

The City of Sisters History

The town of Sisters derives its name from the three prominent Cascade peaks that grace the southwestern skyline: Faith, Hope, and Charity, collectively known as the Three Sisters.

A very old story suggests that the mountains were named in the 1840s by members of a Methodist mission based in Salem. Others credit trappers who frequented the region in the early part of the 19th century.

The town was officially christened when the post office at Camp Polk, some three miles to the north, closed in 1888 and was moved to the future town of Sisters. The new post office was moved to a store owned by John Smith, and local residents were invited to submit names for the new facility. Local merchant Jacob Quilberg's entry was accepted by the US Postal Department, and the handful of wood frame buildings lying at the junction of the Santiam and McKenzie roads officially became known as Sisters.

Sheep traffic over the Santiam wagon road was responsible for the early growth of settlement. Then on July 10, 1901, two enterprising brothers, Alex and Robert Smith, officially platted the City of Sisters. As the only town between Prineville and the mountains, the newly platted town grew quickly. By 1904 the Prineville Herald wrote of Sisters, "there are two good stores, a hotel, blacksmith shop, saloon, real estate office, livery barn and a splendid schoolhouse costing \$1,800, and a short distance from town is a fine lumbering mill."

By the turn of the century, cattle raising had replaced sheep herding as the main industry in the region. In Sisters, cattle raising focused around the vast holdings of the Black Butte Land & Livestock Company. The large firm, begun by Nick Lambert, centered around two stations, the A.S. Holmes Ranch and the Black Butte Ranch. The company lasted until about 1920.

Replacing the cattle industry was the logging industry. Sawmills, large and small, prospered in the rich forest land surrounding the town. The first large operation was the Duckett & Spoo mill, built in 1914. Before then small operations were common in the area as early as 1890.

New businesses continued to open their doors to serve the needs of the ever-growing number of settlers and the future of Sisters looked bright. But two fires in the 1920s threatened to reduce this blossoming community to little more than ashes and fond memories.

In May of 1923, local store owner Frank Leithauser noticed smoke coming from an untended garage near the center of town. The garage housed equipment used for work on the McKenzie Highway. Flames spread quickly, igniting at least 10 of the town's wood frame structures in less than 20 minutes. There were fewer than 10 men in town to fight the blaze because everyone else was in nearby Redmond to attend a track meet.

The flames moved west and attacked the town drug store owned by George Aitken. Above the store was Forest Service office space. In an attempt to save important documents, Mrs. Fred McKinney attempted to gain entry into the building, but she was driven back by the intense heat.

Mrs. McKinney suffered a scorched face and forearm, and all Forest Service documents in the building were destroyed.

It was estimated that several hundred people from the area gathered to watch the blaze, which could be seen for miles. People in the surrounding countryside initially thought it was a forest fire.

In September of 1924 the town was again set upon by flames. And although half of the town subsequently burned, the townspeople considered themselves lucky. Had the Hotel Sisters and the Sorensen service station across the street caught fire, it was widely believed that the entire town would have been destroyed. The total loss was estimated at \$25,000.

Like many towns, Sisters has had its ups and downs in subsequent years. In 1946 after several failed attempts the city was officially incorporated. In the 1980s, the city weathered a deep economic crisis and emerged as a tourist destination. The economic upswing was spurred by the redevelopment of the old Black Butte Land & Livestock holdings to the west and was further fueled by the establishment of Bend as a region wide tourist destination. Once again Sisters profited by its location as the last major stopping point before traveling over the Cascade Mountains.