

Deschutes County History

Located in the heart of the state, Deschutes County is the outdoor recreation capital of Oregon. With snow-capped peaks dominating the skyline to the west and the wide-open high desert extending to the east, the beauty and uniqueness of Deschutes County captures the awe of locals and visitors alike. From humble beginnings, Deschutes County, like the region it serves, has grown into a bustling, exciting place where progress and growth are ongoing hallmarks.

Europeans had begun exploring present day Deschutes County as early as 1813. That year a fur trading party from the American Fur Trading Company came through the area looking for beaver. The party, lead by Reed and Seaton, carved their initials and date on a large stone on the banks of the Deschutes River, just south of present day site of Bend. (Today the rock can be found at the Deschutes County Historical Society.) Other early explorers and fur traders, whose names now grace local landmarks, include: Peter Skene Ogden, Nathaniel Wyeth, John C. Fremont, Stephen Meek, Billy Chinook, Kit Carson and Thomas "Bad Hand" Fitzpatrick.

In 1859 Oregon gained statehood, however Central Oregon remained largely unsettled. Three years later the first real settlers arrived in Central Oregon. Cattle ranchers Felix Scott Jr., Marion Scott, John Craig and Robert Millican brought 900 head of cattle into the region and spent the winter here. They are reputed to be the first white people to do so. Most of the early settlers of today's Deschutes County were sheep, cattle, and wheat and potato farmers. In fact, potato farming was so popular that at one point the Deschutes County Fair was actually first known as the Annual Potato Show.

By 1900, the Columbia Southern Railroad had only reached Shaniko, then the largest town in the region. Regardless, the future of Central Oregon looked bright. Midwestern businessman Alexander M. Drake had arrived on the banks of the Deschutes River and by 1900 had platted the City of Bend. Within five years the city incorporated with approximately 500 people.

Other businessmen followed Drake's lead. In 1901 the City of Sisters was officially platted, and in 1904 Tumalo was platted as Laidlaw. Further investment came after the arrival of the railroad in 1911. Other future town sites were platted such as Terrebonne (originally known as Hillman), Redmond and LaPine.

The creation of Deschutes County began in 1914 when a failed attempt was made to move the Crook County seat from Prineville to Bend. At the time, Bend was billed as the "spot of the railroad, in the actual center of business, population, and taxable property in Crook County." Despite the best efforts of Bend businessmen, the vote failed by a bare margin of 2 ½ percent.

Backers of the proposal believed that if removal of the county seat wasn't possible, then division into a separate county would be the next best option. As a result, the November 1916 election showed an overwhelming vote for the formation of a new county, present-day Deschutes County.

Shortly after the election however, Crook County sent her latest child, Deschutes County (Jefferson County had been the first to break off of Crook County in the 1914 election) a

Christmas present marked "do not open until Christmas." The package was found to be a set of quo-warranty proceedings against the members of Deschutes County's new court, questioning their right to conduct a separate county government. After a recount of the ballots and adjustments in the votes, on December 13, 1916 Governor George Withycombe proclaimed Deschutes County's official existence. (See above photo of Governor Withycombe signing the proclamation.)

Some of the first officials were: Commissioners A.L. Mackintosh and Lew Smith, Judge William D. Barnes, District Attorney Harvey DeArmond, Sheriff S.E. Roberts, Treasurer Clyde McKay, and Coroner Elmer Niswonger.

By 1915 two large companies, Shevlin-Hixon and Brooks-Scanlon, announced plans to build lumber mills just south of downtown Bend. By the mid 1920s, the lumber capacity combined for both mills was one of the largest white pine lumber mills in the world. By 1924, Shevlin-Hixon alone was cutting 200 million board feet a year.

The arrival of the lumber mills brought a large building boom and rapid expansion of the county's population. In 1916, when the county was formed, the population was just 5,000 people. By 1920 it grew to 9,622, almost doubling in size in just four short years.

The first official offices for the Deschutes County were in the O'Kane Building, built the same year the county was founded. Later, the offices moved across the street to the 1st National Bank, now the site of US Bank in downtown Bend. By 1935 the county had outgrown its offices and moved into its third home, the old Central School. The County was actually renting the building and had negotiated a purchase price of \$35,000 from the school district when on February 10, 1937 a mysterious fire destroyed the building.

Coincidentally, County Clerk Mable Livesay had reported problems in balancing the books and had requested an audit from the state, which had begun the day before the fire broke out. After working all day, the auditors requested to see the books from the time of the county's formation. However, due to the fire, most the requested records were lost including marriage indexes, mortgages and deed index, warrant records, school superintendent records, and the complete law library. Tax records dating back to the formation of the county were found however, secure in the safe.

Investigators discovered that the fire was started in the southwest corner of the building, on a night when the winds were blowing from a direction that could rapidly spread the flames. Telephone wires to the building had been cut forcing the railroad switchman who first saw the blaze, to run 6 blocks to the fire hall. Naturally state officials suspected arson, but to this day no one has been charged with setting the fire.

The need for a permanent home and the first real courthouse for the county were immediately apparent after the fire. Plans began within 12 hours of the blaze for a new home. With the help of a \$67,000 PWA grant, \$17,000 worth of clearing and excavation cost by the WPA, and a \$48,000 tax levy money, construction of the new county courthouse began in February of 1940.

Designed by Truman Phillips of Tourtellote & Phillips architects, the new county courthouse was modeled after the Linn County Courthouse in Albany. (See photo of the Courthouse below.)

The Courthouse was finished just 10 short months later and three long years after the fire. On December 30, 1940 three men: Frank Horton, Woodrow Latham, and M. Henkle received the distinction of being the first persons arraigned in the new courthouse.

During this same period, the first official home of the Deschutes County Library was completed by local contractor Fred Van Metre on Wall Street in Bend. In 1941 Roberts Airfield was completed allowing flight travel in and out of Central Oregon for the first time. The field was further developed as a training base during WWII for P-38 and B-17 bombers and then given to the City of Redmond after the war.

By 1950 Shevlin-Hixon had sawed its last log, and Deschutes County's population had reached almost 22,000. The 1960s saw further growth in the region with plans being made to convert Camp Abbot into Sunriver. Bachelor Butte Ski Lodge opened for business and Central Oregon Community College broke ground for its campus on Awbrey Butte after outgrowing its initial site on Wall Street.

By 1980 Deschutes County's population had reached the 50,000 mark and Brooks-Scanlon Lumber Company sold their timber interests to Diamond International symbolizing the end of the logging era. With that change came the shift in the main industry from logging to tourism.

During the past 10 years, Deschutes County has experienced the most rapid growth of any county in the state largely due to its invigorating climate and year-round recreation activities. Central Oregon offers downhill and cross-country skiing, snowboarding, fishing, hunting, hiking, rock climbing, white water rafting, and golfing. Deschutes County is proud to be the hosting area of diverse annual events including the Cascade Festival of Music, the Bend Art Hop, Cascade Children's Festival, Pole Pedal Paddle, Sisters Rodeo, Sunriver Sunfest, the Cascade Cycling Classic and the Deschutes County Fair (now housed in one of the newest and largest fairground and expo center facilities in the west).