

Valsetz

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Introduction

Hidden high in the Coast Range of Polk County, between Falls City and Lincoln City, located in the Siletz Basin, the town of Valsetz could once be found. Surrounding Valsetz are steep and gentle sloping mountains covered with Douglas-fir trees. Fanno Peak to the Northeast of Valsetz, and Chandler Mountain to the Southwest, helped surround Valsetz, which kept the town isolated from the Willamette Valley and the Oregon Coast. For sixty-five years, this logging community produced valuable wood products including, lumber, plywood and veneer, for U.S. and world markets. The company owned town changed ownership three times during its existence, with each new owner adding different chapters to the history of Valsetz. Changes to Valsetz over the years were few, while changes to the surrounding environment were many. Natural and manmade disturbances helped shape Valsetz and the surrounding area into its present day landscape. Today, this landscape has a network of logging roads leading to clear-cuts or forested mountain sides, which provide the valuable wood resources needed by society. Trees and brush now inhabit the dried lake bed that was once Valsetz Lake. Adjacent to the lake on its Eastern shore, where Valsetz once rested, only a dirt road, Douglas-firs and a storage shed presently inhabit the area. The purpose of this paper is to provide the history of Valsetz, before, during and after its existence; and to provide an understanding of how changes in the landscape surrounding Valsetz are related to changes that occurred in the town itself. Various newspaper articles, maps, books and brief oral interviews helped mold together Valsetz history.

1900's and Before

The Siletz Indians were probably the first people to experience the Siletz Basin and its surroundings. The Siletz River flows through the Siletz Basin and it is assumed that the Siletz Indians used the river to provide food. In the late 1800's, with western expansion and the Homestead Act of 1862, European settlers began to move into Oregon. Accounts of the first European settlers inhabiting the Siletz basin vary. Writer "Hemlock Slim" of the Mountain Echo, the Valsetz newspaper, claimed of knowing about trappers and hunters who settled the area in 1853 to make profit of its abundant wildlife(The Itemizer-Observer, 1966). He mentioned that settlers used a network of trails in the dense forests to lead to desired areas that provided the needed resources to survive. This account of early settlers, however, was not otherwise documented. The first fully documented proof of inhabitants in the Siletz Basin was by surveyor Andrew L. Porter in 1894. Porter and his survey crew scaled the Coast Range, township 8 south, range 8 west, mapping it (figure 1), while giving details of its vegetation and inhabitants.

Porter reported that seventeen settlers were inhabiting the township and range by 1894, and that there were still many good claims to be made. In sections 28, 33 and 34, 9 settlers were inhabiting the area that later would become Valsetz. Arden Handy, Zimri Hinsham, Montgomery Syron, William Mc Carty and O. A. Fanno were some of the settlers in the Siletz Basin during Porter's survey of the area(BLM website). Fanno and Handy each became permanent fixtures in the Valsetz area. Fanno had a creek, ridge and mountain peak named after him; while Handy had a creek bearing his name. Each of these settlers used resources in the Siletz Basin to provide food and shelter. Fanno had a road running from his cabin, about 15 miles East to Falls City.

Porter describes the Siletz Basin area as heavily timbered, with Fir and Hemlock blanketing the surrounding mountainsides and basin. Some of the surrounding mountains are steep and have exposed bed rock cliff, while others are gently rolling slopes. In the Siletz Basin, the land is relatively flat with first rate soil. Numerous small streams, including Beaver and Fanno Creek, flow into the Siletz Basin, joining the Siletz River and continuing on to the Pacific Ocean. The South Fork of the Siletz River flows through the basin from the Southwest and continues northwest into a steep, rocky gorge. Along the river banks various types of trees and vegetation grow. The Siletz River, named by the Siletz Indians, means “fern river.” This could lead one to believe that the ferns that are currently scattered along the river bank, were also present at the time of the survey(The Oregonian,1984). The old growth forest consisted of large diameter trees ranging anywhere from 4 to 7 feet in diameter(Itemizer-Observer, 1997). Occasionally, some trees would reach diameters larger than 9 feet. The mixed aged stands were primarily dominated by Douglas-fir and Western Hemlock. Hemlock was probably the most dominant tree in the old growth understory, due to their ability to grow well in the shade. This can also be seen in the survey of Porter, who mentions smaller diameter Hemlock in his notes. Scattered in the Fir and Hemlock forests, were Cedar, Alder, Crab Apple and Big Leaf-Maple. Porter mentions that Larch could also be found in the Siletz Basin area, but Larch does not normally grow in this region. Areas of the old growth forests had barren forest floors, as seen in photos of the area, and as told by loggers, Gary Strom and Harry Miller who experienced the breathtaking size of old growth fir trees in the Valsetz area. Conversely, some areas of the forest floor were covered with dense brush. Vine maple, Huckleberry, Salal, Chittum, Salmon Berry and Elk Briars were

many of the vegetation types found on the forest floor that Porter described in his survey notes. Porter also described occasional openings in the forest where brush grew, but these openings in the forest were not very big.

While the Siletz Basin area had some settlers, the area, for the most part, was found by Porter in its virgin state. Changes to the area were caused by natural disturbances like floods and fire. These events helped mold the forests into mixed-aged stands, where trees of different species and size grew together. When a tree died, it opened up the forest canopy and allowed sunlight to reach the forest floor. This promoted vegetation growth, which became dense in many areas. These natural ecological cycles of the forest would change as the area became more inhabited. The need for timber would help change the landscape of the Siletz Basin area to a more uniform, single-aged forest that consisted mainly of Douglas-fir.

1900-1930

By the early 1900's the Siletz Basin area had settlers strewn throughout; many had been granted their 160 acre parcel by the Homestead Act after improving upon the land over six years. The importance of lumber to a growing country was evident as timber barons began to look west in search of timber.

In 1904, the Mitchell and Cobbs Lumber Company in Cadillac, Michigan purchased 36,000 acres of prime virgin forest from Mr. Mitchell and Mr. McClure (Valley & Siletz Railroad). The land purchased was in the Siletz Basin and the surrounding area. Mr. Mitchell and Mr. McClure had purchased the land from the settlers once they understood the value of the timber growing in the area. The land purchased by Mitchell and Cobbs was to be logged sometime between 1945 to 1950 (Valley & Siletz Railroad).

In the summer of 1910, a forest fire burned approximately 4,000 acres of Mitchell and Cobbs' timber in the Siletz Basin area, changing their previous plans to log the Siletz Basin(Valley & Siletz Railroad). Mitchell and Cobbs decided there still was valuable timber in the burned area, and in order to make a profit, they would salvage log the burned timber.

The timber barons from Michigan headed out to Oregon to make a profit on their burned timber. In 1912, they purchased a mill in Falls City and two additional mills deeper in the woods, closer to the Siletz Basin. Railroad lines enabled them to take logs from the woods to the mills, where they were processed into lumber. In 1912, it was decided that they would build a railroad that would run from Independence, in the Willamette Valley, through the Coast Range and into Newport(Valley & Siletz Railroad). The railroad would pass through the Siletz Basin, where the salvage logged timber could be loaded on the train and taken to the mill. The railroad line would be called the Valley & Siletz Railroad. Construction of the railroad started in 1912, and wound its way through the foothills, using timber to build the railroad lines. By 1919, construction of the railroad had reached the Siletz Basin. Mitchell and Cobbs decided to stop building the railroad, and to build a mill in the middle of the Siletz Basin. It would be cheaper to process the logs in the Siletz Basin, instead of shipping them to the mills they had purchased in the valley.

In 1922, construction of the mill and the town were complete. The name of the town was created by combining Valley and Siletz, the name of the railroad that ran to the town. They would call it Valsetz. The South Fork of the Siletz River was dammed at this time, so a log pond would be created which would float the fallen timber right to the mill. At

this time, the population of Valsetz was estimated to be 200(The Oregonian,1984). The mill, bunkhouses, cookhouse and post office were the only buildings that stood in Valsetz. School children learned in the bunkhouses from 1922 until 1924, at which time a schoolhouse was constructed(Itemizer-Observer, 1966). Snuggled into the Siletz Basin was Valsetz, which existed due to the virgin timber that surrounded it. The people of Valsetz would make a way of life out of this timber; the area would mold them into a unique community, where everybody knew one another and where the environment would isolate them from the coast and valley. This area, characterized by heavy rains and dangerous working conditions, would be home to the “logger.” It was this “logger, ” who’s blood, sweat and tears in the forest would help provide the needed lumber for a growing nation. Photos show the treacherous conditions these men worked in, often hovered 5 feet in the air on a spring board cutting down old growth trees with axes and misery whips(Polk County Museum). A 1928 photo shows the simplicity of Valsetz, with the mill built next to Valsetz Lake and the other structures adjacent to the Southwest side of the mill(Valsetz Star). The photo also shows the logged hillside on the Western side of the lake; snags and vegetation were now visible where the wooded hillside once stood. The expansion into the surrounding hills in 1929 was minimal, with many of the surrounding hills still heavily covered in virgin timber. A trail on the northern portion of the lake, a narrow winding road to Falls City and the Valley & Siletz railroad were the only ways to and from Valsetz(Metsker Atlas 1929).

1930-1960

In the early 1930’s, the mill in Valsetz closed down due to the Great Depression, but about 30 families decided to remain in Valsetz(Itemizer-Observer, 1966). During this

time, they would live off the land, taking advantage of the abundant wildlife that roamed the area. Elk and deer are a few of the big game animals they hunted for in the area, while steelhead could be caught in the Siletz River. During this time the only wood harvested was for heating purposes. This allowed the burned and logged hillsides to begin regeneration. These forests started with 1'-2' saplings and would eventually grow to a size suitable for harvest.

In 1936, the town of Valsetz was given life again (The Oregonian,1984). The stagnate economy was showing signs of life, and soon the old growth trees would be harvested again. The landscape of the Siletz Basin would be altered, however, due to a forest fire in 1938(Itemizer-Observer, 1966). The fire started on the western hillside of Valsetz Lake. With young trees and vegetation adding fuel to the fire, it burned toward Valsetz. Fortunately, strong winds from the East helped push the fire away from the town.

By 1940, the population of Valsetz was around 600(Valsetz Star). The population consisted of loggers, millworkers, superintendents and family members. From 1937 to 1941, Dorothy Anne Hobson, a 9 year old resident, published a national newspaper(Valsetz Star). The Valsetz Star was “straight from the hip” journalism, advertising the quality lumber the town was producing, and giving readers insight to events happening in Valsetz. The need for timber began to move operations from land surrounding the town to other hillsides and adjacent valleys. Until the mid-1940's, harvested logs had to be dragged off the hillsides by a steam donkey. From there, logs were loaded onto a train, by a log boom with grapples, which ran back to the mill. Expansion for timber can be seen in a 1941 map(figure 2). While the movement to areas around Valsetz is limited, it can be observed with a new road that heads West from the

town toward Diamond Peak. Another road also heads south from Valsetz, toward Chandler Mountain, and then heads toward the town of Hoskins. The 1941 map shows that a road goes across Valsetz Lake. In the earlier, 1929, map this road does not exist. It may have been created when the lake was drained, as L.B. Lambert remembers the lake being drained for cleaning(The Oregon Statesman,1969). It also may have been a railroad line that brought logged timber from the Diamond Peak area back to Valsetz Lake, where it was dropped off and taken to the mill.

By the late 1940's, the population of Valsetz was around 1500, the highest number of people that would live in the town. Valsetz was truly booming. The need for timber was great, as World War II was over and great amounts of lumber were needed for suburban expansion. By 1947, over two-thirds of the 36,000 acres purchased by Mitchell & Cobbs had been harvested. Also in 1947, the land and the town of Valsetz were sold to Herbert A. Templeton (Valsetz Star). Mr. Templeton purchased Valsetz near the peak of its boom years and named it Valsetz Lumber Company. Technological advances made harvesting logs easier than the older methods. Now there was road building and log trucks that could dump the logs off at the log pond much quicker than a train could. Chainsaws were also becoming more common place, making fallers' jobs more efficient. Shovels and skidders allowed logs to be harvested and loaded onto log trucks faster, making logging operations faster and more economical.

By 1950, Valsetz was a town with many unique characteristics. The sidewalks were wooden planks that were elevated above the dirt or gravel roads, which, at one time, were covered with planks as well(Itemizer-Observer,1988). Each area of the town had a name like, "Snoosville, Snob Hill or Greek Camp;" each given by earlier residents based on

certain traits or characteristics of its setting or residents(Valsetz map, 1950)(figure 3).

Cadillac Avenue was the main road in Valsetz, the name coming from Mitchell & Cobbs, the original owners, who came from Cadillac, Michigan(The Oregonian, 1954). While the surrounding landscape was undergoing changes, the town would occasionally undergo changes of its own. A fire in 1950 burned the original store down, so it was moved into the recreation hall(Gazette-Times,1982). A 1950 photo of Valsetz shows the expansion of the mill, compared to the 1929 photo, showing the need to process larger quantities of harvested timber(Valsetz Star). In 1952, a high school was constructed to meet the growing population of older students(Itemizer-Observer,1966). The population of Valsetz in 1954 was approximately 1,100, showing a slight decline compared to the population of the late 1940's(The Oregonian, 1954). However the decline did not dictate the mass lumber output the Valsetz mill was producing.

In 1954, the mill was cutting approximately 200,000 board feet of lumber a day(The Oregonian, 1954). As this was a considerable amount of lumber to produce for that time period, Valsetz mill was one of the more efficient mills around(Don-Lee Davidson, mill owner). The large quantities of logs being processed can be seen in a 1956 air-photo of Valsetz and the lake. Log rafts, awaiting processing cover the lake, showing the vast amount of wood being harvested from the surrounding forests. A 1956 topographic map (figure 4) also shows the expansion farther into the woods. The foot trail that was seen on an earlier (1941) map is now a road, showing the advances that technology brought to Valsetz. These technology changes allowed timber harvesting to move deeper into the forests. The 1956 map also shows that the road that once ran across Valsetz Lake is gone, possibly showing a shift in log transportation to the mill.

While changes to Valsetz were more frequent than changes to the mill, a change brought on by economic endeavors occurred in 1957. The mill was converted to a plywood and veneer mill due to the reduced amount of old growth timber being harvested(The Oregonian, 1984). A lumber mill was not economical, due to the smaller diameter trees being harvested.

In 1959, Valsetz ownership exchanged hands for a third, and final time; this time Boise Cascade would become the owner(The Oregonian, 1984).

1960-Present

The mill in Valsetz was mainly a veneer mill, which processed the layers needed to make plywood. The quest for timber farther from Valsetz is noted in a 1962 Metsker map(figure 4). The map shows the network of roads dissecting the mountains and valleys in the Coast Range. Each road leads to various units that had been clear-cut.

By 1965, Valsetz population had diminished to 600 residents(Gazette-Times, 1982). The population reduction can be linked to easier access to Valsetz by automobile. While the train still operated, people could commute to Valsetz, and no longer needed to live in isolation from the coast or valley, and rely on the train to take them to and from Valsetz. Another contributing factor was that many of the original residents of Valsetz were retired or retiring; there was no need to live in Valsetz any longer. The further reduction in the population was aided by Boise Cascade who widened and improved the bumpy narrow road to Falls City in 1968.(The Oregonian, 1984).

Even though the population of Valsetz was declining, improvements were still made to accommodate the remaining residents. Cement sidewalks were built in 1968 to replace the worn out and deteriorating wooden planks that many residents used to stay off the

muddy roads(The Oregonian, 1984). Cadillac and Main streets were finally paved in 1972, reducing the amount of mud and dust the roads would produce(The Statesmen Journal, 1974). The Valley & Siletz Railroad would carry its last passengers through the Coast Range to Valsetz in 1972. Boise Cascade decided to stop running the railroad because it was too expensive(The Oregonian, 1984). By 1974, the population had dropped to 467 people(The Statesmen Journal, 1974), but, in 1977 these residents were finally hooked up to the general public's power supply. While the water for the town was provided by Fanno Creek, they finally received power in 1977 by hooking up to a substation in Kings Valley(Jay Ellis Ransom). This ended self-generated power by steam turbines, which were powered by wood. A top-of-the-line school was built in 1981 to school the young children of Valsetz(The Oregonian, 1984).

While all of these changes were occurring, the average tree diameter size on the hills and mountains surrounding Valsetz was diminishing. No longer were the old growth timber, 4 plus feet in diameter, readily available. This resulted in substantial economic losses for Boise Cascade. The future of Valsetz was becoming uncertain. These enormous trees helped create the town of Valsetz, and now their limitlessness was but a memory. The harvested forests were no longer covered with the quality timber that Andrew Porter noted in his survey of the Siletz Basin. The forests were, instead, blanketed by second and third generation Douglas-Fir stands. These stands consist of smaller trees, that would take many years of growth to reach the size that their predecessors had achieved.

With this understanding in mind, Boise Cascade decided, in 1983, that they would have to close Valsetz(The Oregonian, 1984). It was no longer economical to run the mill

and the town, when the trees being harvested were of smaller diameters. It would be more beneficial for Boise Cascade to ship the logs from the harvested unit to a mill in the valley, because the logging activities were occurring at great distances from Valsetz. To ship the logs fifteen miles from the logging site to Valsetz and then from Valsetz to the valley was not cost efficient. The market for lumber was declining, so the revenue generated from smaller trees was not enough to keep Valsetz running.

In 1984, the Valsetz mill was burned, marking the end of 65 years of lumber production for the small town in the Coast Range(The Oregonian, 1984). The remaining residents of Valsetz were moved from their homes and left to find employment elsewhere. The once occupied houses and buildings in the town were knocked down with bulldozers and shovels, put into piles and burned. This was the end of Valsetz. The land was leveled and eventually planted with Douglas-Fir trees, so in 60 to 80 years they could be harvested. Valsetz Lake existed a bit longer than Valsetz; it was not until 1988 that the lake was drained(Itemizer-Observer July,1988). Once the lake was drained, any evidence that a town once existed in the Siletz Basin vanished.

Conclusion

For over 65 years, Valsetz helped create forest products that people all over the world used. The unfortunate end of the town was a direct result of its creation. Valsetz was built on the basis of timber harvesting and production. Once the trees around the town were harvested, expansion to other areas began. This marked the depletion of old growth forests, which were the trademark of Valsetz. Once it was too costly to obtain trees from areas far from Valsetz, its demise began. The end result was the closure and destruction of the town. Ironically, the town was planted over with trees so, in the future, trees will

be harvested on ground where Valsetz once thrived. The people who lived in Valsetz until its closure still meet once a year, showing the closeness that its residents still share with one another. It also shows that Valsetz was something special, a unique town that became part of Oregon history. The logged over area around the Siletz Basin shows the impact that Valsetz existence had; and eventually, those changes in the landscape resulted in Valsetz closure.