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Smith River--The Pioneer West Lives On

The William Westbrook home watches over the valley.

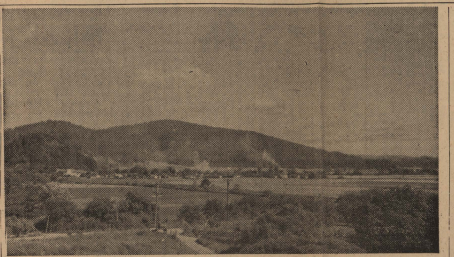
Smith River's school is soon to be enlarged.

The new Henry Westbrook home is outstanding.

The Everett Woodruff home has seen history.

Smith River's oldest house was built about 1852.

Picturesque Rowdy creek school is now abandoned.



Panorama of Smith River town from porch of William Westbrook home.

NORTHERNMOST COMMUNITY IN CALIFORNIA REDWOOD EMPIRE HAS PERSONALITY OF ITS OWN

By CHET SCHWARZKOPF
Photos by Humboldt Times

Smith River is the name of a town and valley located on 101 highway, some fourteen miles north of Crescent City, and just over 100 miles from Eureka. Smith River's center is the farthest north town in California's Redwood Empire, for the Oregon state line is a scant ten miles above it.

You first enter the Smith River valley three miles south of the town proper, when you cross the Smith river on the Dr. Ernest M. Fine Memorial bridge—a structure named after a beloved physician of Del Norte county, who practiced in Smith River and other areas. And a fitting tribute it is—right at the gateway.

Here indeed is a beautiful and peaceful part of the world. To the south, the valley is bounded by the emerald-clear waters of the river Smith; to the west by the sea; while forested hills outline it on the north and east. Scant wonder settlers were attracted to it as early as 1853—while many of their descendents remain. For Smith River valley offers an unsurpassed combination of rich soil, salubrious climate, and abundant rainfall.

Smith River likes to call itself one of the last outposts of the west. Named after the famed fishing stream which attracts so many visitors to the region, the town itself is a combination of today's hustle and bustle, and a pioneer spirit that has stayed singularly alive. True, the great post-war growth of the west has been felt here, but the town and valley remain a kingdom unto themselves—although visitors and prospective new residents are made welcome with traditional western hospitality.

In fact, a visitor's first impression of Smith River's people is more than usually pleasant, and the idea grows as you look about and ask questions. Prosperity has been the rule here, and everyone seems to have a share in it—nor have they forgotten how to take time off and enjoy living.

SMITH RIVER TODAY

There is quite an impressive little community where 101 highway makes a right - angle turn and heads toward the seacoast. It is long-established, and several of the region's oldest homes are in its midst, as well as a fair-sized business district.

Largest enterprise is the Del Norte Co-operative Creamery, run by a group of dairymen in Smith River valley. First established some 29 years ago, it was operated for a number of years by the Golden State Company, Ltd., but was re-organized after the war, and taken over by local men. President of the Co-operative is Henry Westbrook, scion of one of Smith River's pioneer families. Members of the board are: Lester Ulrich, Nis Jepsen, Presley Tryon, Ken Layman, Palmer Westbrook, and Clarence Westbrook.

Four lumber mills, adjacent to the town, have sprung up in recent years, and likewise have grown into large enterprises. These are the Crag Lumber company, which operates both a redwood and fir mill; the Dunbar company, and the Powers company. Notable is the fact that a harmonious class of people seem to have come to Smith River and the lumber and logging game, while the operative companies have entered into the town's affairs with true public spirit.

In and about the "four corners" of the town, you will find a well balanced business entity, replete with pioneer family names. For instance, there's the Tryon Hardware and Implement store, the Westbrook brother's market, and the Hight family's big grocery. There is a large community hall, in which all manner of social gatherings—including the annual flower show and art exhibit of the Smith River Women's Club—are held. A weekly movie, principally for the youngsters, also is given there by Deputy Sheriff Ron McClish.

Then there's Midge and Bob's Coffee Shop, owned by Mrs. Claude Taylor, where the visitor can get excellent and reasonable meals. And there's the historic Smith River hotel—an interesting looking structure of early colonial design—now run by Cesar Forsini. For the traveler, there's the Greyhound Bus depot, in charge of Mrs. Harry C. Brown, who also runs the phone exchange and a soda fountain; while across the street is Buckner's Super Service and garage.

Recent addition to Smith River's center is Maudee Luick's information bureau, for which materials were furnished by the Crag Lumber company. Here the visitor can get fishing data on the river, as well as tackle and souvenirs, from a Smith River resident who knows her countryside and angling thoroughly.

Postmistress is Pearl Bosch, and the town likewise has a good volunteer fire department, to round out the picture. Nearby is the Methodist church, whose pews are said to have been hand hewn in early days.

THE SCHOOL SITUATION

You are told that Smith River valley and town have a population of at least 600, and you can well believe that when you gather facts on the school. There were four teachers last season, and some 110 pupils. Principal is Mrs. Helen Tracy, with Mrs. Mary Ostrom assisting; while two new teachers are expected for the fall semester. A bond issue recently has been passed, and a new addition to the present good-sized building is being planned.

The school has grown rapidly since the several lumber mills brought in new residents and their families. Before the war, there were only two teachers. In recent times, the nearby Rowdy creek school was closed down, and its pupils sent to the central establishment at Smith River. An Indian school, near the river's mouth, also was closed and its pupils merged with the others. So now, the town has ambitious plans for a large unified school.

A VERY INTERESTING LADY RECOUNTS SMITH RIVER HISTORY

Grandmother "Eddie" Westbrook is the present senior member of one of Smith River's prominent pioneer families. A very youthful 85, her fine eyes sparkle as she tells you of early days in the land.

Mrs. Westbrook herself was brought to Smith River from Missouri in 1866 at the age of 2. Her father had been killed in the Civil War shortly before she was born. So her mother named her Edward in his memory, and all of her life she has been nicknamed Eddie.

"My mother brought me to the West by way of Panama," Grandma Westbrook recounts. "The first railroad was not yet built across the country.

"After coming to Smith River, she married Daniel Haight, who had settled here in 1853. He had come from Crescent City over the ocean beaches, and was forded across the river by the Indians in canoes. He was among the very first to penetrate what was then an unexplored wilderness up here.

"The first Westbrook in Smith River was Henry, who was born in Germany, and who came West in the gold excitement of the first 1850s. He settled here in 1854 after coming down from Oregon.

"Who were some of the first pioneers? Well, Dennis Tryon was among the earliest, I think, and his descendants live here now, as do the family of Clarence Woodruff. Then there was James Haight, who came here with Daniel, my stepfather. And I knew James and Walter Brookins—they are not to be confused with Brookings, Or., which was founded by another family.

"Let's see, now—there were James Beckstead, Joseph Anthony, Benjamin Lane, Theron Crook, Hudson McVay, Charles Brown, Luther Jones, John and Bill Bailey, Daniel Otto—and many others, too.

"Joseph Marls was one of the older settlers, too—one of the first, in fact—as were George Ulrich and James Hight. All of their names are prominent in this community now. In fact, a great many of Smith River's present population are directly descended from the first pioneers. People seem to stay here . . ."

THE WESTBROOK FAMILY

Grandmother Westbrook's husband, William, was born in Smith River, but has since passed on. "Grandma Eddie" lives with her grandson, William, and his wife, in a fine big home on a hillside overlooking a 600-acre ranch, where she and her husband settled long ago. The house is an imposing structure, built in 1882—and seems as sturdy as the day it was completed.

Another Westbrook ranch, comprising some 1000 acres, is owned by Mr. and Mrs. Henry Westbrook—another branch of the same family. Henry is the grandson of the first Westbrook, and is the third in line with that given name—while his son, Henry, is the fourth. Yes, indeed, people do "seem to stay" in Smith River.

The Henry Westbrook ranch is one of Smith River's best, and contains a herd of several hundred Guernsey cows. Its most interesting landmark is the "Reservation house," which is said to be Smith River's oldest, and was once used as a troop headquarters in the days of Ulysses S. Grant—1833-54. The building is in an excellent state of preservation, and until recently, was used by the Westbrooks as their residence. Hand-wrought square nails hold the house together, and it is now used as quarters for ranch employes.

As you go about in Smith River, you almost wonder why the place isn't called "Westbrook," for another of the family, Clarence, also owns a large ranch. And two of Grandma Eddie's grandsons, Edward and Palmer, own the Smith River market and likewise have a ranch where they raise lilies.

FARMING AND TALENT

Incidentally, the lily industry has done well in Smith River, thanks not alone to a suitable climate, but also to an overhead irrigation system that was pioneered by Bob Maris, of another noted family. Abundant underground water from wells turned the trick, and now many dairy farmers, as well as lily men, are expanding their irrigated holdings.

Estate and Croft lilies, as well as outstanding varieties of daffodils, are being raised by a number of ranchers. Edward Westbrook is an inventive genius in this line you are told, for he not alone improved irrigation facilities, but developed a lily bulb grader that has solved difficulties in that line quite satisfactorily.

Impressive to the visitor is the great amount of water being sprayed over Smith River fields. You see it the length of the valley—or so it seems. Fortunate is this region to have not alone an abundant supply of water, both from its river and underground sources—but an abundant supply of intelligence and ingenuity to make use of that natural resource.

No wonder, then, it has such splendid dairies, thriving lily farms, a cooperative creamery that pays dividends, and a general air of well-being. No wonder it has a women's club that has

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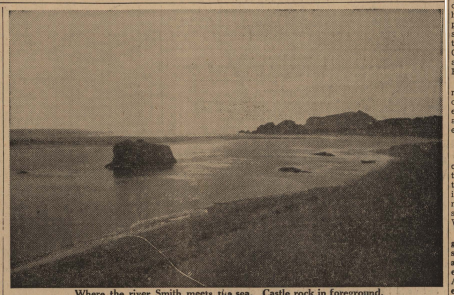
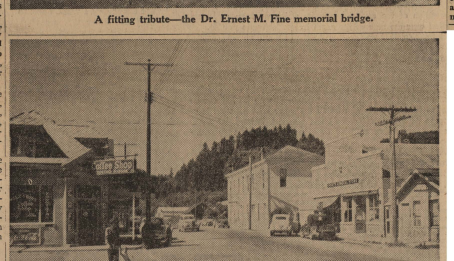
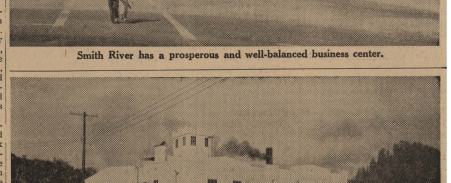


Where the river Smith meets the sea. Castle rock in foreground.

A fitting tribute—the Dr. Ernest M. Fine memorial bridge.



Smith River has a prosperous and well-balanced business center.



The Del Norte Co-operative creamery is a good going concern.

F. D. Haight home is one of the town's first.

Smith River—

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become noted not alone for its art collections, but for a number of artists as well. Grandma Eddie Westbrook has been a painter of landscapes and flowers all of her life—and is doing beautiful work today. And Constance Luick, daughter of Maudee Luick, has had work exhibited in many places in the West. And there are several others in that unusually talented region, including Mrs. Clarence Hight, who has written an interesting history of Smith River.

All in all, you can see the community has a definite personality of its own—it is enjoyable, interesting and hospitable . . . as well as a stronghold of the true Western spirit.

GREAT RECREATION AREA

No account of Smith River could be complete without mention of its superb recreation setting. Center of it all, of course, is the river after which the community was named—and which itself was named after an early Western explorer.

A colony of retired people is growing around the Castle Rock section, by the river's mouth, in an environment almost unique even for the Redwood Empire. Artists, writers and world travelers are there—or come there for part of each year. People who have been everywhere return because, they aver, there is no place like it.

Fishing for salmon and steelhead is one of the season's major ports, while the river is famed for its big square-tail cutthroat trout the year 'round. Of all the streams in the West, probably none is more beautiful than the Smith, from its sources to tidewater. And the mountains and hills from which it comes provide excellent hunting for the nimrod who prefers gun to fishline.

Several well-established resorts are in the Smith river area, including Dunroven, Joe Sierka's Castle Rock Camp, Chateau Lodge and White Rock Cottages, while a new pleasure wharf is being planned at tidewater, you're told.

And last, but far from least, Smith River feels that the Mill Creek State Redwood park is within its bounds—that beautiful area on the north side of the river Smith, that extends as far as Hiouchi bridge. And well enough it should be—a final touch that completes the picture of a valley and hill hinterland whose environment is Nature's purest poesy . . .