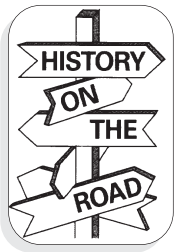


HISTORY ON THE ROAD

TILLAMOOK FOREST CENTER CONNECTS PAST AND PRESENT

By Doug Decker



Drought conditions had plagued the Pacific Northwest for two months when a fire broke out on a logging site in the Tillamook region of Oregon on August 14, 1933. The fire burned 40,000 acres in ten days before exploding and consuming 240,000 acres within twenty hours. The smoke plume from the Tillamook fire rose to 40,000 feet, but that was not all: “The power of the fire created a hurricane force wind that uprooted trees and snapped them like matchsticks. Nearby coastal cities were plunged into darkness at mid-day due to the thick, blinding smoke. Ashes and cinders fell on ships 500 miles at sea.”¹ History would repeat itself three more times over the next eighteen years.

The Tillamook Burn became the collective name for the series of large fires that began in 1933 and struck at six-year intervals through 1951: in 1939, 190,000 acres

burned; in 1945, 180,000 acres burned; and in 1951, 33,000 acres burned. Each subsequent fire consumed some of the same area as the 1933 fire, destroying any new growth that emerged after each fire. The fires had profound environmental, economic, and social repercussions for the coastal counties of northwest Oregon. The logging industry, a mainstay of local economies, ground to a halt; wildlife was decimated due to habitat loss; rivers were choked with sediment and debris; and seed cones—the beginnings of a new forest—were annihilated.

Over the last half-century, foresters, professional tree planters, and volunteers have worked painstakingly to reestablish the forest and its many resources. Oregon voters passed a constitutional amendment in 1948 authorizing \$12 million in bonds to rehabilitate the land. The long reforestation project, the largest ever undertaken, began in 1949. Helicopters were used for the first time for large-scale aerial seeding. On the ground, forestry crews, prison inmates, and school groups planted

trees by hand. More than one billion seeds were dropped from aircraft as part of the effort to “green the burn.” In total, 72 million seedlings were planted to create the Tillamook State Forest, one of the largest forest planting efforts ever undertaken.

Drive through the area today and chances are you would never know about the area’s fiery past or about the monumental replanting effort. Interpretation and education programs have been underway in the Tillamook State Forest since 1996, reaching out to visitors with information



The Tillamook Forest Center is open all year and provides a unique educational experience for visitors.



COURTESY OF THE TILLAMOOK FOREST CENTER

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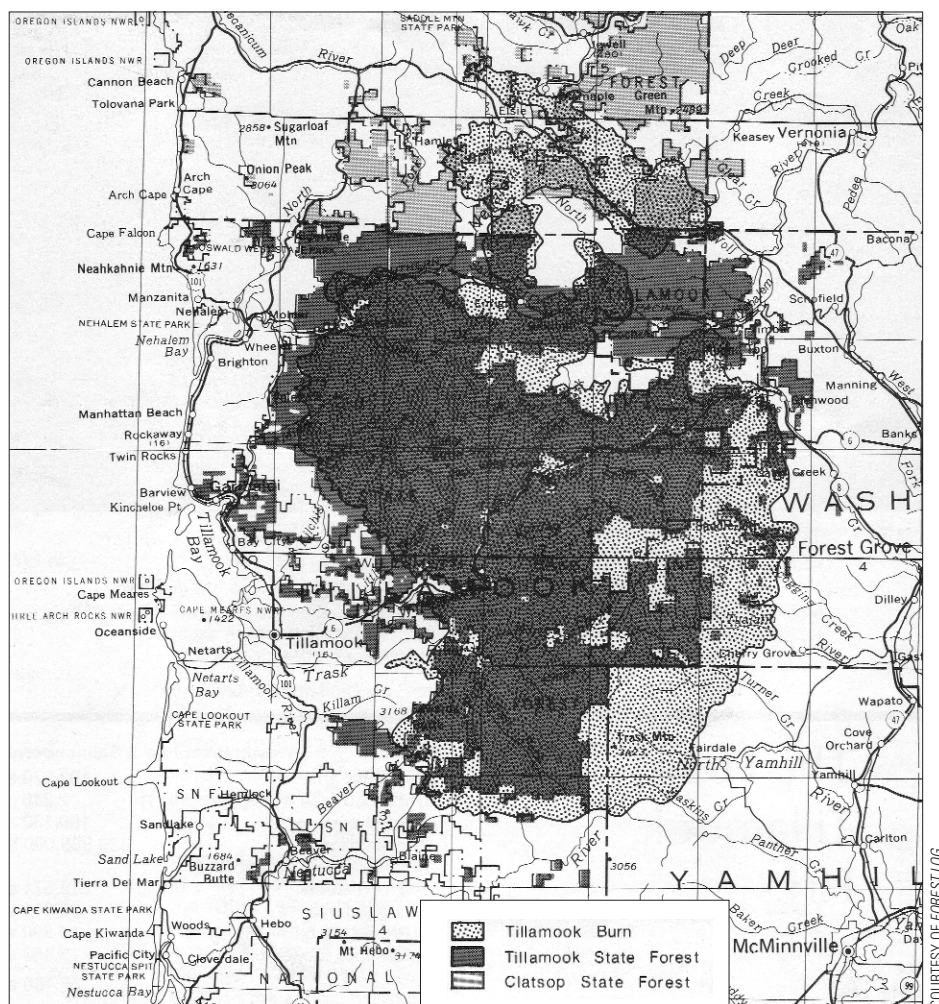
about the forest. Annually, more than 5,000 school children participate in curriculum-driven field trips, led by professional educators.

A new interpretive center and visitor facility located in the heart of the former burned area—the Tillamook Forest Center—opened last year and is now showcasing the phoenix-like story of the forest’s return from total devastation.

Located on the scenic Wilson River Highway (Oregon Highway 6) 50 miles west of downtown Portland, Oregon, the Tillamook Forest Center provides new landmarks for travelers through the area. A 40-foot tall replica of a fire lookout tower and a 250-foot-long pedestrian suspension bridge are “bookends,” with the 13,500-square-foot center in between filled with exhibits about the Tillamook State Forest. The center also features a major classroom facility, a multimedia theater, and a forest archive, with interpretive trails leading from the building out through the forest to the river. Rustic benches dot these trails—hand-hewn from trees removed to make way for the building.

The Tillamook Forest Center provides unique kinds of forest-based learning opportunities. Visitors come away with knowledge of forests in general, the Tillamook State Forest in particular, and about how our lives are connected with forests. They can explore the past, present, and future of the Tillamook State Forest through artifacts, personal stories, photos, film, exhibits, games, hands-on models, computer simulations, interpreter-led programs, and other innovative media. Outdoors, the forest comes alive through salmon watching viewpoints, the bridge and lookout tower, and interpretive trails that consider the forest through the eyes of Native Americans, homesteaders, early loggers, firefighters, tree planters, and future forest managers. The center is situated alongside a picturesque narrow gorge of the Wilson River on a forested site planted entirely by school children.

Sustainable design and construction have been hallmarks of the project since planning began in 1997. Major building systems including heating and ventilation, plumbing, and structural systems have been designed and built with sustainability in mind. The wood and glass structure reflects elements of the region’s past; the roofline is evocative of its homesteads and forest camps. In 2000, the master plan



Reforestation efforts in the burn area led to the creation of the Tillamook State Forest in 1973. The Tillamook Forest Center is located at the state forest’s western edge.

received the Award of Excellence for Landscape Planning and Analysis from the Oregon Chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA), the highest professional achievement award given by the group. The biennial award recognizes projects that improve the relationship of people to their environment.

A team of design professionals led by the Miller/Hull Partnership worked closely with a group of forest and wildlife experts, educators, and historians on the center design. The total cost of the project was \$10.7 million, funded in part by a public-private partnership facilitated by the nonprofit Tillamook Forest Heritage Trust. More than 400 donors—including foundations, individuals, business, and organizations—have contributed to the project. No tax dollars were involved in the creation of the center.

The Tillamook Forest Center, located on the Wilson River Highway (Oregon Highway 6) in the Tillamook State Forest,

is owned and managed by the Oregon Department of Forestry. Admission to the Tillamook Forest Center is free. From Memorial Day to Labor Day, the center is open every day from 10 am to 5 pm. The rest of the year, the center is open from 10 am to 4 pm Wednesday–Sunday (closed Monday & Tuesday). For more information, visit www.tillamookforest-center.org. □

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NOTES:

1. “Welcome to Tillamook State Forest,” accessed at <http://www.oregon.gov/ODF/TSF/docs/A.TSFwelcomebrochure.pdf>.