

From the Willamette to the Coast Range  
By J. D. Adams

In the countryside are the elements that make Oregon great, the strength of independence and the value of hard work. To the countrified, work is a religion that keeps people healthy and lean. Young and old are content in the accomplishments of the day, which begins early with the starting up of faithful farm machines.

On this summer morning, combines weave their artwork of tracks through the fields alongside the Salem-Dayton Highway. The drivers wave a greeting, their tanned faces flashing the whiteness of a smile. My wife and I turned toward Hopewell on the Lafayette Highway, each bend of the country road bringing new inspiring vistas. Wheat fields rippled in the wind, extending like a sea of gold. Folks greet each other with familiarity on the main streets of small towns that hold together the tapestry of farmland. Distant snow-capped mountains look over it all, like castles protecting a fertile patchwork kingdom.

The road angled toward Amity and we headed south on Highway 99W, a byway serving the towns of the Willamette Valley on the edge of the coast range. Our destination would be Willamina, a logging town that started high in the mountains above the present location. We rolled in the direction of Highway 18 through the quiet sunshine of the countryside, the smell of hay in the air.

From the Cascade and Coast Range mountains flow pristine rivers and streams that are the lifeblood of the farming communities. Maneuvering somewhere north of Perrydale, we passed over the South Yamhill River, where locals were flocking to their favorite swimming holes. Life along the river is a tradition that flows with the seasons. In the summer, the river is a gathering place and there is a communion and rite of passage. In the spring and fall, fishing beckons with rain-freshened riffles and eddies where the silver flash of trout and steelhead are kept a closely guarded secret. Water is central to the rural lifestyle, feeding irrigation pipes and canals for thirsty crops.

We motored through Willamina, past the colorful sign boasting "Timbertown USA", an ambiance that still clings to this small community. Alongside modest homes log trucks are parked, and the streets rumble with muddy four-wheel-drives. Main street is lined with quaint shops in old brick buildings that contrast pleasantly against the backdrop of forested hills. A ramshackle auto court from the 40's with it's faded sign still graces downtown, hinting at a bygone era when roads were few and timber was king. The grocery and hardware stores bustle with activity, like remote outposts on the edge of civilization. Most of the people here are second or third generation, whose parents were loggers or worked in the plywood mills. Even after economic downturns that decimated the logging industry, they decided to stay on, spurning the big cities in favor of the hardy lifestyle they were raised with. The homes and farms here are still recalled with the names of the

original families who built them years ago. On any drive through the countryside, the conversation turns to local history and folklore, of Swiss immigrants who crafted the old Grand Hotel in Grand Ronde, or of those who arrived during the Great Depression with only the shirts on their backs. Communities such as Willamina have deep roots, and gather their identities from long-standing occupations such as agriculture and logging. Humorously, those folks who were troublemakers in grade school are remembered as such 40 years later, and still regarded with suspicion.

The conveniences of modern life came slowly to impoverished rural communities in the Willamette Valley. Through the 1960's, some families had no phone service and no hot water. Houses could be primitive, sometimes made from remodeled farm structures without consideration for building codes. Nevertheless, most families were happy and enjoyed wholesome pastimes without the frenetic pace of the city. Social events were important, and when a difficult task presented itself, everyone pitched in to help. Today, the economic base has diversified, logging is more sustainable, and farmers have more options. With the portability of new technology, the natural settings of rural areas are now more attractive, combining the best of both worlds.

The old coast highway connected Salem, Dallas, and Grand Ronde; it meanders through the foothills to the south of the present Highway 22. It was used in a time when the pace of life was slower, and travel was an experience in itself. Along one stretch of the old coast highway was a stop known as Maple Leaf Station. Within a year after the construction of the new highway, Maple Leaf Station was no more. Now all that remains are the maple trees, and the memory. How completely the brambles and the elements have erased this moment in time.

We returned to our home on a stretch of the old coast highway, now bypassed by four lanes of Highway 22. In the adjacent field, a rattling machine harvested grass seed. Turning on the pump for irrigation, we watched with approval as the sprinklers sputtered to life. Our sweet peas were growing so fast they were over our heads now, and in the pumpkin patch, green tendrils reached out hungrily for more space. Birds chattered noisily from nearby trees and hummingbirds hovered at the feeder. Although life in the coastal Grand Ronde Valley was idyllic in many respects, there was always work to do, weeding in the garden, pruning back the onslaught of blackberry vines, and repairing fences, irrigation lines, various machinery, and so forth. Tools are important out here as a matter of practical independence.

Towards this unspoiled tranquility gravitate country folk who can unerringly judge the nature of things with a keen and unfettered mind. Take a long drive along Highway 99W. Let the miles unwind past the hay bales and horses, the rustic fences and old pickup trucks. Put yourself into a country song of your own making, a ballad as soft and comfortable as your old blue jeans.