African-American Loggers and the Making of Forestry in the West

By Carl Wilmsen

To the Ku Klux Klan members who gathered at the town’s edge, J.D. MacMillan, the superintendent of the Bowman-Hicks Lumber Company, and Jim Criley, the woods boss, had one message: they were to get the hell out of Maxville and not to come back. It was the mid-1920s and the Missouri-based Bowman-Hicks Company had purchased property near the town of Wallowa in northeast Oregon to serve as a base for logging operations in the extensive ponderosa pine stands in the area. Bowman-Hicks employed some 40 to 60 Black workers at a time when Oregon’s constitution banned Black people within the state. The Governor actively supported the Ku Klux Klan, and still on the books were laws passed by the territorial legislature in the mid-1800s that prohibited Black people from entering and settling in the territory.

Students of forest history know well the story of the westward march of US lumber companies: moving to the Midwest after harvesting the merchantable timber in eastern forests, and thence on to the Pacific Northwest once the midwestern forests were depleted. What is less well known is the significant contribution of African American lumber-jacks and other workers of color to the development of the forestry industry in the United States.

Moving west to follow the timber

The story of these workers begins in the Southeast in the late 19th and early 20th centuries where the majority of loggers and lumber-mill workers were African American men. In 1910 more Black men worked in the lumber industry than the number of people, regardless of race, employed by textile mills. Black lumber workers outnumbered workers in iron and steel by a factor of four. The number of Black workers in forestry nationwide steadily grew through the first half of the 20th century, more than doubling to reach 180,000 in 1950. Prior to the second World War, the lumber industry employed more Black workers than any other industry.

Most of these workers were in the South, but by the 1920s, Black workers were seeking economic opportunities offered by the developing lumber industry in the expansive forests of the West. Some lumber company owners moved their operations west as well, taking their African American workers with them. Maxville and Vernonia, Oregon; McNary, Arizona; and Weed, California, are some of the towns where African Americans were
employed in the lumber industry.
In 1923, the Bowman-Hicks Lumber Company established the town of Maxville in Wallowa County, Oregon. The company recruited workers throughout the South and Midwest, and ultimately employed a diverse workforce of Black, Greek, and white workers, as well as members of local white settler families. As everywhere in the United States, this diversity was organized in public and private spheres, at work and at home, by prevailing racial attitudes and discriminatory Jim Crow laws.

Workers were hired for jobs according to their race or ethnicity. Black workers were tree fallers, log cutters, tong hookers, and railroad section hands. Some worked on repair of railroad locomotives. Greek workers were railroad builders, and white workers were section foremen, tree topers, saw filers, contract truck drivers, and bridge builders. Available information suggests that workers were paid the same rate for the same work, regardless of race or ethnicity—about 50 cents per hour for foremen and about 38.5 cents per hour for laborers.

A common practice in the South and West was that the work white workers did was considered “skilled,” and the work performed by people of color and people who today would be considered white but at that time were considered “undesirable” and “of nondescript race,” such as Greeks and other immigrants from eastern and southern Europe, was considered “unskilled.” Wages for the latter were lower, and therefore the people doing these jobs earned less than their white coworkers. In an interview with Ester Wilfong Jr., whose father worked in Maxville, he observed that “...minorities were making less money because of the jobs.” Wilfong also suggested that there was wage theft: “Their biggest complaint was about the scale—the scaler—the man who scaled, told you how much lumber you had cut in a log—they measure that. They sometimes they would cheat you just a little bit.”

“Unskilled” work tended to include the most dangerous, disagreeable, undesirable jobs. While data on occupational injuries and fatalities in Western railroad logging operations in the 1920s and ‘30s used “steam donkeys” in addition to horses to haul logs to decking platforms where they were loaded onto the railroad cars that took them to the mills. In Weed, California, African Americans were the choker setters on a state-of-the-art skidder called the “Titanic.” This job was so dangerous that white workers on the crews called the Titanic the “nigger killer.”

Social life in Maxville was also segregated by race. The white townspeople in Wallowa were initially opposed to Black workers living among them. Although Alan Dale Victor, descendant of some of the original white settlers in Wallowa County, recalls that “everyone got along” with the Black residents once they arrived, he also noted that Black people could not stay in the local hotel or eat in the local restaurant. Bowman-Hicks segregated the town of Maxville as well, building two schools, one for white children and one for Black. There were two baseball teams as well, also divided along racial lines.

An unspoken social pact, enforced by threats of, and sometimes actual, violence, guided relations between Black and white residents of Wallowa County. In a 2010 interview, Ester Wilfong Jr. describes it as follows:

As a child, your parents teach you certain things— the things that you don’t do—that you don’t argue with the white people. You know your place so to speak, and you live longer if you know your place, which is something that I think

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the younger generation now did not understand about their parents—is why didn't you rebel against certain things. Well, what do you rebel against if you know you are going to be shot down, and literally shot down, in what you do. The adjustments you make are the adjustments that tell you this is what you need to do to stay alive—to get along with people. Not that there were threats, but if you got too far out of line some things could happen. You might get hurt. Something like that could happen, and people don't talk about those things, but sometimes if people are too far out, somebody may grab them and you will get a whipping going along or a beating, and nobody knows who is doing those or nobody will talk about who is doing those.

The past is present

It was in this context of racial segregation and discriminatory work organization that African Americans and other people of color contributed to the development of the forestry industry in Maxville and in the United States as a whole. The relocation to the West of many Black lumberjacks in the early decades of the 20th century was part of what became known as the Great Migration in which 6 million Black southerners migrated north and, to a lesser extent, west in search of better opportunities in a wide variety of occupations for themselves and their families. The expertise Black lumber workers brought to the logging and milling towns of the West helped to establish forestry as a major industry in the region. The Ku Klux Klan went west too. While J.D. MacMillan and Jim Criley stopped whatever nefarious plans Klan members may have had on the day they arrived in Maxville, KKK chapters were active in Oregon in the 1920s. The Bowman-Hicks Company pulled out of Maxville in 1933 as conditions in lumber markets during the Great Depression made their operation less profitable. Many of the Black workers then moved their families to Wallowa, La Grande, and Portland. Some went to California and continued logging there. The last remaining loggers left in the 1940s, rendering Maxville a ghost town.

While much in forestry has changed since Bowman-Hicks was active in Maxville nearly a century ago, many of the inequities in the forestry industry remain unchanged. Forestry is still characterized by segmented labor markets in which workers of color, many of whom today are immigrants and non-immigrants (i.e., workers on temporary work H-2B visas) from Latin America, have the lowest paid, least desirable, most dangerous jobs. These workers have high job-related injury and fatality rates and often experience wage theft. The Pacific Coast Knights of the Ku Klux Klan is active today in Oregon as well.

Capitalizing on a forestry legacy

The forest sector in the area is now a small footprint from its heyday. Although there have been efforts in recent years to revitalize small wood products production, employment in logging and forestry in Wallowa County represents only about 3 percent of the entire workforce. The area's forestry legacy, however, is seen as a resource contributing to the rapidly expanding tourism industry that is an economic driver of the surrounding rural community. The Maxville Heritage Interpretive Center (MHIC) is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization that collects, preserves, and interprets the history of the logging community of Maxville and similar communities throughout the West. The organization was founded 12 years ago by Gwendolyn Trice, and its mission is to serve Oregon and the greater Pacific Northwest by preserving resources and providing information and education about this little-known chapter of the American experience.

In December 2020, MHIC entered into a Purchase and Sale Agreement to buy the 240-acre town site of Maxville. Currently all that remains of the original town is the log building that served as the Bowman-Hicks Company's office. MHIC plans to use the site for education and the study of forest history. We work with university students and faculty and other interested parties in uncovering the history of Maxville, setting it in the context of the broader history of forestry in the West, and drawing lessons for the present and future. The purchase of the town site will provide exciting new opportunities for MHIC to build on, expand, and enhance these efforts. "WF

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