



## *Kenneth W. Ford*

**1908-1997**

In 1936, Kenneth Ford gathered some salvaged equipment from junk dealers, patched together a sawmill east of Roseburg, Oregon, and launched the Roseburg Lumber Company. Fueled by Kenneth's unlimited willingness to work and his far-reaching vision, that second-hand sawmill grew into Roseburg Forest Products. It comprises one of the most integrated manufacturing facilities in the world and produces a broader mix of forest products than any other forest products company. From this extraordinary success and his deep compassion for people, Kenneth Ford also became a generous philanthropist, responsible for one of the largest charitable foundations in Oregon.

Kenneth was born in 1908 in Asotin, Washington, a small farming community on

the Snake River. His dad was a sawmill operator who moved the family to Lebanon, Oregon in the early 20s. Although he had always imagined himself running a dairy farm on the Oregon coast, a stint at a sawmill working for his dad hooked Kenneth on the lumber business for good! After graduating from high school in 1926 and completing a term of college at Oregon State University, he went to work for his dad at a sawmill near Salem.

What was to become a characteristic of his success---recognition of opportunity and the courage to act---Kenneth headed to Douglas County in 1935 to pursue lumber possibilities there. Until then, lumber companies hadn't ventured south of Eugene. The forests of Douglas County seemed ripe with opportunity.

He put his “re-cycled” sawmill on line in 1936, and Roseburg Lumber Company was born.

Employing 25 workers, Kenneth himself worked 18-hour days, mostly with the crew. He served as head logger, salesman, mill superintendent, and sometimes even cook and waiter. His work ethic, devotion to the company and dedication to his employees built rapport and earned the respect of his workers. He worked side by side with them. It was quite common to find him assembling or re-assembling machinery to make it function better. He called it “barnyard engineering”. That first year the company produced 30,000 board feet of lumber per day and eked out a small profit

Earnings were put back into the business, and a second circular saw was added in 1937, doubling the daily capacity to 60,000 board feet. Slabs and edgings were cut into firewood lengths and sawdust went into bins---all sold as fuel. For several of the early years, the fuel business actually provided one of the main sources of income.

The 1940’s brought more profits and capital improvements: a new office building, a wigwam burner, new boilers, and new dry kilns. Capacity increased to 146,000 board feet per eight-hour shift. The growing, modern operation employed 80 people.

During this time Douglas County was making some 450,000 acres of repossessed timberland available and selling it for as little as \$2 an acre. Exemplifying his long-range vision, Kenneth bought as much as he could afford.

World War II brought labor shortages. Roseburg Lumber hired anyone who was willing and able to work. The company prospered during these busy years, and lumber with the Roseburg stamp found its way throughout the South Pacific all during the War.

Frustration in obtaining sufficient quantities of logs during this period led to innovation. Typical of Kenneth’s approach to challenges, Roseburg Lumber became the first company in the area to introduce power saws for felling and bucking. The results were a dramatic increase in production.

In 1945 a new mill site near Dillard was purchased and work began immediately on a planing mill, band mill operation and gang edger, gang trimmers, loading docks, storage sheds, and dry kilns. Upon completion in 1948, this comprehensive new mill complex became the company’s main plant when a fire at the Roseburg location destroyed its dry kilns, dry sheds, green chain, more than a million board feet of finished lumber and part of the planer. Amazingly, partial operations

were restored after four days and nights of intense work---led personally by Kenneth Ford!

The post-War building boom made it obvious to Kenneth that there was a solid future in plywood. The company put its first plywood plant on line at Dillard in 1952 with a capacity of 5 million square feet per month. By the mid-50s a second plywood plant was added to meet the tremendous market demand. A 1959 issue of Business Week featured Kenneth as an “example of one of the Northwest’s bright young men.”

The company continued to grow. Further additions included a plant in Coquille and, in the early 60s, a factory finishing plant in Dillard where production began on a variety of styles and species of interior wall paneling. Roseburg Lumber had come of age---growing rapidly, innovating, creating new products, and selling them all over the country through a company sales force. Throughout all this growth, Kenneth quietly maintained a steady acquisition of timberlands.

Mirroring its leader’s principles, the company continually strove for the highest product quality possible. Roseburg Lumber was one of the first to institute a quality assurance department for each of its products. Constantly upgraded, to this day Roseburg’s quality control program is one of the most

extensive there is, insuring that quality is built into every product.

Always looking for ways to better utilize wood wastes, Kenneth built a particleboard plant at Dillard in 1965. It was the largest plant of its kind in the United States. Demand far surpassed supply, and a second production line was added in 1972, making the facility the world’s largest at that time. Daily capacity was 25,000 four-by-eight panels!

Better waste recovery led to better overall utilization of timber. In the late 60s, chipping facilities were set up at strategic locations throughout southwestern Oregon to utilize wood waste and cull logs not suitable for lumber production. An extensive facility was built on the coast at North Bend to store and load ships with chips for export.

By the late 60s, demand for plywood resulted in the company’s “super” plywood plant. Covering an astounding 17 and-a-half acres under one roof, the facility emphasized maximum log utilization and produced more than 225 million square feet of plywood each year. Thanks to Kenneth’s expertise with machinery, it contained state-of-the-art equipment at every stage of operation. Another Business Week article in 1979 called the company “one of the nation’s top plywood producers and the market leader in sanded plywood.” It continued, “(Kenneth’s) new

mills incorporate computerized planning that maximizes the use of every part of the increasingly costly log. He knows his markets as well as he does his machinery.”

Kenneth Ford’s vision and engineering expertise have kept the company on the leading edge of competitiveness and quality. By his own design, he wasn’t a pioneer in the use of new methods or processes. But he was quick to adapt the technology once it had been proven. Jim Pratt, a retired Roseburg Forest Products plywood manager, said “Kenneth Ford’s genius was his ability to take someone else’s idea and make it better.”

Technological advances became standard in both particleboard and plywood manufacture. The company’s sawmills became some of the most sophisticated in the industry. Air and water quality systems were installed for all company facilities far in advance of government deadlines. Roseburg was among the first to stop using wigwam burners; was the first major plywood manufacturer to use an all-exterior glue line; was among the first to incorporate thorough clean-up, site preparation, reseeded and replanting policies.

Always looking forward, Kenneth steadily bought timber, including a 200,000 acre purchase in 1996, bringing the company’s total holdings to 750,000 acres and insuring an uninterrupted timber supply.

Today, Roseburg Forest Products employs a workforce of 3,500 people and is one of the nation’s leading forest products producers.

But the story of Kenneth Ford doesn’t stop with the success of Roseburg Forest Products. Described by former CFO Ron Parker “...as compassionate a man as I’ve ever known”, Kenneth Ford deeply cared about people. Whether it was his devout dedication to his employees or his heartfelt commitment to the people in his community, Kenneth was as well known as a generous benefactor as he was a successful businessman. He began giving to others in need in the early 50s. In 1957 the Kenneth W. Ford Foundation was established, replaced in 1970 by the Ford Family Foundation. It has channeled millions of dollars into local charities, schools, and scholarship programs. Often, Foundation recipients never know the identity of the donor. As someone who never sought credit for helping others, that was the way Kenneth wanted it.

In his later years, an endeavor near and dear to Kenneth’s heart was the Ford Foundation Scholarship Program. Established to help individuals without the means to advance their education, the program pays up to 90% room and board, tuition, and books for each scholar. Today, more than 175 new students are added to the program to receive scholarships each

year. Not only did Kenneth develop the selection criteria, he wrote to each scholar every quarter. He attended the Ford Scholar conferences each summer to meet with students. Through this program, Kenneth Ford asked only that scholars do well, work hard, and pass on his legacy of community service and work ethic.

Although Kenneth never sought the spotlight and recognition, the spotlight found him. He was honored throughout the years for his many contributions to both the industry and the community. In 1996 he was named the first recipient of the Harry A. Merlo Award for a lifetime commitment to sustainable forestry and affordable forest products.

Amidst all of this, Kenneth helped raise a son, Allyn, and a daughter, Carmen---both successful in their own right.

When Kenneth Ford died in 1997 the forest products industry and the region lost a genuine leader and a true friend. But he left behind an astounding legacy. Roseburg Forest Products

is truly a manifestation of his personality...his leadership qualities and business philosophies are finely ingrained in every supervisor and manager. Kenneth's son Allyn, President and CEO, is much like his father, exuding strong leadership, vision and business skills to continue leading Roseburg Forest Products into the future. Kenneth's commitment to improving the quality of life for others through his Foundation will leave its mark on generations to come.

At the time of his death, a Roseburg News-Review story paid tribute to Kenneth, and included the following: "The poor man who came to Roseburg during the Depression didn't just build a small mill into an empire. He became a father figure, a reluctant hero who helped the less fortunate while converting an agricultural town along the Umpqua River into the so-called timber capital. (Kenneth Ford) lived the American Dream – and carried with him a community on his shoulders."