

Forest History Foundation, Inc.  
St. Paul, Minnesota

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW  
with

HARRY W. COLE  
San Francisco, California

March, 1953

by John Larson

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Interview with  
HARRY W. COLE

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by John Larson, Forest History Foundation, Inc.

A good many of the Canadians back in the 60's, 70's, 80's and 90's and prior to that time had lumbered in New Brunswick. From there they went into Maine, then into Michigan, then over into Wisconsin, and finally they landed here on the Coast. Most of the people were workers originally, but they were thrifty people. They saved a lot of money; they had an adventurous spirit; and they were enterprising. They would start a small logging operation, possibly do contract logging, or get started in a small mill, which as years went on, they would develop into a sizable operating business.

James J. Hill put in a railroad across the Northern tier of the states and A. B. Hammond, who then lived in Missoula, Montana, took a contract for the ties and supplies of lumber and timber that they used along the way. After that he started a commissary establishment located at Missoula. Then he started a lumber company. The small mill that he originally started getting out ties developed into quite a large lumbering operation.

George McLeod is familiar with the early history of the Hammonds. Mr. Hammond didn't appear in the Redwoods until about 1901 or '02. Then he went into Humboldt and originally bought an interest in The Pacific Lumber Company. Then he bought out the Vance Redwood Company. He then expanded the mill at Samoa and brought in a more active and aggressive group of employees than had been there before, and went straight forward. In a short time he became the largest operator in the redwood industry. He changed the name of his company from Vance Redwood Company to Hammond Redwood Company, and say from 1905 to 1921 or '22 he was the largest lumberman in the Redwoods.

Our company originally was the Bronson and Weston Lumber Company of Ottawa, Canada. They started in business sometime before 1840. They were the largest company in Ottawa, the center of the white pine industry in Canada. Although along in the 80's they had made quite a little money, the Honorable Erskine H. Bronson came to California to look at some orange orchards around Riverside and became interested there and in the large redwood trees up in Humboldt County. He made a trip to Humboldt, and while there he bought quite a large block of timber on Little River. That was in '84. The Bronson people hadn't run out of white pine as they were one of the largest holders of white pine timber in Canada at that time. They had two mills at Ottawa that put out 60 to

70,000,000 feet a year, which they shipped all over the world. And that California investment they just let lie until about 1906 or '07.

The sawmills in Ottawa were water power mills, and water power became too valuable for electrical purposes to be used for sawmills. In 1900 there was a very large fire in Hull and Ottawa, and the larger of the Bronson Company mills was burned down. When that happened the company built on the mill site an electric power plant and called it the Ottawa Power Company. They then had two power plants -- the Ottawa Electric Power Company and the Ottawa Power Company both of which were on the Ottawa River and belonged to the Bronson Company, so all their power was diverted to the electrical business; and they organized the Ottawa Electric Company.

The Bronson Company had their California redwood property lying out here not doing anything so they decided they would take a look at developing it. They sent out one of the Bronsons (Frank) and William McGillivray out -- in 1906 -- and started to build a sawmill. The directors were running it from Ottawa, which was a little too far -- too great a distance. Then Frank Bronson was taken sick. At that time there was a large fire in an adjoining property. We didn't hear anything from Mr. Bronson and Mr. McGillivray for a week or ten days, and we didn't know what had happened out here. The company decided I should come out here and see what was wrong and to make a report on the situation. That was in October 1908. I came out permanently in January 1909, and I've been out here ever since.

I started the mill in May 1909. That company property was on Little River and the operation was called The Little River Redwood Company. We kept increasing the capacity of the mill until 1923. At that time our people were interested in another large timber property just north of us -- the Lagoon Lumber Company, which they had owned for some time. As a matter of fact, in 1912 I took over the management of the Lagoon timber -- that was just a timber holding company. Because there were a great many outside properties within our boundaries I suggested that it would be well, before anybody else started operations in that area, to buy all that timber. By 1923 we had bought out about 50 such timber holdings and at that time we had a solid stand of timber of about 34,000 acres. In 1923 we consolidated the Lagoon Company with the Little River Company and washed out the Lagoon Company. Then later, along in the 1920's, the Hammond Company which had timber between The Little River property and the Lagoon property, suggested a consolidation with us. We didn't want to consolidate with them, but some of our people did; so finally our Eastern people decided to consolidate. That was in 1930 during the depression.

Question: Did the depression have any effect on your decision?

No, because both The Little River Company and the Hammond Company were well provided with cash and were as little influenced by the crash as any of the large companies. The Hammond Lumber Company and The Little River Redwood Company consolidated as Hammond and Little River Redwood Company with the largest holdings of redwood timberlands of any company in California. But it was too long a name, though The Little River Company had a very high reputation for doing business on a large scale and made a fine product, and had a fine line of customers, which it was desirous of preserving in the consolidation. The name continued for five or six years; then it was decided to cut out The Little River Company name and the consolidated company was called the Hammond Redwood Company. That was about 1937; then the Hammond people consolidated all their interests and took the name of Hammond Lumber Company. That is what it is now.

Question: Whatever happened to the records of the old Little River Company?

They were delivered at consolidation with all their assets and all records. They were just left in the storage boxes where they were and the Hammond Lumber Company has them. These records just built up into a mountain of paper and nobody ever refers to them. A lot of these records through the years I understand were burned up by the Hammond Lumber Company just to make space for new records that are being produced all the time.

(We encourage and we also have a collection of old business records and where people don't want old records to go out of their area, then we have local depositories -- here we're working with the Bancroft Library. We have, for example, hundreds of square feet of Weyerhaeuser records.)

I had a very complete chronological story of the whole operation. I managed the company just as though it were my personal property. The only time the directors saw the property was when they came West to the annual meeting. I always made a practice of keeping them informed by letter once a week or once in two weeks, giving the whole history of our affairs and any development of their interests. It is a wonderful record. In the later years I was ably assisted by Howard Libbey, who joined us in 1916 and in 1926 was made assistant manager. He now is President of Arcata Redwood Company, one of the major lumber companies in Humboldt. All our records went in with consolidation to the Hammond people. I presume nobody has any use for them now.

Question: Would Earl Birmingham be the man to see over there?

Yes, though Earl Birmingham was a comparatively new man, he had been with the company since the early 30's. He came before the death

of Leonard Hammond about 1942. He is now President of Hammond Lumber Company and is a very fine operator. George McLeod, who is Chairman of the Board of Directors and was with Mr. Hammond in Missoula, was president after Mr. Leonard Hammond died.

Question: Is Mr. McLeod quite active?

Yes, very. I suggest you ask him about the records of The Little River Company. They were stored in the basement of the store building at Crannell. Among the records is a large book of statements on background -- 1910 to probably 1930.