Area History

The first recorded visit of Non-Native American people to the Packwood area occurred in March 1861. James Longmire, William Packwood, George Blankenship, and Walter DeLacy accompanied by five Nisqually Indians trudged up the Nisqually River, across Skate Creek and down to the Cowlitz River near the present site of Packwood. They were looking for a wagon route across the Cascades. For the next twenty-odd years the only white visitors to the area were prospectors and the occasional railroad reconnaissance party.

In 1889 August Snyder made a claim at what is now the community of Packwood. The first post office in the upper valley was located four miles west of Packwood near the Bevin Lake Rest Area. The Sulphur Springs post office was established June 30, 1890 at the home of John Blankenship.
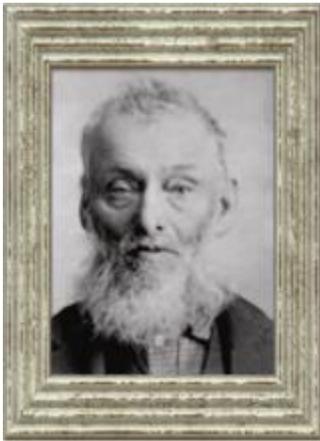

Photo: William Packwood

Walter Combs became the postmaster on April 21,1910 and moved the office to his claim adjacent to that of August Snyder.

The name of the Sulphur Springs post office was changed to Lewis on November 4, 1910, to honor the president of the Valley Development Company. That company had been organized in 1908 for the express purpose of developing a reservoir at Packwood Lake. In 1908 the U.S. Forest Service established a ranger station in the area.

On April 1, 1930, the post office at Lewis was renamed Packwood due to community mail being misdirected to Fort Lewis.
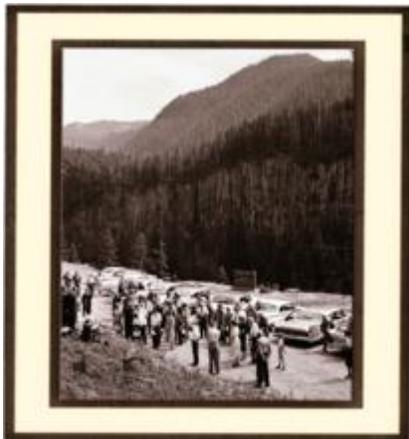
When settlers first came, the trees were nothing but a nuisance to be removed to develop a farm. Later a market developed for cedar, and the trees were cut into shingle bolts and floated down the Cowlitz River to the mill at Kelso.

In 1916 the Cora Bridge was built across the Cowlitz River. It was the mid-1920's before there was a decent State road to the community. Better roads meant bigger trucks and more opportunity to utilize the timber resources.

The Great Depression was easier on Packwood than many other communities. Surrounded by the National Forest, Packwood became the site of a Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camp. The mountains were alive with the sound of young

men working, building trails, lookouts, campgrounds, and roads in the forest. The Kerr Brothers, electricians for the CCC camp, started a mill in 1934, which evolved into Packwood Lumber Company and later into the Pacific Lumber and Shipping Company. Work began in earnest on the White Pass Highway during the 1930's. World War II interrupted construction in the forest and on the highway, but the demand for lumber spurred the harvest of timber. The Forest Service began to sell more timber, and more roads were built out into the forest.

More roads meant easier access for hunters and people seeking recreation. Soon after the White Pass Highway was completed in 1951, a ski area was developed atop the pass. The White Pass Ski Area has become increasingly more popular through the years, and even was the home of a couple of Olympic Champion skiers, the Mahre twins, Phil & Steve.

The mill and the Forest Service saw their biggest years through the 1960's into the 1980's, but both are gone now. Recreation is the remaining attraction including the White Pass Ski Area and the many back country wilderness areas. The East entrance to Mount Rainier National Park is but ten miles away, making Packwood a terminus for a loop via Ohanapecosh, Stevens Canyon, and Paradise, thence back through scenic Skate Creek Canyon to Packwood. Mount Adams and Mount St. Helens are each about an hour and a half away. Packwood has seven motels and over a hundred vacation rentals. There are eating establishments to choose from, two gas stations, two realty offices, two coffee shops, two hair salons, a discount grocery store, a branch of the regional library, a Senior Citizens center, an impressive Fire Station, a flower shop, an advertising newspaper, an Historical Museum in the old Packwood Elementary School building, a Thrift and Gift shop, a visitor/information center, a garage, a ski shop, grocery store, and the historic Packwood Ranger Station which now serves as office space, an event center and vacation & seasonal lodging.

Twice a year, on Labor Day and Memorial Day weekends, the community teems with vendors at the Annual Flea Market, perhaps the largest in the Pacific Northwest. Every imaginable type of merchandise is available.

One other thing Packwood has is elk. Often at the end of the day one can see them grazing in the fields and yards around the community. Come see, come stay a few days.

Packwood is the center of a traveler's dream. Wintertime in Packwood boasts boarding, skiing, both cross-country and downhill, and miles of snowmobile trails. During warmer months, camping, hiking, boating, and fishing lure outdoor enthusiasts to the Packwood area. Summer use of state highway routes affords easy access to Mt. Rainier, Mt. Adams, and Mt. St. Helens. Favorite hiking destinations include Packwood Lake and High Rock Lookout. Goat Rocks Wilderness and the entire Pacific Crest Trail system branch out from Packwood.

With comfortable lodging, unique dining experiences and several gift shops, the welcome mat is always out. Come to Packwood. You will love it here!

Credit goes to Destination Packwood for this wonderful history of the Packwood Area.