

## **Eagle Point** **By Dennis Powers**

As settlers made their way towards the Willamette Valley over the Applegate Trail, numbers stopped in Southern Oregon and decided to start their new lives here. With the Jacksonville gold rush as a magnet, pioneers settled in the Eagle Point area in the 1850s to sell their produce to the miners. The Englishman, James J. Fryer, acquired his property on Little Butte Creek in 1852; he established a general store and planted a fruit orchard. Considered to be the “Father of Eagle Point,” Fryer caused the settlement to grow around his operations.

The area became another center for agricultural production and supplied food--along with Sams Valley to one side and the Medford-Talent area further south--to the Valley. In 1872, the Snowy Butte Mill (now named the Butte Creek Mill) was constructed along the banks of Little Butte Creek. It drew farmers from around the region, as wagons lined the dirt road to the mill to have their grain ground into flour.

Constructed of local pine trees, the four-story, 5,500-square-foot structure had two, four-foot diameter, 1,400-pound millstones that ground the grain; quarried just outside of Paris, the huge stones were shipped around Cape Horn and brought by wagon train from Crescent City to the Rogue Valley. Water is diverted from the creek into the mill’s basement where the water’s weight turns a turbine that powers the equipment.

As the fertile land drew farmers and ranchers, eagles soared overhead and nested high up on a bluff that overlooked the town. In 1877, John Mathews named the town Eagle Point, after the butte with its eagles. The advent of the railroad along the Rogue River limited Eagle Point, as the line passed through Gold Hill, Central Point, and Medford on its way to Ashland. Farmers had to bring their products to these stations for shipment outside the area.

Accordingly, the town didn’t have a commercial center until the early 1900s, when the Pacific and Eastern Railroad connected there. The city then became incorporated in 1911 and the home to residences, three hotels, a livery stable, blacksmith shop, a few saloons, and rowdy dance halls. Dependent on the fortunes of the timber industry, the town ebbed and flowed with this industry, as the railroad spur served the Medford mills.

Although the construction and operation of Camp White during World War II at what’s now White City was an economic shot-in-the-arm, afterwards this stimulus ended when the camp was torn down. The large available blocks of land brought about a rebirth, however, as seen in the 18-hole championship golf course--designed by Robert Trent Jones Jr.--that came into being in 1995 with housing developments clustered about it.

Eagle Point today is a retirees’ destination and a commuter center to jobs in the area, whether it is the local Walmart or in Medford. It still retains its historical centering, as the Butte Creek Mill is still operating. The National Register of Historic Places calls this, “The last water-powered

Southern Oregon **Past & PRESENT**

See: <http://southernoregonpastandpresent.com/>

grist mill, still commercially operating, this side of the Mississippi.” In 2005, Bob and Debbie Russell bought the mill from its previous owners, who had run it for thirty-three years, and continued its country store and mail-order business selling milled flours and grain products.

Seen from Highway 62 and 1-1/2 miles north of Eagle Point, the “Old Wood House” is another draw. Owing to the efforts of Skip Geer and other volunteers, this 1870’s homestead has been preserved in exhibiting what life was like then. Due to its old, weathered condition and Mt. McLoughlin backdrop, the Wood House is the most photographed and art-painted house in the Pacific Northwest.

Although orchards and forest lands decades ago stretched as far as one could see, life here in the Valley now is easier and more comfortable. Seeing what life used to be, however, brings about a feeling of thanks to our forefathers.

Sources: “City of Eagle Point: History of Eagle Point,” at [Eagle Point History](#); Dennis M. Powers, “Eagle Point Grows and Sells Produce to Hungry Miners,” Jefferson Public Radio: As It Was, February 28, 2011, at [An Overview](#); Greg Stiles, “Butte Creek Mill Owner Set for Retirement,” *Mail Tribune*, Feb. 13, 2005, at [Butte Creek Mill](#); Sanne Specht, “Pair Breathe New Life into Historic Mill,” *Mail Tribune*, March 13, 2006, at [New Owners](#); Skip Geer, “The Old Wood House,” December 4, 2011, at [Old Wood House](#).