



Neil Cooney

1860-1943

Neil Cooney was born on October 11, 1860 on Prince Edward Island off the East Coast of Canada. He grew up on a farm and his schooling ceased along about the eighth grade. Lack of money put any thoughts of college completely beyond reach. The trade that appealed to him, and to which he apprenticed, was that of ship's carpenter. In his early twenties he arrived in a small community on the West Coast of the State of Washington and, having learned his trade well, he had no difficulty securing work.

From his job as ship's carpenter in Cosmopolis, Washington, Neil Cooney switched to one of common laborer in the extensive Gray's Harbor lumbering operations. By 1911, through hard work and keen economic ability, he had become manager of the Gray's Harbor Commercial Company, a Pope & Talbot subsidiary.

The town of Cosmopolis consisted of the big lumber operation, a short business street and housing for men working the mills. On a hill

overlooking the river, the mills, the business district and the homes, was a big house surrounded by well-kept lawns, shrubs and trees. Spruce Cottage, as it was called, was home for the company manager. Here, like a bachelor king in his castle looking down on his subjects, lived Neil Cooney. The interior of Spruce Cottage was all finished in the native Sitka Spruce. Much of the furniture, including a large dining table with chairs to match, was made of spruce, hence, the name.

It is easy to imagine what thoughts ran through Mr. Cooney's mind as he stood in the living room gazing out of the spacious window down on a the huge lumber operation over which he ruled with absolute power. He not only could say when to start or shut down the mills, he personally owned many of the buildings housing the small businesses serving the community. The little bank in the town was under his virtual control. Cosmopolis was strictly a one-company town.

Fortunately for those who lived there and were dependent on that one company, the man in charge, fully realizing the potent power entrusted to him, was very careful never to abuse that power. Hard as he was in dealing collectively with the ever-present labor problem, where one individual was involved, there was a warm heart and quick mind ready to reach out a helping hand. People came to him seeking advice or maybe financial help.

Neil had a very individual way of expressing himself. He referred to the loud crashing noises of the sawmills as “sweet music.” Timber growing, logging camps harvesting the crop, lumber being manufactured, payrolls, sales, shipments new money coming in to house, clothe and feed the community. Loud, crashing, strange, sweet music.

With all his wealth and power, there was something terribly tragic in the life of this man. Childhood poverty, lack of education and environment combined to submerge him in his youth in the lower ranks of labor, fighting for survival. Later, as success began to crown his efforts, he became suspicious and fearful that his money was the attraction for some women. He loved little children and acknowledged that his big mistake in life was that he “never married.”

Neil Cooney was liked and admired by men because of his tough, rugged, “look ‘em in the eye and tell ‘em to go to hell” approach. Women were intrigued by the contradiction. They were drawn to him, but in a way feared him.

Neil Cooney died May 8, 1943. On that day, the mortal life of a great man ended, but that for which he lived was born.

His Will, as written, was a masterpiece. He had ordered the carrying out of three personal wishes: that his remains be buried in Fern Hill Cemetery in Aberdeen; that funeral services be conducted by the Catholic Church; and that there be erected a modest monument over his grave.

A startling disclosure followed. The lumber operation of the Gray’s Harbor Commercial Company had some years before closed down for all time. Profitable operation of the sawmill was not feasible because of a lack of suitable timber supply. However, Cooney had acquired ownership of all the stock of the company. This meant control of the valuable mill site with all the land and docks along the river.

Here he visualized the erection of a pulp mill. To accomplish this, he ordered that the site be donated to any responsible company that would assure the building of such a mill. In addition to donating the site, he offered a cash gift of one hundred thousand dollars to the company that would build a pulp mill. All of this, he made clear, was to benefit the people of Cosmopolis. By this bold stroke, he opened a vista of jobs and a renewed foundation of values in the community.

Having thus provided for the people formerly dependent on the lumber operations in Cosmopolis, Mr. Cooney turned his attention to the whole harbor, including Aberdeen and Hoquiam. Here he was convinced the greatest good lay in improved hospital facilities. After the specific bequests, the Will, dealing with an estate in excess of one million dollars, provided for the building and equipping additions to the hospital where he had spent his last days.

This, poor, uneducated ship’s carpenter, who arrived in Gray’s Harbor so long ago and wanted for himself a simple little monument over his grave, caused the building of a monument of great potential in benefiting the people of Gray’s Harbor. The thousands who will be employed in the pulp mill and the thousands to be served by the hospital comprise an army that will march on through the years carrying symbolic banners blazoned with the words of praise and thanksgiving to that rough, tough Irishman who worked hard all his long life that he might help others less fortunate.