



Blaine

Story and photographs by Michael Hofferber

"Put your hand over your heart when you say that," Mildred Davy said when asked about her home town.

Mrs. Davy, whose familiar voice has graced the radio receivers of Tillamook County residents for 20 years, hails from a tiny village which lies upon the upper reaches of the Nestucca River at the point where Moon Creek and East Creek and Limestone Creek merge with the main tributary. The place is called Blaine, named after a Republican candidate for the presidency who ran in 1892, James G. Blaine.

Mrs. Davy's father, Fred Burke, was an avid outdoorsman, she said, who loved to hunt and fish the streams and hills of Tillamook County. He and a few of his cronies would frequently make the trip from Portland, where the family originally lived, to partake in his favorite sport. When the government opened up lands in the area around what is now Blaine to homesteading in 1910, he took advantage of the opportunity and moved the family into Tillamook County.

"He announced to his wife that they were moving to a homestead," Mrs. Davy said and explained that her mother, who was used to the conveniences of Portland life, didn't know what a homestead was, let alone the kind of lifestyle that would be waiting for them in Blaine. "My father said to her, 'You order enough staples to last for six months.' And then they moved."

Mrs. Davy was born a year later in Portland after her mother received special permission from the government to leave the homestead unattended while she delivered her child, and for the next five years was reared in Blaine. Her father, a plumber by trade, rode his bicycle into Tillamook where he worked each week, and then rode back home to spend the weekend. "We used to walk down to the bottom of the hill to meet him when he came home," she remembered.

After the requisite five years on the homestead, the family sold their property and moved in to Tillamook, Mrs. Davy explained, "because Blaine is a great place to raise kids and nothing else."

The family frequently returned to Blaine for visits with friends and neighbors from those early days, Mrs. Davy fondly remembers, and she still speaks reverently of her first home.



The Burkes' story is similar to most who found their way into this southeastern corner of Tillamook County. It is similar to the story of the William Smith family, among the earliest settlers in the valley.

While Mildred Davy is probably the most notable and recognizable native of the Blaine community in modern times, Smith, who lived from 1841 to 1895, had the greatest influence upon it. It is he who, with the founding of the first post office in the area in 1892, gave the village its name. Blaine, an ex-senator from Maine and a Secretary of State, was a popular candidate for president in that same year and the small Oregon town became his namesake.

Smith, who served as a gunners mate on the USS Great Western in the Civil War, moved west by covered wagon with his young wife in 1873 and settled near Spokane, Washington. Thirteen years and five children later, health problems forced him to abandon the grain farm he'd established and move to a plot of timbered land on the Nestucca River.

The Smith family lived in tents that first year while timber was being cut to build a log cabin. A sawmill

was set up on the riverbank and a home was carved out of the douglas fir wilderness.

"He made that country up there," Nellie Ayer, William Smith's 96-year-old daughter, remembered of her father. Being only five years old when the family first settled on the Nestucca and only ten when her father died in 1895, her memories of those early days are faint and precious, but she said with obvious pride and respect that Smith "was the best man that ever lived." Today five generations of his descendants are living and working and carrying on his line in that same Nestucca River valley.

"If there was a flower around I'd find it," Nellie Ayer said of her childhood in Blaine. She grew up among trees and hillsides, horses and oxen, salmon and clean, fresh air. She attended a school that was built there in the community and married Earl Reuben Ayer, a young man who had moved into Blaine with his family by covered wagon from Colorado.

Earl Ayer, like William Smith, served as postmaster in Blaine beginning in 1920. After he died in 1937, his widow took over the position and ran it another 18 years before she "had to retire" at the age of 70.



The mail was first brought by foot from Beaver, Mrs. Ayer recalled, and later came by horseback. In the last few years before the post office was discontinued there in 1956, it came by truck or car.

Blaine has changed some with the passing of the years. Its population has fluctuated back and forth and the logging in the area has changed the face of the land.

"There was a time when I was young when the hills were just full of people," Alma Spidell, daughter of Nellie Ayer, said. The people were living off the land, she recalled. They had cows and chickens and pigs, and they would peel bark and sell it and make part of their living in that way.

During the Depression years, though, it seemed like everyone was gone, she remembered. The government bought up the homesteads and the land that the people had worked on and the population decreased dramatically.

Today the people are back again. A lot of people have built summer homes in the area, she pointed out.

May and Frank Larrew, originally from Missouri, were the first Mennonite people to move into the Nestucca River Valley. The date was Oct. 15, 1925. They lived in a 12 by 18 foot log cabin that had no windows, and their only furniture consisted of a homemade bed, a table, chest, a few chairs, and a stove.

Others followed after them, including Jake Kaufmann, who moved to Beaver from Kansas in 1945, and then to Blaine in 1947. He became the first pastor of the Blaine Mennonite Church, and has been leading weekly services of prayer and song for more than 30 years. The white frame church was built in 1952 after services had been held in the old schoolhouse for several years.

In those thirty years Kaufmann has seen a lot of changes in Blaine, but a lot has also remained the same. "There used to be a lot of small saw mills in the area," he said, "and quite a few small dairies. But the dairymen either had to get bigger or get out, and a lot



of them got out."

"I don't think there's more people here today than there ever was," Kaufmann said, "but I think there's more homes. There was a time when there were many more children than there are now."

Of those who live year-round in Blaine today, most either commute out to work in the timber industry, the plug mill in Tillamook or elsewhere. Others are retired or semi-retired, and a few still try to make their living from the land with cattle and light farming.

The major change to the area has been the addition of summer homes. Before land-use planning forbade the practice, much of the dairy land was being subdivided and sold in smaller lots for cabins, weekend retreats, mobile homes. Today the building boom has abated, but the number of homes still outnumbers the permanent residents.

The post office and the grocery store are closed, the schools that once dotted the country have all consolidated, the cheese factory that once operated beside East Creek is no more, and the loggers who cleared the nearby forests have moved on to other stands and a new growth of fir is flowing over the hillsides. What remains is a pleasant, peaceful valley, a cool, clear stream that supports annual runs of salmon and steelhead, and a residual population of those early settlers who homesteaded here. "Jake, you live in a park," Kaufmann's brother from Kansas told him when he visited a few years ago.

Kaufmann and his wife have raised their children in Blaine, beside the Nestucca River that dances its way to the ocean. They watched them hunt in the surrounding hills, fish from the streams, and swim in the river. It's a pleasant enough place to live, they agree.

"We're protected from the winds," Kaufmann said. "We don't get the strong winds or storms you get in Tillamook or other places."

"I had a man up here doing some logging for me once who told me this valley was the most beautiful of all the ones he'd ever seen," Kaufmann said. "I don't know what's so special about this place, that makes this valley different from any other. But we do seem to get more sun."

Almost as if on cue, the thin cover of clouds parted, allowing beams of sunlight to spray across the wet and gleaming hillsides, reflecting sparkles across the surface of the Nestucca River, and warming the hides of cattle grazing solemnly in green pastures.

"Put your hand over your heart...."

