

Agriculture



By Katy Vaughn

The earliest settlers in Cottage Grove were farmers who practiced subsistence farming, growing enough for their own use, with a bit left over for market. Timber was useful for building houses, barns and fences, but open fields for crops and livestock was the most desirable land for early settlers. According to an early account by Marguerite Overholser of settler David Mosby:

“As all settlers made their living from the land, so did he. His cash money for supplies came from hogs. He would butcher as high as sixty a year. At butchering time, the meat was packed in salt in a salt box made by hewing out the center of a 30 inch log twelve feet in length. After a few days in the salt, the ham, shoulders and side bacon were hung from poles, wall to wall, in the smokehouse. A slow fire of vine maple was kept smoldering and smoking, thus curing the meat. The hams and bacon were then hauled to Portland by team and wagon, a tiring trip, one week going and one week coming back with supplies.”

The two busiest times of year for the early farmers were haying and **threshing**. Haying happened in early July using horse power to cut and rake the hay. Threshing occurred in late August or early September and involved the whole neighborhood. If a farmer



Trunnell Farm, Latham

did not own or borrow a thresher, he hired one from the McDole brothers of Latham. A threshing crew generally consisted of about 15 men and the farmer’s wife was expected to feed them all.

The first commercial agricultural processor in Cottage Grove was the water powered flour mill, built in 1857. Many farmers would bring wagon loads of sacked wheat to the mill. In exchange for grinding the wheat, the mill kept and sold a portion of the flour.



The mill could make 48 barrels of flour per day and operated under the brand name Pride of Oregon. The mill stopped producing flour sometime in the 1920's and became a feed and grain cleaning operation. In 1949 the old mill burned down. The location is now the site of the Old Mill Farm Store.

The Doolittle and Bales families had commercial orchards on Rat Creek. They shipped their fruit to Portland by rail, and from there to points east, including New York. High shipping costs put these operations out of business. Fruit growers had better luck after the Cottage Grove Cannery began processing fruit in 1918. Most of what was processed at the cannery were pears and apples from the Lorane Orchards, but many local farmers and housewives sold fruit to be canned for extra money. Almost everyone in town sold berries to the cannery when they were in season. In 1919 the cannery was doing well enough to pay **dividends** to stockholders, but by 1926 it failed to turn a profit and went out of business.

Over time timber **surpassed** agriculture as the economic engine of Cottage Grove. However, small farms kept on producing. Beans were an important crop well into recent times. In the middle of the 20th century about one third of the bean picking work force was high school students. It was not unheard of for farmers to ask that the start of school be delayed if the crop was late getting in. Even today local farms provide employment for young teens looking for a little spending money during harvest season.



Picking Beans

Discussion Points

1. What was the benefit of settling on open land for early farmers?
 2. Consider local agriculture today, how was it shaped by the history of farming? How is it different from historical farming?
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Vocabulary

Dividends: a sum of money paid regularly (typically quarterly) by a company to its shareholders (investors) out of its profits

Surpassed: exceed; be greater than

Threshing: separate grain from a plant stock, typically through beating by handheld tools or by the action of a revolving mechanism

