

Lester M. “Bud” Hampton

1893-1974

A dedicated and self-made lumberman, Lester Meredith “Bud” Hampton built from the ground up what has become one of the West Coast’s largest lumber companies, Hampton Affiliates. In the face of the Great Depression and several disastrous setbacks, Bud persevered because of his tireless work, entrepreneurial spirit, and leadership abilities.

Bud was born on August 11, 1893, in his family’s one-room farmhouse near Randle, Washington. His father, Charles J. Hampton, had been a machinist for the railroad industry, but hoped to make a success of his 160-acre farm. Bud’s mother, Margaret Hampton, née Meredith, had come from a farming family in California’s Napa Valley.

Life on the farm was difficult. Bud’s father initially lost money on his property because he had paid a squatter rather than the true owner, the Northern Pacific railroad. In spite of financial difficulties, starting around 1905, he began work on a large, sturdy house, which the family occupied in 1907.

In addition to raising beef cattle, pigs, and sheep, the family kept dairy cattle and grew hay for their feeding. Bud helped with chores around the farm and participated in the yearly cattle drive to Chehalis, Washington. At the start of each school year, Bud and his siblings received a single pair of shoes. After they wore out their shoes, they went barefoot for the rest of the year.

Bud attended elementary school near Randle and graduated from Randle High School in 1915. At graduation, he delivered a speech called, “The School, Past and Future.” Happy

to leave the harsh life of the farm, Bud enrolled in Oregon State Agricultural College (today Oregon State University), but his studies were interrupted by World War I. He entered the U.S. Army near the end of the war, serving at Ft. Lewis, Washington.

Bud attended one more year at Oregon State before he got his first business break. In the summer before his fourth year of college, Bud worked as a carpenter on a hotel in Mineral, Washington. The contractor, a Tacoma schoolteacher named Eugene Emmons, noticed Bud’s hard work and offered the young man a chance to go into business. Emmons was starting a retail lumberyard in Tacoma and asked Bud to run the operation. Bud jumped at the chance and moved to Tacoma.

With capital and inventory provided by Emmons, Bud began selling windows and doors to local contractors. Initially he kept no records, knowing nothing about bookkeeping. When Emmons came to check on the business, he grew suspicious, but Bud had a remarkable memory and was able to precisely recall transactions. Seeing that Bud was both honest and successful, Emmons joined the business full-time and made Bud his junior partner. Calling their business the Tacoma Sash & Door Company, the two men acquired machinery piece by piece and began manufacturing millwork. By 1929, they had built the company into the largest millwork manufacturer on the West Coast.

In Tacoma, Bud met Ruth Lillian Cavin, and the two were married in September 1922. They eventually had four children, Charles,

John, Virginia, and Margaret. Charles and John both followed their father into the lumber business.

During the 1920s, Bud developed a wealth of knowledge about manufacturing and became financially prosperous. However, like so many Americans, he kept a sizeable portion of his wealth in the stock market. He considered liquidating his stock holdings before an extended business trip to Hawaii, but decided to handle the matter on his return. During his trip, the stock market crashed and virtually all of his wealth was lost.

As the Great Depression set in and construction fell, Tacoma Sash & Door struggled. Emmons kept family members on the company payroll, further driving the company toward insolvency. In 1935, Bud parted company with Emmons and struck out on his own with nothing more than an old flatbed truck, some obsolete moldings, and \$3,500 of now worthless Savings and Loan stock. A friend provided free warehouse space—he could not find a paying renter—and Bud set up an office, the first home of the Hampton Lumber Company.

Stoking a pot-bellied stove in his spare office, Bud spent three weeks trying to figure out what to do. With inexpensive lots available as a result of tax foreclosures, Bud decided to go into construction. He found an excavator, a carpenter, an electrician, and a plumber who were willing to combine their services to build a house on the promise of payment once the house was sold. Fortunately, when they finished the house, it sold quickly for cash, and everyone was paid. Bud repeated the process and his fledgling business grew rapidly.

An old associate from Tacoma Sash and Door named Albin J. “Al” Anderson joined Bud and bought a 25 percent interest in Hampton Lumber. Over the next several years, the two compatible partners built a thriving construction and retail lumber business. However, after the United States entered World

War II in 1941, lumber became scarce, with most of the nation’s supply going into the war effort. In order to secure a direct supply of lumber for the company, Bud recruited an old college friend named Connor Harmon to find, purchase, and operate a sawmill. Harmon located an obsolete mill in Willamina, Oregon, and with \$25,000 from Hampton Lumber, he bought and began to run the mill in 1942.

A short time later, Harmon telephoned Bud in Tacoma to report a problem: he had run out of money. Bud hopped in his car, drove to Willamina, and took over direct supervision of the mill operation, bringing his professional days in Tacoma to an end.

Though Bud knew nothing about running a mill, he learned quickly and turned the business around. In spite of labor shortages during the war, Bud was able to assemble a strong, knowledgeable team to construct a new state-of-the-art mill by 1945. It could cut 40-foot timbers and had an eight-hour capacity of 100,000 board feet.

Bud’s younger son, John Hampton, recalled his father’s special gift that made the feat of building the mill possible. “People loved working for my father. He was so enthusiastic and optimistic that he was an inspiration to the people who worked for him.”

In 1950, Bud was hit with another business disaster: the lumber mill at Willamina burned to the ground. Experienced in responding to setbacks, Bud acted decisively. He exchanged a 24-inch Swedish gang mill, located at the other end of the mill pond, for one with a 36-inch capacity, and gradually rebuilt his Willamina operation.

Through the late 1940s, Bud commuted between Tacoma and Willamina, and finally moved his family to Portland in 1951. In the 1950s, he and Al Anderson amicably divided

their business; Bud took over full ownership of the Oregon operation, the Willamina Lumber Company, and Al kept the Tacoma business. During the 1950s, Bud expanded his business, starting mill operations in California and British Columbia. By this time, both his sons, Charles and John, had joined the company. Charles eventually ran the Canadian operation, and John started a wholesale lumber company, Hampton Lumber Sales, which became one of the largest lumber wholesalers in the United States.

Bud and the company had their ups and downs. Additional fires destroyed property, and the California markets proved limited. Bud's optimism occasionally led to unwise business decisions, but his hard work and honesty always made a difference. His partnership with Al Anderson had thrived because of their trust for one another, and Bud was often able to complete timber purchases from farmers and ranchers with a simple handshake.

Throughout his life, Bud remained committed to building his business. It was his profession and passion. He was also a member of the Baptist Church, active in the Masonic Order, and a Shriner. He had simple tastes; his single indulgence was driving a Cadillac.

Bud remained highly active in his business until he suffered a ruptured appendix, which resulted in a lengthy period of recovery. During that time, John Hampton took over the business, and he remained head of the company after Bud recovered. Though slowed by age and health, Bud continued to work on special projects for the company and never fully retired. He died on December 28, 1974, at the age of 81.

Bud Hampton was a special sort of lumberman. He did not have a background in business or training in forestry. His family had not been involved in the timber industry. Instead, Bud created and pursued opportunities, worked long hours, and marshaled dedicated workers to build an industry-leading company from scratch.