

CURRY COUNTY; THE GEOGRAPHY OF AN ISOLATED COAST

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INTRODUCTION

The Curry County coastal region of southwestern Oregon is one of the most isolated sections of continental United States. Its handful of pioneers have struggled for years against odds of adverse topography and soils, wet and windy climate, and isolation from major market centers. Eking out a subsistence in timber product industries, sheep, fish, marginal mining and forage agriculture, its inhabitants have traditionally resigned themselves to neglect at the hand of more populous sections of the state, and resented their lot. Sharing this feeling of neglect with Siskiyou county, California, and other isolated counties of Northwestern California and Southwestern Oregon, they went so far as to seriously purpouse secession from Oregon in 1941, joining the state of California, or leaguig with other isolated counties in the formation of a separate state.

In comparison with other counties in Oregon 14 of the 36 in the state are smaller in area than Curry, yet the total county valuation, according to the Oregon Blue Book of 1942, was under \$4,000,000, the lowest of any county in the state, and the total farm valuation, according to the 1940 census, was scarcely \$3,000,000. But in the last few years Curry county discovered an agricultural specialization in lily bulbs that in four years stepped up the total value of agricultural products from \$540,000 in 1940 to over \$2,000,000 in 1945.

There is always popular appeal to the success story, whether of an individual or a region. It will be the task of this paper to analyze the coastal strip of Curry county, tell the story of its struggles against environmental odds, its

recent rise to prominence, and to draw conclusions as to its future outlook.

THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Curry county is located on the extreme southwest coast of Oregon, bordering the state of California. Road map figures indicative of its isolation only tell part of the story. It is located on the picturesque but commercially none-too-practical Pacific Coast highway, over 400 miles from San Francisco to the south and 360 miles from Portland to the north, the nearest market outlets. Seventy-five miles to the east across the rugged Oregon Coast range and the Klamath plateau lies Medford, but no traffic ways as yet have conquered the rugged canyons of the lower Rogue River.

Physiographically it consists of narrow intermittent coastal plain and old beach terraces; interrupted by imposing headlands of basalt and older metamorphics, where the Oregon Coast range and the Klamath peneplane meet and merge. An interesting and significant feature of the region lies in the beach terraces, sandy, wave-cut and variously eroded steps, sometimes several hundred yards wide, representing old fossil shore lines, uplifted at elevations of 40, 100, 220, 500, 100 and 1500 feet. Most of these terraces are considered useless for agriculture; their main use being a ready-made series of level platforms along which the coast highway has been built. The hinterland is exceedingly rough and mountainous and virtually untenanted.

Climatically the region represents the wetter phase of the Temperate Marine type of climate, with cool damp winters and a short summer that may reach warm-dry conditions. Total rainfall is heavy. Port Orford averages 67", Gold

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Beach 75" and Brookings 70" along the immediate coast. Langlois, on the 500 foot terrace, receives more than 99". Winter months at each of the stations receive 10 or 11 inches; summer months about half an inch in July and August. The total varies considerably, however; Port Orford has received as little as 44" and as much as 119". Highest temperatures in summer have reached 100 degrees F. at several stations. Minimum temperatures in winter have dropped as low as 19 degrees F. above zero. The growing season is long, averaging 238 days at Langlois and 286 at Port Orford. Growing season data also shows considerable variation. Brookings, for example, has had a frost-free season as short as 219 days and as long as 312; Port Orford's range is from 194 days to 365. However, the general climatic conditions all along the coast reveal heavy rainfall, mild temperatures, and virtually a subtropical-length growing season, restricted somewhat by excessive cloudiness.

Under these conditions of topography, soil, and climate the natural vegetation of Curry county, in the more exposed stretches, consists of coastal grasses, furze, wild hazel, bracken, and other brush forms. The protected back lands and better soil areas are wooded with small stands of Douglas Fir, Western Hemlock, Sitka Spruce, and the relatively rare Port Orford Cedar. Minor stands of Balsam Fir are also found. Curry County shares with Coos County, immediately to the north the possession of important stands of the rare California Laurel or Oregon Myrtle, providing a basis for a small-scale industry devoted to the manufacture of Myrtlewood novelties.

HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY

Although the coast was described and some place names affixed by Captain George Vancouver in 1792, the first settlement at Port Orford did not take place until 1852. Throughout that year hundreds of miners bound for the Rogue River gold fields landed at Gold Beach

on their way to the Josephine and Jackson county mines.

In 1855, four years before Oregon was admitted to the Union, the Oregon territorial legislature created Curry County from the southern extension of Coos county. During the succeeding years the Indians were brought under control, but with scarce gold resources many of the miners and traders left the country. Some remained, however, and took up the raising of livestock, worked in small lumber mills, or engaged in fishing around the mouth of the Rogue River at Gold Beach.

Population growth was slow. In the 1850's several hundred men and their families settled at three or four of the more favorable centers, true pioneers, subsisting mainly on the free goods of the land. By 1900 only 1,868 inhabitants were recorded in the census. By 1910 the figure was 2,044; ten years later 3,025. In 1930 3,257 were counted, and the last census in 1940 listed 4,301.

With the completion of the Coastal Highway and an influx of tourists, three main centers entertained substantial growth, Port Orford listing 755, Brookings 544, and Gold Beach 841. Until 1928, Gold Beach, the county seat, was the only county seat in the United States that was unincorporated.

PRESENT ADJUSTMENTS

Under the heading, present adjustments, will be included the normal economic activities that engaged the people of Curry county up to 1943.

The leading interest of the region centered around the raising of livestock, particularly sheep. Sheep raising is confined to hilly and logged-off land, and to the coastal moors. These animals do not require supplementary feeding in this area and go through the winter, as a rule, in excellent condition. The mild cool and damp climate produces a long staple wool, similar to that of the Penine and Cheviot hills of England and southern Scotland, with the result that Curry county wool was in especial demand for army blankets and G.I. woolens during World War II.

Open range feeding and careless tending would imply that the sheep industry of Curry county is particularly free from problems. Such an assumption is hardly the case, however. Climatic variations sometimes cause considerable loss on the range. A March 13, 1936 dispatch from Gold Beach is illustrative:

"Losses in Curry county lamp crop because of starvation and exposure may run as high as 70 per cent, R. M. Knox, county agent, said today after studying reports from ranchers. The dry autumn delayed grasses to such an extent that they were beginning to grow about the time the severe winter storms occurred and lambs which did not die from the snow were starved to death by lack of feed. Ewes did not have enough forage to produce nourishing milk, Knox said."

Every winter there is some loss of older ewes, especially among those who fail to be rounded up for shearing, and consequently become weighted down with wet fleeces during the winter rains, but this loss is more than compensated for by the low-cost care normally received.

The sheep industry of the region is limited only by range conditions, with the result that an active reseeding program has been instituted. Burned and logged-off lands, in particular, have been heavily reseeded. Local ranchers continue the pioneer practice of burning brush and bracken whenever dry seasons permit, and have developed skill in burning understory beneath forest stands without materially damaging the trees. Normal carrying capacity for the county is between 25,000 to 30,000 head, although in 1936, due to the dry fall followed by a severe winter, as indicated by the above clipping, numbers were reduced to 15,000. With nearly a million acres suitable only for grazing, and with the county taking back annually many tax delinquent acres, additional plots of actual or potential range land available at values as low as 50c to \$1.00 an acre provide an opportunity for expansion of the sheep industry. The goal is 60,000 to 80,000 head of sheep, according to R. M. Knox, county agent. Improved pastures are his hope, and he cites, with climatic and topographic similarity, New Zealand, where in recent years the sheep range carrying

capacity has risen from one ewe per acre to five per acre through range improvement.

Normal wool yields run 178,000 pounds, according to the 1940 census.

The lumber industry is minor in the county, and is centered mainly at Port Orford. Much of the county is in National Forest, and as such is subject to Federal cutting and fire-control measures. At present 165,406 acres of timber over 20 inches in diameter are classed as forest lands and should remain in permanent forest. Much of this forest is merchantable either as pulpwood or lumber and should be regulated on a sustained-yield basis. Myrtle Groves, especially, should be utilized carefully, as this tree grows only here and in Coos county. (The only other known stands of this wood are in Palestine.) Port Orford cedar is a rapidly diminishing resource that likewise should be restocked and cut on a sustained yield basis.

Commercial salmon fishing is centered around Gold Beach at the mouth of the Rogue River, although sport fishing interests have been instrumental in restricting the commercial catch in recent years. A few miles south of Gold Beach crabs, clams and rock oysters are procured. Frequently a pattern of part-time fishing and part-time farming supplements both activities.

Tourism is a recent and promising activity. Highway improvement has encouraged many tourists to stop at Port Orford, Gold Beach, and Brookings, for sport fishing, hunting, and summer camping.

Mining has had a long and varied history in the region. Both placer and quartz gold mining have been significant since the first years of settlement in southwestern Oregon. Place names, such as Gold Basin Butte and Mineral Hill in the mountainous hinterland and Gold Beach on the coast, are indicative of this activity. Beach mining has been an industry of minor importance for many years, and in time may increase in significance. Gold, platinum, and chrome have been taken from the

"black sands" of the coastal beaches and the terraced slopes. Values assay high, but the problem of profitable separation remains. The technology of commercially handling black sands is at present being investigated by a number of interested geologists and mining engineers from the region. A rather unusual occurrence of graphite occurs in one long dyke near Brookings. Concentrations of pure amygdaloidal graphite are abundantly scattered along the dyke and await a technological development for profitable extraction.

Agriculture has normally been of minor importance. Three hundred and seventy-five farms were reported in 1940, with a total produce valuation of \$540,000. Only 104,332 acres were reported in farms that year, comprising 10.1 per cent of the total land area of the county. Corn, potatoes, and hay were the leading crops raised.

THE RENAISSANCE OF BULBS

The new development that has revolutionized the agricultural industry of Curry county dates back to 1939, although tangible results were not forthcoming until 1943. Prior to the outbreak of World War II over 25,000,000 lily bulbs were imported from Japan, with Holland and Bermuda also contributing. At that time American production was less than 1,500,000. With the coming of hostilities both Japanese and Holland sources were completely cut off, and Bermuda's supplies were sharply reduced, providing a high priced market for domestic Easter lily bulbs.

Curry county, with sandy loam soils and a unique combination of climatic factors on the old beach terraces between the 100 foot and 500 foot levels was found to be ideal for the production of bulbs.

The story starts with Sydney Croft, a migrant farmer from Michigan, who through failing health and fortunes left Michigan and came to Oregon in 1939. Familiar with bulb culture in Michigan he put in an experimental acreage near the community of Brookings. Croft succeeded in producing good bulbs within two or three years, but without an established market name he was forced

to sell bulbs for 5c that three years later were to bring a dollar. However, even in those days he encouraged several of his neighbors to grow bulbs in the hopes of establishing a reputation for the Oregon bulbs. Croft died shortly after pioneering the industry, and today in his memory, the leading bulb from Oregon is known as the Croft, although a modification, the Kenyon-Davis, is becoming equally well known on the market.

As a result of these early efforts to produce a high quality bulb, plus the sudden demand as a result of the war, the renaissance of Curry county came about. In 1944 stories that rivalled the tales of Paul Bunyan were being told in the streets of Brookings. One grower reported the sale of \$6,000 dollars worth of Croft bulbs from a crop produced on a corner lot. Land values catapulted. One newcomer bought a single acre in 1942 for \$1,000. In 1944 he was offered \$10,000 and refused. In 1944 over 50,000 bulblets and 5,000 commercials were sold from another small acreage, valued at \$9,000. In 1945 actual transactions involving sales of small acreages of lily land at \$2,000 per acre were recorded.

The upshot of the bulb development up to the end of 1945, with information supplied by personal correspondence with C. H. Young, cashier of the Curry County Bank of Gold Beach, R. M. Knox, Curry County Agent, and Dr. Frank P. McWhorter, Plant Pathologist, Oregon Experiment Station, Corvallis, presents the following statistical picture. There are now nearly 1,000 lily growers in Curry county, the number of farms in the county has doubled since the 1940 census. Bank deposits have increased more than 300 per cent, and profits from an acre of ground range from \$10,000 to unverified yields as high as \$20,000. Curry county is suddenly proud to be a political constituent of the State of Oregon and Oregon is equally proud to claim Curry county. Total bulb sales during the fall of 1945 approximated one and one-half million dollars.

But what of the future? Is this industry merely a Cinderella dream that will

vanish with a return of Japanese competition? Opinions differ. The end of the war will undoubtedly have a profound effect on the further development of the industry. The exceedingly high prices have come mainly from the sale of seed stock. It is fully expected that prices will decline with increased supplies. With a return of Japanese stock eastern forcers and florists will undoubtedly seek large numbers of the cheaper bulbs. However, the Curry county coastal terraces are particularly suited to the growing of a commercial Easter lily stock, and the superior quality of the bulbs developed here makes them worth three times the value of imported Japanese stock under normal conditions. Hence it is fully expected that the future of the industry will remain promising.

It should be pointed out, however, that the big boom is over. Land is now high priced, competition from imported bulbs will be felt within a year. Two years of meticulous care are required in their production, hence it is expected that few new growers will enter the field after this year. A new agricultural specialization, however, has been achieved in Curry county, and one that promises to remain of importance to the region.

CONCLUSIONS

Several conclusions may be drawn from this analysis of recent developments in Curry county. (1) The lily industry, although reaching its greatest boom in 1945, can be expected to remain the single largest agricultural specialization of the region. (2) The outlook for expansion of the sheep industry is encouraging through range improvement. (3) Timber activities, based on sustained-yield management in Douglas Fir, pulp species, Port Orford Cedar, and Myrtle wood, should continue and should become a permanent source of wealth to the region. (4) Commercial fishing will remain a strong part-time activity, and sport fishing will increase in importance, as the region becomes better known. (5) Gold mining will continue in minor importance, but new minerals, based on improved technology in handling the black sands, and possibly the commercial development of methods of extraction of the graphite ores, should open new opportunities for wealth in the region. (6) Tourism, based on sport fishing and hunting opportunities, as well as the isolated wilderness of coast, river country, and mountain highlands, increasingly available through highway development, offers increased promise.