

A Brief History of the Florence Waterfront

by Bill Calder

At the turn of the century, the Florence waterfront was the center of activity for a thriving community. Tall schooners could be seen loading a fresh salmon pack; small businesses along Front Street served loggers, fishermen, and new homesteaders. Most of the traffic was on the river; steamers, river boats, and schooners were a frequent sight. To the settlers, and to the Indians that preceded them, the river was a "life line."

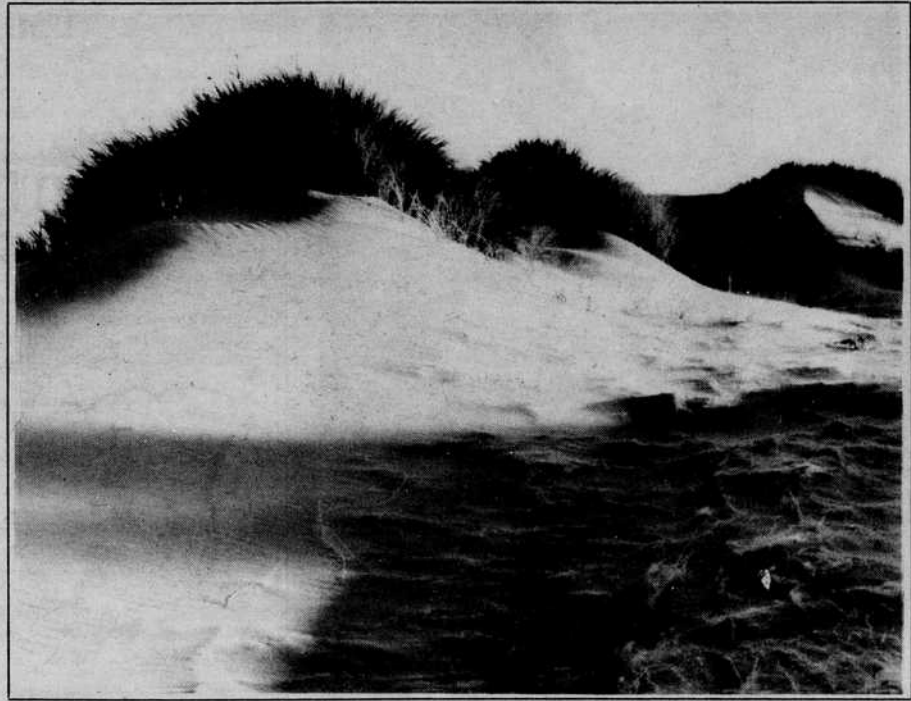
Originally, the townsites had been the home of the peaceful Siuslaw Indian tribe (pronounced si-oos-law). They lived along the banks of the river and fished for the prized salmon that were abundant. Canoes carved from solid logs provided river transport. By 1875, the federal government had formed a reservation on the Siletz River to the north and effectively relocated hundreds of Siuslaw's away from their homeland. The stage was set for white settlement in the Siuslaw Valley.

By 1880, a small community had been formed along the banks of the river where the Indians once lived. A few stores opened to serve the small population of homesteaders and settlers but the area was still remote and removed from the lines of communication and shipping. Twenty years later, the population had grown to 300 and, according to a reporter from Portland, "has one weekly newspaper, two general merchandise stores, one saloon, two canneries, and a lumber mill." Today, one of the original general merchandise store buildings remains

intact in its original location.

It was in the 1930's that a major change took place that would eventually shift the emphasis from the river to the highway. As part of a federal jobs program, the WPA built five bridges on the coast, including one over the Siuslaw. When completed, the bridges successfully linked the famous Roosevelt highway on the Oregon Coast. Over a period of several years after the completion, many businesses moved from the waterfront area to the new highway, all in search of the opportunities and money that could be made along the automobile roadway. By the 1960's, what was once the center of a thriving community had become a "blighted" area. Windows were boarded up, buildings were allowed to decay, many were torn down. The waterfront area had gone into a period of dormancy.

In the early 1970's however, people began moving back into the old buildings and fixing them up. Some even started businesses. A small commercial area slowly formed but it was primarily a residential neighborhood. Today, the waterfront area has come back to life. Businesses and residences combine for a unique mix in what was once the center of the town of Florence. There is less waterborne traffic and many modern amenities, but there are also several buildings that have survived the changes over the years. Stop, look and listen; try to feel what it must have been like here at the turn of the century.



Nature takes over as sculptor of the magnificent sea of dunes south of Florence.

Photo by Kim Harrington

Central Oregon Coast

Continued

through the forest, campfire talks at **Tillicum Beach**, naturalist-led nature hikes into the forest and down to the tidepools, films and exhibits at the visitor center high atop the cape (maps and information here, too). One of the more spectacular trails leads down a path and stone steps to **Devil's Church**—a turbulent white-foamed chasm at its best at high tide.

Three miles north is the small community of **Yachats**, home of several good eateries and beachside inns. The southernmost town in Lincoln County, Yachats was home to the Coast Range Indian reservation headquarters for many years. In July the community holds the annual Silver Smelt Fry, sharing the sea's bounty with natives and visitors—it's the only spot on the Pacific coast where smelt come to shore and are harvested.

Heading south again, Highway 101 wraps itself around high cliffs and rocky headlands, gradually dropping in elevation as it winds back to Florence. This section was one of the last and most difficult stretches of coast highway to be finished, in the early 1930's. Originally it was a narrow Indian path, and later, a wagon road passable only during summer months to all except the more adventurous hiker.

Florence, home of the annual Rhododendron Festival each May, signals the start of sand dunes country, extending south to Coos Bay. A stop at the **Oregon Dunes National Recreation Area** office in Reedsport

will provide helpful information, slide shows, and good maps of the best areas for newcomers to the dunes as well as seasoned veterans. There are special areas reserved for dune buggies. For a safe look at the ever-changing sand dunes, stop at the new **Oregon Dunes Overlook** a few miles south of Florence. Good ramp and handicap access.

Fishing buffs will want to check out **Mercer Lake, Sutton Lake, Big Creek, and Tenmile Creek**—most of the lakes are stocked and have boat ramps. If larger bodies of water are more to your liking, try stalking the big-mouth bass at **Siltcoos** or **Woahink Lakes** south of Florence and **Jessie M. Honeyman State Park** (one of the larger coast parks remaining open most of the year). For deep sea fishing, check at the **Visitors Information Center** on Highway 101 in Florence.

With fishing pole and lure, dune buggy, clam shovel, crab ring, binoculars, or camera in hand, travelers will enjoy exploring outdoor treasures along Oregon's central coast.

For Information:
Chambers of Commerce & Visitors Information Centers—
Florence (503) 997-3436
Yachats (503) 547-3530
Mapleton Ranger Station (503) 758-1589
Cape Perpetua Recreation Area (503) 547-3289
Oregon Dunes National Recreation Area (503) 271-3611.



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