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from Tami Quinn Hollenbeck

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The important history of O&C lands

BY JAKOB SHOCKEY

The "O&C lands" and the "county timber receipts" they generate are regional subjects that many of us pretend to understand. We have become practiced at nodding in agreement when the topic arises. But they are an important piece of our region's history and well worth understanding. Here goes.

In 1866, 3.7-million acres of land were deeded to the Oregon & California (O&C) Railroad Company in a checkerboard pattern across the forests from Portland down into California. These lands were meant to incentivize the building of a great railroad, which would encourage settlement and commerce along what is now the I-5 corridor. Under this land grant, these lands were to be sold, in 160-acre parcels by the O&C Railroad Company, along the proposed route to "actual settlers" for the reduced rate of \$2.50 per acre. In theory, the funds from these sales would go toward building the railroad, while simultaneously populating the railway corridor.

These lands were heavy in virgin timber, which was worth a lot more than \$2.50 an acre, so top officers from the O&C Railroad Company commenced a scheme to round up drifters from saloons

in Portland's waterfront district and set them up as shill settlers. As soon as these "settlers" had acquired the O&C parcel's title from the lands office, this title was quietly signed back over to the railroad men, who sold bundles of these "settled" parcels to timber companies at a fat profit. Eventually, this fraud was exposed, and in 1916, Congress took back 2.9 million acres that were still deeded to the O&C Railroad Company.

In 1937, during the Great Depression, Congress passed the O&C Lands Act, which stated that timber was to be "sold, cut, and removed in conformity with the principle of sustained yield for the purpose of providing a permanent source of timber supply, protecting watersheds, regulating streamflow, and contributing to the economic stability of local communities and industries, and providing recreational facilities." That quote is the first important thing to remember about the 1937 O&C Act—a vague bit of text that set the fate of these forests, the loggers who work in them, and the adjacent communities. Also in this act was an initial Allowable Sale Quantity (ASQ) of 500-million board feet per year, until the productivity of these lands could be better assessed—

another important detail. It fell to the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to manage these lands in accordance with this language.

The 1937 O&C Lands Act also provided that 75 percent of the revenue from timber sales would go back to the counties from which the timber was harvested. These are the fabled timber receipts, which became a windfall for our counties post-World War II as demands for lumber soared. Since nearly all old-growth timber had been harvested from private land, energy turned toward logging the big timber from the federal O&C lands. The counties were taking in so much money by 1953 that they offered to return 25 percent to the BLM, which used those funds for creating more roads into O&C lands and reforestation of clear-cut stands. By 1983, the ASQ soared to 1,185-million board feet. Most of the remaining virgin forest had been clear-cut, and our counties had become reliant on these payments.

The rest of this story is one many of us are more familiar with. The vanishing northern spotted owl and silted-over streams led to the 1994 Northwest Forest Plan. The ASQ fell to 211-million board feet, and our counties were suddenly desperate for funds. Passions flared, mills closed, and people lost their jobs. In the Applegate, we came together under the Applegate Partnership—a group of residents, environmentalists, timber industry folks, and federal agency staff who sat down at a table together to work through differences and toward a shared vision for our forests.

However, behind that collaboration has been the specter of the 1937 O&C Act, and it's important to remember that BLM continues to interpret its mandate for our forests' management from that legislation. I recently heard someone in BLM make a statement to the effect that "when it comes to forest management, there is public land, and then there is O&C land." With a nod to L. Frank Baum's classic book, the O&C Act continues to be the "man behind the curtain" in decision-making for our forests, even today.

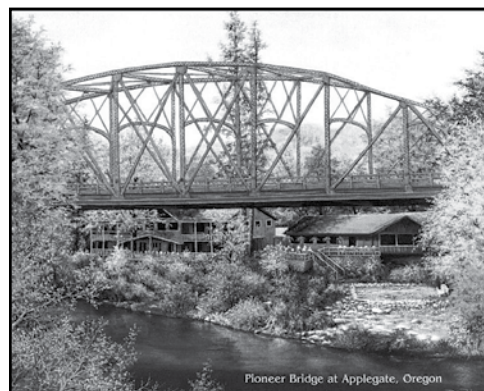
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Voices of the Applegate

Voices of the Applegate, our community choir directed by Harmony Sue Haynie, ended the fall session with two concerts: the first one on November 18 at the Old Presbyterian Church in Jacksonville, and the second at Applegate River Lodge on November 20. Harmony, our new director, led the choir through an impressive variety of music consisting of South African songs, Bulgarian hymns, Georgian wedding songs, and Jamaican and gospel worship arrangements.

Voices of the Applegate will begin another session in the spring with rehearsals at Ruch Library once a week starting in January 2017. The beginning date and rehearsal days will be announced in December. Sessions are 12 weeks long, including the concerts, and the membership cost is \$55 per session, which pays for the director, the cost of the venues, and copies of the music scores. Concerts are free, but donations are always welcome.

For more information, call Joan Peterson at 541-846-6988.



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