Forest History Foundation, Inc.
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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW
with

Clarence W. Broback
Redwood City, California

March, 1953

by John Larson

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by John Larson, Forest History Foundation, Inc.

I started as timekeeper in the shipping department in 1900. Wages then was $26.00 a month. They allowed $12.00 a month for board which made $38.00 if you didn't board with them, $26.00 if you did. They had a boarding house which was very good. They also had a rooming house - a room was $3.00 a month. You didn't get much pay, but it didn't cost much to live. At the hotel you could board for $12.00 a month, room for $4.00 - $16.00 a month. The boarding house was $15.00. They had as high as 150 - 200 men boarding with them.

I can remember when there was as much as four or five girls in the dining room waiting on table. It was all family style service but still they had waiters bringing in more all the time. The food was very good. For breakfast, they'd serve bacon or ham and eggs, hot cakes every morning, coffee and toast, and so on.

Around the plant, the men were largely Scandinavians. Then they drifted away and it shifted over in later years, so it was largely Italians. We used to get Swedish boys from Sweden as soon as they had served their time in the army when they were about 18 or 19 years old. In fact, originally, when Mr. Johnson started the plant, he had several old-time Scandinavian people around and through them these young boys learned to come here. The boss of the shipping crew that I had, his name was Emil Larson. He spelled it "s - o - n."

Twice a day, forenoon and afternoon, we had to make lists of the men working. We'd take the time-book and make a half a mark in the morning if the man was there and in the afternoon complete that mark. Then at nightime, we'd carry that out to the end as to whether he worked all day or part of the day. At that time they worked 12 hours - 6 a.m. 'til 6:30 with a half hour for lunch. Then they changed it to an hour lunch and cut it down to 11 hours. Then later 10 hours and now it's 8 hours. They hardly work at all now. But we used to load the boats. Everything went out by water; there was no rail connections at all, you know. When a boat came in, it had to go out the next day with its load. If she was late getting in, with a little head wind coming up, that meant work until 12 o'clock that night. And that all went in for a day's work. Of course, the men on 12 hours would get 17 hours for that day's work. But the timekeeper and the bosses got a day's work - that was all - got a dollar for that. I worked 402 days one year. This young Swedish fellow I had for foreman, he got overtime and I didn't. But he was always there when there was anything doing. When I totaled up his time at the end of the year, it was 402 ten

hour days. I'd worked with him, maybe a little more than he had. I got paid for 12 months' work.

Money was pretty hard to get then. The men were paid off in 90 day drafts. You could draw part of your pay in the office if you wanted to, and they had coupon books in the store for married men. You'd go in and they'd give you a $10.00 coupon book and charge it to your account. It was the same as giving you $10.00 in cash. You could turn that in for groceries, and so forth. And the other stores around town also would accept those coupons. Of course, after you got your first payday, after your first 90 days, then you got a payday every month. Every month you got a ninety day check. One would come due every month then. So it didn't bother. I used to draw $5.00 cash once in a while. I was single; I had to have a little spending money.

They had two classes of workmen there. One worked every day regular, never laid off at all. They got one rate of pay. Then the other that worked only when the boats were in, they got a higher rate per month, but they didn't get a full month's work every time. But that way, when the boats came in, there'd be as many as 50 or 75 men show up at the shipping office, ready to go to work. They'd start loading lumber. Very often we didn't know what we was going to put on the boat 'til it came. If the wires weren't working right and all, we wouldn't get any information 'til the boat got in, and the captain would have his loading orders with him. So we'd have to hurry and get men and get some lumber ready for shipping. It was very interesting work. Never a dull moment sawmilling and all.

The next step above timekeeping was handling the shipping and all the orders. Nearly all the information from the San Francisco sales office came through that shipping office. The man in charge of the shipping also had charge of the yard. He had foremen under him. He was known as the yard and shipping boss. My job was to help him - a little book work and various things like that, making out the manifests after the vessels were loaded, taking care of the mail, and many other little jobs.

At that time, their transportation was horse and buggy - they used to drive around the country. Very often I was asked to do that kind of work too. Well, I'd been all over the county many times, knew every road. To come up to the mill, they'd have to come as far as Cloverdale or Ukiah by train. And the team would meet them there and bring them over. Very often I would meet Mr. and Mrs. Johnson, or Mr. Johnson and guests that he'd bring with him, in Ukiah or Cloverdale and drive them to the mill. Sometimes they'd drive into the woods at the end of the railroad and come into town on the logging train. It had a caboose and they'd come in that way.

They logged some with horses and some with bulls after I got there. Then gradually they worked around to steam donkeys and from steam donkeys into tractors. That's what it is today - practically all tractors.

I worked as timekeeper until 1903. In 1902 they bought another mill at Cleone, three miles from Fort Bragg, and sent the yard and shipping foreman from Fort Bragg up there to act as superintendent, and put his helper in his place. When he died in 1903, I was given that job.

As yard and shipping foreman, I had charge of all the cutting orders, all the shipping orders, and all the yarding, how the lumber was graded and how it was piled, and what grades went into the different piles. I looked after that, and then the loading up and getting ready for the boats. It was an interesting job, but when you worked into it after three years, of course, it was very familiar to you. This other man was sick quite a bit while I was there. One spell, he went out and stayed in a summer home out in the woods for four or five months. He'd come in maybe once a week and check up. I did his work while he was out there. Then he was sent down to a place near Los Angeles. At that time it was the only T. B. sanitorium on the Coast. He died down there, but in the meantime I had been doing his work. Of course, we were in telephone communication with the sales office. Mr. Johnson did most of the phoning. He and the sales manager would phone a couple times a day on different orders. A lot of their business was done on an inquiry basis. In other words, they'd get an inquiry from the railroad for half a million feet of lumber. They'd call us. We had a stock-book right in the office. We could tell from that what we could do. They might want to know how many cars we could ship out, how soon we could ship ten cars, and how soon we could complete the order. We had to know about what the mill could do with an order or specification of that kind. We'd sit down and figure it up and reply to the sales office, then they'd bid on that. If they got the business, they'd send the order, and the mill would start in cutting on it.

We'd make a regular cutting order for the mill, and give it to the mill foreman. He'd put it up in front of all the different operators - the sawyer, the edger, and the trimmer - those three fellows got a copy of the order - what size to cut, how wide to edge it, and what length to trim it. Those three are the key men in the sawmill - the sawyer, edgerman and trimmer. One's as important as the other practically, as far as getting value out of a log is concerned. For instance, you have one trimmer that can trim up to 42 feet long. Well, you send a 2x12 down and over that trimmer, and there might be some clear in there - that would be the high priced lumber. He would cut that out, trim it so that he would get the clear out, and leave the one that had the knots in it - that would be called commons. We didn't have very many grades in those days. We had three grades of commons and two of clear.

Grading is based largely on what the lumber is used for. That's the way you developed the grades. For instance, outside walls, they used to be boards up and down. They wouldn't take anything that didn't have a

sound knot in it. A sound knot was a knot that wouldn't come out even after the board had dried on the house. That would be a pretty high-grade piece of lumber. They didn't use much clear for that. But in the early days, in redwood, they used clear even for shelving in houses. I lived in a house that had pieces of redwood 30 inches wide, 1x30 boards for sheeting in the house, wallpaper was over that.

I can remember when fir sold for $9.00 a thousand; redwood was $15.00 a thousand. That was the average price at the mill about 1903 or '04. Fir was $9.00, $10.00 a thousand. Lots of times they would leave the fir in the woods if they could. If we would strike a stand where the fir was very thick - most of that particular patch would be fir - we'd leave it stand with the idea that we could go back later and get it if we wanted it. Particularly when they got into tractors, but even when they had the steam donkeys, they did a lot of that - selective logging. They sold a lot of redwood export in those days. That had to be all clear lumber and they had to take a good body of timber to get it. We'd have to do select logging to get to it, and we'd move the whole logging layout to get into a better body of timber, if they was going to have a lot of export orders coming in that summer. They'd kind of run streaked - those foreign countries would buy for a year or two, then they'd slow up again. That way they would select the logging and get what they needed.

Then, whenever we got a building boom or anything like the San Francisco earthquake, fir would be very high. Prices would go up on that. They'd move in on the fir, and log that and get a better price for it. It worked like that all the time - you had to know pretty near what you had standing in the woods in order to do that, too. At that time they used to fall the timber a year ahead. They had a year's timber, a year's cut, down on the ground. You had to know what that was, and how much of it had been cut into lengths or logs. So you'd get an order - for instance, an order for tunnel timbers from the Southern Pacific Railroad. They used all tunnel timbers that were 16 and 18 feet long. We had to cut logs that length or multiples of that length from the woods. We had to know when they went up to log, what they were to cut to length in the woods. That was one reason for going into the woods - to look it over, know what was going on all the time.

Later on, in addition, I'd take trips down to the sales office and then go on the road all over the territory with the salesmen to see if we were cutting the right sort of lumber for the customers, what they had demands for and all that. I kept that up and then it developed into grading. The mills formed more and more associations together and they had grading committees. I served on a grading committee for a number of years. Going out that way with the salesmen, I'd see where the lumber was used - where certain grades were used - and whether or not that grade of lumber was adaptable to that purpose. The main object, of course, was to make the lumber most serviceable to the customer and the consumer who

eventually got it. If a man had used one grade for his outside walls and it wasn't satisfactory, why if we had recommended that grade for that purpose, we'd have to change our recommendations along that line. Maybe we'd have to suggest or recommend a different grade altogether for that purpose. For what they called rustic on the outside wall of the house, we used to recommend #1 common for that - that was the lumber with knots in it - but we found out that wasn't entirely satisfactory; we had to go up to higher grades.

And then the sap redwood which for a long time was thought to be no good at all, because in the early days when they got into redwood they used that lumber on the ground, and sap is not good lumber on the ground. But put on the outside wall of a house and painted, it's as durable as any part of the wood as long as you keep the weather off of it. So we found that out. They used to throw that sapwood away - burn it up. We found out we could save it and make outside walls, rustics and various sizes. Use it that way and it was perfectly all right. It was also all right in the common lumber which is used for framing the house. It was very interesting work.

They had grading rules before I went to work there. I guess they were sort of an agreement between all the redwood mills at that time. Of course, there were then, practically, only two counties producing redwood lumber - Humboldt and Mendocino - with some little coming from Del Norte and some from Santa Cruz. They evidentally had agreed on rules, and those rules progressed like everything else. You got different grades, and made more grades out of the ones you had, separated them more to get them more suitable for the purpose. We did that at Fort Bragg at the mill.

On the grading committee I went to all the redwood mills. I served until 1940 when they revised the grading rules. Herb Class of the Pacific Lumber Company and myself were the grading committee. We worked on it for two or three years before we finally completed the book. We'd write up the grading rules, and correct them where we thought they should be corrected. Then we'd submit them to the Board of Directors of the Redwood Association, and discuss them. Finally we reprinted the book. All the mills had the same problems. Practically all the mills sold the same cuts at some time or other, and the grades had to correspond at the mills. That was a problem too, because the timber was different from the different territories. Then we had the export business which, as I said, took all clear, all the highest prie and quality redwood.

We shipped it on foreign vessels loaded right at the mills. They went to Australia, Argentina and Germany - all over, but the largest export we made was to Australia and New Zealand. They wanted the wood because it was high quality wood for home building - that's what they bought it for. They bought very large sizes and re-manufactured lots of it after they got it themselves. First years we exported nothing thinner than three inches - three, four, five and six inches thick, eight inches wide and wider, and

they manufactured all that into building sizes. Later on they'd take all thicknesses from one inch up.

At first, only a little bit was shipped East. It had to be shipped to San Francisco, of course, and dry. They had yards in San Francisco. We had no rail connections at any mill. The Union Lumber Company had the first rail connections in 1912. It was about 1915 before they got a railroad in Humboldt County. All that lumber had to be shipped by boat. It was very easily damaged after it was dried. There was quite a bit of tank stock shipped East in those days, and into the Middle West - Kansas, Nebraska and through there - for water tanks of all sizes from 1,000 gallons up to a 100,000. They were shipped to San Francisco, then went East by rail.

There were many railroad ties but no poles. For years, the Union Lumber Company had a large trade in split ties. If a pieceof timber was hard to get at to log and get out with the spur from the railroad track, they'd make it into ties, split stuff, and haul it out with wagons. Tanbark was quite a factor. One year we shipped 6,000 cords of tanbark for tanning leather goods. That went around San Francisco Bay, largely. We used to ship that out too. A vessel would carry about an equal amount of bark in cords as of lumber. In other words, if a boat carried 300,000 feet of lumber, it'd carry 300 cords of bark.

They peeled the tanbark in the spring of the year, packed it out with mules to where they could get it with the wagon. They hauled it with the wagons to the railroad, loaded it on the cars, brought it to the wharf and stowed it on the vessels. It was peeled a year ahead of the logging, because when they logged, they knocked the tanbark trees all down, and they couldn't get it then. So they'd go in for the bark a year ahead of the logging. They'd have to build wagon roads from the bark to the railroad track, which would be a mile or two of road for each lot - sometimes five or six miles. Later on, they used to grind the bark at the mill, cut it up with hammer machines for the tanners, and sack it. It was more acceptable to the tanners that way. Some of it was for export to foreign countries. We used second-hand coffee sacks for that. We'd grind it up, sack it, and ship it in 100 pound sacks. Of course, this wasn't redwood bark; this was tanoak bark.

They use redwood bark for insulation. The Pacific Lumber Company turns out worlds of it. They shred it all up, fine as hair almost, and bale it up and ship it out. It is put in between the studdings, fills the walls in. It keeps the heat and cold out. It's been the past fifteen years they've done that. They have a big business. It's used for various purposes.

Yes, redwood shrinks. So do all woods in the joints. That's one thing we had to overcome. One thing we found that was against redwood was the fact that it picked up moisture after it had left the mill in shipment. In fact, we had a car of green lumber going east, that froze together in the

car so that they had to break it apart. Lumber picked up moisture, and swelled, then when it was used in a dry, warm building, it did shrink, and gave bad results. There were many things we had to overcome. We had to caution people to be sure that it was kept dry, to store it in a dry shed. Even when it was stored in open sheds, big sheds that had a roof but no sides, it would pick up a lot of moisture in a damp climate during the wet season of the year. That gave redwood a bad name for shrinkage.

Then there were various things about finishing redwood. Most people want a lot of varnish, and varnish would turn redwood black. Eventually the paint people manufactured a finish that won't darken the wood when it's put on, but will keep the natural color. That's one thing that's brought redwood a lot of help in recent years, because in building they're able to use this stain. No, it's not a stain; it's a coating that doesn't change the color of redwood, but maintains its natural color. In this building boom, we've had in the state here lately, many houses have been finished in natural redwood. There are a good many stains now that can be used on redwood. They maintain its natural color and at the same time give it a finished look.

I mentioned before that people claimed that sapwood wasn't durable. Well, it wasn't on the ground, but if it was taken care of and used in the right places - in the interior, or if it was kept painted on the outside of the house - it was all right. At the time of the earthquake and fire in San Francisco, we had houses torn down where the sapwood rustic had been on 35 years and was in perfect condition. Since then, of course, it's been used many more years than that. In these redwood sawmill towns, you'll find that nearly all the houses are built of redwood and there's sap redwood in all of them. The outside walls of nearly all the Fort Bragg buildings are sap redwood because it was cheaper than any all clear redwood. Local people would get it and build their houses with it. They kept their houses painted, and they're just as durable today as the day they were built.

We still run into these objections. You'll find people using sap on the ground, even for a post or a mudsill, or you'll find them using sapwood on the side of the house and not keeping it painted, and having trouble. Then you'll find them using the wet or green redwood - not dry - for finishing and it shrinks for them. But at that, it shrinks less than any other commercial wood. Take fir - in the house, the studding shrinks. These new houses built around here - the studding shrinks so much it pulls the ceiling loose from the wall.

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The first bandsaw in the redwood industry was put in by the Union Lumber Company along about 1899 or 1900. They built the mill originally with the idea of having two saws eventually. The first saw was a double circular. Then when they got ready to add another side to the mill, they

put in a band mill, ten foot band mill. I think that was the first band mill in the redwood industry. The great trouble, then, was to find someone that could operate it, could keep the bandsaws on the wheels, and also to find a man who could hammer and file the saw so that it would cut straight and not snake. They had a great deal of trouble with the band mill snaking in the logs at first - sawed crooked lumber.

And then, of course, after that, they had to get more power, more power on the saws and more power on the edgers. The trim saws were held down by heavy counterweights. To get the saws up to cut, a man had to pull up that counter-weight by pulling on a lever. That was changed over from hand power to air power. The chief engineer at Fort Bragg, Ed Parcy, made the air trimmer. Then all you had to do was touch an air trigger and it would drop the saw. They changed the saws then from underhead to overhead saws. When they wanted to cut, they'd release the air and drop the saw. Then the air goes out and pulls the saw back up again to where it belongs. All that made the work much faster.

And then another step was re-saws in the mill. They would saw thick lumber and put it through a small re-saw to make thinner boards. In other words, if they wanted 1" boards, they'd saw 2" lumber, and put it through a re'saw to make two boards of it. This gave the head saw the opportunity of sawing much faster and sawing the log much quicker. Those were some of the early advancements.

Then dry kilns came along to dry the lumber. It was along about 1903 or '04 when the Union Lumber Company got its first dry kilns. They did that in order to dry the lumber and ship tank stock and various types of finish to the eastern market. Now practically all redwood is kiln dried, when it's used for any finish purpose where it would be necessary to use dry lumber rather than green.

You noticed the de-barker at the sawmill there today, the hydraulic de-barker. It's been in use up in the fir counties for some little time. I think they tried the de-barker at Weyerhaeuser's plant at Everett. They're satisfied with it, and at Fort Bragg, they're putting in a plant now. Quite expensive - $700,000, I think.

It was very important that salesmen know something about the mill. When they started to introduce redwood into new territory where it had never been used before, people didn't even know what it was. They used redwood as two different words - they thought it was a red wood. One time they had salesmen back East who had had experience at the mill. They were a great help to the customer in specifying the grades and sizes of lumber he could use to advantage. For instance, we found that one firm who made chicken coops used a 1x4, four feet long. 1x4 four feet and eight feet were a drug on the market at the redwood mills, and it was just what they were

looking for. They'd been paying a premium to get so much eight foot lumber, and we had been selling eight foot lengths at a sacrifice to get rid of it. This California boy who was a salesman for the Chicago office was able to land an order for 25 carloads of 1x4, eight feet, on his first business experience with this chicken coop manufacturer. Quite a feature for him, because he knew what the mill had.

When they'd go back to this new territory, those salesmen would go around to the different yards and different industrial plants that were using wood, and see what sizes and kinds of wood they were using, what they were using it for, and what they were paying for the different sizes and lengths. Often they would have something to suggest that would save the industrial manufacturer money on the cost of the lumber, and at the same time would be an advantage to the mill by selling a particular size or length of lumber. Both benefitted by the deal.

One of the big steps in introducing redwood was having salesmen who had had mill experience at the redwood mills. They knew what manufacturing meant, knew when they got hold of an inquiry for a particular size that wasn't stocked and knew whether the redwood mill could cut that to advantage or not. That has been one big factor in introducing redwood into new territory.