Medford

By George Kramer

Medford, the county seat of Jackson County, was platted in 1883 in the center of the Rogue Valley on Bear Creek. With more than 85,824 residents in 2020, Medford is the eighth largest city in Oregon and serves a metropolitan area of more than 200,000 people. The city is the primary retail, health, government, and service center for the Rogue Valley and some portions of northern California and is home to several prominent national businesses, including Harry & David, Lithia Motors, and Tucker Sno-Cat. Since the 1990s, the city's slogan has been "Medford—The Center of it All."

Originally the home of Shasta and Takelma peoples, the broad plain in the center of the Rogue Valley was a travel route between the richer upland areas that surround it. With EuroAmerican resettlement in the mid-nineteenth century, following the discovery of gold in the area, the central valley was transformed into large wheat fields and agricultural lands.

Medford was laid out in anticipation of the arrival of the Oregon & California Railroad (later the Southern Pacific) as it built track south from Roseburg, about a hundred miles to the north. David Loring, the right-of-way agent for the railroad, saw the benefits of a direct route through the center of the Rogue Valley, even though it would bypass the county seat in Jacksonville. In October 1883, C.W. Broback, I.J. Phipps, Conrad Mingus, and C.C. Beekman donated land along the west bank of Bear Creek to the railroad, which agreed to build its depot on the site. The new town was named Medford after a city near Loring's home in Massachusetts. The first train arrived on January 18, 1884, and Medford was incorporated on February 24, 1885. By 1890, the town had 967 residents.

The railroad allowed southern Oregon products to reach larger markets, and Medford became a major shipping hub, primarily for pears, apples, and peaches grown in the valley. Southern Pacific, the Commercial Club, and local realtors promoted Medford's climate, its business conditions, and the profits that could be made by growing and marketing fruit in the region. Between 1900 and 1910, years often called the Orchard Boom, Medford grew by 392 percent, to more than 8,840 residents, making it the third fastest growing city in the nation.

The new city attracted wealthy emigrants, many from Chicago, following in the footsteps of Mrs. Potter Palmer, a socialite from that city who developed the Modoc Orchards. Other Chicagoans made the move, included Harvard-educated H. Chandler Egan, the U.S. Amateur golf champion in 1904 and 1905, who moved to Medford and transformed his orchard into a golf course, the first in southern Oregon. Easterners Dr. C.R. Ray, supported by his wealthy brother Col. Frank H. Ray, invested in area gold mines and developed the Gold Ray Dam at Tolo, the first large-scale hydroelectric facility in the Rogue Valley. Many well-off college graduates, notably Alfred and Leonard Carpenter, arrived during the Orchard Boom and helped build the orchard industry in the Rogue Valley. The men established the University Club, and their wives formed the Colony Club, an organization for women.

In 1917, the Pacific Highway was completed through Medford, which had grown into the largest city in southern Oregon, and the surrounding forestlands had become the focus of large-scale timber developments. The Owens-Oregon Lumber Company was founded in 1924 with backing from midwestern lumber money. The company grew into the Medford Corporation (Medco), which along with KOGAP and other companies made Medford a major wood-products producer for the rest of the twentieth century.

In 1927, voters approved the transfer of the county seat from Jacksonville to Medford, and county government moved into the new Jackson County Courthouse in 1932. The courthouse was soon a focal point for a popular uprising, called the Jackson County Rebellion, the result of the so-called Good Government Congress, which culminated in the removal of elected officials under charges of sedition and murder. Publisher Robert Ruhl and the *Medford Mail Tribune* won a Pulitzer Prize for reporting on those events.

In 1942, a U.S. Army training facility, Camp White, was built northeast of Medford. Many of the men stationed there returned to the area after the war; Medford's population grew by more than 50

percent between 1940 and 1950, to 17,305. The Rogue Valley Medical Center (now Asante) opened in 1958, and the Rogue Valley Manor was built in 1961, boosting Medford's reputation as a regional health and retirement center. The Rogue Valley Mall, which opened in 1986, is the largest indoor shopping center between Eugene and Sacramento, and the Rogue Valley International Airport served more than 750,000 passengers in 2015.

Medford is the hometown of Vance DeBar "Pinto" Colvig, the voice of Disney's cartoon dog Goofy (and others) and the inspiration and creator of Bozo the Clown. Dick Fosbury, Olympic medalist and the inventor of the Fosbury Flop, a style that revolutionized the high jump, attended Medford High School. Famed University of Oregon track coach Bill Bowerman got his start in Medford, and actor and dancer Ginger Rogers lived near Medford for much of her life. Medford-born John Frohnmayer, chair of the National Endowment for the Arts (1989-1992), is part of a prominent Medford family that included his father Otto and brother David, Oregon attorney general (1981-1991) and president of the University of Oregon (1994-2009).

Sources

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