

History of Lincoln County

Ice and water created most of the geographical features of Lincoln County. Once, this area was a wide empty plain high above sea level and barren of animal or plant life. When the planet cooled and shrank, a great range of mountains heaved up to the west along what is now the Pacific Coast. This upheaval caused the sea to flow in upon the plains from the Gulf of Mexico to the Arctic Ocean. Through the ages, sediment eroded from these mountains and settled to the bottom of this inland sea, burying in the process billions of tons of shells and skeletons of sea creatures to eventually form limestone rock. Millions of years later the earth's forces caused this sea to gradually uplift to form the Rocky Mountains. In the intervening 60 or 70 million years the solid rock tops of the mountains weathered until their height was reduced by two (2) or more miles. Today geologists marvel that the oldest rocks on earth are exposed in the Siyeh Formation at the top of northwest Montana's mountains.

After the glaciers formed, over a million years ago, they alternately advanced and receded as the climate changed until their last retreat some 25,000 years ago. They covered all but the highest peaks. The Tobacco Valley is part of the Rocky Mountain Trench, which filled with a continental glacier in its 900 mile length from the Yukon to St. Ignatius, Montana. The glacier formed Glacial Lake Missoula and scraped out the valleys under it and the sediment flowing into the lake created the Tobacco Plains. The Kootenai River Valley was carved out by another glacier and as it melted, it too created a lake, Lake Kootenai, which left vast deposits of silt. In the years since, the Kootenai River has been cutting through the deposits eroding down to its present level.

As the glaciers melted, the first inhabitants arrived somewhere around 10,000 years ago. They were the Kootenai (or Ktunaxa) Indians. Their name is spelled Kootenay in Canada and anthropologists use Kutenai. To other tribes they were the "Deer Robe People," a cross between the Plateau Indians to the west and the Plains Indians to the east. They loved to hunt buffalo, as well as elk, goat, sheep, moose, bear and caribou. Many early explorers extolled their deer hunting ability and clothing made from their elegantly tanned hides. They constructed canoes of exquisite workmanship with which to travel the rivers and lakes to fish using bone for hooks. Lincoln County's

lands also provided berry-picking opportunities, with huckleberries, elderberries, thimbleberries, serviceberries and strawberries. The Kootenai knowledge of the physical geography was legendary and they, no doubt, knew every nook and cranny in the area. Early explorers recognized the Kootenai as great climbers with tremendous leg muscles. The explorers were unable to maintain a similar pace when traveling with Kootenai hunters. A series of interconnected trails, similar to our current road and highway systems, crisscrossed the Kootenai homeland. For centuries, these trails led to adventure whether it was hunting, fishing, trading or war before becoming many of our current roads and highways.

The Kootenai grew one crop, tobacco, from which the Tobacco Valley was named. It was the first explorer to this area, David Thompson, who named the Tobacco Valley. He traveled down the Kootenai River in the spring of 1808 and his explorations led to many others following in his footsteps. In the first half of the 19th century, fur trappers joined the Indians along the trails. Most trappers worked for the British Company North West Fur and later the Hudson Bay Company. Pine martin, often called the American sable, was the most valuable fur-bearing animal. Others, including wolverine, fisher, weasel (ermine), mink, wolverine, coyote, bobcat, lynx as well as beaver and muskrats, were all available in the wilds of Lincoln County.

In the last half of the 1800s miners entered the region. Lincoln County had no major gold finds but other minerals became important and mining remains an important industry in the southern half of the county.



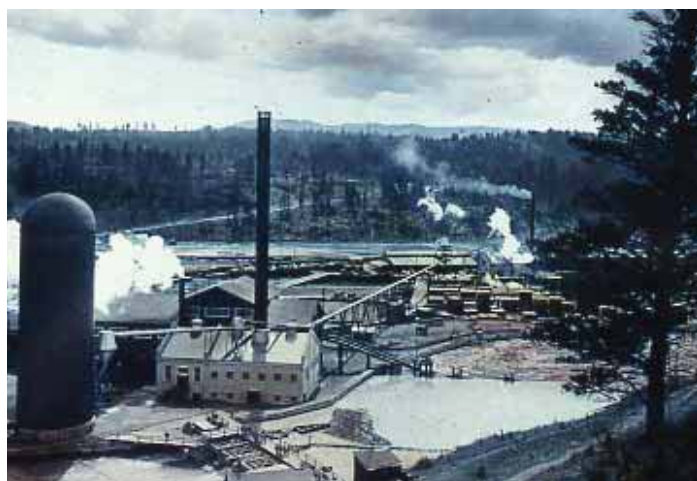
"Perfect 2 Speed, Summit of the Yaak"

Montana became a state in 1899 and Lincoln County was part of Missoula County until Flathead County was created out of the most northwest sections of the state. Eventually Lincoln County was created in 1909 from the most northwestern corner of Flathead County and was named for President Abraham Lincoln. After a long fight between Eureka and Libby, including three trips to the Montana State Supreme Court, the County Seat was established at Libby.

Historically, because most of Lincoln County is forested, logging was the most important industry. At one time, Libby and Eureka had 2 of the largest sawmills in the state.

Some ranching and agriculture operations can be found in the county, mainly in the Tobacco Valley, which is more open than the mountainous terrain and narrow river valleys of the southern part of the county. The Christmas tree industry was also important in Lincoln County. At one time, northwestern Montana was known as the “Christmas Tree Capital of the World”.

The population of the county increased after 1909 as the timber industry boomed. A steep decline in population followed the reduction of the lumber manufacturing business and population remained fairly steady during the 30’s, 40’s and 50’s. The building of Libby Dam and the Flathead Railroad tunnel, through Elk Mountain, in the 60’s and 70’s led to a dramatic growth of residents. Many left after the completion of the dam and tunnel in 1973, but a few stayed and became permanent residents.



Eureka Lumber Company, circa 1917

In the decade of the 1990’s, the population skyrocketed as new residents came to make their home in this beautiful section of Montana.



Construction of Libby Dam 1970



Town of Marston



Things didn't always go right in the good 'ol days