

Maxville Heritage Interpretive Center

Telling the Story of African Americans in Wallowa, Oregon

by Gwendolyn Trice

THE TOWN OF MAXVILLE, Oregon, is no more. But during Maxville's heyday, between 1924 and 1933, its population exceeded four hundred — the largest town in Wallowa County at the time.

Maxville was a timber town built by the Bowman-Hicks Lumber Company. Loggers and their families came to Maxville from all over the South and Midwest. Many were African Americans. They came to Oregon when exclusion laws were in effect and when the governor, Walter M. Pierce, had close ties to the Ku Klux Klan.¹ African American families in Maxville lived in segregated conditions, attended segregated schools, and played on the segregated baseball teams — but photographs show that they worked together with white loggers in the woods. When the logging operation ceased in the early 1930s due to the Great Depression, the company

closed the town. Bowman-Hicks Lumber Company dismantled most of the houses and moved them to the town of Wallowa for houses or shops and pulled up its railroad tracks, and the town of Maxville virtually disappeared. Some residents resettled in Wallowa, but some lingered at Maxville, working in the timber industry until the mid 1940s, when a severe winter storm collapsed most of the remaining structures.²

The story of Maxville is the backdrop for the Maxville Heritage Interpretive Center (MHIC), which I founded in 2008. I am the daughter of a Maxville African American logger, Lucky Trice, and I worked with Oregon Public Broadcasting (OPB) to tell the story of my search for his history in an *Oregon Experience* program, “The Logger’s Daughter.”³ Through the MHIC, I am working to make Maxville come alive again.



Maxville women and children pose for a photograph in the late 1920s. The ease and comfort among these people indicates that their segregated housing and schools did not prevent friendships from forming.

MHIC collects, preserves, and interprets the history of the logging community of Maxville as well as that of similar communities throughout the West. Other logging operations, such as the Mt. Emily Lumber Company in La Grande, Oregon, relied on Indian, Japanese, and Greek workers. The mission of the MHIC is to serve Oregon and the greater Pacific Northwest by preserving resources and providing information and education about this little-known chapter of the American experience.

The elder residents of Wallowa still remember their neighbors in Maxville. Partnering with the MHIC, they engage in the Annual Maxville Gathering to build awareness and promote education about this cultural resource,

the MHIC. Thanks to another partnership with Forest Capital Partners, LLC, which owns the original Maxville town site, the Annual Maxville Gathering now occurs during the third week of August each year. Community members and heritage organizations volunteer time, resources, and materials. Local businesses, agencies, clubs, and the community provide donations, in-kind support, and artisan work.

Each year, the Annual Maxville Gathering features a guest speaker to invoke a new perspective on the history of the vanished town and the time in which it existed. The guest speaker this August 18, 2012, is Dr. Melissa Stuckey, assistant professor of History at the University of Oregon. Stuckey is an innovative and insightful speaker

who will provide a retrospective look into Oregon's exclusion laws. The Annual Gathering is not complete without historical logging demonstrations, good local music, tours of the site, local food, a silent auction, kids' booths, and adult games and activities. The Maxville site is located about thirteen miles north of Wallowa. Although the town itself was long ago dismantled, some structures can still be identified by longtime residents of Wallowa.

While the Annual Maxville Gathering is the signature event of the MHIC, the MHIC also has developed traveling exhibits for youth enrichment. As funding grows, educational kits will

become available to school districts and historical institutions.

The story of Maxville continues to revive itself in other ways, too. Graduate students in Oregon State University's rural studies program are offered an annual educational tour of the area surrounding Maxville, and the archaeology of the area is under study. National Park Service archaeologist Dr. Doug Wilson, in a partnership with Portland State University, provided an anthropology class curriculum: "Historical Archaeology and the Origins of the Modern Pacific Northwest: Maxville Logging Camp Group Project."⁴ A 2012 historical record-collection project is under discussion by University of



The Maxville Heritage Interpretive Center includes displays such as this one, showing some of the tools the loggers used daily and combining images with artifacts, oral history vignettes, and maps. A home exhibit complete with a heritage quilt in the background is accented with the tongue-and-groove walls from a donated historic cook car.

Idaho's historical archaeologist Mark Warner and MHIC.

And thanks to a grant from The Kinsman Foundation, a musical play about Maxville, *On to Higher Ground*, is being written by Marv Ross, award-winning musician and playwright. The fictional story about Maxville is based on first-hand historical accounts, transcripts, and research, and is designed to build awareness of this local history and promote engaging interaction and professionally facilitated discussion. (The MHIC is excited to announce a sneak preview of the play with musical guests Janice Scroggins and Linda Hornbuckle, on Thursday, October 25, 2012, in Portland. Check the MHIC web site for details, www.maxvilleheritage.org.)

Like many rural areas in Oregon, Wallowa County has faced significant economic hardships. The small town of Wallowa has been particularly hard hit — its grocery store and mill both closed recently. In contrast, the MHIC and its programs create renewed energy and enthusiasm in this corner of Oregon. All programs sponsored by the MHIC are run by community



This uniform was recreated based on a photograph from the R.D. McMillan Collection at the Maxville Heritage Interpretive Center.

volunteers and with the support of local businesses. The MHIC speaks to the community's social worth and its connection to place. This cultural connection roots community members to each other through a common experience. Visitors from around the globe express this sentiment with comments in the MHIC guest book.

NOTES

1. Article I, §35, of the Oregon state constitution provided that "no free negro, or mulatto, not residing in this State at the time of the adoption of this Constitution [1857], shall come, reside, or be within this State, or hold any real estate, or make any contracts, or maintain any suit therein." That provision was repealed by a vote of the citizens in 1926. Pierce's ties to the KKK are detailed in Robert R. McCoy, "The Paradox of Oregon's Progressive Politics:

The Political Career of Walter Marcus Pierce" *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 110:3 (Fall 2009): 390–419.

2. Oral histories filmed and collected by the author, 2003 to 2010.

3. See www.opb.org/programs/oregonexperience/programs/19-The-Loggers-Daughter.

4. See http://www.maxvilleheritage.org/CEDocuments/Downloads_GetFile.aspx?id=379838&fd=0.