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## Estacada

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# Estacada

by Jeremy R. Young

*“Close to everything, but away from it all.”*

That’s the official motto of this former timber town in Clackamas County, 30 miles southeast of Portland. This “city” of nearly 2,700 is remotely tucked away in pristine wilderness—set against the backdrop of the Mt. Hood National Forest and the Clackamas River Gorge—yet is within reach of Portland’s hustle and bustle. The scenic drive from Portland to Estacada, via OR-224, typically takes forty-five minutes. Just over a hundred years ago, however, paved roads didn’t even reach this place.

In fact, the town wouldn’t even exist today if it hadn’t been for the construction of the Clackamas River’s first hydroelectric dam, the Cazadero, in 1905. At the turn of the last century, the rapidly growing City of Portland (pop. 90,000) needed electricity to power its streetlights. In 1901, after the successful completion of a hydro power station at Oregon City, the Oregon Water Power and Railway Company acquired property along the Clackamas and built a rail line from Gresham to the new site through the nearby town of Boring.

What literally started as a “tent city” for workers building the dam quickly sprouted into a full-fledged community of nearly 400 by October 1904. Before anyone knew it, streets were platted and Estacada was incorporated the following year. Local lore has it that the town’s name, Spanish for “marked with stakes,” was selected at random from a U.S. map

depicting the Llano Estacado region of Texas.

The newly constructed rail line to Estacada almost immediately gave rise to a new lumber industry that would drive the economy of this place for almost a century. The rail line not only transported the abundant natural resource, but also brought multitudes of urbanites from Portland by streetcar to picnic and enjoy the great outdoors. The scenic wonderland surrounding the new town provided a much-needed retreat from the industrial city. For fifty cents, Portlanders could board the Estacada-Cazadero streetcar at the Morrison Bridge and be transported to a forested oasis for the day. For a dollar more, passengers could ride the streetcar plus enjoy dinner at the new Hotel Estacada on Main Street.

The line also lured many a fisherman from Portland to the shores of the Clackamas at Estacada, where salmon and steelhead trout were plentiful. As such, the railway quickly became known as the “Trout Route.”

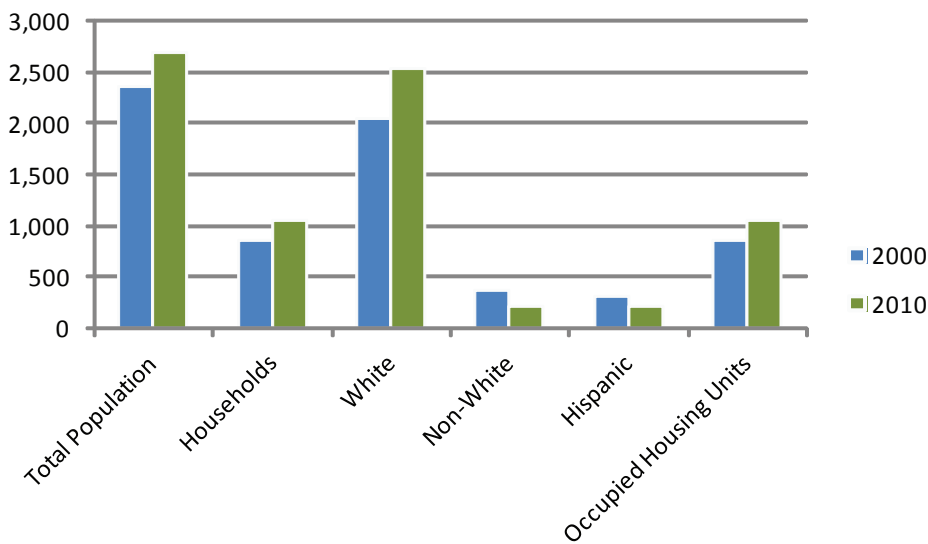
Tourism was an important component of Estacada’s early economy, but began to fizzle after the popular streetcar line ended passenger service to the town in the early 1930s. It was ultimately timber, not tourism, which kept Estacada residents and business owners prosperous, however.

Legend has it that logging trucks chugged through town at a pace of one





**Estacada Census Profile  
2000 and 2010**



per minute during big timber’s glory days in the 1950s and 1960s. During this time, one could measure Estacada’s economic pulse by simply counting the logging trucks as they rolled through town rattling downtown storefront windows.

For the greater part of a century, most residents of Estacada were employed at the saw mill; one of the metro area’s largest producers of lumber products. Gradually, over time, increased state and federal regulations imposed on the logging industry resulted in its decline, and the town’s economic pulse began to slow dramatically by the 1980s. After holding on for dear life for two decades, the Estacada Saw Mill Co. closed its doors for good in 2007. As

*Leading the charge for a renewed civic pride in recent years is a group of local artists who have banded together to transform their community one brush stroke at a time.*

a result, many downtown shops have also shuttered their doors in recent years.

“The decline of the timber industry has changed the identity of Estacada. Most of us no longer see Estacada as a lumber town or mill town,” says Mayor-elect Brent Dodrill. Like many other former timber towns throughout the state that are now confronted by an identity crisis, Estacada, too, is struggling to reinvent itself.

Despite Estacada’s depressed economy, residents, downtown business owners and local elected officials haven’t lost hope in their town. Leading the charge for a renewed civic pride in recent years is a group of local artists who have banded together to transform their community one brush stroke at a time.

Each summer, the ArtBack Artists Cooperative has wowed the community with their “mural-in-a-weekend” event. During this event, a mural depicting a unique aspect of Estacada history or culture is painted on a blank wall in town. Since 1994, murals have been painted portraying the history of the native peoples who occupy the Pacific Northwest; Estacada’s timber heritage; the steam engines and streetcars that once carried dam workers and throngs of city dwellers to this place; the area’s scenic beauty and rich wildlife; recreational opportunities on the Clackamas and in the Mt. Hood National Forest; as well as other themes.

The creative class has become a thriving presence in Downtown Estacada. The Spiral Gallery on Broadway Street now attracts arts enthusiasts from around the region on the first Friday of every month. Across the street, another type of innovative “spirit” draws quite the crowd: the craft-brewed beer at Fearless Brewing Co.

Estacada’s elected officials have acknowledged the role of the creative class

in helping to market downtown as a destination. It’s quite apparent that more needs to be done to rebuild the city’s economy and attract new industry, however.

In April 2011, the state Department of Land Conservation and Development approved the city’s application to annex 130 acres of farmland into its urban growth boundary to create an industrial sanctuary along the city’s western boundary. “We hope to see this [land] developed and bring some great jobs to our area,” Mayor-elect Dodrill explains.

In the meantime, while city leaders try to lure new industry over the next few years, officials like Dodrill hope to move forward with two plans adopted by the city in the last five years: The Estacada Downtown Urban Renewal Plan (2007) and the City of Estacada Downtown & Riverside Area Plan (2011). These plans outline goals for Estacada’s historic Downtown core as well as its scenic riverfront. The latter could be a boon for efforts to boost tourism and recreational activities in the area.

Dodrill takes office on January 1. When asked about moving forward on the Downtown & Riverside Area Plan, he said, “This plan will begin to pick up speed over the next three to five years and some great changes will be made to the historic downtown area.”

About the people who live and work here, Dodrill says this: “The people of Estacada are wonderful, hard-working people who work together for the good of the community. Our new identity is not fully formed yet, but it’s in the process.” **M**

*Jeremy R. Young is a Lancaster, PA native and a Master of Urban and Regional Planning student at Portland State University.*