

# Great Depression left mark on Coquille

## Harry Slack remembers early law career

By Laura Isenhardt  
Publisher

**I**t was October 1929 when Harry Slack Sr. came to Coquille to begin work in the law offices of the late A. J. Sherwood. Only weeks later Coquille and the rest of the nation was plunged into the Great Depression. But unlike some businesses, the Depression actually created business for the firm which 54 years later is still headed by Mr. Slack.

A. J. Sherwood was the father of Mr. Slack's wife and had a thriving law business in the town in 1929. He was also involved in the community in a number of ways and was the president of the First National Bank of Coquille. His death in September 1929 brought Mr. Slack to Coquille that fall to pick up the business. Being from Dallas,

Texas by way of Illinois Wesleyan University he was not a member of the Oregon bar. He had to wait until July of the next year before he could take the examination. Offices were located downtown in the upper floor of the bank building which is at the corner of First and Central.

Mr. Slack says that although the Depression in some ways added to the law business, often it became a matter of barter and exchange in payment for services. He, along with physicians and other professionals, sometimes took firewood, fruit, potatoes, and etc. for payment. "They were fair transactions," he says, and of course there were bank failures.

Mr. Slack was the attorney for the receiver when the Farmers and Merchants Bank in Coquille folded. In the county he remembers a number of banks closing; one in Myrtle Point, another in

North Bend, and one in Marshfield.

The bank failure in Coquille may have precipitated the failure of the Coquille Sawmill Company, Mr. Slack remembers, for which he was also the attorney for the receiver. "Some people got hurt," he adds. "There was no FDIC. Not only the stockholders but some of the depositors."

**F**or Coquille he says the Depression started tapering off in 1935 and 1936. Before that period George Ulett came to town and bought the Oerding Myrtlewood Company and with Ralph Smith started the Smith Wood Products.

It employed many and kind of pulled Coquille out, he adds. "It was a real shot in the arm."

Dairy ranches were still operating in the valley during those years, but prices for dairy products were way down in those days, he says. "All of the bottom land had dairy farms. Now they are almost extinct -- the younger generation doesn't want to milk cows, but prefer to raise beef."

In 1929 there were several other law offices in Coquille. Those included "Art" Berg, Grant Corby, Harley Covalt, J.J. Stanley, Jas. Watson and S.D. Pulford. But the population wasn't much different Mr. Slack says he doesn't believe that in 50 years the population of Coquille

has varied more than a thousand in either direction.

There were more stores in the business district, however. Stores were open on Saturday nights and people came for the social part of it as well as to make purchases. He remembers Henry Lorenz' store which was quite a nice dry goods store carrying many brand names and quality merchandise. A large grocery store was located where the U-Mark is now.

**T**ransportation changed some of that. When Mr. Slack first arrived the road was gravel all the way to the California border. There was no black top, although a concrete road existed from Coquille to Marshfield.

Mr. Slack has seen in 54 years in the law profession change also. "Two years ago about 50 percent of the lawyers in Oregon had less than five years experience." He thinks there are some attorneys who do not have the proper perception of the profession. "They went into it for the big buck and it is not the place for those who want to make a lot of money," he says. He points to the suspensions and disbarments of younger ones today; something that was very rare years ago. There were no grievances against lawyers as there are today. Mr. Slack sees the problem today as the profession being overcrowded -- the same as medicine.

"Advertising was unheard of. Now the yellow pages contain ads, including lawyers outside of Coos County."

Mr. Slack also notes that in his professional career he has probably turned down more cases than he has taken. The cases had no merit. "Today some of the younger lawyers take cases of any type, clog the court dockets and wind up costing the client money."

The clogged courts are also due to the public defense system, Mr. Slack



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