

Hi, Fred Nelson for Community Comment,

With all the raging wild fires in California this year, we, in the Eureka area, have been very fortunate with a lack of ash fallout due to our coastal breezes. There have been numerous days that we have had a lack of sun due to the very high smoke and cloud cover. When I look back to the nineteen thirties and forties we were not so fortunate with smoke cover due to the number and location of many saw mills. I can't give you a figure on how many mills were situated in the area but there were many. One of the problems facing each mill was the disposal of accumulated wood waste. This would amount to tree bark, wood shavings, splinters and saw dust. The technology used to manufacture by-products from the wood waste did not exist, or if it did, was not economically feasible. There was only one alternative, burn the waste. The larger mills used the wood waste as fuel to power their operations. The smaller mills built burners, situated a reasonable distance from the mill itself. These were called 'tee pee burners' made of metal with a screened cover so the larger particles of ash would not escape into the air. In many cases a conveyor belt carried the waste from the operation to the burner. Even with screened covers, the smaller particles of ash managed to escape and could be carried on the winds for many miles. Green or wet Redwood is not a very flammable material so with the water content comes an incomplete burn and plenty of smoke. Keep in mind that these operations were ongoing all through the year. Some days were fairly clear, depending on the wind currents and the weather in general. Some days were choked with smoke and ash. Of course, the ash, floating in the air, would settle at some point. The days with little wind were often the curse of the housewife as the ashes would settle on the laundry just hung out to dry on the back yard clothesline. That left her with two choices; either take all the laundry and wash it over again hoping the second time around the ash would not be as prevalent or you could let the clothes dry and snap each piece, hoping the ash would fall away from the dried fabric. The housewife could not plan on any given day to have an ash-free atmosphere so she took pot luck. You might hang out your clothes to dry on a rainy day with the idea that the rain would wash away the fallout but it didn't do a hell of a lot to help dry the clothes. I talk about the problem of the smoke and ash getting things dirty. Don't forget that this same stuff was also polluting our lungs. We wore no masks or had any means of purifying the air we breathed.

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