



THE WESTFIR STORY

№. 24

in a series of monographs on the history of plywood manufacturing



Published by the
Plywood Pioneers
Association
October 2006



Plywood in Retrospect

In memory of the old Westfir, a company town a cut above the ordinary. In its heyday the mill employed over 500 people. It was a town of neat houses, a church, school, gymnasium, theater, café, grocery store, saloon and pool hall, cook house, clinic, a railroad, and a scenic covered bridge.

The Mill and the River

*I watch the river's crystal flow
As I did so many years ago
Its insistent journey to the sea
Just the way it used to be
Of the mill there is no trace
Only a vast and empty space
In my mind I see it still
I suppose I always will*

*I saw the river every day
Flowing on its seaward way
Along its banks was this old mill
With endless needs to fill
Insatiable in its demand
A trackless forest to command
A vast forest from which to draw
To placate the clamoring saw*

*Men worked round the clock
Impending change was theirs to mock
Heedless of the river's endless flow
They did not know t'was time to go*

*Stout and steady men were they
Those men who could not stay
Change would play its hand
Nothing is forever, we understand*

*The mill is no longer there
The people gone, who knows where
Some departed for other climes
Victims of the changing times
Many have taken earthly leave
Of this I'm certain and do believe*

*It was a way of life that is no more
It was the era of the company store
Company towns are gone for good
As we know they some day would
Relics of the industrial age
Anachronisms in history's page
Remnants of the American dream
Long vanished from the western scene*

*Today, as I view the river's flow
I still hear the noon-time whistle blow
I see the men in accustomed place
I see many a familiar face
I hear the sounds of that old mill
The haunting echoes are with me still
I watch the river's crystal flow
As it did ten thousand years ago
Unmindful of the times that were
In a place called Westfir*

By Milt Grundeman
Westfir, Oregon 1994*

** Milt Grundeman - Personnel and Safety Supervisor for the company during the '60s and '70s*

Westfir's story begins in the early years of the 20th century as the Southern Pacific Railroad pushed its way up into the mountains to the southeast of Eugene with the ultimate goal of linking the Northwest to the valleys and cities of California to the south. The railroad reached the pristine, narrow valley of lower North Fork of the Willamette River in 1910. Tents and shelters for the work crews building the bridge across the North Fork and excavating the tunnel linking the Oakridge side of the hill to the Westfir side were the first structures erected on the site that was to become Westfir, but they were temporary and soon abandoned as the railroad work moved on.

The story of Westfir is the story of a town and of a mill, inseparably linked to one another and as the mill went, so went the town. The story begins in earnest shortly after 1920.

The managers for the Cascade National Forest (which later became the Willamette National Forest) had developed a long range plan to sell some 585 million board feet of timber from the surrounding drainage of the North Fork. They estimated that it would yield a harvest of 50 million board feet annually. The contract was to go to a bidder who would agree to build a sawmill in the area to process the timber and a town for the people who would work there. So Westfir was born a "company town" – the first one in Lane County.

Colonel George Kelly must have been pretty confident that his Western Lumber Company would win the contract because he started work on the mill and town site in 1922 a year before the contract was signed on July 23, 1923 for an agreed upon price of \$1.50 per thousand board feet. Colonel Kelly was the President and Manager of the company. He was the brother of John Kelly of the Booth-Kelly operations in Saginaw, Coburg, Wendling and Springfield. By the time of the signing a cookhouse for the workers had been built and work had started on a dam to hold the logs for a small sawmill that would be built to provide the lumber needed for the construction of the larger main mill and for the town. This first small mill was built upstream from the main mill and produced lumber for the project until it burned to the ground in 1924 before the main mill was completed. This would not be the last time that fire and water would conspire against Westfir. With the main mill not yet complete, Western

was forced to buy additional lumber from other mills to complete their project. By the time the main mill opened, the community had a general store, a barber shop, and its first students enrolled in school. The main mill opened for production in 1925 with all the fanfare of a major event. Oregon's governor at the time was in attendance along with the President of the Southern Pacific Railroad and an assemblage of other notables of the time. They were accommodated in a sumptuous railroad car parked on the mainline along side the mill. It was probably no coincidence that one of the early markets for the mill's wood were timbers and ties for the anticipated construction of the railroad, at that time called the Natron Cutoff, on up and over the mountains to SE of town.

The name of the town, Westfir, was, according to the records of the Oregon Historical Society, first used on July 19, 1923 ...“ and was chosen by the officers of the company as being distinctive because trees growing in this locality are principally Fir; and the name is a combination of ‘Western’ coupled with ‘Fir’ hence ‘Westfir.’”

To gain access to the timberlands up the river, Western began building a logging railroad that would eventually run some twenty miles up the North Fork into the heart of the sale. Construction of the railroad proved to be more difficult and costly than anticipated. This, in conjunction with higher than planned construction costs for the mill, drove Western to issue bonds in 1924 to raise money needed to continue the work. By 1928, the railroad extended 9 miles upriver at a cost of \$1.7 million dollars, but when lumber prices declined that year, so did the fortunes of Western Lumber Company.

Western defaulted on the bonds and Blyth, Witter and Company a major bondholder out of San Francisco, took control of Western and appointed Myron Woodard Operations Manager. His son-in-law, Bill Ferrin, came in as the resident manager in 1928.

By 1931, the railroad was delivering some 500,000 board feet of logs to the mill's pond daily. The railroad now included the Incline Railroad, which was built during the years 1928-1930. The Incline Railroad was a 3,600 foot stretch of track straight up the southeast face of the North Fork's valley at a grade ranging from 52% to 72%.

It provided access to the large stands of old growth timber on the Huckleberry Flats area above the river and served as the take-off point for an addition 10 miles of railroad.

In 1933, while inspecting the upper dam to decide what was to be done with it, Bill Ferrin fell and died from his injuries. The upper dam had been built to provide logs to the small upper mill but was no longer necessary since a lower dam had been constructed down river to provide logs to the main mill. The lower dam was built in 1924, promptly washed out in 1925 and then rebuilt almost immediately. Bill Ferrin was replaced by Earl Downing.

By 1934 the town's first church was completed and in 1935 a new school building opened. That same year, because the mill was still struggling for profitability, a Bondholders Protective Committee was formed and as a result, Western Lumber Company was dissolved and the Westfir Lumber Company was formed as a division of Blyth and Company.

Throughout the great depression and during WWII, the town continued to slowly grow and the mill continued sawing lumber although at times sporadically. Dean Lowman remembers that often during the early years of the depression, the mill only worked part time, so when an order did arrive, the company, since it produced the

electrical power for the community, would blink the lights twice in all the houses throughout town at 8:00 PM to let everyone know they should show up for work the next morning. It was also during these years the houses on "Logger's Row" and in "Hemlock," – local neighborhoods – were constructed by the company for its workers and their families.

In 1936, the upper dam was removed. That same year saw the replanting of the Huckleberry Flat area by the Civilian Conservation Corp.

During the war years, as with many industries during this time, the mill employed local women in jobs that had previously been held by the men who were off serving their country.

In 1945 Edward Hines Lumber Company, a retail lumber dealer out of Chicago, purchased the mill for \$2,000,000.00 and began investing in modernizing the facilities. By 1948 dry kilns and three additional boilers had been installed as well as two-way radio communications for the logging operations. It was also the year that the lower dam was washed out a second time. As before, it was rebuilt.



Jay Parks marking logs with yellow paint in 1952

By the early 50s, the railroad up the North Fork no longer served a significant purpose in providing timber to the mill. By this time timber was being trucked in from adjacent drainages on Salmon Creek and up highway 58 on Salt Creek. The Forest Service was also beginning to pressure Hines to remove the tracks and replace it with a road that would allow easier access to the area for the general public. A young Paul Ehinger had recently been hired by the company in 1952. After returning from the Korean War, he was assigned the job of supervising the removal of the railroad and for one of the few times in the history of the company a project was brought in under budget and ahead of schedule. The railroad was removed and the new road in place in less than a year.

After the war the demand for building materials boomed and by 1950 Hines found it was getting more and more difficult to keep a supply of plywood in their yards in the Midwest. And so, one day in 1950, Normal Stone, General Manager of the Westfir operation called Paul into his office and laid an envelope out on the table with a sketch on its back showing a rough layout of how a plywood plant might be built on the land across the river adjacent to the saw mill. He asked Paul, then a Forest Engineer for the company, to convert the sketch into a working drawing. This drawing would become, by late 1951, the new plywood plant in Westfir.

Because the existing sawmill already set astride the middle of the narrow flat between the railroad and mountainside to the northwest and the mill pond on the river to the

southeast, the only land available short of a total tear-down and reconstruction of the mill, was on the northeastern upriver side of the saw mill, with another parcel on the southwestern down river side. Since the plant would require more land than either parcel could provide, the only solution was to split the plywood plant in two. The Hines plant at Westfir was one of the first to separate the green end of the plywood plant from the dry end. To take advantage of the millpond, the green end was built on the upriver side and dry end on the down. Straddle carriers were used to transport the green veneer a quarter mile from the green end to the drying kilns on the dry end.

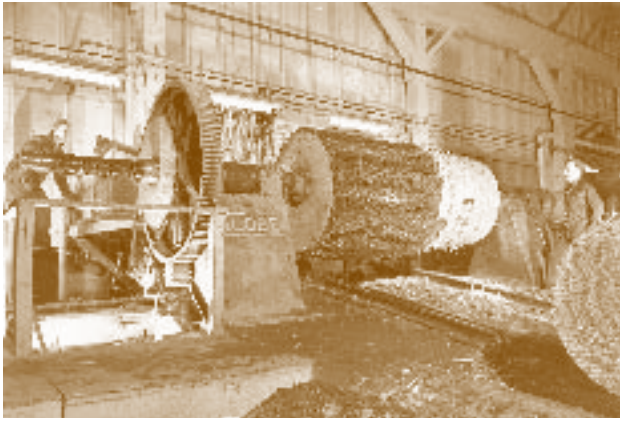
The plant was completed in 1952. It was built in less than a year at a cost of approximately \$2,000,000.00, the same amount Hines had paid for the entire operation seven years earlier.

The green end consisted of a Globe barker with a combination rosser and pressure-bar head, a 113 x 84 inch Coe main lathe and a 60 x 48 inch Coe core lathe. The barker, main lathe and core lathe were positioned parallel to one another in a single line at the head of the green side. Gravity rolls carried the cores from the main lathe to a bucking saw then on to the core lathe. Two 7-1/2 ton Milwaukee rail cranes moved the blocks from the barker to the main lathe while a one ton Yale hoist was used to feed the four foot blocks to the core lathe. The main lathe fed a 150 foot, six-tray system and two automatic Coe clippers. The core lathe fed a single tray and a 64 inch Coe clipper.



Scaling the blocks

Debarking the hard way, 1952



*Blocks ready for the lathe in foreground;
Debarker in background*



Core lathe clipper





Pulling veneer off the green chain

The green, sorted veneer was transported to the dry end to a five-line, fourteen-section Moore dryer, which off-bore onto a single-line dry sorting chain. The patching operation primarily used Globe patching equipment and consisted of a patch cutter, a defect cutter, three hot patchers and two Raimann cold pluggers. Two Fluckinger spreaders, one for external grade and one for internal grade plywood, were in line preceding a 20-opening Williams-White hot press. Plywood was finished by a Yates-American H268 sander.

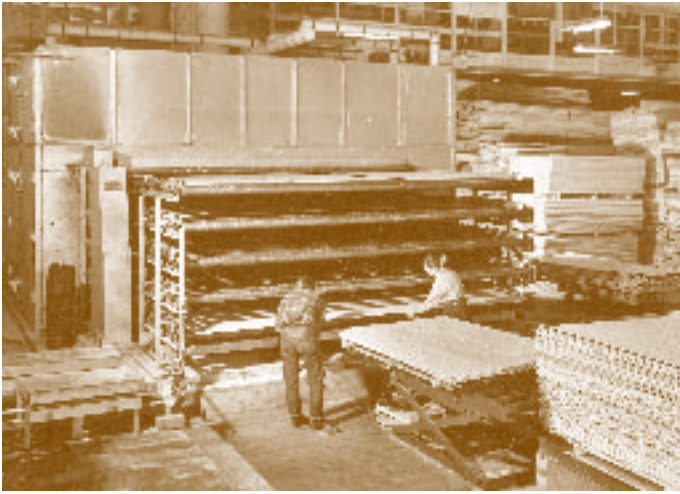
(Most of the above was excerpted from The Timberman, Vol. LIII, No. 9, Portland, Oregon, July, 1952, "The New Hines Plant at Westfir.")

Production began full bore with two shifts on the green end and three on the dry and a total of 125 employees. Adolph Paul was the first manager for the plant. He

was brought in along with a number of other employees from Fir Manufacturing down in Myrtle Creek, Oregon. Paul had served as the Plywood Plant Manager for Fir Manufacturing. He was described as an "old hand" at the business and under his steady leadership the young plant was soon turning out 2-1/2 million feet of 3/8 basis sanded plywood per month.

Finding 125 new employees in a relatively isolated community might seem like a difficult problem. But Westfir and Hines had two advantages that stood them in good stead in filling their employment needs. They had low-cost company housing available for prospective employees and their families, and they had a reservoir of women in the community who had worked in the sawmill during WWII. As it turns out, Hines at Westfir was one of the early post-war companies to employ women full time

Feeding green veneer into the dryer



Dry Chain, 1952



Genevieve Bonds removing defects from veneer



in the wood products industry. It should be noted that, in these days before the Equal Rights Amendment, the heavier jobs were not open to the women, these being primarily on the green end, but most of the jobs on the dry end were, and men and women competed for these jobs and worked side by side in them.

Mary Bales and Ada Racy were two of the women who were there near the beginning and who stayed until their respective retirements some 20 years later. Mary was one of the first women hired by the mill. She was hired in November of 1951. She began working days on the “hot patcher” and moved around through several other jobs before settling into a position on the graveyard shift “to escape the heat of the day.” She retired the last day of March of 1976, some 25 years later.

Ada Racy began her career waitressing at the “cookhouse” in 1947 until it closed. Then began working in the plywood plant in 1954. Like Mary, she began on the “hot patcher” then moved over to the dry end where she stayed for most of her career grading veneer. She retired in June of 1976, just three months after Mary Bales.

The 50s were the glory years for Westfir – more than a thousand citizens in over 300 homes in the community, and the crown-jewel, a brand new modern high school so the children no longer had to take the bus to the Oakridge schools.

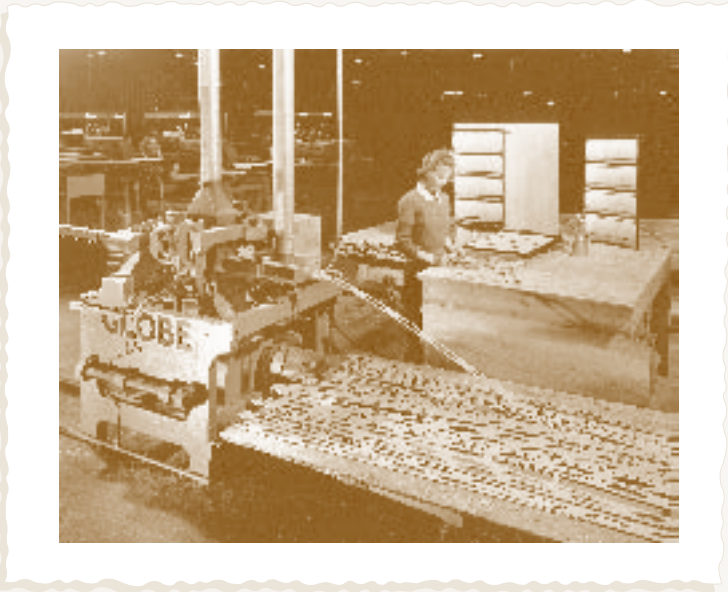
But the roller coaster life of this timber-dependent community continued. By 1955 lumber production had fallen from 320,000 board feet per day to around 190,000, and concerns were beginning to surface about the availability of timber supply.

By the mid 50s Stone had been replaced by Glen Lee from the company’s Portland sales office and Lee was replaced temporarily by Joseph Fitzgerald, the company’s attorney from Hines Corporate offices in Chicago. He in turn was succeeded by Howard Lemons. Lemons came to the business out of the John Day area of eastern Oregon through the University of Oregon to Westfir where he served for a while in a management training situation before being promoted to General Manager. Howard Lemon served on the DFPA board of directors until his death in 1960.

The second half of this decade saw a shift away from the larger old growth timber base toward a smaller log resource and as that trend evolved, so did the mill. In the 20s, when the sawmill was first built, the average log scaled 600 board feet. By 1960, the yield was half that figure. As the timber supply changed, Hines continued to invest in upgrading systems and equipment to handle the smaller logs and to improve the efficiencies and economies of scale needed to remain profitable. As a result, employment levels began to decline and by 1960 the small log transformation was fairly well in place.

In the early years of the plant, the plywood was shipped to the Midwest as originally intended, but it wasn’t long until the market in the west and intermountain area claimed more and more of the product because of lower shipping costs. The Hines plant in Westfir primarily produced 1/4 through 3/4 inch sanded and sheathing plywood along with an occasional experiment with specialty items. In the 50s most of the US plywood was produced in the West, and at one time the plant at Westfir produced nearly 10% of the entire product on the market. By the mid 1960s however, plants in the South were beginning to come into production and take up more of the market in the Midwest and eastern seaboard.

The strike of 1958, the only serious strike in the history of the plant, reflected the changing economies of the times and the industry. The strike was over the proposed changes the company wanted to make to the busheling rates for fallers and buckers in the woods. These rates had not changed since the early days of hand falling and bucking before power saws were used. Obviously, production output had increased many times over because of the power saws, to the extent that many of the timber fallers made more money each month than anyone else in the company top to bottom. Most of the industry had gone along with the rates in the most recent rounds of negotiations, but Hines dug in their heels. The strike began in June of 1958 and wasn’t resolved until January of the following year. Because the saw mill and logging operations were represented by the CIO while the plywood plant was affiliated with the AFL and because the community was remote enough that everyone in town worked for the company, on any given shift-change during the strike you could find wives and neighbors of timber workers crossing picket lines staffed by friends and husbands to go to work



Mary Bales cutting patches for use in grade A veneer



Mrs. Mary Bales patching veneer



Loading the press the hard way

at their jobs in the plywood plant. As the strike moved from weeks into months, you could also see striking timber workers driving trucks for gypo outfits delivering logs to the very mill they were striking against. By late 1958, the formal negotiators were firmly entrenched, but this was a community of people who lived together as well as worked together. They lived in the same neighborhoods. Their children went to the same schools. They shopped at the same grocery store. And word has it that unofficially one Sunday afternoon two cooler heads, two non-negotiators, two neighbors, one from each side, began exploring just what it might take to actually settle the strike and with that conversation, the ice was broken and the dispute was settled within weeks.

In November of 1960, Paul Ehinger, by now the Assistant General Manager under Lemons, was literally thrust into the General Manager's position overnight when Lemons and his entire family were killed in a tragic car accident on their way back to Westfir from Eugene on a dark rainy evening on Highway 58. Ehinger remembers how organized and meticulous Lemons' office was when he reported to work the day following the accident. "The only thing laying on the desk and waiting to be done was the mail from **that** morning. Everything else from the day before had been completed and filed away."

By 1963, Clarence Herman succeeded, through retirement, Adolph Paul as Plywood Plant Manager. Clarence had been with the plant since near its beginning and had worked his way up through positions as the green end foreman for nights and then days, as well as swing shift foreman on the dry end before serving as Mr. Paul's Assistant Manager prior to his succession to the Plant Manager's position. For the Hermans, like many in the Westfir – Oakridge area, it was somewhat of a family affair. Clarence's brother Dick Herman served for a number of years as the Quality Control Supervisor for the plant, while Emil Herman, their father, supervised on the maintenance crew. Emil is noted several times in the company's publication "up the Northfork" for technical innovations around the plant to improve safety and efficiency.

In the winter of 1964, the dam was washed out for a third time, and again it was rebuilt so the pond could continue to provide logs to the mill.

By 1965 Ehinger had been promoted to Vice President of Western Operations for Edward Hines and was succeeded as General Manager of the Westfir operations by Jim Anthony. Anthony was a local boy whose father had come to the area in the 1920s. Jim came up through the sawmill



The dam at Westfir breaking up in the December 1964 flood

Clarence Herman checking the green chain



Adolph Paul (right) - plywood plant manager, 1952

Charles Tistadt (left) - shipping foreman



side and had served as Ehinger's Assistant Manager prior to his promotion. Anthony served as General Manager until the operation's closing in 1977.

By 1968, Lodgepole Pine logs were being hauled to the mill from as far as 110 miles away on the other side of the Cascade summit in Eastern Oregon. Pine was peeled in a four-foot lathe designed for the small diameter logs and the veneer was used as core stock for their sanded fir plywood. By now, the mill had modernized and evolved to the point where nearly 100% of the log was utilized, yet total employment was still dropping and was down to around 430 people.

A year earlier, in 1967, because of the declining population and hence tax revenues, the pride of the community, the local high school, had to be consolidated once again with the Oakridge School District.

Edward Hines Lumber Company leadership was a conservative leadership, probably because of the difficulties during the early years of the Great Depression when they nearly lost the business. But by the late 1960s a conservative buying philosophy actually hurt the company. As Paul Ehinger remembers, "What killed Westfir for us was that we found we had to buy timber two to three years ahead, and to do that we would have had to bid for it very aggressively against a lot of other timber-hungry mills. We couldn't justify the high bids in conventional terms – people were increasing their bids in the belief or hope that prices would continue to climb at a very steep rate. The bidding frenzy made it impossible to plan rationally. Trying to factor in the inflation factor during these years was impossible. A few were willing to gamble. We were not. The central belief of those willing to bid was that, no matter what you did today, inflation would continue and almost any price would be OK three to five years out."

"We had good people and probably could have hung in there a few more years," Ehinger said, "but we would have been buying raw material hand-to-mouth, and that was not an attractive, long-range prospect."

By the early 1970s Clarence Herman had moved on to another position down in the valley and was replaced by Berchtal (Berch) Montieth, another "old hand" in the

business. Montieth was the last of the three Plywood Plant Managers. He served up until the plant's sale and then moved over the company's operations in Hines, Oregon.

Even though economic stresses were buffeting the plant, there was still a sense of pride amongst the employees. This was exemplified in the days immediately prior to August 1, 1974 when the plywood plant put together 555 straight days without a lost time accident. They won an American Plywood Association Award for safety and were ranked among the top seven plants nationally for their safety record.

By 1977, total employment had dropped to 340 jobs and the cost of raw materials continued to drive up manufacturing costs. It was becoming clear to the company that it was time to consider getting out of the business in the West. Ehinger, by now a Senior Vice-President for Hines, had been given the go ahead to sell any of the Westfir properties. He put the Westfir operation and its properties on the market.

At the time of the sale, the following bill of particulars described the equipment in operation in the plywood plant at the time of the sale, and gives an indication of the evolution of the plant from its inception in 1952.

Plywood Plant

The plywood plant has an 8' Coe lathe and charger and 4' Coe lathe and charger. Both have retractable chucks and each is followed by an Elliot Bay Clipper. The 8' lathe has five trays to the clipper. The 4' lathe has two trays. The plywood plant has two Moore dryers, a veneer edge gluing machine, four Raimann patchers and three Skoog patchers. Two of the Skoog patchers are Super Skoogs – one new this year. There are three Globe spreaders feeding two 20 opening presses. Each has a pre-press and automatic loading and unloading devices. A Clark bag house was installed in 1975. An Artek patch line for synthetic patching was installed in 1976."

The log pond behind the dam at Westfir



The Westfir operations were purchased by Mitchell, Blacketer and Associates, out of Medford, Oregon who immediately shut down the sawmill and focused on operating the plywood plant. They ran the plant from 1977 to 1980, then closed the plant and sold it to John Anderson, a wholesaler from Portland, Oregon. It was in turn sold to Jack Robotham in 1982. He operated the plant until just before Christmas in 1985 when a fire destroyed the plywood plant, thereby ending any plywood processing on the site, probably forever. Eventually, the property defaulted to Lane County because of taxes. In 1999 the land was purchased by Mill Site Developers, LLC with plans to develop a resort-retirement community with sites for 120 homes, an RV park recreation area and a light industrial-commercial district. To date nothing has come of this proposal.

What had begun as a dream, and then a plan to build a community and mill to perpetually harvest the timber of the drainage of the North Fork of the Willamette River, on a sustainable, 100-year cycle ran its course in just 50 years. What had begun in the 20s was effectively finished by 1977. The mill is gone. The dam is gone now, not

washed away this time, but removed in 1994 to restore the North Fork to its status as a pristine, free flowing stream, and the office complex for the mill is now a bed and breakfast sitting across the intersection from the wooden, covered Office Bridge that leads across the river to the old mill site. The covered bridge was refurbished in 1997. It remains the longest span of any wooden covered bridge in Oregon.

Now, it is as though the lower valley of the North Fork is resting, tired from a sometimes frenzied roller-coaster ride through the small town timber economy of the mid 20th Century. The town is still there. It is incorporated now, the smallest incorporated town in Lane County, but it is primarily a retirement community for those who spent their lives there and don't want to leave, and a bedroom community for those few jobs over the hill in neighboring Oakridge or for those with the gumption to get up every morning and make the drive to the Eugene-Springfield area 40 miles down highway 58. It is still a beautiful place. It was at the beginning. It is now. But it is much quieter now – much like it must have been back when it began.



The office bridge at Westfir. Longest covered bridge in Oregon.

The Incline Railroad

By the late 1920s, the railroad reached some nine miles up the North Fork to a narrow, vertically edged, rocky stretch known as The Gorge. Construction on up the river stopped here for several years, but high above, on the plateau called Huckleberry Flats, stood a fine stand of virgin timber. Access to it by railroad by normal means would have been prohibitively expensive and time consuming requiring miles and miles of additional track and many switch backs in order to climb up out of the canyon. But these were no ordinary loggers. It is lost to history just who first suggested it, but the decision was made to build the railroad straight up the side of the canyon beginning down river from the entrance to the gorge area.

Taking off from a flat area by the railroad near the river, the Incline ran straight up the side of the canyon to the top, which meant a vertical climb of approximately 3,600 feet at a maximum grade of 72%. No switchbacks. Straight up! Half way up, on a portion of the hillside with a slightly gentler grade, the track split into two parallel lines that ran side by side for a ways, then came back together again to continue on up to the top of the flat. This section of parallel tracks allowed the loaded log carriage traveling down the track to pass the empty, upcoming carriage on its return trip. Switches at the top and bottom of the parallel segment were automatically tripped as carriages passed over them allowing a seamless, smooth operation up and down the track.

While the track was being laid up the mountainside, a unique steam “snubber” donkey was under construction to control the movement of the carriages up and down the track. It had a nine-foot bull wheel, two nine-foot brake drums, brake bands lined with oak blocks that were cooled internally by water and a double extension fire box. It had two gears, a low gear for heavy loads and a higher gear for lighter loads. Westinghouse, air powered locomotive controls and dials allowed the “donkey puncher,” the operator, to know exactly where each of the two cars was on the incline at any given time.

When the donkey was completed, it pulled itself laboriously up the tracks to the top and was mounted just back of the tip-off point. The system used a single steel cable, 3900' long, 1-3/4" thick with a minimum breaking rating of 133 tons. The cable itself weighed more than 20 tons. Two cars were attached to the cable equidistant from one another so they could pass each other safely on their



respective trips up and down the mountain. At the top, the cable ran up over a tower, around a huge block, back down to a 6' “gypsy drum,” around the drum three times, back up to the tower, through another block and then down the 3600' drop where it attached to the empty, upcoming carriage at the bottom.

When a loaded carriage was ready, the donkey pulled it over the edge onto the down-sloping track and then used its huge braking system to control the speed of the carriage as gravity pulled it down the hill. The weight of the loaded carriage moving down the slope pulled the empty carriage back up to the top at the same time.

When everything was working properly, the system could transport five loads per hour all day long as the full and empty carriages seesawed back and forth up and down the hill moving as much as 720,000 board feet of logs from the railroad above to the railroad below each day.

Occasionally, accidents would happen and loaded carriages would break loose and go hurtling down the mountain sending loggers, loaders and operators down below scurrying for their lives and the logs driven into the river. No reports were found of any deaths from these accidents.

Another ten miles of railroad eventually spread out over the flats at the top of the hill to bring logs to the Incline, down the hill and into the sawmill at Westfir to be processed. The railroad at the bottom of the hill eventually moved some 10 miles on up the river valley before the whole system was dismantled in favor of roads and logging trucks in the late 40s and early 50s.

Nearly all of the above has been excerpted from: [up the Northfork](#). *The Westfir Story. The Extraordinary Railway Incline*. Vol. 1, No.12. February, 1973.

Reminiscences

I was one of the lucky ones. I was born in Westfir and grew up there during the best of its years.

I remember the company-owned store and the crunch of caulk boots as they bit into the wooden sidewalks. I remember the tiny post office with its two windows and rows and rows of mailboxes. I remember the covered “breeze way” of the six-room grade school where we roller skated and played hop-scotch when we were in the lower grades and the baseball field out back where you were “somebody” if you could hit the ball onto or over the roof of the bus barn at the back edge of the outfield.

I grew up in company housing down in the Hemlock neighborhood and later in a house further down the road that my parents purchased when Hines built and sold houses there in the late 50s. My mother still lives in that same house now several years after my father’s passing. He worked for Westfir Lumber Company and later Edward Hines from the mid 30s until he retired late in the 1960s. They had come to Westfir from Silverton at a friend’s invitation shortly after they were married. For a while they lived in Camp 3 on the flats above the river near the top of “The Incline” and then later up the river at Camp 5. There were other camps: Camp 2, Camp 4, and Camp 6. They were temporary camps for the loggers and their families when they were working in the surrounding areas. Camp 6, up on High Prairie, is the only one remaining now still inhabited.

I remember the bunkhouse building for the single loggers and mill workers. My brothers delivered newspapers there. I remember the cookhouse where employees could get their

meals. I remember when there were two covered bridges in town and not just one. We walked across the lower one from Hemlock to catch the bus to school in the morning.

I loved the simple, local place names. If you lived in Hemlock and wanted to go to the company store, or school or office, you simply went “uptown.” If you went the back way to Oakridge, you went “over the hill.” Now the drive up the North Fork is Aufderheide Drive. Then it was just “up the river.” Everyone knew what you meant.

I started and finished high school at Westfir High School during the 12 Cinderella years of its short life.

It was truly a working man’s Camelot. There were no class differences. There were no racial or ethnic divisions. People were neighbors and friends. We visited one another in the evenings. We left our homes to their care when we went on vacations. We hunted the mountains in the autumn and swam the river in front of the house in the summer. We hiked into lakes that now have roads into them, and in the winter we went to school.

I didn’t know at the time how special and how beautiful a place it was. I thought everyone grew up like I did. To me it was just normal. It wasn’t until years later after I went off to school and then out into the larger world that I began to realize that it was not the norm, that it was truly a special place and a special time.

Everyone should have the good fortune to grow up in a “Westfir.”

I was one of the lucky ones.

*Marv Himmel,
February, 2006*





**Published by the
Plywood Pioneers
Association**

October 2006

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PLYWOOD PIONEERS
ASSOCIATION

Plywood Pioneers Association
7011 S. 19th St., Tacoma, Washington 98466