

Maxville, Oregon: A Logging Ghost Town



By *Silas Lobnibe and Mary Oberst*

Can a ghost town be brought back to life? Gwendolyn Trice, executive director of the Maxville Heritage Interpretive Center (MHIC) in Joseph, Oregon, is going to find out. MHIC's mission is to collect, preserve, and interpret the multiracial history of the former logging community of Maxville and similar communities throughout the West.¹

Maxville's history is rooted in a forgotten aspect of America's forest industry history. As timber supplies in the Upper Midwest and South dwindled at the close of the nineteenth century, lumber companies began moving into the Pacific Northwest. By the early 1900s, companies were moving entire towns by rail, and workers either came along or migrated later. By the 1920s the lumber migration corridor to the American

West was in place, attracting Black loggers from the South.

The Bowman-Hicks Lumber Company, based in Missouri, was one of those companies. In 1923 it established the town of Maxville in the state's northeast corner and recruited experienced White and Black loggers from around the country. Most of the White workers came from the Deep South and Midwest, as well as parts of Oregon. Of the sixty or so Blacks, most came from Arkansas, Mississippi, or Louisiana, where Bowman-Hicks had lumber mills.² Bowman-Hicks carved Maxville out of the forest. In its heyday, between 1924 and 1933, Maxville was home to about four hundred residents—making it one of the largest towns in Wallowa County overnight.

WHY PRESERVE MAXVILLE?

Gwendolyn Trice first heard of Maxville in 2002, when she learned that she was the daughter of a Maxville logger. Her father, Lafayette

Maxville loggers, circa 1926. Workers pose with their tools, which include cross-cut saws, a stamp to mark the felled timber, and poles for log-scaling.

“Lucky” Trice, was nineteen years old when he arrived in Maxville from Arkansas. But Gwendolyn knew her father only as a respected African American businessman and civic leader in La Grande, some forty miles southwest and a lifetime away from Maxville. Lucky died in 1985; in 2002, during a casual conversation with a family friend, Trice learned that he had been recruited in 1923 to work as a logger in Maxville.

Trice began to retrace her father's life in Maxville and discovered overlapping cultures: the Nez Perce tribal members who were forced off their land in 1877; the Black loggers of Maxville; the Chinese laborers who helped build the state's major railroad lines; the Japanese immigrants who

cleared the land for the logging and farming industries; and the Greek immigrants who helped build and maintain the logging railroads and trestles that Maxville depended on for moving lumber to market.

To tell the story of Maxville, in 2008 Trice opened the Maxville Heritage Interpretive Center in Joseph, forty miles away. “Nobody talked about it,” Trice says about Maxville’s multiethnic citizenry. “If I hadn’t started this [center], the history would be gone.”

The Bowman-Hicks Lumber Company chose a dangerous time in Oregon’s history to bring Black loggers to its new operation. In 1920, the state had only 2,114 African Americans, three-quarters of whom lived in Portland. Oregon’s constitution, passed in 1857, still contained an exclusion clause nearly seventy years later: “No free negro, or mulatto, not residing in this state at the time of the adoption of this constitution, shall come, reside, or be within this state, or hold any real estate, or make any contracts, or maintain any suit therein.” Although the clause was rendered moot by the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution and was never enforced, it was not repealed by voters until 1926.³

Racism and nativism were very much on the rise at the time Bowman-Hicks set up Maxville. The Ku Klux Klan, having established itself in Oregon only two years before, claimed thirty-five thousand members in more than sixty local chapters. Klansmen quickly won elections at local, county, and state levels in 1922 and helped elect as governor the nativist Walter Pierce, who hailed from the same mountainous region as Maxville.⁴ A mix of federal and state laws and policies restricting the rights of Chinese and Japanese immigrants were also in place.

Despite that overt hostility, Bowman-Hicks moved forward with Maxville. Sources differ on whether the company was indifferent to Oregon’s constitution and racial history, simply chose to ignore it, or intentionally defied it. At any rate, the company “had more important tasks to tackle, which was harvesting timber to supply the masses,” writes one historian, and Maxville thrived for the next ten years.⁵

Thus, Maxville’s story highlights a unique moment of inclusion in a difficult racial history that some Oregonians still struggle with today. Maxville tells an important story of how people of color have been at the center of Oregon’s history and have shaped the state’s history.

MAXVILLE THEN

Most of the forest workers, including Trice’s father, traveled to an existing logging camp by rail, in boxcars, to just outside Wallowa. The company built a new town for them and their families, both White and Black, at nearby Bishop’s Meadow. The town was originally named Mac’s Town, after Bowman-Hicks superintendent J. D. McMillan, but the name soon became Maxville.

Unlike most timber towns in Oregon, Maxville housed entire families, and that fact alone made the town distinctive. Homes for Whites were built with shiplap; the Black homes were decidedly more makeshift. Trice says that Black workers who brought their wives were required to provide proof of marriage; common-law marriage was not allowed.

Although the town was built for both White and Black loggers, it was laid out according to the usual southern Jim Crow rules for logging camps: residents were segregated by marital status (single men lived in

boarding-style houses) and ethnicity. The town also segregated the schools, building a school for Whites at one end of town and a Black school at the other. MHIC has created a street map of the town, reconstructed from the memory of elders.

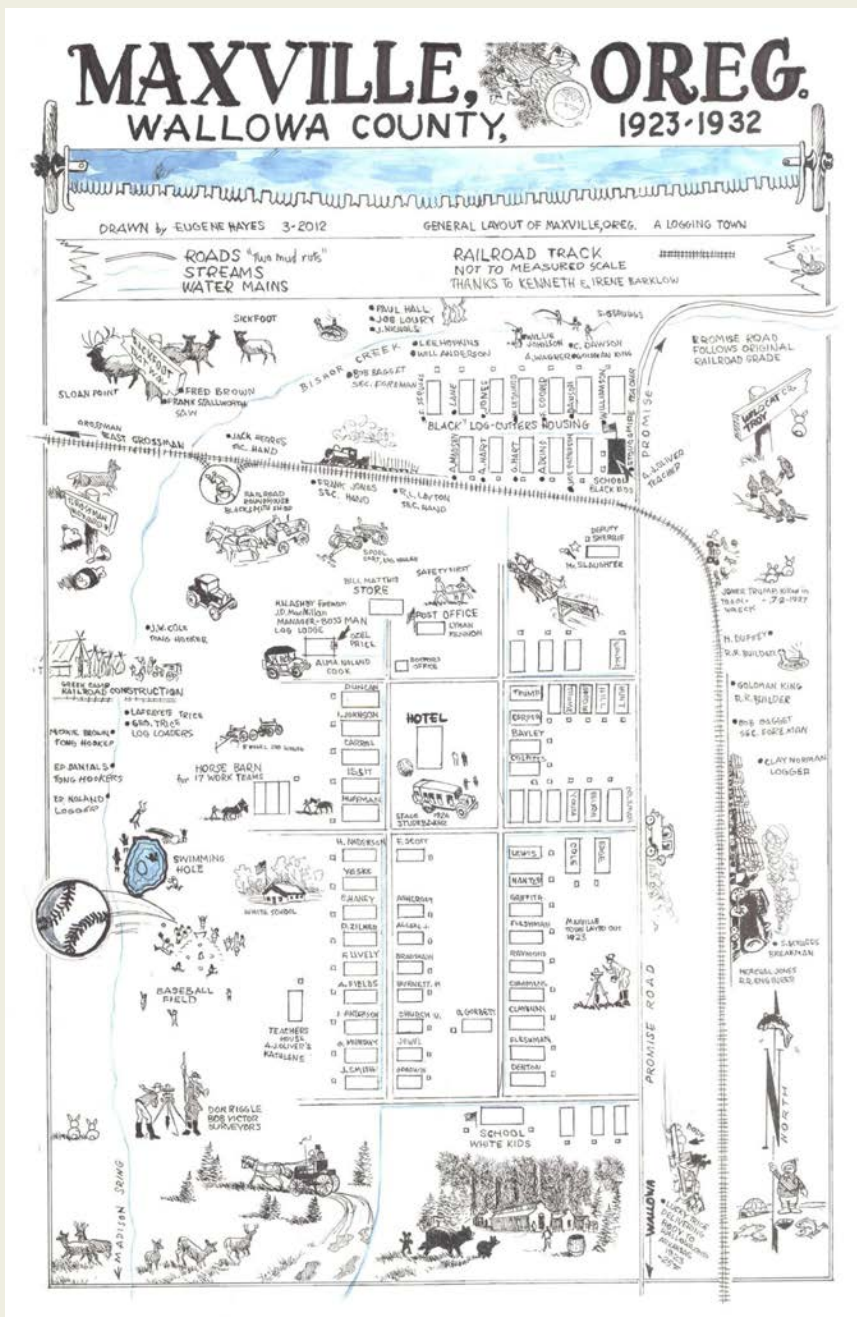
As Wallowa County’s largest town, Maxville boasted a post office, a medical dispensary, a company store, a hotel, a horse barn, a blacksmith, and a roundhouse to turn the log-train engines. The lumber company ran its business from a large log building, which also served as a meeting place for residents of Maxville.

To profitably haul huge ponderosa pine logs from the forest, felled trees were skidded, using steam engines, steam donkeys, and Maxville’s seventeen draft horses. Workers also used elaborate timber chutes to move logs. Jobs were typically segregated based on ethnicity. Working in teams, Blacks used crosscut saws to fell the trees, and many also had experience as log loaders, log cutters, railroad builders, tong hookers, and section foremen. Their primary expertise was logging, although there are first-hand accounts of Black workers who repaired and maintained the railroad engine. The White workers were section foremen, tree toppers, saw filers, contract truck drivers, and bridge builders; Greeks specialized in railroad building. Because of the nature of timber-felling work, however, the work teams were integrated despite the segregation of jobs.

LIFE IN MAXVILLE

Most of the Maxville houses lacked electricity and indoor plumbing. Residents traversed mud in the spring and fall. In winter, snow storms were common and winter temperatures could dip to minus twenty degrees.

The Bowman-Hicks Company included a baseball club in its business



MICHAEL AND IRENE BARKLOW FOR HER PERMISSION TO ILLUSTRATE HER ORIGINAL MAP

The Maxville town site map (not to scale) was created from the memories of the elders and illustrated by Wallowa County artist Eugene Hayes.

model to provide a recreational outlet for workers, and Maxville had a baseball field and two baseball teams, segregated except during regional tournaments. In the 1930s, the combined Maxville team earned a tournament win against the nearby town of Elgin. Maxville also had a

swimming hole created by a spring and a natural land formation; based on an old photo, the swimming hole was available to all.

The surviving White residents of Maxville tend to describe the relationship between Blacks and Whites as largely absent of racism.

White homesteader Alen Dale Victor recalls, “[A]s soon as the blacks moved into town, everybody got along with them. . . . We got along fine.”⁶ Ester Wilfong Jr., whose father was a Black logger, offered a different point of view: “[Y]ou did what you were supposed to do and keep your mouth closed and not step out of line, and you would get along fairly well.”⁷ Nevertheless, the Black loggers at Maxville drew the attention of the local Ku Klux Klan. In the mid-1920s, a mob of local Klansmen came to Maxville to intimidate the Black loggers. According to Trice, the White superintendent dehooded the leader and declared, “Get out, you are not welcome here. We know who you are.”⁸

There are two likely reasons for this racial détente. The first is human nature. Says Trice, “People were connected in many different ways. They worked alongside one another. They had to rely on one another. The families saw each other every day. People became friends.”⁹ The second reason is economic: Maxville’s 400 residents—timber workers and their families—were a boon for Wallowa County’s economy. Many of the surrounding homesteaders, ranchers, and shop owners—KKK or not—also worked as loggers and mill workers. The needs of Maxville residents, especially for food, translated into jobs for locals and steady demand for goods.

The Great Depression and the consequent downturn in the lumber market caused Maxville’s decline. When the logging operation ceased, Bowman-Hicks closed the town in 1933. Some families migrated to California to continue work in the logging industry, but Lucky Trice moved to La Grande. In the mid-1940s, a severe winter storm destroyed most of the remaining structures in



PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN; MAY ANN HENDERSON COLLECTION; COURTESY MHIC

Using steam locomotives to transport lumber sixteen miles to the mill in Wallowa was not always a smooth operation. Regardless of race or ethnicity, workers cooperated to correct the situation.



PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN; LIVELY COLLECTION; COURTESY MHIC

Maxville’s segregated baseball teams merged when they competed against other local teams.

Maxville, leaving only the deserted company headquarters. And then Maxville truly became a ghost town.¹⁰

AND MAXVILLE NOW

Today the Maxville town site is private property, owned by Manulife Investment Management. At first

glance, one sees few indications that four hundred people once lived here. A closer inspection, however, reveals an old water pump, the remains of the machinery workshop, some railroad and logging equipment, and the four-acre town dump. A few miles away, also on private land, stands the last

of Maxville’s wooden railroad trestle bridges, still spanning a gully.

The large log building that served as the Bowman-Hicks Lumber Company headquarters is gone, but only because Trice persuaded the property owner to allow her to save the building by properly documenting, dismantling, and storing it off-site.¹¹

As of February 2022, MHIC has raised the funds to purchase all 96 acres of Maxville’s original town site, as well as 144 acres of forested land surrounding it. Trice sees the land as 240 acres of opportunity for the community, the Maxville Heritage Interpretive Center in nearby Joseph, local schools, and the general public.

When the land purchase is finalized, the reassembled log building will serve as a space for research and education, in tandem with the MHIC Museum in Joseph. (The hope is to start reconstruction in 2023, the centennial of the town’s establishment.) Trice plans to begin a robust educational program that will offer archaeological research, historical information, forestry education, and a seminar in land stewardship. In addition, she is working to offer an Outdoor School program, a legislatively mandated opportunity for every fifth or sixth grader in Oregon schools to stay overnight for up to five days outdoors—unplugged from electronic devices and engaging in natural sciences programs and experiments.¹²

Trice has already recruited several local schools and universities to help her understand and interpret the land. Rory Becker, an archaeology professor at Eastern Oregon University, says, “I think that there is a lifetime of work out there, archaeologically speaking . . . [The site] also can provide training, education, and real opportunities for folks to engage in that past.”¹³



Students from Eastern Oregon University and Clatsop Community College documented and measured the log building before its disassembly in 2015.



Gwendolyn Trice in the doorway of the now disassembled log building in 2011.

In the meantime, the MHIC Museum in Joseph is open to visitors. If you can't travel to this remote part of Oregon, you can see a collection of videos, photographs, and oral history interviews on the MHIC website at www.maxvilleheritage.org. Early on, Trice captured on video some of the former residents of Maxville; Oregon Public Broadcasting ran an episode of *Oregon Experience* called "The Logger's Daughter," which features some of those interviews.¹⁴

Says Trice, "When I arrived here . . . , nobody was interested in the Maxville story. . . . But now we've got a museum in the middle of Joseph and we're loved! In summer, we get hundreds of visitors every month. America is changing, doggonit!"¹⁵

Silas Lobnibe is a recent graduate of the University of Oregon School of Journalism and Communication. He is a legislative assistant to State Senator Akasha Lawrence Spence and serves on the Maxville Heritage Interpretive Center's board of directors. Mary Oberst currently serves on the Oregon

Geographic Names Board and the Oregon Encyclopedia editorial board.

NOTES

1. Most of the information in this column derives from three sources: the MHIC website, which includes oral histories and photographs, <https://www.maxvilleheritage.org/our-story>; *The Oregon Encyclopedia*, which includes entries on the Ku Klux Klan and Maxville, www.oregonencyclopedia.org; and S. Renee Mitchell, "Reaching Back for Truth," *Oregon Humanities*, August 24, 2017, <https://www.oregonhumanities.org/this-land/stories/reaching-back-for-truth/>.
2. Kayla Tunstall, "Maxville: The Town of Oregon's African American Loggers," *Filson Journal*, <https://www.filson.com/blog/profiles/maxville-the-town-of-oregons-african-american-loggers/>; see also Jack Reid, "I Wanted to Get Up and Move," *Forest History Today*, Spring/Fall 2016, 6–7.
3. Oregon voters passed the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868. Greg Nokes, "Black Exclusion Laws in Oregon," *The Oregon Encyclopedia*, https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/exclusion_laws/.
4. Robert R. McCoy, "The Paradox of Oregon's Progressive Politics: The Political Career of Walter Marcus Pierce," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 110, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 390–419.
5. Tunstall, "Maxville."
6. Alan Dale Victor, interview by Gwendolyn Trice, date unknown, transcript on Maxville Heritage Center website, <https://www.maxvilleheritage.org/oral-history-collection/alene-dale-victor>. His name is sometimes spelled Alen, as it is in the interview.
7. Ester Wilfong Jr., interview by Gwendolyn Trice, date unknown, transcript on Maxville Heritage Center website <https://www.maxvilleheritage.org/oral-history-collection/ester-wilfong-jr-maxville-elder-interview>.
8. Quoted in Tony Perrottet, "The End of the Trail," *Smithsonian Magazine*, May 2021, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/travel-guidebook-oregon-past-present-180977454/> (accessed February 4, 2022).
9. Perrottet, "The End of the Trail."
10. Grace Murray, "Defiance and Diversity in a Forgotten Oregon Ghost Town," *Daily Emerald*, January 12, 2021, https://www.dailyemerald.com/arts-culture/defiance-and-diversity-in-a-forgotten-oregon-ghost-town/article_f2f8d270-5485-11eb-801d-d7485bdf4d6f.html.
11. Steve Tool, "Saving Maxville Cabin," *Daily Astorian*, December 7, 2018, https://www.dailyastorian.com/news/local/saving-maxville-cabin/article_54281f2c-098f-55ce-a39a-c89748a1f5bc.html (accessed February 4, 2022).
12. For more on Outdoor School, see <https://friendsofoutdoorschool.org/statewide-ods> and <https://friendsofoutdoorschool.org/what-is-outdoor-school>.
13. Murray, "Defiance and Diversity."
14. Program available at <https://www.opb.org/television/programs/oregonexperience/article/the-loggers-daughter-/>.
15. Perrottet, "The End of the Trail."