

Gilchrist, Oregon: An Ideal Company Town in Transition

When I saw that the theme of this year's conference was to be "Constructing Community: Architecture, Diversity, and Identity in the Pacific Northwest," it seemed to me that a re-examination of the company town of Gilchrist, Oregon, would be appropriate.

Nearly 25 years ago at the annual meeting of this group in Walla Walla, Washington, I presented an initial report on Gilchrist. In the interim, a great deal has changed in Gilchrist, as with so many other towns once wholly owned and operated by a single company. So the title of this presentation is "Gilchrist, Oregon: An Ideal Company Town in Transition."

Fortunately for those living and working in Gilchrist, the town continues to exist, unlike many others in Oregon. What was not known to me when I visited and photographed Gilchrist in 1993 was that the town was then at its architectural and social apogee. Today I want to update the ongoing story of this small, idealistic company town,

because the original cohesion of its social structure and the uniformity of its architectural character, representing the last and arguably the best of the company-owned model industrial communities in Oregon, has largely been undone during the past quarter century.

To speak of *planned* lumber communities in the Pacific Northwest is almost an oxymoron. Industrial communities in the American west have been preponderantly based on *extractive* processes, and the history of American lumbering industry, almost up until the last decade, has been to cut over, and then to move on to new areas. It made little sense to most company owners to build elaborate communities, replete with social services and architectural amenities, when, in a few years, the trees would be gone. Only the most necessary perfunctory accommodations were usually provided, and the workers were often physically isolated from other employers or industries.

As seen in these maps, the North American continent was once blanketed in trees from Maine to Louisiana, and with particularly dense stands in the Rockies and Cascade mountains. Early in the eighteenth

century, serious commercial cutting of New England's forests began the depletion of this old growth. By the early part of the nineteenth century, these lumbering industries had grown into large commercial enterprises, and by mid-nineteenth century, the established Eastern lumbering families had clear-cut so much of the landscape that to survive as businesses they had to relocate to the upper mid-west, to northern Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. Here the same process was repeated; the gently rolling forested landscapes were stripped of trees that in turn became the lumber used to build Detroit, Chicago, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, and hundreds of other cities.

As the large old-growth trees of these Midwest forests were depleted, some lumbering families then looked south and west to as-yet largely untouched stands of trees. For example, at this time, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, Frederick Weyerhaeuser, who had made great sums of money in the forests of Minnesota and Wisconsin, sent agents to the Pacific Northwest to purchase large expanses of heavily forested land. Hence, serious large-scale forest exploitation in the

Pacific Northwest did not really begin until the *end* of the nineteenth century.

A great many of these western tree-felling settlements were hardly more than rough camps. One way of dealing with the problem of the trees disappearing around the camp was simply not to *build* a fixed conventional town. Many lumber camps had their small buildings erected on skids so they could be hauled to new sites when the surrounding trees were depleted. Similarly, other camps had dining halls, sleeping rooms, and other facilities built in box cars, so that when the trees were cut away the rail line would be extended into an uncut forested area and the "town" simply rolled to the new location. One locally famous example was the peripatetic town of Shevlin, Oregon, which, despite having a post office, remained hardly more than two years in the same place. Finally, in 1951, when the ever-moving "town" was situated about 3 miles east of present-day Lapine, Oregon, and with all the trees gone (so far as economic purposes were concerned), the

post office was officially closed, the “town” hauled away, and Shevlin ceased to exist.

Even seemingly permanent lumber towns vanished. One example in Oregon was Valsetz, created roughly 20 miles west of Salem by the Cobbs and Mitchell Company in 1919. The company pushed up the Luckiamute River deep into the Coast Range to an isolated valley where it built the town of Valsetz, the name a contraction of the company-owned Valley and Siletz Railroad. The rail line and a single gravel road were all that connected Valsetz to the outside world. The road through the town proper, neatly laid out in the long narrow valley, was roughly three-quarters of a mile in length and lined by trim houses. In the 1920s, the population numbered about 300, peaking around 1950 at nearly 1,000, with 260 men in the mill and another 125 logging the forests.¹ A general store, a school, and a combination recreation hall/Post Office were the only facilities provided by the company, but the community proved stable and many people who grew up there found they cherished the solitude and the near-absence of crime. But

after 1960, with the reduction of good timber and the slowdown of lumber production, the population dropped to 300 people. By the early 1980s, the old growth timber was gone and the new owner, Boise-Cascade, closed the mill. It proved a wrenching experience for the expelled residents, one of whom remarked sadly that the company had once been "like our father."² In 1984, all the buildings were knocked down, the mill deliberately set ablaze, the debris then bulldozed away, and the land replanted with tree shoots awaiting a new harvest in around eighty years. The rail line and even the gravel road were removed, so that current maps of the region show nothing at all. The vital commodity was the trees; the people were expendable.

The cases of Shevlin and Valzetz reveal a callous lack of concern on the part of at least some owners for creating among their employees a sense of identification with place, a sense of connectedness, a sense of being "at home." There were, however, a few notable exceptions in the Pacific Northwest, and among the most intriguing, and arguably the best, as well as the last, was Gilchrist, Oregon, built by the Gilchrist

family in 1937-38. Lying astride U.S. Highway 97, Gilchrist is nearly 50 miles south of Bend and not quite 100 miles north of Klamath Falls. It was created by Frank W. Gilchrist, the company president, the end result of the family's century and a half of activity in the lumber business.

Gilchrist's great-grandfather, Albert, had begun lumbering in 1850, first in New Hampshire, and then in Michigan. His son, Frank William, greatly enlarged operations in Michigan, and then, with business associates, expanded even further into Wisconsin, southern Illinois, Tennessee, and then, in 1907, into Laurel, Mississippi. But as early as 1902, Frank William Gilchrist began sending out scouts to purchase old-growth timberlands in central Oregon. His son, Frank R., continued this forward-looking investment, acquiring timberlands in northern California, eastern Oregon, and Idaho, and, by the time of his death in 1917, had accumulated a further 85,000 acres in the area around the future Gilchrist, Oregon.

Frank R.'s son, Frank W., only fourteen when his father died, worked in the Mississippi operation.³ As the business depression of the 1930s worsened, the Gilchrist company in Mississippi faced a problem, since Mississippi law virtually compelled the rapid clear cutting of woodlands so the land could be converted to farming. Accordingly, Frank W. Gilchrist and other company officials began closely examining their holdings in the west, and finally, in 1937, decided that they had to make a fresh start. The decision was made to move the entire company operation from Laurel, Mississippi, to Oregon, and to build a smaller mill. The company would also need to build a self-sufficient town for the workers, because distances to towns of any size were too great for commuting laborers, especially given the poor roads and that, at that time, few mill hands owned their own automobiles. So company officials decided to create a particularly attractive *permanent* residential community to correct the problems they had had with itinerant mill hands in Mississippi, where they had provided lumber *camps* such as this one near Laurel shown on the screen.⁴

Construction of the new town, to be named Gilchrist, began in April of 1938, and the first phase was completed by September before winter set in. The decision to hire Portland architect Hollis Johnston, working with Herman **Brookmann**, to design all the public buildings and all the residences in the new town, was a wise one, but the reason these architects were chosen seems not to be mentioned in any of the surviving records. The town was situated roughly in the middle of the 85,000 acres of Ponderosa pine owned by the company, and was divided into two zones cut through by Highway 97. The mill pond and the mill were on the west side of the highway, while the business and residential sections lay on the east side.

A simple grid, aligned with the highway, was developed by Johnston for the easterly residential half. At its center, and fronting the highway, was an organized cluster of commercial buildings, as well as the school, built by the WPA in 1939. Johnston's overall plan provided services and homes for an eventual maximum of 1,500 people, and his

goal was to create what one company official called "civic personality which promotes a spirit of respect and affection in the inhabitants."⁵

Included in the centermost complex of shops were a restaurant, cocktail lounge, barbershop, beauty shop, bowling alley, grocery store, theater, and post office. Most of the businesses were run by independent operators; only the town movie theater, gas station, and bowling alley were operated by the Gilchrist Company itself. All the business buildings were deliberately subdued in character, with a few details in cupolas and trim that suggest Johnston may have been looking at contemporary Scandinavian architecture. This is further emphasized by the painted Scandinavian-like stencil patterns (called "Swiss" by some observers) that embellish the commercial buildings.⁶

The most adventurous building architecturally was the movie theater, designed by Johnston in 1941. Behind the two business complexes is the school, with a separate apartment building to house the teachers.

In 1938, the first two- and three-bedroom houses were built; these were rented to employees at about \$25 per month. These photographs

of the first buildings were shot by Dorothea Lange for the Farm Security Administration. Provisions were made for the construction of more houses in later years, as needed, and a group of California-style bungalows built in 1951 finally brought the number of dwelling units to 140.⁷ The first houses filled rapidly in 1938, for more than half the Mississippi labor force decided to move to Oregon (it was noted that, fifty years ago, a person could still hear slight traces of a southern accent in Gilchrist). All the business buildings as well as the houses were painted a rich chocolate brown with cream-colored trim. The company also provided a three-man maintenance crew, whose jobs included completely repainting all buildings every five years.

The town of Gilchrist, whose population rose from 350 in 1940 to about 500 in 1988, had no elected government. Nonetheless, the *enlightened* paternalism practiced here differed from that which undercut so many other earlier industrial communities. The company eventually deeded 10 acres to Klamath County for the school site. Scrip was never issued to employees nor required in the town's shops,

although in tough times credit was liberally extended. And, in fact, there was only *one* strike that occurred in October, 1945, lasting six months, principally because Gilchrist employees felt obliged to side with the Wood Workers union which had called for a general strike in all the west coast lumber mills to obtain higher wages that had been frozen during World War Two. The response of Frank W. Gilchrist was to give employees vacation time, fearing that if he continued mill operation his employees would be injured by strong-arm union enforcers at the picket lines.

And, unlike so many other company towns of the past, Gilchrist was *not* dry. Complying with state statutes, the Gilchrist liquor store within the general store was operated by the state, while the cocktail lounge was leased to a private operator. The company also provided an office for a state patrol officer (said to be one of the most coveted posts among the State police). A building was also provided to Klamath County for a branch of the county public library. And the company

provided lots at no cost for the construction of three churches — Methodist, Roman Catholic, and Mormon.⁸

One reason so many workers and residents remained in Gilchrist so long is explained in part by economic advantages. In 1972, one millworker, Bud Koewn, with 14 years' experience with the company, was earning \$9,600 a year when rents for houses in the town peaked at \$85 per month. Even if Koewn paid this highest rate, his cost of housing would have represented only 10.6% of his gross income. Eleven years later, in 1983, the highest house rent had increased to only \$90 per month.⁹ No wonder that, for many young people in Gilchrist, the highest aspiration was to graduate from high school and go immediately into the mill.¹⁰ Writer John Driscoll's assessment in his essay of 1984 (coming at the end of a particularly serious recession in the northwest lumber industry) was that “in the 1980s, as was the case in the 1930s, the Gilchrist Timber Company is providing its employees with employment and inexpensive housing during a period when both are scarce.”¹¹

All this began to come to an end when Frank R. Gilchrist was gravely injured in an automobile accident in the winter of 1982. This personal tragedy was compounded by near-simultaneous changes in Oregon law regarding timber cutting versus animal habitat preservation. Longtime employees and family members who had helped operate and guide the company for nearly half a century died one after another, with the most serious loss occurring with the passing of Frank R. Gilchrist in early 1991. Increasingly the long-term practice of sustained logging on company timberlands proved difficult to continue under state and federal government regulations, so production in the sawmill declined. This step-by-step decline in the fortunes of Gilchrist and its inhabitants is well documented by a second book-length study by Driscoll published in 2012.

In 1990, the stockholders (who now greatly outnumbered members of the Gilchrist family) voted to sell the company. The sale to Crown Pacific, Incorporated, of Portland, Oregon, was finalized in

October of 1991, with the result that all the anxious employees were fired immediately.

Particularly problematic was that no property lines had ever been laid out between the homes, other buildings, and commercial properties in the town, since everything had been owned by the company. Nor was it precisely clear who owned what, and Crown Pacific was not eager to be the landlord. So, members of the Gilchrist family bought back the residential portion of the town east of the highway and continued as landlord, while Crown Pacific retained the timberlands and the mill facilities. During 1997-1998, as employee residents purchased their homes, the regular repainting of the houses a uniform “company brown” ceased. In 2000, operations in the sawmill changed when Crown Pacific upgraded machinery in the mill to handle smaller logs. Conditions in the town, and prospects for its future, changed again in 2003 when Crown Pacific filed for bankruptcy. Crown Pacific was then taken over by creditors in 2004, with the mill eventually sold

to the Canadian corporation Interfor Pacific in 2006, and the Ponderosa forests sold to Cascade Timberlands.

One proposal that held the promise of bringing prosperity back to Gilchrist was the idea of making the area a multi-faceted recreation destination to be called Crescent Creek Resort, with a lodge and restaurant surrounded by almost 2,000 new resort residences and 785 overnight rentals spread out across five and a half thousand acres. But this proposed dream evaporated in the stubborn recession beginning in 2008-2009. Cascade Timberlands, the agent in charge of creating this resort transition, remains convinced the proposal is still sound, but “the project is on hold until the economy turns around,” according to Linda Swearingen, a consultant working on the project.¹²

With the loss of Gilchrist-owned timberlands, and with lumber production greatly transformed by advances in technology requiring fewer operators, Gilchrist faces an uncertain future. Today, the unity of social purpose and of building design and maintenance within Gilchrist has largely disappeared. Sadly, like the romantic Camelot of the mythic

King Arthur that long ago receded and disappeared into the mists of time, Gilchrist has ceased to be a model company-owned, socially-united *community* of workers. A new life perhaps awaits the anticipated creation of the proposed resort community. And so – with apologies to Lerner and Loewe for this totally awkward new scansion – we might say today. . .

Don't let it be forgot

That once upon a crest,

For one brief, shining moment

There was the town of Gilchrist

Notes

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1. Portland *Oregonian*, November 21, 1954.
 2. Eugene *Register-Guard*, May 28, 1984.
 3. Information on the Gilchrist family and its extended history in the lumbering business is found in: John Driscoll, "Gilchrist, Oregon, A Company Town," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 85 (Summer 1984): 135-53; John C. Driscoll, *Gilchrist, Oregon: The Model Company Town* (Bend, OR: Maverick Publications, 2012; and Jim Fisher, *Gilchrist: The First Fifty Years* (Bend, Oregon, 1988)
 4. Allen Nacheman, "Company Town," *Columbus [Ohio] Dispatch*, May 12, 1972, 18a.
 5. Jim Fisher, *Gilchrist*, 20.
 6. Driscoll, "Gilchrist," 139, uses the descriptive phrase "using a modern Norwegian architectural style," but does not explain further, nor give any reasons why.
 7. Driscoll, "Gilchrist," OHS 139, 147.
 8. Allen Nacheman, "Company Town," 18a.
 9. Jane Seagrave, "Company Town Life Survives in Gilchrist " *Portland Oregonian*, 1983
 10. Driscoll, "Gilchrist," OHS, 152-53; Thoele, "Mill Town Takes Care of Its Own," c2
 11. Driscoll, "Gilchrist" OHS, p. 153.
 12. Jeremy Kang, "Mill Town Gilchrist Pines for Resort," *Portland Oregonian*, Mary 24, 2009, [online at http://www.oregonlive.com/news/index.ssf/2009/05/mill_town_gilchrist_pines_for.html]