



## *Joseph William Copeland*

**1886-1978**

Joseph William Copeland was a pioneer Oregon lumberman who left his indelible imprint on the lumber and home building products retailing business in five Western states. At the time of his death on January 17, 1978, Copeland Lumber Yards, Inc., had more than 80 retail outlets in Oregon, Washington, California, Idaho and Nevada.

It was a business that began in 1912 with the purchase of a small lumberyard in the Lents district of Portland, Oregon. In the early years growth was slow, but never in the 66 years that Joe Copeland was connected with the firm did it have an operating loss. Sales exceed \$30 million annually. It was one of the nation's largest, remaining, family-owned lumber operations.

Of Scotch-Irish descent, Joseph W. Copeland was born at Sumner, Iowa, on August 31, 1886. His father, Joseph, taught him the lumber business in yards acquired or opened in Cresco, Perry, Toledo and Gardiner, Iowa. It was a learning process – from piling lumber in the yard on up to an office position. The elder Copeland was a man of integrity, insisting the company give every customer every penny's worth of goods due him. That continued to be the credo of his son, Joe, until his death at the age of 91 years.

Joseph W. Copeland graduated from high school at Cresco, Iowa, and then matriculated to the University of Minnesota, fully intending to become a lawyer, but that never happened – his father got the urge to go West.

The Copeland family moved to Hood River, Oregon, to enter the fruit growing business in 1908. It was at Hood River that young Joe, then 22, worked in the Hood River Bank and Trust Company. He also became an officer. Lee A. Copeland, Joe's older brother, got the family back in the lumber business with purchase of retail yards at Meridian, Kuna, Star and McKermit, Idaho. (McKermit no longer exists)

After a few years in the fruit business, father Joe exercised a \$10,000 mortgage he had on a lumberyard in the Lents district of Portland. Stock was purchased until 1912, and the elder Copeland was in the retail lumber business on the West Coast for the first time.

In 1920 Copeland Lumber Yards had only five outlets and 20 employees. Only two additional yards had been added by 1927. In the meantime, however, father Joseph, 72, died on March 7, 1924. And death struck the hierarchy of the Copeland organization again in 1926 when brother Lee Albert Copeland died at the age of 43.

Joseph William Copeland, then 40, became president and chief executive officer in 1926. He guided the growth and destiny of the company for 47 years, until stepping aside to become board chairman a few days before his 87<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1973.

In those 47 years, Joe Copeland increased his number of yards until they totaled 84 on February 15, 1974. Perhaps the most distinguishing mark of Copeland Lumber Yards, Inc., was the use of bright, Halloween orange on the buildings and a big black cat insignia. This all came about when the company, in its early expansion days, purchased the Fenton Lumber Company of Fenton, Idaho. The orange color and black cat were trademarks of the Fenton firm.

The pioneer lumberman served his community and industry well. In 1926, Joseph W. Copeland was instrumental in helping organize and served as first president of the Portland Retail Lumber Dealers Association, which no longer exists. In 1948 he was elected as a director of the National Retail Lumbermen's Association. He was elected president of the Western Retail Lumbermen's Association in January, 1951. He first became a member of the Board of Trustees of Lewis and Clark College in 1944. In 1965 the Joseph W. Copeland Residence Hall was dedicated to him. With his sister, Margaret Copeland, he built a campus chapel in memory of their parents.

In 1973, when Joe Copeland was elevated to board chairman, he was succeeded by his only child, Mrs. William Alexander Whitsell, then 35. She was known throughout the Copeland organization as Helen Jo, named after each parent. She held numerous positions, including yard manager.

Helen Jo's mother was the former Helen Cornwell, a native of Wausau, Wisconsin, who married Jo Copeland in 1936. She abandoned her career as an art teacher to marry the lumberman who met her through friends on a business trip to Montana.

She survived Joseph William Copeland, as did his daughter, two grandchildren, William A. Whitsell, Jr. and Cathy Jo, and son-in-law, William A. Whitsell, Sr. Whitsell became a Copeland administrative officer.