

The Izee Sawmills:

**Ralph L. Smith Lumber Co.
Ellingson Lumber Co.**

**1946-1949
1950-1966**

You might wonder why sawmills as far away from the center of Oregon as Izee are included in this tale. You may remember from an earlier chapter that the decision on which operations to include here was based on whether or not the operation had an economic impact on the epicenter of this story, Prineville, Crook County, Oregon. Both of the sawmills at Izee had an economic impact on Prineville, but some may find it difficult to comprehend why that is true. Simply put, it was a matter of transportation: quite often it was easier—and safer—to make a trip to Prineville than it was to John Day. More about the transportation situation later.

Second, you might wonder, like many people do, how the place got its name. Izee; what kind of a name is that? Well,

In 1877 the Carlos Bonham family came to Canyon City. Carlos came west with the Calvary and was stationed at Fort Harney for a time. He married Dolly Parker, of Salem. In about 1885, Mr. Bonham homesteaded in Izee. His family moved to Izee in 1888. By 1889 there was a need for a post office. The postal authorities asked for a name. Bonham's brand was IZ [for reasons that are no longer remembered]. It is related that Carlos Bonham said "Call it IZ with two E's." The post office of Izee was established, November 6, 1889 with Carlos Bonham postmaster. The post office moved many times before it was discontinued [in 1954].¹

But Carlos Bonham was not the first settler in the Izee area. In 1882 the Keerins brothers, Matt, Owen, Joseph, and Dave, came to the area with a band of sheep. They had come from Ireland to

San Francisco, then to Canyon City, staying one winter in Fox Valley. The sheep were picked up in Mt. Vernon from a rancher were brought to Izee to be run on the shares. The Keerins Ranch was the land upon which both Smith and Ellingson built their sawmills and the Keerins family will figure into the story of these two operations. The mill site land is still under ownership of the Keerins family.

It would be easy to skip quickly over the Ralph L. Smith Lumber Company's operation as it lasted only three years. But the story of how it all came about, why it lasted only three years, and what happened to Ralph Smith, are stories to good not to be told, stories that have not been told before.

This writer is indebted to several people for the Izee information. Initially, information was provided by Robert P. Ellingson, III, the current president and general manager of Ellingson Lumber Co. (headquartered in Baker City). The Ellingson Lumber Co. closed a few years ago because of bankruptcy. The company continues to manage some timberlands and is rehabilitating former mill sites. On the Internet the following was found:

The Ellingson Lumber Co. owns several available properties in prime locations within Baker City. The largest site is approximately 40 acres, very near to the heart of Baker City, at the site of the company's former primary mill. Another 25-acre site lies in south Baker City adjacent to a former plywood and Elco board plant complex now occupied by a plastics company and industrial lumber cutstock firm.

1. *The History of Grant County, Oregon 1862-1983*, p. 9; Grant County Oliver Museum, 1983.

Both sites have undergone extensive clean up and have been in compliance with state and federal environmental laws. The sites are also well served by all utilities. —

Ellingson Lumber Co. is an affiliate of Center for the New West, an organization that is: “Thinking...Listening...Engaging: Ideas and Leadership for America’s Future.”²

Mr. Ellingson wrote a summary of the Izee operations and provided a couple of aerial photographs which you will see later. Mr. Ellingson’s summary of the Ellingson Izee operation started by saying that the mill had been purchased from the Ralph L. Smith Lumber Company in 1949 or 50. But who was Ralph L. Smith? This became a very difficult question to answer. But before you read about that, there are some other people that helped me collect the Ellingson information.

Sonny and Marilyn Rider are two of the most gracious people you would ever want to meet. Sonny and Marilyn live in Seneca—which has an interesting history of its own—and they have been exceptionally helpful, loaning photographs, preparing employee lists, and a variety of other materials that make for a better understanding of the Ellingson operation.

For months many attempts were made to locate someone who had worked for the Ralph L. Smith Lumber Company. None of the Ellingson workers—timber beasts, sawdust savages, plant managers—had ever heard of Smith. Yet the man and company had existed. At some time during the search for information, Royce Dotson³ located a book about the timber industry in northern California.⁴ The book gave a brief description of the Smith operation at Anderson, California; still not much help learning about Mr. Smith.

An Internet search for “Ralph L. Smith Lumber Company,” located Ralph’s granddaughter, Harriet Denison. Ms. Denison lives in Portland

and was able to provide names and telephone numbers of people who *might* have information about her grandfather’s operations. Out of the blue, I asked Dennis Berryman (McCloud, California) if he knew anyone who knew about Smith. Dennis offered the name and e-mail address of Hal Bowman of Dunsmuir. Hal had been the chief forester for Smith at the time the Anderson operation was sold to Kimberly-Clark in 1961. Hal has provided a lot of background information on Mr. Smith. But no actual Smith employee has been found from the Izee operation. So not much can be told about the Smith operation, but you will read quite a lot about Ralph Smith. The Smith story is being told because it hasn’t been told by anyone else and it needs to be recorded before the details fade away.

Ralph L. Smith Lumber Company 1946-1949

One of the things that continually amazes this writer about the timber industry is how closely interwoven the timber companies were. In researching the Ralph L. Smith Lumber Company (the full name was always used and “company” was never abbreviated), I came across other timber companies that were also to be included in the list of sawmills at the back of this book. Deschutes Lumber Company (there were at least three companies by this name), Ochoco Lumber Company, Ellingson Lumber Co. These companies history’s tend to intermingle. This intermingling will reveal itself as the stories unwind. But now meet Ralph L. Smith and his ventures in Oregon (telling the story is Ralph’s daughter, Margaret).

2. (Source: www.bakercity.com/chamber/economic/dev_opp.htm; July 28, 1999.)

3. Of Prairie City. Royce has been very helpful throughout the research phase of recording the history of the timber industry.

4. Beulah Johnson. *Chips and Sawdust*. Redding, California: Press Room, Inc., 1978.



“While Other Lumber Men took Depression’s Jolts, Ralph L. Smith Bounded Upward.” Article headline appearing in *The Kansas City Star*, January 30, 1938.

Ralph Leftwich Smith was born in Galesburg, Kansas on June 5, 1887, the eldest son of Lillian and Matt Ryan Smith. Lumber was his father’s livelihood and it was in this business that Ralph Smith began his extraordinary career.⁵

Ralph L. Smith entered the M.R. Smith Lumber and Shingle Co., his father’s Kansas City wholesale firm, in 1908. He opened an office for the company in Toledo, Ohio in 1914, remaining there until 1917. During

1918 Smith accepted commission as a First Lieutenant with the United States Army, selling spruce from a federally owned saw-mill in Vancouver, Washington.⁶ After the Armistice he returned to Kansas City to develop an interest in wood products, other than lumber and shingles.

As the son of a well-to-do father and recognized as being reliable and hard-working, Ralph Smith was a young man with a future that appeared patently cut out for him. However, in 1924 Mr. Smith elected to enter business for himself, operating as the Ralph L. Smith Lumber Company. His genius as a businessman was soon to emerge.⁷

His company did business in the manufacture and sale of Port Orford Cedar specialty items to be used in the manufacture of battery separators and Venetian blinds. During the first year, exactly 100 railroad cars carried the company’s business at an average profit of \$300.00 per car!⁸ Soon afterward the lumber industry plunged into a recession, well in advance of the great depression of the 1930’s. Seemingly untouched, Ralph L. Smith emerged out of the depression as the head of two lumber organizations...that grew from infancy while other companies continued to experience financial reverses.

A crisis in the battery separator business came in 1928. Part of the demand for separators was the result of the radio. But by 1928 radios no longer used batteries.⁹ Competition was growing more intense and the battery industry was looking at cost-cutting practices. Ralph L. Smith convinced the National Battery Company of St. Paul, Minnesota that \$40,000.00 per year could be saved by producing separa-

5. This information comes from a biographical piece written by Margaret Smith-Denison for the opening of the World Forestry Center, Portland, Oregon. The piece is undated but the museum was opened in 1971 by Oregon governor Tom McCall.

6. Perhaps it was during this time that Ralph learned of the forests of Western Oregon.

7. But Ralph continued to run the wholesale part of this father’s company too. A family member said that Ralph would look over the loaded railroad cars of his father’s and pick out the best and sell them on his own. True or not, the family thought everything he touched turned to gold.

8. There is some disagreement among family members about the number of cars that were sent out each day.

9. Radios were now using electricity. The portable radios of today came many years later.



This is thought to be a photograph of the Ralph L. Smith Lumber Company's mill at Izee. It is not known now where this photograph originated, or who the photographer was. It was provided to the author by Lucille Fooks of John Day.

tors at the edge of Oregon's great Port Orford Cedar stands. With a \$25,000.00 advance from National Battery Company, Smith established a new manufacturing plant at Coquille, Oregon, producing 40 million separators the first year. The new plant, known as Smith Wood Products, grew steadily under the able management of George A. Ulett and was eventually sold in 1946 for over three million dollars.

In 1942 Smith's other operation, the Ralph L. Smith Lumber Company, expanded its wholesale operations into product manufacturing. The company bought timber and a sawmill at Canby near Alturas, California, and later acquired another sawmill and timber in Klamath Falls, Oregon and Elgin, Oregon. Boxes were produced at the Alturas plant

while moulding was the specialty at Klamath Falls. Cut stock and mouldings were manufactured at Elgin.¹⁰

Foreseeing the need of integrating all the lumbering operations, Mr. Smith bought the Deschutes Lumber Co. at Anderson, California in 1947.¹¹ On the 200 acre site, a modern sawmill, remanufacturing plant, and a box plant were built under the direction of A.B. Hood, vice-president and general manager. These facilities furnished employment for 650 men and turned out some 10 carloads of finished products a day. Considerable additional footage was transported by truck.

There soon followed the acquisition of the Wildwood Lumber Co. at Red Bluff, California, the Castle Creek Lumber Co. at Castelia, California, the Dunsmuir Lumber

10. The Izee operation is curiously missing from the story. This may explain why, when I contacted Harriet Denison, she was unaware of her grandfather's Izee operation.

11. It was this action that resulted in the sale of the Izee plant to Ellingson.

Co. at Dunsmuir, California and Mt. Shasta Pine Manufacturing Co. at Mt. Shasta, California. All included adjacent tracts of timber to assure an adequate supply. Their largest source of timber came from the Walker Agency Lands, as a result of the dissolution of the Red River Lumber Co. in various parcels within convenient distances to the mill and factory at Anderson.

By 1960 Ralph Smith was giving some thought to retirement. Among other interested companies was the Kimberly-Clark Corp. of Neenah, Wisconsin. The objective was to build a pulp and paper mill at the Anderson site.

Extensive studies and public hearings before the Water Pollution Control Board indicated that the locality was suitable. More than 20 local organizations presented resolutions urging the Board to favor the Kimberly-Clark Corporation's pledge that it would adhere to the standards set by the Board on the basis of economic need, greater utilization of forest products, and a broader tax base. By 1961 negotiations with Kimberly-Clark Corp. were completed and Mr. Smith was able to retire.

Ralph L. Smith worked hard during his younger years, building up his business, and then spent much of the remainder of his life helping others. Philanthropy provided a deep personal satisfaction. His earlier philanthropies were often the product of sudden impulse and tended to be of unusual nature, often including little-known organizations and obscure persons. In his late years Smith "put his house in order" by establishing an unrestricted foundation in Kansas City, Missouri.

The great bulk of his gifts went to the education of Blacks, either in grants or scholarships to institutions or direct aid to outstanding students. Smith felt strongly that education was the hope for American Negroes to attain financial and social equality.

Ralph L. Smith savored the fruits of his success with great dignity. Showplace live-stock farms, on which he raised some of the nation's finest purebred Black Angus cattle and Percheron horses, were a particular hobby for many years. He donated his award-winning livestock to Future Farmers of America clubs in several states and to universities in Kansas, Missouri, Oklahoma, Alabama and Georgia.

He was married to Harriet Tomlinson of Kansas City, Missouri in 1914. They had three children; Margaret (Mrs. Thomas T. Denison); Anne Odell (Mrs. Edward M. Douthat, Jr.) and Ralph L. Smith, Jr. After his first wife's death in 1954, Mr. Smith married Evelyn Moran.

Ralph L. Smith, lumberman, farmer¹² and philanthropist died at 81 on August 22, 1968.

Now you know something about Ralph L. Smith but you still don't know much about his operation at Izee. Mr. Smith's granddaughter and this writer have put together the following information after reviewing all that is known about Ralph's operations.

Mr. Smith spent quite a lot of time in Oregon and when he wasn't there, he no doubt received reports of the growth of the timber industry. He had a moulding plant in Klamath Falls. On trips to Klamath Falls he surely met Sig Ellingson and R.G. Watt of the Deschutes Lumber Company (Mowich, Oregon). Either of these two men could have told Ralph about the beautiful timber along the South Fork of the John Day River near the community of Izee. Ralph saw an opportunity and seized it. Ralph was good at that.

By 1949 the Deschutes Lumber Company's interests had moved from Mowich to Anderson, California, and Watt offered Smith a deal not to be turned down.

So Ralph must have made Sig a deal he couldn't turn down, because Ellingson bought out Smith, and Smith headed for California. Now

12. Ralph would cringe at being called a "farmer." He was a CATTLEMAN!



Main camp houses seen from a hill southwest of the site. The building in the foreground was the lumber sorting shed. Photo takes sometime in 1966 before demolition started.

— From the collection of Sonny Rider.

don't jump to conclusions; just because the Smith operation lasted for only three years doesn't mean that it was a small operation. It wasn't.

Other than some financial reports and one photograph, no proof of the value of the Ralph L. Smith Lumber Company at Izee can be produced but, rest assured, Ralph L. Smith never did things in a small way. But now on to Smith's successor, Ellingson Lumber Company.

Ellingson Lumber Company 1950-1966

It can't be said for sure how much of what is known as the Ellingson mill and town was a hold-over from the Smith days. Smith operated a camp just as Ellingson did, but there is little doubt that Ellingson expanded the operation.

A photograph (above) of the Ellingson Lumber Company's town, was taken sometime in 1966 before demolition had started. The building in the foreground is the lumber sorting shed. Since it is empty it can be assumed that the photograph was taken after the mill had ceased operations in 1966. The river is not visible but it separated the mill from the town. What you see in this photograph was called the "main camp." There was also a "lower camp" some half mile up river from the main camp. Lower Camp was misnamed since it was up river from the main camp.

Below the main camp, a number of workers had brought in trailers and these created something of a separate camp. The trailer camp was on the opposite side the river from the mill.¹³ Some rubble (derelict cars and other left-overs) remains of the trailer camp. Very little remains of lower Camp, and nothing remains of the main camp. Rubble from the sorting shed is disappearing fast



Lower Camp was up-river from the main camp. The river was beyond the cabins to the right.

— From the collection of Sonny Rider.

(picture frames from “old barn wood”?). The only item of machinery to be found is a small boiler. For some odd reason this small boiler is up on the side of a the hill where the houses would have been. It is too small to have been part of the saw-mill’s main plant.¹⁴

In researching the Ellingson operation I contacted Robert Ellingson, III, current head of the Ellingson Lumber Company. From the information Mr. Ellingson provided, here is a description of the operation:¹⁵

In 1949 Ellingson Lumber Company purchased a sawmill from Ralph L. Smith who had built it in about 1946. The mill was located about four miles downstream on the South Fork of the John Day River from the Bonham Keerins Ranch. The sawmill was located about 45 miles southwest of John Day, Oregon, and about 84 miles east of Prineville, Oregon. In 1951 the mill was destroyed by fire and was rebuilt over a period of several months by company personnel.

The mill was a 7-foot band mill with a resaw, edger, and edge sorter. The plant generated its own power, first with a diesel



This small boiler is the only item of machinery still at the mill site. The boiler sits near the middle of the housing area.

— From the author’s collection.

electric generator, and later with a wood fired boiler/turbine generator. In about 1956 Central Oregon Co-op brought power into the Ellingson Lumber Co. site.¹⁶ This, plus the shopping by employees and operational expenses by the mill itself, contributed a great deal to the economic development of both Crook and Grant Counties.

Logs were fed into the mill out of a large pond, which obtained its water out of the South Fork of the John Day River. In the early years the company did its own logging using mainly D6 skid cats. Later the logging and lumber haul was done by contractors. One of the first contractors of logging and lumber haul was Walt Ruberg. Lumber was shipped by truck to a planer and rail site at Seneca, Oregon, a distance of about 36 miles.

13. That road now follows the river from the Keerins Ranch to near Dayville. The road through to Dayville did not exist during the days the mill operated. When attempting to learn more about the road, I couldn’t find any government organization that wanted to admit ownership.

14. It has been learned that this boiler provided hot water for the men living in the bunkhouse.

15. This information was compiled for Mr. Ellingson by Lloyd Evans, an employee of Ellingson Lumber Company at Izee from February 1956 to June 1959.

Employees of the logging, lumber haul, sawmill and planer numbered between 75 and 100.

Logs for the sawmill were obtained primarily from the Malheur and Ochoco National Forests. In the 1950's logs were mainly high quality pine logs and it was not unusual to cut 90 to 100 thousand board feet in an 8 hour shift.

After going through the planer operation at Seneca, the lumber was shipped by rail to various points throughout the East and Midwest.

There was a large camp associated with the mill that included 30 plus houses, 20 plus trailer sites, five bunkhouses, a cookhouse, a company store, gas pumps, post office, a community hall, and a company school bus that transported students several miles upriver to school at Izee. Roads were maintained by the company on about half the distance to the school site. Rent for the company houses was \$20 per month. When the mill was temporarily shut down, no rent was charged. The cookhouse served excellent meals for \$1 which was deducted from paychecks, as was the rent and groceries from the store. The community hall was used a great deal for dances, card tournaments, etc.

Due to competition for logs by mills in Burns, Prineville, and John Day, the mill closed down in 1966, followed by a closure of the planer, in Seneca, the following year. Most of the sawmill equipment was sent to other Ellingson plants at Unity and Baker City, Oregon.

In later years the owner of the property (Keerins Ranch) dismantled all the houses, etc. and today, all that remains of a once

busy place is the mill pond. A road now goes down the South Fork of the John Day River to Dayville, Oregon.

In 1966 Sonny Rider and the demolition crew, after salvaging everything that was salvageable, burned what was left. Some of those photographs are included in the album which follows.

Ellingson Lumber Co., Partial List of Employees

The names here represent employees that worked for varying lengths of time, and at different times, at the Izee site. The asterisk (*) indicates deceased. This list has been prepared with the help of Sonny and Marilyn Rider, Lloyd Evans, Royce Dotson and Gordon Paustian. Some names are missing; for those that have been missed, sincere apologies.

<u>Employee Name & Spouse</u>	<u>Position</u>
Abdish, Al	lift truck driver
Ashcraft, Smoky & Ione	
Barr, Jim* & Jean*	logger
Bearden, Roy*	saw filer
Beebe, Floyd	
Bennet, Gilbert* and Bev	woods
Bezona, Dale & Bonnie	tail sawyer
Black, Johnnie*	machinist
Boyer, Richard & Mary	
Brainard, Miles & Barb	dry chain
Bratt, Vern* & Amy	saw filer
Browning, (unknown)	truck driver
Buchanan, Jim & Sue	end sorter
Buford, Jim & Gloria	sawyer; handyman
Bullock, Dave & Gerhilda*	lift truck driver
Burril, Deloy & Ellen	tail sawyer
Collins, Albert*	truck driver
Cook, Gordon & Shirley	log truck driver
Cook, Pete & Donna*	truck driver
Cox, "Shorty"*	watchman
Crafton, Leonard	Seneca planer
Curtis, Bud* ("Slim")	truck driver
Demastus, Jim	faller
Drake, John	end sorter
Drake, Steve* Veda*	mill maintenance
Evans, Lloyd & Dolly*	first bookkeeper ¹⁷

16. "The year 1956 also marked the completion of a power line to the site, still quite remarkable for its length and location. Earlier, in the spring of 1954, a delegation of ranchers from the Izee/Suplee area, some 40 miles east of Paulina, met with the Central Electric Co-op Board to discuss the feasibility of extending power lines into their area. Although only about 85 potential customers were in the area, the prospects for the co-op line extension was sweetened considerably by the existence of the Ellingson Lumber Co. sawmill near Izee. The small mill community had about 50 residential customers, plus the considerable load of the mill itself...." (James R. Ramsey, *History of Central Electric Cooperative, Inc. 1940-1990*; Central Electric Cooperative, Inc.; 1991.) To one visiting the site today it seems strange to see power lines that end in the middle of nowhere. Several people have told me the same story which I'm about to tell you. A group of locals and CEC officials were standing around talking about "turning on the power." Bonham Kerrins is said to have asked, "How long will it take to get here?"

GREEN GOLD

Evick, Johnnie*	boiler room	Ostberg, Cork & Sally	truck driver
Fallet, Keith & Beverly		Panky, Leo* & Avis*	edgerman
Fisher, Jim* & Mary	woods	Parrett, Alfred & Bonnie	log truck driver
Fooks, Raymond & Lucille		Paustian, Gordon & Fay	edgerman,
Gabiola, "Chappy"*	boss		handy-man,
Goodman, ("Scarface") Hank*	sawyer		oiler, millright
Graves, Elbert* ("Pop")	carpenter	Paustian, Jack & Illa	oiler
Gunder, Pat & Cap	sawyer	Paustian, Les & Janice	off-bearer
Hale, Fred* & Joanne	logger		& oiler
Hankins, Henry	lumber truck	Porter, Billy* & Margaret	
Hardinbrook, Si & Cynthia	fitter		
Hardwick, Don* & John*	contract loggers	Porter, John*	truck shop
Harris, Buzz	green chain		mechanic
Harris, T.A.	logging boss	Post, George	laborer
Hart, Helen	cook	Post, Jim	boiler room
Hasher, Bobby*	electrician	Post, John	boiler room
Hasher, Red* & Bobbie	electrician	Post, Junior & Kay	stacker operator
Hayes, Ben	stacker		& fireman
Hayes, Paul* & Betty	relief man	Powell, Harold*	grader
Huffman, Bob & Donna	lift truck driver	Reilly, Clayton & Lucille	floor man
Huffman, John*	log truck driver	Rhea, Bill* & Tina	loader operator
Hunsucker, Gene		Rider, Don & Rhea	tail sawyer
Hunsucker, John	watchman	Rider, Larry* & Joyce	ratchet setter
Jacobs, M.C.* & Ruth		Rider, Leonard & Joyce	end sorter
Johnson, Allen & Shirley	logger	Salisbury, "Little Joe"*	sawyer
Johnson, Wilber & Billy	dry kiln operator	Schiewe, Ray & Eloise	truck driver
Johnston, Bob & Donna	grader	Schoenburger, (unknown)	
Jones, Burl & Maymie*	shop mechanic	Shaver, Bud* & Alma*	bull cook
Jones, Jack & Darlene		Shaver, Doug	dry chain
Kerns, Ben & Billi*	truck driver	Simpson, Charlie	bull cook's helper
Kerr, Don & Deloris	logging	Simpson, Dale & Nellie	chain puller
Kerry, Bob	FS scaler	Smith, BobSmith, Gladys* & Helen	fireman
Kimball, Lewis* & Vivian	faller	Smith, Howard* & Ruby	tallyman
King, Mike		Smith, Jim*	sticker picker
Lane, Jack & Marilyn	logging	Sporup, Emery* & Ione*	bookkeeper
Langford, D.A. & June	cook house	Sporup, Walt*	carpenter
Larkin, Earl* & Hazel*	Hazel ran store;	Steele, Mike & Roma	
	Earl was millright	Strong, Bruce	saw filer
	mill boss	Thrall, Richard & Becky	truck mechanic
	dry chain	Tuttle, Glen & Mary	truck mechanic
		Tuttle, Keith & Leslie	
Lemburger, Jack*		Upshaw, Carl* & Lillian*	
Lemburger, John		Van Leuven, Darrell	truck driver
Lyons, Keith & Kay	sticker picker	Wainsberg, Joe*	chain puller
MacKinnen, Pat (Siuckoia)	green chain	Ward, Frank	dry kiln operator
McCloughan, Bill*	truck driver	Ward, Jerry & Althea	
McCloughan, Thad & Zella	cook house	Wells, Del & Evelyn	FS scaler
McGetrick, Harley	logger	Wise, Erb & Dorothy	contract logger
Miles, Bud* & Mildred		Wise, Kenny & Carmen	contract logger
Miller, Jim* & Kathryn		Wordall, Rick & Cindy	pond monkey
Munter, Alice		Zinke, Steve	FS scaler
Newton, James & Carol	logger		
Newton, Logan*	contract logger		
Oliver, Roy* & Verna			



The equipment repair shop on the day it was destroyed by fire, on purpose, 1966. Pretend that these two photos are in vivid color; they are quite dramatic. (Sonny Rider collection)



17. Also camp manager and purchasing.

