

W. C. Geddes

(For information about Mr. Geddes, see the American Lumberman for January 15, 1927.)

I was born in Plain City, Utah, December 16, 1879. I went to work firing a boiler in the plane mill in 1894 at Pleasant Valley, Oregon, just above Baker. There was just a siding there. The company had a store, and there were the helping crews on the railroad, not our railroad, the short line. And that was all that lived in the town. The mill was located about fifteen miles in the woods. After that I had many jobs, one job after another. I don't recall any particular one - they were all in the pioneering state. We were mostly cutting ties at that time out of ponderosa pine, and it was rather crude machinery. Circular saws until the mill, the Oregon Lumber Company was built in 1892 at Baker. And then we had one band saw and one circular saw.

I had a lot of trouble with the band saw. While I was sawing, they brazed the saws then and didn't weld them like they do now. And as I was coming back a sliver got in the braze and just ripped the saw completely in two and it wrapped all around me; never scratched me. No, we didn't experience much trouble keeping them on the pulley. We had more trouble with the piston breaking loose from the carriage. It was fastened under the carriage, the piston was, with a kind of a joint. It was held there with bolts, and I had a carriage break loose from me and go out the mill. When those bolts broke and the pistons, the carriage just went clear out of the mill.

Question: You were saying that you were one of two men still alive who were present at the organization of the Western Pine Association. Can you remember any of the motives for setting up this association and how it came about?

We were all working more less at cross purposes. We didn't have any grades. The only grades we knew were the Mississippi Valley Lumbermen's grades, which McGoldrick and those old timers brought out from Michigan and Wisconsin, and we saw the necessity of organizing together for the purpose of standardizing our grades and manufacture, and also for the purpose of fighting for better freight rates, by

organization rather than by individuals or groups doing it. For instance, like Eastern Oregon and also like Montana and Spokane - we were all working at cross purposes and that was one of the main reasons for the organization of the Western Pine. I don't remember the exact date of the first meeting, but it was in 1908. J. P. McGoldrick was there, Kenneth Ross of Barnum, Montana A. C. M. Company, John O'Toole of the same company. There was George Stoddard of Eastern Oregon, Joe Stoddard, his brother, and myself. I was with the Oregon Lumber Company. So that was about all the outstanding things. We had a lot of grief afterwards. I was chairman of the Bureau of Grades which established our grades. The white pine rules would not apply to the Western Pine as we called it at that time, and we had to work out the defects that was found in the Western pine, yellow pine, we had sixteen different names for it. And in order to get a standard grade, we had to work out from experience and exchange of views and meetings, what would apply, what sort of a knot would apply for a number two common. We didn't save any number one out of ponderosa pine at that time. It was just number two and better. And then number three and four.

I was quite familiar with lumber and its uses because I became sales manager of the Oregon Lumber Company, and it was necessary for me to find the uses to which the lumber was put - and uses for which it was not, in the opinion of the Bureau of Grades, suitable, such as the Idaho white pine, or the sugar pine, which is also a true white pine. That was quite a problem because each manufacturer was somewhat of an individualist and he thought that he knew just exactly what to do and what not to do, and so on. And after we got the grading rules established, then we formed the Trading Bureau within the Association. And from that we developed to a high point of manufacture and distribution of lumber. We could only use persuasion on a company that wouldn't conform. We had no punitive powers, it was just persuasion. And the heads of the company would send out some of their key men to the different mills to see how they were handling their lumber; manufacturing it, grading it and so on.

I don't think there was a time when I wasn't on some committee in the Association from the time of its organization until I retired. I was on some sort of committee all the time. I think the most important one is, in my opinion, the establishment of the research department. I was so enthused about that, about the establishment of a research department so that we could determine what you might call the end use, or the use it could be put to. I knew that we didn't know all the qualities of our product and we didn't have adequate or efficient kilns. In fact, I put in the first kiln that was ever built in eastern Oregon in 1912. It was, oh, a rather mediocre kiln, but did do the work and this research department, of which I was chairman for twenty years or more, developed the kilns and we hired Mr. Albert Herman as our research engineer, and he developed kilns, until we have the present kiln. Our research department developed the tensile strength in comparison with other woods for structural purposes. We established the superiority of pine over any other wood except perhaps maple or hardwood, for flooring where trucks was used on it, such as longshoreman's trucks and hand trucks, trucking wheat. It wore down but didn't splinter up.

When this thing came up, there was a committee selected to go into what might be developed in the research department. That was along in the early twenties - I don't know the exact year. Just gradually worked up to that as things developed. All the companies saw it would be cheaper to do this together than to do it alone - very much so because we'd have the combined experience and knowledge of the engineer and he would visit the different plants as he does today - not he, his successor, Paul Rasmussen. He visits the plants and helps solve their kiln problems, and their drying problems, and stuff of that sort. We're quite a competitive industry, but one of the - this was later - one of the hard problems that we had to solve was a name for the wood. We had sixteen different names.

The first step in standardizing would be to get one name. And the Weyerhaeuser group would not consent to the ponderosa pine being called white, for instance California white pine. And they started suit against that Association. Well,

that's where a committee of three of us, consisting of Jim Henderson, of the Shevlin-Hixon interests; myself and Jack Irwin of Potlatch, tried to work out with the California White Pine Association a name that would be acceptable to all. They selected me again chairman of that committee, and we got together with California. And so we submitted our problem to N. W. Ayer and Sons of Philadelphia, a big advertising concern, and they gave us one hundred and six, I think it was, names that we could call it without using the word "white", so we started the process of elimination. We couldn't call it three-needle pine; we couldn't call it soft pine; we might have called it that, but we wrestled over that, this committee, in connection with A. W. Cooper, who was secretary-manager of the Association at that time. And after wrestling with it and using this process of elimination, for three or four days, at Portland, I became disgusted and I meant to say to call it ponderosa pine, but my tongue slipped and I said, "We'll call it pondosa pine." Cooper, just by the snap of his finger said, "We can copyright that name." And it was copyrighted and then when we persuaded the California Association to join in with us, make it one big association, but they wouldn't stand for the name pondosa. I don't know why. Willis Walker was one of the chief objectors. I was at a meeting at Klamath Falls and could hardly keep my seat, but Jim Henderson held me down. He said, "Oh, W.C., just let it go." And that was when the name was officially adopted as ponderosa pine instead of pondosa pine, entirely because of the California group, and the concession made by the northern group, that is Montana, eastern Washington and Oregon and central Oregon, conceding the point.

Well, prior to 1927, I was president of the Association. I had been vice-president for a little while and I was elected president and when we come to the establishment of the laboratory and the marketing of our products, my activity was largely in the promotional work as well as the laboratory work. We were trying to sell this lumber back east. In fact, I think that through one of the companies that was associated with the Oregon, known as the Grande Round Lumber Company, we

established offices at Chicago. And Dan Sherman, who recently passed away, was the first one that was a direct mill representative. It was sold largely through wholesalers. The lumber moved to the east, but the company didn't know who got it or where it was sold or what it was used for or anything of that sort. Once you had a mill representative there then you could study all the uses of it. Then others began to establish offices there.

This pine was misrepresented a lot by wholesalers. One of the outstanding misrepresentations was the use for it for oil tank bottoms. They built it out of the pine and then they used the cypress for the staves and they figured they couldn't use anything but white pine because of the knot defects. So wholesalers from Pittsburgh went down there and sold a lot of this tank bottom stock. He had been getting his supply from the north, but his supply run short. So he came west and told us to cut a certain amount of that product, two inch stock, and didn't give us proper information. And we manufactured a lot of it that was not suitable. But he sold it practically white pine prices. We'd never hear the complaint; he'd allow it. And we'd never hear anything about it until finally our company, the Oregon, wired me at Kansas City when I was on one of my routine trips to proceed to Bartlesville, Oklahoma. There was a complaint on a carload of tank bottom stock there. So I went down, saw it. And he showed me - Black, I think his name was - showed me the type of lumber they couldn't use in there, because they grooved it and if that knot - if it was a horn knot as we call it - and they'd groove down to that, then they couldn't caulk it enough to stop the oil from leaking through. But if the knot only went half way through, they they could. "My goodness," I said to Mr. Black, "What are you paying for this?" And he told me. Well, I just gulped. And so I told him that now that I had seen what he wanted, we could manufacture it the way he wanted it.

So I came back to Oregon and started to manufacture it as it should be manufactured. And then the Bureau of Grades, I told the Association and the Bureau

of Grades came to me and wanted to know what it had to contain in the way of knots, that would be acceptable, which I told them. Then I was, at that time, I believe vice-president of the Association; I suggested that our chief inspector, go down there and study it. So he did and then they established in the grading rules a grade for tank bottom stock. People of the Association were never, in my opinion, selfish. If any of us, for instance, discovered something in the way of manufacturing, kiln drying, grading, we never hesitated to tell the other fellow, believing that by his properly manufacturing his product, he would help the whole industry.

We established better freight prices and the Government got after us, said it was a monopoly. I think this was in '25. The trial was held at Minneapolis. We all had a common price book and we'd give discounts from that price book. Through stipulation with our attorneys and the Government attorney, there were men selected to discuss and answer the question on the witness stand on different phases. Mine particularly was manufacture, and all led in to the price list. And I've forgotten, we were there for a week or ten days at that trial. It was held in Federal Court. Well, the decision was in our favor. I was on the witness stand for two days under direct examination and one day under cross examination. At that time prices did run away and some of the larger mills tried their utmost to keep the prices from going wild. Tom McCann of Shevlins was one of the other witnesses; Joe Lansing of Lumber Company was another; and myself and Mr. Tufel, Philip Hinze, and several wholesalers from the east.

I was the last witness on the stand and the judge said to me, "Mr. Geddes", he says, "this run-away price was not confined to the Western pine alone, was it?" I says, "No, sir. It was universal, all over the United States." That was the question that my attorney should have asked me, but Youngman's attorney objected many times because he said my answers gave our attorney a hint as to what to ask me next, which it did, but he didn't tumble. Charlie Elmquist was the chief examiner, or chief attorney for us. Of course, the whole problem actually hinged on whether

it was just in our industry. That settled it. We were never bothered again with the government interfering with our price list or discount cards or what have you.

I think the government took action largely on account of the run away prices. They were trying to see if it was a conspiracy among the Western Pine people to send these prices sky-high. But it was established that that was not a fact. And we had no more interference from the government.

I was able to get through college largely because of a railroad accident. You see this scar here on my head. That gave me enough money besides keeping my family, my mother and brothers and sisters, enough money to put me through college. College experience helps you a lot in the lumber business. I think that a college education will help you to think better and clearer along given lines, than an untrained mind. Of course, forestry, when I was in school, was just in its infancy - and while I was a member of the Board of Regents of the University of Idaho for nine years, why I stressed forestry. You'll observe in the Potlatch that most of their logging men and people of that sort are graduates from forestry school. Idaho has one of the best in the United States, I think, if not the best. Cornell ranks high. Cornell I think is ahead of Yale, and Idaho ranks right up among the top ones.

My father died when I was 12 years old. We had nothing but a little 2 x 4 farm, and I had to work. I worked in Oregon during the vacation period, then went back to school, till I got through high school. When I got through high school, I was in this railroad accident. I just set that money aside for college work. I often say that wreck saved my life.