Thompson’s Mills and the Lost Town of Boston

Oregon’s Newest State Heritage Site Celebrates Its Ten-Year Anniversary

by Kristine Deacon

Just east of Shedd in Linn County, the Calapooia River and 156 years of state, national, and international history run through Thompson’s Mills, Oregon’s oldest water-powered grist mill. Now a state park, the mill is a unique repository of Oregon’s technological, political, and social past. Built in 1858, the mill operated commercially for 146 years and survived and thrived by changing with its times, during national shifts in agriculture, consumer culture, and international affairs. The focal point of the twenty-acre property complex is a Rube Goldberg–esque, six-floor mill building with concrete grain-storage silos, grain elevators, milling machines, and a hydropower plant, all in working order. Six outbuildings include the 1904 Queen Anne millkeepers’ house, which was a family home, as well as a dormitory and dining hall for mill employees. While the mill building is the heart of the enterprise, its heart’s blood has always been the water flowing in the Calapooia River. The mills’ owners were able to adapt and evolve through regional and national events including the California Gold Rush, Pacific Rim trade, World War I, the 1918 Influenza Pandemic, and the 1970s energy crisis. The river directly generated power for the mill through a complicated system of dams from 1858 until 1986, when the property’s last private owners stopped using its water to produce power and instead used it to produce revenue by installing an electric generator and selling power to Pacific Power and Light Company.

The mills’ story began in 1850, when Americus Savage, living in Maine, learned of the Oregon Donation Land Claim Act. The act offered 320 acres of free land in the Oregon Territory to every unmarried white male citizen eighteen years old or older and 640 acres to every married couple who relocated there. On May 11, 1851, Savage, his pregnant wife Mary Ann, and their five children crossed the Missouri River, heading west on the Oregon Trail. Stopping their wagon briefly on October 6 so Mary Ann could give birth to their son Columbus, the Savage family arrived in Oregon City a few days later. On October 30, Savage travelled to the central Willamette Valley in search of farm land, chose an L-shaped lot bordering the Calapooia River, and built a cabin. Savage retrieved his family and “finally landed at [the] little cabin home, with a puncheon floor, a dirt fireplace, on the 25th day of December in 1851.” At first the family successfully grew wheat, but in 1858, financial hardship forced the Savages to sell “three and a half acres of land more or less and also the privilege of using all the water that may run or that they may cause to run through our land claim” to Richard Finley of Finley & Co. for $500.00 in cash. Finley also bought, for $75.00, water rights from Robert Elder, who owned land on the other side of the Calapooia.

In 1858, Finley began milling flour on the banks of the Calapooia River, a mile and a half east of Shedd on the land acquired from Savage that same
In 1866, miller William Simmons purchased shares of the mill from Alexander Brandon and Philemon Crawford. Internal Revenue Tax Stamps were affixed to the handwritten contract, which was required as part of the Revenue Act of 1862 and raised funds for the Civil War.
in 1870, Boston was home to about twenty families, had a stagecoach stop and a school, and its businesses included a brick factory.\textsuperscript{15}

But trouble loomed on the horizon. In 1871, Benjamin Holladay was building his Oregon and California Railroad through the Willamette Valley, but he did not plan for it to pass through Boston. Holladay was known for his underhanded practices, including accepting bribes to divert the course of the railroad, such as in Albany and Eugene, where the citizen's paid to have the railroad through their towns. The citizens of Boston, however, could not or would not pay Holladay to run the train through their town, so he built the railroad through Shedd, a mile and a half to the west.\textsuperscript{16} Chinese laborers laid train track one and a half miles west of Boston Mills in August of that year.\textsuperscript{17} Boston immediately died. Almost all the people living there moved to the newly named Shedd's Station, taking their houses with them. The Boston Mills Post Office closed, and the Shedd's Station Post Office opened on August 28, 1871.\textsuperscript{18} Today, except for the mill, all traces of Boston, Oregon, are gone.

In 1872, the citizens of Shedd's Station formed a co-op and built a shipping warehouse near the train tracks, which allowed the mill to store its flour for transportation by rail. The financial panic of 1873 caused fierce competition among flour mills in the Pacific Northwest, and Boston Mills suffered.\textsuperscript{19} From 1875 to 1891, ownership of the company changed several times. Two concurrent events turned around the mill's fortunes in 1891: German immigrants Volquart (Martin) Thompson and Sophia Thompson arrived with their seven children, just as Oregon was entering the lucrative Asian Rim flour trade.

Martin Thompson immigrated to the United States in 1870 and had worked at flour mills in Champoeg and Turner before accepting work at Boston Mills.\textsuperscript{20} In a serendipitous brush with history, before coming to the mill, Thompson bought a plot of land in Salem from The Oregon Land Company in Salem. The company's president, H.J. Minthorn, signed the deed, and Minthorn's 17-year-old nephew and office clerk, "Bert" Hoover, witnessed the document. Martin Thompson could not have imagined that twenty-six years later, the clerk would become the thirty-first president of the United States. Immediately after he arrived in Shedd, Thompson bought half the mill and became partners with Simmons. In 1897, Thompson became the sole owner. The company stayed in the Thompson family for three generations, until 1974.\textsuperscript{21}

As soon as he owned the mill outright, Thompson upgraded it. He installed an electric generator to provide lights, and added warehouse space, improved sifting equipment, and turbines. His proudest accomplishment was upgrading the limestone mill stones to steel roller mills. He changed the company's name to Boston Roller Mills and had “Boston Roller Mills, Manufactured by Martin Thompson” emblazoned on custom-printed flour sacks. In 1899, he placed advertising in The Brownsville Times announcing: “Boston Roller Mills, Shedd, Oregon, Martin Thompson, Proprietor, Manufactures ‘PRIDE OF OREGON’ flour, ‘WHITE CORN MEAL,’ Bran, Shorts, Chop, Graham flour a specialty. Awarded Diploma at Oregon Industrial Exposition 1898.”\textsuperscript{22}

Under Thompson’s management, the mill thrived. In 1904, he built a two-story Queen Anne house, which was both the family home and a rooming house for some mill employees. By 1909, the firm’s letterhead boasted “First Premium at Goldendale Wash., 1883, Three Diplomas at Portland, Ore., Industrial Exposition, 1898, and Two Gold and Four Silver Medals at Lewis & Clark Centennial Exposition, Portland, Oregon, 1905.” The next year, days after the Great San Francisco Earthquake, Thompson donated ten barrels of flour to the relief effort.\textsuperscript{23} The mill’s prosperity was obvious: by 1910, both the house and the mill office had telephones, Thompson was hiring servants, and
he owned one of the 5,210 cars registered in Oregon.22

Just as Boston Mills’ earlier owners had profited from the California Gold Rush, Thompson profited from the Pacific Northwest’s entry into the Asian Rim markets. He had the good fortune to become sole owner of the mill just as the golden age for Pacific Northwest millers and wheat growers was starting. During the second half of the nineteenth century, China, devastated by the Opium Wars, a severe famine, and several natural disasters, was technologically unable to mill flour. Until 1888, all United States flour sold to China was shipped through California. In November 1887, William Dunbar, a flour and produce merchant in Portland, travelled to China to directly introduce Oregon flour. He began shipping flour to China in 1889. Soon after, T.B. Wilcox, manager of the Portland Flour Mills Company, also joined the China flour trade and reported in 1900 that “the Oriental flour trade has taken approximately one-third to one-half the surplus wheat of the Pacific Coast.”23 Through the efforts of mill owners in the Pacific Northwest, by the early twentieth century, Californians were driven out of the China flour market completely, and the increase in wheat and flour capacity for Asian markets continued to outpace domestic demand.24 The Pacific Northwest’s leading flour exporters were Wilcox’s Portland Flouring Mills, Sperry Mills, and Centennial Mills in Washington. Boston Roller Mills’ ledger books show the mill selling flour to all three companies.25

For two decades, the Pacific Northwest was enriched by wheat growers and millers exporting goods to Asia. By the start of the twentieth century, the great milling corporations of California, Washington, and Oregon were exporting more than a million barrels of flour annually to China and Hong Kong.26 In 1904, however, Chinese merchants responded the United States’ anti-Chinese immigration policies that had begun with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and was extended by the Geary Act that same year. That legislation, restricting Chinese-worker immigration to the United States for an indefinite period, severely affected trade. The boycott lasted for about a year and strengthened both Chinese nationalism and anti–United States sentiment, which in turn spurred efforts to establish flour mills in China. By 1910, only half the amount of shipments from the previous decade were being exported to Hong Kong, and most direct shipments to Chinese ports had ended.27 In 1910, both the output of Thompson’s Mill and Oregon’s China flour trade significantly decreased. Tough economic times, combined with a tough transition in family ownership to the second generation of Thompsons, plunged the mill into economic distress.

Martin Thompson died in 1910 and left the company to two of his sons, Otto (Ott) and Leo, who changed the name to Thompson Bros. & Co. Leo died in 1915 and left his half of the mill to Ott’s oldest son, Myrle.
His grandmother Sophia purchased Myrle’s half, making her co-owner of the business with Ott. In the spring of 1917, Ott Thompson hired the Burrell Construction Company to build four concrete grain silos. The increased storage capacity enabled the mill to operate twelve months of the year, and it began buying huge quantities of wheat from eastern Oregon. The timing of the increase in storage capacity and production coincided with an increase in demand for the mills’ flour as the United States entered World War I on April 6, 1917.

President Woodrow Wilson created the U.S. Food Administration and hired international mining engineer (and future president) Herbert Hoover to run the program. Hoover’s task was to organize food relief for the United States’ European allies. Once again, international affairs resulted in an economic bonanza for the mill. It began operating twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, selling flour directly to the U.S. Food Administration. The mills’ ledger books show this to be its most profitable period.9

While the Thompsons profited from World War I, the era’s other global event, the Influenza Pandemic, devastated the owners. Sophia Thompson successfully nursed Ott’s family, who lived at the mill, through the flu, but Ott’s sister-in-law Caddie Thompson, living in Shedd with her husband Charles, died suddenly of heart failure in 1910. His grandmother Sophia purchased Myrle’s half, making her co-owner of the business with Ott. In the spring of 1917, Ott Thompson hired the Burrell Construction Company to build four concrete grain silos. The increased storage capacity enabled the mill to operate twelve months of the year, and it began buying huge quantities of wheat from eastern Oregon. The timing of the increase in storage capacity and production coincided with an increase in demand for the mills’ flour as the United States entered World War I on April 6, 1917.

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In 1927, Otto Rohwedder of Missouri patented his machine for slicing bread, and consumers’ enthusiasm for store-bought sliced bread created an immediate drop in the demand for grocery-store flour. Before 1927, consumers preferred homemade bread because they wanted store-bought loaves “to be extremely soft — not because they liked the taste of the gummy bread (they didn’t) but because they considered squeezing to be the best way to determine if store-bought, factory-made loaves were fresh. This squishy bread proved all but impossible to cut into sandwich-and-toaster-ready slices.”9

During the Depression, Thompson’s Mills diversified and began producing farina, fancy pastry flour, and whole wheat flour. Sophia Thompson died in 1928, and on August 1, 1930, Ott and his eldest son Myrle formed a partnership and renamed the company Thompson’s Flouring Mills. They each owned half the mill.9 While the Great Depression was a national economic event, its impact on individuals is poignantly revealed in Thompson Flouring Mills’ ledger books: By 1930, the notation “Flour sacks, sold at cost” became increasingly frequent. Before 1864, flour was shipped in tin containers or wood barrels. J.M. Hurd of Auburn, New York, patented a flour sack sewing machine that year, and those containers quickly replaced tins and barrels. People reused and recycled flour sacks in many ways. “The textile bag that began as a plan white bag for packaging food staples in the last half of the nineteenth century developed into one of the hottest advertised and promoted items of the twentieth century,” writes Anna Cook in Textile Bags: The Feeding and Clothing of America. “During this time, the textile bag became the single most popular way of clothing the American family as well as decorating the home. These bags were recycled by the American housewife in every way from making underwear for family members to making curtains and dish towels for the home.” During the late 1920s, textile companies began printing patterns on flour sacks — flowers, butterflies, cowboy motifs, patterns for dolls, etc. — so that women could more easily recycle the sack into clothes or toys. Nationwide, women began accompanying men to buy flour, so that the women could choose the flour sack material they wanted. From the Thompson’s Mills’ Depression-era ledger notations, it is clear that local women were buying unused sacks from the mill for clothing material. And in 2006, while stripping wallpaper in the upstairs hallway of the millkeepers’ house’s, park staffs Kees Ruurs and Margriet
Ruurs discovered the Thompsons used their flour sacks for wallpaper lining as well.30

Thompson’s Mills’ extensive collection of flour sacks is one of its most popular artifacts and one of its most informative. Most of the mills’ sacks, which date to 1899, have both the name of the town (which changed from Shedd’s Station to Shedd’s to Shedd to Shed) on them, as well as the often-changing name of the mill, making it possible to identify them chronologically. The sacks provide a wealth of information about changes in graphic arts, advertising and branding, depictions of femininity (including the evolution of women’s hair styles and clothing), and changes in the kinds of food consumers demanded. The bags illustrate rural America’s narrative over time.

Throughout the Great Depression, Ott continued running the Thompson’s Flouring Mills and Myrle ran the Shedd warehouse, which processed grass seed. Ott’s other son, Orval, graduated from the University of Oregon Law School cum laude in 1937, and even before then advised his father about the mills’ legal affairs. In 1938, Orval became the mills’ lawyer and went to work for Albany attorney J.K. Weatherford, eventually becoming a partner in the firm. With Orval in the Shedd warehouse, which continued to operate during times of low flow — the mill was allowed to divert water for upstream irrigators. When the mill was connected to Mountain States Power, it allowed operations to continue without the use of water. The water rights could then be used to generate revenue instead.

In 1953, Orval Thompson prepared a Water Use Agreement with the fifty upstream farmers, proposing that if they would pay the mills’ electric bill, the mill would not use the Calapooia’s water in the summer, when water was low and farmers needed it the most. The mill calculated its summer electric bill was $1,250.33 Orval Thompson drafted and signed the agreement to Charles Stricklin, the Oregon State Engineer, in charge of the Oregon Water Resources Department. Stricklin suggested that Orval Thompson create a water irrigation district, under the provisions of Oregon Revised Statute 545. In September 1954, voters authorized the Calapooia Irrigation District, with taxes to be collected by the Mountain States Power, it allowed operations to continue without the use of water. The water rights could then be used to generate revenue instead.

In 1979, the mill had twelve year-round employees and was producing about 410 tons of livestock feed a month, which was distributed in company trucks to small farm, ranch, and feed stores in a five-county region, extending to the coast. Gross sales in 1978 totaled about $700,000.34 On June 22, 1979, the mill was operating at about fifty percent capacity when its concrete retaining wall collapsed, destroying part of the first floor.35 The Babitses repaired the mill, but demand for its animal feed continued to dwindle. By 1986, sales had fallen due to national conglomerates’ selling feed at much lower prices and an overall decline in the usage of animal feed.36 The mill laid off all the full-time staff in 1987. The Babitses planted a Christmas tree farm on the property, then began exploring the money-making potential of the mills’ water rights.

When Orval Thompson became the mill’s attorney in 1938, he wrote many cease-and-desist letters, often threatening injunctions, to upriver irrigators taking water from the Calapooia.37 Connecting to the electrical grid made it possible for the mill to free up water for upstream irrigators. When the mill was connected to Mountain States Power, it allowed operations to continue without the use of water. The water rights could then be used to generate revenue instead.

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During the recession of the 1980s, the Babitses converted one of three turbines to generate electricity in order to sell power back to the regional power grid.45 They created the Boston Power Company and spent $500,000 to convert the mill to a power-generating plant. In 1983, Dave Babits signed a contract to sell hydropower to Pacific Power and Light Company, but the contract expired in 1986 because the Fish and Wildlife Department took so long to verify that the power generator would not be harmful to fish.46 He signed a new, twenty-year contract with the power company in 1986 and immediately began selling power.47 Soon, Babits was concentrating his efforts on a new project: selling the mill to OPRD.

Conflicts between the mill and environmentalists increased in the following decades, particularly in 1999, when the U.S. Department of the Interior put spring Chinook salmon and winter steelhead on the Endangered Species Act’s (ESA) list, prompting state and federal officials about their use of Calapaooia water. That same month, the Babitses converted one of three turbines to generate electricity in the mill to OPRD. In 1999, Dave Babits signed a new, twenty-year contract to sell power to the regional power company, but the plant. In 2003, Dave Babits signed a new, twenty-year contract with the power company in 1999 and immediately began selling power.47

In 2004, OPRD staffers began turning the mill into Oregon’s newest state heritage site. They learned to operate the hydropower plant and milling machines, and catalogued more than 3,000 artifacts and documents. They discovered buildings crammed full of historic items: a 1910 combination safe in the office as well as a letter from Pittsburg Safe Co. with its combination, antique fire extinguishers tucked in corners upstairs, mill stones abandoned under the hay barn, handwritten deeds dating from 1858, and even a VHS copy of the movie Timescape, a 1992 scientifiction movie starring Jeff Daniels, filmed at the mill.

The mill opened to the public as a state park in 2007, and the buildings themselves tell stories that the artifacts and archives alone cannot: the architectural functionality of the Queen Anne residence compared to the absolute functionality of the commercial buildings, tallies of grain sacks written in pencil on the walls, and a plywood patch under a grain spout where one miller, after a quarter-century of sacking grain, started wearing a hole through the floor. The mill is a significant resource for Oregon historians because of its longevity — which precedes Oregon’s statehood — and the completeness of its archives and artifacts. Its intact legal, and more important, financial records document how Oregonians responded to, and profited from, international, national, and state events as well as social, economic, and environmental change.

NOTES

The author would like to thank Doug Crispin, Oregon Parks and Recreation Department (retired) and Martin E. Thompson, grandson of Thompson’s Mills patriarch, and the University of Oregon Library’s Special Collections staff.


5. The Revolutionary War Battle reinforced Cornett was fought on June 11, 1775, in Boston, Massachusetts and was named for the adjacent Bunker Hill. For oral histories related to Boston, Oregon, see: Leslie L. Haskin and Nina L. Williamson, Pioneer stories of Linn County: interviews by Leslie L. Haskin et al, vol. 1 (Albany, Ore.: Early Pioneer Publications, 1984), 11; Sherman Lee Pompey, A history of Boston: the town that moved West to become Shedd in Linn County, Oregon (Harrisburg, Ore.: Pacific Specialties, 1974), 4. In an advertisement, W.K. Caldwell stated: “Wool Carding. At New Boston, Linn County, Oregon, on the Calapooya, at Finley & Co.’s New Mills,” The Albany Democrat October 1, 1861, 2.


9. Polly Ann Kirk, daughter of Richard Finley, told a WPA interviewer: “With the flouring mill there was a wool carding factory and a fire was kept burning all the time to keep the wool warm as they worked, and she believes that this was the origin of the mill fire.” For accounts that suggest the carding machine was in the Boston Mills building see: Pompey, A History of Boston; and Alfred Lomax, Later Woolen Mills in Oregon (Portland, Ore.: Binfords & Mort, 1974), 300. Lomax’s account suggests the carding-mill machine was inside the Boston Mill building: “The mill, including the carding machine, was a loss of $8,000.” The only primary source of information on the subject, Caldwell’s advertisement in The Albany Democrat, is also unclear, but suggests

Deacon, Thompson’s Mills and the Lost Town of Boston
the wool-carding machine was in the mill building: "Wool Carding. At New Boston, Linn County, Oregon, on the Calapooia, at Finley & Co's New Mills, 12 miles East of Corvallis . . . Having bought the Machine, it is under thorough repair, and will be under my immediate charge." Lucy Sjolstad, Milling on the Calapooia 1874/1878: Saga of the Boston/Thompson Mill (Corvallis: Horner Museum, Oregon State University, 1980), pp. 45, 50.

20. Leon Emil Thompson, Last Will and Testament, June 21, 1931, Linn County Courthouse; Return of Sale of Personal Property and Petition of Confirmation, signed by Otto M. Thompson, October 24, 1941, Linn County Courthouse; Advertisement, The Brownsville Times, January 13, 1899, 3; see Thompson’s Mills State Heritage Site archives for canceled checks and receipts that document Thompson’s mill upgrades.
33. In The District Court of the State of Oregon, For The County of Linn, Order to Convey Property, Case No. 10665, June 30, 1905.
34. Anna Cook, Textile Bags: The Feeding & Clothing of America (Florence, Alabama: Books Americana, 1990), 1, 3.