

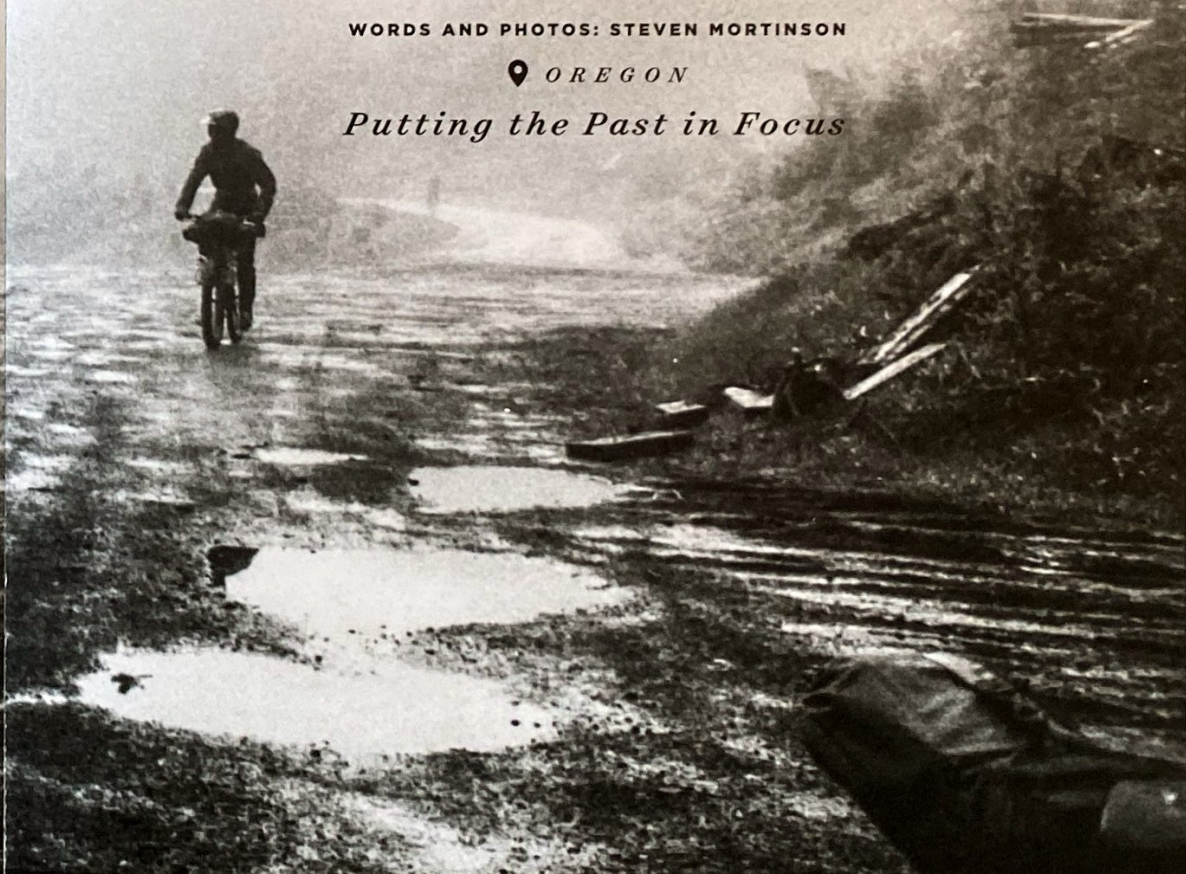


BURN BY BIKE

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📍 OREGON

Putting the Past in Focus



Few people have heard of the great Tillamook Burn, and only a fraction of those know much about it. Being an Oregonian, whispers of it had reached my ears as a youngster, but no explanations were ever given. The most I knew of the word "Tillamook" was the beloved cheese that bears the area's namesake, which is a product of the factories, cows, and dairies in the northwestern part of the state.

Spanning from the Columbia River, over the Coast Range, and to the Oregon Coast, the Tillamook State Forest appears just like any other forest in the Pacific Northwest today: lush green conifers with plentiful wildlife and rushing streams. However, an observant eye will note that it's still a young forest, and the most mature trees are only about 80 years old. There's a deep, mysterious history behind its massive expanse of

young Douglas-fir, hemlock, and cedar. What was the Tillamook Burn? Having bikepacked through it in the past without an answer to the question, I was determined to find out more.

It might seem silly to ask, "Why learn about a place's history?" But how many times do we just ride through an area without a thought? In Oregon, I've become so accustomed to traveling past rusted-out mills and dilapidated barns that I forget there's likely a long and storied history behind every one of them.

Although I've pedaled from Portland to the coast before, passing through the Tillamook Burn, I only recently learned the full story of the area. Doing so triggered something in me: the desire to ride through it again to observe and appreciate it in a new light. Additionally, I wanted to photograph it entirely on



analog black and white film—to imprint it on emulsion with silver halide crystals, a truly chemical process, not so different from how it might have been captured mid-century.

Learning about a place takes work. I had to go to my local library and dig up books published 30 years ago to find reliable information about the Tillamook Burn. But your appreciation and value for a place can increase ten-fold with more knowledge, even if there might be a dark history hidden there. Understanding a place's past enables you to empathize with the people who still live there, the way they live and work, and why they hold so fiercely to certain ideologies.

For this trip, I created a 100-mile loop starting in the middle of the Tillamook State Forest at Elk Creek, traversing west over the mountain range to the Kilchis

River, and popping out at the coastal town of Tillamook. From there, the route pushes back east up the Trask River Valley, hopping over the mountains and heading north to return to Elk Creek along the Wilson River. I'd ridden parts of the Trask River Road and trails around Elk Creek, but everything else was new terrain for me.

I gathered friends JT, Susie, and Meredith, and we set off to ride the route over two days. It was to be a quick weekend getaway and a chance to share bits of my newly discovered knowledge about the Tillamook Burn with my companions. I hoped it would also spark their interest in the area's beauty and history. Of course, in typical Oregon fashion, even at the end of May, we were hit with miserable rainy and cold conditions from the start. Good company can lift the spirits, though, and it was plentiful.

“In the blink of an eye, a once flourishing and towering forest was no more.”

Upbeat, positive adventure buddies are some of the most invaluable tools in your kit.

Step one was to get over the mountain pass and reach Tillamook, where beer and good food awaited us. As it was just a weekend outing, we knew we could withstand being soaked to the bone for two days. And despite the marginal weather, I was still looking forward to seeing, riding through, and photographing this place that had captured my imagination.

Until 1933, the Tillamook was one of the most magnificent old-growth forests in the world. Douglas-fir trees towered up to 300 feet high, and it's said they grew so dense that some parts of the forest had never been seen up close by humans. Millions of animals and plants had called this forest home, but it would soon become home to their ashes.

The summer of 1933 was an exceptionally dry one. There had been no significant rain for two straight months. It was mid-August, and foresters urged logging operations to shut down until the extreme conditions had passed. But with jobs scarce during the Great Depression and few laws governing unsafe working conditions, logging continued.

There's no consensus on exactly how the fires started. One account tells of “the last Douglas-fir of the day” being dragged up toward a landing by a steam-powered yarding donkey, and as it ground over a fallen cedar, friction started the flames. Whether ignited by logging or some other natural cause, a large plume of smoke had risen into the sky above Gales Creek by that afternoon, eventually reaching 40,000 feet into the atmosphere. It could be seen from Salem, Oregon, some 70 miles southeast.

Over the next 10 days, despite firefighting efforts, which were still quite primitive, nearly 240,000 acres of forest were burned. Twelve billion board feet of Oregon's timber was destroyed—enough to build nearly a million modern five-room homes—and the majority of the wild-life perished. In the blink of an eye, a once flourishing and towering forest was no more.





Feeble efforts to replant and replenish the land followed the fire, but 1939, 1945, and 1951 (the “six-year jinx”) saw additional large fires in the Tillamook. What remained was a dry expanse of dead matchstick timber, an eyesore to Oregonians traveling and vacationing from Portland to the state’s popular northwest beaches. Travelers disliked the area so much that Oregon’s state legislature heard formal complaints about it. A \$12 million funding bond was passed by voters in 1948 (prior to the 1951 fire), and an ambitious plan was made to restore the 355,000-acre wasteland. At the time, it would be the largest single forest rehabilitation attempt in world history.

In the 25 years following the last major fire, through a momentous effort, the Tillamook was replanted, and the forester profession became more realized. The Tillamook was an invaluable research lab for soils, regrowth, and new foresting practices. Government-funded nurseries were established with the sole purpose of supplying trees to be planted in the Tillamook. Paid work crews planted year-round, and communities got involved as school children, families, and volunteers came out to the forest to help with the massive operation. For the first time, advances in technology allowed the deployment of helicopters in replanting. Seed hoppers rigged to their sides, they dropped tree seed on more than 97,000 acres of difficult-to-access land.

In addition to reforestation, fire suppression plans were put into place with water tower installations, fire crew stations, lookout towers, new recreational rules, and the construction of 164 miles of fire access roads specifically built to enable rangers to reach any new fire within 30 minutes of it being spotted.

In the 1990s, logging of selective state-leased and -monitored lands resumed. Timber sales continue to be a lucrative export industry for Oregon, and advances in forestry science and technology have made it more sustainable. Current Oregon reforestation rules require seedlings to be planted within two years after logging, and dated planting signs are posted throughout the forest.



With logging comes dirt roads that create connections, skirt highways, teeter along misty ridges, and sweep along river valleys. Although the spider web of roads scar the mountainsides and disrupt the natural beauty, they make for a bikepacker's paradise, allowing for innumerable shortcuts, reroutes, and possibilities for exploration. All of the bikepacking routes from Portland to the Oregon Coast have one thing in common: they go through the Tillamook Forest, a place that was once a burned-out void and is once again a thriving forest ecosystem.

Climbing over the mountain pass, sopping wet, we ventured through vast active logging operations and past large steel machines—skidders, bunchers, and loaders—awaiting their next assignment, everything enveloped in the thick whiteness of the low clouds. Apart from the gentle pattering of rain and tick-ticking of freehub pawls, it was oddly quiet.

Shielding my Minolta camera from the rain, I framed up JT riding toward me past a ghostly knuckleboom log loader and released the shutter. From our viewpoints, we saw only white, somber nothingness, swaths of clear-cut land; trees sacrificed for industry, jobs, and economy.

As much of an eye-sore as these clear cuts were, it wasn't hard to shift our focus while pedaling forward. Soon we were passing steep hillsides packed thick with tall conifers. This was physical evidence of the successful implementation of a plan to bring the Tillamook Forest back to life. And there we were in the middle of it, soaking up all the benefits.

Ripping down the descent, whooping and hollering, my hardtail bouncing over the rock-strewn path on its burly 2.8-inch tubeless tires, I was having a blast. In the back of my mind, though, I knew two of my fellow riders on traditional rigid gravel grinders would have sore wrists and thin brake pads by the end of the section.

We leveled out into the Kilchis River Valley and, after a short break to give everyone's hands a rest, pressed on

west toward the coast. Innumerable swimming holes that would have been must-stop places for a coffee and a swim in warmer months were less than welcoming in this weather. Even still, seeing this gorgeous landscape flourishing, almost untouched in appearance, was uplifting. Evidence of the Burn now covered, it wasn't hard to imagine it turning into a massive old-growth forest again someday.

People living in mid-twentieth century northwest Oregon wouldn't have known if their restoration work had paid off until around the 1970s. It was all a giant experiment. No one had ever tried to restore an entire forest. But today, thanks to their dedication, the Tillamook State Forest looks like a forest again. The wildlife has returned, and recreational opportunities abound for off-road enthusiasts, hikers, equestrians, and bikepackers. The story of the Tillamook Burn is one of resilience, and it stands as an example of what's possible when the people and the state cooperate for a common good.

Reaching the town of Tillamook, we filled up on fresh local beer and grub. As the sun dropped, the weather lifted and we nested down along the coast, a pleasant stealth camp surrounded by waist-high dune grass. The next day, a robust meal at Cafe Fern fueled us through the second half of our journey back east along the Trask River. A calm morning shifted again to dismal conditions as we crested the mountains. A fresh landslide made for a two-mile detour, but eager to finish and dry out, we made quick work of the remaining miles, completing the loop and returning to where we'd begun just a day before.

Back home in my bathroom, I plopped my rolls of 35mm film into a double-layered dark bag to prep them for the developing tank. So many things can go wrong in film development: a dark bag with a light leak, an unruly film spool, water temperatures off by a few degrees, expired chemicals. Success depends on a combination of muscle memory, mathematics, and luck. And it all culminates when you remove the spool from the tank and take your first look. Are there images?





The scariest result when shooting and developing film is if you didn't capture anything at all. It's likely the Tillamook restorers had the same question about the Burn: "Would all this hard work pay off?"

When I first mentioned this photo project to people, many asked me if I had a vendetta against loggers or if I was some sort of tree-hugger since many of my images show logging operations and clear-cuts common for the industry. Although I'm rather fond of trees, I have nothing against loggers, and I think our U.S. foresters seem to be doing a fair job of balancing restrictions on logging.

Rather, it was the people involved with the Burn and the reforestation effort who inspired me to pursue the project. It didn't matter what background they had—city folk, country folk, loggers, foresters, farmers, homesteaders—they all felt like they had skin in the game. They all felt an obligation to do something about the Burn, a calamity that had wrecked their immediate environment. They were willing to break down the barriers between themselves and make sacrifices for the greater good. And what was thought to be an impossible problem—reviving 355,000 acres of ash and destruction—is now a mighty forest, a symbol of their cooperative spirit.

Our two-day, 100-mile bikepacking trip through the reforested Tillamook instilled a new appreciation for the land and the people and organizations that continue working to restore it. The Tillamook Burn wasn't that long ago in human years and is infinitesimally more recent in ecological time. To see a forest *become* a forest in such a short time is truly a privilege.

Perhaps that's the lesson to be learned. What are our present-day calamities? Climate change, plastic pollution, and freshwater access come to mind. Maybe these awful problems, which affect us all, present an opportunity to bring us together for good. ■