By 1883, Castle Rock, located on the Columbia about one mile east of a lava formation that looked like a castle, was a major rail & river boat shipping point at the end of a freight road from the south. A ferry moved Morrow County hay across the Columbia to feed sheep on the Washington shore. Freight wagons took supplies south to the Heppner region, and wool and wheat north to the Columbia for the Portland market. The railroad reached Heppner in 1888 and the Castle Rock settlement declined. In 1916 the abandoned school building was moved to Boardman until a new one could be built. Backwaters of the John Day Dam now cover Castle Rock.

Additional homesteaders and business owners arrived after irrigation water was brought from the Umatilla River in 1916. E.P. Dodd of Hermiston platted a 40 acre townsite. By 1917, Boardman had replaced the freight station at Castle Rock, a few miles down the Columbia and the railroad section town of Coyote, a few miles upstream. In the early years, a train depot was located at Messner, between Boardman & Irrigon. In 1922, a new depot was built in Boardman.

Early commercial ventures focused on agricultural productions, commerce and traveler hospitality.