



# John Whittemore Eddy

1872-1955

John Whittemore “Jack” Eddy was a man of action and adventure, characteristics that served him well as a successful Northwest businessman and timber pioneer in the first half of the 20th century. Under Jack’s leadership, the stalwart 19th-century Port Blakely Mill Company was transformed into a thriving, sustainable timberland business.

Jack was born in Bay City, Michigan, on August 12, 1872, the oldest son of John Franklin “Frank” Eddy and Charlotte Whittemore Eddy. The Eddy family traced its roots back to colonial New England, and the family had run a lumber mill in Maine.

Frank Eddy had relocated from Bangor, Maine, to Bay City in 1866 to help his cousin Edwin Eddy run a family-owned lumber mill on the banks of Michigan’s Saginaw River. The family eventually had interests in banking, mining, shipping, and salt manufacturing. Jack had two younger brothers, Robert Bailey and James Garfield, and two younger sisters, Lucretia Glover and Caroline. Robert and James later played roles in the Port Blakely venture. As a youth, Jack worked in the mills and at the Eddy Brothers lumberyard in Bay City.

Jack was the first of his family to attend college, graduating from Harvard in 1895. Two years later, in 1897, he formed a partnership with David Edward “Ned” Skinner, who was a distant relative by marriage.

The partnership first focused on the salt industry and launched the Anchor Salt Company. Around the turn of the century, Anchor was sold to the Morton family of Morton Salt fame. Meanwhile, the lumber industry was in decline in Michigan, and the family mill in Bay City stopped cutting lumber at the time of Frank Eddy’s death in 1899. Skinner relocated to San Francisco, and Jack focused on managing his father’s estate and the Eddy Investment Company, taking stakes in some western timber companies. According to his entry in the Harvard College Class of 1895 Second Report, Jack also found time to travel, visiting Naples, London, and Paris in early 1901.

In 1902, with the family’s investment operations running smoothly, Jack determined to devote himself to the lumber business and headed west. In a bold move, he and Skinner bought the storied Port Blakely Mill Company, which had been founded by William Renton in 1864, on Bainbridge Island, just west of Seattle. At the time that news of the purchase spread in January 1903, the Port Blakely sawmill was said to be the largest under one roof in the world and could cut 275,000 board feet in 10 hours.

Jack settled into work at Port Blakely, overseeing mill operations. Skinner ran a sales office in San Francisco, where James Garfield Eddy joined him. Despite fierce competition from numerous new mills throughout the Northwest, Port Blakely prospered, with the company selling lumber in the U.S. and overseas. Following the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire, the company sold millions of board feet of lumber to rebuild the city. But fire turned the tables on the company. On April 22, 1907, a substantial portion of the Port Blakely mill burned to the ground.

Jack immediately set about rebuilding, though it took legal action to win a settlement from the company’s insurers. The fire also coincided with an economic downturn, the Panic of 1907. Even as Jack moved forward with rebuilding the mill, he looked for other opportunities, primarily by investing in timberlands. In 1909, Jack and other close family members, without the participation of Skinner, purchased the Ferry-Baker Lumber Company in Everett. For Port Blakely, Jack purchased additional forestlands in Snohomish County, northeast of Seattle.

Though Jack relocated to the Northwest to pursue business, he also had the opportunity to make new friends here, including Ethel Garrett. The two were married on April 25, 1908. They had three children, Franklin, Jasmine, and Garrett.

Jack and Ethel became well-known in burgeoning Seattle’s social and philanthropic circles during the first decades of the 20th century. They were friends and neighbors of Mr. and Mrs. Joshua Green, and their homes served as a hub of social life in the city. Green ran the highly successful steamboat operation, the Puget Sound Navigation Company, and was later the head of Peoples National Bank.

Jack and Ethel also provided time, energy, and financial support to numerous arts and charitable organizations. Notably, they contributed to the construction of St. Mark’s Episcopal Cathedral in Seattle. Ethel was also closely involved in launching what became the Cornish College of the Arts.

Though refined, Seattle’s social elite still had a touch of the frontier in them. Jack once took part with Green and others in a mock robbery of a stage coach that transported society women from downtown Seattle to the Seattle Golf Club as part of a charitable event. The women were incensed to find out later that the desperadoes were merely masked gentlemen, using stage pistols.

While the U.S. economy recovered after the Panic of 1907, the lumber business still faced challenges, including over-production. In the years following, Northwest mills, including Port Blakely, often went idle. Skinner attempted to boost foreign sales by forming a cooperative, but he faced considerable pressure from government trustbusters.

Though strain emerged in the partnership between Jack and Skinner, the two remained united for one last venture: shipbuilding. The lumber business required transportation, and Port Blakely had owned a transportation subsidiary since 1907 that included steamers. The advent of World War I created a new demand for shipbuilding, and in 1916, Skinner, Jack, James Garfield Eddy, and two other smaller partners formed the Skinner & Eddy Corporation to pursue ship construction.

The venture was an early and astounding success. An innovative modular shipbuilding system enabled Skinner & Eddy to speed construction time. The firm built more ships than any other company for the wartime Emergency Fleet Corporation.

The end of the war, however, led to a rapid decline in demand for the shipbuilding industry, including Skinner & Eddy. The industry’s problems were exacerbated by labor unrest as well. A 1919 strike, mounting debt, and legal troubles also contributed to the company’s decline. The Port Blakely Mill Company had also declined during the war, and mill operations ceased in 1922. Finally in 1923—and made legally binding in 1924—Jack and Skinner ended their partnership, with Jack retaining the mill and timber assets, and Skinner the shipbuilding. Jack sold the mill equipment, and the buildings were soon demolished as well. Port Blakely would now focus entirely on growing and harvesting trees.

Despite the ongoing demands of business, Jack was able to pursue one of his greatest passions, big game hunting, often in the company of his friend Joshua Green. He hunted extensively in the Northwest and undertook trips to remote parts of Alaska as well. He memorialized two exciting expeditions in his books, “Hunting on Kenai Peninsula and Observations on the Increase of Big Game in North America” (1924), and “Hunting the Alaska Brown Bear” (1930). To this day, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game includes the second title in the Alaska Hunting Bibliography that it provides to prospective hunters.

Jack enjoyed the challenge and rugged adventure of big game hunting, and his enjoyment was accompanied by great respect for wildlife, the outdoors, and scientific inquiry. His writings reflected this respect, and his poetic use of language beautifully captured the drama

and immensity of the rugged Alaska landscape. In his second book, he praised a 1900 U.S. law prohibiting the trafficking in bear hides, which helped enable bear populations to survive. Jack also contributed his observations of the remote Alaskan Peninsula to the National Geographic Society. These observations, including place names and locations, were later incorporated into reconnaissance maps produced by the Society.

One of Jack’s hunting companions was his brother-in-law, Edward I. Garrett, whose son Peter Garrett fondly recalled his uncle Jack’s nature. “He was a very friendly guy, very outgoing.” Peter remembered that Jack was a physically small man, but that he had a presence that “I stood in awe of.”

Jack also traveled to east Africa for a safari in late 1929 and early 1930. He returned with more than 800 bird specimens and other preserved animals, many of which he donated to the University of Washington’s Burke Museum. Decades later, Jack’s son Garrett would become a principal benefactor of the Burke.

Jack enjoyed his greatest hunting expeditions in the years before the Great Depression shook the U.S. to its core. In the early 1930s, hard times fell on the lumber industry, and Port Blakely’s fortunes were affected as well. Investments in Canadian timberlands also were hurt by the protectionist Smoot-Hawley Act of 1930. But Port Blakely was already taking a long-term view of forest management. Jack’s brother James pioneered studies in reforestation and tree breeding. Spurred by his friend the great American botanist Luther Burbank, James founded the Eddy Tree Breeding Station in Placerville, California, which later became the Institute of Forest Genetics.

Unhappy with Washington State’s slow economic recovery, Jack ran for the State House of Representatives on the Republican ticket in 1932. Though the state swung heavily Democratic in the election, Jack won the seat for the 43rd District. He held office for five terms, until 1943. Sadly, during Jack’s time in office, Ethel fell ill with cancer and did not survive her illness; she died in 1937.

Like so many timber businesses in the Northwest, Port Blakely made a substantial contribution to providing resources to the U.S. effort in World War II. Lumber was needed for wartime construction of pontoon bridges, docks, tent framing, buildings, and dunnage—the interior, temporary framing of ships to carry munitions and other supplies.

After the war, Jack’s younger son Garrett, who had served in the U.S. Navy, took on a greater role in the family business. A strong-willed, scientific man, Garrett recognized that the timber industry needed change, and he pioneered the industry’s turn to tree farming and sustainable forestry. Jack supported Garrett’s rigorous scientific research into forestry practices that formed the foundation of Port Blakely’s ongoing success.

In 1952, Jack named Garrett the president of Port Blakely. By this time, Jack was 80 and his health was failing. He stayed involved in Port Blakely’s business, though he traveled and wintered in Arizona. He died on August 5, 1955, assured that Port Blakely had a strong leader in his son who could nurture the family company and its forestlands for years to come. Jack’s many descendants are still enjoying the benefits created by his remarkable life, and they are actively carrying on the enterprise that he began. In 2008, more than a half century after Jack’s death—and seven years after Garrett’s death—Port Blakely remains a fifth-generation, family-owned company with a reputation for exceptional forest management.