



John Shelk

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John Shelk has roots in the lumber industry that go back five generations to his great-great grandfather Armon Clark who cut railroad ties in Ontario, Canada. His family has been prominent in Oregon's lumber industry since his great-grandfather O.M. Clark came to Portland in 1904 and established Clark & Wilson Lumber Company in Linnton.

Stuart Shelk, John's father and O.M.'s oldest grandson, accompanied his grandfather to the Linnton mill as a young boy and moved to Prineville in 1938 as the accountant and office manager for the new Ochoco Lumber Company sawmill. John was only five when his father led him through the mill. "I remember the machinery, the workers, the smell of sawdust," John said. "It was exciting."

John worked summers in the mill and the woods, learning the business from the ground up. Although his father was president of the company, John never received special treatment. He worked wherever he was needed, including cutting weeds around the plant. After graduating from Willamette University, enlisting in the Army and serving in Vietnam, John came home and began his career at Ochoco Lumber as payroll clerk in 1970. Ten years later he was named general manager.

Darrell Williams, president of the company after Stuart's retirement, spoke highly of John. "As John worked his way up through the company, I saw he was a quick learner. He could grasp a complex principle or idea faster than anyone I have ever known. John is an idea man and has the guts to try something new and carry it through. He has never backed off one tiny bit."

Legendary newspaperman Robert Chandler also recognized John's intelligence and skills and gave his highest compliment, "That guy (John) has the guts of a second-story burglar."

Those qualities guided John as he led the company through the bidding wars of the 1970s and the recession of the 1980s that crippled the housing industry and collapsed the lumber market. While production faltered across the Northwest, Ochoco Lumber expanded. Malheur Lumber was formed in 1983 to build and operate a sawmill in John Day. A small log mill was added in Prineville in 1988. Another mill was purchased in Princeton, Idaho, in 1993.

When the ongoing public timber supply issue was exacerbated by environmental lawsuits John looked globally for innovative and sometimes risky methods to keep the mills running. He was among the first to step into the vast potential of Russian forests.

Ochoco Lumber partnered with ten family-owned companies in Oregon, Washington and California in 1993 to form Global Forestry Management Group. GFMG logged and managed forests in the Russian Far East to supply logs for the partners' mills and plywood plants and for export to Japan, Korea and China. About the same time John found an abandoned brick factory in Kupiskis, Lithuania, and made it a dry kiln and planing facility to process wood for European and American customers.

Ochoco International was formed with an office in Chile to

trade in domestic and international wood products from South America and New Zealand. Ochoco West, a venture partnership, provided one-stop shopping for the building industry, delivering lumber custom-milled to contractors' specifications. The acquisition of Deschutes Pine Sales, a lumber wholesale operation with retail lumber yards, completed Ochoco Lumber's diversified, full-service lumber marketing program.

As the company expanded internationally and nationally, the Prineville mill could not find a sustainable supply of logs. Finally on July 31, 2001, Ochoco Lumber Company, the last operating sawmill in Crook County, closed and 135 people were out of work. "It was the hardest thing I have ever had to do," John said. "I knew every one of these people and their families. Many of them had worked for my father."

Assuring an adequate timber supply for the mills was a constant concern from the time John stepped into management at Ochoco Lumber. He looked for reliable sources of timber across the Northwest and around the world. Finally, back home in the Ponderosa pine forests of Eastern Oregon, John found a solution in an unlikely alliance with a U.S. Senator and an environmentalist.

Forest health was becoming an issue reaching beyond the concerns of the forest industry. Overstocked stands of diseased and dying trees caught the attention of the general public. Catastrophic wildfires clogged the air with smoke. Oregon Senator Ron Wyden and Congressman Greg Walden took notice and introduced legislation to address forest health and restoration. The environmental community, too, began to realize that logging is a useful tool to manage and sustain healthy forests and if mills closed and loggers found other jobs, no one would be left with the skills and infrastructure to maintain healthy forests.

It is said that good leaders need conviction, persistence, a temperament for creative solutions, and the courage to take measured risks. John reached out to Andy Kerr who, as executive director of the Oregon Natural Resources Council, was instrumental in the spotted owl endangered species listing that brought timber sales to a halt and crippled the timber industry across the Northwest.

It was another risky move and unpopular with many of John's peers. But in this case, both sides stood to gain. Environmentalists were saving Oregon's eastside forests from loggers only to lose them to insects and fires. And unless some timber sales could proceed without costly and time-consuming lawsuits, the last operating mills would close.

John and Andy found areas where they could agree. In December 2009 they both were present in Washington, D.C., as Senator Wyden introduced the Oregon Eastside Forests Restoration, Old Growth Protection and Jobs Act. The bill was a compromise that would speed up thinning of overstocked eastside forests and keep the mills running, while protecting old-growth trees and lessening the chances of fire.

Notwithstanding the bilateral agreements, by 2012 the mill in John Day was running out of timber and, reluctantly, Ochoco Lumber announced their last mill would shut down. Talk quickly turned to action. With the support of

Senators Wyden and Merkley, Congressman Walden, Governor John Kitzhaber, and motivated by the truce between John and Andy, the Blue Mountain Forest Partners collaborative and Malheur National Forest put together a stewardship contract guaranteeing a ten-year supply of timber to keep the John Day mill operating.

John, who grew up when Prineville was known as the Ponderosa Pine Capital of the world, recognized values related to the use of natural resources were changing. But he also knew that trees continue to grow, forests need to be managed to remain healthy, and rural communities are the front line in saving our forests for future generations.

Responding to the interest in lowering dependence on fossil fuels, Ochoco Lumber continued to innovate by building a pellet mill in John Day. The densified wood pellets and bricks from forest biomass heat homes and industrial boilers worldwide, reducing the use of fossil fuels and improving air quality with carbon-neutral emissions.

Beyond managing Ochoco Lumber Company, John has served the forest products industry with two terms on the Oregon Board of Forestry, chaired the Western Wood Products Association, and sat on the boards of the World Forestry Center, Timber Operators Council and Oregon Business Council. He was a board member of Willamette Industries, US Bank of Oregon, Western Communications, and Community First Bank.

His personal interests in education and community led John to chair the High Desert Museum board and serve on the boards of Willamette University, Deschutes River Conservancy, Prineville Hospital Foundation and Pioneer Memorial Hospital. He spent 12 years on the Crook County Planning Commission and his leadership helped stimulate industrial growth and economic development throughout Crook County.

Ochoco Lumber has donated to the Oregon Alliance of Independent Colleges and Universities for 57 years and it assists college students in Crook and Grant counties through the Ochoco Scholarship Fund. John and his wife Linda contribute personally, through the Shelk Foundation, and with an OCF Advised Fund to projects and organizations throughout Oregon and especially to the counties of Central and Eastern Oregon.

John, his father Stuart, and Ochoco Lumber have operated with integrity, honesty and high principles. John calls it enlightened self-interest. "Enlightened self-interest is looking into the far distant future and seeing where you want to take yourself and the company," he explained. "That vision is something I keep in front of me every day and it has kept me from short-term thinking."

"Sometimes the strategies you develop take you in strange directions and into counter-intuitive alliances. At times I've had to put my personal emotions and instincts aside to get where we want to go. When you fill in that gap between where you and the company are now and where you want it to be, you do different things than you would do if you only respond to the competitive demand of day-to-day business."