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Local History

A Howling Wilderness: Felling the Giants

By Stephen Payne

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The first redwood tree (*Sequoia Sempervirens*) seen by a white man was on the Corrallitos Creek, in what is now Santa Cruz County, in October 1769, by members of the Portola Expedition. (62:480) One hundred years later redwood lumbering was Santa Cruz County's largest business. (46:192-197) In 1860 Santa Cruz County lumbermen cut ten million board feet of lumber. This was only a fraction of the total redwood supply available in the County. A United States Agricultural Report in 1875, showed Santa Cruz County as having 52.8 % of its land covered with redwood forests. (55:Vol. VII, 75fn.7; 57:203; 56:205) The lumber industry served two purposes: 1) it supplied lumber for a growing California, and 2) the efforts of the lumbermen in clearing the forest enabled settlers to come into previously-inaccessible regions of the Santa Cruz Mountains and begin farming the land.

Although the growth of the redwood lumber business was due largely to the efforts of the Anglo-Saxon lumbermen after the United States took possession of California in 1846, other people before the Anglos had used the giant trees. The Costanoan Indians used large branches or fallen trees to build their huts. Later the Spanish and Mexicans used the small trunks as roof beams over their adobe buildings.

Between 1836 and 1840, Thomas Larkin, the United States Counsel to Mexican-held California (Alta California), had a lumber business in Santa Cruz County. In 1838 Pedro Somsevain and William Blackburn whipsawed lumber for Isaac Graham at his Felton lumbering site-Graham later helped in the American takeover of California in 1846. But these early lumbering efforts were by the slow whipsaw method as the demand was small. (55:Vol. VII, 76 Fri. 7; 3:2)

In 1840, Graham opened a water-powered lumber mill three miles above Santa Cruz on the San Lorenzo River, near where the California Powder Works was erected in 1865. This mill had the

first mechanical saw in Santa Cruz County. The mill was built for Graham by Peter Lassen, a Danish blacksmith living in San Jose. (55:Vol. VII, 75 fn. 7; 44:85)

The switch from the whipsaw method to a mechanical lumber mill was the beginning of the lumber boom that was to last in the Santa Cruz Mountains until the early 1900's. The old whipsaw method was slow and tedious. The lumbermen worked in pairs. They would dig a seven foot pit, deep enough for a man to stand in, and to accommodate sawdust. Then a nearby redwood tree would be selected. A scaffold was built six to ten feet above the ground and the men would proceed to cut the tree down, using axes, saws or a combination of the two. The scaffold was needed because the first ten feet of a redwood is hard, with the grain twisted and unusable. After the tree had dropped, the men would strip branches and cut the tree into the desired finished lengths-eight, ten, twelve feet, etc. These lengths were then dragged over the pit. One man would stand on top of the log while the other would stand in the pit. Together they would push and pull the whipsaw up and down until the board was cut from the log.

Although the process was slow it took very little capital to enter the lumbering business. These men lived in cabins close to the pit during the summer and fall, until the rains came. In the winter they would cut firewood, stakes, and other "split stuff." Little is known about these early lumbermen for most lived lonely lives in the woods, remaining bachelors. (3:2-4)

Another early lumbering method was to fell the redwood and split lengths of lumber out of the logs with wedges and mallets. Much of the early lumber was split rather than whipsawed. (57: 203) Even after the gold rush started, many men found that they could make more money by splitting lumber in the Santa Cruz Mountains than they could in the gold fields. Whipsawed lumber and split lumber was worth \$100 per 1000 board feet, or up to \$5.00 per fourteen-inch plank. Each tree had about 200 feet of timber.(57:203; 20:Autumn 1960; 44:141)

In the 1840's the first mechanical saws began to be used in the Santa Cruz Mountains. These early water-powered sawmills were located on streams that had been dammed into lagoons or ponds. An overshot waterwheel powered an up-and-down "Muley" saw. These saws were very slow, but a vast improvement over the old whipsaw or splitting methods. The operator would often sleep during the process, awakening when the piece of board dropped to the floor. The operator would then reset the log and resume his slumber. Although the circular saw was invented in 1810, by Sister Tabitha Babbit of the Harvard Shakers, it was not used in the large lumber mills in the 1850's. By the 1850's there were very few whipsawers left in the area. The early "Muley" mills cut 5,000 linear feet of lumber a day, equal to ten whipsawers. (55:Vol. VII, 77fn.7; 38:7/8/1934; 64:22,24,71; 3:4-5)

The early powermill business was quite risky. Unlike the low cost of a whipsawyer team or a splitter, whose cost involved only hand saws, axes, wedges and mallets, the mills cost between five and fifteen thousand dollars to build. Because the mills were located in deep ravines, on creeks, the danger of a flood washing out the entire investment was always present. By the 1850's the cost of timber rights was also high and most mills required several financial backers.

Along with the cost of the mill and mill shed, other buildings had to be built to house the large crews necessary for full production: a cook shed, consisting of a large eating hall with kitchen and storage; a company store, or sometimes private stores, with a post office; a meeting hall in large camps; stable areas consisting of a barn for horses, mules, and oxen along with storage for feed; bunkhouses or cabins for the crews; a blacksmith shop; and business buildings. All these went into the construction of a lumber camp. Although the camps resembled small towns, and many of the early camps eventually became towns, the company did not allow certain amenities found in towns. Saloons were prohibited. The loggers would have to walk or ride to the nearest town for entertainment of this nature. (3:5-7)

Large companies employed between fifty and sixty men. The men worked a long, hard, twelve-hour day, with the teamsters working fifteen hours a day, since they had to feed and water the stock in the morning and at night. The pay was \$1.50 a day, and \$.50 for room and board was paid back to the company. Most of the men worked only during the dry season, but the fallers and strippers could work the entire year.

The fallers worked in pairs. First they selected a suitable redwood tree--the trees varied in size from six to fifteen feet in diameter and reached 200 to 250 feet in the air. Then they would determine the direction that they would fall the redwood and prepare the area. This meant building a cushion of small trees, brush and limbs to soften the fall of the tree-redwood is very brittle and the trunk could easily split. Next the fallers would cut a notch six to ten feet up the trunk to hold the scaffold used to stand on when falling the tree. After the tree fell, the strippers would cut away all the branches and strip the bark from the tree, then cut the tree into the proper sections-eight, ten, twelve feet, etc.

In the early spring the drag crews would start working. They would first burn all the brush, broken trees, and limbs scattered all around the site. These fires would not penetrate the dense logs. The drag crew would then build a skid road. These roads followed gullies downhill to the mill site. The men would dig out a six to eight foot road bed and then bury logs, eight to ten inches in diameter and six to eight feet long, three-quarters into the ground every few feet. A skid greaser would then smear beef tallow on each buried log, making it easier for the oxen to drag the cut logs down to the mill site.

The teamsters and their helpers tied cables around the logs and threaded the cable into a block and tackle set-up that was anchored to a stout tree. Oxen would then pull the logs down to the skid road. Several logs were then tied together in a train. Eight to ten yoke of oxen were used to pull the train down the skid road to the mill. A teamster or "bull puncher" controlled the oxen with a long sharp pole while the skid greaser went in front, greasing the buried logs. Men walked alongside the train to watch the progress on turns and dangerous areas of the skid road. A big problem was keeping the logs from going out of control on downgrades and into the oxen.

Upon reaching the mill the logs were rolled by log jockeys into the millpond. At the mill the superintendent oversaw the production for the owners, but the millwright ran the mill

operation and was responsible for keeping it in good working order. The logs were floated into position to be taken up to the saw where the sawyer made the initial cuts on the log and controlled the speed for the entire operation—the sawyer also acted as the camp spokesman for grievances. The edger determined the width of the boards; then the second edger, or trimmer, cut the board into the proper lengths, from ten to sixteen feet with intervals of two feet. The small cutoff pieces dropped beneath the saws and were carried to a large burner by camp laborers. Eight to ten stackers took the finished lumber and put it into piles reaching twenty feet into the air.

Finished lumber did not usually remain at the mill for long. Transportation to market was handled by jerkline teams of five to eight pairs of horses and mules. From 2000 to 25,000 board feet of lumber was piled on the heavy wagons and driven to market by a teamster at a cost of \$9.00 per thousand board feet.



Undated postcard from the library's collection. The caption reads, "Hauling Wood with Oxen Team in Santa Cruz Mountains, Calif."

Along with the crews working in the forest and mill, other men worked around the camp. The cookshed often was run by a Chinese cook, who called the men to eat by banging a large triangle or pan. The blacksmith was very important for keeping shoes on mules, horses, and oxen. He also made repairs on the mill machinery and made yokes for the oxen. These yokes were cut from hardwood blocks four feet long by eight inches square. The blocks were seasoned in water to remove the sap, then fitted to the oxen.

Although the fallers and strippers could work all year, once the rains began the haulers and mill hands were laid off. Many of these men lived in company cabins during the winter and did piece work splitting railroad ties, posts, stakes, shakes, pickets and firewood. During the winter the men could work whenever they wanted, as they were paid by the cord or by the thousand board foot of lumber.

Although the men worked six days a week, twelve to fifteen hours a day, when Saturday night came they were ready to relax. The loggers would head for the nearest town with a saloon. On Sunday morning those that were able to went to church, while the rest slept off the previous night's revelry. On Sunday afternoon the men attended dances, picnics, feeds, and card games.

While the early "Muley" saws cut about 5,000 board feet of lumber a day, the later circular and band saws could cut as much as 10,000 feet a day. The sawed lumber sold for \$20.00 per 1000 board foot. Along with boards, the mills produced "split stuff": posts were four by six inches by five feet long, and rails were two or three by six inches by ten to twelve feet long and both sold for 8 cents each; pickets were two and one-half or three inches square and six and one-half feet long and sold for \$25.00 per 1000 board foot. Except for shakes, "split stuff" was used to make fences. Pickets were driven one foot into the ground every two to three inches. Near the top a

rail was nailed to each picket. Split boards were used to make a squirrel-tight fence in gardens and vineyards and to cover shanties.

In the 1880's the South Pacific Coast Railroad was built through the Santa Cruz Mountains. The advent of train service allowed men to live with their families near the depots. Train service also made transportation to market of the cut lumber quicker.

The development of the steam donkey allowed the mills to keep up with the new faster pace demanded by the railroad. A steam donkey was a mechanical cable winch. It was powered by steam produced by a boiler fueled with cordwood and water. The steam donkey moved logs on hillsides and skid roads quicker than oxen. It could also be easily moved to the next site by attaching a cable to a stable tree and letting the winch reel in the cable, thus pulling the machine along.(3:8-22; 51:3-5; 40:7/1959; 20:Spring 1958, 4; 14)

Although the early pioneer farmers in the Summit area of the Santa Cruz Mountains cut and split lumber for their own use and sometimes to sell, they were not primarily occupied by the lumber business. The first full-time lumbermen in the Summit area were Stephen "Si" Hall Chase and his cousin, Josiah W. Chase.

The Chases left Maine in 1859 on the three-masted schooner, the Golden Rucket. Sailing around Cape Horn they arrived in San Francisco on May 18, 1859, and immediately headed for the Santa Cruz Mountains. They worked as laborers in the lumber camps around Lexington and Alma, in the lower Santa Cruz Mountains. On April 15, 1863, they bought about 146 acres from Lyman Burrell for \$100 (6) and built a mill and lumber yard on Summit Road. The Chases began to cut timber and make lumber on their land, becoming the first lumber company to transport lumber from Santa Cruz County to San Jose. After cutting a section of land they would sow hay to help feed their working animals. The lumber business grew rapidly resulting in four mills on various parts of the mountain.

In 1878, the Chases moved their finishing mill into San Jose and by 1885, had one of the largest industries in the area. This mill turned out fruit boxes, drying trays, doors, sashes, and other products of mill work.

When Stephen Chase's brother, Foster, came to California he lived on Summit Road and engaged in farming. Foster Chase improved the Chase ranch by planting prune orchards in the 1880's and 1890's.(20:Home Coming 1959; 5; 40:12/18/1961; 34:12/1927)

William A. Young was another of the early lumber pioneers in the mountains. In 1870, he operated a mill at the foot of Highland Way for the Chase Lumber Company. From 1873 to 1874, Young ran the mill at the future site of Wright's Station. Young also ran a mill from 1878 to 1880 at the foot of Hall Road (intersection of Summit and Skyland Roads). (40:7/28/1959, 12/18/1961)

Below the present Stetson Road, off the San Jose-Soquel Road, Jerd Comstock built a lumber mill in 1878. Like many of these early lumbermen, Comstock had to build his own roads in order to reach his mill site. In 1880, Comstock moved the mill one mile up the hill, building a road one and one-half miles long above Hester Creek. This road, still in evidence, took off from the San Jose-Soquel stage road, across from the future site of the Hester School, and ended up three-quarters of a mile below the present site of The Willows (at the intersections of Stetson, Skyland and Long-ridge Roads on the Amaya Creek). This mill was used for two years. In 1881, Jerd Comstock sold his mill to Charles "Mountain Charley" Henry McKieman who ran the mill for two years before abandoning the site.(40:7/16/1959, 7/21/1959; 7/23/1959) In 1884, Adams and McKeown operated a mill south of The Willows. William A. Young had the logging contract for the mill. (40:8/4/1959) Smaller mills contracted out various phases of the logging operations rather than having to employ large crews.

Hiram Morrell and his brother, Brad, owned a large ranch in the Summit area and built a mill on the west branch of the Soquel (Laurel) Creek. They used Schultheis Road to get to the mill site. (40:12/7/196 1)

In 1893, Franch and Miracle opened a new mill at the original Comstock site. In 1897, they moved one mile up the hill for a second cutting. This mill worked until 1900. (40:7/16/1959)

From 1894 to 1899, William A. Young operated a box and shingle mill near the Skyland-Highland area. The mill supplied fruit boxes to local farmers. In 1900, Young sold the mill to Daniel M. Lawrence.

Daniel M. Lawrence was born on January 2, 1827, in Ohio. A veteran of the Mexican War, Lawrence came to California in the early Gold Rush Days, becoming a gold miner and later a hunter and trapper in the Rocky Mountains. Before coming to the Santa Cruz Mountains, Lawrence returned to Ohio where he married and lived for several years. In 1870, he and his wife, Lucinda, settled in the Santa Cruz Mountains. With his son, Harry F. Lawrence, he operated the box and shingle mill near Skyland until he died on December 31, 1910. His son, Harry, ran an advertisement to sell the mill in The Realty, in 1911, but did not sell it. Finally about 1914, he moved the mill to Wright's where he and Tom Lindsay operated it. (40:7/16/1959; 34:1/1911, 6/1911)

In 1880, the South Pacific Coast Railroad depot at Laurel became the most important shipping point for lumber in the Santa Cruz Mountains. The South Pacific Coast Railroad operated a lumber mill at Laurel during the construction of the line from 1877-1880. The mill produced timbers for the many tunnels and railroad ties for the road bed. Laurel was also the main storage point for firewood used to fire the steam boilers of the railroad engines.

In 1899, Fredrick A. Hihn opened a mill near Laurel. Hihn was born on August 16, 1829, at Holzminden, Dutchy of Brunswick, Germany. As a young man he was trained as a merchant gathering herbs for market. In April, 1849, in the company of sixty political refugees, Hihn set sail on the brig Reform, from Bremen, around Cape Horn to California. Landing in San Francisco

on October 12, 1849, Hihn and his fellow travelers set out for the gold country, where a storm destroyed all the company's supplies. Hihn went into business in Sacramento, but again a storm destroyed his holdings. He engaged in another business in Sacramento and, upon that failure, moved to San Francisco where he opened a drug store. Again disaster struck, and it was destroyed by a fire in 1851.

Leaving San Francisco, Hihn walked to Santa Cruz with a backpack holding all his possessions. Entering Santa Cruz as a poor country tinker in October of 1851, Hihn quickly became a financial success through various business interests throughout the county. By 1860, Hihn bought 404 acres of timber in the Soquel Augmentation Rancho and opened a mill at Laurel in 1899.

Hihn's steam-powered bandsaw at Laurel produced 50,000 board feet of lumber a day. Located close to the railroad depot at Laurel, Hihn had a railroad spur track built down to the mill on the Soquel Creek. Although a railroad engine could not pull the lumber up the steep bank of the spur line, a steam donkey provided the necessary power, thus eliminating the need for the old heavy lumber wagons hauling the lumber to the railroad depot.

After the 1906 earthquake, which damaged the railroad tunnels, Hihn's mill used the old jerkline wagon teams to transport lumber from Laurel down the hill to Los Gatos where the lumber was loaded on freight cars and shipped on to the great rebuilding effort at San Francisco. The lumber company operated in Laurel until 1913, a year after Hihn's death. The lumber supply had run out and the mill was closed.(38:6/10/1934; 48:126, 173, 227-228; 47:146)

In the summer of 1899, a fire destroyed a large portion of the Summit area. The home of Josephine Clifford McCrackin, a well-known California writer and poet, was in the path of the flames and was consumed. After the ordeal was over McCrackin, realizing that the native redwood forests were being destroyed, not only by fire but by the many logging operations, wrote articles published in the Santa Cruz Sentinel, calling for conservation of the great forests. She enlisted the help of Andrew P. Hill, a noted artist and photographer, who had taken pictures of the fire's destruction. Together with many Summit residents, McCrackin and Hill formed the Sempervirens Club. The club, dedicated to the preservation of the redwood forests, was helped by the Native Sons and Daughters and the California Pioneer Society. They appealed to the California State Legislature for the creation of parks to protect the redwoods. The result, in 1902, was the creation of the first California redwood park, now known as Big Basin State Park, located near Boulder Creek in the northern part of Santa Cruz County. (38:5/27/1934; 62:480)

In 1906, The Realty began a series of articles written by local Summit residents asking Frederick Hihn to stop lumbering the Soquel Creek area in Laurel. (34:11/1906) Little heed was paid the "do-gooders" by the lumbermen and they continued to log the area. Soon, however, there were no more trees left to cut and the lumbermen were forced to close their mills and leave the area.

Source

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