

SAWMILL ON THE COLUMBIA

The great lumber industry of the Pacific Coast had its beginnings in a small mill near Fort Vancouver, in 1828.

by Donald H. Clark

THE great-great-grandfather of all sawmills in the Pacific northwest was a small water-powered rig established by Hudson's Bay Company in 1828 on the Columbia River a few miles upstream from Fort Vancouver. This modest affair, fitted with an overshot water-wheel and operated by Kanaka labour, was the first evidence of Pacific coast civilization seen by thousands of home-seeking emigrants who swarmed down the Columbia River in the 1840's and following years.

When the American pioneers established homesteads and donation claims in the forest, they built "two-man-power" whipsaw mills to utilize some of the timber felled in land clearing. Later, when machinery became available, they followed the Company's lead in harnessing abundant natural water power. Along the Columbia and Cowlitz, up the Willamette and its tributaries, and on far-away Puget Sound, the whine of saws biting into fir and cedar logs swelled to a symphony of home building and lumber trading.

Captain James Cook, a half century before this first sawmill was established on the Columbia, had loaded a cargo of "small spars & pieces of lumber which might be sawn into boards" at Nootka Sound on the west coast of Vancouver Island. Ten years later John Meares brought

The time-honoured method of sawing planks, in use at most Hudson's Bay posts until recent times. Natl. Mus. of Canada.



to Nootka the frame and fittings for a small vessel, dug saw-pits, and established a miniature dockyard. These, however, were "hit-and-run" operations with no permanent plan. They were short-lived, in isolated areas, and inspired no others to use the vast forests as a foundation for enduring communities.

Construction of the real progenitor of the northwest lumber industry was started in 1827 following George Simpson's visit to Fort Vancouver in 1824-1825. Governor Simpson and Chief Factor John McLoughlin conceived lumber production not only for building ships and facilities at the fort, but for sale to the Sandwich Islands, California, the west coast of South America and other markets available to Hudson's Bay Company ships. The mill also assured year-round work for Company employees as a complement to the fur trade, and utilized Company ships and crews during off-seasons.

It was built on the north bank of the Columbia at the mouth of a small stream some six miles above Fort Vancouver. The mill machinery was shipped from England in a Hudson's Bay Company vessel, and installed by William H. Crate, brought from Canada for the purpose. William Cannon, who came overland with the Astorians as a hunter and handy man, was employed as millwright and later became superintendent.

Dr. McLoughlin expressed his need for a sawmill in letters to the Company, and in his construction of a saw-pit operation at the fort to produce lumber for fur-shipping containers. "Men are now Employed in sawing Boards for this purpose," the doctor wrote on September 1st, 1826, "... it is necessary the Boards should be sawed a year before hand so as to dry and properly season."

The sixty-ton vessel *Vancouver*, built at the fort during the same period, and sheathed with crude hand-sawn planks, was unseaworthy. "The want of a sawmill," Aemilius Simpson reported to McLoughlin, "has been the cause of our not fitting her out for sea." He went on to comment with some bitterness on her warped planks and wide seams.

When the sawmill started in 1828 it had a single saw operating on the primitive "muley" system, and an eight-man crew of Sandwich Islanders. Four fathoms of water close to the river bank permitted loading of lumber by the Company's largest ships. The annual cut approximated 300,000 board feet of deals and plank, against an operating cost of £150. Ten shillings per thousand was extremely cheap lumber, but stumpage was free and the Kanaka labourers' wages were £17 per year plus their board, which consisted mostly of smoked salmon and sea biscuit.

On this basis Governor Simpson believed that the timber trade might prove as profitable to the Company as the coastal trade in furs. He took McLoughlin to examine the falls of the Willamette River which now run the many mills of Oregon City. "Saws enough could be employed here to load the British Navy," Simpson enthused, and forthwith charged the Doctor with establishment of a large sawmill at the falls "as soon as circumstances permitted." The record shows that McLoughlin developed the power site and had timbers hewn for building the mill, but when the machinery was shipped from England it was diverted to Company establishments on Vancouver Island.

Meanwhile the original mill buzzed along merrily, often running a night shift. In the fall of 1830 the *Vancouver* took a cargo to "Wahoo" (Oahu), which included 13,000 feet of deals, and the *Dryad* sailed for Monterey, California, with 35,000 feet of planks which brought exceptionally good prices.

By 1836 the mill crew had been increased to twenty-eight and the original logging equipment of two yoke of oxen had been boosted to ten. The Kanakas were excellent mill hands, but jealousy of white employees forced the Company to reduce their wages to £10 annually. Incidentally, these Sandwich Islanders were indentured by their government to Hudson's Bay Company for three-year periods, and they were expendable to the extent that the Company had no obligation in case of their death. However, there was a cash penalty if they remained alive and were not returned to their native heath at the expiration of the contract.

After ten years of active operation, the sawmill evidently needed a complete overhauling, as evidenced by a letter to Governor Simpson in March 1838 from James Douglas, in charge of Fort Vancouver during McLoughlin's furlough. "When in repair," Douglas emphasizes, "it cuts 1500 square feet of one and two-inch Boards on an average every week. If it worked steadily at this rate, we could furnish if necessary at least double the quantity of Lumber annually sold in the Sandwich Island market." He added that the mill worked from six to ten saws, and that the crew was divided into hewers, carters, fodderers, rafters, sawyers, and one overseer.

The same paragraph of Douglas's letter indicates some labour instability. "We greatly feel the want of a gang of trained sawyers who would take an interest in the work, and be kept exclusively engaged about the Mill . . . our ablest and best men, are often called off by other more pressing duties, and the Saw Mill work must then be committed to people quite unqualified to do it justice. However, even under the system, we are now constrained to pursue, we will contrive to keep the disposable shipping in constant occupation and think fully to meet the demands of the Sandwich Islands."

Between spring and fall of that year Douglas rebuilt the mill, following suggestions by McLoughlin, and installed double gearing and lighter saw frames. Admitting that it was still imperfect, Douglas reported a cut of 90,000 feet of one-inch boards in four months, which more than

LUMBER.

JUST RECEIVED. Per. H. H. B. C. Brig
Lama, from Columbia River, a cargo of assorted
lumber, consisting of
30,000 ft. 1 Inch boards—assd, lengths.
70 Beams 18 ft. l. 12 in. w. 4 in. t.
500 Rafters 12 a 18 ft l. 3 dy 4 in.

The above for sale, at wholesale and retail, in quantities to suit purchasers. Please apply to

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Aug 5.

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Lumber from the pioneer mill arrives at Honolulu. Advertisement in the "Sandwich Island Gazette" for Aug. 5, 1837.

doubled the output of the original mill. The Sandwich Island market paid \$2,400 for 60,000 feet of this lumber, which according to Douglas was considerably above the total sawmill expense for the four months period.

In the fall of 1839, following return to Fort Vancouver after his furlough, McLoughlin writes of shipping difficulties: "There is a demand at Woahoo [another interesting variation in spelling] for Spars and Timber of 40 feet, but we cannot send either in the Vessels hold, in consequence of our Vessels having no raft Port, and I am afraid if I get one here, it would vitiate the insurance."

He also mentioned that the Sandwich Island market was furnished with little lumber other than that supplied by the Fort Vancouver mill, and that prices in that market had been raised to 5½¢ per square foot. Briskness of demand, as well as profitable prices, were credited to the effective salesmanship of the Company's Sandwich Island agent, George Pelly. Alertness in keeping buyers informed of his stock is indicated by advertisements in Honolulu publications. The following appeared under date of December 22, 1838: "Just received per Hudson's Bay Company's Barque *Columbia* from Columbia River, an assorted invoice of lumber, chiefly boards of various dimensions, in all about 60,000 feet."

A year later McLoughlin reported the Sandwich Island market still firm, and concluded his letter with the statement, "Mr. Pelly has consequently effected sales within the last year to the amount of 16943½ dollars, having sold off nearly our entire stock . . ."

Not only did Hawaii purchase most of the lumber produced by the H B C sawmill on the *Columbia*; it also supplied nearly all the mill's labour. The Company certainly was staffed by real traders who overlooked few bets.

In the summer of 1841, McLoughlin sought permission to increase Fort Vancouver's sawmilling capacity at the expense of his especial *bete noir*, the Company steamship *Beaver*. He suggested removal of the *Beaver's* engine to power a steam-operated sawmill on the *Columbia* or *Cowlitz*, which would "not depend on water fall as now," and the conversion of the *Beaver* to a sailing ship for the California trade. His plan evidently met with disfavour, which was quite understandable to those who knew of Governor Simpson's faith in the *Beaver* and his partiality toward trading ships as compared with land-based trading posts.

Had McLoughlin been given a free hand, there is little doubt that the Company would have operated sawmills at many strategic points in the Columbia River basin, including the falls of the Willamette. He did as well as he could with his one mill, considering its mechanical and labour limitations. On March 20, 1844, he had 260,000 feet of lumber ready for shipment, and more in the making. He carried this on his books at 75 shillings per thousand, although it sold at 200 shillings or more.

Following determination of the boundary between Canada and the United States on June 15, 1846, Governor Simpson ordered an immediate inventory of all HBC property south of the 49th parallel of latitude. Fort Vancouver's inventory by Chief Factors Peter Skene Ogden and James Douglas carried the sawmill at a value of £2500. "1 (one) substantially built sawmill, 91x30 feet, capable of working a gang of 11 saws with an overshot wheel of 16 feet diameter."

They also listed, "1 (one) New Single Sawmill, 60x19½ feet," at £1500, but the record does not indicate whether this was in operation at the time of inventory.

During the following year, anticipating removal of the board of management and of all Company property from the Columbia River to Fort Victoria, the sawmill was dismantled and most of its equipment sold to Michael Simmons, an American pioneer. He used the machinery to build a sawmill at Tumwater, some eighteen miles from Nisqually House. Thus the first sawmill on the Columbia became also the first sawmill on Puget Sound.

Had the HBC remained in the Oregon country, it would unquestionably have been a major factor in the lumber industry that developed rapidly during the next few decades. However, the equal rights to navigation of the Columbia that were accorded British traders by the boundary treaty were nullified by the levy of heavy duties on British or foreign-made goods by American customs officials.

The little sawmill on the Columbia served the Company well in furnishing lumber to build forts, warehouses and ships, and earned substantial profits in the export trade. Those benefits, however, terminated with the closing of the mill. The enduring value of this pioneer operation, and one that is uncredited by historians, is the example it set to early settlers, and the vast industry it fostered.

In 1843 Oregon settlers from the middle-western states built a similar mill on the Tualatin Plains near present-day Cottage Grove. Another mill was put into operation that same year on the Columbia River opposite Puget Island. Hunt's mill was started below Westport, Oregon, in 1846, just in time to have 100,000 feet of lumber ready for sale in California during the gold rush—at a cool hundred dollars a thousand.

Abernethy & Clark's mill at Oak Point, Marland's mill at Tongue Point, and a mill at Milwaukie were also operating in time to catch the booming California market of 1849 and the early 1850's. In 1850 Abrams & Reed built the first steam sawmill to appear in Oregon, located on the present site of Portland, and in the following year a water-powered mill was erected in the same vicinity by James Welch.

Many other mills, similar in design and function, sprang up along the Columbia and its tributaries. Sawmilling spread to Puget Sound, and increased so rapidly that in 1855, Nisqually House, heretofore engaged in trade with Indians, called for "finer kinds of goods to satisfy the demands of the now fast increasing white population coming into the country to find employment at the large sawmills now in operation and in the course of construction."

Pacific northwest lumbermen might well erect an enduring monument on the site of Fort Vancouver's sawmill, with the inscription:

HERE STOOD THE FIRST SAWMILL
IN THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST—
FOUNDER OF A GREAT INDUSTRY.

All that remains of the first sawmill in the Pacific Northwest.

Leo. F. Simon

