



Lasells D. Stewart

1876-1964

A family, a community, and ultimately a state are built not so much upon individual performances as upon joint efforts directed toward a common goal of economic self-sufficiency. These efforts may not be consciously coordinated, but they do result in steady progress. This is the pattern that Willamette Valley lumbermen in general, and Bohemia Lumber Company in particular, seem to fit. Notable personalities naturally developed, and one of these was “Cap” Stewart, at times called “Wicked Jimmy.”

LaSells David Stewart, the son of David and Eliza Stewart, was born June 10, 1876 in Anoka, Minnesota. Coming to Oregon at the age of 27, he appeared in Lane County as foreman for the Booth-Kelly Lumber Company under Lon Hill. Married March 31, 1908 to Jessie Hills, a member of one of Lane County’s pioneer families, they shortly moved to the Cottage Grove area where, except for his World War I service in France, he spent the rest of his life.

Three children, Loran L., Dorothy F., and Faye H. were born before he joined the well-known Forestry Regiment, the 20th Engineers, in 1918. Returning to Lane County, he elected not to work for Booth-Kelly but to join his old friend Lon Hill, who with Jack Magladry had formed and was operating the Bohemia Lumber Company on Row River. Stewart was assigned the responsibility of the woods. W.A. Garoutte was installed as sawmill superintendent. This four-man team stayed together until Hill retired. The remaining three carried through the “depression” when Magladry died leaving Stewart and Garoutte to continue through World War II.

Reacting to the stress of the war years, both Stewart and Garoutte decided to sell out and retire in 1946, but Stewart continued to live in the family home in Cottage Grove until his death, June 13, 1964, at the age of 88.

He left a great heritage for his children and his community. The material elements are in the form of the Bohemia Lumber Company, but the real bequests are in reputation, community service, and strength of character that set a pattern by those who followed him.

Stewart was thrifty. The idea of self-sufficiency for himself, his family and his company was strong. It may have come from his Scottish ancestry. But he was not penurious; he sent his children to college during the “depression” although personal sacrifices had to be made. Because of this characteristic, Stewart had a modest nest egg in the form of a good savings certificate available when the firm needed collateral to survive the depression years.

He was energetic and ingenious. Often riding the crummy with his crew, he spent the same or more hours than they did and in the same weather with them. Although his formal education came to a halt at the seventh grade, his native common sense permitted him to arrive at workable solutions to engineering problems in a manner that was simple and effective.

An example is the use of a 50-foot length of whistle wire and a hand level as the only instruments to lay out a railroad grade of several miles and which included switchbacks, relatively new to the Lane County woods. Another was the construction of a trestle on a grade and a curve. This would take pages of calculation for a graduate engineer, but Stewart accomplished it by using a whistle wire center line adjusted by guying to stumps. When the wire looked right to him, he put the carpenters to framing the structure.

He could admit a mistake. Once, after the younger generation had taken over the operation and were changing from time honored plank to gravel roads, he was incensed at the apparently needless expense. He delivered a stern lecture on such activities. Later, when the wisdom of the change had proven itself, he recalled his outburst and admitted his error.

He was warm-hearted and generous. Many individuals were helped by a personal loan of a few dollars for needed items such as “cork shoes” or to fill the Christmas stocking for the children. No one will ever know how many students for whom he paid tuition because he did not care to brag about these things. Employees were friends and neighbors, not just workmen. Even salesmen were treated as individuals. Any peddler who had the ambition to hike up the track to the landing could be assured of a small sale, perhaps only a choker, but his effort was rewarded.

He had a sense of humor. His dry wit extricated him from many a potentially serious circumstance. And if the joke was on him, it was still enjoyed for the pure humor of it. Many people regarded the instance of his carrying a strike banner in front of his own operation as a huge joke. On the surface it would appear so, but the underlying character of Stewart indicates that it was more an instance of still another of his characteristics.

He had humility. In carrying the strike banner, he was simply doing what was natural when interrupting a man's job with another one. He would not ask a man to do what he was unwilling to do himself, no matter how disagreeable. So in this instance, he had asked a man to do a job for him and in return was doing the man's job until he was able to pick it up again.

It could be said that he was simply conservative. He did not waste words, money, time, equipment or energy. When necessary, he would invest in any or all of these things and expect to get a reasonable return. But if in spite of all efforts and precautions, the project went sour, he would accept the result without whining or complaining. He gave fair treatment to his crew and associates and expected the same in return from them. In the process of living and working in the Row River Valley, many yarns, even legends, have grown up around the character of this man whose name is on only one physical feature in the area, the LaSells D. Stewart Park on the river where he spent a good share of his life.