

Stuart J. Shelk

1905-1995

Respected by his peers, admired by his workers, and esteemed by his community, Stuart Shelk developed a distinguished lumberman's career that was unswerving in times both favorable and tumultuous.

He drew his sharp business sense and keen insight from an interest in the industry developed at an early age and from a family heritage that was solid in the lumber trade.

Indeed, Armon Clark, his great-grandfather, produced railroad ties in Ontario, Canada during the late Nineteenth Century. Armon's son, O.M. Clark, moved to Michigan's Upper Peninsula where in succession he was a lumber inspector, logging manager, and later owned and operated a sawmill and shingle mill.

But by the year 1900, the region's timber resources were nearly depleted and O.M. Clark looked west for better prospects. He found them in the hamlet of Linnton, north of Portland on the Willamette River. O.M. moved west in 1905 and established the Clark & Wilson Lumber Co. with his brothers-in-law, Charles and Albert Wilson.

Shortly after his move, O.M. soon convinced his daughter, Mabel, and her husband, Louis Shelk, to sell their prosperous jewelry store in Cheboygan, Michigan, and join him in Oregon. They did and shortly after on July 23, 1905, Stuart Shelk was born. He was the younger of two children.

Louis Shelk opened a general merchandise store in Linnton and sold various dry goods

and merchandise. He operated it until 1918 when he went to work for Clark & Wilson Lumber as head of the yard office, which handled local lumber sales.

At age twelve, Stuart set to work at his grandfather's mill where he would arrive early on Saturdays to stoke the office stove for his grandfather, who would come in to open his mail. By age 14, Stuart was working in between school terms as a lumber stacker in the planer mill. He quickly became adept at several other mill positions throughout high school and college, all the while developing a deep love for, and broad knowledge of, the lumber industry.

In 1928, after graduating with a bachelor's degree in business from Oregon Agricultural College—now Oregon State University, Stuart returned home at the bequest of his grandfather to work fulltime in the mill. He started as timekeeper and later became bookkeeper. In time, he was promoted to purchasing agent, charged with buying supplies for all the logging camps and cookhouses.

However, in 1929, O.M. Clark died. "My grandfather picked me and trained me to work in the business. I know he had certain plans for me that I was not able to carry out because of his death," Stuart said. "He said I may end up in Prineville – it was just like he guided me there."

In 1938, Stuart did indeed travel to Prineville, Oregon, where he sought opportunity with a newly formed venture, the Ochoco Lumber Co. Ochoco Lumber was formed as the result

of the bankruptcy of Ochoco Timber Co., whose assets included 1.26 billion board feet of timber spread across 83,000 acres of ponderosa pine timberland in eastern Oregon's Ochoco Mountains.

In January of that year, Ochoco Timber stockholders and newly elected directors of Ochoco Lumber held their first organizational meeting in Portland. At that meeting, W.E. Lamm, president of Lamm Lumber Co., Modoc Point, Oregon was elected vice-president of the board and was later designated for a one-year term as general manager of the new company. Wilson W. Clark, Stuart's uncle and then president of Clark & Wilson Lumber, was elected secretary-treasurer.

As general manager, Lamm's first duty was to hire an accountant and office manager, a position which he offered to Stuart. However, the beginning salary was \$150 a month – less than what Stuart was making and Clark & Wilson. As the potential for advancement outweighed the lower wages, Stuart accepted and in April, 1938 started work at Ochoco Lumber Co., which was then still under construction.

Also in 1938, Stuart married Barbara Sturges, whom he had met in Portland. "It was pretty sparse (country) here back then," he once recalled. "But it was beautiful country. We learned to like it."

The new mill site, selected by Lamm, was a \$7,500, 58-acre parcel of land on Combs Flat Rd., east of Prineville. Lamm further acquired second-hand mill equipment from the Sandpoint, Idaho-Norida Land & Timber Co.

Lamm also gained the cutting rights to 400 million board feet of timber from Ochoco Timber Co. and by August 1938, the first logs arrived at the mill, even though the log pond was not yet completed.

By September the mill was in operation. The following month it used the newly built City of Prineville Railway to ship its first carloads of lumber from Prineville, destined for Midwestern markets.

From the start, Stuart shouldered a heavy workload, putting in countless hours during days, nights, and weekends to help ensure that the fledging company would find solid ground. His and the efforts of those first workers at Ochoco Lumber produced results. In its first year of operation, the mill produced some 21 million board feet of lumber.

Both production and profits continued to show promise in the mill's early years. However, the decade of the 1940s proved more formidable. The out break of World War II created a shortage of skilled labor and sharply boosted lumber demand for war-related needs.

Through these challenging times, Stuart Shelk sharpened his skills, which were further tested in 1944 when, just barely six years after he started with the company, he was named general manager and a director of the corporation. In his new role, he rapidly set to work and in the following year oversaw the acquisition of all timberlands from the Ochoco Timber Co. With this purchase, Ochoco Lumber could then position itself to acquire federal timber to supplement its seasonal harvests.

Furthermore, Stuart prompted additions and upgrades to the mill including new equipment, trucks and trailers. His early actions contributed significantly to the company's firm conviction that continual improvement leads to the best possible product at the most reasonable cost. By 1948, the company's capital stock had jumped more than seven fold to \$1.5 million.

It was during this period that the Shelks had two children. John, who was born in 1944 and Susan, who was born in 1949. But in 1950 his wife Barbara died following an illness. After raising two children on his own for six years, Stuart eventually met and married his second wife, Pauline Caine, who had two sons, Bill and Bob.

The company's ongoing successes continued, but were tempered in the early 1950s by growing concern over the liability of federal timber. With the onset of the Korean War in 1951, stumpage prices more than doubled, reaching \$49 per thousand board feet. Too, by the early 1960s, logging rates had increased and the company felt adjustments were necessary. A lengthy negotiation failed to reach agreement with the union and a subsequent federal court decision ruled in favor of Ochoco Lumber, allowing the company to contract its logging work. The action set a precedent industry wide.

Stuart's acumen for maintaining the strength of a progressive organization in difficult times was again rewarded, when in 1964, he was named president.

But the 1970s proved no less daunting for Stuart and his management team. Competition for federal timber escalated into a bidding war, with five companies now vying for available sales on the Ochoco

National Forest. For the first time, companies outside of the Prineville area competed for timber sales that were traditionally purchased locally.

Despite bearing the responsibilities of daily mill operations, dealing with cyclical lumber markets and continual concerns over timber supply, Stuart Shelk maintained an exemplary professionalism toward both his workforce and his peers. During his leadership he was firm and demanded perfection, yet was approachable at all times by any employee and he harbored a resilient sense of humor.

His conservative approach to business gained him widespread respect as it bound the company together through the lean years and created a solid foundation for Ochoco Lumber's ongoing successes in later years. Most notable of his traits, Stuart went to great lengths not to draw attention to the company, or even to his personal accomplishments and deeds.

Aside from his duties with Ochoco Lumber, Stuart maintained an integral role in furthering the industry. He served on the executive committee of the Western Pine Association, which later became the Western Wood Products Association.

In addition to his career accomplishments, Stuart also gave generously of his time to his community. He served for nearly 25 years as a member of the Prineville City Council, with duties including chairing the railroad commission and acting as police commissioner. He spent one year as acting mayor of Prineville.

He was also a founder of the Pioneer Memorial Hospital in Prineville and was a force behind the establishment of Central

Oregon Community College in Bend, Oregon.

Furthermore, he established the Ochoco Charitable Fund scholarship for area high school students aspiring to college.

As a vital member of both company and community, Stuart helped bring growth and insight to the business and direction and foresight to the area. “He served without fanfare, doing the detail work to assure the responsible running of a small government,” said his son, John. “He was not on state boards because he felt the best contribution he could make was in Prineville and he focused intensely on that.

“His work assured Ochoco’s competitive place in the business world. He put a lot of thought into his community as well as his business decisions.” Shunning the limelight, Stuart Shelk “in quiet ways helped make his community a better place to live.”

In 1976, after developing a career that spanned nearly six decades and overseeing the establishment and growth of a world-class lumber operation, Stuart Shelk retired. Continuing the family’s lumber tradition, John Shelk later became company president.

But in a manner reflecting his lifelong discipline and dedication, Stuart Shelk continued to pursue his interests in both the company and his community by making himself available, even on a daily basis to those who carry his work forward.