

“Every state has a legacy of truths; those stories we tell each other to explain why the world is organized the way it is—and every successive generation has to live with this legacy.”¹

Though Oregon’s truths are as complex as any other state’s, there is no doubt that logging the great forests of the Pacific Northwest is a central thread in that narrative. This history is, for some, that of enterprising pioneers settling an untamed wilderness. For others it’s the corrupt railroad and timber barons grabbing up free federal land and pushing the homesteaders aside. As the twentieth century rolled around however, the Midwest’s forests could no longer provide the raw material for a growing nation, and capital followed the construction of the railroads westward, seeking ever more wood.

Washington state was next to feel the bite of the lumberman’s axe, and finally some sought their fortunes in the last reservoir of available virgin timber—located in southwestern Oregon, specifically Coos Bay. Why Coos Bay? It had it all: timber, coal, shipbuilders, a protected harbor—and no rules.

Coos Bay was deemed the “Lumber Capital of the World” by the Oregonian in 1947—and the name stuck until around 1980, when lasting environmental turmoil created a downward spiral for the forest products industry in the region. That turmoil had begun in the 1960s and ’70s, which had brought a bevy of federal laws complicating the management of forest lands.

My purpose here is simple, however: to identify and describe the scores of mills that populated the shores of Coos Bay from the 1850s to the 1960s; to record how these mills came into existence, then drifted into history; and to tell the stories of the entrepreneurs who made it all happen.

— William “Bill” Lansing
North Bend, Oregon, 2019