John Warjone

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John Warjone's forty-four-year career with Port Blakely Tree Farms was inspired by his love of the outdoors and Mr. Joe Richert, his seventh/eighth-grade biology teacher. To encourage John to complete assigned work on time, Mr. Richert imparted these words of advice: It is possible to make a good living working outdoors. For a boy who loved the outdoors, preferring to be at a beach under water or catching snakes and tarantulas in the orange groves behind his family's home than sitting in a classroom, that was the motivation John needed to complete high school and graduate from college to live that life.

As his mother was Maryanne Cooley Eddy, the youngest of James Garfield Eddy's three daughters, John "Onny" had a familial connection to Port Blakely; however, the Washington State-based company seemed far away from where he lived in southern California. "Working for Port Blakely was the furthest thing on my mind. I didn't even know it existed," John said. With his father having contracted rheumatic fever during World War II, the family needed to live in a warm, dry climate such as California.

John was introduced to the family company during the summer of 1961 when he spent a summer at the Garrett Eddy Tree Farm field office, which was located in Startup, Washington. Assigned to fire call duty, he was required to stay near the company's fire call system. After graduating from California State University-Fullerton in 1972, John contacted Garrett Eddy, a cousin and longtime CEO of Port Blakely Mill Company (the predecessor to Port Blakely Tree Farms). A subsequent chat with Chief Forester George Thomson followed, and John was told he had a job.

With the promise of a salary of $700 a month, John and his wife Sally, whom he married in 1970, moved to McCleary, Washington. John worked at Port Blakely's office on the John W. Eddy Tree Farm located off State Route 108, which was barely three miles away. What he remembers of those first six months was trying to find his way back to the office. "Everything looked the same; there were trees everywhere," John said. "There was no delineating anything, and I didn't know where I was."

As the new hire, John did the grunt work: digging out culverts, planting seedlings, spraying maple stumps, lighting slash burns, or all that normal stuff as he described it. "I enjoyed it," he explained. "I was outside. That's what I wanted, even if it was freezing cold and pouring rain." One vivid memory from this time was working in Pacific County on the Robert B. Eddy Tree Farm with the company's road building crew as they dynamited stumps in an area with sixty to seventy acres of old-growth trees. John recalled the trees as being as wide as a boardroom table with no undergrowth beneath because they shaded everything out. He ate his lunch on a hillside that overlooked a patch of clover running down between the old-growth trees to the stream. "I almost had a religious experience," he said. "I had never been in a place like that. It was just amazingly beautiful. Everybody on the road crew gave me a lot of guff over it, but it was life-changing for me about how beautiful it was. From that point on, I just thought, "There's much more to this environmental stewardship than I thought." For John, that experience highlighted Port Blakely's commitment to responsible environmental stewardship, and the role he would be playing in fulfilling that commitment.

With only a team of four field staff overseeing the 35,000-acre John W. Eddy Tree Farm, John rotated to different positions, such as animal damage control, road layout, and acquisitions, as needed, and in his words, "I learned by doing it all." By 1983, John was promoted to Operations Forester, in charge of all the company's harvesting across its holdings in the Pacific Northwest. It was also during this time that Port Blakely became well-respected within the industry for the efficiency of its field staff and business operations. One day out in the field, John came across a friend from a competitor company scoping out Port Blakey's operations to see how Port Blakely got so much done with so few employees. For John, it was a source of pride that the company planned everything out in detail and their people, himself included, loved the work. "I could just hardly wait to get out of bed in the morning and go work," he explained.

John remained an Operations Forester until 1994 when he was promoted to President of Blakely Pacific Ltd., a wholly-owned subsidiary of the company. Starting this business and setting up a land-purchasing program in New Zealand was in response to two coincidental events. The first was the Forest and Fish legislation enacted by the Washington State legislature on May 19, 1999, which enacted restrictions on certain type of forestland to protect salmon habitat. John was on the industry's negotiating team during those three years of meetings. Washington State's adoption of these proposed regulations meant forestry and owning forestland was becoming more regulated, even if the proposed new agreement's goals of protecting salmon habitat were already being implemented by Port Blakely management long before the rule was adopted. The second reason for the company's interest in New Zealand was in response to a Port Blakely-initiated Internal Revenue Service ruling that was related to allowing involuntary conversion income (1033) to be invested in foreign countries with a reciprocal tax agreement with the U.S.

John recalled telling the company Board of Directors that the new state and federal regulations in the U.S. were taking land away from the company faster than it could earn money and buy replacement land to remain profitable. The Board said, "Well Onny, you'd better go find someplace else to grow trees, so we did." The company looked at thirty-three places around the world, and there were many requirements and visits needed to make a qualified decision. New Zealand rose to the top of the list, and today, Blakely Pacific is a major forestland owner in the country.

As President of Blakely Pacific, John ran the subsidiary company exactly as Port Blakely was run in the states. "We treated our contractors, our neighbors, and the people we dealt with like we'd wanted to be treated." He also took a special interest in negotiations with indigenous Maori groups in New Zealand, and the company has since become a well-respected employer and forestland owner in the country.

In 1996, John was asked to serve on Port Blakely's Board of Directors, and he welcomed the opportunity to contribute more to the company. The following year, he was promoted to President of all Port Blakely's U.S. forestry operations. John served as President for the next ten years until his retirement in 2006. "I'd visit New Zealand on forestland purchasing trips and call back to our Olympia office only to hear them say, 'Everything's fine. You don't need to hurry home.' It was very satisfying to hear that," he said.

In addition to diversifying the company's forestland assets beyond the U.S., John furthered Port Blakey's commitment to environmental stewardship. He oversaw the implementation of Port Blakely's first Habitat Conservation Plan, which covers 9,700 acres in western Washington on the Robert B. Eddy Tree Farm. This was the second forestland related habitat conservation plan issued in the state of Washington by the federal government. John would also be asked for advice on the impacts of potential forestry regulations the Washington State Department of Natural Resources was considering. He considered this request for advice a well-deserved recognition of Port Blakely's culture of treating forestland with the upmost respect and managing it accordingly.

While President, John took an active role in educating the public about the importance of forests. Garrett Eddy was John's inspiration, having demonstrated firsthand the value of education—as well as the spontaneity of its delivery. One afternoon early in John's career, he visited the Seattle office to find Garrett hosting several bankers. After fielding several questions about Port Blakely's operations, Garrett suddenly stood up said, "Come on Onny, we're taking these bankers out on a woods tour." The group jumped into Garrett's worn-out travelall and drove down to McCleary, with Garrett narrating the whole way. "That's when it hit me," John said. "The chance to educate is huge. You've got to take advantage of the opportunity at any moment." This practice later became company culture. "If you had two or more people in your office asking questions about our forestry practices, it was an instant tour," John said.

John initiated Port Blakely's Environmental Education Program, which continues today. In the twenty-seven years since the program was launched, 87,000 students, parents and teachers in Washington, Oregon, and New Zealand have visited Port Blakely's working forests. Among the most gratifying comments he has received are from parents of touring students saying how life-changing the tour was to them years ago as students. John was also a cofounder and the first president of the Pacific Education Institute, a science literacy-focused nonprofit in Washington State.

Other organizations John was involved with included the Washington Forest Protection Association, where he served on many committees and two terms as President, and the Oregon Forest Industries Council. He has also had a long and rewarding relationship with the World Forestry Center: serving as vice president from 2009 to 2011; chairman of the board from 2011 to 2014; and is currently a member of the World Forestry Center's Advisory Council. Not one to rest during retirement, he currently serves on the board of directors of Olympia Federal Savings and Loan, and as an advisory board member for Anderson Middleton Company.

In reflecting back upon his career with Port Blakely, John does not hesitate when saying, "I'd do it all over again, and you don't have to pay me. I just love working in the woods."

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