11-2015

Korbel Sawmill Report

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KORBEL SAWMILL
Historic Resources Report

Humboldt State University Library photo coll. 2636. Photo c. 1950.

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November 2015
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Introduction
The California Redwood Company (Green Diamond Resource Company/Simpson Timber Company) closed its Korbel mill February 2015. Decommissioning plans include removal of equipment for auction which requires partial dismantling of the sawmill. At some later date, the sawmill will be totally demolished. To comply with California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Section 15064.5, “Determining the Significance of Impacts to Archaeological and Historical Resources,” a Historic Resources Report was prepared. The report includes historic background information on the mill site, assessment of the sawmill using CEQA criteria, and a determination of significance.

Methods
In October 2015, Pat Barsanti, SHN Project Manager, and Craig Compton, Green Diamond, gave a tour of the sawmill, explaining milling operations and answering questions. Jamie Roscoe, Roscoe and Associates, was also present for the tour. Interior and exterior photographs were taken of the sawmill and associated structures on the site.

Local newspapers, notably the Arcata Union, Blue Lake Advocate, and the Humboldt Times, provided information on the early mills constructed at the Korbel site, and, most importantly, dates and physical changes that affected the present mill. The newspapers were read on microfilm at Humboldt State University Library (HSU). Also available at the HSU Library are historic photographs, some of which can be viewed online as special collections; others are in the Library’s Humboldt Room and are available on request. Deed searches were conducted in the Recorder’s Office, Humboldt County Courthouse, Eureka.

Findings
The sawmill building dates to 1969, but even during the intervening 47 years, it has undergone numerous structural and design changes. Computerization of the mill in the 1980s changed the traditional milling process, making it even less relevant to its historic context. The sawmill fails to meet any of the eligibility criteria and is, therefore, not historically-significant under CEQA.

Setting
Located on the North Fork of Mad River, the Korbel mill enjoys a picturesque setting, if not for a lumber mill, certainly for the little town that once supported the mill. It occupies a large, flat-bottom bowl with a westerly outlet into the Mad River valley and, easterly immediately into the mountains, to Angel’s Ranch, Bald Mountain, Redwood Creek and ultimately to Willow Creek and the Hoopa Valley. A pack trail, the county wagon road, and a railroad connected this place with the coast, all of which were vital to the commerce of both Korbel and the interior country.

Constructed initially on a 60-acre site in the southwest corner of section 28, 6N2E, the mill gradually expanded over the years, as its timber base expanded into the surrounding
mountains. Little remains of the carefully-planned Town of Korbel. The community was integral to the mill, and early photographs do attest to an extensive development, almost subsuming the mill, which, on the contrary, was the center piece of this North Fork flat. After more than a century and a third of operating mills on the site (with periodical shutdowns), the present, modern mill was closed in early 2015 and its buildings scheduled for either dismantling or adaptive uses.

Early History

The inevitability of Korbel was set a decade before its reality. Construction of two mills north of Arcata, the Dolly Varden in 1872 and Jolly Giant three years later were just the first of several leading up the Mad River Valley (Weekly Humboldt Times 13 July 1872; West Coast Signal 17 Feb. 1875; Weekly Humboldt Times 21 Aug. 1875). John Vance’s Big Bonanza Mill at Essex with its own railroad down the north bank of Mad River was under construction in late 1874 and fully operational the following summer (Humboldt Times 31 Oct 1874, 21 Aug. 1875, 18 Sept. 1875). Moving into the valley, Isaac Minor and partners built the Warren Creek mill in 1881 (Democratic Standard 9 April 1881; Weekly Humboldt Times 17 Dec. 1881). Minor moved across the river to Hall Creek, constructing another mill there in 1885 (Weekly Times Telephone 25 July 1885, 6 Feb. 1886). Meanwhile, George Chandler constructed the Blue Lake Mill, which was in full operation in 1883 (Weekly Humboldt Times 15 July 1882, Weekly Times Telephone 5 May 1883). Chandler moved onto the North Fork to build a new mill at Riverside in 1886 (Daily Humboldt Standard 27 Feb. 1886, 3 May 1886).

Literally the last location before the mountains precluded mill construction, the big flat at North Fork was available to the Korbel Brothers, Francis, Anton, and Joseph, when they came looking in the spring of 1883 (Daily Times Telephone 4 April 1883). The Korbels’ mill from that time became an institution that persevered until 2015, albeit through two more ownerships.

Opportunities for developing a successful lumbering industry beyond Humboldt Bay, which provided easy access to shipping facilities, were made possible with construction of railroads. Initially, logging railroads were short-stretched for moving logs by animal power from a landing to tidewater. With construction of the Arcata Wharf in the mid-1850s and continual extension of that wharf to accommodate deep-water ships, more substantial roads were built to those northern mills, first with wooden rails, but when things really became serious, with actual iron rails with real locomotives.

New Railroad and Lumber Mill—Articles of incorporation were filed yesterday of the Arcata and Mad River Railroad company….It is the purpose of the new corporation, which absorbs the Arcata Transportation Company, to immediately begin the construction of an addition to the present line, the terminus to be on Mad River to a point opposite Vance’s mill. A lumber mill will be built at this place, which is situated on the claim of Cullberg, Minor and Kirk and the principal object of the new road is to transport lumber from the new mill to the end of Arcata wharf, there to be loaded onto vessels. ….Two of the directors of the new railroad corporation also went below to purchase the iron for the railroad. The wooden rails now in use will be replaced by new iron track over the entire length of the road. (Weekly Humboldt Times 23 July 1881)
Using Chinese labor, work was underway to extend the newly-named railroad from the Dolly Varden to Minor’s new mill at Warren Creek the summer of 1881 (Weekly Humboldt Times 20 Aug. 1881). With construction of Chandler’s Blue Lake Mill, it was clear that the railroad would not stop at Warren Creek, but push on, opening up the “whole North Fork country” (Weekly Humboldt Times 15 July 1882; Democratic Standard 17 Feb. 1883). The newspaper, recognizing the developments in the Mad River valley, opined that in the lumbering business, “Mad River is going to take the lead in Humboldt” (Weekly Times Telephone 31 March 1883).

The Korbels
Enter the Korbels—the “parties from San Francisco.”

From present appearance it would seem that the lumber business on Mad river is to be opened up on a large scale with the coming spring. Within the past week, parties from San Francisco, some of whom own large bodies of timber on the North Fork, have made leases of large lots of redwood on that stream and will proceed to erect a mill or mills on the ground and commence the manufacture of lumber on a grand scale. Up the North Fork on either side for a number of miles and from its mouth to Angel Ranch, there is a forest of redwood that stands unparalleled in excellence and abundance. With the mill at Blue lake and others at the North Fork, a season of prosperity will be inaugurated in the upper and lower Mad river settlement heretofore unknown and scarcely dreamed of…. (Weekly Times Telephone 3 Feb. 1883)

Francis Korbel purchased a 60-acre parcel—the North Fork flat—from Frederick H. and Maggie Burg in March 1883, described as the SW qt SW qt, S half NW qt SW qt sec 28, 6N2E (Deeds 8:53). The parcel was transferred from Francis to the Humboldt Lumber Mill Co., the Korbel Bros.’ newly-incorporated firm the following month (Deeds 8:342). Crucial to the Korbels’ success was control of the railroad to ensure timely movement of its production to tidewater. Purchasing the Arcata and Mad River Railroad in March 1883, they proceeded immediately to acquire the rights of way for extending the rails across Mad River at Skedaddle, and by late May, nearly a hundred men were grading, pile-driving and building trestle work for the extension (Daily Times Telephone 6 April 1883; Democratic Standard 26 May 1883). August 29th, 1883 was remembered as a red-letter day, when the new locomotive, North Fork, steamed into Chandler’s lumber yard at Blue Lake (Democratic Standard 1 Sept. 1883). Within the month, the Times editor paid a visit to the Korbels’ new mill.

The North Fork Mill—On a recent visit to the north fork of Mad river, we were not a little surprised to find so imposing a mill structure as that which the railroad company is now hurrying to completion with all possible energy. On approaching it, one is reminded of the new Bay mill in this city, although as a result of location, it shows to much better advantage. The main building is 50x181 feet, two stories high and crowned with a ventilator roof. The entire covering will be of iron—a timely protection against fire communicating from the tall smoke stack or from the adjacent timber. The location, for the purpose intended, could not be more favorable, and affords lumber-storing conveniences not often enjoyed. The pond from which logs will be moved to the mill is at the north end of the structure, and the lumber, after leaving the saw, will pass directly to the yard or cars. The boilers, three in number, are placed outside the mill building proper, and the engine and ponderous driving machinery occupy positions about the center of the mill building proper. All the cutting machinery, which is of the most approved patterns, will be
on the second floor of the structure. An endless variety of labor-saving machines are stored in and about the building, including a Dolbeer logging apparatus.

To Mr. Bronson, the superintending machinist of the North Fork mill, we are under obligations for courtesies extended and information furnished in a most courteous manner. The gentleman superintended the construction of the Occidental mill in this city and ranks high as an artisan. He expects to have the machinery in position within three weeks, which will be as soon as the railroad can be completed to the mill. The company has not yet decided whether a supply of water for the mill will be furnished by an artesian well, or by a flume from the north fork. In point of location, climate and facilities for obtaining timber, the north fork mill has advantages which are not enjoyed by other mills in the county, if we except those located on or near Mad river. (Daily Times Telephone 28 Sept. 1883).

By January 1884, the Humboldt Lumber Co.’s mill at North Fork was producing 40,000 feet a day with expectations of 60,000 feet when everything was up-to-speed (Daily Times Telephone 18 Jan. 1884). A report from the Standard gave the mill’s size as 200x40 feet with sheds, 25x60, on either side, all covered with a corrugated iron roof. The right shed contained the shingle mill, picket machinery and filing room, upstairs, and under one portion, a blacksmith shop. The shed on the left was for lumber storage. The machinery was driven by a 20x30, 300 horsepower engine. The mill pond had a capacity of three million feet. Two logging engines and three teams, including a fine yoke of cattle to each team, were used in logging operations (Humboldt Standard 17 Jan. 1884). The mill and woods relied on workers, and lots of them, in a time of hard, hard manual labor. Without ready access to housing and stores, the Korbels built a company town in order to recruit and retain a sufficient workforce to cut the trees, transport them and operate the mill.

This company have 30 houses built and furnished for lodging, board and lodging being included in addition to wages—four men to each house, two rooms. The company are also having put up twelve houses of four rooms each to be rented to married men, at a nominal figure, they being anxious to secure men with families as employees. A large boarding house is also on the ground, the upper story being utilized for furnished rooms. A company store building is soon to be built. It will be 40x100, two-story. Upper floor will be used for furnished rooms. This company employs 120 men. Average wages paid $50 per month, with board and lodging. (Humboldt Standard 17 Jan. 1884)

Despite all precautions with a “corrugated iron roof,” the “most disastrous fire that ever occurred in Humboldt County,” totally destroyed the mill in November 1886 (Arcata Union 13 Nov. 1886). Representing an investment of $80,000 and only partially insured, the mill, was, nonetheless, rebuilt and back in production by early spring 1887 (Arcata Union 19 March 1887). Meanwhile, the nearby Riverside Mill Company, which was to figure prominently at the Korbel site, dissolved its partnership and reorganized under a complicated agreement with George Chandler relinquishing his three-eighths interests and the remaining partners, H.W. Jackson and Frank Graham, buying him out. Articles of incorporation will filed in June 1889 for the Riverside Lumber Co. with H.W. Jackson, Frank Graham, A. Kendall, James Kirk and G.A. Tilley as directors. Captain stock was $80,000 with 800 shares, each valued at $100 each. H.W. Jackson and Frank Graham purchased 240 shares each; Kendall, 120; and Kirk and Tilley, 100 each (Arcata Union 11 May 1889, 15 June 1889).
The lumbering outlook for the 1902 season was “very bright,” for Riverside and Korbel, the latter mill having been thoroughly overhauled with pieces of new machinery and plenty of orders to assure steady operations and a big summer’s work (Blue Lake Advocate 5 April 1902). Nothing suggested that a big change was afoot, except a report in May that Capt. Charles Nelson and wife were guests of Korbel’s Superintendent Victor Zaruba, who gave them an inspection tour at Canyon Creek (Blue Lake Advocate 17 May 1902). In August, both Anton and Francis Korbel came up from San Francisco to attend to business at the mill, including proposed improvements to be made during the coming winter (Blue Lake Advocate 9 Aug., 23 Aug. 13 Dec. 1902). Banner headlines in the February 7, 1903 Advocate announced: “Korbel Bros. Sell Out to Riverside Co.”

**Northern Redwood Lumber Company**

Transfer of mill, land, and railroad from the Korbels to the newly-created Northern Redwood Lumber Company apparently wasn’t a “sell out,” but rather a merger of companies, and although the Advocate reported that the sale involved a million dollars, just what that financial arrangement was is also unclear. Nonetheless, new managers, another mill, and the Korbel Brothers exit from Humboldt were the result.

One of the greatest and most important changes in the lumbering and railroading business was positively made known this week when articles of incorporation of the Northern Redwood Lumber Company were filed for record last Monday. The new company is simply the consolidation of the Humboldt Lumber Mill Co.’s plant at Korbel and the Riverside Lumber Company of Riverside, situated only two miles from Blue Lake. This change means that the Korbel Bros. have gone out of business in this county, for together with the mill and timber lands belonging thereto, the Arcata & Mad River Railroad and their interests in the steamer North Fork are included in the transaction.
The incorporators are H.W. Jackson and Frank Graham of Arcata, A. Kendall, Charles Nelson and James Tyson of San Francisco. Messrs. Jackson, Graham and Kendall, together with Lewis Everding, are members of the Riverside Lumber Co., and Capt. Charles Nelson and nephew, James Tyson, of the Charles Nelson Company of San Francisco, the large shipping and lumber firm of the coast metropolis, are the agents for the Riverside and other mill companies of this county.

Mr. H.W. Jackson, president of the Riverside Lumber Company, who with Mr. Frank Graham, returned from San Francisco, tells the Advocate that the new company, as stated above, has acquired not only the mills, but the timber holdings of both companies, aggregating about 12,000 acres of redwood land, and about 5000 acres of stump land, and also the Arcata & Mad River railroad of the Korbel Bros. While nothing is known as to the exact sum paid for this large deal, it is generally conceded by some who know that the round sum of $1,000,000 covers the purchase price.

The Korbel and Riverside mills are both band saw mills of about 50,000 feet capacity in 10 hours’ work and are equipped with the latest improved machinery. (Blue Lake Advocate 7 Feb. 1903)

In a 1944 “Humboldt Redwood Mills” advertisement/feature that appeared periodically in the Humboldt Times, the writer, presumably Earl G. Roberts, provided background for understanding this event. Relying on information from H.A. Baldwin, formerly Cashier and later Secretary of the Northern Redwood Lumber Co., Roberts reported that the Charles Nelson Co., a leading shipping company from San Francisco, acquired the Korbel mill to ensure lumber cargoes for its ships after discharging incoming freight at Humboldt Bay. The “Cargoes for the Ships” story also reported that consolidation of the Riverside and Humboldt Lumber Mill companies gave the steamship lines two excellent “feeders” for its ships. With new capital available, one of the first projects of the lumber company was a “complete rebuilding of the plant at Korbel,” the old mill having become somewhat obsolete. While the Riverside mill ran night and day, the Korbel mill shut down for a thorough overhauling, reopening in the fall of 1903. Two bands saws at Korbel and one at the Riverside mill operated at capacity with six to seven hundred employees in the mills and woods for a monthly payroll of $125,000 (Humboldt Times 27 Aug. 1944).

A clearer understanding of the organization was provided in a March 1903 Advocate article. HW. Jackson, president of the new company, became the general superintendent of both the Korbel and Riverside mills with Capt. Nelson acting as president of the Arcata & Mad River Railroad. Jackson also assumed the superintendence of the railroad and Mr. Zaruba, the former general superintendent of the Humboldt Lumber Mill Co and the railroad, became Jackson’s railroad assistant. Francis and Anton Korbel remained as directors (Blue Lake Advocate 28 March 1903). Demoted to an “assistant,” Mr. Zaruba retired to San Francisco a month later (Blue Lake Advocate 25 April 1903). The Northern Redwood Lumber Co. may have initially been a merging of two different companies, but the reality was that the Korbels faded from the scene.
and the Riverside people, notably Harry Jackson and Frank Graham, became the face of the new company, a company that was Korbel for the next half century.

By the end of the summer, the two mills were producing “considerable” lumber, one daily shipment totaling 150,000 feet (Blue Lake Advocate 15 Aug. 1903). Mill improvements, increased production from two mills, and an expanded workforce also prompted other developments in the Town of Korbel. Harry Jackson moved his office to Korbel, and, perhaps, feeling the need for more spacious and up-scale offices, built a large office building near the railroad tracks, and the Korbel Hotel, an elegant, three-story building, became a destination resort after its construction in 1908 (Blue Lake Advocate 25 April 1903; Guy 1979).

The New Korbel of Today—Korbel is twenty-two miles northeast of Eureka and is the northern terminus or the Arcata & Mad River Railroad, which runs between Arcata, Blue Lake and Korbel. This place is also reached by a wagon road, which has a very good gravel bed, and in the spring and summer, many autos make this run from all over the county to spend the day at Camp Bauer, which is one of the most beautiful picnic grounds in the state…. Korbel has the distinction of having one of the best hotels in the state. The hotel is a very neat structure, having 40 rooms altogether, besides having two large dining rooms and a spacious lobby. The latter is finished with curly redwood, which with proper “dressing” will take a very fine polish. Off of the lobby, on one side, are the two dining rooms, and one on the other side, the card and billiard room. Upstairs is the ladies’ parlor, which with its wicker chairs, Mission tables and the piano go to make the appearance very homelike. On two sides of the building, there is a
veranda from which guests have a very pretty view of the river and the hills with their green foliage.

Korbel is the northern terminus of the Arcata & Mad River Railroad, which is owned by the Charles Nelson Co. of San Francisco. The railroad has considerable rolling stock, passenger coaches, box cars, lumber cars, and logging cars, besides nine engines, one gypsy locomotive, two powerful Heislers and six locomotives.

The main feature of the little city is the sawmill. This mill will cut on an average over 100,000 feet of lumber daily. There are two sides cutting on an average of 55,000 and 45,000 daily. Besides the sawmill, there are a shingle and shake mill, a planing room and tank room… The mill employs almost 150 men. This place has its own lighting plant behind the mill. (Blue Lake Advocate 28 Dec. 1912)

In 1912, the lumber company was operating Camps 3, 7, 10, 12, and 13 and three ranches to raise the food for these hard-laboring woods crews. The Porter ranch at Iaqua provided grazing for cattle, as did the Ira Russ place on upper Redwood Creek. The nearby Norton ranch, located on Mad River between Blue Lake and Glendale, was considered one of the “prettiest ranches in the county,” where a dairy and creamery operated. And there was the “chicken ranch,” where the company kept 1000 white leghorns for an endless supply of eggs and the chickens and turkeys for Sunday dinners at the hotel (Blue Lake Advocate 28 Dec. 1912). In town, the company’s large orchard consisted of hundreds of trees (Blue Lake Advocate 19 April 1902).
The Depression years were difficult one for Humboldt’s lumber industry. Owing to slack conditions and the “tax situation,” the Northern Redwood Co. closed down the Korbel mill in July 1931, the Riverside mill already closed in 1927 (Guy 1979; Arcata Union 16 July 1931). An overly-optimistic Advocate announced that “Depression on the Run in this Locality,” with the re-opening of the Korbel mill in September 1933 (Blue Lake Advocate 9 Sept. 1933).

The town of Korbel is humming with activity, the mill of the Northern Redwood Lumber Co., having resumed manufacturing operations last Monday with 300 men back at work after a lapse since July 1931. The confectionary, pool hall, post office and store, under Manager Fred McFarland, are doing a rushing business. The cook house crew are again serving meals to the single men and all the houses are filled with workers’ families. At night the town is lighted up with electric lights, the first in a number of months. (Blue Lake Advocate 23 Sept. 1933)

Unfortunately, the “humming” came to an abrupt halt ten months later and the mill was shuttered for nine years (Arcata Union 3 April 1943). Responding to the national need for lumber during the War, Fentress Hall, president of the Northern Redwood Lumber Company, led a reorganization effort and sought financial backing to reopen the mill. Funded through a loan from the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, the work of dismantling the old mill and reconstruction of a modern mill began in the spring of 1942, but it was another year before the mill began production (Arcata Union, 13 Feb. 1942, 3 April 1942; Humboldt Times 27 Aug. 1944, 7 Dec. 1947).

Korbel Mill to Start Work Monday, April 12—Opening of the Northern Redwood Lumber Co. mill at Korbel is slated for Monday, April 12, according to announcement made Tuesday by Fentress Hall, president of the firm. One side of the mill will be operated. About 200 men will be employed, most of whom already have been engaged. Full operation of the mill, one of the larger in the redwood area, probably will not be undertaken until after the war, due to manpower shortage.…

Logging operations have been underway for some time and the pond holds sufficient logs to assure steady operations. In the meantime the company made a financial readjustment and paid
timber taxes of more than $200,000 to Humboldt and Del Norte counties, releasing a vast quantity of timber which is now clear for logging. (Blue Lake Advocate 3 April 1943)


Fentress Hill, whose professional life was devoted to lumber finance, was able to get the bondholders to accept stock in the company in exchange for the bonds and in one move, wiped out the mortgage against the company. A renovated, modernized mill came on line during a crucial time, making it well-positioned to take part in the unprecedented, post-war lumber boom that swept northern California. In 1947, the company produced 30 million board feet, mostly redwood, with a daily output of between 125,000 and 150,000 feet using two headrigs (Humboldt Times 7 Dec. 1947).

In 1949, the Northern Redwood Lumber Company entered into an agreement with Simpson Logging Company, precipitating a major expansion of the Korbel plant.
An enormous program of expansion was announced this week by Fentress Hill, president of the Northern Redwood Lumber Co. at Korbel, which will mean the employment of more men and the possibility that the mill will be operated on a double shift, day and night basis.

He said agreement had been reached with Simpson Logging Company of Shelton and Seattle, enabling the Northern Redwood Lumber Co. to handle and market the entire output of the Klamath Simpson plant, which is expected to amount to 70,000 board feet of lumber per day, all being trucked to Korbel for drying, finishing and shipping.

A six-acre drying, storage and shipping yard has been completed at Riverside by the Korbel firm, which will handle the Simpson production. Hill indicated it might be increased to a total of 140,000 feet daily by the first part of next year. The Simpson company owns more than a billion feet of timber at the mouth of the Klamath river, it was reported.

In preparation for processing the Simpson lumber production, the NRL has recently completed five large dry kilns, each with a capacity of 60,000 board feet. The five kilns can turn out a total of 1,000,000 feet of dried lumber each month. The kilns, with their auxiliaries, represent an investment of $250,000, Hill said.

Further improvements at Korbel are rapidly being completed and a new Yates N-60 vertical resaw is being installed and is expected to be in operation within three weeks. The resaw has tilting rolls, which will make it possible to cut beveled siding. In addition to the new resaw will be a $250,000 addition to the mill. A new resorter is being built and is expected to be in use within six weeks. (Humboldt Times 25 Sept. 1949)

In 1951, the Northern Redwood Company initiated an expansion program at Korbel to make the plant “one of the most efficient in the redwood industry.” Included in that development was a new dry storage shed and a new planing mill, adding to the installation of a new cant gang saw and new carriage and band mill on the No. 1 side, all of which was to materially “increase production” (Arcata Union 9 March 1951).

**Simpson Logging/Simpson Redwood/Simpson Timber Company**

Simpson Logging Company made its initial entry into California in 1948 when it purchased the Coast Redwood Company mill at Klamath, an event noted by Dick Ryan as the “latest move of Oregon and Washington lumber concerns into Northern California” (Humboldt Times 19 Sept. 1948). As mentioned above, production from that mill received additional drying and finishing at the Korbel mill, but in the spring of 1951, Simpson began construction of a large remanufacturing mill west of Arcata. Operations were underway by the fall of 1952 with two shifts and an anticipated production of 25 million feet of remanufactured lumber, plus some green timber. Simpson’s Klamath mill provided the rough lumber for the new mill (Arcata Union 17 Oct. 1952, Special Simpson Logging Edition).

Simpson was well into the milling business in California, but it was also one of the major timberland owners in the region and those holdings only got bigger in 1956, when Simpson Redwood Company purchased the Northern Redwood Company interests, including the Korbel mill and 30,000 acres of timberland, and, of course, that little Arcata & Mad River Railroad that had been carrying big lumber loads for three-quarters of a century! In announcing the sale, C.G. Price, president of Northern Redwood, explained that the major portion of the company’s timberlands had been cut over, leaving it with an insufficient supply of raw material to permit profitable, long-term operations. On the contrary, it was the second-growth on these lands that interested Simpson, as it began a management strategy of “long-range, sustained yield,” in northern California (Humboldt Times and Arcata Union 27 Jan. 1956).
Simpson continued its investments in northern California, purchasing Sage Land and Lumber Company timberlands, over 70,000 acres in Humboldt and Mendocino counties that same year. The Humboldt block was adjacent to and intermixed with Simpson holdings and “advanced Simpson’s previously announced sustained yield objectives” (Arcata Union 29 June 1956). At this point, Simpson Redwood Company became a separate corporate entity, although it remained a wholly-owned subsidiary of Simpson Timber Co. of Seattle. In 1960, another name change occurred in a consolidation move and locally, the company was known as Simpson Timber Company (Arcata Union 18 Nov. 1960).

In 1965, Simpson purchased the plywood plant in Arcata and timberlands in Humboldt, Del Norte and Mendocino counties, formerly owned by the Weyerhaeuser Company, bringing its holdings in the redwood region to 245,000 acres (Humboldt Times 8 Dec. 1965). Two years later, the U.S. Plywood plant at Fairhaven was purchased by Simpson, along with 3,400 acres of second-growth in the Bald Hills east of Orick (Times-Standard 10 Oct. 1967).

Modernization of the Korbel mill, to the tune of over four million dollars got underway in 1968, but as an interim production facility while the mill was closed, Simpson purchased the Van De Nor sawmill in Arcata. Proposed work at the Korbel site included replacing the boiler, remodeling the re-mill department, installing a new hydraulic Barker, and “completely rebuilding the entire head end of the mill” (Blue Lake Advocate 17 Oct. 1968). The renovated plant reopened in late 1969.

Simpson Timber Company this week at Korbel has started up its redwood sawmill following completion of a $5,000,000 modernization program. Closed since last May 2, the mill has undergone a remarkable transformation

“We have begun regular production at the mill, but it will take some time to build up to full capacity,” said J.R. Perry, production manager, redwood, Arcata. “This major investment will greatly strengthen Simpson’s redwood program, and is a measure of the faith we have in the redwood business over the long term.”

….An amazing change has taken place at the old Korbel mill in just seven months. Inside a clean white building, green painted new machinery is producing redwood lumber. Overhead, banks of fluorescent fixtures brightly bathe the work areas in light.

Major parts of the modernization include new equipment in the head end of the mill and a new building to house it, a completely new resaw department, two 600,000 gallon Simpson wood stave tanks for fire protection, a new steam boiler and a new fuel bin. The former log pond has given way to a dry pond operation.

Ten years later, Simpson announced a $33 million capital improvement program to retool the old-growth Korbel mill to handle smaller logs. In a “realignment” of the company’s operations, Simpson, one of the county’s three largest employers, anticipated elimination of 400 workers over a two-year period, as it changed course from old-growth logging and manufacturing to the production of lumber from younger-aged stands (Arcata Union 9 Aug. 1979). In response to its declining old-growth forests, Simpson issued a Message to the Community in the Arcata Union (9 August 1979):

1. Mad River Plywood would be closed permanently.
2. The Fairhaven Plywood to undergo major changes.
3. The Klamath mill would be upgraded.
4. Modifications of the Korbel sawmill to process small logs from five to 24 inches in diameter. This would entail the removal of the headrig to the Klamath mill, replacing it with new equipment. In addition the Korbel mill planned to saw fir as well as redwood, and modification of Korbel’s remanufacturing plant.

5. The Arcata Remanufacturing plan would continue current operations.

6. New road were planned to access the young stands in the Mad River watershed.

Simpson proceeded with his capital program of upgrades, spending $15 million on a new second-growth mill at Korbel, which featured “state of the art computer technologies.” With an estimated twelve to thirteen years of old-growth left on its timberlands, the company was instituting major changes, all the big logs were to be milled at Klamath, the smaller-dimension logs at Korbel (Arcata Union 16 Oct. 1980). February 1981 brought the announcement that the company’s sawmill at Korbel had been “virtually rebuilt” to handled logs 24 inches and smaller (Arcata Union 5 Feb. 1981). By the fall of 1981, Simpson’s Korbel mill was processing “almost exclusively” the smaller diameter logs (Chapman 24 Oct. 1981).

But in just four years, Simpson began another renovation program at the Korbel mill to “increase production, cut labor expenses and make the company more cost competitive.” Installation of more computerized equipment required a four-month shut down beginning in October 1981, resulting in the loss of about 60 workers. Using fewer workers, the Korbel mill’s output was predicted to increase from 600,000 board feet a day to 680,000. The newly-renovated sawmill would simplify the milling process by reducing the number of different lines the wood would follow, eliminating two of the four lines. The new “gutted and redesigned” mill had a new head rig, a new twin horizontal resaw, and a new computerized optimizing edger to be used in combination with two existing edgers with new set work. The only thing that couldn’t be done by computers at this point was grading, still to be done the old way. A new sorter was described as “whiz” that not only sorted the wood, but also bundled it. Korbel was producing rough and surfaced green, and rough and surfaced dry. The Korbel green chain faded into “logging history” with this computerized mill (Bentzley 13 May 1985).

In 1988, Simpson purchased the Arcata Redwood Company, taking over the Orick old-growth mill on Prairie Creek at the foot of the Bald Hills Road (Arcata Union 6 May 1988). Simpson operated this mill until October 2009, when the plant was closed, its logs sent to Korbel for milling. The Orick mill’s headrig and edger were transferred to Korbel in early 2010 (Press Release 2 July 2009, online). In the meantime, the big remanufacturing mill of the 1950s on Arcata Bottom was purchased by the bulb grower, Sun Valley, in 1999 (Arcata Eye 8 June 1999).

In 2004, the Simpson Resource Company was renamed Green Diamond Resource Company, indicating a new direction, as Simpson gradually eased out of the manufacturing business to concentrate on management of its vast timber holdings (Times-Standard 12 Feb. 2004). Simpson Timber Company’s California operations were acquired by Green Diamond in 2007 and the Orick and Korbel sawmills; the Korbel, Brainard and Samoa remanufacturing plants; and the Samoa chip dock were to be identified as California Redwood Company facilities (Times-Standard 21 Sept. 2007). Continuing its move toward management rather than manufacturing, Green Diamond announced in 2014 that its subsidiary, California Redwood
Company, was getting out of the redwood lumber business, transitioning to Douglas fir timber by the end of the year, affecting up to 80 workers.

The California Redwood Co. will continue to process its remaining redwood log inventory and supply customers from existing redwood lumber inventories over the next few months while exiting the business. This move will enable Green Diamond to focus on [company] strengths and to add value to [its] timber lands. The Seattle-headquartered Green diamond will phase out the transfer of redwood logs to California Redwood Co. for milling. Its redwood logs will instead be sold to other manufacturers. Green Diamond will continue to harvest Douglas fir and [it] will be processed at the Korbel mill....phasing out Brainard remanufacturing facility. (Times-Standard 1 May 2014)

The Korbel mill was put on the market that fall as its closing approached (North Coast Journal Blog 14 Oct. 2014). The Del Norte Triplicate reported that the timber giant owned 1.3 million acres, including 93,185 acres in Del Norte Co and a recent purchase of 600,000 acres in south-central Oregon, but was selling 47,000 acres in the Klamath’s Blue Creek area to the Western Rivers Conservancy and the Yurok Tribe. The Simpson Company with its various names and subsidiaries was, after sixty-six years in California, out of the manufacturing business to concentrate wholly on growing trees and management of other forest resource (Del Norte Triplicate 9 Dec. 2014). California Redwood Company shut down the Korbel mill on February 5, 2015, the last log traveling through the sawmill on the 29th of January (North Coast Journal 5 Feb. 2015).

California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA)

CEQA’s Section 15064.5 “Determining the Significance of Impacts to Archeological and Historical Resources” provides four criteria for identifying a historically-significant property. The criteria are those used in determining a resource’s eligibility for the California Register of Historical Resources. Generally, a resource is historically significant if it

- (A) is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of California’s history and cultural heritage,
- (B) is associated with the lives of persons important in our past,
- (C) embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, region, or method of construction, or represents the work of an important creative individual or possesses high artistic values, or.
- (D) has yielded, or may be likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history. (CEQA 15064.5(a)(3))

A resource needs to meet at least one of these criteria, but it must also retain sufficient integrity to impart that significance. Unless a building retains its architectural integrity and associated values sufficient to convey its significance under any of the eligibility criteria, then it fails the test for significance. It should be noted here that the condition of a property is not a consideration in determining historic significance under CEQA.

Integrity is the authenticity of a historical resource’s physical identity as evidenced by the survival of characteristics or historic fabric that existed during the resource’s period of significance….Integrity is evaluated with regard to the retention of location, design, setting,
Another factor in documenting and evaluating a property is context. A building doesn’t exist in isolation; there are particular circumstances that caused it to be constructed, and understanding those reasons is part of evaluating a property’s significance. Context statements describe events that provide a property’s background, its history. How well a property reflects its context is part of assessing its significance.

**Determination of Significance**

Today’s sawmill is an expansive, sprawling building that houses the most important piece of equipment on site—the headrig—at the head-end of the building. An impressive system of conveyors move the logs and lumber into and through the building, where various manufacturing treatments occur until the sawmill’s final product emerges into the automatic sorter and then to the yard. What was needed to turn a log into lumber a century ago remains essentially the same, but the process of doing it is light years away. Nineteenth-century milling was a labor-intensive, dangerous operation; today it’s a computerized system that ensures the safety of the workforce, a fraction of what was once required to operate a mill.

Although it is not possible to know what, if any, of the earlier structures remain as part of the current sawmill building, it is possible to develop a rough chronology of several remodels, renovations, and constructions that affected the Korbel mill.

1. Fall 1883: Construction of the original Korbel mill.
2. Spring 1887: Mill rebuilt after it was destroyed by fire in Nov. 1886.
4. Winter 1903: Mill is a band saw mill of about 50,000 feet capacity in 10-hour shift; equipped with the latest improved machinery; “complete rebuilding of the plant at Korbel (Humboldt Times 27 Aug. 1944).
5. Spring 1903: Another band saw to be added, so that both sides can operate.
6. Spring 1903: Rotten foundation timbers replaced; cement piers for foundation timbers; band mill re-set; two new boilers installed.
7. Winter 1912: Mill cutting 100,000 feet per day; two sides operating; shingle and shake mill, a planing room and tank room. Electrical plant. Mill employs 150 men.
8. Summer 1931: Mill closed down.
9. Fall 1933: Mill reopened; operating with two saw rigs; 300 workers in mill and woods, and on railroad.
10. Summer 1934: Mill closed down.
11. Winter 1942: In preparation of reopening, old mill dismantled, including old machinery and other equipment.
12. Spring 1943: Mill reopened; 200 men employed for operations of one side of mill; repair and improvements of mill yards, grounds and buildings; Ross carriers replaced old monorail system for handling lumber and sorting tables replaced.
13. Winter 1947: New large shipping and storage shed; railway extended deeper into timber; steam-operated mill; two sides operating; two pairs of edgers and trimmers sending lumber to 300-foot green chain; third edger for re-milling of flawed lumber; eight Dutch oven boilers generating 1800 horsepower; electricity from 350-kilowatt
turbine; hoggers grind material for the fire; lath machine to recover some wood; daily production between 140,000 and 150,000 feet with two headrigs.

14. Summer 1949: Completion of five large dry kilns, each with a capacity of 50,000 feet; new Yates N-60 vertical resaw installed to cut beveled siding; $250,00 addition to mill; new re-sorter; thoroughly modern, well-equipped plant.

15. Spring 1951: Installation of a new cant gang saw, new carriage and band mill on the No. 1 side; new dry storage shed and new planning mill.

16. Summer 1968) Announcement that Korbel mill improvements to include replacing boiler; remodeling the re-mill department; completely rebuilding the entire head end of the mill; installation of new hydraulic barker.

17. Winter 1969: $5 million in improvements at Korbel; new equipment in the head end; new building to house it; completely new resaw dept.; two 600,000 gallon Simpson wood stave tanks for fire protection; new steam boiler; new fuel bin; former log pond filled in for dry operation.

18. Summer 1979: Announcement that Korbel sawmill to be modified to process small logs 5 to 24 inches in diameter; old headrig moved to Klamath Mill; Korbel to saw fir as well as redwood; remanufacturing facilities to be modified.

19. Fall 1980: $15 million invested to convert mill to second-growth operation; state of the art computer technologies installed.


21. Spring 1985: Announcement of another overhaul with installation of computerized equipment that will cut workforce again, but output will be about 680,000 feet/day; mill to be gutted and redesigned to feature two lumber lines instead of four; new twin, horizontal resaws, new computerized optimizing edger, new sorter eliminated green chain.

22. Fall 1985: Mill shut for remodeling; key to work to be a modern computerized system for sorting sawn lumber.

23. Fall 1987: Mill largely computerized; essentially rebuilt inside of mill.

24. Summer 2009: Announcement that in 2010, the headrig and edger from Orick mill would be moved to Korbel.

25. February 2015: Korbel mill closed permanently.

It is difficult to believe that any portions or materials in the present sawmill pre-date the reopening in 1943. It is possible that some materials remain from the major work that occurred in 1947, but the improvements completed in 1969 suggest that the present sawmill dates from that time forward. Reported as part of the 1969 program were “new equipment in the head end of the mill and a new building to house it” (Arcata Union 4 Dec. 1969). Retooling to handle smaller logs in 1980 resulted in the sawmill being “virtually rebuilt” (Arcata Union 5 Feb 1981). A computer system, installed at that time, was expanded in 1985, essentially creating a totally computer-controlled mill, except for grading. The 1985 renovation resulted in a “gutted and redesigned” mill to accommodate two lumber lines instead of the previous four and the installation of an automatic sorter to replace the old green chain (Bentzley 1985).

Context
When Euro-American settlement began on California’s north coast in 1850, the initial objective was gold and the development of commerce to serve those who came in search of those riches. But it was immediately apparent that the region’s real wealth was its trees—those giant redwoods that seemed inexhaustible. Logging woods adjacent to Humboldt Bay and mills to process the logs started up within a couple of years and the timber industry, established well over a century and a half ago, came to dominate the economic, political, and social life of north coastal California.

The 1870s mills north of Arcata and the Vance mill at Essex were merely the precursors of the five mills, constructed up Mad River Valley in the 1880s. The Warren Creek Mill, Minor’s Hall Creek mill across the River, Chandler’s Mill in Blue Lake, the Riverside Mill, and the Korbels’ Mill, located on the North Fork flat below the redwood-covered hills, were all possible because of a railroad and a wharf. In this environment, the Korbel Brothers, looking for lumber to manufacture the vats and barrels they needed for their Sonoma County wineries, found just what they needed and, most importantly, they had the capital to make it happen.

Changes in ownership and the physical plant over the years is business as usual in any industry. The sawmill, itself, has undergone numerous, major modifications, if not complete reconstruction. What is notable is the Korbel mill’s long run—one hundred thirty-two years—exceeding any other in Humboldt County, even the Scotia mill. During that period, the mill weathered economic slumps, several wars, changes in technology and consumer demands, and now, a new direction focuses Green Diamond’s management on its natural resources, letting others do the milling.

**Historic Assessment**

Criterion B, associated with the lives of important persons, and D, likely to yield information important in prehistory or history, can be eliminated rather easily. Certainly there were influential and important company people involved in the management and ownership of the mill and lots of really hard-working, laboring people, but it would be difficult to argue that any particular “persons important in our past” were associated with the sawmill building.

Criterion D is generally associated with prehistoric archaeological resources, but could also be applied to historic artifacts. While there may be such resources beneath the pavement on which the sawmill stands, the machinery inside the sawmill is sufficiently modern to preclude unknown information important in history. If there are prehistory resources in the ground beneath the sawmill, they will remain protected, covered by decades of fill and pavement which will not be removed.

Criterion C addresses the building itself. Does it embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, region or method of construction, or represent the work of an important creative individual or possess high artistic values? To begin with, it is not possible to identify a single date for the sawmill’s construction. In fact, there probably isn’t a date, since the present building represents multiple rebuilds and new construction, most of which occurred since 1969. The sawmill is a very large industrial building without distinctive characteristics of any particular type, period, region or method of construction. Although the engineers and contractors should be recognized for their ingenuity and expertise in the design and construction of this highly
functional building, they would not be considered as important creative individuals, nor does the sawmill possess high artistic values.

The sawmill does deserve consideration under Criterion A—an association with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of California’s history and cultural heritage. The Korbel Mill was an important participant in Humboldt County’s timber industry, beginning in 1883 and continuing right up to 2015. The large community that grew up around the mill included housing for hundreds of workers and families, commercial enterprises, a school, and hotel, all of which supported a thriving social and civic life. The mill, its logging woods, and the railroad provided livelihoods for generations of workers, certainly thousands and thousands of them.

How long has the sawmill building been part of that context? Does it retain sufficient integrity to convey a significant association? The mill site has been occupied by manufacturing buildings and ancillary structures for 132 years, but the sawmill has been there less than 50, and significantly, during that period, major changes occurred so that the present sawmill isn’t the one constructed in 1969. The 1981 and 1985 computerization of the sawmill substantially changed the way the sawmill worked, further removing it from the sawmills of the previous one hundred years.

Conclusions

The sawmill building dates to 1969, but even during the intervening 47 years, it has undergone numerous structural and design changes. Computerization of the mill in the 1980s changed the traditional milling process, making it even less relevant to its historic context. The sawmill fails to meet any of the eligibility criteria and is, therefore, not historically-significant under CEQA

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