

At Home in the Woods – Part One

Trackside Series - #12

By Lloyd Palmer
Dec. 2005

This, the twelfth installment of the **Trackside Series** will be the first of three articles that will cover an interesting part of the U.S. Army's operations of their Spruce Production Division in Lincoln County during World War I. The army was involved in the building of three separate railroads in our area during the war and in doing so, established a number of camps to house the soldiers that were building the lines.

This month's article will discuss the camps that were located within the city limits of Toledo as well as those along the line of the Toledo & Siletz Railroad. The next installment will cover the camps along the Yaquina Northern Railroad, which extended from Yaquina, through Newport, to Otter Rock and part three will address the camps along the Alsea Southern Railroad. This last line was built from South Beach, southward to a point several miles below Waldport.

When World War I broke out in April 1917 it didn't take long to realize that the aeroplane (as it was called at the time) would play an important role in combat. At the time these machines were being built using spruce lumber and the U.S. Army soon came to understand that it was going to need a large, steady supply of this material. The greatest concentrations of spruce timber were located along the coastlines of Oregon and Washington and at first it was felt that the timber industry, as it existed at that time, would be able to provide the necessary lumber. However, due to a number of reasons, including labor unrest, the isolation of the stands of spruce and the strict manufacturing requirements for airplane lumber, it didn't take long to realize that the existing logging and lumbering facilities weren't going to be able to provide the large amounts of lumber that was required.

As a result, the army established their Spruce Production Division and sent a Colonel Brice P. Disque west to take charge of the new organization and get it established. After meeting with a number of representatives from the timber industry he developed a plan that would be able to provide the ten million board feet of aircraft quality lumber that would be needed each month (the monthly amount was increased to 30 million board feet by the end of the war). To do so he intended to build thirteen logging railroads into the spruce stands along the Oregon and Washington coastlines and construct a large sawmill in Vancouver, Washington. In order to accomplish this he planned on using thousands of soldiers to bolster the existing workforce of loggers and sawmill workers.

These "sprucers", as the local people would come to call them, began arriving in the Pacific Northwest during December 1917. Once they had reported to Vancouver Barracks they were given some basic military training and were then shipped out to one of the hundreds of camps that were located all along the coast.

Here in Lincoln County, plans called for the building of three separate rail lines and eventually the construction of a large sawmill in Toledo. To accomplish this massive

undertaking, over thirty-three hundred soldiers were sent here where they were moved out to the many camps that were being established along the lines. The army assigned a combination number and letter designation to each of these camps in order to keep track of them. Camps located in Toledo and along the Toledo & Siletz RR. were all numbered in the "3" series, such as 3-A, 3-B etc., while camps along the Yaquina Northern RR were given the "7" designation. Camps farther south along the Alsea Southern RR were numbered both in the "2" and "5" series.

When the war broke out there was already a logging railroad established along Depot Creek that was being operated by the J.B. Miller Logging Co. It extended from Miller's camp on Little Depot Creek, south to his log dump that was located along the main Depot Creek, about two miles north of Toledo. The army decided to lease his railroad but would need to extend it on both ends.

The army constructed their own line from a connection near the upper end of Miller's line, extending their railroad west into the Wessel Creek area. At a point about a mile up Wessel Creek they established camp 3-A and soldiers from the 80th Spruce Squadron began arriving in April 1918. These new recruits were put to work clearing and grading along the new railroad. A second camp, this one designated 3-G, opened in May and was built at a spot a short distance farther west, also along Wessel Creek. Soldiers from the 80th Spruce Squadron were also stationed at this location and put to work on extending the tracks into the stands of spruce along Wessel Creek.

From Miller's log dump, the army extended the railroad on down Depot Creek towards their own log dump that was to be located near the mouth of the stream. To build this segment of line they established camp 3-E near what was known as Dundon Bridge. This is near the spot where today's Dairy Queen is located. On April 9, 1918 soldiers of the 82nd Spruce Squadron began arriving at this new camp.

Another camp, 3-D was located about midway along Miller's railroad and soldiers from this camp were used to replace the existing rail with heavier iron and otherwise strengthen Miller's line. This one was the first camp in the "3" series to open and was also manned by soldiers from the 82nd Spruce Squadron.

Separate from the railroad operation, a camp was established several miles north of the town of Siletz. Designated as 3-B it was also referred to as Chitwood Camp and was located near the county road, across the Siletz River from the mouth of Jaybird Creek. Soldiers here were used in the riving operations and built a plank road into the timber from a connection with the county road. Riving was the process by which the large spruce logs were split into cants in order that they could be transported easier. This camp lasted only a short while, opening on April first and closing in early May when the soldiers were moved south to camp 3-G.

As the railroad work was completed soldiers that had been busy constructing the line were put to work beginning the logging operations. The three camps along the northern portion of the line, 3-A, 3-D and 3-G were all in existence until near the end of the war with 3-A being open until late October 1918. However, at the southern end of the line where there were no logging operations used, camp 3-E was closed at the end of May when the railroad was completed. A notation in the *Lincoln County Leader* dated May 13, 1918 stated, "Camp 3-E, located at Dundon Bridge, has been moved to Yaquina City following completion of Line #10."

Two additional camps were set up within the city limits of Toledo. Camp 3-F was located near the army's store #3 and was in existence from March until the end of the war in November. It was also staffed with soldiers from the 82nd Spruce Squadron.

By far, the largest camp that was established was camp 3-I. It became a rather large tent city and was used to house the men that were at work building the large sawmill in Toledo. It was opened on August 9th when soldiers from the 101st and 109th Spruce Squadrons began arriving. Prior to that time the men working on the new mill had been housed at Camp 3-F. The workforce at Camp 3-I was soon augmented with additional men from the 80th, 83rd and 84th squadrons as the work on the mill was pushed forward.

As suddenly as it had begun, the need for airplane spruce disappeared. The armistice was signed on November 11, 1918 and World War I was over. The urgency of producing vast amounts of lumber vanished overnight and soldiers began heading home. Camps that had sprung up along the railroads and in the stands of timber were no longer needed and were closed as rapidly as they had sprung into existence. Camp 3-I in Toledo lasted longer than most as it became the staging area for the departing soldiers. It lasted until December 1918 at which time it too was finally closed.