

Fort Stevens Review

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Summer 2018

Three Issues: Winter, Spring, Summer

Fort Stevens And The World War I Spruce Production Division

by D. Lindstrom

2nd Lieutenant John Ferguson has not been forgotten. The spring issue left John wondering if he would get to the front and see some action, and as he was boarding a train, the terms of an armistice drawn up by the United States President Woodrow Wilson, were about to be signed by the Central Powers. The 2019 winter issue will bring John's story to a conclusion.

In the meantime, the summer issue takes up a fascinating aspect of the World War I story that took place in the Pacific Northwest and in several respects, albeit minor, involved Fort Stevens. That story revolves around the United States Army Spruce Production Division. The short story is that from locations in Alaska, Washington State, Oregon and California, the US Army was sent in to log spruce for airplane lumber. Before the United States entered the Great War, Great Britain and France were in constant need of spruce lumber to build airplane frames which were then covered with fabric. They couldn't get enough of it. Once the United States entered the war the problem became desperate.

As in most eras of American history, the leadup to the nation's entrance into the war was filled with debate, conflict, and in certain quarters, animosity. A major player in this drama was the Industrial Workers of the World, or sometimes known as the Wobblies (no one seems to know why). This was a nationwide organization of low wage industrial

workers, loggers, unskilled laborers, immigrants, and women. Their ideology was a mix of socialism, communism, anarchy, and a longing for better treatment from industrial tycoons and lumber barons. They were vocal, conducted strikes, committed sabotage, engaged in street violence, and alarmed many. The IWW was particularly active in the Northwest: Washington State and Oregon. In 1916 several boat loads of Wobblies from Seattle traveled up Pudge Sound to Everett to conduct a protest. They had guns. The local sheriff and a group of deputized men met them at the water front, with guns. Shots ensued, and an unknown number of Wobblies were killed as were several of the sheriff's men. The exact number of deaths has never been determined. History calls it the "Everett Massacre."

The War Department became alarmed because Northwest lumbermen were reporting work stoppages, sabotage of equipment, and workers refusal to meet production goals. The IWW was demanding an eight hour work day, better food, improved sanitation, and proper sleeping quarters. Plus, they opposed the war. Then, in 1917 there was the general strike. Consequently, America's friends fighting in Europe were not getting the spruce they needed for manufacturing their aircraft and with the United States about to enter the war, the situation became intolerable. So, when drastic

conditions demand drastic action, what do you do? You send in the Army.

An army officer was sent in to Washington and Oregon to spy out the situation and to offer solutions. The purpose of the Army wasn't to round up the Wobblies, much to their credit, but to bring order to the work of the woods. The Spruce Production Division set up shop in the Yeon building in downtown Portland, Oregon. Thousands of soldiers were sent into the woods to build mostly temporary logging railroads and plank roads, operate the latest in trucks and other vehicles. They innovated the fastest way to cut logs, then loaded them on railroad cars for daily shipment to the Army depot at Vancouver, Washington for final milling. Then the lumber was shipped to airplane factories at home and abroad.



Moving out the spruce on Railroad No. 9, Clatsop District, Clatsop County, Oregon.

Overall, the division eventually boasted of 30,000 officers and men. They were assigned to over 200 camps along the coasts of Washington and Oregon. The soldiers worked along the side of civilians, many of whom were former Wobblies. Throughout the entire operation, Ward Tonsfeldt writes that spruce production probably increased from 1,500,000 board feet a month to 23,000,000 board feet a month...an astounding achievement.

Clatsop County, home to Fort Stevens, was a major player in the spruce production project. Not far from Fort Stevens and north of Seaside, the Spruce Division constructed Railroad No. 9 from the SP&S rail line to a point south and east of town (logging railroads were numbered consecutively

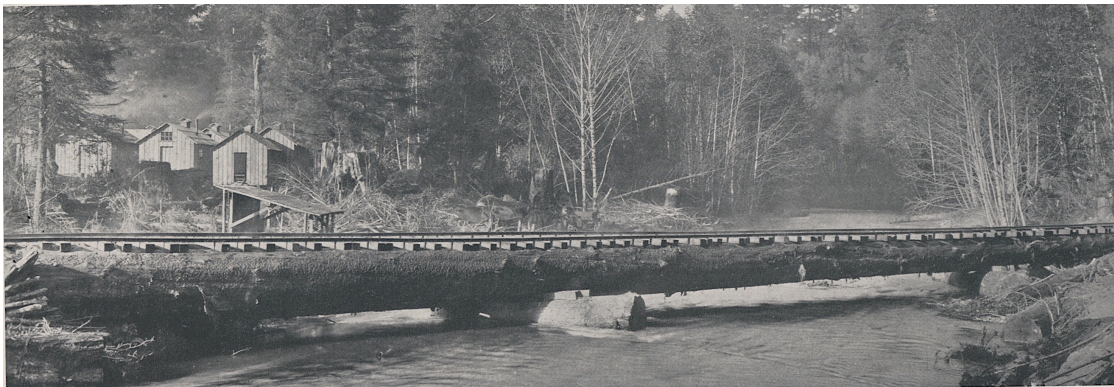
from Washington's Olympic Peninsula down to Coos Bay, Oregon). Rail spurs and camps were established. Marshal Hanft noted that by early 1918 about 750 troops were in Clatsop District logging camps and shortly thereafter they quadrupled in size.

What of Fort Stevens? Marshal Hanft notes that dispensary surgeons at the forest camps in the "Clatsop District, Spruce Production Division," regularly sent their patients to the Fort Stevens hospital. Then there was Seaside, that little town down a ways from the fort. The Fort Commander was obligated to furnish guards down there with special instructions: "To suppress and to report any actions of coast artillery soldiers in the way of annoying men of the Spruce Production Division." Hanft wrote that the colonel had, "unbiased reports of harassment of this kind, especially toward the Spruce Production Division military police." The Spruce Division men always had to prove that they were real American soldiers and not just avoiding the shooting war overseas.

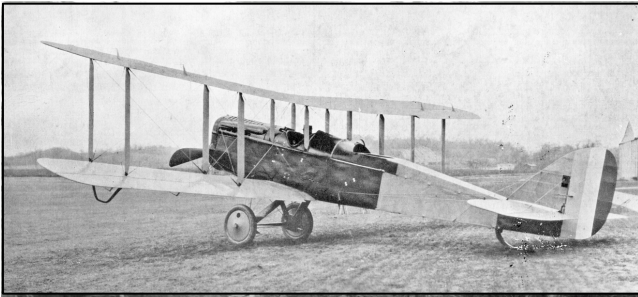
Through the Army's efforts, civilian workers joined the four L's (Loyal Legion of Loggers and Lumbermen) which remained the working code for timber workers right up to the second world war. The code established the eight hour work day, clean camps, decent food, and for those times, good sanitary conditions.

The whole enterprise lasted fifteen months. Once the armistice ending the Great War was signed on November 11, 1918 production abruptly stopped. The camps were taken down, railroads were dismantled, equipment including locomotives, rail cars, rails, railroad ties, donkey engines, vehicles, rigging, cables, etc. were taken to the Vancouver, Washington Army depot and sold off as surplus. Again, a remarkable achievement.

For those readers who want to learn more about this oft forgotten story, the internet has a large amount of information and photographs concerning it.



Improvised railroad bridge crossing the Lewis & Clark River, Clatsop District, Clatsop county, Oregon. Note the logging camp in the background. (Photos on this page from "Spruce Helped Win The War," 1918.)



DeHAVILLAND BI-PLANE-LIBERTY MOTOR
"Eyes for the Army and bombing enemy facilities to annihilate the enemy" made possible by the Spruce Production Division, United States Army.



1918, 500 soldiers and civilians stand at Retreat. From the notations on the photo, the scene is of Camp 1F, Clatsop, Oregon. (Oregon Historical Society Photo)



Oregon Historical Society Photo



Seaside Museum and Historical Society Photo

Both the photos were taken at the Seaside, Oregon fishing pier located off of 2nd Avenue alongside of the present day Seaside Aquarium. To the left, soldiers are watching a spruce log splitting contest. To the right, the soldiers are waiting for a tug-of-war contest to begin. A companion photo in a private collection (not available) shows the actual tug-of-war contest. It is safe to assume that the soldiers were a mix of Coast Artillery men from Fort Stevens and Spruce Production Division men. This would be especially true of the photo to the right.



1918, US Army harvesting Spruce for WWI airplanes. Clatsop County, Oregon (OHS photo)

IMPORTANT UPDATE ON THE BATTERY PRATT PROJECT



Some of our long time readers will recall that FOOFS, in cooperation with Fort Stevens State Park, funded the construction of a life size replica of the type of 6-inch disappearing gun that was emplaced at Battery Pratt. We hasten to add that the project was actually the sole work of Jack Buckmeir, a longtime director on the FOOFS board. From line drawings he was able to fabricate the gun tube and its carriage. Sadly, he passed away in 2016, and the work stopped. His widow and FOOFS board president, Terri Buckmeir, has connected with Rob Heller who has the talent, equipment, and desire to finish the project. By finishing, FOOFS means that in the end the barrel will actually raise into firing position just as the original one did and through innovative means retract again. Rob is enthusiastic about the project and believes it will be finished in a year or less.

In cooperation with Rob Heller, FOOFS is promoting a fund raising campaign. Any contribution, \$10.00, \$100.00, \$1,000.00 or any amount in between will be devoted solely to the project. No funds will be used for administrative costs. Contributions can be sent to the FOOFS address or better yet, make one online by entering tacticalordnance.com and clicking on the Battery Pratt Project link.