

Brownsville

By Mandy Cole

The City of Brownsville (Linn County) is in the southern Willamette Valley on the banks of the Calapooia River and in the foothills of the Cascade Range. The landscape is characterized by flat lands and deep soils in the valley, timbered hills to the east, and an abundance of year-round water. The town was known as a center for wool and agricultural production, which included wheat and then hops, grass seed, filberts, and walnuts. Today, antique stores and cafes operate in historic buildings constructed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century on Main Street. Brownsville's population was 1,800 in 2024.

For thousands of years, Kalapuya people lived in this part of the Willamette Valley, harvesting abundant camas bulbs, wapato, acorns, berries, salmon and elk, and plentiful basket-making materials such as cedar, dogbane, tule, and cattails. But by the 1800s, Native villages were being decimated by introduced diseases—smallpox and, especially, malaria. In 1830, an estimated 13,940 Indigenous people lived in the lower Columbia and Willamette Valleys, but only 1,175 people remained by 1841.

When the first non-Natives arrived at or near present-day Brownsville in 1846—John B. Courtney, Isaac Hutchins, Josiah Osborne, William Finley, and brothers Elias and Austin Walters—they found the land suitable for farming and settlement. Within a year, more immigrants had arrived by wagon train—R.C. Finley and the Blakely, Kirk, Brown, and Keeney families. In 1847, Alexander and Sarah Kirk established a ferry service on the Calapooia River near the small settlement, which was known as Calapooya or Kirk's Ferry. By 1849, Henry Spalding, a Presbyterian missionary, was working as a schoolteacher in Brownsville at the first school in Linn County.

By the early 1850s, James Blakely had settled on a 640-acre claim that is now part of Brownsville. He laid out the town and in 1853 named it for his uncle, Hugh Leeper Brown, who had traveled west with him. North Brownsville and a town called Amelia were on the north side of the Calapooia River, and South Brownsville (usually called Brownsville) was on the south. Both communities were growing, as more and more immigrants established farms in the upper Willamette Valley.

At the same time, political pressure intensified to remove Kalapuyans and other Indigenous groups from the valley. In 1855, the Kalapuyans and additional tribes and bands signed the Willamette Valley Treaty with the U.S. government, agreeing to cede 19 million acres of their traditional homelands. In 1856, about two thousand Kalapuyans were marched to the Grand Ronde Agency in the southern Yamhill valley, where a reservation would be established the next year.

In addition to EuroAmerican immigrants, several Black people, most enslaved, arrived in the Brownsville area as early as 1850. In 1852, for example, a seventeen-year-old young woman named Cora arrived with her owner, who settled on land just south of present-day Brownsville. After Cora was freed, she purchased thirty-six acres of her former owner's land, which she and her husband (also formerly enslaved) farmed for twenty years. Upon her death on December 7, 1891, Cora Cox left a bequest to Willamette University. Some Kalapuyans also remained in the area, including Eliza Young (known as Indian Eliza), a highly skilled basketmaker who lived in Brownsville until she died at over a hundred years old in 1922.

The early local economy was centered on agriculture, and in 1858 the three-mile-long Brownsville Canal was dug from the Calapooia River to North Brownsville to provide power to industries in that area; a grist mill, a woolen mill, a sawmill, a sash-and-door factory, and a tannery. The most important sustaining industry was the Brownsville Woolen Mill, originally a subscription-funded venture whose first buildings were constructed in 1861. Two years later, Englishman Thomas Lister Kay was hired as the loom boss; in 1888, he was made the mill's superintendent, and a year later he founded the Thomas Kay Woolen Mill in Salem. The original Brownsville Woolen Mill burned in 1865, and a new mill, named the Eagle Woolen Mill, was opened in 1866. (Renamed the Brownsville Woolen Mills Co. in 1875, most of its buildings were destroyed by fire in 1955.)

Brownsville became a busy market center, and in 1880 a narrow gauge rail line connected the community to commercial areas in the Willamette Valley. By 1894, the Southern Pacific Company

had acquired the line and widened the tracks to standard gauge. Eventually, rail service was abandoned, and the railroad depot was sold. It is now the home of the Linn County Historical Museum.

In 1887, local citizens in the county established the Linn County Pioneer Association to plan an annual reunion in recognition of the contributions made by early white immigrants. Since 1893, the Linn County Pioneer Picnic has been held in Brownsville on the north bank of the Calapooia. The event is recognized by the State of Oregon as the “oldest continuous annual pioneer celebration in Oregon.”

Brownsville had a thriving economy after 1895, when the towns of North Brownsville, South Brownsville, and Amelia were consolidated. By the early 1900s, the town contained the Starr and Blakely Drugstore (1874), now listed on the National Register of Historic Places; an Opera House; the IOOF Hall; at least two hotels; the C.J. Howe Building (1908), a grocery and mercantile; the *Brownsville Times* office (established in 1888); and the First Baptist Church of Brownsville (1907). A fire in 1919 destroyed many of the original wood buildings and burned three blocks of businesses and homes on the north side of the river. In the early 1960s, a group of citizens, many of them descendants of early white settlers, scoured attics, garages, and barns seeking artifacts for the Linn County Historical Museum, which opened in 1962, and the 1881 John and Elizabeth Moyer House.

The historic downtown was “Victorianized” during the 1960s and history-based tourism, agriculture, nearby timber mills, and local small businesses became the foundation of the town’s economy. In 1985, scenes for the movie *Stand By Me* were filmed in Brownsville; fans from all over the world continue to visit the movie’s locations and attend Stand by Me Day in July. The town is also a stopping point for tourists interested in antique shopping, visiting the Brownsville Art Association, Linn County Historical Museum, Living Rock Studios Museum, and enjoying the Willamette Valley Scenic Bikeway and Willamette Valley Birding Trail.

Sources

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