The Great Depoe Bay Fire of 1936 a Chilling Bit of Oregon Coast History

Published 06/08/21 at 6:10 PM PDT
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North Lincoln County Historical Museum

Scene at Depoe Bay

(Depoe Bay, Oregon) – 1936 was not a very good year on the Oregon coast. In fact, in August and September, the region – recently bursting with tourism activity because of the new Highway 101 – was plagued with conflagration after conflagration. It was the year the Oregon coast burned. (Above: Depoe Bay in the '40s, courtesy North Lincoln County History Museum)
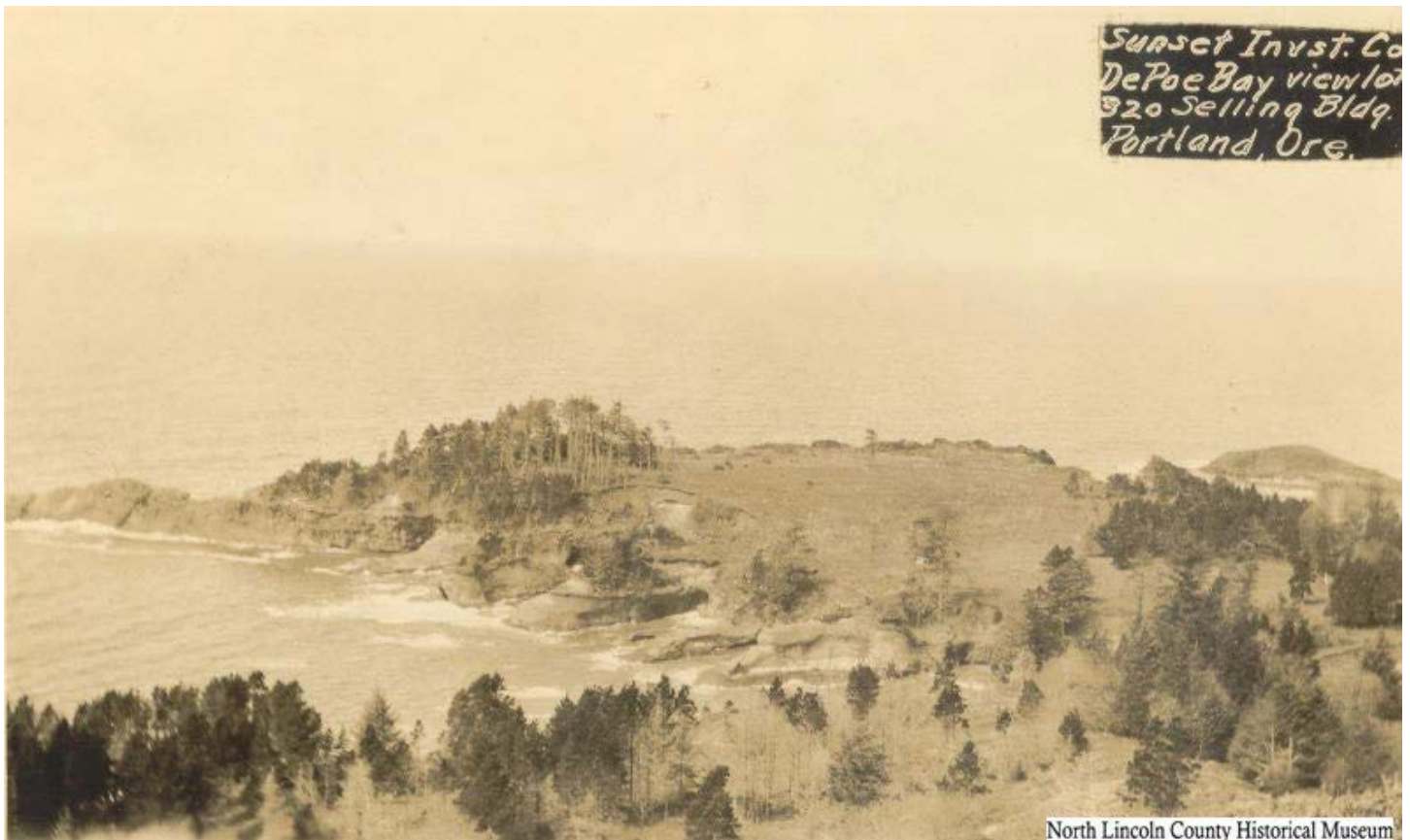
By mid-September of '36, Bandon was about to experience its complete devastation, Gold Beach and Marshfield (Coos Bay) were in the middle of their own set of forest fires, and Yachats and Waldport were fighting a blaze. There were some 25 different fires along the coastline. Right about then, somewhere between September 15 and 20, a fire broke out near Depoe Bay.

At first it was a somewhat distant forest fire. According to the City of Depoe Bay, there are two versions of how it started. One is that a shingle mill caught fire (possibly

arson), almost a mile east of town. The second is that a homesteader's cabin caught fire. What's been handed down through the ages – but wasn't in newspaper reports at the time – is that local fire officials didn't take it seriously, figuring it would just burn itself out. It was largely burning five miles to the east of town. According to the city, six days later the fire re-erupted and made its way into town.

There are considerable discrepancies in the exact timelines, as one newspaper report dated September 24 indicates the forest fire to the east started around September 15 or earlier, then came under control on Sunday, September 20. In any case, it had ravaged land that had been mostly logged for almost a week, then fanned to new life on Tuesday, September 22, lighting up the green timber just east of Depoe Bay.

This article shows the fire within 500 yards of the community on the 24th, with firefighters guarding the area and soaking everything with water. A man named Cy Olson and his family were getting set to be evacuated as their home was just across the street from the flames, and then came the order. They moved all their belongings across the bay.

Depoe Bay in the '20s, showing a remarkably bare, undeveloped North Point. Courtesy North Lincoln County History Museum

Flames were encroaching on the schoolhouse, being driven by heavy winds on the coast – a hot east wind that apparently shot up to 35 mph at certain points.

Then, according to the city, it hit the town with a roar and it jumped the highway. The Capital Journal (Statesman Journal) called it a "spectacular blaze in the timber between the highway and the ocean."

Some 200 men fought against it, using small but powerful pumps attached to any little stream or body of water they could find. Boys from the Civilian Conservation Corps helped out along with soldiers stationed in the area, and even tourists who had driven in by car out of curiosity got out and assisted.

At one point, the fire marshal, now backed with federal authority, issued "get out now" orders to just about all the town's people. "If you have any valuables, move them out," he told everyone in town. Many simply moved their stuff into the streets to keep it away from their own walls.

One family moved in and out of their home six times over a few days.

12 families were left destitute by the fire, according to the city, and newspaper reports indicate not a single home "stands without blackened stumps and logs almost touching them." Several homes had caught fire but were put out eventually.

By September 28 it had all come under control and stopped menacing the town, although some areas just east were still smoldering. Then came a series of rain storms, and according to reports it was the first the population slept at night for a while.

Some two and a half miles along the beaches had burned.

THE SPOUTING HORN - DEPOE BAY, ORE.

Photos above, courtesy North Lincoln County History Museum