement, suggested that issues with cleanliness had become public knowledge.³⁹⁸ The fact that Ott was working this hard to correct perceptions suggest that the pioneer mill's reputation was beginning to falter.

The miller's product was also faltering. Marcia Margason remembers that starting around 1921, Ott Thompson would pay her in flour to enter cakes into the local fair using his products. She admitted that the soft wheat that grew locally was hard to work with, especially for home bakers.³⁹⁹ People were also just buying less flour. During the World War I, consumers were asked to cut down on bread to help the war effort, and this change in diet continued after the end of the war, contributing in small part to depressed wheat prices.⁴⁰⁰ According to one newspaper account, the United States sent 33 million barrels of flour overseas by 1919, made possible in part by the conservation of flour in homes and bakeries, in addition to agricultural increases.⁴⁰¹ After the war, the annual average consumption of wheat went from 224 pounds at the turn of the century down to 176 pounds following World War I. Neighbors stopped baking at home when store-brought bread became commonplace, even in rural communities. All-purpose flour, a mix of hard and soft wheat, also became more widespread due to the ease of baking.

The resulting wheat surplus was one of many disasters facing the American farmer. The *Albany Democrat-Herald* published an article in July of 1929 on how Hoover

³⁹⁸ "Thompson Flouring Mills," *Greater Oregon*, April 17, 1931.

³⁹⁹ "Annual Fair at Shedd Set for September 23rd," *Albany Democrat*, July 12, 1921.

⁴⁰⁰ Jellison, *Entitled to Power*, 25.

⁴⁰¹ "Wheat Showed Spirit of U.S.," *The Lebanon Express*, January 15, 1919.

could really help local farmers. "A farm relief bill has been passed to furnish salaries to some new officials and do nothing at all for the farmers - as every farmer knows." Instead of looking to Hoover, the author suggests, farmers should look to the women, who favored svelte figures over bread, potatoes, and cream. "If Mr. Hoover want to do something for the farmers... let him come out strongly for the female figure with curves, attained only by hearty eating. And there will be no farm surplus."⁴⁰² While certainly tongue in cheek, the article showcased a growing concern over farm product surplus.

But it wasn't only tastes that were changing. Ron Townsend, Ott's son-in-law and a Thompsons Mills salesman, remembered that he couldn't sell Thompson brand flour during this period to any larger bakeries. Even in the 1930s, food regulations for certain suppliers required testing and quality assurances, something that Thompson didn't have the resources to perform.⁴⁰³ The mill had been able to expand the production floor, grow to meet the high wheat demands of 1917, and even contort to new business models as wheat farming in the Willamette Valley started to wane. But Ott Thompson simply did not have the capital or the staff to do any robust testing on the products they manufactured. Ott began to re-focus his energies on animal feed, a natural by-product of milling wheat with less regulation. Sylva Thompson called the need for testing and lab reports the downfall of the flour mill, but her husband pointed instead to government requirements that a certain amount of flour come from each bushel of wheat during World War II, criteria that again, the mill wouldn't meet. The same type of government involvement in farming that boosted fortunes during World War I destroyed the flour

⁴⁰² "Across the Headlines," *Albany Democrat-Herald*, July 6, 1929.

⁴⁰³ Townsend, Sylva and Ronald, interview by Martin Thompson, September 17, 1984. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

business for the Thompson's Mills in the 1940s. The milling equipment that was the height of modernity in 1900 when it was installed under Martin Thompson's watchful eye was almost entirely obsolete 40 years later.

It was a perfect storm; the mill and the idea of milling were fading from public consciousness just as Ott's reputation started taking a hit. Flour production tapered off during the 1930s and 1940s, and by the 1950s, the mill in Boston was making exclusively animal feed. While the pioneer was being lionized, the pioneer mill became antiquated. Removed by nearly a century from its height, the need for local milling was gone. It is hard to discern whether there were any financial dips during this period, but there was certainly anxiety. The building stayed the same, and the worker experience was largely unaltered, but this was the beginning of a decades-long death. Ott Thompson thought that he inherited his own personal goldmine. By the end of his life it felt more like an albatross hanging from his neck.

CHAPTER 4: WEARING DOWN (1940-1987)

Introduction

Historian Walter Dorwin Teague wrote a far-reaching history of milling in 1952. Detailing the beginning of grain processing to the postwar era, the book made the claim that milling is one method to trace the grand evolution of mankind, centering the miller as a folk hero for the modern era.

Here in America they took the lead in developing the mass-production concepts that are our special contribution to the world's technology; and by providing an ample supply of wholesome, cheap bread for democratic peoples, the miller and baker have given a solid foundation to mankind's highest hopes.⁴⁰⁴

Millers, the book argued, were leading industrialists who "revolutionized production in these modern times."⁴⁰⁵ In actuality, the mill and the miller in Boston were anything but modern, and the miller was not much of a folk hero. After a century of production, the mill was an afterthought in a modernizing rural space. Its only useful legacy was tied to a pioneer heritage that had been mythologized decades before.

Thompsons Mills continued grinding grain the same way it always had, but the tone changed. As Ott prepared for the 50th anniversary of Thompson ownership of the mill, the hundredth anniversary of the building itself, he stopped trying to convince anyone that it was modern, that it could grind feed better or cleaner or faster. The building would betray the truth if he tried. Instead, Ott called it what it was, a pioneer mill and Ott became a pioneer miller. Beginning in 1941, articles appeared in local

⁴⁰⁴ Walter Dorwin Teague, *Flour for Man's Bread: A History of Milling*, Minnesota Archive Editions ed., ed. John Storek, with Harold Rydell (Univ Of Minnesota Press, 1952), 323.

⁴⁰⁵ Teague, *Flour for Man's Bread*, 322.

papers celebrating the hand-hewn beams, the old equipment, and the gleaming silos. In 1962, a photo of Max Elder appeared in the *Statesman Journal* under the heading, "Past, Present Blend in Ancient Mill."⁴⁰⁶ The "ancient mill" couldn't pass USDA inspections, but in the postwar era it continued to provide wage labor to a community of failed farmers, offering the same wage labor that kept the earliest Boston residents afloat. The period from 1940 through the 1970s was the last era of Thompson family ownership and also the end of anything resembling largescale production at the mill. The animal feed milled in Boston travelled throughout the Willamette Valley and along the Oregon Coast, but the days of international trade had long vanished. The mill survived, not as a modern institution, but as a quaint holdover. Specialty feed could be mixed for customers. Delivery men would perform inventories and fill out orders for general store owners in tiny communities. And, within the community of Shedd, the dwindling number of farmers who kept livestock would drop by the mill to grab an order, chat with Ott about the water levels, and then head out.⁴⁰⁷

This is not a story unique to Boston, but a larger trend in rural agriculture in the postwar era. The slow death of Boston is echoed in other areas in Oregon and the United States. Farms grew, farm values grew, but rural populations shrank. Nationally, between 1940 and 1960, the percentage of individuals that lived on farms fell from nearly 25 percent of the population down to only 12 percent, a long demise that started decades before. Between 1950 and 1960, the overall population of Oregon increased 16.3

⁴⁰⁶ "Century-Plus Mill Still Running Near Shedd with Water Power," *Statesman Journal*, June 28, 1962.

⁴⁰⁷ Townsend, Ron. Interview by Martin Thompson, October 25, 1984. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

percent. In urban areas, populations grew 39.6 percent while rural populations decreased by 5 percent.⁴⁰⁸ Between 1920 and 1959, the average farm size in Oregon grew from 269.7 acres to 498.8 acres due to corporate farm consolidation. Linn County felt these changes in a subdued way. In 1959, there were 2,539 farms in Linn County, 490,000 total acres, for an average of 192 acres per farm, though it was not equally dispersed. Family farms shrank as corporate farms grew. The market for land was growing. Farm values in Linn County rose from \$35 to \$92 per acre, following national trends and incentivizing small-scale farmers to sell. While Shedd area farms didn't grow as much as the average in the whole of Oregon, residents remembered this as a period of consolidation.

For those who held on to their land through the 1930s and had the ability to improve their farms, business was good.⁴⁰⁹ For those able to grow their acreage, business was even better. But that didn't stop the exodus from rural communities, especially among the few remaining subsistence farmers. Opportunities for larger incomes, especially during the boom of World War II, were available in urban centers. Even among rural communities, jobs in the lumber industry paid nearly twice as much as the salary available at the mill.⁴¹⁰ Community recollections highlight these seemingly abrupt changes. In Linn County, farmers remember the size of farms growing and connections to neighbors shrinking. Large farms further isolated neighbors while mechanization lessened the need for manual labor, eliminating the community of work that formed

⁴⁰⁸ Richard M. Highsmith, *Atlas of Oregon Agriculture*. (Agricultural Experiment Station, Oregon State College, 1958).

⁴⁰⁹ "Employment and Earnings including the Monthly Report of the Labor Source", August, 1960. United States Department of Labor, Volume 7 No. 2.

⁴¹⁰ Rasmussen, Clayton. Interview by Doug Crispin. 6 April 2006. TM2017.1.3 Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

around farming families. But the long history of Boston shows that this was simply the latest convulsion in the slow death of the small rural farmer. Cracks in the yeoman farmer date back to the days of Americus Savage, when the land failed the men and women who farmed it.⁴¹¹

When the mill was sold, its economic viability came into harsh focus. The feed business was waning as new cash crops matured, and the young labor force continued to move out and move on. By the time the last Thompson owner signed over the land, the mill couldn't maintain its role in the community. The last owners, the Babbits, left the property. Grass had overgrown the fields. The fifteen or twenty workers who worked the building at its heyday had dwindled to only a handful in the 1980s, and then no one, save Dave Babbits. In 1987, the last vestiges of mill labor in the lost town of Boston would grind to a halt. But there was a resurrection for the ancient mill in the form of state intervention. It was a nod to its historic significance, and its enviable water rights, that led to its acquisition as a State Heritage Site.

How does a failing business become a thriving historic landmark? In the end, as finances faltered, the mythology of the mill would rescue it from demolition. As the dream of the yeoman farmer was abandoned and rural industry atrophied, postwar cultural changes created an interest in rural Americana. Television shows, books, articles, and monuments to the triumphant pioneer instilled value in the mill. Just as in the pioneer era, the mill began standing for something it never was. The truth of the mill—low paid wage labor, economic uncertainty, and capitalist volatility—gave way to pioneer

⁴¹¹ Pugh, George, interview by Valsala Manaloor, October 2, 2005. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

nostalgia of self-made men and a strong rural ethos. At the mill's end, its value became the myth, with the impact of rural poverty buried just beneath the surface.

A Secret Change and Another War

Mill letterhead from the 1940s and 1950s proudly stated the availability of hay, grain, flour, feed, seeds, and cereals with a list of over 30 different types of animal feed to meet Linn County's livestock needs.⁴¹² An increase in dairy farms in the vicinity of the mill likely guided the decision to more prominently feature the availability of feed.⁴¹³ But, while the mill was still known widely for flour, the flour sold under the Thompsons brand by 1940 was milled elsewhere, a fact not widely publicized.⁴¹⁴ Interviewees remembered buying flour at the mill long after it discontinued grinding grains for human consumption. The building was, quite simply, too dirty and inefficient to meet food regulations. Families by this point were more reliant on store-bought bread, which made the needed upgrades a foolish cost; the flour business was unprofitable in Boston. A 1941 photograph of the mill showed the silos with Valley Rose and Red Delicious flour logos still painted on the side. By the 1970s, the logos were whitewashed over. Disrepair rather than expansion would be the most visible change for the mill after midcentury.

The feed business allowed the mill to stay afloat into the 1970s. Each feed recipe was mixed to exacting specifications using both local and imported grains brought into

⁴¹² Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

⁴¹³ Carey and Hainline, *Shedd*.

⁴¹⁴ Townsend, Robert and Martin Thompson, Interview by Doug Crispin, December 29, 2004. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

Shedd by train from eastern Oregon and Washington. New equipment, like a machine to add molasses to feed, was crammed into the building, nestled between sackers and cleaners. The equipment could run off waterpower into the 1940s, except some industrial sewing machines, which needed electricity to function. Ott hooked the mill and millhouse up to the electrical grid sometime between 1940 and 1950; the final straw was his home's refrigerator, which couldn't handle the irregular power provided by an old dynamo. At that point, Ott had the option of running the majority of his equipment off of electricity but chose not to; he preferred the free power that the Calapooia River provided.⁴¹⁵ The widespread electrification of Shedd by the 1940s also allowed local farmers to easily grind their own grains for feed, shrinking the mill's relevance within the immediate community.

For workers, the change to feed production meant very little. The daily labor was identical, the mill equipment was largely the same, even delivery routes were unaltered. It did, however, change the seasonality of the position. While processing wheat for flour was timed to coincide with wheat harvesting, the call for animal feed was the largest in the winter when animals couldn't graze.⁴¹⁶ Workers remember the misery of working in the building during damp winter months. In the basement, when the mill race churned under the floorboards, the wood felt soft and damp. The millrace, combined with steamers for oats, made the air extremely humid and cold. Upstairs things weren't much

⁴¹⁵ Townsend, Robert and Martin Thompson, Interview by Doug Crispin, December 29, 2004. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

⁴¹⁶ Allen, Seymour and Bob Allen, interview by Sarah Scott, August 10, 2004. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

better: loading dock doors were thrown open to move grain, letting in wind and rain. Four small electric space heaters, dating to around the 1950s, were part of the mill's historic collection, but no central heating existed in the building, and these heaters were likely used in the offices; they wouldn't have helped much on the production floor.

In 1940, there were as many as ten to twelve employees working in the winter, running a single 9.5-hour shift, sometimes ten hours during busier periods. The pay was \$1.25 an hour, more for overtime, which most men relied on. At their fastest, the team could fill ninety sacks in an hour, quickly shuffling from station to station. Workers interviewed in 2006 were in their teens and twenties in the 1940s and 50s. They often worked in tandem with older workers, filling, weighing, sewing, and moving sacks. Like the decades before, the mill was split between lifetime employees like Max Elder and young men hoping to make a little money before they set off on their own. But the work was becoming less and less appealing as the wages failed to rise with the cost of living.

The outbreak of World War II changed the flow of labor in Boston by placing many of those young men into the military or wartime industries in Portland and Seattle. In response to labor shortages, younger men, not yet out of high school, labored at the mill. Ray Ruckert worked at the mill "soon after the war started," around 1941, when he was just fourteen years old. He remembered learning about Pearl Harbor on a battery powered radio; his family's farm didn't have electricity. His father, George, worked at the mill too, off and on. He was a farmer not far from the mill site, and, as in previous decades, the mill offered supplementary income for small-scale farmers. Ray worked primarily as a sack cleaner or shoveling out bins, work reserved for a younger man with a strong back. Of his two older brothers, one was a farmer with a family, exempted from

war service. His other brother worked in Seattle and was drafted. Two days after Ruckert graduated, in 1945, he enlisted.

To make sure the workforce was adequate to harvest wartime agricultural products, Oregon encouraged the work of young men, like Ray, and women. After a decade of urging women out of the fields and the farms to elevate the rural family, World War II forced rural advocates to reconsider. State and federal initiatives to maintain farm capacity were established to place women trained in agriculture into the positions that were vacated by men. Federally, this program was known as "the Women's Land Army." It is estimated that these programs placed around six hundred thousand women into rural industries in 1943. Linn County initiatives to place women in agricultural jobs began in February of 1942, when women and children in the seventh grade or above were required to register as available labor.⁴¹⁷ There are no records to indicate that women worked on the production floor at Thompsons Mills, Ott Thompson instead relied on young men, as he always had, to fill labor gaps.

The important role of the farmer in wartime was touted in *Greater Oregon*, reminding Oregonians that the home front war effort was as honorable as the fight overseas. The article contrasted the farmer to an urban laborer, arguing that farmers would never require an hourly wage, or overtime, or dare to strike, threatening the stability of America and American troops. "We think our farmers have always been 100 per cent Americans and have always done their duty in feeding our country." The article goes on to advocate for raising prices of certain agricultural products to even the playing

⁴¹⁷ "Farm Workers List to be Available to Help Harvest," *Albany Democrat-Herald*, February 12, 1942.

field for the true Americans, the farmers.⁴¹⁸ An article in the *Albany Democrat* noted that "American farmers are doing the job that gloom spreaders and shortage shouters predicted couldn't be done."⁴¹⁹ This propaganda was meant to alleviate the ill feeling toward rural industry lingering from the Depression era.

The demographics of labor changed, but, economically, farming was hitting a high point. For farmers, the war meant sudden markets for the surpluses that had plagued American agriculture during the Depression. The war also removed surplus people, unskilled laborers who were no longer needed for farm work due to increases in mechanization. But, while farmers were touted as "true Americans" in articles on the war effort, the small-scale farmer was being forced from the fields by larger commercial enterprises that could more adeptly meet the needs of expanding markets. The ever-increasing reliance on mechanization and expansion by 1940 only heightened the difference between largescale commercial farmers and the small-scale farmers who could not afford necessary agricultural enhancements. Commercial farmers in the war era profited, small-scale farmers were more than likely left behind during this boom."⁴²⁰ As small or subsistence farms continued to decline financially, high paying wartime industry lured men away.

Nationwide, five million people left their farms between 1940 and 1945, one sixth of 1940's total farmers.⁴²¹ For those farmers who were able to benefit from the wartime

⁴¹⁸ "Sunday Eggs and Milk," *Greater Oregon*, March 27, 1942.

⁴¹⁹ "Farm War News - New Food Record Set," *Albany Democrat-Herald*, August 12, 1943.

⁴²⁰ Gilbert C. Fite, *American Farmers: The New Minority*, First Edition Thus (Indiana University Press, 1981), 79.

⁴²¹ Fite, *American Farmers*, 80.

surge, the year 1941 was the best in recent memory.⁴²² But agriculturalists were hesitant to rely on the same wartime booms that busted them after World War I. They looked to the federal government to offer assurances that they wouldn't be forced into an agricultural depression in peacetime. Agricultural experts in Linn County, remembering the downturns following World War I, warned of a slight slump in farm profits and urged farmers to pay debts rather than expand.⁴²³ In contrast, industry boosters urged farmers to hang in there and continue to invest in improvements, despite an uncertain future. In 1944, an advertisement announcing the easy future of the "all electric farm" featured a man, with a strong jaw and straw hat, looking toward the horizon. Just like the promises of mechanization at the turn of the century, the electric farm was meant to cut labor needs in half and allow farmers to spend time in laboratories improving crop yields, not on tractors.⁴²⁴ So farmers had a choice to make: invest in improvements and believe that the country would support the farmer into the twenty-first century or pay down debts and wait. A few Shedd farms expanded during this period, but many farmers, still reeling from the last downturns, sold off land and relied on nonfarm income to survive. The Farwell family home, now owned by Neil Farwell, kept livestock and raised some produce, but the vast majority of the family's income was from Neil's job driving truck for the mill. Farwell's land shrank from the original Donation Land Claim, and generations of Farwells sold off acreage to the mill or other neighboring farms. Farmers

⁴²² Fite, *American Farmers*, 87.

⁴²³ "Farmers Warned Use Caution During Post-War Period of Readjustment," *Albany Democrat-Herald*, August 18, 1945.

⁴²⁴ "Advertisement: Mountain States Power Co." *Greater Oregon*, July 14, 1944.

like the Farwells, who shrank acreage rather than expanding, had little choice. Revenue from farming had not supported them for decades, and no amount of electrification would turn their small acreage profitable.⁴²⁵

Failed federal initiatives to stabilize the farm economy during the previous decade made politicians and the public alike wonder if rural America was worth salvaging. More specifically, were there just too many farmers? Dispassionate economists believed that there were. Technologies and globalization advanced so profoundly in such a short period that it was simply no longer necessary to have as many farmers in the United States. But the idea that America had modernized beyond the usefulness of rural America was unsettling, even if it was true. Forcing small scale farmers to give up their land and find a new occupation was unpopular nationally, and the majority of farmers also found the policy disagreeable.⁴²⁶ The debate over farm populations would reach new heights in the postwar era, but the discussion began in the 1940s, as a booming agricultural market did very little to impact rural poverty.

At the end of the war, communities nationwide wondered if the rural populations that left for wartime jobs would be able to re-acclimate into the rural spaces they once occupied, or if they'd even want to return to the farm.⁴²⁷ While the exodus of the young labor force at the start of the war caused concern, wartime agricultural industry successes proved that there was no need for a large rural workforce. In Linn County, a committee

⁴²⁵ Fite, *American Farmers*, 121.

⁴²⁶ Fite, *American Farmers*, 123.

⁴²⁷ Olaf F Larson, *Some Postwar Rural Trends in the Pacific Northwest* (U.S. Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Pacific Northwest Region, 1946), 2, <https://search.library.wisc.edu/catalog/9910371341502121>.

was convened to determine exactly how many farmers it could support. Officials believed that the county could accommodate up to 525 persons engaged in agriculture, some of whom would replace an aging population.⁴²⁸ But the mass influx of GIs-turned-farmers failed to materialize in Shedd, with the community's population holding steady in the postwar era. Individuals with land holdings or community ties were likely to return to their communities, while laborers and tenant farmers without local family were less likely to return. While the GI Bill offered advancement opportunities to veterans, available funding was not adequate to purchase land or even obtain adequate loans for land ownership in Linn County. A report on the issue noted, "present prospects are that the veteran who has relatives on a farm who are willing to help him will have the best chances for being an owner or renter in the near future."⁴²⁹ While the national debate focused on whether there were too many farmers, Linn County kept the number of farmers in check simply because there wasn't enough cheap land.

When the war ended, Ray Ruckert enrolled at Oregon State University with the GI Bill. He eventually found his way back to farming, but he would never work in the mill again. His family had no land to pass down, but his brother loaned him a tractor, and that was enough to get some crops put in on rented acreage. Ray slowly grew his farm from there, renting more land as he could. He would farm rye grass for thirty years. A 1945 article in the *Albany Democrat* noted that "a number of families moved from this community with others taking their places." The Ruckert's farm, likely Ray's father's land, was purchased by the Pugh family. Mrs. Freerksen's home was sold to Ott

⁴²⁸ "Linn Farm Postwar Growth Set at 525," *Albany Democrat-Herald*, January 10, 1945.

⁴²⁹ Larson, *Some Postwar Rural Trends in the Pacific Northwest*, 9.

Thompson; he bought it for his daughter Alice, newly married to a former mill worker.⁴³⁰

This consolidation of land into bigger and bigger farms was, according to federal officials, an ideal scenario.⁴³¹ Machinery and crop management meant that, in certain agricultural industries, day laborers that would have been required in early wheat and vegetable farming were no longer needed. This collapse of the industry meant that families who held on to smaller homesteads had fewer wage labor options. Those who could stave off poverty by picking up extra work saw their and household incomes shrink. To economists, these small farmers prevented the expansion of larger and more productive agricultural enterprises. Ties to the land, community connections, and the rural ideal was, by 1950, standing in the way of progress.



Figure 4.1 - Thompsons Mills, circa 1940, *Thompsons Mills Historic Collection*

⁴³⁰ "Rally Day Program Set for Sunday," *Albany Democrat-Herald*, October 3, 1940.

⁴³¹ Hurt, *Problems of Plenty*, 116.

The Postwar Workers

The population of Linn County between 1940 and 1950 grew from 30,485 to 54,317, but these increases were largely in urban or nonfarm labor. In the 1950s, 69 percent of the population was under nineteen years old with only 20 percent of the population between 20 and 59, indicative of the postwar baby boom. But this growing young population didn't see the appeal in farm labor. Agricultural prices began to falter, federal initiatives to regulate agriculture were debated in Congress, and popular opinion on farm aid hit a low ebb, a trend that began during the Great Depression. While farmers struggled to deal with postwar surpluses, consumers were frustrated with grocery store prices.

Between 1942 and 1945 there was a sharp increase in the price of consumer goods, and an even sharper increase between 1945 and 1948.⁴³² In 1944, Wayne Morse, during his run for Oregon's senate seat, urged that "City People" not turn on farmers, specifically farmers who were benefitting from wartime booms in 1944. Morse argued that, while profits have increased, so too have costs, a fact hidden from the "city people" who are agitating for cheaper goods.⁴³³ But subsidizing farms was costing taxpayers more than they were willing to tolerate, especially as farming was viewed more as a corporate endeavor, not a rural subsistence occupation, in the postwar era.⁴³⁴ There was also a pervasive fear of any federal involvement in capitalist systems as a slippery slope into

⁴³² U.S. Census Bureau (1960). Whole Price Index. Retrieved from www2.census.gov/library/publications/1960/compendia/statab/81ed/1960-06.pdf

⁴³³ Wayne Morse, "Frank Talk to City People... about the Farm Situation," *Greater Oregon*, May 12, 1944.

⁴³⁴ Fite, *American Farmers*, 105.

communism. This fear was not new; it was present since farm collectives at the turn of the century, especially into the upper Midwest, and continued during the Depression. But political fears of the 1950s re-ignited the connection between farm aid and communism, adding fuel to the anti-rural fire that was smoldering during World War II.⁴³⁵ Price guarantees for farmers were phased out in the 1950s and agricultural prices dropped. At the same time, non-farm good prices increased. As the country at large was enjoying a boom, farmers were in the middle of another price squeeze. Government aid to farmers had the stigma of welfare, and popular media felt that the hold farmers had on the feds had gone too far. Farmers who were able to stay ahead of the price squeeze through technological investments were able to buy land from their neighbors who couldn't, and farms that were once owned by a dozen different families were consolidated. Red barns were replaced with warehouses, and small farm communities were abandoned to industrial agriculturalists. Of course, small farmers remained on family farms, but American agricultural was looking more like big business, and Americans were tired of footing the bill.⁴³⁶

Locally, farming was following national trends in large part due to a boom in grass seed farming. More than half of the farms in Linn County were run as commercial farms. Of the farms responding to the census in 1954, over half were under thirty acres, and farms under three acres, likely hobby or parttime farms, increased from fifteen in 1940 to eighty-two fifteen years later. Essentially, farms were either large or small, with

⁴³⁵ For information on farm radicalism in the 1920s through the 1950s, see: Dyson, "Radical Farm Organizations and Periodicals in America, 1920-1960"; Maier, "The Farmers' Fight for Representation"; Pratt, "Farmers, Communists, and the FBI in the Upper Midwest."

⁴³⁶ Fite, *American Farmers*, 107-19.

the number of farms in the midrange, around one hundred acres, shrinking. Residents of Linn County who lived on farms shrank from 46 percent in 1940 to 21 percent by 1954. The Linn County report on farms worried that "many farms in the county are passing into the hands of lawyers, doctors, merchants and farmers who already are large landowners." The committee discouraged this trend because absentee landowners were more likely to let building deteriorate, but there was nothing in the way of intervention.⁴³⁷

These farm statistics obscure the impact on the families in Boston, like the Allen family, who had endured generational threats to their communities and livelihoods. The rise of commercial farming was only the most recent in a series of slow destructions to Boston. Before moving to Shedd to secure a small farm, the Allen family's patriarch, Robert Allen, worked in Crowfoot as a sawmill laborer.⁴³⁸ Around 1930, he saved enough money to rent a farm near Shedd. Like their neighbors, the Allens raised a small amount of grass seed in addition to livestock for family consumption. Seymour remembered that there were farms every quarter mile in the 1930s, "not big like they are now." The Allens didn't have the landholdings to thrive, so they stayed within the orbit of Thompsons Mills as wage laborers. Each member of the family worked at the mill one time or another since 1935. Robert's son Erwin started at the mill after high school, around 1933, and stayed for eight years. He is listed in the payroll alongside his father. Robert's daughter worked as a cook at the mill house with Laura Thompson one summer. Seymour Allen worked at the mill in the wintertime in the 1950s. It was a fill-in job for him, designed to

⁴³⁷ *Report of the Linn County Oregon Farm and Outlook Conference*. Albany, Oregon, March, 1956.

⁴³⁸ 1930 United States Federal Census Year: 1930; Census Place: Crowfoot, Linn, Oregon; Page: 2A; Enumeration District: 0015; FHL microfilm: 2341681 Accessed via ancestry.com

pick up during the slack time on their family's farm. When asked about the worst parts of the job at the mill, Seymour said that it was "just part of living."⁴³⁹

The family survived on wage labor and some farming until Seymour's father passed away in 1958. He'd given up on tenant farming by that point, instead working at a service station.⁴⁴⁰ Following his death, Alice, the family's matriarch, took a job at the mill house cooking and cleaning for Ott Thompson and the remaining boarders. Laura Thompson died three years prior, leaving the labor of the home entirely to hired help. By 1961, Ott and Alice were married. Locals joked that Ott just got tired of paying Alice to keep house and determined through rough arithmetic that having a wife would be cheaper.⁴⁴¹ Alice would have likely approached the marriage with a similar amount of pragmatism. Five members of the Allen family worked at the mill over the course of twenty years, with wage labor needs extending to women of the family as farming became less viable in the postwar era. The generational wage labor of the Allen family shows the interdependence of small farmers and wage labor, dependency that existed in some capacity for a century. While the rest of the country was experiencing a decade of abundance, farmers in Boston were still very much the working poor.

These dependencies allowed men to stay in Boston on inherited land but hobbled them economically. Max Elder, Fred Ossenbrink, and Neil Farwell, individuals with a longstanding relationship with the mill, continued to work into the 1950s and 1960s. By

⁴³⁹ Allen, Seymour and Bob Allen, interview by Sarah Scott, August 10, 2004. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

⁴⁴⁰ Corvallis Gazette-Times Corvallis, Oregon · Friday, August 01, 1958

⁴⁴¹ Thompson, Eunice and Robert Arthur, Interview by Sarah Scott, July, 27 2004. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

1950, Elder was an unofficial boss of the production floor, keeping an eye on mixing and sacking.⁴⁴² As Seymour Allen passed Max's station during a tour of the building, he said, "Max Elder probably stood here for 40 years." Seymour Allen and Max Elder earned a wage well below the national average, with men working at the mill in the postwar era earning below the poverty wage. For men like Max Elder and Neil Farwell, it was likely ties to community and land holdings that kept them in these positions. Both men could trace their heritage to original Donation Land Claim settlements. But the shrinking rural farming population continued to shrink, from 20 percent of the national population in 1945 down to just 5 percent by the mid-1970s, and rural influence and identity shrank with it.

Boston Grass Seed Creates Suburbia

While the majority of farmers in Shedd were small scale, like the Allens, there were exceptions, like the Pugh family. The Pugh family came west in 1846 on the Oregon Trail, predating the Finley, Farwell, Elder, Morgan, and Savage families. Like many residents of Linn County, they initially settled outside of Portland but were encouraged to settle near what would become Shedd in the 1850s, around the same time as Americus Savage. They stayed in the community through the boom-and-bust cycles in the century that followed. The second generation in Shedd included a son that studied at the Oregon Agricultural College in 1903 and worked in forestry as a mechanical engineer. He chose to return to Shedd in 1911, when the area was still recovering from the depressions

⁴⁴² Allen, Seymour and Bob Allen, interview by Sarah Scott, August 10, 2004. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

twenty years before, and bought land adjacent to his brother, who had inherited the family's Donation Land Claim.

Perhaps because of an advanced education and connection to agricultural research, the Pugh family became involved in grass seed cultivation in the 1910s and 1920s, before the crop boomed. They were not the only farmers looking for alternatives to wheat, but their early adoption likely saved the family from the rapid depreciation of wheat prices after World War I, which in turn allowed for the growth of their farm as other lands were mortgaged and foreclosed on during the Great Depression. This land stayed in the family, and George Pugh, who sat for an interview in 2007, was the third generation of farmers specializing in various types of grass seed with occasional grains in rotation on the fields. The farm had grown from 80 to 2,700 acres, absorbing smaller farms as people moved on. In the early 2000s, the Pugh farm was considered a medium sized farm in Shedd. Astonishingly, running a farm of this size required the full-time labor of only five people in the fields. In the summer, staff size might grow to thirteen. Mechanization removed the need for more than a handful of seasonal laborers.

George was born in the 1940s, and he and his siblings spent their lives in Shedd. His grandparents lived nearby, in the house where George's father was born. Due in part to the financial solvency of his family, the mill was more of a recreational space than a place where business was conducted. George remembers swimming in the millrace as a child. At that time the Pugh farm had grown and was also cleaning seed for twenty-five other farm families. By the 1990s, that number had dwindled to six families but more acreage of seed, due exclusively to the consolidation of farms. Farm consolidation was

"necessary for efficiency" George Pugh said ruefully. Larger farms were better for productivity, but "we've lost neighbors, and the rural atmosphere has been altered."

The collapse of the wheat industry, the rise of Eastern Oregon farming, and the perpetual fight with soggy Willamette Valley soil made farmers quickly turn to rye grass at the recommendation of Oregon State University agricultural scientists and the extension service. The change in Linn County's crop focus in the post-World War II era sped up an already present consolidation process. In 1954, ryegrass earned farmers 6.7 million dollars, and 77,000 acres of ryegrass was farmed, far surpassing the land dedicated to wheat, the first cash crop of the area. For farmers who were able to make the transition to largescale rye grass farming, profits were immense. Rye grass was ideally suited for the wet farmland surrounding Boston. Pests in grass fields would drown during the wet season, and the fields dried out in time for harvest.⁴⁴³ And so rye grass became king, and Shedd changed to accommodate it by accommodating larger and more commercial farms, removed from the family farms of previous generations. The movement to professionalization that had been the ethos of farm reformers in the 1930s had finally taken hold, and those rural farmers that couldn't invest in more land sold to those farmers like the Pugh family who could.

In the beginning, rye grass was investigated as a cover crop for the eroded landscapes of the American South.⁴⁴⁴ Depression-era subsidies and Oregon State's

⁴⁴³ "Grass Seed and Oregon", Forage and Turf Grass Seed, Oregon Agriculture for the Classroom Foundation, Oregon State University, accessed 2021, <https://oregonaitc.org/resources/oregon-resources/oregon-grown-commodities/forage-and-turf-grass-seed/>

⁴⁴⁴ William G. Robbins, *Landscapes of Conflict: The Oregon Story, 1940-2000*, First Edition (University of Washington Press, 2004), 86.

interest in crop optimization allowed for seed's quick adoption. But the postwar era opened a new market for grasses: the suburban lawn. Lawns and lawn care became intrinsic to notions of postwar prosperity.⁴⁴⁵ By 1969, 16.5 million acres of manicured lawns were in the United States.⁴⁴⁶ Originally modeled after estate lawns of the English countryside, lawns were meant to be uniform, a lush carpet of purely green grasses. Lawns were tailor-made for American consumer culture of the 1950s.⁴⁴⁷ First, grass grows extremely well in recently disturbed soil, like the soil around newly constructed homes. Second, land uses of earlier eras, like kitchen gardens, were no longer fashionable or necessary for the postwar family, with readily available groceries. And finally, new lawn care technology, specifically herbicides and lawnmowers, were marketed to consumers wishing to create the homogenous, electric green landscape.⁴⁴⁸

Suburban areas were created in the postwar era as White, homogenous spaces that mimicked rural landscapes. These sanitized spaces took the charm of rurality without issues of poverty that had, up to this point, tainted the rural mythology. This created a duality of suburban identity that abandoned and mimicked rural spaces. Historian Stacey Denton writes, "rurality in the postwar was simultaneously idealized through a nostalgic lens and devalued as the province of the most retrograde members of society, considered

⁴⁴⁵ Pugh, George, interview by Valsala Manaloor, October 2, 2005. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

⁴⁴⁶ John Howard Falk, "Energetics of a Suburban Lawn Ecosystem," *Ecology* 57, no. 1 (1976): 141–50, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1936405>.

⁴⁴⁷ Ted Steinberg, "Lawn and Landscape in World Context, 1945-2000," *OAH Magazine of History* 19, no. 6 (2005): 62–68.

⁴⁴⁸ Steinberg, "Lawn and Landscape in World Context, 1945-2000.," Paul Robbins and Julie T. Sharp, "Producing and Consuming Chemicals: The Moral Economy of the American Lawn," *Economic Geography* 79, no. 4 (2003): 425–51.

a mere backdrop against which the postwar forged ahead."⁴⁴⁹ Farms in Linn County became a bastardization of the suburban ideal. The same low, green, monocultured landscape that was popular in suburbs from coast to coast began as seed crop along the lowlands of the Calapooia River. These fields pushed out small scale farmers and the rural poor, like the Allen family.

Much has been written about the cultural and ecological impact of the American lawn, but, for communities like Shedd, the depletion of natural un-manicured landscapes in Eastern states allowed for the concentrated wealth of farmers just as the worth of rural American was being culturally contested. Given the increased value of grass seed and the minimal labor required for its growth and maintenance, fruits and vegetables that would also thrive in Linn County were pushed out, aided by the closure of appropriate canning facilities to process harvests. So, the monoculture of suburban lawns also diminished diversity of farms continued around Shedd. This re-shaping of the American landscape fueled the reshaping of Linn County. Unskilled wage labor positions that had sustained small farmers diminished as grass seed became king. Positions that remained, like those at the mill, failed to raise salaries to meet cost of living increases in the postwar era.

George Pugh remembered this as an abrupt shift in the economy. In actuality, the story stretched nearly a century. Looking just at the 1940s, rye grass was a brave new world for Linn County economics. But grass seed's fast adoption is tied to the wheat bust of the 1920s, the train's arrival in the 1870s, and the size of donation land claims in the 1850s. These events, linked through the long memory of Boston residents, created a

⁴⁴⁹ Stacy Denton, "The Rural Past-in-Present and Postwar Sub/Urban Progress," *American Studies* 53, no. 2 (2014): 119–40.

landscape primed for a cash crop, the land holdings that would spell success for rye grass, and the infrastructure that was prepared for the booms of the new agricultural "it" product. Boosters viewed this as a natural evolution of the community. Rye grass was the latest in a string of attempts to make Shedd thrive. But commercial farming meant absentee landowners, largescale operations alienated neighbors, and monocropping had environmental and economic impacts on the land.

While Pugh complained about the lack of a community, farmers did unify for business interests. Rye grass growers met in Shedd in 1940 to cooperate in the stabilization of rye grass prices at four cents per pound. Over one hundred growers from throughout Linn County were in attendance, hinting at the sheer number of rye grass farms in the area. This cooperative effort was enacted in response to the growing market for rye grass, edging out Kentucky bluegrass as the preferred seed along the East Coast. Modern estimates suggested that each acre of land could grow between 30-40 pounds of rye grass seed, showcasing the immense economic possibilities of larger farms during the 1940s.⁴⁵⁰

The Manning family, like the Pugh family, were a successful rye grass family. Merle Manning was born in Klamath Falls in 1915 and moved to the Plainview area as a child. Possibly hoping to cash in on the wheat boom but arriving a little too late, the Manning family lost their farm during the Great Depression, staying on the property but, like many families, becoming tenant farmers.⁴⁵¹ In time they were able to buy up what their neighbors failed to farm and began growing rye grass in 1934. An article on the

⁴⁵⁰ "Rye Grass Growers Seek Stabilize Season Prices," *Albany Democrat-Herald*, April 11, 1940.

⁴⁵¹ "Obituary - Merle Manning," *Albany Democrat-Herald*, January 21, 2008.

Manning family noted that "the Manning farm, like many large operations in the mid-valley, is composed of several smaller original farms that failed during the last 20 years." The land that the ranch-style Manning family home occupied was an old donation land claim. The rest of the farm was "11 or 12 tracts of land that were quite close together. Most of them were original homesteads, many of them 160-acre farms."⁴⁵² The postwar ryegrass boom was extremely favorable for the Manning family, and Merle Manning became an influential speaker on issues facing farmers in subsequent decades. The grass seed industry made Linn County \$25 million in 1972, half of the agricultural income that year, all from a single crop.

Beginning with the postwar period, the land of Boston became almost entirely grass seed, and the pioneer mill that was the epicenter of the wheat trade was now completely divorced from the landscape. The majority of crops used in feed were now shipped in from distant farms. One of the largest changes within the Thompson family regarding this new industry was the purchase of a warehouse along the railroad tracks that was specifically built to process grass seed for shipping. The warehouse was built in 1918 and passed through various owners before the Thompson purchase. Myrle Thompson, a savvy businessman, saw that the future of Linn County would be in grass seed and opened the Shedd seed warehouse, retrofitting mill equipment to clean seed, and expanded into Albany, albeit briefly, with another seed warehouse.⁴⁵³ At the mill in Boston, rye grass was a peripheral concern. Farmers that dropped off product in Shedd

⁴⁵² Jim Edmunson, "Life on Manning Farm Changes over 30 Years," Albany Democrat-Herald August 10, 1972.

⁴⁵³ The seed warehouse was demolished in 2006, when the building itself became a liability.

would be paid by Ott at the mill, and, on occasion, the mill could store excess rye grass. While sheep were still commonly seen grazing rye grass fields, farmers were less likely to keep other types of livestock that would rely on Thompson feed. With a dwindling market for feed, wages stagnated, and worker loyalties built over generations died and disappeared. Rural Linn County was irrevocably altered for those that lived there. For those just passing through, Shedd became a quaint connection to a lost era.

"Only a Place on a Country Road": Looking Backwards

In 1969 an *Oregonian* piece titled, "What is a Very Small Town" was written about Shedd, warning readers that if they looked down for a moment while driving, they'd miss it. What the reporter, James Doyle, saw in Shedd was an idyllic link to the past, a continuity that stretched from the earliest White settlement to the late 1960s without a single change. He wrote, "it is an easily read anthology, a close and friendly link with history." Highlighting the area's role in lamb breeding and rye grass, the article continued that "things are slower in this part of the valley." Almost exactly one hundred years prior, a reporter travelled by stagecoach to Shedd and wrote a similar, almost anthropological, study of this rural time capsule. Again, the folks the reporter encountered smiled wide. This time the roads were paved, but there still weren't any sidewalks, a complaint in the 1870s. And the population lingered at 150 people. To Portland gawkers, very little had changed. How lovely, they would write with a wistful tone, that such places had so adeptly avoided the trappings of modernity.⁴⁵⁴ Another

⁴⁵⁴ Monte Lewis, "Where the Sheep Are..." *Sunday Oregonian*, December 15, 1968

nostalgia piece published on Shedd during the same period noted that, "It is only a place on a county road."⁴⁵⁵

Articles like these were reliant on the notion that rural populations were frozen in amber. Sociologist W.H Friedland argued that there was no "rural" left in America by mid-century, but the desire to discover and emulate it was extremely strong.⁴⁵⁶

Sociologists Daniel T. Lichter and David L. Brown wrote that, "rural America is sometimes viewed as a kind of safety deposit box that stores America's fundamental values." Rural inhabitants were framed as "past-in-present: a spatially, temporally, and culturally regressed entity that is set apart from 'modern' progress."⁴⁵⁷ These conflicting narratives, that rural spaces were backwater and delinquent but also the keepers of a "true American identity," impacted how Americans looked at rural populations, including Shedd. After decades of aid to farm populations, there was a growing dissatisfaction directed at farmers. A 1955 article in the *New York Times* insinuated that farmers were getting rich off of the backs of taxpayers by stating, erroneously, that most farmers in Iowa had two new cars in their driveways.⁴⁵⁸ The modernity of farmers with brand new cars coupled with a general dissatisfaction with farm subsidies caused suburban and urban populations to bristle at rural advocacy. This dissatisfaction combined with a growing unease over the backwater rural south, especially as poor southern populations, Black and White, migrated into Midwestern, and urban, areas. Policy makers and

⁴⁵⁵ Floyd Mullen, "State's Oldest Water Power Mill Sold," *Greater Oregon*, June 14, 1974.

⁴⁵⁶ Daniel T. Lichter and David L. Brown, "Rural America in an Urban Society: Changing Spatial and Social Boundaries," *Annual Review of Sociology* 37 (2011): 565–92.

⁴⁵⁷ Lichter and Brown, "Rural America in an Urban Society," 568.

⁴⁵⁸ Fite, *American Farmers*, 148.

residents of urban communities found this population a deterrent to the progress of modernity, especially during the postwar boom.⁴⁵⁹ Rurality, then, was something to seek out and also something to view with a degree of skepticism. In Oregon, removed from larger eastern urban centers, places like Shedd were a nonthreatening opportunity to gawk at the past.

Popular media was also fixated on rural nostalgia in the postwar era. Television re-oriented to a rural landscape after what one scholar calls the "first great purge" of television in 1957. Television programs before 1957, most originating in radio, were largely urban and ethnically diverse. By 1957, as rural and suburban communities acquired the new technology, programming changed to accommodate what producers believed to be a "rural aesthetic," described as "tame, whitewashed, domesticated, and lowbrow." Executives moved existing television shows into the country, including *Lucy* and *Ricky Ricardo*. They were relocated from cosmopolitan New York to the staid respectability of a Connecticut county home, where *I Love Lucy* plots revolved around flower shows and PTA meetings rather than nightclubs. New television programs like *Petticoat Junction*, *The Andy Griffith Show*, and *Green Acres*, which all debuted in the early 1960s, recycled the well-trod simple-life tropes that had been tied to rural life since the colonial era in the United States.⁴⁶⁰

⁴⁵⁹ Max Fraser, *Hillbilly Highway: The Transappalachian Migration and the Making of a White Working Class* (Princeton University Press, 2023), 15, 149.

⁴⁶⁰ Dennis Tredy, "The 'First Great Purge' of American Television Programming: Understanding How and Why Popular Television Changed So Dramatically from the 1950s to the 1960s," *TV/Series*, no. Hors séries 2 (November 2022): Hors séries 2, <https://doi.org/10.4000/tvseries.6089>.

Locally, popular culture used the Oregon pioneer as a monument to morally simplistic rurality. In previous generations, pioneer nostalgia was localized in communities that had pioneer populations, like Linn County. In the postwar era, pioneer memorialization became national, with the pioneer becoming a convenient stand-in for the ideal American family. Monuments to the pioneer during this period echoed the 1950s rhetoric of the ideal White household, with a strong gendered division of labor split between men and women. Historian Cynthia Prescott argues that communities sought to represent through art that which was under attack. In the Cold War era, stories of the good, and morally upright, American pioneer was convenient shorthand for American morality. This was not an isolated incident. American anxieties in the 1970s and the culture wars of the 1990s would also create an uptick in pioneer nostalgia.⁴⁶¹

But none of this, the television programs, the monuments, the newspaper retrospectives, engaged with what was actually occurring in Boston. In reality, the community at the epicenter of local rural nostalgia was dying. Quintell's pool hall had closed down and all but one church shut its doors. The bank was still there, where Ott Thompson kept his fortunes and where farmers took out the loans that would cause them to lose their land in the 1930s. But reporters touring Shedd didn't see foreclosures or economic ebbs and flows, they saw Shedd as a straight line from the pioneer cemetery to the diner, where modern pioneer stock gathered for lunch. Reporter James Doyle saw a through-line of fortitude that obscured the cataclysmic impacts of state and federal

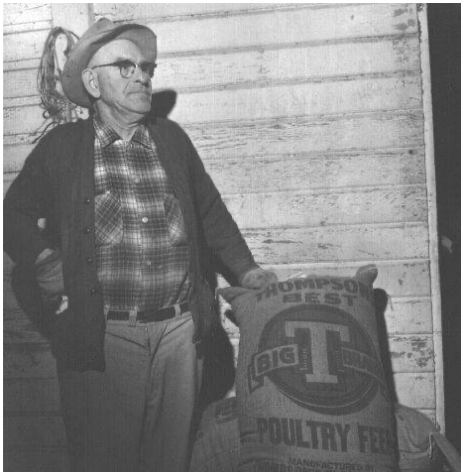
⁴⁶¹ For more on the creation of the postwar familial ideal see Cynthia Culver Prescott, "Representing the Ideal American Family: Avard Fairbanks and the Transformation of the Western Pioneer Monument," *Pacific Historical Review* 85, no. 1 (2016): 110–42; Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s*, First Edition edition (Hill and Wang, 2012).

initiatives and economic failures that buffeted communities like Shedd for the last century. These popular culture touchpoints, like the pioneer reminiscences of an earlier era, created a view of rural identity that was divorced from reality. Rural people were both the simplistic everyman and the town yokel.

The mill as an industry was, by the 1960s, losing money. Despite this reality, the mill was the centerpiece of James Doyle's article, its photograph occupying more than half of the page of the newspaper. The photo was taken, as most were, from the bridge at Boston Mill Road, so that the mill race reflected the entirety of the mill building and silos. The Thompsons Mills logos were a little worse for wear, but that only elevated the tone of the piece; it was a building transported from the pioneer era. Doyle noted that there was a town named Boston, but that the rail stop at Shedd's Station made the community migrate, pulling homes and businesses "like gravity" to the rail stop. It was all inevitable. Doyle described the progression, from wheat to seed, dairy cows to lambs, as though it was fated. The seed grows in the summer, the fields are burned in the winter, and the lambs are born at the start of spring. This forward moving but backward-looking ethos was something that Shedd residents willingly participated in. Every story told stretched backwards decades or even a century. Longtime Shedd residents were tied to the Donation Land Claims of their great grandparents. And even the new and novel was linked inextricably to what came before it.

Around the time Doyle wrote his nostalgia piece, a local photographer, Ben Maxwell, toured the mill. Ott Thompson posed for two photographs. In one, he stood next to a burlap sack of Big T Brand chicken feed. In the other, he was standing next to a bag of Delicious hard wheat flour, the product that he built his career on at the turn of the

century. In a photograph of Max Elder, the walls had frayed fabric pieces and old machinery belts ran along the ceiling. Dust from the machinery settled on Elder's shoulder and the cuffs of his sweater. These were the two versions of Shedd. One, a glossy photograph in the *Oregonian* of the mill, blurred in the ripples of the mill race. The other, an in-focus look at an era, and workers, that were fraying at the edges. Shedd residents knew both interpretations. When asked how the mill should be discussed as a state heritage site, Ron Townsend, the grandson of Ott Thompson, said simply "don't play it up to be something it isn't." He did not elaborate.⁴⁶² The town was touted as a gem of small-town America, but longtime community members struggled to reconcile the gleaming place the Willamette Valley pioneer held in history with the aged view from the mill floor.



*Figure 4.2 - Ott Thompson, 1965
Ben Maxwell Collection
City of Salem Historic Photograph Collection*



*Figure 4.3 - Max Elder, 1965
Ben Maxwell Collection,
City of Salem Historic Photograph Collection*

⁴⁶² Townsend, Robert and Martin Thompson, Interview by Doug Crispin, December 29, 2004. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

Ott, well aware that the building and his business was showing its age, deftly rebranded the mill as a historic showpiece. He was a regular contributor to local newspapers, writing about the history of Shedd and Boston and touting his own role as a founding community pioneer despite his family's late arrival on the scene. He kept the silos painted, and Bob Allen, the grandchild of his second wife, remembered that the lawn was kept mowed, the outbuildings pristine, "It was a reflection of his family." But by this point the majority of his family had moved on. He and his brothers never truly recovered from the estate battle of the 1920s, and members of Ott's extended family were hesitant to visit. His daughters had married, with Eunice, Dorothy, and Alice starting their own families. Sylva Townsend stayed in Shedd. Her husband worked for Ott for his entire adult life, and Myrle was close by, managing the Shedd Warehouse. Orval, his other son, became a politically powerful man, a well-known lawyer, a state representative, and, according to some, very nearly the governor of Oregon. But aside from handling legal issues for this father, Orval was not involved in mill dealings.⁴⁶³ By 1960, Ott's home was empty of the bustle that had defined it during the mill's heyday, packed with boarders and maids and children.

Thompsons Mills attempted to straddle the line, a pioneer monument on one hand, and a lucrative business on the other. A 1959 advertisement for Thompson's Mills boasted that the equipment used in the pioneer building can make seventy-five barrels of flour daily and fifty tons of stock feed. But it was a farce. Flour hadn't been manufactured on-site in at least fifteen years. Mentions of the mill pivoted between acknowledging the

⁴⁶³ Allen, Seymour and Bob Allen, interview by Sarah Scott, August 10, 2004. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

history of the building while also ensuring the modern standards of the product, with phrases like, "the visitor soon forgets that the mill is ancient and sees what a well-run place it is." The mill was depicted as a thriving business even if "Boston never was."⁴⁶⁴ These nostalgia narratives were told and retold for three generations, passed from original settlers down to their children and the children after them. The story of Richard Finley going to California to pay off his debts and feeding early settlers was passed down alongside the stories of Ott's crumbling empire of the 1920s. The hardships of the 1920s and 1930s sat uncomfortably alongside the gilded narrative of pioneer conquest. To sell his wares, Ott obscured the truth of Boston for the more palatable fiction, just as popular culture sanitized rural identity. The mill trudged forward, celebrating 100 years in business, a milestone Ott put on his business cards.⁴⁶⁵ And the work, too, moved forward at a lurching pace. But the community of Shedd emptied.

Workers and the War on Poverty

When Clayton Rasmussen sat for an interview, he brought with him a collection of sack needles specifically designed to quickly thread and cut. If they were still in use, they'd be highly polished, running through 300-400 feed sacks each day, but his were tarnished, kept in a drawer for decades. Born in 1938, Rasmussen was sixty-eight years old when he sat for an interview. He was a worker at the mill, but only briefly, as he and his family were starting out. He'd lived in the area his whole life, out toward Tangent

⁴⁶⁴ "101 Years Ago" *Greater Oregon*, August 7, 1959.

⁴⁶⁵ OM Thompson business card, 1958. Box 109 Folder 6. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR.

where his father farmed grain and grass seed. The Rasmussens were recent residents of Oregon, compared to the Donation Land Claim settlers, his father was born in Idaho, his mother in Michigan. Both bounced to various farming communities during their childhoods and ended up in Linn County in the 1930s, likely taking advantage of depressed land prices. Their original farm was 160 acres and slowly expanded through purchasing or renting adjacent lots.

The Rasmussens gave one third of all of the seed grown on rented land to the landowners, an example of the absenteeism that Linn County farm officials were worried about. By the 1940s, the family lived on around four hundred acres that was exclusively grass seed. Clayton was married in 1957 to Juanita "Nita" Sizemore and started his own small farm. The couple was expecting their third child a few years later, and that was when Clayton stopped by the mill to look for work. Clayton's father Harold, like most small-scale farmers in the area, worked the mill in the winter months for a little extra money. A 400-acre farm, even with lucrative grass seed, was still not profitable enough to support his family, especially if a portion of that land was rented. Knowing that his son had five mouths to feed and not nearly as much land, Harold offered to let Clayton work at the mill in his place. There was no formal application, Ott knew the Rasmussen family. When Clayton stopped into the office, he was put to work that day. Clayton remembered the year exactly, it was 1960, the year his daughter was born. His interviewer noted that it was also the year Kennedy was elected and Clayton shrugged, "that wasn't particularly important to me. Making a living for my family was."⁴⁶⁶

⁴⁶⁶ Rasmussen, Clayton. Interview by Doug Crispin. April 6, 2006. TM2017.1.3 Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

Whether or not Clayton cared about national politics, politicians were very focused on rural families like his. During the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, farm families were twice as likely to live below the poverty line than nonfarm families, even when adjusted to account for the benefits of subsistence farming to supplement income. In 1960, when Clayton Rasmussen was hired on at the mill, 45.7 percent of farmers nationally sat below the poverty line. Eight years later, the number was 18.8 percent, a huge improvement, but still twice as high as nonfarm families.⁴⁶⁷ Reports on the poverty issue highlighted that "the essential problem for a majority of the poor is low earnings, not an absence of earnings."⁴⁶⁸ Men and women were working, they just weren't earning enough. In Linn County specifically, the poverty rate in Linn County was often equal or higher than state and national averages. In 1960, the poverty rate in Linn County was 16.5 percent, equaling 9,773 people below the poverty line.⁴⁶⁹ In terms of median household income, Linn County ranked eleventh out of thirty-six counties in Oregon, with counties ranked from lowest to highest incomes. Linn County, while tracking within national averages on poverty levels, fell into the bottom third of counties when it came to income.

John Kennedy developed vague plans to address rural income inequity, but it was his successor, Lyndon Johnson, who made the "War on Poverty" a large component of his

⁴⁶⁷ Robert G. Mogull, "American Poverty in the 1960's," *Phylon* (1960-) 33, no. 2 (1972): 161–68, <https://doi.org/10.2307/273344>.

⁴⁶⁸ Mogull, "American Poverty in the 1960's."

⁴⁶⁹ Martha J. Bailey and Nicolas J. Duquette, "How Johnson Fought the War on Poverty: The Economics and Politics of Funding at the Office of Economic Opportunity," *The Journal of Economic History* 74, no. 2 (2014): 351–88.

presidency.⁴⁷⁰ Kennedy's knowledge of rural issues was sparse as he ascended to the presidency. He, like the men who espoused the brilliance of Donation Land Claims in the century prior, was convinced that it was the yeoman farmer, now re-branded as the "family farmer" that held the key to rural prosperity. During his 1960 campaign, John F. Kennedy said, "the family farm should remain the backbone of American agriculture."⁴⁷¹ Johnson, a New Deal Democrat and Texas hill country man, was more willing to admit that rural nostalgia of the yeoman farmer did not account for the redundancy of American farmers in the era of modernity.⁴⁷² Federal officials under Johnson latched onto the postwar notion that technological advances would necessarily lead to fewer farms. And with fewer farms, rural poverty would only grow.

Despite his dedication to poverty eradication, Johnson refused to entertain anything that could be considered putting someone on the dole, such as guaranteed income programs. Farm subsidies, still viewed with suspicion, were also not part of Johnson's plans. Overall, Johnson's War on Poverty showed success. From 1960 to 1968, the percentage of individuals below the poverty line shrank, from 22.2 percent to 12.8 percent. This is due, in part, to more than two hundred pieces of legislation passed under the War on Poverty umbrella, the largest increase in social safety nets in United States history. While much of the work of the War on Poverty would be chipped away at in the following decades, it was hugely successful in decreased elder poverty, better access to

⁴⁷⁰ Bailey and Duquette, "How Johnson Fought the War on Poverty."

⁴⁷¹ Hurt, *Problems of Plenty*, 125.

⁴⁷² Gareth Davies, "War on Dependency: Liberal Individualism and the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964," *Journal of American Studies* 26, no. 2 (1992): 205–31.

healthcare, and access to education for a wider population. Poverty among working adults, however, was not substantially diminished during this period and has only increased in the fifty years since.⁴⁷³

In 1967, the year that the President's National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty published "The People Left Behind," national rural unemployment was more than triple the unemployment rates of urban areas. Nationally, one out of four individuals lived in poverty in 1967. A Linn County newspaper article urged Oregonians to take the report seriously. While poverty rates in Oregon paled in comparison to areas in the rural South, areas that were considered well-off historically, like rural areas in the Willamette Valley, reported high poverty rates. Federal funds to combat poverty in Oregon totaled over 22 million dollars, the majority of which centered on Job Corps programs. Authors of "The People Left Behind" wrote "poverty in the midst of plenty is both a tragedy and a social evil." This social evil, the report continued, was pushing populations out of rural areas and into urban ghettos, increasing poverty, crime and substandard living in bloated metropolitan areas. Echoing the work of federal initiative fifty years before, Johnson's programs aimed to keep rural men and women on the land, for the benefit of the nation.⁴⁷⁴ Federal officials wanted to keep rural populations in rural areas, but there was a question as to whether rural families could stay on farms. Hubert Humphrey, in his treatise on the poverty problem in 1964, wrote that self-reliance in rural farming was a

⁴⁷³ Roger A. Lohmann, "Four Perspectives on Appalachian Culture and Poverty," *Journal of the Appalachian Studies Association* 2 (1990): 76–91; Bailey and Duquette, "How Johnson Fought the War on Poverty"; Davies, "War on Dependency."

⁴⁷⁴ Edward T. Breathitt, *The People Left Behind, A Report by the President's National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty* (1967), <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED016543>.

myth ready to be abandoned.⁴⁷⁵ The solution was not free land, like it was in the 1850s, or professionalization, as it was in the 1910s, or technological advances, as it was in 1930s. Farmers without adequate farms couldn't find new, more lucrative crops, and they couldn't tap into new markets. Herbert Humphrey and other rural advocates argued instead that farmers should seek second jobs. They should work in the mills, the lumber camps, or the factories to save their farms. "Many rural families should be able to supplement farm income while remaining on their small farms."⁴⁷⁶ While this may have felt like a new idea to those outside of rural communities, wage labor to supplement farm incomes in Linn County was as old as settlement itself, and it did little to elevate the rural poor.

The federal poverty line was set as less than \$3,000 per year in the early 1960s. Government officials acknowledged that this yearly wage was unlikely to sufficiently support a family in the postwar era and placed the necessary income at closer to \$5,000 per year for a family of four in an urban center, likely slightly less in a rural area. Humphrey argued that poverty levels were inherently arbitrary and that, even if a family was above that line, they may "exist on the ragged edge of subsistence."⁴⁷⁷ At Thompsons Mills, one of the wage labor positions that was meant to save rural families, the pay rate for young men was around \$2,500 a year, assuming a fulltime position. Overtime during this period would have been available during busy seasons, but layoffs were equally likely during slow periods. Rural populations in Linn County couldn't adequately

⁴⁷⁵ Senator Hubert H. Humphrey, *War on Poverty* (McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964), 51.

⁴⁷⁶ Humphrey, *War on Poverty*, 69.

⁴⁷⁷ Humphrey, *War on Poverty*, 18.

supplement farm incomes for the same reason their farms couldn't thrive. Large corporate farms shrank the need for labor and bought land that could have supported diversified industries.

By 1967, the War on Poverty era was in decline. The Vietnam War necessitated an international focus of federal attentions, and the same war hobbled Johnson's domestic initiatives, leading to Nixon-era small government. Those poverty programs that survived were moved to state implementation, and funding was cut on a federal level.⁴⁷⁸ Earl Butz, the infamous Agriculture Secretary under Richard Nixon, summarized his policy on agriculture in the 1970s as "Get big or get out." After a century of placating the small-scale yeoman farmer, the federal government gave in to the supply-and-demand cycle of American farming and increased interest in largescale monoculture farming. What was happening in Shedd, the decimation of small farms in exchange for large corporate farms, was exactly what Butz and his ilk were hoping for.

In 2007, Rasmussen walked the production floor, pointing out machinery he recognized and trying to remember how it all worked. "It made more sense when it was running," he said. Four decades after moving on from his mill job, Rasmussen couldn't quite reconcile the space. He didn't stay long as an employee, and when asked about his next job, he said he "went into the woods." He worked on a road building crew for logging company towards Alsea Falls, making \$2.75 an hour, more than doubling his wage at the mill. At some point, he opened an automotive repair shop where his son would also briefly work. His brother-in-law, John Sizemore, worked at the mill after Clayton left, and his father, Harold, continued working at the mill during the off season of

⁴⁷⁸ Bailey and Duquette, "How Johnson Fought the War on Poverty."

his farm through the 1970s. Ed Putman, a worker at the mill for multiple years, also left for the lumber industry, getting a job at a plywood mill in Albany, leaving the community of Shedd altogether.⁴⁷⁹ Farming, even with supplemental income, was no longer an option.

Myrle Thompson and Labor Changes

Ott was in very poor health in the months before his death. In March of 1965, he suffered a heart attack at the mill but demanded to be taken home rather than the hospital. He lived just two more months. Otto Thompson's obituary, carefully crafted and sent to multiple Willamette Valley papers, identified him a "pioneer miller," linking him to an identity created in Linn County before he was even born. Thompsons Mills and the warehouse were closed for the day so that employees could pay their respects.⁴⁸⁰ Ott's sons inherited the mill. Orval had a thriving law practice, leaving Myrle to handle mill business alone. Ott's daughters, all of whom had either worked at the mill or married mill employees, did not receive any part of the mill business. Eunice remembered that, while she didn't hold ill will towards her brothers, she didn't return to Boston for many years after her father's death, disappointed at being left out of the legacy their family built. While women had always been instrumental in the successes of Thompson's Mills, they

⁴⁷⁹ "Ash Swale Men Join Rural Fire District," *Albany Democrat-Herald*, April 26, 1941.

⁴⁸⁰ "Otto Thompson, Linn Pioneer Miller, Dies," *Albany Democrat-Herald*, May 24, 1965

were economically and socially excluded from its legacy. Decades later, Eunice shrugged at the memory, "those things happen in all families."⁴⁸¹

After Ott's death, Myrle added mill operations to his workload, in addition to the seed warehouse. Neil Farwell, Max Elder, and a few other "old timers" stayed on with the new leadership, but the transition wasn't smooth. While the work was the same, the workforce in the late 1960s and 1970s had changed. Young men who came to the mill for work during this period were not as likely to have farm experience because family farms were few and far between. Milling machinery was entirely foreign to them, especially equipment this old. While Ott relied on passed down knowledge, a "make do" outlook, and cash business, Myrle tried to modernize. Ron Townsend's son remembered Myrle correcting work that he'd been taught by longtime staff, telling him that Fred Ossenbrink, one of the longest tenured mill employees, was "a Dutchmen, they do everything backwards."⁴⁸² When asked about Myrle, interviewees would pause. And then, carefully, they would say that he was a particular man.⁴⁸³ He thought the older staff were ineffective, and he was equally vexed by the young men coming in for work.

Decades later, owner Dave Babbitts would blame workers for the mill's financial collapse. He said that it was the lack of good workers, individuals who knew enough about mills to handle the complex maintenance requirements of the structure, that

⁴⁸¹ Thompson, Eunice and Robert Arthur, Interview by Sarah Scott, July, 27 2004. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

⁴⁸² Townsend, Robert and Martin Thompson, Interview by Doug Crispin, December 29, 2004. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

⁴⁸³ Allen, Seymour and Bob Allen, interview by Sarah Scott, August 10, 2004. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

doomed the business. He wrote to friends, "the people that are available are either kids that merely want to put their time in, grab the check, or they are high priced to the point we can't afford them." He continued, "Finding people that are actually knowledgeable in the art of being a millwright is a joke." Both owners, Myrle in the 1960s and Babbitts in the 1980s, saw the downstream impact of the end of small-scale farmers. Even though the fear of rural out-migration was nearly one hundred years old, the mill's seasonal labor had been staffed with the remaining subsistence farmers through the 1950s. As small farms disappeared, young workers, the farmers and sons of farmers, disappeared as well. By the late 1960s, there were very few subsistence farmers looking for extra work. For those searching for regular employment, mill work seemed unreliable and underpaid. Other unskilled labor industries were more likely to provide a living wage. Myrle Thompson's office staff complained that workers were prone to quitting or unable to perform extremely physical labor. A notice in 1970 from Oregon Employment sounded the alarm that the skilled rural workforce was diminishing in the Willamette Valley. In 1973, the last year that the mill would be in Thompson family ownership, there were a total of forty-two employees who worked, at some point, at the mill. The mill by this period only needed ten workers on the payroll at a time, so this number hints at the short tenure of most employees. Of those forty-two workers in 1973, only seven were local to Shedd, and most of the Shedd residents were longtime workers hired by Ott.

The first official timesheets appear in 1968, three years after Ott's death, during a push to professionalize under Myrle Thompson. These records give a glimpse of the mercurial nature of employment in the latter decades of the mill's operation. A survey of timesheets, unemployment claims, and ledger books show that it was common for

workers at the mill to be injured, laid off, or quit. Individuals who worked at the mill for their adult lives, like Rex Harrison, were prone to accidents as they aged. Harrison was injured on the job in 1969, after twenty-five years at the mill. He died of a heart attack before he returned from medical leave. The work was hard on young employees too. One worker developed a hernia, another was injured when a testicle was pinched between salt blocks, a third caught his hand in a chain binder. Dorothy Trent, one of Ott's daughters, applied for unemployment in 1975 when she developed a severe dust allergy. James Gomez listed his reason for quitting as poor work conditions, possibly due to the number of worker injuries and completely absent safety equipment.⁴⁸⁴

Between 1975 and 1986, thirty-nine workplace accident claims were filed at Thompsons Mills. The two most costly injuries occurred in 1985 and 1986, when the Babbitts had the hardest time finding experienced mill workers.⁴⁸⁵ A safety inspection conducted during Myrle's tenure called out missing safety guards on multiple belts and carbon tetrachloride fire extinguishers, which are a nerve toxin, still in use on the production floor. A later report would suggest that none of these issues were addressed. For younger employees, the strain and risk of injury was not worth the compensation. One employee said he'd rather be a clothing salesman on his unemployment form. Another worker left after only a few days because he wasn't strong enough to haul feed sacks.

⁴⁸⁴ Administrators Decision, September 10, 1972, Box 8, Folder 19. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR.

⁴⁸⁵ SAIF'S SUMMARIZATION OF FIRM THOMPSONS MILLS, March 30, 1986, Box 41 Folder 55. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR.

While mill work allowed for unskilled employment, the physical nature of the position had risks, especially for those for which manual labor was the only option. Two men with intellectual disabilities were hired during this period. Joe Harper, aged twenty-eight, had a wife, children, and a fifth-grade education. Harbor was unable to read and write, but, through memorization, was able to pass a driving test and receive a license. As an adult, he held a series of manual labor positions before working at the mill. After a serious workplace injury at the mill, Harbor required surgery and suffered permanent disabilities for the rest of his life. He was "permanently restricted from any kind of activity which requires lifting, frequent bending or stooping, or prolonged standing." A report noted that Harbor couldn't hope for a living wage given his injuries, his lack of education, and the positions that would be open to someone with his disability. After his injury, he became dependent on government assistance.

Bud Kronsteiner was also hired during this period. His handwriting was very careful: he would sometimes draw lines on his timesheets to be sure that he wrote his name straight. According to his sister, his name was the only thing that he could write. Bud's intellectual disabilities frustrated his mother, but at the mill, he found work that suited him. Extremely tall and strong, Kronsteiner was known as a hard worker and kind man. His station was at the corner of the production floor, next to the original edge of the 1860 structure. The beams that he leaned against were hand hewn by P.V Crawford and his son in the 1860s. Kronsteiner's job was to sack, weigh, and sew feed sacks. His motions, gliding from the chute to the scale, the scale to the sewing machine, were so regular that he wore down the floorboards beneath his feet. The floor was patched with plywood, but each patch was worn through. Kronsteiner's boot print is still clearly

visible in the floorboards. He would stay in his position at the mill until its final days, at which point he moved to Eugene to be cared for by his sister. He was unable to secure other employment.⁴⁸⁶



*Figure 4.4 - Bud's Corner, 2020. Note the wear in the plywood flooring.
Picture taken by author*

Gendered spheres at the mill also weakened by the 1970s. Eleanor Wetgen, an office worker, watched leadership changes from Ott to Myrle and then the Babbitts. In the 1950s and 1960s, she answered phones, handled invoices and orders, and managed the office. When low staff necessitated it, especially after Myrle sold the mill, she started

⁴⁸⁶ Sherrill Kirchoff (sister of Bud Kronsteiner) in conversation with the author, June, 2024. Timecards are in Box 103, Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR.

doing truck deliveries to Coos Bay and Roseburg.⁴⁸⁷ Joan Whippo and Linda Cummings listed mill work in addition to office work on her timesheet suggesting that, by the mid-1970s, women were working on the production floor in some capacity.⁴⁸⁸ During this period, men also began to work in the office. Art Burke, Gerald Jensen, and Nate Kropf all handled the books in the last decades of the mill. When Nate was interviewed, however, he noted that the workplace distinctions were still clear. The office workers, even the men, didn't eat lunch with mill workers. Nate would have liked to, but he said that it would "change dynamics" if he tried. In place of a century-old gendered labor distinction, a blue collar/white collar distinction took hold. The office workers, while friendly with production staff, were separated by their job title and their education, or perhaps a bit of both.⁴⁸⁹

Workers were low paid and the mill building was unsafe because there was no capital to invest in improvements or staff retention. Demand for small-scale feed production was contracting. During this period, a letter arrived addressed to Myrle Thompson in 1972 from a Hong Kong distributor. Thompsons Mills had been named as a potential distributor of animal feed by the Department of Agriculture. The mill's office manager wrote a terse reply, stating simply "we do not export." Decades prior, possibly immediately following the wheat crash of the 1920s, the mill's world shrank down to Oregon alone, even as exports of grass seed from neighboring farms were on the rise. By

⁴⁸⁷ Albany Democrat-Herald Albany, Oregon · Saturday, August 16, 1952.

⁴⁸⁸ Linda Cummings Timecard, July 30, 1979. Box 24 Folder 73. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR.

⁴⁸⁹ Kropf, Nathan and Eleanor Wetgen, interview by Sarah Scott. August 2, 2004. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

1972, the world of the mill was even smaller, returning to the small family affair serving only local farms that it had been under its first owners.

"It was a nostalgia thing": Selling the Mill

Myrle Thompson watched his father work until the day he died, like Ott's father had before him. So, in 1973, he decided to quit while he was still upright. Myrle announced to local farmers that the building would be for sale, and he was open to offers. While the mill and seed warehouse were still employing ten or so people, Myrle's income was mercurial. The take-home of the mill's officers, Myrle and Orval, between 1969 and 1973 was usually around \$20,000. But some years, like 1969, show zero dollars distributed to officers. The costs of building upkeep were responsible for unpredictable expenses. Old equipment could burn out; the building itself could falter. The mill, when stripped of its nostalgia, was simply a liability.

Ellwood Miller, a former employee, met with Myrle to talk about the business. They poured over the books together and toured the mill and outbuildings. But eventually, Ellwood recalled, "reality set in." At that point "it wasn't really an economic unit." Ellwood remembered the mill in the 1940s, with trucks loaded high with feed and deliveries throughout the Willamette Valley. He remembered floral-patterned flour sacks and groceries for sale. By 1974, if there was money in feed, the mill was ill equipped to cash in on it. Larger farms were buying bulk feed, and the small orders that had been commonplace in the 1950s, when family farms had livestock, were no longer the business norm. The livestock industry was shrinking in Linn County, and a feed mill was not a good financial bet. The mill also couldn't handle bulk deliveries or shipments, the loading

areas were designed for wagons, not semitrucks.⁴⁹⁰ From July 1972 to May 31, 1973, net profits were only \$17,586.78.

Ellwood Miller was a descendent of the Farwell family, the last in a long entanglement between the Thompsons and Farwells. Richard Farwell, the pioneer father, witnessed his sons working at the mill under Martin Thompson, and one son, Ed, was shot by the lovely Ella Thompson. The ugliness of that evening, however, did little to dissuade a cordial business relationship. Ed Farwell, Ellwood's grandfather, continued at the mill, working alongside his supposed son prior to World War I. In 1951, Ed Farwell celebrated his 50th wedding anniversary with a large party at their home next to the mill. Ott and Laura Thompson were in attendance, as well as numerous former and current mill workers.⁴⁹¹ Ellwood remembered that his grandfather spoke often about his own father's overland journey and the earliest days in Boston. An article on Ed and Mabel's golden anniversary described the Farwell family, noting a "long line of a family tradition marked by the qualities of permanence and stability." The article continued, "families like the Farwells represent a sustaining and stabling influence in our society that has helped to make our country grow and become great."⁴⁹² Ed Farwell had lived long enough to bury the more unsavory parts of his past.

Ellwood Miller's mother was one of the gaggle of children born to Ed and Mabel Farwell. Neil Farwell was Ellwood's uncle. Ellwood's father, Dale Miller, lodged at the

⁴⁹⁰ Kropf, Nathan and Eleanor Wetgen, interview by Sarah Scott. August 2, 2004. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

⁴⁹¹ "Mr. and Mrs. Ed Farwell Note Golden Anniversary," *Albany Democrat-Herald*, December 6, 1951.

⁴⁹² "95-Year-Old Shedd Man Still Owns Part of DLC," *Albany Democrat-Herald*, May 24, 1956.

Thompson house as a teenager and worked in the mill in the 1920s through 1940s, though he only appeared in surviving ledger books in 1941.⁴⁹³ By the time Ellwood was a teenager, his father was, like nearly everyone else in Shedd, raising grass seed. Ellwood worked at the mill during a break in college in the mid-1950s. He installed a hopper on the upper floor of the mill, specifically to assist in making bulk feed. The work was so bad that he was hospitalized with dust pneumonia and was thrilled to return to college in the spring, leaving mill work behind him. Two decades later, Miller looked through the glossy lens of nostalgia when he considered buying the mill. But in the end, the mill was sold to Merlene Danaher nee Manning. Merlene and Ellwood were in 4H together as kids, and in an interview, he brought out an album with a photo of a young Merlene next to the cow she raised. They were standing in Ed Farwell's yard, a stone's throw from mill property. Two decades later she would be the last mill owner.⁴⁹⁴

When Myrle Thompson put the mill up for sale, newspapers noted that it was the seventh oldest continuously operating business in Oregon. The history of the mill was part of its value, and as buyers passed through the structure, a series of ideas were floated as future mill ventures. A roller rink, a dance hall, and an antique shop were all options, but when Merlene decided to make the purchase, the mill stayed as it was, a feed mill with "a woman's touch," as the *Albany Democrat* noted.⁴⁹⁵ At the bottom of the article announcing the sale, Myrle, Merlene, and James, her husband at the time, posed next to

⁴⁹³ Ledger Book, 1941, Box 81. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR.

⁴⁹⁴ Kropf, Nathan and Eleanor Wetgen, interview by Sarah Scott. August 2, 2004. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR. Digital Audio File.

⁴⁹⁵ Connie Petty, "There was no shortage of Buyers for Shedd Mill," *Albany Democrat-Herald*, June 18, 1974

the mill. Once the sale was final, Myrle sent a letter to longstanding customers and distributors, announcing his retirement.

It was with a great deal of reluctance that this decision was reached because the mill was established in 1858 and has been operated by members of the Thompson Family since 1891; however, we are especially pleased that Jim and Merlene Danaher have purchased the mill because Merlene is a member of a pioneer Linn County family, being the daughter of Merle W. Manning.

The "daughter of Merle Manning" was accepted due to her proximity to her father, a well-known farmer in the rye grass trade who was involved in political and agricultural positions in Linn County. But he wasn't a Linn County pioneer. Perhaps, like Ott Thompson, he claimed an identity of pioneer simply because he occupied pioneer land. This connection to history, however dubious, was important enough to highlight.

Back to the Land: Merlene Babbitts Tries to Rebuild

In a 1972 article about the Manning family, two photographs appear. The first is of the Manning men, four generations of farmers gathered around a truck. They appeared in blue jeans, sturdy boots, and white t-shirts. The second photograph is the matriarch, Polly Manning, in a pair of sunglasses and a white blouse, her dark hair immaculately styled. She is pictured standing on her manicured lawn, holding a beautiful blooming flower. The modernity of Mrs. Manning, a model housewife standing in a perfect suburban lawn, was a forward-looking image, while the farm hands' photograph looked backwards, to the labor of men that stretched more than a century. Before World War II, Mrs. Manning noted that she was responsible for feeding threshing crews of as many as thirty men to manage the Manning grass harvest. But now, in the 1970s, the Manning family was "a modern farm family that has changed with the times." The operation was

largely family-run, with only one fulltime man. During harvest, a few part time workers were brought on. But beyond that, the business was a family affair with the capacity of a commercial farming enterprise thanks to technological advancement lessening the need for manpower. This was the ideal farm family for the twenty-first century. Large, commercial, mechanized, and nearly self-sufficient. Merlene Danaher was raised on the Manning farm and looked forward to modernizing a pioneer mill.

The fact that a woman owned the mill bemused local reporters. Merlene was asked in a 1979 interview how she felt working around a production floor full of men, and she said that she didn't mind, she was raised around men. But she did have a foreman to manage the staff day-to-day. "They answer to him."⁴⁹⁶ Her relationship with her father legitimized her ownership of the mill; her foreman legitimized her management. In 1979, Merlene divorced Phil Danaher and married Dave Babbits, her employee. Dave grew up not far from the mill and was only in his mid-twenties when he came to the mill for work. Merlene and Dave had two children, and just as Ott's children had half a century before, they played in the millhouse and came to the production floor. In the 1930s, a young Eunice Thompson wrote her father a pretend check, proudly signing her name. The check was found in a desk drawer seventy years later. In the 1980s, Matt and Katie Babbits wrote their father notes and drew him pictures.⁴⁹⁷ Dave Babbits carefully filed the notes as a keepsake within the notices from creditors in a filing cabinet. In many ways, the Babbits era of mill ownership was a return to the family business that it was in the 1930s

⁴⁹⁶ Jerry Easterly "The Millowner" *Statesman Journal*, March 11, 1979.

⁴⁹⁷ Note for Matt, undated. Box 109 Folder 5. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR.

when Laura and Ott Thompson worked together to maintain the mill and lodging for workers. But, unlike the 1930s, which the mill sailed through without financial hardship, the 1970s and 1980s were catastrophic for Boston's economic health. In 1979, the load bearing flume wall of the mill collapsed, creating costly repairs for the Babbits, who were only just breaking even on the business. The damage to the flume wall and storage area above the millrace decreased production by 50 percent. While repairs were part of the mill's history, this collapse was the first largescale structural issue that the mill faced in its century of service.⁴⁹⁸ By that point, workers wondered if the mill had many more years left.

The best years, Merlene recalled, were during the "back to the land movement" of the 1970s. Counterculture advocates came out to rural communities to try their hand at small-scale subsistence farming. The bloom quickly fell off the rose, though, and these hippie farmers returned to cities, according to Merlene. This short-lived movement tapped into the same nostalgia that fueled interest in areas like Shedd for the last century. Communal and cooperative farms were a reaction against the consumerist impulse of the postwar era, but they relied on a sepia toned understanding of rurality. Back-to-the-land advocates used the terms like pioneer and all of the rhetoric associated with it to legitimize their settlements.⁴⁹⁹ A mix of environmentalism and a misplaced nostalgia for a "primitive" life, communes and counterculture farming was widely discussed, even if the implementation was sporadic and unsuccessful. It is hard to know exactly how large the

⁴⁹⁸Ruth Rydell et al., "Tributaries of the Willamette: Yamhill, Santiam, Calapooya," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (1943): 147–71, JSTOR.

⁴⁹⁹ Ryan H. Edgington, "'Be Receptive to the Good Earth': Health, Nature, and Labor in Countercultural Back-to-the-Land Settlements," *Agricultural History* 82, no. 3 (2008): 279–308.

movement was in Linn County. But the general consensus was that those that returned to the land for love of simplicity failed to thrive at farming and commune living. This brief nostalgic return to simple living was the last time anyone would describe the mill as profitable.

This environmental nostalgia was also represented in Oregon politics during this period. Urban environmentalists, worried at the long ranging impacts of suburban sprawl, unchecked logging, and the environmental impact of chemicals rallied around Governor Tom McCall. He promised to stem the tide of development and protect natural, and agricultural, spaces. Like the cultural importance of rural identity in television, the wide-open spaces of Linn County grass fields were viewed as something to protect. But suburban sprawl was not a risk in the sparsely populated area around Shedd. Farmland was too lucrative, and no one was clamoring to move into the area, unlike the coastal communities and area around Portland that were rapidly being developed.⁵⁰⁰ In this battle, agriculturists were an idealized use of land, especially when compared to the logging enterprises that were receiving the brunt of environmental ire.

But this approval was limited to nostalgic versions of farming, which were small scale family enterprises. When urban environmentalists were faced with the realities of modern commercial farming, the alliance fractured. In Boston, this would come to a head over the issue of field burning. Field burning was re-introduced on Willamette Valley farms following World War II. A practice of Kalapuyan peoples prior to White settlement and nineteenth century farmers, burning was phased out during the mechanization of the

⁵⁰⁰ To see McCall's impact on beaches and natural spaces, see: Aurand and Carpenter, *So the Future Will Have a Place*; Robbins, *Landscapes of Conflict*; Devon McCurdy, *Upstream Influence: The Economy, the State, and Oregon's Landscape, 1860-2000*, February 24, 2014, <http://hdl.handle.net/1773/25016>.

1920s. But the practice was extremely effective for controlling pests and disease-causing spores on grass seed farms, and the practice was reintroduced by the 1950s."⁵⁰¹ With Oregon's focus on environmentalism in the 1970s, fires seemed like just another way in which farmers were taking advantage of their role in the community. The general consensus of those interviewed for a 1989 article on a potential smoke ban was that these burnings were ruining the summertime. People were choked up when they left their homes and, especially for those with breathing issues, the smoke was unbearable. One resident of Lebanon who was interviewed compared the smoke to Los Angeles smog.

The non-farm public in the Willamette Valley firmly believed that the farmers burning fields were giant commercial conglomerates. Some people didn't remember burns from their youth, incorrectly assuming that it was only large commercial farms that relied on burns. Only one person interviewed noted that it was part of Willamette Valley's heritage, but they still didn't like it. Public complaints about the smoke, especially in more populated and less agricultural areas like Eugene, increased, even as the numbers of acres burned decreased. An article in the *Eugene Register-Guard* quoted various politicians encouraging the people of Eugene to protest any change in the U. S. Environmental Protection Agency that would relax burning restrictions.⁵⁰² McCall's policies had little impact on Boston outside of burn restrictions. But the debate around field burning highlighted the growing divide between those who worked the land and those who appreciated it. Farmland and farmers were idealized as Oregon populations

⁵⁰¹ "Rural Fires Again," *Albany Democrat-Herald*, August 25, 1959.

⁵⁰² Notice of Air Contaminant Discharge Permit", July 1, 1975. Box 57, Folder 6. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR.

grew, but that approval was limited to an extremely narrow understanding of how the land should be managed.

Unemployment Notices and the End of the Mill

Merlene and Dave Babbitts were unable to stop the slow demise of Thompsons Mills. One could blame largescale cultural, political, or economic shifts, but the reason was simply a matter of profit and expenses. What began in 1940 with the end of flour production continued as small-scale Willamette Valley farmers left rural communities. As community makeups changed, the built-in workforces of farm laborers stopped coming into the mill for work, and untrained labor was fickle and accident-prone. Prices for grain, deliveries, and building upkeep all went up. Starting around 1979, the men and women working at the mill made their feelings known about pay, the work, and (on occasion) each other in writing. On May 19, 1980, Daniel Kroeger wrote "Uncle Sam works here" on the back of his timecard where withdraws were tallied.⁵⁰³ Alongside tally marks scribbled on mill walls in the 1920s and 1930s, new staff tagged the walls with childish graffiti of dinosaurs. To deal with downtime, a basketball hoop was hung in one of the loading areas. Staff were no longer forced to keep busy by sweeping out silos. Annoyances among the young and underpaid staff only grew, and unemployment notices came in waves. Some men left on their own, when the work was too hard, or too low paid. Some men left for better opportunities. Fred Samson worked only four days before he quit. James Prater started in July but left in August to join the army. Charles Wilson

⁵⁰³ Daniel Kroeger Timecard, May 19, 1980. Box 28 Folder 3. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR.

worked at the mill for three months, but the commute was too far for the amount of pay he received.⁵⁰⁴ The mobility of this generation was its greatest asset in combating low wages. While men in the 1940s and 1950s were often tied to farms, consolidation of land into commercial farms severed a link that had, in previous eras, kept men at the mill. Without inherited land, there was no reason to stay, and so workers didn't.



*Figure 4.5 - Dinosaur Graffiti
Photographed by author*

⁵⁰⁴ Compensation Records, 1973. Box 11 Folder 77. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR.

Nate Kropf was one of the longest tenured new employees; he stayed at the mill for six years. He was also one of the last to have a farm. Kropf's family moved to a farm adjacent to the mill in 1957, when Nate was about four years old. The Kropf family lived in Oregon for multiple generations, originally emigrating from Texas, and they lived in various farming communities in and around the Willamette Valley ever since. He was raised Mennonite, so, unlike the largescale rye grass farmers, the Kropf family kept a small farm and still raised chickens, cows, and pigs. They also fished along Sodom ditch, the last vestiges of a subsistence lifestyle that had fallen out of fashion in the previous century. Nate knew he wouldn't be able to support himself farming, so he went to school for accounting. After college, Kropf replaced Dorothy Trent, Ott's daughter, as the bookkeeper. The mill was "fine" financially in the 1970s according to Kropf, but as things got farther along, it started to get a little harder to pay bills within thirty days. Railcar deliveries of grain alone could cost as much as \$12,000. When Kropf left the mill for a better job, bills were going sixty days before they were getting paid. Financial troubles, Nate recalled, just snowballed. Kropf would argue with Eleanor Wetgen, another worker, about the future of the business. He thought that sacked feed was going to give way to bulk orders, something the mill could not accommodate, but Eleanor believed that there'd always be farmers with a cow or two to keep sacked feed in business. She could not envision a community without small farms, even as they had all but disappeared.

At the end of 1982, the mill was breaking even with little to no profits after expenses were paid.⁵⁰⁵ Young men on the production floor, chronically underpaid, started calling out. Keith Johnson's 1982 timecard listed two days off, one because he was "sick in the head" and the other because he was "sick in the pants." On the bottom of the timesheet, he drew a cartoon reindeer.⁵⁰⁶ To survive on low wages, workers took pay advances for as much as \$250, which would be subtracted from subsequent paychecks, essentially indenturing themselves to the mill.⁵⁰⁷ By this point the mill was delivering to mid-Willamette Valley and coastal communities. Deliveries to the Portland area stopped after the end of flour production, and there are no records to suggest that Thompsons Mills products ever shipped to eastern Oregon. In 1983, Dave and Merlene Babbitts decided to run a series of radio advertisements to help the business,

For 124 years Thompson's Mills has been producing quality livestock feed to ranchers all over Oregon. Their product is available in 36 stores and used in 8 counties. Some farmers won't use anything except the Big "T" Brand because they know the oldest is the best. Ask for the Big "T" Brand...from your local feed store... since 1857 ... Thompson's Mill of Shedd Oregon...⁵⁰⁸

The Thompson family sold the mill the decade prior, but the name stayed the same. Unfortunately, cashing in on the pioneer myth wasn't as effective as it had been, and it was becoming apparent that maybe the oldest wasn't the best. In an effort to diversify

⁵⁰⁵ Trial Balance Sheet, December 31, 1981, Box 26, Folder 1. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR.

⁵⁰⁶ Keith Johnson Timecard, December 13, 1982, Box 103 Folder 6 Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR.

⁵⁰⁷ Bob Davie Timecard, December 13, 1982, Box 103 Folder 6 Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR.

⁵⁰⁸ Radio Advertisement, 1983. Box 35, folder 4. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR.

income, Dave Babbits opened a Christmas Tree farm on mill property. He also dabbled in power generation by installing a generator over the millrace, netting the mill \$35,000 a year. These were only stopgap measures. Business went from bad to worse, and building upkeep and staffing issues kept growing. Layoffs of everyone but the most essential workers during the slower seasons began in 1982. In 1985, payroll folders had stacks of unemployment claims, with "lack of work" handwritten under the cause for termination. Nate Kropf had already moved along to a different feed supplier, Max Elder left shortly thereafter. Neil Farwell finally retired after a lifetime of mill labor. In 1987, a simple note signaled an unceremonious end: "No payroll to report."⁵⁰⁹

The same year that there was no payroll to report, Dave, listed as President, and Merlene, listed as secretary, wrote a letter to their creditors asking for a payment plan to meet their outstanding debts. Downturns in the local economy are to blame, they wrote. "We value your continued patience. We are hopeful that you will be tolerant and work with us through this difficult time."⁵¹⁰ Creditors returned the letter signed if they agreed to the payment plan. Willamette Seed Co, Wilcox Feed and Seed, Dickson Warehouse, Cala Farms, Orval Thompson's law firm, Central Linn Seed, Mill Rite Farms, and Louis Falk Screenings are a few of the creditors that the mill owed. Sheri at the Falk company wrote a note of commiseration to the Babbits: "we know hard times."⁵¹¹ The Babbits worked to pay off debts, but business never recovered. The post-Thompson era of the

⁵⁰⁹ Employers Tax Report, June 30, 1987 Box 100, folder 25. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR.

⁵¹⁰ Letter to Credits, March 20, 1987. Box 100 Folder 23. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR.

⁵¹¹ Letter from Floyd Stout to Thompsons Mills, March 24, 1987. Box 100 Folder 27. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR.

mill was over in less than a decade. The Babbits used Calapooia water rights for power generation, and Dave could run a specialty feed order if such an order came in, but wage laborers were entirely absent for the first time in the mill's history.

From 1987 until the mill's final sale to Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Dave and Merlene worked to arouse state interest in the property, seen as the only option for saving the building and recouping sunk costs. Dave Babbits wrote to family friends about the struggles he was facing in the last years that the Babbits owned the property.

We are continuing our effort to sell the mill and surrounding land. There has been so much pressure from environmental agencies and groups that it seems the most prudent course of action at the time."

Environmental agencies took an interest in the mill, specifically the obstruction to natural fishways that were legally sanctioned by the mill's territorial water rights. Meeting new state regulations was costly, and the mill was more of a liability than an income generator. Dave Babbits wrote, "the darn place could always burn down and then we'd have nothing."⁵¹² Eventually, with urging from environmental advocates to restore the waterways, the mill was purchased by Oregon State Parks, one of many new properties bought during a spurt of parks expansion in the early 2000s.⁵¹³ The Babbits family moved, and the work of milling ended with a whimper. Just as flour was discontinued without a word, the last day the machines ran for commercial production was unannounced. After 150 years, the mill that sustained a lost community ground to a halt.

⁵¹² Letter from Dave Babbits to Larry Nancy and John, September 26, 1994. Box 88, Folder 30. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR.

⁵¹³ Aurand and Carpenter, *So the Future Will Have a Place*.



*Figure 4.6 - Thompsons Mills, circa 2000
Thompsons Mills Heritage Site Historic Collection*

The Last Labor of Boston Mills

In 2004, State Parks Director Mike Carrier, an advocate for natural resources and natural fishways, announced that the papers to purchase Boston Mills were signed. Negotiations stretched on for years. The Babbitts originally asked for nearly \$4 million for the land, buildings, and water rights in 1999, a number that Governor Kitzhaber rejected out of hand, as it would have limited other park acquisitions.⁵¹⁴ The final cost of the 30.5-acre property, the water rights, and the dams that restricted the Calapooia River, was \$856,547. The land that was freely given to the Savage family to stimulate settlement in the 1850s was bought back by the State of Oregon as a heritage site. The state paid another \$15,000 for the items and artifacts that were strewn around the site, totaling more than 3,500 objects and object collections and an expansive archive of rural labor.

⁵¹⁴ "State Considers Buying Historic Site", Albany Democrat Herald. April 28, 1999.

It took years for Oregon State Parks to modify the building enough to meet safety regulations and clear out a century of scrap metal, dust, and dirt. In 2011, Parks removed the Sodom and Shearer dams that Ott Thompson had so carefully tended. Removing the dams liberated salmon and steelhead trout that hadn't enjoyed free navigation on the river since at least the 1890s. Mike Carrier's replacement as parks director, Tim Woods, saw to the removal of the dams, historic relics that had outlived their usefulness. Water still ran through the millrace, but Parks promised local farmers that they would keep water levels at an agreed upon height to prevent flooding and allow for irrigation. During high water, farmers came to the mill to complain, a tradition generations long.

Rangers were given access to the site in June of 2004, 146 years after the first mill was built in Boston. Ranger Doug Crispin was handpicked to transition this feed mill into a heritage site, and he documented the experience in a 282-page work log. Exasperated by the piles of equipment, Crispin wrote about the mess that he'd been left to clean up.⁵¹⁵ It would be more than a decade before a full inventory was completed. During this period, workers were called and interviewed, and Dave Babbitts walked through the building with rangers to explain the machinery. After a years-long fight to make this a state park, Babbitts was less than impressed with the rangers in charge. They weren't good pioneer stock. They weren't farmers or millers. And then didn't understand what the mill meant to people.

Instead, state parks workers seemed more like the bureaucrats that had come into Shedd like the tide each generation, making suggestions and demanding improvements,

⁵¹⁵ Crispin, Doug, *Illustrated Work Log 2004-2010 Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection*, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR., pg. 5

and then rolling out again, leaving the rural community to fend for itself. Crispin wrote a short book about his experience, recounting the slapdash handling of the mill and its complexities. This isn't how it was done, Crispin would moan, as he watched Babbits use a broom handle to flip moving power belts from one wheel to another. The transition was rocky, but in the end, Dave Babbits warmed slightly to Doug. He donated three items to the Oregon State Parks historic collection. First was an old cowboy hat that he'd worn on the mill's production floor.⁵¹⁶ The second was a chewed-up cigar. And the third was a collection of rocks and arrowheads that he'd found buried in the muddy Boston landscape.

⁵¹⁶ Hat Receipt, Cascade Hat & Cap Company, March 24, 1980 Box 18 Folder 69. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR.

CONCLUSION: THE LAYERS OF BOSTON MILLS

The story of working poverty in Boston began with the suicide letter of a failed farmer, Americus Savage. He arrived in Boston in 1851. His neighbors along the buttes of the Calapooia River were the famed miller Richard Finley, early pioneers Miller Morgan, Richard Farwell, and Richard Elder, and the contemplative P.V Crawford. Together, these men would settle on Donation Land Claims around the community of Boston. Americus Savage died not long after the community of Boston was plowed under. After placing his hopes on Oregon settlement, Savage's farm was a failure. In a lamenting suicide note, Savage tells his family that he was past labor, and since he had failed to amass the stability he dreamed off, he was choosing death over dependency. His body was buried on a butte that overlooked Boston Mills.

Workers for the next century, knowingly or not, labored on top of Savage's failed farm. A century after Americus Savage died, a worker named Gregory Ellison wrote a note and left it in the mill office. He had toiled without anything to show for it, and he was moving on.

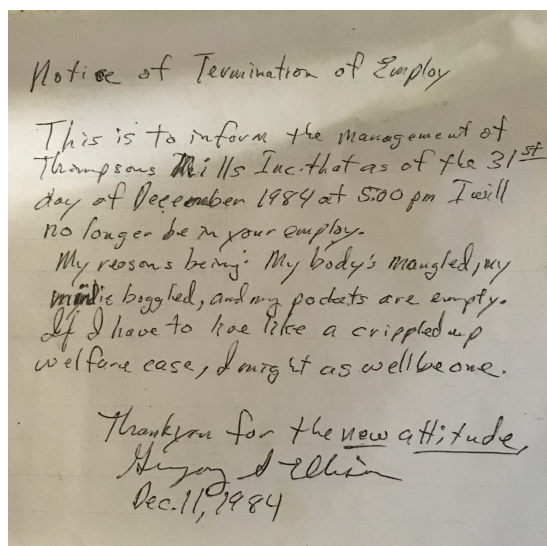


Figure 5.1 - Resignation Letter, 1984
Thompsons Mills Heritage Site Historic Collection

"Notice of Termination of Employ

This is to inform the management of Thompsons Mills Inc. that as of the 31st day of December 1984 at 5:00 pm I will no longer be in your employ.

My reasons being: My body's mangled, my mind's boggled, and my pockets are empty. If I have to live like a crippled up welfare case, I might as well be one.

Thank you for the new attitude.

Gregory Ellison
Dec. 11, 1984¹

After Ellison resigned, he submitted an unemployment claim. The unemployment office ended their investigation with the following notation: "claimant's job in Shedd may have been less than ideal in all respects, but he has not shown how, or if, things were so grave for him."⁵¹⁷ The unemployment office didn't see that Ellison's complaint was a century old. The lack of opportunity on this land for working men and women is the throughline, from Americus Savage to Greg Ellison and the dozens of other names that crowd ledger books and census reports. The promise of Boston was never its reality, and the mythology of the landscape, an American Eden, outlived everyone that tried to survive there.

Greg Ellison, his letter, and the debate over whether things in Boston were in fact so "grave," is a monument to what the mill was in its final moments as an industry. It is also the latest retelling of a story that was as old as the building itself. Ellison was the latest in an unbroken line of working poverty. The first White settlers of the Willamette Valley were mesmerized by what was described as an American Eden. Savage, Farwell, Crawford, and Finley all came to Oregon as a means of elevation. For poor farmers and industrialists in the Midwest, the free lands available in Oregon Territory would allow them to thrive, without the inequities of tenant farming and Eastern markets. But the large tracts of lands they received were unmanageable, soggy, and quickly depleted of nutrients by intensive farming. Men and women during the early settlement period worked in rural

⁵¹⁷ Referee Decision, April 24, 1985. Box 39 folder 62. Thompsons Mills State Historic Site Collection, Oregon State Parks and Recreation, Shedd, OR.

industry to support these unprofitable farms. Land rich but cash poor, many first-generation farmers, like Americus Savage, sold off land to survive.

Early twentieth century rural boosters echoed the rhetoric of farmer exceptionalism, inflating the importance of the yeoman farmer just as mechanization threatened both rural economics and rural self-sufficiency. By 1900, farmers who did hold on to their land were mortgaging it to pay of federally sanctioned improvements. Connections to world markets promised a windfall but instead introduced market volatility that pushed more men and women into wage labor positions. Anxiety over urban influence and the role of the farmer in a modern world manifested in strict adherence to gender roles and a frenetic interest in the "rural problem."

The boom years of the 1910s were followed by a catastrophic bust as federal subsidies expired and the role of the government in supporting rural industry was challenged. Nationally, rural advocates began to wonder if rural populations were too intellectually deficient to survive in a rapidly modernizing country. The Great Depression was salt on an open wound for farmers. Overinvesting a decade prior meant that farmers couldn't weather the storm. When the mill rebounded, the divide between farmers and the industries that supported them grew wider. Wheat farming was abandoned for rye grass, and farmers could grind their own grains. When the mill lost community importance, it became a lightning rod for rural dissatisfaction. As the reality of rural farming was at its lowest point, the community latched onto the story of the pioneer, preserving a mythology that was free of modern struggle.

By 1950, very few pioneer families remained on their original claims. The rest moved on or made do from the meager wages available at Thompsons Mills. Farms grew,

with land bought up by corporations or absentee owners. Some farmers, like the Pughs and Mannings, were able to buy land cheap and create one-thousand or more-acre farms. The cash crop was rye grass, and blankets of electric green grass seed replaced the golden waves of grain in the Willamette Valley. Most farmers, however, failed during this period. Workers at the mill were less likely to farm or even own land in the community. Wages available in the lost town of Boston could not support families. Men were less likely to start at the mill for work. The building was falling apart. The community atrophied. The last gasps of Boston Mills were captured in unemployment notices.

Speaking on the importance of local history, William Cronon wrote, "one cannot understand national or global history without grounding them in local places where the seemingly abstract effects of much larger systems and processes become real."⁵¹⁸ The story of rural agriculture can be a dry study in wheat exchange rates and federal policy. But at the epicenter of these outside forces, acting and reacting to rural American identity, stood communities like Boston. Boston's failure is not unique. Lost communities dot the Willamette Valley, the Midwest, the country. In each town, there is pride of place that keeps individuals on lands that were unable to support them. The ways in which federal oversight, railroads, crop failures, and international markets failed farmers is equally universal. But Boston offers an opportunity to understand how one community responded to a volatile industry. In Boston, economic impacts of rural poverty are as apparent as the psychological and social impacts. As farming communities continue to struggle, the long history of rural poverty, and rural dependence on federal subsidies, remains relevant.

⁵¹⁸ Robbins, *Landscapes of Conflict*, xiii.

The annual Linn County Pioneer Picnic is still held each year, the same event where original settlers, like Richard Finley, gathered and reminisced more than a century ago. Dave Babbitts wrote checks each year to support the event even as his pioneer mill was bankrupting. Every mill owner and resident of Boston grappled with this dichotomy; the sepia toned reminiscences and the harsh realities of rural poverty. Tours of Thompsons Mills State Heritage Site focus on the story of community-minded, adventurous, and moral men who made the Willamette Valley prosper and thrive. The story starts with Americus Savage and continues to Richard Chism Finley, the sorrowful William Simmons, and then the Thompsons. Blurred by nostalgia, the story is a triumph. But when placed in focus, the story is meager wages, depressed communities, and lost opportunities. It is a harkening back to a time, to a success, that never existed.

There were brief dreams of recreating the community of Boston, a living history park with Thompsons Mills at the center. But, when archeologists surveyed the site, there was no sign of the lost town. The gridded blocks and roads on the only map of Boston that survived were likely more aspirational than literal. The conclusion was simple: there was no Boston to reconstruct. It was the great agrarian myth of Linn County. The town that early residents of Boston dreamed of never came to be and, largely, their descendants would suffer more than they would prosper. On a Christmas Day in 1851, Americus Savage sat in a hastily constructed cabin and thought that his life was about to change for the better. In 1920, Ott Thompson sat at the millrace, wondering how he would explain a squandered fortune to his family. In 1970, Bud Kronsteiner shuffled through the floorboards as he sewed and stacked bags, and in 1982, Gregory Ellison wrote a letter of resignation for an entire generation of rural workers living at a poverty wage. The land

was never going to be enough to create prosperity in Linn County for the working class, Boston was doomed to fail as soon as it was platted. And now, travelling down I-5, the most visible relic of this community is a signpost for Boston Mill Road on a bridge over the interstate and, behind a stand of trees are two gleaming, but empty, white silos.

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