



Fred A. Hills

1885-1961

Fred A. Hills, son of pioneer logger J.B. Hills, was born at Jasper, Oregon, in 1885. One of eight children, Fred distinguished himself by graduating from the Oregon Agricultural College in Corvallis in 1905 with a Bachelor of Science degree in Agriculture.

Hills' knowledge of the lumber industry had its basis in the arduous work of the logger. Having grown up in a logging family, Fred was never far from logging action. His early work in the woods included the dangerous job of a high climber. A climber's job was to scale, with climbing spurs and a rope belt, 100 to 150 feet up a large Douglas fir tree to cut the top out of the tree, creating a spar tree. The climber was then responsible for rigging which included top and 'belly guys', a bull block and various other sized blocks and lines. This rigging facilitated the yarding of logs to the landing at the spar tree's base.

Fred Hills worked as a camp foreman for the Booth-Kelly Lumber Company of Springfield from 1917 until 1922. He then established his own sawmill at Lowell where bridge planks and railroad ties were the principle products produced. In 1926, Hills joined with his brother, Roy, and Jim Higgins, who already owned a mill, to form the Hills Creek Lumber Company.

During that era, transportation of lumber with flumes was popular. Elevated wooded, v-shaped troughs carried logs and lumber as diverted water sluiced down the channel. There were six flumes operating in Lane County and two of those belonged to the Hills Creek Lumber Company. Miles long, the flumes carried rough-sawn lumber to a planing mill at Jasper.

Around Lane County it is remembered that "the Hills boys, Fred and Roy, were gifted with the faculty and ability to run a business with a minimum of effort and worry." About

Fred, particularly, it was remarked that “given a piece of whistle wire and a broken down mule, Fred would get logs.”

As the first president of the Oregon Logging Conference in 1939, Hills exemplified the character of men of the logging industry of that day. He knew that if all loggers of the area could get together and exchange ideas, the industry would become more modern and progressive. Hence, Hills was responsible for much of the early organization of the Oregon Logging Conference.

Hills’ education made him more aware than most that conservation would be necessary to maintain forest productivity in the future. His logging activity in the hills east of Springfield, even in the 1920s, spared a prescribed number of mature seed trees on each acre. As a result, forests again stand on those old logging sites, awaiting their second harvest.

During the 1930’s Hills was active in efforts to finance one of the country’s first tree-growing nurseries. The Willamette Valley Lumbermen’s Association, in cooperation with the West Coast Lumbermen’s Association, voted to impose a tax on members based on the amount of timber harvested, in order to provide funding for the nursery.

Fred Hills was disturbed by waste and dedicated to efficiency. He led the industry efforts in utilizing the slab cuts that were by-products of lumber sawed from logs. He was among the first to use crawler tractors for logging in Western Oregon. Those early tractors had blades at the back of the machine, requiring a backing action to build roads.

During the depressed 1930’s, Hills pushed to increase production in his mill while limiting the hours worked by employees. Previously, the mill operated 50 to 60 hours a week with production averaging 28,000 board feet per day. With new procedures and equipment alterations, operating time was reduced to 40 hours per week and production increased to 40,000 board feet per day.

Hills’ mill survived the early depression, only to totally burn in 1937. In characteristic form, Hills bought used equipment on \$19,000 credit, had his new mill operating in six weeks, and was cutting 75,000 board feet per day!

After the death of his brother, Roy, Fred acquired a partner, Frank Graham, and changed the mill’s production to lumber for railroad cars. In 1949, Hills sold his ownership in the thriving plant.

The active lumbering career of an innovative and conservation-minded man ended with that transfer of ownership. His contributions to progress remain a memorial to the man who time did not pass by, the logger who led horse logging industry into the modern mechanization of the Twentieth Century. Fred Hills’ death was suited, perhaps to a man of the woods. While deer hunting on October 30, 1961, Fred killed a buck. Carrying the deer from the woods on his shoulders, Fred paused for a rest. He died beside the trail that would have led him home.