

Smithsonian Folklife Festival Interview

John Poppino
President of Oregon Small Woodlands Association
Portland, Oregon

February 2004
Interviewer: Don Gedney

Don Gedney: Okay, John, can you tell me your name, address____?

John Poppino: Okay. John Poppino, Portland, Oregon.

DG: John, can you tell me a little bit about how you grew up and how you developed an interest in forestry? When did that happen and how did it happen?

JP: I was born in Portland and lived here through the seventh grade, and my folks always wanted a stump ranch. And in 1943 they found it and in 1944 we moved out to the Squaw Mountain country east of Estacada, where I grew up eighth grade on. We had this place, and it had more trees than stumps when we got there but there was an awful lot of fern patches and such. My interest in forestry came about when I first met the local district ranger. He had come down – there was a small fire in our area and he and the protective assistant were the fire crew. We had an opportunity to get acquainted a little bit, and he seemed- or they seemed – like people that really enjoyed what they were doing, and I thought that might be a good outfit to work for. And as time went on through high school there was a forestry course that I took and everything I saw about forestry was something I was interested in. When I graduated from high school I enrolled in forestry at Oregon State. Then the Korean War came along and I spent four years in the Air Force, all the time thinking, what am I going to do when I get out of here? And it came back forestry every time. So when I got discharged I returned to Oregon State and completed my requirement for a degree and then went to work for the forest service in Estacada. I spent the next thirty-one years as an employee of the Forest Service in various jobs from - basically from a timber sale layout person to a project leader for the forest inventory analysis unit in Portland.

DG: So John, let's talk about your woodlot, your woodland, and how you got it, how it's organized, and how you run it.

JP: Okay, the place was my folks' home until they both died. Mom died in 1971, and my brother and sister and I decided that we really needed to keep the place. It was – it had some good memories for all of us. So I, being a forester, was appointed to be the manager, and did that in a partner configuration for about ten years.

DG: Okay, John, tell me your current position with the Small Woodland Owners Association.

JP: I'm currently the president of Oregon Small Woodlands Association, which is made up of twenty-five hundred family forest landowners in the state of Oregon. We have only about 5 percent of the potential membership because family forestland owners owning ten or more acres represent about fifty thousand parcels in the state of Oregon, between ten and five thousand acres in size.

DG: In terms of forest area what part of the total private forest land do they represent?

JP: Well, in Oregon, again, the family forestland owners represent about 16 percent of the forest land in the state.

DG: That includes all owners?

JP: Yeah. Family forestland owners represent 16 percent of the forest land in the state of Oregon.

DG: In terms of production what do they represent?

JP: Very close to 16 percent now. They're probably fluctuating between 12 and 20 percent, depending on the current log market price.

DG: In past history, do they represent a kind of buffer when industry land production is down? Has that happened in the past?

JP: Yes. A few years ago when the forest service – the federal government – cut back on their production of logs, industry stepped into the breach, so to speak, and increased their harvest. Then they got to the point where they didn't have an awful lot more to get to, and prices went up and small woodland owners – family forestland owners – increased their production quite a bit.

DG: Why is the forest service interested in woodland owners? First of all, talk about it from a nationwide point of view.

JP: The very number of small woodland owners means that individual management objectives have quite a range. From a biodiversity standpoint, the small woodland owners do a great job of providing all kinds of habitat: water production potential, recreation potential, as well as timber.

DG: From a more direct point of view: What role does the forest service take directly in working with the small woodland owners?

JP: In Oregon the state and private arm of the forest service provides financial assistance to state department of forestry that helps fund the service foresters and also provides funds for other forest management related things - management planning. Also the forest service is involved with fire suppression efforts.

DG: John, in Oregon, who are the FFL owners? Can you tell me about some other than yourself?

JP: How much time you got, Don [laughs]?

DG: Oh, just five or six people.

JP: I'm not sure that I could describe the typical family forest landowner. We have a fellow that is very active in the Clackamas County Farm Forestry Association that has about four hundred acres in his family ownership that is a retired college professor and very innovative in developing marketing potentials for it. We have a single woman who was kind of an "empty nester" so to speak, retired schoolteacher with about sixty acres of forest land, that acquired the land as the result of a divorce. Knew absolutely nothing about forestry, and is a recent County Forestland Tree Farmer of the Year. There is a certified public accountant that has a family ownership of a little over seven hundred acres that is doing all kinds of creative things, including running the second largest fish hatchery – private fish hatchery – in the state of Oregon, in conjunction with the forest land. There are folks who are very similar to our situation where we have inherited a piece of property from our parents and are managing it for various resources. I have some friends that are managing their property strictly for wildlife and have no plans for any significant timber harvest at all. So the range of folks is very diverse – very large.

DG: Now, if you can give me as much of your management objectives and history – how it works, I'd like to hear about it.

JP: The objectives for the tree farm - the primary objective is to end up with a piece of property that's in better shape when our heirs get it than it was when we picked it up. In order to do that I have developed a management plan that lists some specifics. One of the items on the management plan is to return some income to the owners. We have eight different family members that are now shareholders in a chapter S corporation. We started out in the early '40s with 114 acres of land that my folks bought, and it had some timber on it. By 1950 they had sold all of the timber over eleven inches diameter at breast height, which at that time was merchantable. So we were effectively down to zero inventory. When my siblings inherited the property we had a management plan developed, and by 1989 a professional inventory indicated that there was a million and a quarter board-feet. We periodically harvested - basically a commercial thinning in the stands – multiple entries. We then had a need for a cash influx. In 1991 – '92 I accelerated the harvest and we bought three quarters of my sister's share. Then in 1999 we had another inventory and we now have 1.6 million board-feet of timber on the place in spite of having cut roughly a million feet in the twenty-five years that we have been managing the place. The appearance of the property looking at aerial photos shows a like increase in timber stands over the whole place. We have returned about \$350,000, or have had a \$350,000 income, and \$120,000 worth of expenses since 1970. So the place is paying for itself, and we are achieving the objective of having it in better condition vegetatively, aesthetically, and from a wildlife standpoint than it was when we got it in 1971.

DG: John, can you think of how you could portray activity – family forest land ownership in the Washington Mall? What could you show that would be of interest to the people there?

JP: I think we would have to show -

DG: John, can you start that, “I think on the Mall...”, and start in a complete sentence.

JP: I think that on the Mall it would be very difficult to show a forest, but without any difficulty at all we could show the different activities that occur on family forest land. We could have hands-on planting and give the visitors an opportunity to see what it’s like to plant a tree. Unfortunately we’d be on flat ground, and a lot of tree farms are not. But we could also show the different types of equipment that are used, ranging from horses – have some logs that the horses could move. We could also have other types of machinery: a single grip harvester that cuts the trees into specific lengths and lays them on the ground. We could have an ATV with a small...

DG: What does ATV stand for, John?

JP: An ATV is an all-terrain-vehicle, lovingly called a “quad”, frequently disdained by small woodland owners because of the damage that one can inflict on wet trails and such, but also a very useful tool. There are arches, which are devices that go over a log and carry part of it so that the log is not gouging into the earth as it’s being moved.

We could also have demonstrations of some hand-held equipment. Currently GPS is used by quite a few of the woodland owners to map their property: to show where the roads are located, where different harvest areas are, and then specific points. Like, I’ve got a fifty-four inch western red cedar that I keep losing, but with the GPS I can go out and find it. It’s quite possible to demonstrate on the Mall. [A clock chimes, at length.] That’s going to keep going – it’s striking twelve.

In addition to the equipment that I’ve already mentioned, the potential exists for any one of a number of small portable mills to demonstrate the manufacture of products from logs. It could also be that I could be there in work clothes with a chainsaw, wearing chaps and the proper safety equipment: the hat with the face shield and the earmuffs. That could be to demonstrate what a working woodland owner looks like during a harvest operation. It [laughs] would also be necessary I think for me to have a power mic [microphone] to be able to answer questions to more than just one person at a time.

[there follows a visual section showing JP cutting down a small tree with a chainsaw]

JP: Let’s do that again.

We have this property because my parents bought it in 1943 and lived up here for many years. After they died in 1971 their kids, my brother and sister and I, decided that we wanted to keep it, and we’ve been managing it since then to supplement our retirement incomes.

DG: Okay, John.

JP: We've been working on this place pretty intensively for the last twenty years, and have done everything from harvesting major transmission poles up to ninety-five feet long to harvesting pulpwood that would go down to about one inch in diameter. The majority of our thinning sales, though, have been twelve- to fourteen-inch Douglas fir and some hemlock for thinnings that went into the local sawmills, although some of the larger material has been exported in the past. We probably will continue at a lesser intensity of harvest for the next four or five years, primarily because we have pretty much been over the whole property with the first entry, and some of the stands will be ready to go back in and do some spacing management, probably in a couple of years.

We have a management plan for this property. I must say that in the first fifteen years or so after my parents died the management was all in my head. It worked reasonably well, but as a result of becoming involved with a program with the extension service, I developed this management plan that has been very helpful for the last five years. In it, we identify the eight or ten different timber stands that need to be harvested and some of the different actions that need to be taken there. In particular I've identified the five spring areas on the place and have been very intentional in the management that goes in there so we don't disturb the spring and muddy up the water that flows off the property and goes downstream. The plan that we made five years ago is still quite accurate, although I will be revising it here in the next few months, mainly to bring it up to date and to correct some assumptions we made about the price of timber. One of the basic assumptions was that timber would continue to be worth about three hundred dollars a thousand. It has been worth significantly more than that the last couple of years.

The plan has also helped identify where different actions can take place. One stand is called the "Pole Stand," and in 1990 my wife and I cut 101 trees out of that stand. Ninety-five of them made major transmission poles ranging in size from sixty to ninety-five feet, and we netted from that one operation eleven times what my parents paid for the place in 1943.