

The Town is Named

Sisters was established in the late 1800's at the intersection of the two cross-Cascade wagon roads. By the mid-1880's there were about 20 families in town and the post office was moved from Camp Polk to the John J. Smith Store, located just north of town on Camp Polk Road. Patrons of the new post office were invited to submit names. Jacob N. Quiberg proposed the name "Three Sisters". The postal department, however, eliminated the "Three" and gave the new post office the name Sisters. In 1901 the actual town of Sisters was plated. ¹

Through the Eyes of The Press

"There are two good stores, a hotel, blacksmith's shop, saloon, real estate office, livery barn and a splendid school house costing \$1800. A short distance from town is a fine lumber mill. The larger store in town is owned by Smith and Wilt. The company carries a \$5000 stock of groceries, hardware, harness, stationery, a small drug department, *etc.* The townsite belongs to this firm. The only other store in town is owned by Alex Smith. A large stock of some \$4000 of gents' furnishings, boots, shoes, and dry goods is carried. The years business aggregates to about \$1200. Real estate has been changing hands so frequently of late that an office has been opened..."

The Prineville Herald, November 1904

"...a good lively town with sawmills that are immediately surrounding this pretty little town to be busy all of the time supplying lumber for the bridges on the Oregon Trunk Railroad between Madras and Bend. In addition, the mill of Roberts Bros. (two miles south of Sisters) is loading from 10 to 15 teams every day for the homesteaders who can be found in numbers in the territory west of the Deschutes River. The stores are well stocked and every house in Sisters is occupied."

Crook County Journal, November 1910

"Sisters without doubt has the prettiest location for a town in Central Oregon. Sisters too, dreams of a railroad and its final coming is inevitable for the millions of feet of timber surrounding must and will be demanded, bringing with it factories and greater prosperity. The proposed line is across the mountains from Eugene. From a single store of a few years ago, this little city now has over a dozen places of business. The country adjacent is becoming thickly settled and has united in boosting Sisters by an annual fair, showing the results of their farming activities. A glad hand and smile of hospitality is always ready in Sisters and the 'eats' of its hotels are becoming noted throughout the country."

Crook County Journal, May 18, 1916

Town History

Early Buildings

The Sisters Jail

“Sisters had a jail house; it stood near where the Hardy Allen house stands today. There were pine thickets in that area. The jail was just about big enough to hold one man. The Indians, and Gypsies camped in that area when they came to town”²

“We were actually mentioned in ‘Ripley’s Believe It or Not’ for having the only known jail that never housed a prisoner. The tiny jail was constructed of two-by-six foot boards. Town blacksmith Hardy Allen fashioned the door from spokes of old iron buggy wheels....It was quite a jail...Kids used to play in it, and there was one old guy who kept his horses in there during the winters.”³

The School

In 1912 a new school, which was to serve the community for 42, years was built. This was a six room structure. For several years only two rooms were used for class rooms. Two teachers were employed. One teacher taught the first six grades and the other the seventh, eighth and the first two years of high school....In the early years this building was in use there was a long shed in the rear. Children who came from a distance rode horseback or came in a buggy. They tied their horses in the shed and there the horses stood all day.⁴

The First Sisters Library

In 1938, the Sisters Civic Club, composed of a group of Sisters’ women, decided that it was time to have a special building in which to house the library books. Up to this time the Deschutes County Library left books at one of the stores and the proprietor of the store was responsible for the books being returned to the Deschutes County Library and returned in good condition. Mrs. George Aitken, who kept the books in the drug store for a time, recalls how much trouble this was. She said that when a book was lost or not returned to the store she paid the County Library for the loss of the book out of her own pocket. She was not paid for her trouble in handling the books, either.⁵

Life in Sisters

First Automobile Over the Santiam

J.L. Nye had an interesting experience on January 20, 1905, when he looked up and saw a “strange contraption” of iron and tin approaching, which came swiftly and had an ugly snort to it. What was it? The gate keeper had never been called on before to let an animal like this through the gate. Then the thing came to a stop, the driver approached and offered to pay toll. The keeper looked the thing over and then consulted his toll sheet. He, also, noted that horses and all other animals had given this rig all of the road. After pondering for a few minutes, he told the driver that he would have to classify his outfit as a ‘road hog’, and since such animals were not mentioned on his toll sheet, he would have to pass him through the same as other hogs, at the 3 cents rate. (This automobile,

belong to Dwight B. Huss and called "old Scout" was the first one to cross the continent and the Santiam Pass.)⁶

Cache Creek Toll Station

The toll road ended 15 miles from Sisters and a 16-foot gate was erected across the road at Cache Creek. The gate was kept locked so that no one could pass through until he had paid the toll. Bob Booth was appointed the first gate keeper at Cache Creek in 1896.

There were a number of buildings at Cache Creek which were owned by the road company, to be used by the toll gate keeper as he saw fit. The toll keeper was paid \$45.00 a month, which was not enough to support a family, so often a small store and meals and logging were supplied by the toll keeper.⁷

Early Mail Delivery

George Scott was toll gate keeper for five years (1906-1911). Two years of that time he had the mail route between Cascadia and Sisters, which was a distance of 64 miles. He hired George Wilson of Sisters, to carry the mail. George, who was barely 16 years old, left Sisters at 6 a.m. sharp. He rode horseback to Cache Creek, ate breakfast, changed horses, and rode to Fish Lake. Here he ate lunch, changed horses and rode to Cascadia. The mail was carried in locked saddle bags similar to those that were carried by pony express riders years before. The bags could not be opened until Cascadia was reached, as the postmaster were the only ones who had keys. George Wilson stayed all night at Cascadia, left a 6 o'clock sharp the next morning. Since mail was delivered just once a week, George stayed all night at Sisters, then rode back to Cache Creek to spend the rest of the week working for Scott.

It is interesting to note how George Scott became toll gate keeper. He had a timber claim near Holly which he traded to Bob Booth (the previous toll gate keeper) for 60 acres, including part of what is now The Willows Ranch, the post office and store buildings combined in Sisters which was run by Alex Smith. Also included were a livery barn, wagon, horses, *etc.* in Sisters, plus the job as gate keeper of the Cache Creek toll gate. Scott sold the 60 acres to Ben Tone, the store to Newt Cobb and livery barn to Charlie Gist, but he kept the horses, wagons, *etc.*, and the job as gate keeper.⁸

Clearing the Street Before Snow Plows

"I remember in 1919, I was three years old, and it got down to zero and started to snow and when it stopped there was 4 feet of snow all over Central Oregon. John Dennis and Anthony Roach had about 8 teams of logging horses. They built a big V out of 2x12's - 6 ft high-and hooked 4 teams of horses on it and made a guy up the street. There was no gravel on the street but lots of mud in the spring."⁹

Fred Painter - Sisters' One-Man Police Department

Town History

In 1946, Sisters was a busy little town, trying to get back to normal after the end of World War II. That was the year Fred Painter came to Sisters as police chief. As a one-man police force, Painter found that he had his hands full. There were eight small sawmills right around Sisters running "full blast." The mill workers and the loggers all came to Sisters to party. "The loggers would come in town in droves."

"They had illegal gambling and everything here," recalls Painter. While there was no prostitution here, there was one woman who came through from Baker wanting to go into business, but I told her "the town was too small."

Painter also ran the water department and the street department as well as serving as watermaster for three months a year. Another of Fred's duties was to serve as official "greeter" for special visitors to town. One time, Governor Elmo Smith was stopping in Sisters. As Fred drove up to meet him, two kids were fighting in the street and right beside them two dogs were fighting. The kids looked up and quit fighting and the dogs looked up and they quit fight. "Gee," Governor Smith said, "when the police chief shows up, everyone quits fighting."¹⁰

World War II

In 1945, Mrs. L. Farleigh was the postmaster. The Farleighs furnished the post office boxes and installed them. In the midst of World War II many troops were in this area on maneuvers. Mrs. Farleigh recalls starting for the post office one morning and finding it surrounded by cannons. They dug fox holes around the area in a mock war. She remembers that they dug a fox hole in the Perit Huntington farm into which Huntington's prize bull fell.¹¹

State Basketball Champions

In 1930-31 Sisters had a midget basketball team with a weight limit of 125 pounds....because of the lack of extra men for another team the coach placed chairs around the gym. These were used as guards and the boys would pass around them. At that time there was no classification of schools according to size, so they played the big schools as well as the little ones in the area. Once they played a shut-out game of 29-0 against Madras. This midget team won the state championship that year, playing the final game of the season against the Sacred Heart Academy team of Portland, in Portland. They were written up in Ripley's "Believe it or Not" column in the Oregonian and for a time were known as the "Ripley" team. (Team member included: Guy and Willard Patterson, Homer and Howard Shaw, Lewis Woods, Carl South and David Zumwalt, Clyde T. Bonney coach).¹²

Automobiles Arrive

The Cyrus family owned the first car in the Cloverdale community and certainly one of the first in the Sisters area. Mrs. Cyrus owned the 160 acre homestead where the present Cloverdale school house now stands. This homestead was traded in 1911 for a Buick car and \$1800. At that time gasoline cost 50c a gallon at the Bob Smith store in Sisters. The gasoline was pumped with a

wooden hand pump from a 50-gallon steel barrel into a gallon measuring can. Then it was poured into the gas tank, a gallon at a time. The Buick made 12 miles to the gallon on the narrow crooked dirt roads. The price of gas was so high because it had to be freighted in by horse team.¹³

Social Life¹⁴

Ice Skating

The favorite skating place was the slough at the foot of McKinney Butte. This slough came from the overflow from Indian Ford Creek, which was originally named Slough Creek. The Huntington's pond was also a popular place for skating.

Charivari's

Marriages were marked by a charivari. Friends of the newly-married couple got together at night, each with a noise-maker of some kind. They surrounded the home where the young couple was staying and began their serenade. This lasted until the crowd was admitted to the house and served refreshments.

Dances

At first dances were held in homes, later in the hall above Smith's store. After this hall was converted to living quarters, dances were held above Hardy Allen's blacksmith shop. Children were bedded down on the benches surrounding the dance floor. Usually at midnight supper was served in the Gist Hotel next door. Oyster stew was the big deal on the supper menu. After a huge supper, dancing continued until the wee hours of the morning. Most of these dances were pretty lively affairs. Men disappeared from the hall by twos and threes and came back feeling their oats-or corn. Fights were not uncommon.

Huckleberrying

Another form of recreation, which was also work, was huckleberrying. Often several families went to the huckleberry patches together. They would camp for days, and sometimes the women canned the berries while in camp. Huckleberry dumplings was a favorite dessert. Little fruit was grown east of the Cascades in those days, and people depended on huckleberries and wild blackberries for most of their winter fruit.

Huckleberries grew abundantly around Big Lake, Hogg Rock and in patches on the McKenzie Pass just west of the summit. The Warm Springs Indians harvested huckleberries in the Mt. Jefferson area and peddled some of them in Sisters.

Skiing and Tobogganing

Skiing and tobogganing were popular winter sports. The Central Oregon Outdoor Club had a series of ski jumps constructed on a run just east of Windy Point on the McKenzie Highway. They also had a toboggan run just below the ski run. Many members skied on Sunday, as most people worked six days a week.

Town History

Sisters Fair & Rodeo

The Sisters Fair was held for 4 years from 1914-1917. It ended with the start of World War I and the beginning of a county fair held in Redmond. In addition, to the expected judging of produce and livestock a baby show was held and a baby clinic was run with a doctor brought from Portland.

"The fair grounds were near where the airport is located today. As I remember the fair was held for about two years, probably 1915-1916. There were horse races; there were always Indians there to race their ponies. The Indians were always bare legged and put their knees through a bellyband on the horses. (That will really hold a man on a horse.) ...You never heard the word 'cowboy'...The ones who rode the horses were called 'buckaroos' or 'Bronco Busters.' Bob Smith had a race horse he called Razzle Patch, the son of Dan Patch, that he had paid 1100 dollars for. Dan Patch held the world record in running at that time. Robert Smith and his brother Alex were the founders of Sisters. Bob Smith had a big sign in his yard that said "Home of Razzle Patch, son of Dan Patch."¹⁵

Rodeo History

Rodeo's have been held in Sisters for years, in different locations and with different sponsors. In 1910 bucking contests were held on an old ball diamond at Fir and Adams street. "No admission was charged, no entry fee and spectators watched from any safe point. A wild horse was snubbed to the saddle of one horseman. The contestant got on the wild horse... it was turned loose..." (and spectators hiked for the safest spots).¹⁶

About 1922 the rodeo was held in the vicinity of Main and Oak streets and sponsored by the Commercial Club. In 1941 or 1942 the rodeo moved to the old Creighton place, called "down in the hole", which adjoins the Sisters airport to the east. At this time fences, corrals and chutes were built. Twenty head of horses were gathered from the wild horses roaming the country, and put in a pasture at Black Butte Ranch. These horses were used for bareback riding and wild horse riding. After two more years an official rodeo association was formed and ground purchased on the site where Hoyt's Hardware is now located. Much of the lumber for the corrals, chutes, bleachers and 2500 grandstand seats was donated by Maurice Hitchcock, who owned the Sisters Mill. The work was done by volunteers. Rodeos were held at this site until 1975.

In 1955 the Rodeo Association was disbanded, but various community groups, including the Veterans of Foreign Wars, sponsored the rodeo and kept it going until the association reformed in 1963. Homer Shaw, who was secretary that year, joined the rodeo association in 1943.

The Biggest Little Show in the World

"The first annual Sisters Rodeo was held at the Creighton place near the Sisters Airport in 1943. In The Nugget, June 7, 1978, Roger Dills described how Bob Graham, long-time resident of Sisters and bronc buster for over 30 years, recalled building the corrals and gathering the stock for the that first Sisters Rodeo. The poles for the corrals were cut from near Pole Creek. Bucking horses were supplied by the McCoin Ranch of Terrebonne. There was no parade. The cowboys commented on the surprisingly high purses that this little rodeo offered, five hundred dollars per event, the same amount of money they competed for at the big rodeos in Cheyenne or Pendleton. These were cowboys rated at the top of professional rodeoing. Jerry Ambler, the world champion bronc rider from North Dakota, was among them. Because of the purse, the cowboys tagged this little rodeo 'the biggest little show in the world.' The year was 1941."¹⁷

Sisters History in a Nutshell

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| 1825 | Early trappers and US Army representatives begin exploring Eastern side of the Cascades |
| 1843 | John Fremont with Kit Carson and Billy Chinook passed through present town of Sisters while developing map of Oregon |
| 1865 | Camp Polk established briefly |
| 1870 | Samuel M.W. Hindman established first homestead in area near site of Camp Polk |
| 1880 | Sisters tourist economy gets its start as area merchants begin catering to sheepman who pass through each summer on their way to and from pasture in the High Cascades |
| 1890 | First Sawmill |
| 1900 | Cattle become an important part of the economy centering on the vast holdings of the Black Butte Land and Livestock Company |
| 1901 | Brothers Alex and Robert Smith file the original town plat. They had purchased the site from an earlier homesteader, John Smith (who was no relation). |
| 1923 | Fire destroyed the block between Elm and Fir south of Cascade |
| 1924 | Fire destroyed buildings on both sides of Cascade from Fir to Spruce |
| 1916 or 17 | First pipeline for water was installed |
| 1930's | First electricity available |
| 1946 | Town incorporated (vote 115 for, 61 against) |
| 1965 | Last Sawmill Closes |

Remaining Historic Buildings

Much of Sisters was destroyed by Fire in 1923 and again in 1924. There are only three pre-fire buildings in town and one built just after the fire.

The Hardy Allen House, Main & Larch (1908)

Town History

Hardy Allen's father, Albert, had been a soldier in Camp A at Camp Polk in 1865-66. He returned in 1868. Hardy Allen initially homesteaded along the Metolius. He moved to Sisters in 1905 and operated a blacksmith shop in Sisters and later worked on automobiles. The house, built on Main and Fir, was said to be one of the most attractive homes in town. In 1990 the house was saved from demolition and moved three blocks to 310 E. Main. It currently houses the shop known as "Nettie's Flowers." Remodeled in 1990, maintaining the original architectural style of the home, it is now recognized as an historic landmark.

The Hotel Sisters , *Fir Street & Cascade (1912)*

The Bend Bulletin reported on the plans for construction of a new hotel in Sisters: " A modern hotel that would be a credit to a town considerably larger than Sisters is being erected by John Dennis...it will contain 19 rooms with two additional bathrooms....There will be hot and cold water accessible to all rooms..."(April 10, 1912.)

The Hotel was remodeled in 1930 after surviving two devastating fires in the 20's. From 1946 to 1974, the hotel was operated by Gertrude Smalley. In 1978, the Reed family of Sisters purchased it and leased the building to an antique dealer and a mountaineering store. In 1983 the hotel was extensively remodeled including a new foundation, a heating system and complete rewiring and replumbing of the building. The saloon was gutted and remodeled to look like the era of the turn of the century. The back bar in the Saloon came from the old Palalce Bar in Bend.

The Aiken Store, *158 Cascade (1923)*

After the 1923 fire destroyed the Sisters Drug Store and post office building, the owners, George and Grace Aitken, moved a one-story building from another location to this site. In 1931, George Aitken made \$1500 worth of improvements to the building. A second story was added for living quarters and storage. Later some of the rooms upstairs were rented and it was called the Sportsman Hotel.

The first floor housed the drug store, soda fountain, and the post office. The marble top soda fountain was purchased from a Portland saloon in 1917. George Aitken made his own ice cream. During the winter, George obtained ice from nearby ponds and stored the ice for summer use in a building that had been specially insulated with sawdust. In 1974 the building, then known as the Sisters Drug company, was leased to Frank and Penny Kristovich. The store maintained the historic soda fountain. In 1987, the store was leased to a new owner and renamed "The Palace". Ice cream is still served from the old soda fountain and marble counter top.

The Leithauser General Store, *251 East Cascade (~1923)*

Built after the fire of 1923 by the Leithauser's the building is currently home of the Sisters Bakery. The wooden sidewalk on the building's west side is a functional reminder of the past.

Endnotes

¹ Hatton, R.R, Oregon's Sisters Country (Geographical Books, Bend) 1996, p. 29

² Cyrus, Alvin, Deschutes Pioneers' Gazette, January 1994

³ Homer Shaw interview by John Hayes, The Nugget, May 20, 1998

(Editors note: There was a Ripley's Believe It or Not column in the Oregonian Paper - I suspect this is what he is referring to)

⁴ T. Wilson and A. Scott, That Was Yesterday, Midstate Publishing, Redmond OR , 1976 p. 13

⁵ Wilson, p. 25

⁶ Wilson, p. 4

⁷ Wilson, pp. 4-5

⁸ Wilson, p. 5

⁹ Willis Spoo note on legend of Sisters aerial, 1981

¹⁰ adapted from an article by Jim Fisher, The Nugget 11/7/90

¹¹ Wilson, p. 10

¹² Wilson, p. 16

¹³ Wilson, p. 78

¹⁴ Wilson, pps. 59-65

¹⁵ Cyrus, Alvin, The Deschutes Pioneers' Gazette, January 1994

¹⁶ Jesse Scott as told to Martha Stranahan, The Nugget, 6/2/82

¹⁷ Hatton, p.55

The Sisters Watershed: History & Irrigation

Early View of Squaw (Why-chus) Creek

September 4, 1885

"After travelling 17.5 miles from camp, we reached Why-chus creek....It was a fine stream, about 30 feet in width, flowing rapidly over rounded rocks. Its waters were slightly turbid. There was an inexhaustible supply of fine grass in the vicinity, but Lieut. Williamson decided to travel on, and encamp near the "Forks of the Indian trail." We passed through an open forest for the whole distance, and encamped on a little brook which, a few miles below us, sank among the rocks. From a slight eminence above camp, the snowy peaks of the Three Sisters appeared quite near. A large meadow, which Lieut. Williamson had previously seen, and upon which he depended for grass, proved to be a cranberry swamp and utterly impassable. A sufficiency of excellent bunch grass, however, was found among the trees. Whortleberries [huckleberries], elder berries and service berries abounded in the vicinity."¹

Water for Town

Squaw Creek - Sisters First Water Supply

When people first settled in Sisters they used Squaw Creek water, dipping it out of ditches in buckets. Then a few people dug wells and pumped water into tanks. One gravity-forced tank that was a familiar sight was just back of the city hall. It belonged to Hardy Allen who had the water piped into his house across the street. Another tank was on the roof of the Sisters Hotel and it furnished water for the hotel.

In 1916 or 1917 the Sisters Domestic Water System was formed. According to Aubrey Perry, watermaster, "In 1916 or 1917 George Aitken and Frank Zumwalt took some boards and nailed them together to form a pipe, and ran the water down from Aitken's pond. That was the first pipe line and it wasn't very successful, but it kind of worked." Aitken's pond was located just south of Sisters and was fed by Squaw Creek water. This pond furnished irrigation water and also was a source of ice, which was harvested in the winter for use in the summer.²

Pole Creek Swamp - Sisters Second Water Supply

"In 1937 Pole Creek became the source of water for Sisters. George Aitken, Jesse Wilt, Lou Farleigh and I (Aubrey Perry) looked it all over, and five springs came out and just about all of it wasted away in the swamp, so we ran a ditch along ahead of the springs and carried the water about 600 feet into Pole Creek and then down Pole Creek about a mile and into a small reservoir. Either an 8" or 10" steel pipe was put down into Sisters. Then we filed a permit for 1.25 cubic feet per second on springs about a half mile south of Pole Creek swamp. These springs came out high on the hillside of Squaw Creek, 6 or 7 of them, and ran down the bank into the creek. So we dug a ditch along the hillside and ran the ditch around the hill and dumped that into Pole Creek. At

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this time we extended the pipe line up Pole Creek and made the small reservoir. This was about 1000 feet above the diversion from Pole Creek. This was 10" metal pipe. I think Jesse Wilt put it in. All of this was done when metal pipe was scarce and it was very thin pipe."³

Irrigation for Farming/Ranching

Background: The Development of Irrigation in the West⁴

One of the most powerful changes that took place in Oregon between 1895-1920 was the reclamation of large areas of desert land by means of irrigation. Both public and private investments were made in irrigation development, adding greatly to the wealth of the state.

The Mormons, who settled in Utah in 1847 were the first US pioneers to establish an agricultural economy using irrigation. Inspired by the Mormon's success many saw irrigation as the "panacea" for western development. Western water rights were established on a "first in, first out" principle based on English Common Law.

In 1877 the Desert Land Act, the first Federal policy specifically for the reclamation of arid land, was passed by Congress. This act provided that settlers could purchase one section (640 acres) of desert land in the entire area west of the 100th meridian if they agreed to irrigate within three years. Due to abuse by large business interests the act was amended in 1890 lowering the limit to 320 acres. In 1891, the General Revision Act was passed, which provided that an association of individuals could construct canals and ditches. Individuals had to invest in irrigation works and other land improvements, be a resident of the state in which they were filing, and cultivate an eighth of the land within three years. The law also encouraged private development by granting canal right-of-ways across public lands to irrigation companies.

The next phase of government's attempt to encourage settlement of the West was the Carey Desert Land Act of 1894. The federal government agreed to cede up to a million acres of land to each of the 10 arid states, if they caused the land to be irrigated, settled and cultivated. Settlers could receive up to 160 acres and the state would arrange for the construction of dams and canals by private construction companies. By 1900, however, it was clear that the Act was a failure. Investors were reluctant and the States unable to administer the complex program.

By 1900 Federal Government's Role in irrigation had become a national issue. Pro-irrigation planks were included in the platforms of all major parties. A good example of the contemporary "irrigation vision" is provided by William Ellsworth Smythe in his 1902 book, Conquest of Arid America. This book was to provide the impetus for irrigation development and homesteading in Oregon, particularly east of the Cascade Mountains. He wrote:

"Considered from every standpoint, irrigation is the golden key which may unlock the doors of civilization to wide districts in Oregon, particularly east of the Cascade Mountains...It is a prosperous stock country, but large portions of it are capable of better things...Here the land is chiefly the property of the Government. Large areas

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are susceptible of irrigation and of serving as the foundation of a very desirable class of homesteads. The water supply is quite abundant...Among the valleys where large opportunities for reclamation may be found, chiefly by means of storage, are those watered by ...the Des Chutes...There are also many large natural lakes which may be drawn upon for irrigation."⁵

In 1902 Congress passed the Reclamation Act which began a progressive program emphasizing engineering and technology as tools to solve many social and economic problems. Federal dams would assist homesteaders in transforming arid lands into productive farms supporting new communities. Financing of water storage and diversion works would come from the sales of public land aggregated into a revolving Reclamation Fund. Local water user associations would assume operation and maintenance responsibilities once half the repayment obligations were met, but the Federal Government would retain title to major works.

SQUAW CREEK IRRIGATION HISTORY

The Squaw Creek Irrigation Company evolved from a cooperative venture between neighboring farms to an irrigation district within about two decades. The diversion of water from Squaw Creek for use on individual farms occurred as early as 1869 or 1871. In 1889, the first Squaw Creek canal was built by Sam Davis. In 1892 Oscar Maxwell built a ditch utilizing creek flow.

In 1895, following the passage of the Carey Act by Congress, the Squaw Creek Irrigation Company was formed using the 1892 water rights. Shares in the company were sold and individuals filed on their water rights. Water was allotted and controlled by the state. After the state adopted the provisions of the 1901 Carey Act, the company contracted for reclamation of 11,766 acres.

Development proceeded and in 1912-13 the main canal was enlarged to extend the system to the upper end of Lower Bridge, including the Long Hollow Ranch. All of the work was done with men and horse-drawn equipment. Water users could work on the system to pay for their maintenance charges.

In 1917, the company became the Squaw Creek Irrigation District, the second district to file and be recognized by the State of Oregon. In 1919 a new point of diversion was selected and a new dam and headgate built of concrete. In 1920, however, a flood destroyed the dam. In 1921 a log dam was built. In 1935 the Cloverdale Irrigation Company, formed in 1903 with Squaw Creek rights merged with the district.

In 1957-58 a re-regulating facility, the McKenzie Canyon Dam and Reservoir, was built to assist in serving the Lower Bridge area. In 1964, the Watson Reservoir was built in the southwest portion of the Cloverdale area to eliminate irrigation water flow variations arising from creek fluctuations. In 1970 a new concrete diversion dam was built on Squaw Creek about 200 feet above the old long/wooden dam.⁶

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In 1982 there were about 80 users, 35 miles of canals, plus turnouts, which extended from south of Sisters through Cloverdale to Lower Bridge. Water was delivered on demand, within each user's allocation. Some patrons with large farms had installed deep wells to extend and balance the district water delivery.⁷

As of 1994 there are about 6,500 acres of irrigated land under the project.⁸

Nutshell History of Squaw Creek Irrigation District

First Water Rights on Squaw Creek:

- 1884 John Fryrear
- 1885 Frank McCaffrey
- 1889 Sam Davis, George Slayton and Enoch Cyrus
- 1889 First Canal Built (S. Davis, E & G Slayton, E. Cyrus)
- 1892 Oscar Maxwell filed for water rights and built a ditch tapping Squaw Creek
Everyone living in the area had their own ditches and water was free. The first ditches were just plowed furrows and each year when they ran water the ditches washed and became bigger. The only cost was for the maintenance of the ditch.
- 1895 Squaw Creek Irrigation Company was organized using the Maxwell water rights. As people moved into the area they bought shares in the ditch company and filed on their water rights. The water was controlled by the state and it allotted 3.2 acre feet per acre.
- 1910 Additional sources of water sought such as Suttle Lake or Green Lakes. None were considered satisfactory.
- 1912-3 Main canal enlarged to extend to the upper end of Lower Bridge with a capacity to carry 200 second feet of water. All work on the canal was done with horses and horse drawn equipment. Water users could "work out" part of their maintenance charges. William Wurzeiler acquired most of the water rights and stock in the S.C.I. Co.
- 1917 S.C.I. Co. merges with the Cloverdale Irrigation Company which had been formed in 1903.
- 1918 W. Wurzweiler refused to sell his interest in the S.C.I. Co. without also selling what is known as the Long Hollow Ranch and submitted a price for all the rights of the S.C.I. Co. and water rights on the Long Hollow Ranch, including the land. The directors deemed it in the best interest of the district to acquire both rights by purchase for \$125,000 bonded indebtedness.
- 1919 Diversion dam was moved and both the new dam and the headgate were built of concrete.
- 1920 A flood took out the dam.
- 1921 A log dam was built.
- 1952 District was free of debt and on a cash basis.
- 1957-8 McKenzie Canyon fluctuating reservoir was built with help from the Agriculture Conservation and Production funds for the benefit of the Lower Bridge area.

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- 1964 The Watson Reservoir was build at the southwest end of the Cloverdale area near Highway 20. There was much seepage in this reservoir and it had to be lined in 1967-8, again with help of A.C. P. funds. Much of the district water goes through this reservoir and it takes care of the creek fluctuation from day to night.
- 1970 New diversion dam built, 200 feet above the old wooden dam. (About 3 miles above Sisters on Squaw Creek.). Wells drilled to supplement water supply by individuals and the district.

¹ -Lieut. H.L. Abbot, US Army Corps of Topographical Engineers quoted in High & Mighty (Oregon Historical Society) 1981, p. 154

² T. Wilson and A. Scott, That Was Yesterday (Midstate Publishing, Redmond OR) 1976, p. 6

³ Wilson, p. 7

⁴ M. Hall, "Irrigation Development in Oregon's Upper Deschutes River Basin 1871-1957: A Historical Context Statement, prepared by the Deschutes County Historical Landmarks Commission, August 31, 1994, p. 5.

⁵ Hall, p. 7

⁶ Hall, p.14

⁷ Nugget article, interview by Martha Stranahan.

⁸ Hall, pp. 14-15

ranching

Sheep

“Sisters was a sheepman’s town; that is, the economy was sheep. They were coming this way before the turn of the century, before there was a Forest Service, when it was Public Domain.

Bill Fryrear was an old sheepshearer and wool freighter; he freighted wool to The Dalles, before the railroad reached Shaniko. Hauling wool down and bringing back freight, driving from four to six head of horses, it would take two weeks to make the round trip. They had freight bells on the horses so other travelers on the road would look for a place to get off the road and stop. Freight teams has the right of way.”ⁱ

“When sheep went into the Cascade mountains for the summer range it was for three months-July, August, and September. herders always lost sheep in storms that might blow in. Lost sheep might come trailing out long afterwards till the coyotes got them. I remember it said there were 1800 sheep lost from all bands one year; that was in the twenties.

One year there were 8 head of sheep found in the foothills near Sisters. A dog was with them; he had stayed with those sheep all winter and protected them. People wondered how this dog lived and what he ate. Probably he knew where there was a dead horse where he could go eat when he got hungry. I remember the dog. Frank Arnold had him for awhile. He had the habit of biting people who came there. He would sneak up behind them and bite them when they were not looking. Frank had to get rid of him.”ⁱⁱ

After 1880 sheep were driven through Sisters from Antelope and Shaniko on their way to the high pasture lands of the Cascade range. As Sisters was the only settlement between Eastern Oregon and the summer range, the merchants did a thriving business, supplying stockmen as well as other travelers.

The last large sheep-raising operation in Central Oregon ended in 1969.ⁱⁱⁱ

Early Winter Disasters

On September 18, 1914, a severe storm swept over Oregon. Gale force winds blew down a large amount of timber. Heavy snows-as much as 17 inches at one place-fell in the Cascades. The Bend Bulletin,...reported that bad weather in the Cascades during the previous six weeks had resulted in heavy loss to sheepmen, with many of the herds scatter and herders unable to find them.

Also in mid-September, this time in 1920, a ferocious storm brought severe cold and blizzard-like conditions to the Cascades. The storm trapped sheep, shepherders, and huckleberry pickers near the lower reaches of Mr. Jefferson. J.W. Wright from Cline Falls lost between \$2000 and \$2500 worth of sheep. The “Redmond Spokesman”, ...reported that “sheep were frozen in bunches. Indians who were in the mountains picking huckleberries had several head of horses frozen.”^{iv}

Winter of 1883-84

W.E. Claypool came to the Sisters area in 1878. In 1883, when he was seven, one of the most severe winters on record in central Oregon almost cleared the ranges of livestock. In places horses and cattle had taken shelter under trees; here the stock tramped out circles but were imprisoned by walls of snow. Some, found in time, were rescued. Starving horses had eaten manes and tails; cows and horses had girdled the bark on trees. But the long cold spell crusted the snow so that rescued stock could walk on top to safety. John Fryrear, too, remembered the big snow of 1883-84, when "just before Christmas two feet of snow fell, which melted back to 18 inches. Then it snowed again two days and two nights altogether, without stopping. There were 72 inches of snow on the level, which stayed until March, 1884."^v

Rabbit Hunts

About 1917 jackrabbits became a real problem for the farmers of Deschutes and Crook counties. There were so many of them that rabbit drives and rabbit poisoning became necessary. This resulted in the killing of 135,000 rabbits. Before the poisoning began the loss to Crook County farmers exceed \$85,000 annually.

Rabbit drives in Sisters often took on a holiday atmosphere. Young people and women as well as men participated. They were armed with sticks, brooms, hats, coats and anything at hand to wave. At the same time they were yelling, ringing bells and blowing whistles to create one big hullabaloo to frighten the rabbits into running for the enclosed area.^{vi}

"The early settlers were self-sufficient and lived off the resources of the country. They had to do with what they had. They had to work away from home to make money just to live, and develop the farm at the same time to make it self-supporting. Their children went barefoot to save shoes and wore hand-me-down clothes.

The first crop was oats, because oats was always a cash crop. Used for horse feed, oats made horses go like gas does for cars today. When the man of the house was away trying to earn a little money, his family stayed home and tended the livestock and crops. They always raised big gardens. Young boys had to take the place of men."^{vii}

"I never could see any good in a coyote. I have never forgot the year 1916; there was an epidemic of rabies. Rabid dogs and coyotes were at large, and the danger was very real. I was just a child - my brother and I had to walk two miles to where we had sheep corralled, turn them out, and herd them all day, then corral them and walk back home at night. The only thing we knew was to climb a tree if danger approached. We stayed near trees we could climb. We would hurry home at night before it got dark."^{viii}

Turkeys in Sisters

In 1916 Mr. and Mrs. Perit Huntington began raising turkeys. Times were hard and money was scarce so the Huntington's started out in a small way. They bought three eggs for \$1.00 an egg and put them under a setting hen. At the peak the Huntington's raised 500 turkeys a year.

When the turkeys were large enough they were herded in the field during the day and brought up to the farm at night. The coyotes were bad and sometimes even came to the house. At times Perit slept outside near the turkeys. The Huntington's raised turkeys for 34 years.

Another turkey farm was up the road from the Huntington's, near the where Lundy Road is presently. Where Mr. and Mrs. Herman Nootnagel raised about 2000 turkeys per year starting in the 1920s. The turkeys were never allowed to roam freely in the woods around their place due to the coyotes but were kept in pens.

Both the Huntingtons and the Nootnagels raised turkeys for the local Thanksgiving and Christmas market^{ix}

Cattle

Bringing the Cattle Over Indian Ford

In 1912 Ellis Edginton acquired a 1200 acre deeded ranch south of Sisters on Three Creeks Road which had been homesteaded by William Cox in 1882. Edginton bought much of his stock from the Warm Springs Indians and depended on their cowboy help to drive his critters from the reservation to his ranch, as the semi-wild cattle would head back at every chance. They forded the Metolius River at the Allingham place, three miles from the river mouth. After each drive the Indians would camp a few days in a cabin on Squaw Creek on the Edginton's place and visit with their hosts. Indian Ford on Slough Creek (now Indian Ford creek) was named for these first inhabitants, as it was the only spot in the narrow but deep creek with a solid bed to give their horses footing. ^x

First Cattle

The first known cattle in the Sisters area were just passing through. In 1862, Felix Scott, Jr. blazed a trail from Eugene City over the mountains on his way to Salmon River, Idaho. As he planned to supply miners with goods, he brought about 700 head of cattle with him. The abundant bunch grass of Central Oregon was welcome grazing.

In 1877, John Y. Todd, the man who was remembered for building the first Sherar's Bridge across the Deschutes River, had about 1200 head of cattle in the Squaw Flat area north of Camp Polk. By 1898 he had cattle ranging from Grandview and the Metolius River area south to Farewell Bend. In this year he moved his ranch headquarters from Squaw Flat to the Farewell Bend Ranch.^{xi}

Irrigation Schemes & Cheat Grass

In 1905 or 1906 three Glover brothers bought the Grandview holdings of Bill Edmundson and had about 400 to 500 head of cattle. About 1910, homesteaders began to come into the Grandview area, lured by the promise of Suttle Lake water for their land. The district was bonded for \$60,000, but only a dam and some test holes were dug, and part of a ditch was surveyed before the project was abandoned. The homesteaders built fences, land was plowed and some of it was seeded to wheat which contained cheat grass. This was the first cheat grass in the country and it spoiled the grazing for the cattle. In 1916 the Glovers and most of the other cattlemen sold their cattle and moved out of the area^{xii}

Butte Land & Livestock Company

early 1890's Elijah H. Sparks, William Wurzweiler and Alex Thomson formed a corporation called the "Black Butte Land and Livestock Company". They owned 5 ranches: Allingham (on the Metolius), Squaw Eye, Swamp Ranch and Long Hollow. The Swamp Ranch is now called Black Butte Ranch. The company dissolved in 1918.^{xiii}

Cattle Drives to the High Cascades

Cattle as well as sheep were driven up into the Cascades for summer grazing. The McCoin's of Terrebonne annually drove cattle through the Sisters area between 1916 and 1960. From the 1940's on they were joined by the Holmes family.

Ray Hatton in his book Oregon Sisters Country describes one of the last cattle drives in the 1960s.

"The drive started June 30, 1960, when a hundred head of cattle plus some calves were rounded up. The herd was driven down secondary roads, over the Highway 97 Crooked River bridge. Yes, traffic was held up! Camp was made near the Crooked River Bridge....departure the next morning was early-REAL EARLY-3 A.M.!

The cattle were trailed west of the Deschutes River to the Holmes Ranch in Long Hollow, where the Holmes joined the McCoin family.... The cattle then crossed parts of the Lower Desert and trekked to Camp Polk. Just west of Sisters, the cattle were driven across the Santiam and the McKenzie Highways, then along a forest road to a counting corral at the Sisters Cow Camp. There a Forest Service employee counted the cows (calves under 6 months were not counted). Each of the two families...was permitted to graze a specific number of head on the national forest lands. The men cut out 50 head from each herd to be taken to Sparks Lake ("over the top" to Green Lakes and down); the others remained on the east slopes to graze."

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"Frank Arnold, one of the early settlers,...was a good trapper, caught coyotes mostly, and bobcats every winter, when their furs were prime....He hunted jack rabbits for the market

when there were thousands of them. He sold them to a Chinese market in Portland. He would get orders for a certain number, then would go out and kill that number, dress them out, put them in burlap sacks, and ship them. He got \$3.50 to 4 dollars a dozen for them; he made enough to buy him a Ford car. I have heard him say he had once killed and dressed 125 rabbits in six hours.^{xv}

Herb Glazier trapped between Nash Lake and the South Sisters. He came out one year with 200 marten furs, which he spread out in Charlie Gist's hotel in Sisters for everyone to see.^{xvi}

The Willows Ranch in the late 1930's

"We had a 32 volt system with a Kohler generator and 16 - 2 volt glass covered batteries that supplied electricity for the house, milk house and main barn. Whenever we noticed the lights getting dim we would start the generator and when we run out of water we would start the pump and pump water up the hill and we would have gravity feed until the storage tank went dry.^{xvii}

ⁱ Cyrus, Alvin, *Deschutes Pioneers' Gazette*, January 1992

ⁱⁱ Cyrus, Alvin, *Deschutes Pioneers' Gazette*, January 1991

ⁱⁱⁱ Wilson, T. & Scott, A., *That Was Yesterday* (Midstate Publishing, Redmond OR) 1976, pp. 28-31

^{iv} Hatton, R.R. *Oregon's Sisters Country*, (Geographical Books, Bend OR) 1996, p.71

^v Vaughan, T., *High & Mighty* (Oregon Historical Society) 1981 p. 25

^{vi} Wilson, p. 80

^{vii} Cyrus, Alvin, *Deschutes Pioneers' Gazette*, January 1991

^{viii} Cyrus, Alvin, *Deschutes Pioneers' Gazette*, January 1991

^{ix} Wilson, pp. 57-58

^x from an article by Martha Stranahan, *Northwest Ruralite*, April 1964

^{xi} Wilson, p. 32

^{xii} Wilson, p. 32

^{xiii} Wilson, p. 32

^{xiv} Hatton, pp. 71-72

^{xv} Cyrus, Alvin, *Deschutes Pioneers' Gazette*, January 1991

^{xvi} Wilson, pp 34-35.

^{xvii} correspondence from John Elliott, who lived on the ranch as a child

Deschutes Forest Service/Sisters Ranger Station

The Deschutes Forest Service district was organized in 1908. At that time some of the Deschutes districts, including Sisters and the Metolius operated under the old Cascade North National Forest. The Metolius district had its headquarters at Allingham and the Sisters district with a station on Squaw Creek southwest of Sisters. According to old times this first Sisters ranger station was located on Trout Creek, about six miles southwest of Sisters.

Perry South who received his appointment as forest guard in 1906, and an assistant ranger on the Cascade North National Forest in 1907, was the first ranger in charge of the Metolius District.

The first building on the Deschutes Forest was the Allingham Guard Station on the Metolius River. The site had been squatted in 1880 and a small cabin and fenced enclosure built. In 1888 the original squatter traded it to D.W. Allingham, who lived in the cabin until 1900, for two horses. The cabin was they sold once more and the new owner conveyed the title to the government. Occupied by Ranger Perry A. South, the old house was the first ranger station in about 1906.

The site of the Sisters Ranger Station on Squaw Creek was selected in 1908, and the small single box constructed house and barn built on the north bank of the creek southwest of Sisters. It was abandoned in 1918 and headquarters moved to offices in the George Aitken store in Sisters. The office and most of the property was destroyed in the fires of 1932.¹

Early Lookouts

One of the first lookouts in this area was a 110-foot pine tree in Sisters. It was used by the State Forestry and a man climbed to the top of the tree each morning to look over the surrounding country in search of fire. The steps were made of iron by Hardy Allen, local blacksmith. Later a platform was built in the top of the tree and three sides were enclosed by three wooden ladders. Because of the iron driven into the trunk the tree eventually died and the limbs were cut off. It was used until 1926 as a lookout. It was then removed due to the fear that it might blow over or fall.

In the early 1930's a number of lookouts were built as it was decided that fires often got too big before they were discovered. At that time Black Butte got an 84-foot tower, a 20-foot tower was built on Cache Mountain, and a 30-foot tower on Abbot Butte. A 100-foot steel tower was put on Trout Creek Butte, and a lookout house on Green Ridge east of Bridge 99 as well as a 65-foot tower on a butte at the north end of Green Ridge near the old Alder Springs lookout.

"This pine tree had a small platform in the top and it was no place for a faint-hearted lookout. With only a light wind the tree would sway back and forth and you would feel pretty lonesome up there about 125 feet above ground on that little platform."²

During the 1930's the State Forestry built a tower on Hinkle Butte, northeast of Sisters, which proved to be a very good lookout point. The lookout on Hinkle Butte gave the Black Butte lookout a 'run for his money' on getting firsts on quite a few fires on the Sisters District.

¹ T. Wilson & A. Scott, *That Was Yesterday*, Midstate Publishing, Redmond OR, 1976 pp. 43-44

² Wilson, pp. 47-48

Logging

At first crosscut saws were used in the Sisters area for logging. Usually two men would work together, one at each end of the saw. If a man worked by himself he used a "rubber man". He would drive a stake into the ground near the tree, fasten one end of the strip of inner tube to the stake, the other end to one handle of the saw; when he quit pulling, the rubber man would pull the saw back the other way.

In 1940 the Brooks-Scanlon Lumber Company started building a railroad to their holdings west of Bend. To do this, two over-passes were built, one over the McKenzie highway about 3 miles west of Sisters and the other over the Santiam highway at Indian Ford. The railroad extended approximately 50 miles, ending in the vicinity of Fly Creek on the West Side of Big Squaw Back Ridge.

In 1946 Brooks-Scanlon's logging camp was moved from the Tumalo area into the Sisters area by rail. The camp was set up 1.1 miles west of Sisters and was run by the company until 1956.

Lumber Mills

Sisters has been the site of numerous small sawmills, many of which were moved a number of times.

The first mill on record was the Stanton mill at the old Graham Corral. This mill provided the lumber for the Graham Way Station, after their cabin burned in 1888, as well as the lumber for the Allingham homestead on the Metolius, which was to become the Allingham guard station.¹

Another early mill was erected in 1890 by William Cox on the land which became the Ellis Edgington ranch. About 1900 this mill was later moved to a new location on Pole Creek where it was run by water power. Before 1911, a steam-powered mill was installed on the Edgington place. This mill cut ties and timbers for the railroad which was extended from Madras to Bend in 1911.

About 1910 during a surge of building in Sisters, J. Duckett and E. Ashmore put up a mill in the actual town site of Sisters. While this mill was operating, the Hotel Sisters was built, as well as the school house and several homes.²

Early resident, Willis Spoo, recalls "I took over the old mill at Sisters on October 1, 1940, on my own (*editors note: the mill had been owned by his father, Ed Spoo*) and could write a terrible book on all the troubles I had. George, Lynn and Johnny Wilson all worked for my dad and then went right on working for me. Jesse Scott did my logging and I look back now at the terrible low price all of us were getting and all you can do is shake your head.

Logging & Mills

Work hard and play hard was the way it went and believe me, they all worked hard. Nothing to do anything with but good horses and lots of man strength. They could take a team of horses, 55 feet of cable with a pup hook on it, a 12' 5/15" chain with a swamp hook, an axe and a cant hook and average around 18 million board feet per day with just a teamster and swamper - that is, skidded and loaded on the truck."³

In the fall of 1934, the Hitchcock Lumber Company came to Sisters. They ended up owning mills in a number of locations which operated under a number of owners until the last one closed in 1966. The first mill was a band mill built on the Sundown Ranch by the Hitchcock Lumber Company. This was a large mill, which cut an average of 50,000 feet of lumber per shift per day. The mill camp across the meadow housed the mill workers and their families. The industry came at good time for many people in the area. Some families had come following the depression and to escape the bad economic condition resulting from the dust bowl era. Wages at the mill at that time were \$4.00/day, but people from the dust bowl offered to work for \$1.50/day just to feed their families. The company later bought the old Ed Spoo mill in Sisters which became known as the M.G. Hitchcock Mill. In 1951 this mill was sold to Dan & Russell Inc. and then later to Leonard Lundgren. The mill, the last to be operated in the Sisters area, was closed in the early 1960's and dismantled in 1966. Lundgren is said to be the first person to successfully process jack pine in Central Oregon.⁴

When the war started in 1941, the Forest Service began selling timber which kept the Hitchcock Mill going until 1951.

Sisters Mill History⁵

- 1880's Stanton Mill (near Graham Corral)
- 1890 Cox Mill - run by water power (Ellis Edgington Ranch)
- 1902 Mill near Melvin Butte
- 1906 First mill in Plainview
- 1908 Mill near Lazy Z Ranch
- 1910 Mill in Sisters
- 1912 Mill in Indian Ford
- 1918 Second mill in Plainview
- 1928 Camp Polk - Spoo Mill (*a.k.a.* M.G. Hitchcock Mill)
- 1934 Mill in Sundown Ranch
- 1942 M.G. Hitchcock Mill burns and is rebuilt
- 1943 Brooks-Scanlon Co. extends railroad from their Bend mill to tap into forests west of Bend.
- 1946 Brooks-Scanlon moves 37 houses including a schoolhouse and store from Brooks-Scanlon Bull Springs logging camp to its present site west of Sisters
- 1951 Hitchcock Mill sold to Dant and Russell
- 1952 Dant and Russell mill closed
The Bend Bulletin headlines: "Dant and Russell Shuts Down Mill at Sisters; U.S. Forest Service Blamed: \$300,000 in Payroll to Go."
- 1953 Dant & Russell mill purchased by Leonard Lundgren and reopened
- 1963 Lundgren mill closed
- 1965 Shake Mill owned by a Reynolds family produced cedar shakes
- 1966 Lundgren mill dismantled

Logging & Mills

Note: Population of Sisters tripled in the years 1935-1937 reaching 441. This was largely due to the lumber industry.

¹ T. Wilson & A. Scott, *That Was Yesterday* (Midstate Publishing, Redmond) 1976 p. 37

² Wilson, p. 38

³ Wilson, p. 39

⁴ Wilson, pp. 40-41

⁵ Compiled by JoAnne Heinzl for the Sisters Watershed History Fest, June 1998

Ranching & Farming

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Ranching & Farming

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