

Forest History Foundation, Inc.  
St. Paul, Minnesota

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW  
with

Howard Libbey

March, 1953 - Arcata, California

by John Larson

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HOWARD A. LIBBEY  
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By John Larson, Forest History Foundation, Inc.

When I originally started in the lumber business all lumber was shipped green, practically no dry. There were no railroads into this area until 1914. Prior to 1914 green lumber was not only shipped to the California ports of export for Australia, New Zealand, Mexico, South America, etc., but the lumber that was destined for the East was shipped down to certain plants like the Redwood Manufacturing Company at Pittsburg, which was originally owned by all the mills in the business. It was shipped by water to what we used to call Port Chicago or Pittsburg. There the lumber was stacked and dried. The Redwood Manufacturing Company was a kind of co-op among the mills of the day - all had their interest in it. About 1912, when they started to see that the first railroad was coming through, some concerns who even had plants in Wilmington in the Los Angeles area, and also in the San Francisco Bay area, where they did their drying and green milling for the California trade, started to build their own planing mills and factories in their own locale. Then, of course, when the railroads came they dropped out of the Redwood Manufacturing Company, and that gradually narrowed down to the smaller mills, and they built their own planing mills, finish sheds and dry kilns and so on.

The smaller mills stayed longer in that set up. Later the Redwood Manufacturing Company was owned by Caspar Wood of the Caspar Lumber Company, which acquired the interests of these other mills as they dropped out. There were the three main major companies that did the business in the East: The Pacific Lumber Company, Hammond Lumber Company and Union Lumber Company. Then the smaller mills formed what they called the Redwood Sales Company which was organized in 1913 in the mutual interests of the small mills. They had their office in the Exposition Building which was built in 1913 in San Francisco at the time of the World's Fair. There were ten or eleven mills in it and the orders were secured for the Sales Company by their representatives in the East and farmed out to the respective mills according to their ability to handle the dry shipment. Of course, the motive for that and for the bigger companies going direct was the lumber weighed so much green that the freight rate was so much they could not afford to ship it to the East. Then, too, it was a case of the customer receiving a product, whether it was siding, or rustic, or finish, that he could use immediately or sell immediately and reorder again. So the problem was solved by moving it back to the sawmill to handle, whereas if they shipped green lumber, not only would the freight be excessive but the customer would receive something on the line which he in turn would have to pile up and dry before using it.

The Eastern market was open prior to 1915, and shipments were made in the earlier days by water, later through the canal, and also via railroad; Southern Pacific to the Gulf and then from the Gulf up by water to the East Coast. Of course, there were two or three factors that entered in there. For a good many years at least, cypress had been going out, so to speak, and the only competitive wood was cedar and, of course, it was a matter of promotional work and salesmanship and advertising and things of that kind, through periodicals and conventions and otherwise, to introduce the redwood.

The Redwood Export Company was formed under what is known as the Webb-Pomerene Act which was an act passed by Congress authorizing and permitting different lumber companies to go together in getting out their specifications and orders which had to go by boat from, originally, San Francisco, later Humboldt Bay to Australia direct. Those orders were of such a nature as to size and quantity that no one mill could handle it, so the result was that they were allowed to go together and pro rate those orders according to their ability to furnish. That law not only applied to clear green lumber going to Australia and New Zealand, but it also applied in the matter of the shipment of ties to South America. What I said about the former Redwood Sales Company in 1915, that went on for some years, but as some of these companies developed and progressed and increased their capacities, they found that they could not secure sufficient outlet; so they withdrew and went into the Eastern market direct. In other cases some other mills cut out redwood timber and went out of business.

The number of operators in the redwood business has never been many on account of the fact that the quantity of redwood timber is limited to a few counties in the northern part of the state - all in California. It used to be we felt that a company didn't have a right to go into the redwoods unless they owned twenty-five years' supply of timber or something of that kind. Of course, that was changed through the different kind of mills today. Originally they were all big heavy mills and as we have gone along the last few years we have had smaller, more compact mills running with fewer men engaged and maybe a little more - some improvements in the different pieces of machinery and equipment. As we have had smaller mills come in some of them have cut redwood and fir, some redwood only, some fir only. However, there has been a definite trend toward the small mill with great success in some cases where the people had the proper background in the business.

Originally all the logs and materials were transported by rail. To build a railroad you had to own the quantity of timber I spoke of, usually on one watershed, or maybe two, and you had a railroad with which to make a connection. You had your logging camps, buried often out in the woods; you had cookhouses and headquarters for the men. The men would come into town, some every month, some every two or three months, some every six months, a few only came in once a year. When they came to town things

roared up. The transportation of those logs was generally to water; all had water ponds, and generally, most of the mills were located on tidewater. There were a few, however, that were off tidewater, with their own artificial log pond. In more recent years, some mills have come along that have dry decks, meaning they do not put their logs in the water at all.

That has changed too, with the advent of the truck. You found that the railroad was limited as to grade, and the degree of curve and all that; whereas with the advent of the truck you were able to build a different type of terrain, of road bed, and you'd get to places with trucks that you could never make with trains. Originally with the railroad you had inclines and declines and maybe you'd be running up a draw and you'd have an incline going up to the top of a hill up to a bench and you'd be working off that bench for a while, but with the advent of the truck and the change in the type of roadbed why you change correspondingly - you didn't have inclines and declines any more.

It's all been a matter of evolution over the years. It naturally follows that with the advent of different kinds and types of logging machinery, where we used to have flyers and fly these logs across canyons, later on we had slackers, then we went into high lead, and more ground logging; and we went from the old Dolbeer donkeys to the regular steam yarder. Then we had cats, tractors and another change that enabled us to change our logging set-up. Now we could selectively log, whereas when we logged with yarders, we had to put down all the trees within the guy lines on account of safety of the men and equipment. The breakage in many instances in cat operations is less. Sometimes the quality of ground and the stand of timber are such that you can't log in any other way than with the yarder.

Of course, as our highways are improved, and with the advent of the truck we had to have the highways, and we had better main roads and back roads, we found that our employees were more reluctant to live in the woods. In many cases they went home every Saturday, and then as time went along, a few years more, we found that men were going home every night, and in some operations they did not have any logging camps anymore. The first to discontinue their logging camps, that I know of, was Holmes-Eureka, and later some of the other companies followed. I would say that was back twenty years ago. This makes it easier for the small operator. With the improved small type of sawmill, with the improvement advantages of logging equipment, trucks, better transportation, and so forth, the smaller operator can go in and log off a small piece of timber. He can log off a 40, or an 80, or a 160 acre piece by simply putting in a temporary road. Perhaps he goes in in the summertime and operates on a dirt road, in some instances, then he has another show in the wintertime that he works off over, maybe, a gravel road, and maybe a bigger patch of timber that he's working on there.

Handling lumber is a long story. I said earlier that the bulk of the lumber was shipped green. With the advent of the railroad, of course, the mills that could afford it, and had the space and room, started drying lumber - air drying it. Some built kilns right away when they put in their remanufacturing plants. Some did not build kilns until a little later - possibly until 1920 or '25, approximately. Originally, in many plants, the lumber was piled in what we used to call a square pile which was anywhere from 12 to 16 feet wide by 20 feet deep, 20 foot length of lumber. In some of the plants where they used to have their railroad spurs, they'd go down to the yard and then pile off a railroad car onto the pile. Later the piles were changed in size; they were maybe 10 feet wide, later they became 8 feet wide. Those piles generally had a tilt from the back of the pile to the alleyway, so that on a real wet day you'd get a pretty good soaking if you walked along the edge of the pile. The piles were generally covered - roofed. Then along came what was known as the Hilkey piler. The Hilkey piler was a four-wheeled affair with a motor that was towed up and down the railroad track in a given alley and the lumber was put on at the bottom. You took the lumber off the car that brought it into the yard and piled it alongside the pile on the opposite side of the alley. The men would put the lumber onto the outriggers of this Hilkey piler and it would take it up over the top and down the other side. There it would be picked off and put onto the pile by the two men. There was usually one man operating on the ground putting the lumber onto the outrigger and another man up on the pile putting it into the pile. Originally, when you piled from the car on to the ground, you could only pile 12 feet high, but with the Hilkey piler - I do not recall how high they were - but, I think they built them to either 24 or 30 feet high, and you correspondingly doubled the height of your pile, and got twice as much lumber in a given space. When you took the lumber down, you just reversed the operation.

As time went along they installed a monorail system. The lumber was set at a given point, then picked up the monorail and taken out to the yard and put under a monorail way, as we called it. The monorail, of course, ran on tracks and the lumber, in some plants, would be taken back to a rough dry shed or direct to a planing mill. At that time it looked like everything was going to be air dried, and that was true for a few years, then they brought out the lumber carrier. When the lumber carrier arrived that changed things again. At some plants the railroad track became obsolete and they changed the yards around, and set them up for carriers. They would run the lumber out in the yard with the carrier which, of course, made faster time, and could handle much more lumber. It was still put in the air in the same way. Then as time went along they developed the lift truck. It was developed up North but it was quickly adopted by the Redwood industry, as well as pine land fir and other operations. That changed things again, in that they commenced to stick the lumber on the ground. The carrier would take it to the point, some distance away, where the sticking platform was, and the lift truck would put it up in the air.



In the current operations the lumber is stuck at one point, it is then taken either by lift truck or by carrier to a yard where it's put in the air with the lift truck, and air-seasoned, as we call it, in the proper grades, after which it is taken from there to the dry kilns. It is not touched by hand, except for maybe being taken down and cover removed. It is taken right from the air yard over and put on a kiln truck, and goes right on through the kiln, from there to a dry sorter where it is then broken down and regraded, dropping the stickers at that point. Today where the lumber is stuck, no hand touches it until it gets right into the planer. Of course, that all depends on how they break it down in their initial segregation at their sorting tables. If they have enough lengths of sorting tables, maybe they'll break it down for grades and widths and in some cases combinations of lengths. In some other mills, where they do not have as much sorting space, they may combine some of these. In which event it generally is regraded and resorted and whatever additional segregations have to be made are made at that point.

There is no type of electrical grader or sorter in our industry - a man has to know it, and you can find differences of opinion among experts, too. A lot of men who started out just knowing lumber have gone on up and through the operations to a point where they are experts. Of course, a man staying in one operation for a long period of time gets to know every wrinkle and every move that's made in that operation. He's thoroughly familiar with every detail and he naturally becomes not alone an expert in his own general field but a specialist in his own.

Many of the resident managers of the various companies are men who came up through the ranks. There have been a few that have come in from the pines - both the logging end and in the plant, sawmill - and they've got along, done excellent jobs, but most of them have been raised in the redwoods. I mean by that that they brought in and handled lumber in the green and the rough and have gone on from there in their experience. We feel that a man who had sawmill experience before going into sales is much more qualified in that he knows the problems of the sawmill. He knows how rapidly some items come, how slowly some other items come in a given grade or given width. We used to think that a man had to have maybe ten years' experience in a sawmill before he could go into the selling end of the business but I think that idea has been exploded somewhat. However, there is no doubt but that a man who has had a sawmill background is, I would say, much more comfortable with himself when dealing with a prospect or customer, especially one that has some idea what he's looking for. Maybe he's calling on an account he's never sold before; if he knows the sawmill problem, he's generally in a better position.

We think that it goes farther than that, in that we have some young men in our sawmill operations and our drying operations that are going to the woods to go into the logging department, and in one case a forester whose

work is to be forestry. Well, we had him in our plant for about three years and a half, and we're going to put him up in the sawmill for another six to ten months. Then he is going into the logging department and is going to load, set chokers, chop for a year and a half or two, and do all the other things in the logging department before he gets into forestry. We believe that he is going to be a far better qualified man in the logging division. He'll know something about what happens to these logs and slabs that come from the woods to the mill.

My father came from Canada in the fall of 1869. My mother was born in Eureka and died at the age of 76. She and her brothers and sisters were all born in a house that is still standing, still owned by the family. It was built in 1852. My grandfa ther on my mother's side came from New York to Panama, crossed over the Isthmus and came by vessel. My great grandfather came over the plains and en route built the first college west of the Mississippi River, (I doubt if you know the name of it) and when they got that pretty well along, discovering they were short of money, he went back to New York and raised \$20,000 and sent it out. He then went to Virginia and built the West Virginia Wesleyan College. Leaving there he came on and was the first president of the college in St. Stephens, Iowa, the Iowa Wesleyan College. Later he came on to Sacramento. The younger generation says that there he was intending to go to San Diego. He was a home missionary and he got some of that firewater in Sacramento and got on the wrong trail and landed in Humboldt County in about 1849. He owned a farm right next to Fort Humboldt and he and his wife were very friendly with the then Captain U. S. Grant who commanded Fort Humboldt.