

# Polk County

K. Susan Appleby, SEDCOR

## Points of interest

Western Oregon University, covered bridges, historic courthouse, Brunk House, Baskett Slough Wildlife Refuge, mountain scenery, wineries, National Historic Trail, Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde Headquarters and Spirit Mountain Casino.

## History and General Information

Polk County was officially created from Yamhill District of the Oregon Territory on December 22, 1845. In 1848, **President James K. Polk** signed a bill approving the boundaries of the Oregon territory, which officially separated the territory from England. Thus came the name Polk County.

The present area of Polk County is 472,960 acres. Hudson's Bay Company hunters and trappers had penetrated the Willamette Valley as far south as Polk County as early as 1830. Initial settlement of the Willamette Valley started with the establishment of Etienne Lucier's farm at the extreme northwest corner of French Prairie in 1829. French Prairie was colonized thereafter, during the 1830's and 1840's, by retired servants of the Hudson's Bay Company.



Polk County Courthouse.

Settlement of Polk County began during the early 1840's. **Jason Lee** was actually the vanguard of the settlement, having established his mission at Wheatland on the east bank of the Willamette River in 1834. The first courthouse was at Cynthia Ann. A second courthouse burned in 1898, and was replaced with the present building which was built the same year. In an effort to develop a local building stone industry, Polk County sandstone from a local quarry was used. A three-story office annex was completed in 1966. Polk County Human Services was consolidated in the Academy Building in 1989.

Various small industries sprang up in Polk County during the period of pioneer settlement. Among them were grist and woolen mills. In the late 1840's, a grist mill was established at Ellendale and in 1852 one was established at Falls City, but later moved to Rickreall. In 1865, a woolen mill was established on Ellendale at the site of the old grist mill, but was later destroyed by fire. A woolen mill began operation in Dallas in 1896 and John Waymire's flour mill started production in Dallas.

After the establishment of the **Grand Ronde Indian Reservation** in 1856, the remnants of the Willamette Valley Indian tribes, as well as Indians from other parts of Oregon, were settled there. More than 1,000 Indians were on the reservation at one time during the 1860's. In 1908, there was a division of the reservation lands to the various Indian residents there at the time, but Federal supervisory control over the last remnant of reservation land, some 500 acres, was not terminated until 1957. The Grand Ronde agency had been terminated in 1925.

During its pioneer period, river navigation was Polk County's principal means of transport for goods produced in the county and for incoming supplies. River navigation was displaced after 1890 by railroads as the most important means of transporting goods to and from the county although riverboats were still in operation as late as 1894. It was during the period of steam navigation that the port of Lincoln attained prominence as a wheat exporting port on the Willamette. For a time, Lincoln was second only to Portland among Willamette River ports in the tonnage of wheat it handled.



Ritner Creek Covered Bridge—South of Pedee.

Grains, cattle and sheep were among the more important rural industries during the period after pioneer settlement in Polk County. A big change in the agricultural scene came in the 1890's with the introduction of two new crops, hops and Italian prunes. Prunes rapidly declined in after World War I, when European prune orchards began to increasingly supply the European market. At one time there were nearly 4,000 acres of hops in the county, but this crop rapidly declined in importance after World War II, leaving only about 400 acres of hop cultivation in the county by 1974.

Traveling back roads in Polk County reveals many attractions – covered bridges and pleasant parks, vineyards, wineries, and bed and breakfast lodgings that spot the surrounding hills. Many roads meander through beautiful, fertile valleys from the Willamette River to the timbered foothills of the Coast Range. One of Polk County's cities, **Independence**, was the final destination of early wagon trains to Oregon. Other cities located in Polk County are **Dallas**, **Monmouth**, **Falls City** and portions of **Salem** and **Willamina**.

## Economic Update

Austin McGuigan  
Polk County Community Development Director



Polk County appreciates the resources offered by SEDCOR that help them attract new industries and build a resilient local economy. Polk County and its cities currently have shovel ready industrial land available for development and they work closely with SEDCOR to help market and promote development opportunities in their region.



Bank in Independence.

In a continuing effort to encourage new business investment, job creation, higher incomes for local residents and greater diversity of economic activity, Polk County has applied for and been awarded a new **Enterprise Zone** encompassing 155 acres of land in Dallas, Independence, Monmouth and unincorporated Polk County.

These incentives have been successful in the past at attracting new and diverse industries. Recently, Polk County has been experiencing a lot of interest in renewable energy businesses and projects including a methane biogas power generation facility, a biofuel production facility and solar power generation projects. Polk County has been aggressive in attracting these new industry sectors and has recently designated a **Rural Renewable Energy Development Zone (RREDZ)** that includes the entire County (whether incorporated or not), with the exception of the lands located within the Salem Urban Growth Boundary. Polk County is also working on new County ordinances that will make it easier for businesses to utilize renewable energy devices and take advantage of associated State and Federal incentives.

These efforts have not been to the detriment of the County's core infrastructure. Polk County values the importance of an efficient road network for economic development not only in Polk County, but to the entire region. These values were reinforced by Polk County voters in 2006, with the passage of a \$20 million road bond. Polk County has already improved 192 miles of County roads as a result of the road bond. In addition to these improvements, Polk County has attracted Federal stimulus awards, which together, will result in improvements to nearly 85% of the County's paved road system. Polk County continues to work at attracting Federal and State investments. Currently, Polk County is working on improving the intersection of Oregon State Highway's 51 and 22 with a grade separated interchange that will improve the capacity and safety of the intersection.

Polk County and local municipal water suppliers also work to secure safe and reliable sources of water to meet long term water needs. The **City of Dallas** recently completed a two-million gallon reservoir that will improve flow and water availability in industrial areas. The **City of Monmouth** has added additional municipal wells and Polk County continues to explore and pursue long term water supplies for the entire region.

Polk County and its cities consistently look ahead, securing long term sources of safe and reliable water, improving and maintaining the road network and aiding in the diversification of the local economy.

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Brunk House on Hwy 22.

## Polk County Statistics

Pam Ferrara, Workforce Analyst, Worksource Oregon Employment Department

Polk County has 744 square miles and is largely rural. It stretches over the Coast Range to the west, where it is heavily forested with some of the biggest old-growth Douglas fir in the state. The Polk county section is home to **Laurel Mountain**, the second-highest point in the Coast Range at 3,589 ft. The eastern part of the county is farmland. The county seat, **Dallas**, is its largest city. The city's picturesque downtown, with its courthouse built in 1898, has been used as a movie set because of its classic small-town appearance.

Polk County had some 18,000 jobs (covered by unemployment insurance) in 2008. Its economy is dominated by three industries – natural resources and agriculture, manufacturing, and government. Forestry-related activities (such as tree-planting), nurseries, and field crops make up the bulk of agricultural employment. The county's percentage of manufacturing employment (15 percent in 2008) is higher than the state average, and the strongest sectors are wood products and food processing. Government employment is higher than average for two reasons. The Grand Ronde tribal government, and all their business entities, are considered local government. **Western Oregon University**, part of the Oregon State System of Higher Education, is located in Monmouth. Half the working residents of Polk County drive outside the county to work. As a result, Polk County is part of the Salem Metropolitan Statistical area, which is Marion and Polk counties combined.

Part of the city of Salem, commonly called **West Salem**, is located in Polk County. In 2007, there were nearly 4,000 jobs in West Salem. The largest percentage of jobs were in the private education and health services (19 percent). The next largest sectors were government (18 percent), manufacturing (17 percent), and retail trade and leisure and hospitality (both at 11 percent).

Polk County had 68,235 residents in 2008 – a 9.4 percent increase since 2000. **Dallas**, had a population of 15,360. The next-largest cities were **Monmouth** with 9,565 residents, and **Independence**, with 8,030. All of Polk County grew 38 percent from 1990 to 2008, faster than the state as a whole. West Salem grew 75 percent over this time period.

The Hispanic population in the county in 2007 (the most recent year available) was 12 percent, up from four percent in 1980 and six percent in 1990. In 2007, the county had a larger percent of residents age 65 and older than the state as a whole. Nearly 87 percent of the population over age 25 had a high school diploma or GED, and 26 percent held at least a bachelor's degree.

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