

# Coquille River was the valley's early lifeline...

*(Editor's Note: the following story was written for the Sentinel by the late Curt Beckham, well-known Coos County historian who lived in Myrtle Point. The story is based on an interview with the late William "Bill" Panter about his family and their boating experiences on the Coquille River.)*

**By Curt Beckham in 1976**

When we moved to Bandon in 1922 we went down the Coquille River on the large stern wheeler, The Telegraph. This was near the end of riverboat transportation on the Coquille as a graveled highway was being constructed down the valley from Myrtle Point to Bandon. This all-year road when completed in the early 20's brought an end to the 30-year riverboat dynasty of W. R. Panter, the late Bill Panter's father.

The Coquille River, as well as many of the other coastal streams of western Oregon, had been used by the Indians with their dugout cedar boats and canoes. The pioneers used the stream to help them settle along its banks. Loggers then and to the present day use the river to raft, store and float the timber to the sawmills along its banks. It was a busy waterway between the settlements of Bandon, (the seaport town) Prosper, Parkersburg, Randolph, the sawmill and boat building communities; Riverton, the coal mining village; Coquille, the county seat; Arago, the rich farming community; and Myrtle Point located at the head of navigation 30 miles inland.

This coastal stream was filled almost beyond today's concept with chinook and silver salmon.

This short but wide and navigable tidewater stream served Indians and our pioneer settlers as a lifeline of communication as well as with an all important food supply.

William R. Panter was born in 1858 in a covered wagon in Nebraska.

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Advertisement from Polk's Coos County Director (1916-1917) for  
 W. R. Panter's transportation company.

His father brought him to Coos County in 1860 where they settled on a ranch near Lampa Creek in 1863, nine miles up river from Bandon. His boating experiences began in the 70's when he worked as a deck hand on the stern wheeler steamer, Annie, under Captain Rackleff. He was married to Ella Hutchinson in 1880 and to them were born Walter, William, Mary Allen, Ruby, Stacy, Dora, Albert and Archie. His early career consisted of mining, farming, logging, but steam boating became his chosen work for many years.

Before W. R. Panter got into the boating business he was a logger and farmer. He owned a farm along the banks of the Coquille River a few miles above Bandon. There were many logging camps located along this river harvesting the huge trees, which grew thickly on the mountains reaching down to the river's edge. In the 80's and 90's much logging was carried on by bull teams, but there were also some steam donkey yarding

donkeys in operation. Getting the huge logs into the river was not an easy task. Someone conceived the idea of building a pole chute to carry the logs to the river. The pull of gravity and the slick logs on the poles caused the logs to come down the steep chutes into the river at a tremendous speed.

Panter was a camp foreman for an outfit yarding a tract of Pershbaker's timber on the north bank of the Coquille some five miles below Riverton. This camp had a pole chute one half-mile long leading back on the high ridge from the river. Logs were skidded to the chute where they were let loose to go speeding down into the river below. There were not many boats on the river at that time but to keep from endangering them with these speeding logs, the boats would whistle when approaching one of the chutes and the loggers would not turn any logs loose until the all clear whistle was given.

The captain of the little steamer,

Antelope, one day wanted his passengers to see the logs coming down so he blew his all clear signal but stopped across the river for a good view of the proceedings. One of the huge logs just missed the Antelope before it lost its momentum in the river.

Captain Bob Fredricks, owner of the Dispatch, had all the freight business he needed so did not want to be bothered by picking up the farmers' milk cans from their small docks to haul to the creamery located three miles above Coquille City. W. R. Panter quit his logging job and bought the small propeller steamer, the Maria, from Fredricks. Panter bought this little forty-foot boat in 1891 or 1892 to meet the transportation needs of the dairy farmers in the lower Coquille Valley. This was the beginning of a long and important career for Cap Panter, as he was affectionately called by the river folk down through the years.

Soon after he purchased the Maria he saw another opportunity on the river. C. Timmons had a large salmon cannery at Bandon, which bought fish from the fishermen along the river. Cap Panter bought a large scow from the Herman brothers, boat builders of Randolph, to haul fish to Timmons' cannery. This scow could carry 3000 salmon at one time. During the fall and winter salmon runs he would tow this scow from Beaver Slough to Bandon picking up fish from the seine fishermen along the river. There were so many fish being caught that Timmons put a limit of 50 fish per day on each fisherman. They were getting 15 cents per pound for silvers and 25 cents for chinooks. Bill did not know how much money his father received for this hauling venture, but he made enough money to enable him to expand his boating operations. He organized the Myrtle Point Transportation Corporation composed of himself, his boys, Elmer and Sherman Hufford and Paris Ward.



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