

Coquille

By Bert Dunn

The city of Coquille (pronounced ko-KEEL), a wood-products manufacturing community and the Coos County seat, is located in southwest Oregon about twenty-five miles up the Coquille River from the Oregon Coast. The town of about 3,900 people is situated on the bank of the river in a spacious inland valley. Coquille shares its name with the river and the Coquille Indian Tribe (pronounced ko-KWELL).

Several villages of the Upper Coquille people were located near the present-day city of Coquille prior to settlement by whites. The Tribe signed treaties in 1851 and 1855 and were moved to the reservation of the Confederated Tribes of the Siletz Indians. The first non-Native settler in the area was Evan Cunningham who served in the Coquille Guard, a local militia, in 1855, when tensions arose in the region during the Rogue River War. Coquille's downtown sits on a section of Cunningham's land claim.

The Coquille River provided access to the fertile Coquille Valley and timbered Coast Range forests upriver as far as Myrtle Point. Coquille was established next to the river on high ground, and a post office was opened in 1870. Early enterprises in the area included wood and dairy products and coal. The first local sawmill, built by Bunch, Bennett & Co. in 1880, sat on the fledgling community's waterfront. Ocean-going sailing ships were towed upriver to be loaded with lumber for San Francisco markets. The town of Coquille was incorporated in 1885.

Given the lack of wagon roads, the community relied on the river for transportation. Riverboats became a part of daily activity at Coquille, with larger boats going to Bandon and smaller boats to Myrtle Point. Most of the vessels, which carried both passengers and freight, were steam-powered sternwheelers burning wood or coal and were built on the river at several shipyards between the two towns.

A wagon road completed to Marshfield (now the town of Coos Bay) in 1886 provided improved access to the bay. In 1893, the Coos Bay Roseburg & Eastern Railroad & Navigation Co. completed a railroad from Marshfield to Myrtle Point, connecting the Coquille Valley to the deepwater seaport. With both river and rail transportation for freight and passengers, Coquille flourished. The railroad increased the transport of logs in the valley and to sawmills on Coos Bay.

With Coquille's improved transportation facilities and central location, the city flourished, and the county seat was moved, by popular vote, from Empire to Coquille in 1896. A second sawmill was built by George, Mark, and Alfred Morras about two miles south of town in 1887. The mill was later sold to Alfred Johnson, but it burned in 1910. A third sawmill, built just west of town by the Coquille Lumber Company in 1911, would later become a Sitka spruce mill during World War I, providing wood for military aircraft.

With maturing riverboat service, several creameries were established on the river near Coquille to produce butter and cheese, making it necessary for riverboats to transport raw milk from local dairies to the creameries. The Coquille Creamery was located one mile south of town, the OK Creamery was on the downtown waterfront, and the Coquille Valley Creamery (later Swift & Co.) was just west of town.

Several small coal mines, including the Peart mine, were developed in the area to serve local markets for fuel and heating. A large mine operated at Beaver Hill several miles north of Coquille, and its output was delivered by rail to a large waterfront bunker in Marshfield for shipment to San Francisco.

In 1921, a paved road, part of the Coast Highway, was completed from Marshfield to Coquille. A bridge was built over the Coquille River at the city in 1922, and another section of the highway was completed in 1924 from Coquille to Bandon. The new roads and an expanded rail system from Myrtle Point to Powers provided improved connections to sources of timber and distant markets and supported expanded commerce with nearby communities.

Ralph Smith and George Ulett established the Smith Wood Products mill in 1929 to make battery separators from Port-Orford-cedar. The mill, which grew to produce plywood and other products, became the town's largest employer and helped Coquille weather the Depression. The mill was purchased by Coos Bay Lumber in 1945 and Georgia Pacific in 1956. In 1952, Coquille Plywood started production, which continues today under Roseburg Forest Products.

With the strength of the wood products industry and two large mills, Coquille continued to thrive, even when the Coast Highway bypassed the city in 1960. Only after major reductions in private and federal timber harvesting and the closure of the Georgia Pacific mill in the 1980s did Coquille's economic fortunes falter. The town now has a population of about four thousand people with an economy still based on timber. It is home to the Sawdust Theatre, the annual Gay Nineties celebration, and the Coquille Valley Museum.

Sources

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