

## **The Orchard Boom and Bust** **By Dennis Powers**

The Medford Commercial Club--now the Chamber of Commerce--promoted a long advertising campaign in the early 1900s about the great advantages of the area's orchard industry: Anyone could plant fruit trees and make easy money. With this information, out-of-towners in numbers arrived in Medford where "real estate men appearing well-to-do" met the trains to hawk the orchards. The speculation eventually led to a terrible bust.

Whether wealthy Easterners or poorer farmers, newcomers joined residents in buying, managing, and selling orchards. From 1905, the boom continued to where two years later, a carload of Comice pears from Bear Creek Orchards sold at an auction in New York City for \$4,600, the highest ever. The 1909 real estate sales in the area totaled \$5 million with a record \$2300 paid per orchard acre.

By that year, numerous Medford buildings were under construction or in planning with names like the Sparta building, Carnegie library, Woolworth building, and four-story Liberty brick building. One year later, more people were arriving there than could be housed. Since houses couldn't be built fast enough, Medford erected a tent city and even the railroad put people up overnight inside the train station. By 1912, Medford had a high school, three elementary schools, a city park, a new passenger depot, the new library, indoor swimming pool, several movie theatres, and an opera house.

Along with the hype and inexperienced buyers, the con men were also busy. North of Medford in the Agate Desert (where White City is now), promoters planted more than 400 acres in the desert-like area. Although the land was not suitable for fruit trees such as apples and pears, potential buyers asked about the numerous rocks. The swindlers answered that this was the best point: Since the rocks kept the heat from the day's sun, smudge pots weren't needed at night. The gullible forked over their money.

A Chicago promoter bought 2000 acres on Roxy Ann Butte, covered the rocks with layers of dirt, and planted fruit trees. Promoting out-of-state by telephone, he sold plots for \$15 dollars down and \$15 a month so that the investors could retire later to a "little place". The trees died, the buyers lost everything, and the promoters disappeared.

In 1910, valley nurseries reported that one-million trees were contracted to be planted. The inevitable bust occurred when the hype couldn't match the over-supply and even hustlers went broke. Owing to World War I, blockades stopped the export market; insect blight, frost, and drought took care of the rest. Medford's population by 1920 had dropped by 28 percent, all due to the orchard bust, and it took years to recover. Nearly one-hundred years later the same speculation in real estate and boom to bust occurred again.

Sources: Ben Truwe, "Southern Oregon History, Revised: The Orchard Boom," at [On the Orchard Boom](#); "The Oregon History Project: News Article, A Word with the Visitors," at [More on the Boom](#); Paul Fattig, "1909: The year that changed Medford," *Mail Tribune*, November 1, 2009, at [Booming 1909](#).