

Making a Timber Industry

By Carl Abbott

In 1905, the business of logging had an entire building to celebrate its development. The Forestry Building was Oregon's unique contribution to the architecture of world's fairs. It was an enormous log cabin such as no pioneer had ever built. Complete with pine cone decorations, it stretched 105 feet by 209 feet, fronted by a portico of natural tree trunks. The interior was modeled on the nave of a cathedral, with colonnades of tree trunks supporting the high ceiling and setting off balconies and exhibition galleries — filled with samples of lumber, dioramas of elk and panthers, and American Indian photographs by Edward Curtis. The largest logs on the foundation weighed in at thirty-two tons and measured fifty-four feet by five feet.

The man who supplied the logs was Simon Benson, a Norwegian immigrant whose career summed up the expansion of the timber industry. He cut them from his holdings along the lower Columbia River and floated them up the Willamette to Guild's Lake, where they could be winched into place at the construction site. Benson had arrived in Oregon in 1879, after eleven years in Wisconsin learning English, store keeping, and the lumber business. He soon began to buy timber lands near St. Helens and adjacent areas, eventually boasting an empire of 46,000 acres.

Benson's success came from shrewd purchases as the timber industry moved westward, and from adopting new techniques for logging such as the use of "steam donkey engines" to winch logs out of the woods and small logging railroads rather than ox teams to haul them to the water. "My camp was the first all-steam logging show in the Pacific Northwest," he wrote. "By using steam I reduced my logging costs by more than half. With railroad and oxen, my total cost of putting logs in the water had been \$4.50 a thousand feet. With steam donkeys and railroad the cost was \$2.15." He also avoided high shipping costs by building huge cigar-shaped log rafts (4.5 million feet of lumber in rafts 835 feet long) that were then towed to San Diego, where he had a sawmill ready to cut them for the lucrative California market.

The steam logging that Benson helped to pioneer transformed the Coast Range and the slopes of the Cascades. Logging could now extend into the wet season since steam winches did not mire down like ox teams. Timber companies built dozens of short logging railroads up small valleys to tap previously isolated stands. Maps from the first quarter of the century show temporary lines reaching up from the coast and the Columbia like the veins of a leaf. In many cases, the routes of the abandoned lines are shadowed by logging roads where growling eighteen-wheel logging rigs haul out the cut from second- and third-growth forests.

Benson rode the curve of the changing timber industry in the United States. By the late nineteenth century, the best timber lands in the Northeast and the Great Lakes states had been logged over. The industry shifted toward the fir and pine forests of the Northwest. The most famous event in this shift was the decision of Frederick Weyerhaeuser of Minnesota in 1900 to buy 900,000 acres of timber land from the Northern Pacific Railroad and relocate to the Northwest. By 1905, Washington ranked first in lumber production and Oregon soon took second place. The Northwest share of national lumber production jumped from 8 percent to 20 percent in the single decade 1900-1910.

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