



James L. Rombach

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Great teachers and mentors, initiative and optimism, and a commitment to achievement and excellence helped James L. “Jim” Rombach rise from modest beginnings to become a highly respected, industry-leading forester. After a career spanning four decades with forest products company Weyerhaeuser, Jim remains active in promoting productive forests, land stewardship, and forestry education.

Jim was born on December 10, 1940, in Grand Island, Nebraska, the third child of Charles W. and Anna C. Rombach. Jim had two older brothers—Bill and Bob—and a younger sister, Sharon.

Jim’s father and mother both set an example of working hard, which helped prepare Jim for long, strenuous hours in the woods. Jim’s father operated a small trucking company, moving construction and agricultural products, as well as delivering milk. The milk routes ran seven days a week and required Jim’s father to rise hours before dawn every morning of the year.

In the early 1940s, the Rombach family moved west, in part to escape Nebraska’s harsh climate. The family first settled in Medford, Oregon, and later moved to Crescent City, California. Jim’s father and mother built successful furniture retailing and real estate businesses in California and Oregon.

Jim attended Del Norte High School in Crescent City, where he participated in football, basketball, and track. In the northwestern stretches of California, timberlands were a central part of the landscape, the economy, and the culture. Jim learned forestry basics in a forestry club in high school. He also worked summers at a local lumber mill and in construction, as well as assisting with his family’s businesses.

None of Jim’s immediate family had attended college, and higher education was not a priority. Several high school teachers saw Jim’s academic promise and urged him to accept a football scholarship to Santa Rosa Junior College. This encouragement represented a turning point for Jim.

“The commitment and support of great teachers made all the difference,” said Jim. “I’ve been trying to honor them for years by supporting forestry education in the schools.”

Jim received his Associate’s degree from Santa Rosa JC—and encouragement to continue his forestry education at Oregon State University. He relocated to Corvallis, Oregon, and completed his B.S. in Forest Management in 1964. He also minored in Business and studied economics and forest engineering as well.

While at OSU, Jim met fellow student MaryAnn Hubbard, and the two were married in February 1964. They raised three children: Jennifer (b. 1970), Jonathan (b. 1973), and Jessica (b. 1978).

During two college summer breaks—as well as on weekends and holidays—Jim worked for the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) in the Willamette National Forest. His duties included road engineering, fire fighting, timber assessment, and reforestation. During another summer, he worked on an engineering crew for the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in southern Oregon. These positions added to his growing forestry experience—and helped make him a great candidate for a permanent position in the USFS.

Indeed, Jim was offered an appointment by the Forest Service, but he was impressed with the Weyerhaeuser Company’s vision for land stewardship and intensive forest management. He wanted to become part of this effort and accepted an offer to join Weyerhaeuser’s Coos Bay engineering crew. After a short time, he was promoted to Assistant Logging Engineer.

While Jim’s career with Weyerhaeuser was off to a successful start, he recognized that men of his age and capabilities were needed in the U.S. Armed Forces as the nation increased its commitment to the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam). Therefore, in 1966, he volunteered for service. The U.S. Army indicated that he would receive a direct commission, but instead sent him first to Fort Sill, Oklahoma, and then to the Engineer Officer Candidate School in Fort Belvoir, Virginia. After

graduating, Jim was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and posted to Fort Lewis, Washington. There, he was offered the opportunity to form and lead the first land clearing team (LCT) in Vietnam.

Equipped with 30 bulldozers, each fitted with a two-ton shearing “Rome Plow,” Jim’s LCT—known as “the 27th”—played a critical role in multiple major combat operations, including Operations Cedar Falls and Junction City. Because LCTs entered dense jungle areas ahead of other troops, this assignment was extremely dangerous. Two of every three soldiers in LCTs became casualties. Later, he served as Operations Officer for the 168th Engineer Battalion (Combat).

The 27th was a highly decorated unit. Jim’s leadership, experience with heavy equipment, and knowledge of forestry engineering all contributed to the accomplishments of the 27th. For his service in Vietnam, Jim was awarded three Bronze Stars (two with the “V” device for Valor), an Air Medal, and other honors.

Jim’s military experience also impressed upon him how well-run teams are essential to the success of large-scale projects. “In the U.S. Army, I formed strong convictions about the importance of team operations,” said Jim. “We had a terrific group of people of all ranks with initiative and creativity.” Jim carried this conviction with him—and acted upon it—throughout his forestry career.

After serving in Vietnam, Jim was assigned to Fort Carson, Colorado, as an Engineer Company Commander. He had the opportunity to become a career military officer, but he instead chose to return to civilian life as a forester for Weyerhaeuser.

He came back to Coos Bay in 1969, where he served as District Forester for Weyerhaeuser. His next promotion—to Willamette Area Forester in 1970—made him the youngest person with this position in the history of the company. His many responsibilities included coordinating with other landowners and government agencies on fire district operations and related issues. He subsequently served as the Willamette Regional Forest Engineer. This position entailed forest planning, engineering, and a range of other duties.

Jim’s next promotion—to Southwest Washington Regional Forest Engineer in 1976—aligned his career with one of the most dramatic and destructive natural events in U.S. history: the 1980 eruption of Mount St. Helens.

Weyerhaeuser was the largest private sector landowner in the Mount St. Helens area, operating what was estimated to be the largest integrated timberlands, pulp/paper, and mill operation in the nation. When Mount St. Helens set off warning signs—earthquakes and smaller eruptions beginning in March 1980—the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) had the lead in assessing and monitoring the volcano. Jim worked alongside other Weyerhaeuser executives as the company coordinated with a wide range of local, state, and federal government agencies that had lead roles at Mount St. Helens.

The tragic eruption hit on Sunday morning, May 18, creating devastation on an enormous scale. Lives were lost; homes, roads, and bridges were destroyed; and nearly 150,000 acres of public and private land—with 68,000 acres belonging to Weyerhaeuser—were devastated. The Toutle, Cowlitz, and Columbia Rivers were also affected by enormous amounts of debris, sediment, and ash.

In the aftermath of the unprecedented event, Jim worked tirelessly as a member of Weyerhaeuser’s management team on recovery, salvage, and restoration. Safety—a fundamental priority for Weyerhaeuser—came foremost. Once government geologists and other experts determined that certain areas could be safely approached, Weyerhaeuser began to salvage fallen timber and replant. Eventually the company reforested more than 45,000 acres with over 18 million seedlings.

Jim also played a key role in Mount St. Helens land use discussions that set a long-term vision for the area. How would this tragic event be memorialized? How would the land be managed to provide for sustainable forestry and public safety,

as well as tourism and recreation? Weyerhaeuser joined with other landowners in advocating that the volcano itself and the surrounding public forestlands remain under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Forest Service. Jim accompanied Weyerhaeuser executives to Washington, D.C., to share the company’s views with elected officials. In August 1982, Congress established the Mount St. Helens National Volcanic Monument, under the management of the USFS.

Following Jim’s committed effort in the aftermath of the Mount St. Helens eruption, Weyerhaeuser widened his responsibilities in the Northwest over the next 15 years. He held several positions with ever-increasing oversight of the company’s northwest forestry operations, including Woods Manager for the Willamette Region. In addition to fulfilling his operational responsibilities, he served as a leader of the Forest Management Committee of the Oregon Forest Industries Council and helped guide forest policy and Oregon state forestry practices.

In 1995, Jim became Director of Forestry for Weyerhaeuser Western Timberlands, which encompassed more than two million acres in Oregon and Washington. He held this position until his retirement in August 1998.

Though Jim left Weyerhaeuser, he hardly slowed his pace—and he kept forestry at the heart of his activities. Jim had previously served as an advisor to community college and high school forestry programs. Now, he focused more intently on helping to develop future generations of foresters by working on several educational initiatives. In 2001, he co-founded the Oregon Natural Resources Education Fund, which raises and distributes funding for high school forestry programs. In honor of high school teachers who made a difference in his life, Jim also supports a motivational teacher recognition program at his alma mater, Del Norte High School in Crescent City, California. He and his family also support a scholarship that recognizes the academic and civic achievements of students, including students at Prospect High School in Prospect, Oregon—MaryAnn Rombach’s hometown.

Jim’s “retirement” includes extensive participation in forestry programs and forest management as well. He plays an active role in the American Tree Farm System and has served for many years as a judge for the Oregon Small Woodland Association in helping to select Outstanding Tree Farms. He also participates on a team managing forestlands owned by the Cascade Pacific Council of the Boy Scouts of America. In addition, Jim dedicates significant time to advising local, state, and federal government agencies and other organizations about forestry issues, with a special focus on the potential costs and impacts of wildfire. He served for three years on a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service committee reviewing stewardship grant proposals.

Retirement has also provided Jim with the chance to travel extensively and pursue his interests in Pre-Columbian and Western American history. He has visited historic ghost towns and Native American sites throughout the West, walked among ancient ruins in Mexico and Guatemala, and rafted rivers in the U.S. and Latin America. Over the years, Jim’s professional work also took him to Russia, Germany, Mexico, Costa Rica, and Chile.

Over the course of his career, Jim received numerous honors and awards. In 2008, in recognition of his sustained promotion of forestry and volunteer service, Jim was awarded the prestigious John A. Beale Memorial Award from the Society of American Foresters. As a Weyerhaeuser employee, Jim helped the company extend its century-plus commitment to responsible forest stewardship. As important, Jim shared his expertise and energy widely, acting as a true champion for the many benefits of healthy forests. Bob Tokarczyk, retired supervisor of the Gifford Pinchot National Forest, called Jim’s contributions significant. “He is a visionary forester who continues to contribute to the field to this day.”