



Julius Neils

1855-1933

Julius Neils was born in Pomerania, Germany, on June 15, 1855. He was one of seven children. When Julius was 17, the family emigrated to America, settling in Milwaukee. The father acquired a team of horses and went to work building roads. The boys helped. Julius took private lessons to learn English and did some clerking in a store to speed the process.

Then came several years of schooling and teaching, playing the organ in church and leading the choir. In 1874, he entered the Teachers College at Addison, Illinois, graduating in 1876. His first teaching assignment was in Reedsburg, Wisconsin, where he taught ninety pupils in the parochial school and also taught several private classes. A year later he met Mary Geiger, of Swiss descent. They were married on January 3, 1878. Thirteen children blessed the marriage, eight of them boys.

In the spring of 1879, Julius moved to Hustiford, Wisconsin, to teach the upper class. His two years there marked a turning point in his life, for the long difficult work schedule

was affecting his health. He had to make a change and he did.

He was 26 years old, a deeply religious man, trained in music and education. However, there was also an impulse to go into business. So when he and his brother, August, learned of a hardware store for sale in Spencer, Wisconsin, they pooled resources and bought it. The store was successful in an unusual way.

Settlers around Spencer were short of cash but most of them had white pine timber. They needed store goods. The Neils boys worked out a barter program. The farmers brought in logs, dumped them at the nearby Thayer sawmill for the Neils account, and got market value at the store. Thayer custom-sawed the logs, and the Neils turned the lumber into cash. That taste of the lumber business gave Julius Neils a love of the industry that never wavered.

The Neils' hardware store had a five-year life, ending abruptly on a Sunday in 1886. A farmer was burning slash under extremely dry

conditions, the fire got away, swept the countryside, wiped out two sawmills and the village – including the Neils' store. The brothers took their modest insurance money and bought another hardware store, this one at Sauk Rapids, Minnesota.

The lure of lumbering, however, had taken hold. In 1887, Julius sold his share of the store to his brother and bought half-interest in a Sauk Rapids sawmill. Soon his friend at Spencer, Mr. Thayer, bought the other half. Thayer and Neils Lumber Company was born. Here Julius got a training course in buying logs. It was an experience that stood him in good stead the rest of his life. When a log shortage was about to overwhelm Thayer and Neils, Julius left for Minneapolis to bargain with the bigger companies whose great log drives were daily floating down the Mississippi past the mill. He persuaded T.H. Shevlin of Shevlin-Carpenter Lumber Company, one of the giants in the industry, to buy Thayer's interest, form a new company and drop off logs at Sauk Rapids. In 1895, as a result, the J. Neils Lumber Company was incorporated, with Shevlin as president and Neils as secretary-treasurer and manager. The log scarcity that had plagued the mill eased at once, but not for long. Before 1900 it became clear that the plant was doomed. Soon the company bought a site to the north at Cass Lake, near Bemidji. Timber prospects there were better.

At Cass Lake Neils built a sawmill, a house and church, and while the saws hummed he and later his sons, especially Paul, bought timber in the backcountry. The struggle to supply logs never ended. Yet the mill lasted for 25 years.

Long before the Cass Lake area had run out of timber, Julius Neils started looking west. In

1906, with Shevlin still a partner, he bought his first timberlands in Montana and four years later the Dawson sawmill at Libby. In 1913, Mr. Shevlin died and Tom Shevlin, Jr. became president of the J. Neils Lumber Company.

Julius and Tom, Jr. had some differences of opinion and decided to divide assets. Young Shevlin took the Libby plant, Neils the Cass Lake mill and some lands near Columbia Falls and Fortine. In the very prime of life, however, just after the U.S. entry into World War I, Shevlin died suddenly of pneumonia. The Libby mill was offered to Neils and he accepted, but not until his sons Walter, George and Gerhard and his son-in-law, Hugo Schmidt, had come home from the war. Today's large operations at Libby attest to the wisdom of the move.

In 1922, Julius and his sons added the pine mill at Klickitat, Washington, to the growing Neils operations. There, and at Libby, they made the buying of timber a priority and purchased timberlands whenever they could to bulwark the mills. When Julius Neils died in 1933, at age 78, the company did not face another Minnesota. In fact, even the depression failed to dim hopes for a permanent operation. In 1936, Paul Neils asked forester Ernest L. Kolbe whether selective cutting would work in Klickitat. Kolbe's report was encouraging, as was a more detailed study undertaken by Dr. Walter Meyer of the University of Washington. The new system was put into effect. At Libby, a similar program was started, adapted to the Montana forest conditions.

Now, after a "trial run" of more than thirty years, there is no doubt about the stability and permanence of the Neils forest operations.

In 1957, the J. Neils Lumber Company became a division of St. Regis Paper Company with Neils' descendants and other long-time employees in key positions. The policies which had helped make its lumber mills permanent operations were guaranteed for the future.