

The conversations with John T. Labbe on January 27th and 31st concern themselves with the history of logging here in Washington County. Mr. Labbe, who was 66 years old at the time of the interview, was born in the city of Portland in 1911. He has been involved with the logging industry all of his working life. Moreover, during the summer breaks from school, young John was out in the forests cutting and hauling wood.

~~Afterwards~~ Mr. Labbe became a "gyppo", or an independent logger. In other words, he would hire his services out to various mills and contractors here in the northwestern part of Oregon. After retiring from active logging around 1969, Mr. Labbe turned reflective on his experiences in the forests and turned to writing about logging. He has contributed to a number of books on the subject and has authored one on his own entitled, Railroading in the Woods.

Mr. Labbe's major interest lies with the railroads. As a result of his research, Mr. Labbe has knowledge of the various logging railroads in Washington County, i.e. the main lines and the spur lines leading into the mills, camps, and logging sites. As an ~~annual~~ extension of this initial intellectual inquiry, he learned about the individual mills themselves. Also, because Mr. Labbe hired his logging services out, he came in contact with many of the mill owners here in Washington County on a personal and professional basis. As a result of these factors, John Labbe makes an excellent oral history candidate.

In this interview, Mr. Labbe delves into the construction of the Southern Pacific railroad into the forest of western Washington County. By opening up this area, the railroad proved to be the lifeblood of the industry. In the second half of the interview, Mr. Labbe discusses many of the individual mills, camps, and logging sites in the county.

This interview can serve as a valuable preface to the entire series of interviews on logging in the oral history collection. It provides a good overall background into the entire industry.

JL: I notice here that you got Elwood Lumber Company in Buxton. That lumber company came fairly late. It kind of bugs me because I could remember a sawmill at Buxton that apparently never existed. I have talked to people that have lived in the area all their lives and there never was a sawmill where I thought there was. In my mind I have confused the Buxton area with someplace else. Elwood came in there from an operation down out of Birkenfeld in Columbia County where he operated as Elwood and Snow. He came up and he set up a mill at Buxton. It was in the woods. They had a railroad that branched off the S.P. and S. line to Vernonia. There's a road going east from the highway junction up through Buxton and on up the hill. Their junction was near that crossing where the old S.P. and S. grade was. Now, I think a state park has that right-of-way. They were back in there about four miles back up the canyon.

Then we have the C.H.P. Lumber Company in Hillsboro which we have already mentioned. I believe that that was also part of this Hillsboro Lumber Company. I think they were all the same operation. Of course, J. C. Hare was involved there too.

All right. Now, over here we have the Interstate Logging Company. Now what they were...that was the old Koster Products Company. Koster products was primarily a Cooperage Company. Cooperage means that they logged and they made barrels. They had the Western Cooperage Company and they had the California Barrel Company which operated down in the Olney area down in Clatsop County. They were primarily a redwood operation in the Klamath area. Koster was the head of it. Then, when

JL: (cont.) they finished down around Olney they moved up on the Vernonia branch of the SP&S about the county line. I'm not sure just which side of the line they were on. They logged into Washington County area. Then, after the Tillamook Burn they opened up that area and ^{the} Consolidated Timber Company was formed. They moved in there and operated up there as Interstate Logging Company. Later on they moved over to Timber. I think that was just a truck operation.

LM: There really was a lot of movement and changing of sites of the companies.

JL: Yes. They moved around and very often they changed names at the same time they chagged sites. For what reason I don't know.

LM: Just to confuse historians, magbe.

JL: They certainly did that. That's for certain. We covered Laurel Lumber Company and Lovegren Lumber Company. I think th is Laurel has some connection with this Hillsboro Lumb er too. I would have to check to be certain of that.

McCall at Timber...that's D.H. McCall. I think Miller-Cox followed McCall as the same operation. D.H. McCall moved from there over into Clark County in Washington. I think this Miller is the Miller that is connected with the East-Side Mi ll and Lumber Company. That's where Tony Lausmann came in. Those are both the same operation.

LM: Excuse me for a moment. There was so many mills and so many mill and camp owners. I'm curious, was there any type of association where the company owners would get together and discuss common problems?

JL: Well, yes. They did that originally. They formed some associations for setting prices. Of course, later on that was frowned on. Originally, they set prices.

LM: They would set prices?

JL: Yes. They would establish the prices they were going to pay for logs. When the loggers were in a position to gouge them for logs, why, they would pay just so much or they wouldn't operate. They also conspired, if that's the word, to set prices for their products. They certainly got together and set limits on production so they wouldn't flood the market.

LM: Wasn't it illegal at the time?

JL: Oh no! It was perfectly legal. But I think that probably that type of activity is what is responsible for the laws now that limit that sort of thing.

LM: When did the laws come in to stop this?

JL: I couldn't tell you exactly. I know up until World War I period, say they used to do that. The main outgrowth I guess of that, would be the West Coast Lumbermen's Association which sets standards for the products. But it doesn't set prices or anything like that. West Coast Lumbermen provide the graders and the various grade stamps and that sort of things. Then, of course, they, the Columbia River Loggers got together and set the standards for scaling logs and so on. But, originally, yes, they did get together to control the market.

LM: Maybe that was part of the reason for the rise of the labor activity among the loggers themselves.

JL: I don't know if it had any influence on the union activity. The lumber companies managed to control the union activity pretty well. Up until the government came along during the First World War and set up the Spruce Division.

JL: (cont.) Spruce Division. Then they set up the Four L's, which was the Loyal Legion of Loggers and Lumbermen. That was kind of a union activity, but it was set-up by the government.

LM: Was there much of those two organizations in this area then?

JL: Yes. The Four L's developed quite a bit. They had their own publication and if I am not mistaken, Stuart Holbrook edited that. They established camp conditions and that sort of thing. They were responsible for putting libraries in camps. They arranged entertainment. Something like the U.S.O.'s for the troops during the Second World War. Their influence remained after the war was over. That was rather a benign organization. It was sponsored by the government. I think the operators took part in it to a large extent. Perhaps they may have influenced a little too much.

There wasn't much union turmoil other than the I.W.W. came along after the war. They were left-wing Marxist organization. Rather radical. They came along and unionized the woods operations. They didn't get a very good foothold because the loggers tended to operate on a piecework basis. By the thousand feet. Of course, some of the higher skills didn't. Like the climbers and loggers, hooktenders, and riggers and that sort of thing. They had a rather well-established price-scale. They were always in demand. They didn't need to organize. They could command whatever prices they wanted. The fellows that worked in the woods and the lower grade of workers worked by the thousand feet. They didn't want union control over their activities. They didn't want to be limited in what they could do.

JL: They'd work from daylight to dark. The more they worked the more they made. They didn't want to pay anybody dues for the privilege (laughs). The unions were rather late in coming to the woods I'd say.

Well, let's go down this list a little further. We got Mowry Logging Company there at Glenwood. They logged north of the highway area. I think, if I'm not mistaken, they logged along the Timber highway, back in that area.

Here we have Multnomah Lumber and Box Company in Reliance. That's Douty again. Fred Douty was the head of that.

LM: It sounds like you knew several of these people personally. What was your contact with these men?

JL: Well, I bought timber from Fred Douty. He was a timber broker when I knew him. He was rather elderly. He had an office in the building right across Stark Street from JK Gills. There was a real estate office there. Up on the balcony he had his office. At that time, he didn't know much about what he was selling because he sent me out to look at timberlands which didn't exist. People would come and list it perhaps giving the wrong locations, you know, section and township and range and so on.

LM: So you would come in contact with these people purely on a business relationship in search of better timberlands?

JL: Yes, that's right. Here at Gales Creek Manary-Davis logged. That was Roland Manary. I didn't know Roland very well, but I knew his brother Gordon, who still lives in Portland on Cornell Road there. Their father, James Manary, was quite an extensive logger. He got started out at Troutdale.

JL: (cont.) He drove logs down the Sandy River into Troutdale. He took over the logging in Lincoln County for the C.D. Johnson Mill in Toledo, the big one. His kids were working there with him. Now, Roland was not really a logger. He was more the intellectual type. He and this Davis, Charlie Davis, who was also out of a logging family, they set up together out there. They didn't make it. They ~~were~~ were out around the Gales Creek area. I've never been able to find out exactly where their operation was. It didn't last very long. He's still living in California but after he left there he got into some other line of business.

LM: Did some of the mills that were set-up they just failed immediately?

JL: Yes, sure. Yes, it's very competitive business and it took either a lot of experience or a lot of intelligence in there to make a profit. You had a large outlay, you had a large overhead, you had a large outlay, and you had to be sure that there was enough timber coming out to cover the costs of getting into it. That took a knowledge of the timber. You had to have some idea of the quality and what market price you get for it and so on. So you had to do a lot of figuring before you started.

LM: Were there many mills operating without the rail lines and the spurlines?

JL: Yes, there were a lot of them. The Carnation Lumber Company is an old-timer there in Hillsboro (actually near Forest Grove) and they never had a camp. They just bought on the market. I don't think they ever had a logging operation, but they've been there for a long time. That's just one example.

JL: (cont.) The Hillsboro Lumber Company did have a logging operation but they also bought from loggers all through that area. That was the common way of doing it. For the most part, you see, if you relied on the market entirely for logs you couldn't plan ahead well because you didn't know what the market would be, what the price would be, or what the availability of logs would be. If you were buying that way and you had a little tract of your own you always had that to fall back on. You could log your own timber when ~~either~~ you couldn't get logs or you couldn't afford them. So, alot of them worked both ways.

Alot of these were rather small (the logging operations). This North-Pacific Fir and Lumber Company like I said, that was Eccles at Banks. Now, Oregon-Kansas Timber Company...I'm confused with Kansas-Oregon. I've got them here at Timber and I don't know what their operation was at Timber, but htere was one down here at Rockton on the east side of the county just below the Cornelius Pass. That's at the west end of the tunnel on the railroad. That was Veness from ~~Winlock~~Knalock, Washington. I think that's Oregon-Kansas if I am not mistaken.

I think we show it under another name here (looks on his list).

Yes, we got Rockton Lumber Company. That was the same operation.

LM: Were there any camps or companies in the Sherwood area toward the southeastern part of the county?

JL: The only one that I have come across is shown at Middleton. Middleton was the next station west of Sherwood. It's about where the rail line crosses the highway, Newberg highway.

JL: There was just a store there. There was a logging company down at Middleton that had a railroad which was rather unusual. It operated on a cable. They built their own locomotive and it would pull itself up the hill on a cable and pull a loaded car behind it. It was called a Potter Climber Locomotive. This Potter designed it. He logged originally over around the Bonnyslope area. He used a counter-balance affair there. He had cars that ran on wooden rails. The loaded car would pull the empty car up and he had a winch fastened to it. So then he could control it. That worked pretty well with the power unit stationary. But then he got the idea of making the power unit mobile and he mounted it on these tracks. He set it up over there and he had about a half-mile of track and he hauled up out of the canyon which I suppose would be between Middleton and Parrot Mountain there.

LM: Sounds like quite an elaborate operation.

JL: Yes. It was a demonstration-operation as much as anything. He tried to sell that locomotive to others, but he never was successful.

I noticed a Middleton operation here under another title. Yes, Chandler Brothers at Middleton. That's maybe the operation. I couldn't be sure without looking it up. But that was just a small operation. These saw mills would cut around 25,000 to 30,000 feet a day. Which is not a very large mill. We used to cut that in a little deisal mill with five men. So, you could see it isn't too large. 25,000 feet of logs would be, oh, I suppose, six or seven loads of logs, truckloads.

LM: What was a good sized daily production for an average mill?

JL: Well, the bigger mills with the railroads usually ran from 100,000 to 250,000 a day. Although alot of the 50 to 100,000 also had railroads. One locomotive and two or three cars would satisfy them.

Now, Prouty Timber Comapny operated between what we might call Westimber and Chchran. Prouty had a big mill at Warrenton, on the coast. They got up there and they logged in the Timber area and just sold the logs. I don't know why. Down on the coast they just logged to their own mill. So they had the two seperate operation. They had a pretty junky outfit. The equipment that Prouty's had was operating up there looked like it had been abandoned for years.

LM: That seems to be quite common.

JL: Yes. They were down on the bottom of the list when it came to maintainance.of equipment.

LM: Well, Mr. Labbe, I think we've spent quite a bit of time here and maybe we could have another recording session sometime else.

JL: Yes, anytime you want.

LM: O.K. I think we've crammed alot of information in just an hour or tawo ~~tawo~~ of tape. I'm really happy with what we have produced.

JL: There's ~~lots~~ more where that came from (laughs).

LM: Thank-you very much.

JL: You are very welcome.

Taken together, the John Labbe interview provides a good, overall synopsis of the logging industry here in Washi ngton County.