



Aaron U. Jones

1921-2014

With the gifts of intuitive foresight and ingenious creativity, a readiness to meet challenges head-on, and a “down to earth” personality spawning both his commitment to finding “common ground” and his genuine, enthusiastic devotion to the forest products industry, Aaron Jones is indeed a leader among leaders. Through his guidance as owner and president, Seneca Sawmill Company of Eugene, Oregon, has become one of the most technologically advanced mills in the world and is currently the second largest producing mill on one site in the United States.

Born in Texas, Aaron moved to an uncle’s farm in Oregon in 1931. He made his way to Eugene in 1940 to work his way through college, but college plans were disrupted when World War II broke out. Aaron joined the Army and served in the Pacific Theatre as an officer. After the War, he returned to Eugene and, in 1947, graduated from the University of Oregon as a member of the Class of ‘44, with a degree in Physical Education.

After a brief real estate career, Aaron saw opportunity knock when the government declared new forest management plans that would open their forestlands to commercial harvest for the first time. He could see the possibilities: “The industry was so antiquated, I figured if I could partner with the government and build a competitive sawmill, I wouldn’t have trouble getting raw materials.”

Seneca Sawmill Company was born in 1953. By 1954, Seneca was producing 18 million board feet of lumber per year. It was then that Aaron began practicing a fundamental principle he believes has led to the company’s success today. Advanced technology was developed on a continuing basis that insured optimum value from every log. A program of developing patents on this technology and plowing profits back into the operation has created the high-tech operation of today.

Seneca Sawmill Company has grown into a leading lumber producer, exceeding 350 million board feet annually. Much of that success is directly attributed to the advanced technology applied in virtually every aspect of the mill. Under Aaron’s leadership, the company constantly works for a higher level of excellence, striving to produce the best lumber available, while consuming less raw material than any other sawmill in the world.

Aaron currently holds over 20 patents in various sawmill technologies that have been developed through cooperative efforts between management, operations and engineering.

A control system that maintains the headrig’s constant temperature, eliminating any fluctuation in sawing due to expansion or contraction of the foundation or framework—allowing for extreme accuracy—is a patented Seneca invention.

A process that scans the log immediately before it reaches the headrig to determine its true shape, then feeds this information to the dollar optimizer which determines the cutting pattern that will produce the optimum value from each log, is a Seneca innovation.

The Flying Edger is a unique sawing method used in the Stud Mill and Dimension Mill. It holds raw material in position while the Flying Edger saw cuts its full length, ensuring straight, stur-

dy studs and dimension lumber. It’s another innovation developed and patented by Aaron.

Seneca’s filing room, the result of years of research, is vibration-free. Since Seneca uses thinner saws than others do in the industry to save wood fiber, lack of vibration allows saws to be sharpened with precision accuracy. The company has also developed various sawtooth patterns for extreme, thin-kerf sawing. Accuracy is calculated in thousandths-of-an-inch rather than simple fractions.

Such ongoing efforts result in more lumber and less sawdust, meaning more wood fiber for high value production. In short, Seneca uses virtually 100% of each log. That includes by-products: bark for fuel and landscaping; sawdust for wood stove pellets; shavings for pressed wood products. This technological approach to business, efficiencies, labor, cost of operation and recovery of material are second to none in the industry.

With the same type of foresight that made Seneca a leader through technology, Aaron recognized the need to diversify his company. In 1989, Seneca became a landowner with the acquisition of 30,000 acres of timberland. Today Seneca Jones Timber Company manages tree farms in over 165,000 acres of Oregon forestland.

Seneca utilizes “Best Management Practices,” a designation given for meeting, but more often exceeding the most comprehensive forest practice regulations in the world – those of the Oregon Forest Practices Act. Promoting sustainable yield forest practices, the company’s volume of growing stock has increased each of the last five years. And Seneca also works with private, state and federal agencies to restore or improve watershed health.

Not surprisingly, Seneca’s forest management policy has been enhanced by technology with the company’s development of the Geographical Information System. The GIS system’s digital map base is directly linked to Seneca’s timber inventory management system. Combined with its modeling capabilities, GIS allows for spatial analysis at the local and global scale. Seneca believes this capability is imperative to properly manage the forests for all the important components of a viable, healthy ecosystem.

Aaron is quick to point out that a key factor in the company’s success is the dedication and teamwork from Seneca’s employees. A sense of family characterizes the working climate. And Aaron knows his people. You’re apt to find him out in the mill as often as behind his desk! He believes that there are no better-trained employees in the industry.

Service to industry-wide organizations has been frequent for Aaron: former chairman and director of the West Coast Lumber Inspection Bureau; former member of the National American Lumber Standards Committee; former president and director of the Western Forest Industries Association; director of the Mountain States Legal Foundation; former president and director of Western Resource Alliance. In 1968 he was named an official U.S. delegate to meetings with the Japanese government to discuss log exports.

As great as his genuine love for the lumber business, Aaron also finds time for passions away from the mill. He and his wife Marie have bred and raced thoroughbred horses since 1971, and both are well known in racing cir-

cles throughout the world. Many of their horses have been successful in winning stakes races. “Lemhi Gold” received the 1982 Eclipse Award for Champion Older Horse. “Tiffany Lass” was the undefeated three-year old filly in 1986, and received the Eclipse award as Champion Three-year-old Filly. “Prime Timber” ran to a fourth place finish in the 125th Kentucky Derby. Riboletta will receive an Eclipse Award for Champion Older Mare for the Year 2000.

An outdoorsman, Aaron helped form the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation to preserve, restore and protect elk habitat and other wildlife. With the help of his dedication and leadership, the Foundation has grown into an organization with an annual budget of over 54 million dollars a year.

Giving back to his community is an important element of Aaron’s life. His support of various local institutions in the Eugene area has truly made an impact. A “dyed-in-the-wool” Duck—Aaron is a true supporter of University of Oregon athletics. He and Marie have been generous sponsors to the athletic department and the University’s business school. In fact, they’re lifetime President’s Associates of the University of Oregon Foundation, and were recent recipients of the University of Oregon President’s Medal in recognition of their ongoing support of the University.

True to his trait of pursuing the bottom line of an issue and seeking common ground between parties involved, is Aaron’s Umpqua Land Exchange Project, or what he calls the “Friendly Swap.” In 1994, he began development of a concept to exchange like-for-like property between the government and private industry. The idea is to turn over private riparian land, critical habitat, migratory wildlife corridors and such to the government in exchange for non-critical land of equal value and substance where intensive forest management can be practiced. Private industry maintains sustainable private forests while the government administers to environmental needs. Everyone wins. Aaron sees it as a way to avoid the recent federal timber battles. In 1996, Oregon Business magazine featured Aaron as one of the visionaries who will shape Oregon’s future with his “Friendly Swap” concept.

As a visionary, facing challenges head on is simply what Aaron Jones has always done. His peers in the industry have relied on his foresight to help steer them through some stormy times. He has fought for small business federal timber set-asides. He helped establish lumber standards to give fair treatment to both green and dry products. He helped create the reciprocal road rights-of-way regulations and the interdiction of the export of logs from State and Federal land in the West.

In 1964, Aaron was given Western Wood Week’s Tall in the Forest Award as “the man who has done more for the forest products industry than any other single individual.” In 1998, Aaron received the Harry A. Merlo Award for a lifetime effort in developing sustainable forests and forest resources. In 2000, Aaron received the Lumberman of the Year Award from the Portland Wholesale Lumber Association. Spanning the generations, Aaron Jones continues to impact both the industry and the community he loves.