



Donald Cameron Thomas

1917-1986

The president of the Broughton Lumber Company, located in Underwood and Willard, Washington, Donald Cameron “Don” Thomas had a natural and familial connection to the woods and the timber industry. Though educated as a lawyer, Don joined his father-in-law, Harold J. Broughton, in operating the family-owned business. He performed the most physically challenging tasks at the mill in Underwood (called the “Hood mill”) before moving up to management and leadership of the company. Because of this work experience, he never forgot that the employees were the backbone of the company.

Don was born on June 26, 1917, in Seattle, Washington, the only son of William Thomas and Ethel Cameron Thomas. Don had an older sister, Dorothy. Don’s mother was a homemaker, and his father was a salesman, selling a variety of automobile-related products and, later, coffee.

The Thomas family relocated to Portland, where Don attended Grant High School. While in high school, Don worked as a

valet parker at the Meier and Frank department store in downtown Portland. While working at Meier and Frank, Don met another high school student, Emily Jean Broughton (she went by “Jean”), who was shopping with her father. The two teenagers struck up a friendship, which included meeting in Portland’s Washington Park to play tennis. Several years later, the two would marry.

After graduating from high school in spring 1935, Don enrolled in the University of Oregon, where he was a member of the Beta Theta Pi fraternity and received his Bachelor’s degree. He later attended the Northwestern College of Law, an evening school in downtown Portland (which merged with Lewis and Clark College in 1965).

Like so many men and women of his generation, Don served his country during World War II. He joined the U.S. Army Air Corps, the precursor to the U.S. Air Force. He was commissioned as a captain and volunteered for pilot training. He served in the Pacific Theater of Operations, flying a B-17 “Flying

Fortress” that had been modified to fly low over the ocean to drop a bright orange boat, which was attached to the bomb bay. This boat was equipped with enough supplies for downed pilots to survive several days until they could be reached by ship. Don remarked on more than one occasion how thankful he was to have drawn a rescue assignment instead of a bombing assignment.

On November 17, 1942, Don and Jean wed at the Broughton family home in Portland. Don was married in his uniform and had to return to military service shortly after the wedding. Don and Jean had three children, Donald Cameron (always known as “Cam”; b. August 11, 1945), Susan Jo (b. December 14, 1949), and Sally Broughton (b. October 14, 1953).

After the war, Don joined his father-in-law in the lumber business on the Washington side of the Columbia River. Founded in 1923, the Broughton Lumber Company was made up of two mills, the upper sawmill in Willard, and the lower re-saw and planing mill at Hood (part of the town of Underwood), right on the Columbia River. The two mills were connected by a nine-mile long lumber flume. When Broughton ended mill operations in December 1986, working days the last functional lumber flume in the United States came to an end.

When Don went to work at the mill, he learned virtually every task hands-on. He even filled shifts untangling rough lumber cants and lining them up for re-sawing, which was incredibly demanding work. Red Smith, a mill worker alongside Don, recalled how hard they worked throwing pine trim over their heads until 9:30 one night. “The next day, Don said to Superintendent Jim Hore, ‘Those guys aren’t men, they’re mules.’”

At first Don commuted weekly to the Hood mill site from Portland, but in 1948, he moved with his wife and young son into a new house on the mill property. Eventually, Don became Broughton Lumber’s sales manager, general manager, and finally president.

Though Don played a leadership role throughout most of his years at Broughton Lumber, he kept in close contact with his employees. He strived to know his employees by their first names, and even to keep track of how their families were faring. He truly believed that the sweat equity of Broughton’s workers built the company. Don also relied on and trusted the expertise of the mill crew. When Broughton Lumber added new equipment or redesigned operations, Don listened to his employees to improve efficiency and streamline tasks on the mill floor.

The employees were rewarded not only with their wages, but with a generous pension and profit-sharing plan. Many employees matched the company’s loyalty with their own loyalty, in some cases working at the mill for 35 to 40 years and more. In many ways, the mill was like an extended family, and indeed brothers and sons followed in the footsteps of their family members. Don’s own son, Cam, worked at the mill for many years.

Doyle Van Deventer, the general manager at Broughton when Don was president, considered his boss, “the working man’s friend.” He recalled that Don proved himself admirably when he joined the company, working right alongside the other employees. “He started like the rest of us and was always willing to go to bat for his employees.” Red Smith echoed this sentiment: “That’s one thing you can say about Don Thomas—he stuck up for the men.”

In 1975, Don purchased land in Underwood near the Hood mill that became the grounds for an annual company picnic. Mill workers helped build picnic tables and a brick barbecue. During the annual picnic, held at the end of July, management served barbecued chicken and all the fixings to the mill crew and their families. This event was one of the year's highlights for Don.

Don also did not shy away from physical work at Broughton Lumber, and he once paid the price. While clearing a lumber jam in the flume, he was knocked to the ground from a height of nearly 20 feet. The soft earth cushioned his fall, but his right knee was struck and shattered by a piece of lumber. The injury required surgery, but Don was soon back on his feet.

Though Don treasured his work in the mill and the woods, he enjoyed the recreational value of the outdoors just as much. Throughout most of his adult life, he kept a dog at his side. Over the years, Don and his family had a German shepherd, a boxer, a collie, and a toy poodle. His last dogs were two cherished black labs.

Don was a member of Portland's Multnomah Athletic Club and the Waverly Country Club. He was such an avid and regular golfer that he could hit a draw shot off most tees, on command. He also had a fondness for old cars, especially a 1928 Chevrolet, and was an active member of the Historical

Automobile Club of Oregon. In addition, Don was a member of the Rotary and the Elks, and he helped found the Klickitat Valley Bank in White Salmon, Washington.

In the late 1970s and 1980s, the timber industry changed as public lands became less available for logging. Broughton's sawmill, built in the 1920s and early 1930s, was designed to cut logs 3 to 5 feet in diameter. Through the late 1970s, Broughton Lumber specialized in cutting large timbers, often up to 40 feet in length. Occasionally, the mill cut timbers as long as 56 feet. Like other mills throughout the Northwest, Broughton faced a dwindling supply of its key raw material—large logs.

With great reluctance, Don announced on July 1, 1986, that Broughton Lumber would cease mill operations at the end of the year. Employees were given six months notice, but few left before the closure and instead chose to stay to the end. Although Broughton ceased mill operations in December of 1986, the company still manages its own timber holdings.

Even in the last months of Broughton Lumber's mill operations, Don's enthusiasm for the company did not flag. On September 13, 1986, while showing visitors around the mill, he suffered a fatal brain hemorrhage. At the age of 69, Don died at the place to which he had passionately dedicated his entire professional life.

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