Skykomish is a Railroad Town, but

Timber was the Dominant Industry

Just about anyone ever affiliated with Skykomish knows it's a railroad town. It began that way and has remained so for decades. The location of the town was determined, essentially dictated, by the needs of Great Northern Railway. Between Seattle and Sky track could be maintained at a 1% elevation gain; east of Sky it went to 2.2% to climb Stevens Pass. The strip of flat valley floor where Skykomish is located along a bend in the river was a natural division point for additional engines to be put on and taken off, thus a five-rail switching yard, coal chute, roundhouse, and water tanks were among the first things built in town.

In terms of employment and commerce, however, timber was considerably more significant in Skykomish and most of the rest of the upper valley.

There were already at least two shingle mills and a sawmill in Sky before the town incorporated in 1909, just as there were sawmills at Heybrook, Baring, Grotto, Berlin, and most other "towns" up the valley.

To appreciate the size of the timber that lined this early dirt track that would eventually grow into Stevens Pass Highway, one need only compare the trees to the size of the car in the distance.

When Empire Builder James Jerome Hill was envisioning how he could make money with his Great Northern Railway to the Pacific Northwest, part of the value he recognized was vast timber resources, thus he included his friend and neighbor Frederick Weyerhaeuser in his planning. Until Great Northern, rail goods came to the Pacific Northwest and largely empty cars went east. Hill knew to make real money he needed full trains going both directions.

Still, in the very early days in the Valley the majority of timber was used within hailing distance of where it was cut. As the railroad was being built whole logs went into trestles and shoring, and thousands of cross ties were needed. Depots were required all along the line, then mills sprang up nearby, and housing quickly followed.

The stumps in this photo likely contributed their trees to the first Foss River trestle. Some of the logs were milled into beams, but many were used with the bark still attached.

In the 1890s mining may have brought as many people to the valley as lumber or railroading. In 1897 Seattle Post Intelligencer published a book called "Mining in the Pacific Northwest" that showed 35 claims along Miller River and Money Creek alone, and there were similar numbers of mining claims in many of the creeks that flowed into both forks of Skykomish River. Tens of thousands of board feet of timber went into the ground for shoring and tram ties, as well as sorting and processing buildings and housing at mine entrances.

In addition to new towns springing up all along the railroad, whole towns burned down with remarkable frequency in those days. Between 1902 and 1906 Index and Skykomish were gutted by fire in their core commercial areas. Both were promptly rebuilt, bigger and better. (Berlin also burned in this era, but that was a forest file that destroyed the entire town which wasn't quickly rebuilt, perhaps because the total devastation or maybe by then it was clear the early promise of mining wealth was not going to happen.)

The population of Washington State doubled from 500K to 1 million between 1900 and 1910 creating an overpowering need for housing. Thus logging and mills were everywhere in the upper valley.

In 1917 Bloedel Donovan bought Skykomish Lumber company comprising of several mills and 133 million board feet of standing timber, and the industry kept right on booming both locally and far away, finding markets both east and west.

The single small mill at Alpine, for instance, continued to increase production peaking during the Great War, as WWI was called until there was a second one, by shipping roughly 600 railcars of cut limber annually.

Various accounts say 8 million board feet of timber had to be cold decked along the millpond in Milltown (adjacent to Skykomish) so the mill could operate all winter.

Above, the mill at Grotto, and below it the Bloedel Donovan mill in MIlltown, a suburb of Skykomish, with a small mountain of timber cold-decked to be cut in winter. This mill continued to operate until the late 1940s when it was sold to Robinson Lumber Co.of Everett which operated it on a much smaller scale until 1958 when it closed completely..

The Great Depression ground all that to a halt for a few years in the early 1930s, but by 1935 the mill was operating at near capacity again. The 1940 census for Skykomish listed 84 lumber industry workers, plus four people who ran the logging railroad for the Bloedel Donovan mill at Milltown. Railroad employees numbered 33 in the same census, and because the actual logging, as opposed to working in the larger mills, was seasonal many more loggers came to the Valley for only the months the snow was out of the hills, so some would likely not have been counted in the census.

Over time logging methods changed greatly. At first it was ground lead logging where logs were yarded along the ground to very nearby mills or water, with a team of loggers accompanying each one if there were stumps or rocks to be worked around. This method gave way to skidders, huge steam powered high lead operations with a tall spar tree at the center, from which a line would be run to a "tail" tree 1500 feet or more out in the woods. This gave lift from both ends so logs could be yarded to a landing without having to be guided past stumps and rocks. From there they were loaded onto rail cars. These were big time labor intensive operations to both lay track and extract the logs.

In the 1930s steam and railroad logging gave way to the internal combustion engines. The first "logging roads" had two tracks of heavy planks laid end to end out into the woods to a landing, so crude single axle gasoline-powered trucks could be loaded. They were chain drive, and they weren't fast, but likewise they didn't have to haul the logs too many miles to water or a mill.

An old single axle Mack, most likely one of the Knutson Nelson rigs on their Miller River job, hauling a massive Douglas Fir log to the mill in MIlltown. Note the plank road it is traveling, the hard rubber tires, and the lack of apparent springs. Even at 5 mph it was a rough ride.

Within a decade of the switch to plank roads, trucks improved to where they could run directly on the dirt. Just as two men with chain saws had replaced several crews of fallers and buckers, a single bulldozer and operator, plus one man on the ground, could punch in enough road that when the logging crew had extracted all the timber on a section of sidehill called a "side," the road would be ready for them to move to a new landing and rig up the next side.

The economy of scale that made railroad logging profitable could not be duplicated in narrower valleys and higher elevations where the timber was not so lush.

As private timber holdings were logged off, National Forest land was offered to "gyppo" logging outfits on contract. During the 1950s and 60s numerous single side contract logging operations worked in the valley, employing a dozen or two people each but over time these also have reduced as fewer Forest Service contracts were let for mostly higher and less accessible timber.

There remains logging in the valley. A recent operation on a sidehill just southeast of Foss River bridge clearcut a patch of second growth trees that would have been called "dog hair" by loggers not many decades ago. They were tall, straight, and skinny, able to be gripped and snipped at the stump by a large machine then laid down in rows to be gathered into a batch which could be pulled to a landing and loaded by another machine. The ratio of men to large machines looked close to one to one, and it is doubtful there were many cork shoes, chain saws, or axes around.

*This web account by Warren Carlson is an expanded version of an article originally published in **The Index Wall**.*