



Ray L. Wilson

1883-1961

Ray Wilson was born in Edmore, Michigan, into a family well-established in the lumber business. In fact, shortly after he was born they moved to an area of more marketable timber, Rhinelander, Wisconsin, a sawmill town on the Wisconsin River. The forests were logged in winter and the logs driven down the river on high water in spring. Wilson had childhood memories of exciting times as the log drives came through town each year. All the sidewalks in town were wood except one block which was concrete and it was a special thrill to watch sparks fly from calked boots as the lumberjacks kicked up their rowdy heels.

Wilson studied law at the University of Minnesota, always intending to continue the family tradition of devoting his professional life to the lumber business, and graduated in 1907. He left immediately after graduating for Spokane, Washington, to sell a block of timber owned there by his uncle. The sale was long in coming because of a financial panic in that year, but the timber eventually was sold and became the original holdings of the Craig Mountain Lumber Company. While waiting for the sale he had been working nights in a sawmill in Spokane and his education and interest in lumber caught the eye of the Exchange Bank. They asked him to take over a bankrupt sawmill at Fishlake, Washington.

This was the beginning of a very successful and lucrative business endeavor. In 1910 he was joined by Walter Leuthold, a colleague from the University of Minnesota. They formed a partnership that continued until 1939. In 1912 the new partnership purchased Deer Park Lumber Company, just north of Spokane, from William Short who was experiencing financial difficulties. Deer Park was a much bigger operation than they had had until then, cutting about forty million feet a year. The partners took this growth in stride, and after World War I expanded Deer Park first to the Spokane Indian Reservation – they built railroads to tap the timber there and hauled the logs to Deer Park – then into Canada’s interior British Columbia. Wilson’s main fields in the business were milling and selling while Leuthold managed the logging. Deer Park was eventually merged into the Potlatch Company in the early 1950’s and stayed in operation until 1970.

On January 2, 1914, Wilson married Genevieve Becker. She was from Los Angeles and he met her during a short time she and her family were living in Spokane. Ray and Genevieve had two children, Robert Becker and Charles Frederick, and lived in Deer Park until 1921 when they moved to Spokane.

In 1938 and 1939 the two sons graduated from college and Wilson sold out to Leuthold in a most generous plan to form a Wilson family partnership including himself, Genevieve, Robert and Charles. He took great care in searching out the best deal and location possible for the new business, and finally settled on a large (five hundred million board feet) block of timber on the Warm Springs Indian Reservation. Ironically, he bought the timber on January 5, 1942, one month after Pearl Harbor and by that time, both sons were on active duty in the U.S. Navy.

In this purchase, Wilson initiated the first development of the extensive timber on the Warm Springs Indian Reservation and he had a contract with the Indians to fulfill. It would have been difficult enough with his sons helping him – and suddenly he had to create the Warm Springs Lumber Company alone. He had to build a power plant, housing, sawmills – everything from scratch. Because of the War, it was impossible to buy turbines for power or new sawmill machinery, so he bought a mill at West Fork, Washington, on the Colville Indian Reservation, operated it during the summer of 1942, then moved it to Warm Springs, and sawed the first log in late summer, 1943. The mill operated steadily after 1943, and when the War was over, Wilson was able at long last to implement his original plan, teaching his sons to manage and operate the mill. In 1950 Robert took it over entirely and the Warm Springs Lumber Company stayed in the family until it was sold to Sam Johnson of Redmond in 1965. It was sold to Johnson with the understanding that the mill would be resold, over a period of years, to the Warm Springs Indian Tribe.

Meantime, in 1950, Wilson had started a redwood operation in Willitz in Mendocino County, California. In that same year, Charles moved to California to run that operation. Later, it changed ownership a number of times and the final sale was to the Union Lumber Company of Fort Bragg, California.

Wilson had tremendous talent in scouting out new areas of possible business in lumber. In 1954, he formed a joint venture with Phil Dahl, Sam Johnson and Harold Barclay at Madras. They built the first plywood plant east of the Cascades – it began operation in 1956 under the name, Jefferson Plywood Company. It was sold to Sam Johnson in 1965, at the same time as the sale of the Warm Springs Lumber Company.

Ray Wilson was an excellent businessman whose wife and family were always first in his life. His generosity to them was so great that he gave up a comfortable life in Spokane where he had established himself well in every way, to create businesses designed to establish his sons as their own bosses. In the spring of 1946, when he and both of his sons were shaping the Warm Springs Lumber Company and he was well into sharing his wealth of knowledge and experience with them, the government took the price controls off for the first time since the War. In characteristic unselfishness this talented man said to his sons: “This will do more for the company than I.” He was a remarkable man, likable and warm, who took time ‘to smell the flowers’ as he lived.