

## Plugs & Shingles

Trackside Series #10

By: Lloyd Palmer

The tenth installment of my **Trackside Series** will delve into the history of a little known operation here in Lincoln County. It involved a small alder and cedar mill in Toledo, a short railroad south of town a couple of miles and a second and larger shingle mill farther south near Waldport. These were the workings of a man by the name of Frank C. Bittner.

Normally when we think of a sawmill operation of the early part of the last century (wow, that makes the 1900's sound like a long time ago) we picture a facility that converted large logs, usually Douglas-fir or hemlock, into lumber. Seldom is any thought given to the smaller operations that manufactured other products, sometimes from other species of timber. Such were the workings of the mills of Frank Bittner. His mills produced plugs from red alder and shingles from Western red cedar.

He was probably best known for his plugs. These were small, round, tapered pieces of wood that were used in the ends of paper rolls. His father, Chris Bittner had invented the machinery used to produce them and at one time had owned the only such machine in the northwest.

In 1871, Chris Bittner migrated to the United States, from Bavaria, and found a job in the Crown-Willamette Pulp & Paper mill in West Oregon City, which is now called West Linn. A short time later he took out a homestead at Elwood, south of Estacada and it was here that he built his first mill. In fact, looking on page 61 of a current Delorme Atlas for the state of Oregon, you will find a Bittner Mill Road indicated a couple of miles southeast of Elwood. While working at his former job he had designed and built the machinery that would turn out the plugs and was ready to put it to the test.

The first mention of this operation in any of the industry trade journals of the period is in the November 1903 *West Coast Lumberman* where it states that, "C. Bittner is operating the Bittner Plug Co. mill at Highland" which was near Elwood. In addition, an article in the November 1940 issue of *The Timberman* magazine, titled "Unique Wood Utilization" noted that Chris Bittner founded his business "forty years ago", putting it right at about the year 1900. The same article stated that the mill continued operations at this location for 28 years then was moved to Springwater. It's at this time that Frank C. Bittner became involved with his father's business.

Piecing together the next several years of this company's history is confusing at best. The numerous trade magazines and newspapers, when referring to Bittner's operations, used several different names for the company and townsites for the location of his mills. A January 1924 issue of *The Timberman* noted that "the new Frank C. Bittner mill at Sandy, located on the Sandy River, one mile from town, is now covered and the machinery is being installed." Then again, this time in March 1924, it printed that the Bittner plug mill at Sandy would be moved to a new site on the Sandy River and enlarged. However, it also mentioned that the machinery from the mill at Elwood hadn't been removed completely and the new mill would not be set up until later in the season.

The names Bittner Plug Co., Bittner Lumber Co. and Bittner Plug & Lumber Co. all seem to be used interchangeably during the mid 1920's. This may stem from the fact that it appears he was also operating a small mill that produced railroad ties and quite likely other dimension lumber. In addition, the *Timberman Directory* for 1923 listed a Bittner Lath & Lumber Co. operating at Colton under the section of Oregon Shingle Mills. At any rate, it appears that he was expanding his operations about this time as both the *American Lumberman* and the *West Coast Lumberman* magazines note that in March 1925, Bittner had acquired the former Brun Lumber Co. mill at Sandy.

It also appears that Bittner ran his own logging show, at least part of the time. There are several mentions of him operating a camp, using a single steam donkey and turning out about 25 MBF (thousand board feet) per day. Also, in June 1927 he was awarded a contract to clear one hundred acres at Bear Creek. This was a new dam site being developed by the Portland Electric Power Co.

In early 1928, things changed for Bittner and his sawmilling operations. He sold his mill to the Bruns-McIntyre Lumber Co. and moved to Lincoln County where he constructed a new mill in Toledo. At this point, it's not known for sure if Bittner continued with any of his sawmilling activities in the Sandy area, while also opening up his Lincoln County operations, or moved completely to Toledo.

At any rate, by early 1929 the new mill in Toledo had been completed and the Bittner Plug Co. was again turning out alder plugs. For the next few years business seems to have continued at a brisk pace. Despite the beginning of the Great Depression an item in the March 12, 1931 issue of Toledo's newspaper, the *Lincoln County Leader*, stated that the company was operating two shifts and it was taking six men to keep up with orders, as had been the case for over a year.

By mid-1933 a new dry kiln was being installed at the mill. Many of Bittner's customers were beginning to request that the plugs be dyed and the additional step required another dry kiln. A year later, in March 1936, the company purchased a shingle mill from A.B. Hammond at Garibaldi and moved it to the millsite in Toledo. To indicate the additional product the company would now be involved with the name was changed to the Bittner Plug & Shingle Co.

It's at this same time that Bittner first decided to "quit mudding his logs out", as the *Leader* described it, and decided to construct a railroad up Montgomery Slough, a couple of miles south of Toledo. The log dump was at the head of the slough and from here, the small railroad extended up the creek about one mile to the landing. It was here that the alder logs were skidded to the railroad, loaded onto small rail cars and transported downstream to the dump. Power to pull the train was provided by a small gas operated engine rather than the normal a normal steam locomotive. Once the logs had been dumped in the water they were rafter the short distance to the mill.

Then in 1939, the same fate struck Bittner that occurred to so many of the other mills of the period. On October 17<sup>th</sup>, fire destroyed his entire mill, all except for a couple of metal storage sheds. The loss was figured at about \$50,000, none of which was covered by insurance.

Undaunted by his loss, Bittner wasn't to stay out of the lumbering business for long. In the January 1940 issue of *The Timberman* an item noted that "F.W. Bittner, whose plant at Toledo, Oregon, of the Bittner Plug & Lumber Co., burned recently, is building a saw and plug mill at Sandy, Oregon." In addition to this, the *American*

*Lumberman*, in September 1940, printed that “F.W. Bittner is erecting a modern shingle mill east of Waldport.”

The mill at Waldport was being built near today’s Taylor’s Landing, seven miles east of Waldport. It was located between the highway and the Alsea River near the east end of the bridge that crosses the river at this point. The name applied to this new operation was the Bittner Shingle Co. and it was up and running by May 1941 with a daily capacity of thirty-six squares of cedar shingles.

Apparently Bittner was determined not to suffer through a fire again as an article in the June 1941 issue of the *West Coast lumberman* noted that “this mill has been made as nearly fire proof as possible”. Corrugate sheet metal was used on the outside walls for the main mill building and was also used for partitioning in some places throughout the mill to prevent the possible spread of fire from one room to the next.

This new mill was a two-story affair, with a donkey skidding the logs up the log chute, from the pond in a slough, to the upper floor. All of the saws and shingle machines were located in this upper portion of the mill building with the shingle bins and sorting areas located on the ground floor. A conveyor belt was used to transport the sawdust and trimmings across the slough to an incinerator for disposal. It’s interesting to note that the last sentence in this article states “Mr. Bittner intends installing an automatic sprinkling system for even greater fire protection”.

Just how long the single mill east of Waldport operated is not known however the new plug mill at Sandy lasted for several years. Frank Bittner was joined by his brother William and their father, Chris, now 85 years of age, designed the new mill and like the shingle mill at Waldport, was constructed with sheer metal. It was located near Sandy, along the Mt. Hood Loop highway, and could produce 25,000 plugs in an eight hour shift. They were turned out in various shapes and sizes and were offered in three colors.

Here in Lincoln County, remnants of Bittner’s operations are hard to find. As late as the mid-1980’s a few rotten piling from the railroad could still be seen and a search might still turn them up today. A recent house remodeling project in Waldport turned up some old cedar shingles with the Bittner Shingle Co. logo on the back of them and the metal stencils was used to apply that mark to the shingles are known to still exist.