



C. Wylie Smith

1908-1997

Clyde Wylie Smith II—known as C. Wylie Smith and called “Wylie” by his friends and colleagues and “Poppy” by his family—embodied the strengths of the Northwest’s greatest 20th-century lumbermen. He not only helped build a substantial forest products business in the Coos Head Timber Company, but also made a strong and lasting impact on the greater Coos Bay area through his philanthropy and community involvement.

Though a Northwesterner most of his life, Wylie was born in Pine Grove, Louisiana, on August 9, 1908. He was the second of four sons born to Clyde Wylie Smith I and Jessie Ada Willis Smith. When Wylie was still young, the Smith family left the South and moved to Ellensburg, Washington, and then to Everett. His father sold insurance, but his extended family was involved in the timber industry going back into the 19th century.

Wylie attended Everett High School, graduating in 1927. He was a strong student and also held down a part-time job during his high school years.

From 1929 to 1933, Wylie attended Washington State College (now Washington State University), where he received his B.S. in Business Administration. At college, Wylie kept busy on many fronts. He was a second lieutenant in the Army ROTC, a member of Delta Sigma Pi, the business administration honor society, and a member of Phi Kappa Phi, an academic honor society. Wylie was also a member of Theta Chi fraternity. He resided at the fraternity house and eventually served as the house manager.

Shortly after graduation, Wylie left Washington and moved to Coos Bay, Oregon, where he took the position of manager of Coos Bay Pulp Corporation. He made Coos Bay his home for the rest of his life.

Wylie was not alone for long in Coos Bay. On October 20, 1934, he married Elvine Lindahl, a fellow Washington State graduate and friend from Everett. The couple made a comfortable home in Coos Bay, and their first child, Colleen Margaret was born in 1935. A second daughter, Joan Karen, was born in 1937, and a son, Clyde Wylie III, in 1943.

When Coos Bay Pulp was purchased by the Scott Paper Company in 1940, Wylie stayed on as a vice president and the manager of Scott Paper’s operations in Coos Bay. A skillful businessman and excellent manager, Wylie ran Scott’s area operations independently, interacting with the home office in Chester, Pennsylvania, primarily to report his unit’s successes.

During World War II, Wylie continued with his work for Coos Bay Pulp. The production of paper was considered an

essential part of the war effort, though it was a challenge to obtain timber for the pulp mill during this time.

After the war, Wylie’s younger brother Willis, who had been an army officer in the Pacific, came to Coos Bay to get started in business. With Wylie as an advisor and silent partner of sorts, Willis started Coos Head Timber Company in 1946. The two brothers recognized the enormous growth potential in the lumber industry, and Coos Head Timber began by leasing mill time from Scott Paper.

Wylie greatly valued his independent decision-making, and by 1951 he had grown tired of Scott Paper’s new top-down management style. That year, he left Scott Paper and joined his brother at Coos Head Timber. The two brothers worked successfully together with Willis overseeing sawmill operations and Wylie in charge of logging operations and timber purchases. In 1962, Coos Head Timber bought out Scott Paper’s area holdings.

At its peak, Coos Head Timber employed more than 500 people. The company eventually included three sawmills, a veneer and plywood plant, and a pulp mill, as well as sales and distribution operations in California. Part of Wylie’s success rested in the respect he had for his employees and the loyalty that he earned. Elsie Marks, who worked with Wylie for more than 50 years, recalled that he “listened to people at all levels of the company.” He welcomed input from everybody, whether they worked on the mill floor, out in the timberlands, or in the front office. Mike Groben, a Coos Head forester for many years, expressed his admiration for Wylie in the simplest terms: “He was the finest man I ever met.”

Though Wylie was a committed lumberman, he did not let work prevent him from enjoying his family life and playing an active role in the Coos Bay community. In addition to being a Mason and member of the Elks Club, he was an active Rotarian and served as president of the Coos Bay-North Bend Rotary Club in 1953-54. He sat on the Coos Bay School Board and held the chairmanship. Over the years, he was also a member of several state advisory boards and commissions, which were shaping policy affecting the timber industry. Wylie also took an active interest in politics. He met and corresponded with elected officials, knew governors personally, and even traveled to Washington, D.C., for a presidential inauguration.

Wylie had a great passion for sports and the outdoors. He became a great fan of Marshfield High School athletics, where his son Wylie Jr. played football and basketball and ran track. Near the end of his life, Wylie contributed the astounding sum of \$1 million toward the renovation of Marshfield’s stadium and field.

Wylie also enjoyed fishing, bird hunting, and gardening. At his family’s cabin on the Millicoma River, he grew a large vegetable garden and took special care with his “butter and sugar” corn and pole beans—called “Wylie’s beans” by

friends and family. He also raised beef cattle on a small ranch in nearby Allegany, Oregon.

Though Wylie maintained a positive outlook throughout his life, he faced several challenges and tragedies. His wife Elvine died in 1960, and Wylie Jr. died in 1973 in an industrial accident. In his son’s honor, Wylie established a memorial scholarship, which is awarded to two outstanding forestry students every year at Oregon State University. Wylie was optimistic at heart and believed that bad times would eventually turn to good. In 1962, Wylie married Florence Hall, a Coos Bay native and longtime family friend. She died in 1981.

Wylie also witnessed—and helped bridge—enormous change in the Northwest timber industry. In the face of a dwindling supply of available timber, Wylie worked closely with company foresters and others in the industry to develop sustainable timber management practices. He understood that the days of inefficient harvesting were past, and the industry needed to focus on long-term viability.

While Wylie knew firsthand that timberland benefits society by providing essential raw materials, he also knew the value of setting aside wilderness areas to be enjoyed by generations to come. He and Willis donated more than 600 acres to the South Slough National Estuarine Research Reserve, which was established in 1974. At the time, this was the largest private donation of land for public use in the state’s history.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Coos Head Timber faced increasing competition and a changing marketplace. The company’s mills contained older equipment in need of replacement. Following a mill fire in 1982, and with no family member to take on the responsibilities of rebuilding the company, Wylie and Willis phased out manufacturing, sold property and equipment, and focused on wholesaling. Though Coos Head Timber waned with the decline of the timber industry, the company’s legacy can be found in buildings up and down the West Coast and beyond. In all, Coos Head Timber cut more than two billion board feet of lumber—enough for some 200,000 houses.

For all his professional achievements, Wylie was a modest man who worked hard, served his community, and cared deeply for his family and friends. He continued to work into his 80s and stayed on top of business matters until his death on October 20, 1997, at the age of 89. His personal legacy remains in the contributions that he made to his greater community and in the example he provided to the people who knew him best.