

THE HISTORY OF THE "FREE OREGON CITY ELEVATOR" SIGN



The "Free Oregon City Elevator" sign hung on the original Oregon City Elevator, constructed in 1915. The sign was most likely built that same year. Today, the elevator is known as the Municipal Elevator because it is owned by the City of Oregon City.

By the early 1900's, most of the residential homes in Oregon City were located atop of the 100-foot cliff in what is now the Historic McLoughlin Neighborhood, while businesses and the mills operated in the downtown area. Around 1867, steps were built to

supplement early Native American trails being used by residents. The preferred route had about 700 stairs from the base of the cliff to the top of the bluff. To help people avoid this long walk, in 1912 the City Commission put forward a proposal to build an elevator.

After three years of discussion and some legal conflict, the original wooden elevator was completed and opened on December 3, 1915. It is reported that nearly the entire population of Oregon City rode the elevator that day - an estimated 3,850 people!

The wooden elevator used a hydraulic system, which was connected to the top of the bluff with a 35-foot catwalk. It took about 200,000 gallons of water to operate, so when the elevator was running, water pressure in the surrounding area dropped. Each one-way ride took from anywhere from three to five minutes.

In 1924, the elevator was updated with electricity. This made the elevator more reliable and faster, reducing the ride time to about 30 seconds. By then, most of the wooden staircases had been removed, making the elevator the preferred method for traversing the cliff.

By the early 1950s, the maintenance on the original elevator became a burden. With more passengers and an increasing number of breakdowns, the city determined it was time to replace the original structure with the concrete elevator we have today. The City Commission directed it to be "as plain as possible without adornment". Their intent was to make sure it was a reasonable use of tax payer money, but this direction also helped lead to the current elevator's sleek midcentury modern design.

It took 751 tons of concrete and steel to construct the existing elevator you see today! At 130 feet tall, each ride takes only 9 to 15 seconds. The Oregon City Elevator continues to operate as one of four outdoor municipal (publicly owned) elevators in the world and the only vertical street in North America.

