



HISTORY DETECTIVES -- The Coquille Valley Museum has a job for you. If you can help identify the workers in this 1933 Smith Wood Products group photo.

Naming faces from the past

Can you identify any of the original Smith Wood Products Mill employees?

BY JAKE WILHELM

They helped build the Coquille we know today.

Now, the Coquille Valley Historical Society needs your help identifying them.

One of the many donations to the new Coquille Valley Museum is a true slice of history. On the surface, it's a group photograph taken in 1933 of all 146 workers standing in front of the Smith Wood Products Mill that brought valuable jobs to early Coquille. The problem is, history has obscured the identity of just about everyone in the picture.

This is where you come in. The historical society is asking museum visitors to look at the picture and let them know if visitors can identify anyone. Remember, many of the folks in this picture grew up here, lived their lives here - chances are you knew some of these people.

Not only were the men and women in this picture hard workers, they are also an integral part of an important chunk of Coquille Valley history. In short, they were those responsible for a success story. And it all took place on what we now call the "G.P. Site".

When the group was called to pose in front of the mill buildings that day in 1933, the mill had been in operation for four years. Smith Wood Products started the last day of 1928 when George Ulett and Ralph Smith bought a small cedar mill on the Coquille River, across from where Safeway now stands. When Ulett took over as manager, with \$50,000 budgeted for start up costs, the mill only had seventeen

workers, five of them belonging to the Oreding family that had started the mill. Ulett came to Coquille with big plans to create a giant mill. Months into the venture, crews had erected those distinctive 'saw-tooth' mill buildings that stood for so many years.

Ulett quickly met the giant mill goal. In less than a year, not only had the tiny mill been replaced by five giant buildings, but over one hundred employees had joined the payroll. Despite the Great Depression that crippled the American economy in October 1929, Smith Wood Products continued to grow with additional buildings and over one hundred more workers added to the mill staff in following years. In fact, while many of their fellow Americans were unemployed, those mill workers in 1933 were still a part of a success story in this hard time in American history. Maybe that's why you can see smiles in the group photo.

Those workers earned their money, a decent forty cents an hour, while helping Smith Wood Products to earn their reputation by milling and creating products made from Port Orford Cedar harvested along the South and Middle forks of the Coquille River.

Their main product was battery separators. In 1933 alone, Smith Wood Products produced 100 million separators that were used to create cells in automotive and industrial batteries. Every week, train carloads of separators headed out for markets in America, Europe, and Asia. Other products included Venetian blind slats and rails, submarine separators, milled Port



The Coquille Valley Museum has hundreds of puzzles on their hands. Many historical photos that have been gifted to the Museum come with a mystery -- many times, no one knows the names of those pictured. The museum is asking all their visitors to peek through the collection and see if they can identify anyone before the faces of those who helped create our valley slip into obscurity. Some of these pictures are over 100 years old, but not all is lost. Remember, many times multiple pictures were taken in order for family members to each have a set -- maybe you have an identical photo in your family album. PHOTO-Jake Wilhelm