

FROM TREES TO CHARCOAL

THE ROLE PLAYED BY THE TRYON CREEK FOREST IN THE PRODUCTION OF LAKE OSWEGO IRON.



A cross section of a charcoal mound. Drawing by Susanna Kuo. Courtesy of the artist.

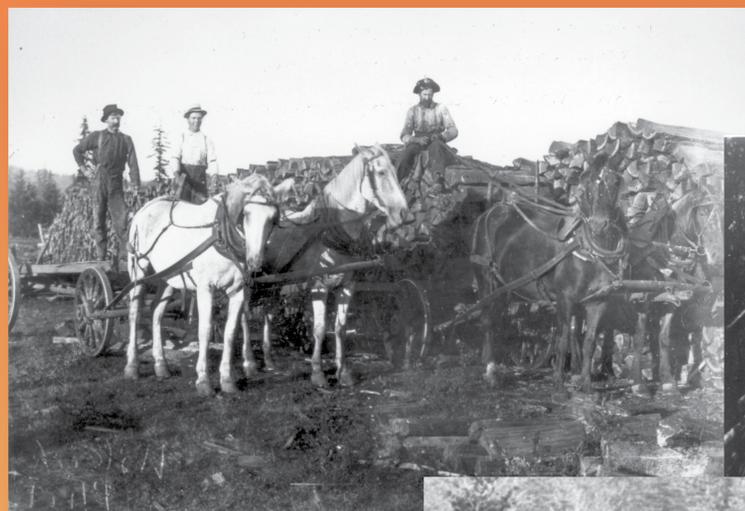


Collier tending a charcoal mound. Drawing by Susanna Kuo. Courtesy of the artist.

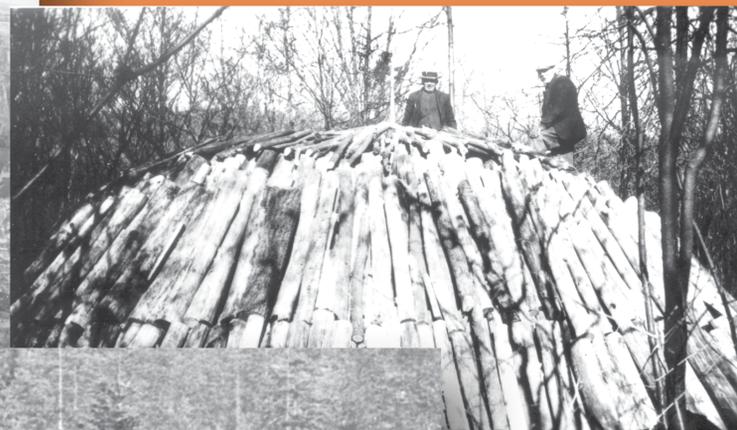
In the late 19th century, the iron industry in Oswego required enormous quantities of charcoal fuel. Between 1867 and 1885 smoking charcoal pits dotted the landscape from Tryon Creek to West Linn. One of these charcoal pits was located at this site beside a wagon road, which later became the Iron Mountain Trail.

It took a lot of work to make charcoal. First, Chinese laborers cut down big Douglas-fir trees and chopped them into a useable size. One acre of forest produced about 100 cords of wood (one cord of wood made about 50 bushels of charcoal). A teamster hauled the cordwood to a cleared area called the "hearth." The collier and his assistants carefully built the mound. The collier covered the mound with dirt and leaves, and then dropped hot coals into the middle down a hole in the top of the mound.

The coals, like a match, ignited the wood. During the next two weeks the wood smoldered, driving off volatile compounds and moisture, leaving pure carbon. When the collier determined that the charcoal was finished, he and his assistants "raked out" the mound. They were careful not to break up the chunks of charcoal too much. Finally, laborers loaded the charcoal into a wagon and drove it to the furnace.



Men with cordwood and teams of horses in the Oswego area. Photo courtesy of the Lake Oswego Public Library.



Finished mound. Photo courtesy of Hopewell National Historic Site in Pennsylvania. From a charcoal-making reenactment, cir. 1969.



Full charcoal wagon at the Oswego iron furnace - Photo detail of an 1867 photo by Carleton E. Watkins. Courtesy of the Oregon Historical Society OrHi#1455.

