

For the Sake of History: The Weyerhaeuser Family and the Origins of the Forest History Society

BY CHARLES E. TWINING

“Weyerhaeuser” is a name long synonymous with North American forest products. Within a few years of his arrival in Illinois in 1856, Frederick Weyerhaeuser began building a lumber empire. While still in his early twenties, the German immigrant was acquiring his own timberlands, the better to provide his Rock Island sawmill with a dependable source of logs. More importantly, he organized other timber operators, convincing former competitors that greater benefits lay in working together toward production and investment goals. The culmination of his efforts was the Weyerhaeuser Timber Company, organized in 1900 to purchase 900,000 acres of western Washington land from the Northern Pacific Railway. When Frederick died in 1914, his reputation in the industry already had become legend.

Nowhere did Frederick Weyerhaeuser cast a longer shadow than across his own family. He and wife Sarah Bloedel had seven children, all of whom grew to maturity—John Philip, Elise, Margaret, Apollonia, Charles, Rudolph, and Frederick Edward. “F. E.,” youngest of the seven, assisted his father in the company’s St. Paul headquarters and took over the operations of that office when Frederick died.

F. E. never ceased to marvel at how his father had managed such a complex business so easily. Feeling compelled to share something of that experience with his family, in the 1930s he began devoting many hours to *The Record*, an exhaustive chronicle of Frederick’s business accomplishments. Compiling *The Record* would prove a much more demanding task than F. E. had imagined. Years passed and the typewritten pages piled up, eventually numbering more than eight hundred. By 1945, F. E.’s health was failing and the destiny of *The Record*, though now complete, remained a puzzle.

F. E. at first seemed willing to permit some reasonable circulation but later became increasingly proprietary, possibly reacting against those who recommended wide and immediate distribution. At the same time, however, F. E. recognized a need to provide accurate information to both scholars and the general public about the Weyerhaeuser-affiliated companies and about the American forest products industry as a whole. He found enthusiastic allies in his nephew, F. K. Weyerhaeuser, as well as several representatives of the Minnesota Historical Society, including Judge Kenneth G. Brill, the society’s president; Theodore C. Blegen, dean of the

Graduate School of the University of Minnesota and vice president of the society; August C. Krey, chairman of the university’s Department of History and member of the society’s executive committee; and Lewis Beeson, the society’s acting superintendent. Not only did these men appreciate the importance of the lumber industry, but they also were seeking a way for their state to celebrate effectively its 1949 centennial.

With that concern in mind, a contingent from the society met with F. E. at his St. Paul home early in September 1945. F. E. enjoyed the visit. He later wrote to a family member that it was “an unusual experience; it is not often that intellectuals come to our house to call on me.” Over “a few cigars and a little charged water,” as Blegen recalled, the society members outlined for Weyerhaeuser their vision of a commemorative centennial publication, “a comprehensive history of the state” that would focus on political, agricultural, industrial, social, and cultural features. Typically, the historical society lacked funds for such a project.

The conversation took another and, ultimately, more far-reaching turn that evening. The delegation from the historical society was well aware of the importance of lumbering in their state’s past, and they lamented the absence of any research center devoted to the history of forestry and forest products. In contrast, the visitors noted several collections devoted to the transportation industry, pointing out the fact mentioning that “the late J. J. Hill established collecting centers at Yale and Michigan” and citing “the special collection for the Burlington and Great Northern Railroad which Ralph Budd has established at the Newberry Library in Chicago” to illustrate their point. Although the geographic center of America’s lumber industry might continue to move, the society members argued, in Blegen’s words, that “whatever the industry shifts, its history can be best served from one systematic collection.”

From this meeting emerged the notion for what eventually became the Forest History Society. The representatives of the Minnesota Historical Society stressed to F. E. their “mutual interest,” as Blegen put it, in preserving and stimulating interest in the history of American forestry and the forest products industry. F. E. would recall that a figure of \$100,000 was mentioned as the amount of “start-up” money needed for such a project. (This figure was later reduced to \$50,000.)



F. E., F. K., and Rudolph Weyerhaeuser celebrating F. K.'s 50th birthday. Weyerhaeuser Archives.

During these months, F. E. was battling the final stages of leukemia, and he wasted no time in soliciting other family members' views on the historical society's concept of an ongoing research project dedicated to the forest products industry. Overall, the Weyerhaeuser children and grandchildren were enthusiastic. Niece Peggy Driscoll's response was representative: "The whole subject of their visit rather 'floors' me," she wrote; "I would certainly go along—myself—with anything agreed upon by you, Father [Rudolph], and the Cousins." Frederick K. Weyerhaeuser, better known as "F. K.," was the key respondent, readily agreeing to the proposed \$100,000 figure. "I feel very strongly," wrote F. K., "that you should determine what is to be done and that if you are inclined to have the family underwrite a project for the Minnesota Historical Society I would strongly favor it being done." F. E. assured Peggy, F. K., and other family members that their decision needed to be unanimous before any forest history center was established.

F. E. did not live to see this vision realized; he died a few weeks later on October 18, 1945. F. K. now became the family's principal representative in dealings with the Minnesota Historical Society. Later that year, he visited the society's headquarters, touring the building in company with Brill, Blegen, and Krey. He reported to his brother, John Philip "Phil" Weyerhaeuser, Jr. (then head of Weyerhaeuser Timber) and his cousins that he was "honestly impressed by the character of the building and the apparent high standard of the activities being conducted there." F. K.'s hosts avoided specifics regarding establishment of a forest history center, suggesting only that with the Weyerhaeusers leading the way in establishing the program, other forest products companies would likely follow with additional financial contributions.

By the end of 1945, F. K. had prepared a three-part proposal for the historical society. First, he wanted F. E.'s *The Record* to be printed and distributed, but with access being limited to family members for ten years. Second, the Weyerhaeuser family was to contribute \$25,000 to \$50,000 as an initial installment "to develop a collection of documents, papers and historical data bearing upon the history of the lumber industry." Finally, the family would seek "a good man to write a short history of the business...for use by employees, friends and customers." (As of this writing, *The Record* has not been published, existing only in a few copies made for exclusive use of the Weyerhaeuser family. Also, the family apparently did not seek an author to write the industry's history.)

F. K. told the historical society's representatives that he intended to submit his plan for discussion at a family meeting scheduled for January 25, 1946. The proposal received a good deal of attention, but too many questions remained unanswered for them to reach a final decision. For example, some wanted assurances that personal papers contributed to the archival collection would be closed to researchers for a specified period.

A few days later, F. K., Phil, and their cousin Ed Davis met with Superintendent Arthur Larsen at the historical society. Larsen apparently was able to settle the minds of Phil and others who had been uneasy about the initial arrangements. Within a day or two, F. K. sent a letter to family members, urging their approval of the proposed forest history center. He emphasized the need for accurate historical data on the lumber industry, citing errors in recent works by Richard G. Lillard and Sarah Jenkins Salo as evidence that such data was lacking. (Lillard apparently had shared with F. K. a draft of

his article, "Timber King," which appeared in the Winter 1947 issue of *Pacific Spectator*. Salo's "Timber Concentration in the Pacific Northwest" was her 1945 doctoral dissertation at Columbia University.) He also praised the professionalism and integrity of the Minnesota Historical Society and its representatives. And, he added, "I know that Uncle F. E. W. would have favored our doing this." At the bottom of the letter was a space where each family member could sign their approval. For most, the appeal to their love and respect for F. E. was reason enough.

Still, final approval awaited receipt of a detailed plan for what was to be called the Forest Products History Foundation. Krey and Blegen put together the three-page prospectus that was forwarded to the Weyerhaeuser family on May 8. Its key provision was contained within paragraph 1A: "The purpose of the Foundation is to establish at the Minnesota Historical Society a complete and authoritative collection of materials relating to the history of forest products in the broadest sense and to develop plans for the best possible use of this collection. No such center exists at present." The proposal also included Canada as a focus for collecting information on the industry.

On June 11, 1946, Brill and Larsen met F. K. and Ed Davis for lunch. As Larsen later recalled, "The opening words were like music to us." F. K. announced that the family had agreed to proceed "along the lines of the outline you presented." The next day, F. K. forwarded a check for \$16,667—the first of three annual payments toward a \$50,000 pledge—"a gift from the Weyerhaeuser Family for the purpose of creating a Forest Products History Foundation as an activity of your Society."

With initial financing assured, the historical society representatives immediately felt pressure to perform. First, they had to find someone to manage the forest history project. Rodney Loehr, a historian on the University of Minnesota faculty, headed the list of candidates, and he was interested in the job. Eventually, arrangements were made for the society to pay one-third of Loehr's university salary, plus an additional stipend, so that he could take over as director of the foundation.

The next step—gaining industry-wide financial support—came more slowly. It was delayed in part because of the illness and death, on July 12, 1946, of Rudolph Weyerhaeuser, F. K.'s uncle and Frederick's last surviving son. Later that month, Larsen wrote to F. K., seeking permission "to give the Foundation proper publicity, if it suits your purposes." Larsen also wanted him to chair the advisory board and directly participate in the formulation of policy for the foundation. F. K. could hardly refuse continued involvement, although he was not enthusiastic about serving as chairman. But the Weyer-

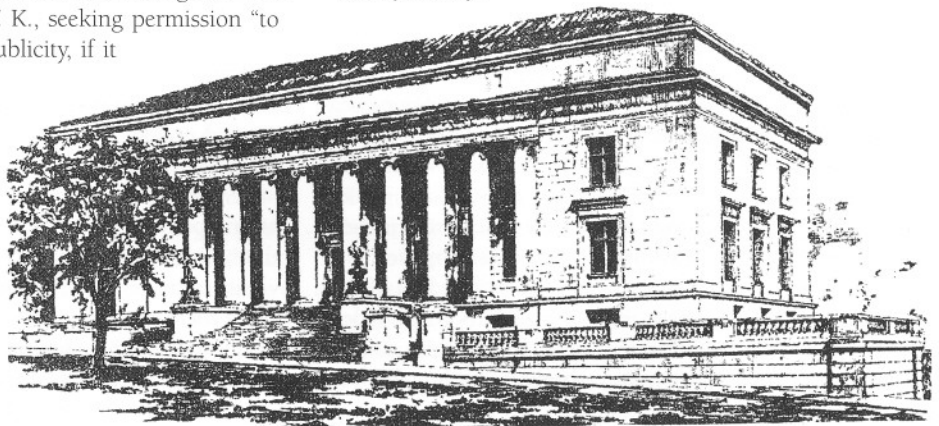
haeuser family was firmly committed to the project's success.

F. K. gave much thought to the composition of the advisory board. Four men in particular—Paul V. Eames, Archie D. Walker, David J. Winton, and Edward Brooks—had strong Minnesota ties, and F. K. contacted them immediately. He wrote that there had been "so much misinformation and plain distortion of fact regarding the history of the lumber industry that there would seem to be substantial advantage in having an institution with the standing and integrity of the Minnesota Historical Society undertake a collection of this kind." None of the four could disagree with that.

Eames was particularly enthusiastic about the proposal, and he suggested that the foundation also should involve Corydon Wagner, president of the American Forest Products Industries, an individual familiar with lumbermen in the Pacific Northwest. Actually, there was little cause for concern about a lack of northwestern backing; the Weyerhaeuser Timber Company supported it, and other regional firms typically followed Weyerhaeuser's lead in such matters. Wagner's true importance was his independence from Weyerhaeuser; early supporters recognized that the sooner the foundation became an industry-wide endeavor, instead of a "family" project, the better. The board met in 1947 on June 24, at which time Stanley Horn, president of the Tennessee Historical Society and long time editor of the *Southern Lumberman* was elected to membership, the first southerner to be included. The board also decided that the original members would continue "without limitation as to the time of membership"; future board members would be appointed by the president of the Minnesota Historical Society to two-year terms. The board discussed a variety of other matters, most dealing with prospects for financial contributions and subjects for possible study, such as the tree farm movement.

As director, Loehr was involved in promotional efforts, persuading timber industry leaders like Wagner to support the foundation. "A calm and impartial appraisal of the history of the forest products industry," Loehr wrote to Wagner, "might contribute to a realistic public attitude." But in the area of fund raising—vital to any non-profit group, especially

Minnesota Historical Society in 1946, birthplace of the Forest History Society.



one just getting underway—Loehr believed it inappropriate to accept any responsibility beyond “the technical aspects” of running the foundation. Fund raising, he believed, could compromise his professional standing; his university colleagues and most of those at the Minnesota Historical Society appreciated his reluctance.

The realities of budget considerations, however, soon suggested that Loehr would have to actively solicit money for the new project. In the foundation’s first annual report, Loehr stated:

The past ten months have been used in organizing a staff, getting acquainted with the industry, developing techniques, plotting a course, and laying the foundations for future work. We are virtually pioneers in attempting the history of an industry as large and old as the forest products industry. The guide-posts have been few in number, but we do have the satisfaction accorded to pioneers: the hewing of paths which others will follow. The next year will see the quickening of our activities, and the fruition of some of the seeds which have been planted this year.

By the end of the foundation’s first year of operation, few monetary commitments had been garnered beyond the three-year Weyerhaeuser family gift. The family of David J. Winton had indicated its willingness to support the project when the initial “trial period” ended, but Loehr’s visit to the Pacific Northwest to elicit interest, though considered reasonably successful, had produced no firm promises of industry funding.

Loehr’s basic problem was simple—the fledgling Forest Products History Foundation had no record of accomplishment. The existing situation was “largely a matter of confidence in persons, rather than in institutions or publicity,” Loehr told the board. But Loehr had plans to accelerate the foundation’s ability to raise money. He aimed to raise the profile of the organization, “building up confidence through the continuance of personal relations and the issuance of several publications,” and to make direct appeals for funds. Loehr also supported a suggestion by Blegen that they offer memberships to interested individuals.

The seeds planted in those early years grew ever so slowly. The Weyerhaeuser family remained staunchly supportive,

despite the doubts of some family members, notably Phil. He was clearly perplexed by an article that appeared in 1950 in the *Gopher Historian* and he communicated his vexation loudly. Phil described the piece, “When Lumber was King,” as being “typical of the half-baked stuff which the conservationists all like to put out.” The *Gopher Historian* was a publication of the Minnesota Historical Society and primarily intended for school children; it obviously had no direct connection to the Forest Products History Foundation. Phil worried, however, about guilt by association. He also didn’t appreciate Loehr’s somewhat aloof attitude, nor the academic’s assertion that he “could not be cooperative with the industry and still maintain his standing.”

F. K., however, tempered his brother’s concerns. He had previously persuaded Phil that the Weyerhaeuser Timber Company ought to make annual contributions of \$4,000 for a five-year period beginning in 1950. And in the fall of 1951, F. K. requested that the family provide additional support of \$5,000 annually for three more years. “I am putting it up to others to get another \$5,000 which with \$4,000 from the W.T. Co. and \$1,000 from PFI [Potlatch Forests Inc.] should give the Foundation sufficient opportunity to prove whether or not it can merit support from other members of the forest products industries.” As for himself, he seemed already convinced: “I am much encouraged by the interest in this project and feel that plans now being made stand a good chance of creating a permanent and worthwhile institution.”

[Editor’s note]: F. K. was prescient. The foundation, now the Forest History Society, has indeed endured. Although many were involved, the society recognizes F. K. Weyerhaeuser and Theodore C. Blegen—one a businessman, the other a noted historian—as its founders. A fellowship and an award are today named in their honor.

The Forest History Society’s initial aim—to preserve and to publish without prejudice the history of the forest products industry—has expanded into seven programs that fund research, reference, publication, and archival collection. The scope of these programs has expanded also, now incorporating the history of forestry, conservation, land use, and many elements of the environment. Fifty years after its modest beginnings, the Forest History Society remains a vital resource for researchers and scholars from around the world.

Mr. Twining’s article is taken from a chapter in a forthcoming biography of F. K. Weyerhaeuser, to be published by the Minnesota Historical Society. It is based in part on correspondence to and from the participants mentioned above. These letters, from the years 1945-51, are included in the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society.

Forest History Society
Durham headquarters, 1996

