

Newport

By Diane Disse

Newport, with a population of about 10,000, is the largest city in Lincoln County and, since 1952, the county seat. The largest minority population is Hispanic, at about 8.5 percent of the population. Tourism, fishing, and shipping are the major industries.

Situated on the coast west of the Coast Range, Newport has the advantage of a major bay. Freshwater and saltwater species flourished in the early years and continue to provide a livelihood for the largest commercial fishing fleet in Oregon. Fisheries help control the harvest of salmon, halibut, and crab. They also bring in tuna, shrimp, Dungeness crab, flounder, sole, rockfish, and lingcod. Newport has a thriving charter fishing and whale-watching business.

Newport sits on land that once was the home of the Yacona Indians, whose history can be documented for at least three thousand years. By the time the Coast Reservation was established in 1855, relocating more than twenty tribes from Oregon and northern California, the Yacona population had been nearly decimated from disease and forest fires.

The town developed around the Yaquina Bay area, which opened to white settlement in 1866 and took a large parcel of land out of the reservation. Sam Case, a former soldier on the Coast Reservation, claimed the land at the northwest opening of Yaquina Bay and built the Ocean House, a hotel named after a favorite hotel of his in Rhode Island. He also named the new settlement Newport after a town in Rhode Island. Newport incorporated as a city in 1882.

Newport has two lighthouses, necessary because of early shipping activity, which included importing supplies for the Coast Reservation and exporting oysters, fish and seafood, and logs. Yaquina Bay Lighthouse, which opened in 1871, is owned by Oregon State Parks and is open to the public. It was decommissioned and its duties taken over in 1874 by the Yaquina Head Lighthouse, which is owned by the Bureau of Land Management. The light is still operational, and an interpretive center and the lighthouse are open to the public.

Travelers to Yaquina Bay before 1884 usually took a boat from Elk City. In 1884, the railroad was completed as far as Yaquina City, a town created by railroad developers up the bay from Newport. Newport's founding fathers lost their opportunity to extend the railroad to their town when they could not agree on a price for the land.

Tourism increased after the railroad opened, and the Nye Beach area began to develop. The oceanfront area is named after John Nye who claimed the land in 1866. Hotels, hot sea baths, and a natatorium were built in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The Sylvia Beach Hotel remains from those years and is on the National Register of Historic Places. The Nye Beach area continues as a tourist mecca, with specialty shops, an accessible beach, lodging, and restaurants.

World War I demonstrated the need for a good north-south road to transport people and supplies. In 1919, Ben Jones, the representative from the district, introduced a bill in the legislature to build a coast highway. Construction of the Roosevelt Coast Military Highway got underway that year. Designated Highway 101, the Coast Highway divides Newport and is the town's downtown area, stretching from South Beach to Agate Beach.

In 1931, the Oregon Coast was feeling the effects of the Great Depression. Conditions were harsh, but the federal Recovery Act brought work to the area, including construction of the Yaquina Bay Bridge, the last link on the Coast Highway. Completed in 1936, the bridge made it possible for people to drive automobiles across the bay instead of ferrying their cars. After World War II, Newport continued to rely on tourism, fishing, and shipping. A Crab Festival and, later, Loyalty Days, which continues today, brought people to the area.

Newport has become a center for marine research and is home to Oregon State University's Hatfield Science Center and, since 2011, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Marine Operations Center-Pacific. The Oregon Coast Aquarium, which opened in 1992, is one of the top ten aquariums in the nation, with about 450,000 visitors a year. These facilities are all located on the south side of Yaquina Bay.

The north side of Yaquina Bay is both a working bay front and a tourist attraction. Boat docking, fish processing, and other commercial ventures co-exist with shops, restaurants, and fish markets.

Sources

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The Oregon Encyclopedia

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