

"LOGGING" IN SAMMAMISH, 1903



Sammamish, 1903. Huge stands of old-growth fir and cedar trees, some nearly a thousand years old, covered almost the entire Plateau-- the only breaks in the forest were a few farms and logging mills. It was astonishing to look at the pictures taken in the forests in and around Sammamish. It looked like—no, it really was-- a primeval forest that has utterly vanished in the 100 years since.

These were among some of the pictures shown by local historian Eric Erickson in his presentation, "Giant Trees of the Pacific Northwest", at the Sammamish Library on October 25. Mr. Erickson is a noted historian of Eastside logging and sawmill history and has published a couple of books on the subject; one of the books lists most shingle sawmills and lumber businesses that have been in King County since 1853. How many would you guess there have been--- a few hundred, perhaps a thousand? Mr. Erickson has documented over 2800 sawmills and lumber business in King County— with names, precise locations, and dates of operation—that have come and gone in the past 150 years.



While the title of Mr. Erickson's presentation might suggest it was all about trees, it was really more about the logging history of these trees and the techniques used over time both to cut the trees and then to haul them away to be processed. One of the first mills on the Eastside was built below Snoqualmie Falls in 1873. Logging and milling in our area increased slowly during the 1880s. Then, in June 1889, the Great Fire destroyed much of downtown Seattle. This resulted in a huge increase in demand for mills. While much of the wood produced was in fact used to rebuild downtown Seattle, eventually our King County—and particularly Eastside—wood came to be shipped all over the world.



In the early years of logging on the Plateau, the trees closest to the lake were cut. This was not an easy task. In the first place, many of the trees approached 15 feet in diameter, and the largest saw at that time was only 12 feet long. Another problem was that many of the cedar trees were hollow inside from being struck by lightning. The lightning burned out the inside of the tree, but the tree itself remained standing. It wasn't safe to cut these trees at the base because they might fall on you—and if your saw wasn't long enough for the tree anyway, that just made the problem worse. Loggers often had to climb the tree up to 15 or 20 feet above the ground where the trees were stable enough to cut, and narrow enough to accommodate the saws. The logger would climb the tree with a ladder, setting up springboards about five feet long but only six inches wide to stand on to cut the tree. A single big tree often took a couple of hours for two loggers to cut when they were using a simple hand saw.



Once the tree was felled, the loggers sometimes used a black powder splitter to split the tree into smaller logs that were easier to transport. In the early 1890s, the logs were "skidded" by using oxen and horses down paths cut into the hills to Lake Sammamish and then floated to one of several mills that operated on the eastern shore of Lake Sammamish.



Toward the end of the 1890s "steam donkeys" (steam engines with winch and cable attached) came into use. These could move logs more easily and rapidly. The problem with steam donkeys is, because they were attached to a cable, they were only practical to move logs for up to a distance of one mile. As the logging operations continued to move inland and away from the lake after 1900 it was more practical for railroad cars to move logs.



Sometime during the mid-1910s logging trucks appeared on the scene. Mr. Erickson displayed some pictures of some of these early logging trucks . Many of these old trucks had no doors on the drivers side. There was a practical reason for this. The early trucks had almost no brakes. If a truck suddenly got out of a control on a hillside, the driver needed to be able to easily bail out.



Loggers worked a 60 hour week—10 hour days, six days a week—during the early years of logging on the Plateau. Women also did logging in the early days, although not in the logging camps. They helped clear land for farm sites by cutting up and clearing smaller logs left by loggers as they prepared the home site for farming.



In the early years loggers predominantly cut Douglas fir trees, and not much else. By 1900, though, loggers had wised up to the value of the western red cedar tree, because the cedar could be used as shingles. The Lake Sammamish Shingle Company at Weber's Point was, in fact, a cedar mill. During the 1910s, cutting spruce trees came into favor. There was a specific reason for this: airplanes were out by this time, and the early planes were made of spruce. Spruce logging for airplanes became particularly important once America entered the First World War in 1917. Finally, even the hemlock tree—long derided by loggers as a “junk tree”—was logged on the Plateau beginning in the 1940s.

Logging in our area began to gradually wind down after the 1940s. The last mill actually on Lake Sammamish—the Issaquah Lumber Company, Monohon Mill—closed in 1980 and moved to Issaquah. Driving through these areas of pleasant homes and small businesses today, you wouldn't have a clue of what life was like here 100 years ago if it weren't for the efforts of Eric Erickson and other area historians to take us back in time and show us where our roots began.

---Phil Dougherty, November 9, 2003