

The Grants Pass Area Hop Harvest

By PRISCILLA AVERILL
Mail Tribune Correspondent

GRANTS PASS—It's a warm September evening during hop harvest, and Grants Pass hop grower Roy Lathrop is looking over his domain.

"Look at that," he says, "Isn't that pretty? Isn't that a pretty sight?"

He's pointing not at the beautiful mountains in the distance, nor even at endless fields of hops. His "pretty sight" is a bulging bale of dried hops which his harvest workers are sheathing in burlap.

"Lovely," because to a hop grower there could indeed be no prettier sight than another 200-pound bundle of his year's work emerging from the baler ready for market.

Bustle During the Night

The hour is 10 p.m., but at the Sunnybrook Hopyard, operated by Roy and his son, Charles, along the Rogue west of Grants Pass, machinery is clattering, trucks are running back and forth between fields and picker, and the whole operation has all the bustle of midday.

There's no 5 o'clock whistle when the hops are ready for harvest — you get them in fast or stand to lose part of the year's work.

A little farther down the Rogue, a similar scene is being enacted at the Christie hopyards, operated by Floyd Christie and his son, Roland.

Both Christie and Lathrop have been growing hops in the valley most of their lives. During harvest time, each runs two 10-hour shifts a day, seven days a week, and between them they harvest, dry and bale the valley's entire 625-acre crop in three weeks.

Used To Be More Hop Growers

There used to be a lot more hop growers in the valley. As late as 20 years ago, Christie says, there were 15 or 16 growers with about 1,500 acres of hops. At one time almost the entire valley was in hops. There also used to be quite a few along the Applegate, but the last of these stopped about five years ago. Pickers got scarce, wages went up, and mechanization represented quite a sizeable investment.

Now only four growers remain — Lathrop, Christie, Melvin King and Don Cook. Of these, only Christie and Lathrop have their own "hophouses," with mechanized pickers, kilns, cooling and baling rooms. Lathrop, with one of the largest harvesting operations in the state, also picks for King and Cook.

Watching the frantic pace of the current hop, which wound up last week end, one would never suspect that this year's is regarded as a "light" crop, because of the summer's unusually cool growing weather.

The pungent smell of hops permeates everything — hops are everywhere; underfoot, in the air, in one's clothes and in one's hair.

Trucks Are Kept Busy

Ten trucks are kept busy running vines, with hops intact, from the fields to the mechanical "picker," a huge clattering complex of machinery housed in a shed half a block long. Here the vines are strung on hooks which move them to a long series of revolving drums which comb off the hops with wire fingers.

The stripped vines go on to a shredder to be chopped for fertilizer, while the hops go into a kiln where they are dried in 140 degree heat for about 12 hours. After a period in a cooling room, they are compressed into 200-pound burlap-covered bales.

The kilns are fired by huge forced-air diesel furnaces which blow 45,000 cubic feet of hot air per minute. Hops are spread to a depth of about three feet on a screened floor above.

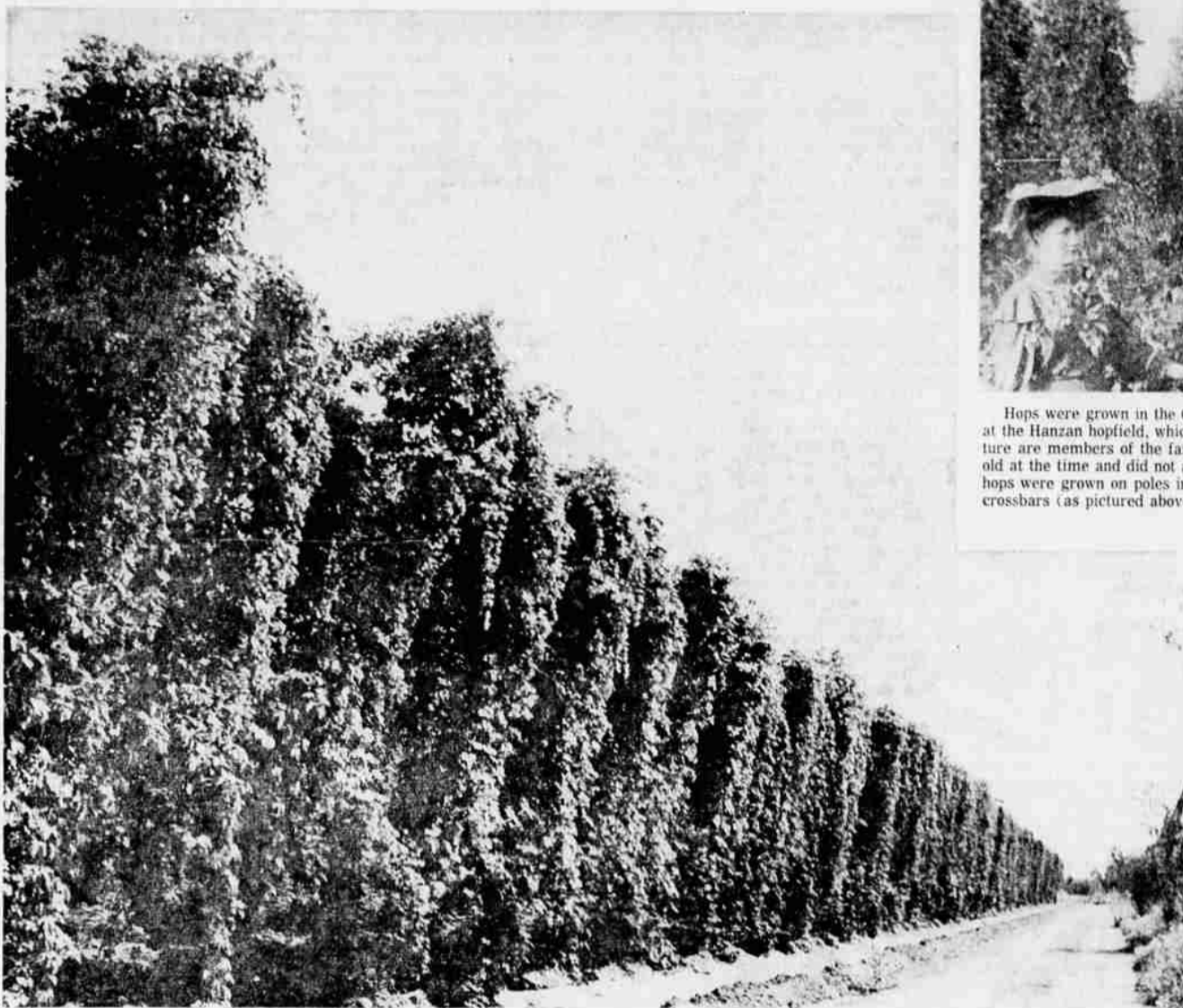
Recognizing the dramatic possibilities in this annual race with time, the "Route 66" television show staged one of their weekly episodes at the Lathrop yards about three years ago, weaving their story around the harvest operation — complete, of course, with a few good chases, fight and truck wreck thrown in.

Harvesting More Efficient

Mechanical harvesting, which began after World War II, is undoubtedly more efficient; but there are many hereabouts who miss "the old days," when up to 5,000 hand pickers found work in the many hop fields at the peak of harvest.

There were hops in here as early as the 1880's. Nowadays they are strung on overhead wires, but previously each hill of hops grew up a separate pole, which was then lowered into cross-sticks for picking. Picking was a family job, according to Mrs. Christie, who reminisced that her family used to ford the Rogue each year traveling from Selma to pick at the Hanzan hopyard, which is now part of the Christie holdings.

Each family made several hundred dollars during harvest,



Scenes like this are typical of the 625 acres of hop fields along the Rogue river west of Grants Pass just before harvest time. Row upon row upon row may be seen. The vines grow up from the crown and are strung on strands of wire. This scene is at the Christie hopyards, operated by Floyd Christie and his son, Roland. Christie is one of four hops growers who remain in the Grants Pass area. As late as 20 years ago, there were 15 or 16 growers with 1,500 acres of hops.



Hops were grown in the Grants Pass area as early as the 1880's. This photo was taken in 1905 at the Hanzan hopyard, which is now a part of the Floyd Christie holdings. The persons in the picture are members of the family of Mrs. Christie, the former Viola Craig. She was only four years old at the time and did not accompany her brothers and sisters on this outing. In those days the vines were grown on poles instead of being strung on wire. Each pole was lowered onto a set of crossbars (as pictured above) for picking.



Dorothy Menasco of Grants Pass separates the strings of hops as they move from the truck to the picking machine, composed of wire "fingers" on revolving picker drums which pluck out the hops as the vines move over them. After this process the hops emerge on a belt which conveys them to the drier kilns, and the vines go to a chopper which converts them into fertilizer.

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and it was regarded as a "vacation" outing. Everyone camped in tents right at the hopyard, and gathered around bonfires at night. The harvest then took about six weeks with hand pickers.

Great Boon to Students

Hop harvest used to be a great boon to students earning money for school, too. It still is, but with the demise of hand-picking, workers now number under 200 instead of several thousand.

Though some hops are used in medicines and dyes, most are used by brewers to flavor beer and for a certain preserving quality. Different brewers have their own formulas, and demand different hops. The English Cluster, grown along the Rogue, is considered a premium hop and is most in demand.

Most growers, including all four local ones, sell to brokerage firms rather than directly to brewers. At end of harvest, brokers will send men to probe the bales and take samples, which in turn are shown to brewers. Some bales may be marked at the site with brand names or with indication of where they are to go.

Some are marked "For Export," "For London." Because

of efficient production methods, American grown hops since 1955 have found increasing favor in foreign brewing centers. Hops grown in Oregon, California, Washington and Idaho, the only states which produce them commercially, are now exported all over the world. Much of the hops grown locally are marked for export to England, Japan or South America.

Virtually Weightless

Since a dried hop is virtually weightless, it seems to take millions of them to make up a 200-pound bale. They are costly to raise, must be "trained" to grow in the right direction, use tons of fertilizer, must be picked at prime, must be right color, cannot be over-dried or under-dried, and will mold if exposed to dampness or rain. Like grapes, they come up from the crown each year, but some years may winter-kill.

Other years may see a frantic race to get the hops all in before it rains, and parts of a crop have been lost because of rains. This year, however, the weatherman smiled on the hopyarders, with three weeks of ideal picking weather.

The crop may have been "short," but it is holding well and is of excellent quality; and growers are looking with satisfaction on the results of their year's labor.



M. E. Dughman, left, and Bill Krenck, both of Grants Pass, "sew up" a 200-pound bale of dried hops at the Roy Lathrop hopyards during the height of the harvest this year. Individual dried hops weigh little, so it takes a great many of them to make a bale.



This scene at the Lathrop hopyards at harvest time shows the trucks (left center) bringing the hop vines in from the fields. Four trucks are operated at a time throughout both 10-hour shifts (20 hours a day) during the three-week harvest season. Most of the hops are used by brewers to flavor beer and for a certain preserving quality. The four Grants Pass growers sell to brokerage firms rather than direct to brewers, however.



Floyd Christie inspects some of his hops on the vine to see if they are ready to be harvested.



Charles Elliott of Merlin unloads vines from a truck and strings them onto hooks which transport them to the picking machine in this scene at the Roy Lathrop hopyards. After the picking machine separates the hops from the vines, the hops are dried in 140 degree heat for 12 hours.