Life in Potlatch Was Different

By R.K. Harris

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Farewell to the Potlatch Mill

By Keith Petersen

Potlatch Historical Society

2022

Occasional Paper Number 6
Gary E. Strong
Series Editor

Special thanks to Carolyn Strong for her
assistance in preparing this manuscript

Photos for the Petersen article are from the Latah
County Historical Society Album 44

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Potlatch Historical Society.
P.O. Box 5
Potlatch, ID 83855

Prepared at
Stronghold Press
Potlatch, Idaho

Life in Potlatch Was Different
By Ray K. Harris

This is the now generally forgotten story of Potlatch, Idaho, during its exciting years as an almost 100 per cent company town. It is on U.S. Highway 95, 18 miles north of Moscow, home of the University of Idaho. The Palouse country hills, famed for their wheat, dry pea, and lentil yields, roll like stormy waves to the north and west. East and south a vast, largely mountainous timbered area tosses 100 miles to the Bitterroot divide.

Withered now to a 1970 census count of only 871 inhabitants, I knew Potlatch 50 years ago when its population peak was around 2,000. I attended grade and high school there, unaware of anything out of the ordinary about my hometown. It wasn't until many years later that I fully realized I had been a fortunate guinea pig in one of the most liberal socio-economic experiments ever unwritten by Big Business in the Pacific Northwest.

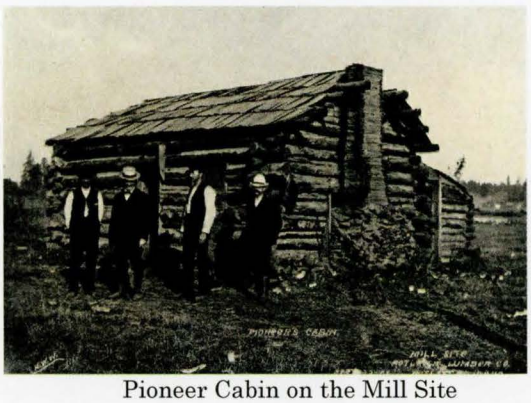
The Potlatch of today is a memorial to the Potlatch Lumber Company, which gave birth to it in the early 1900's, administered and civically pampered for 45 years, then turned back to its residents to govern themselves. Just before the century's turn, two Minnesota and one Wisconsin lumber firms, after logging themselves out of business, sent William Deary west to stake out new holdings to cut. In 1901, he bought tracts of the finest white pine, mixed with other species, in Latah and Clearwater Counties, Idaho. Result of this venture was the formation of the Potlatch Lumber Company in 1902 with Deary as its general manager. By 1920, its total holdings mostly in the watersheds of the Palouse and Potlatch Rivers and Elk Creek, amounted to 265 square miles.

To get this timber to market, the company directors went first class and whole hog, sparing neither horses nor money. They ordered immediate construction of a 49-mile railroad, the Washington, Idaho, and Montana, from its Northern Pacific connection at Palouse, Washington, to its new logging headquarters at Bovill, Idaho. Next, they hired the nation's leading sawmill designer, grandfather of "Bud" Wilkinson, the coach who made the Oklahoma Sooners one of the nation's top college football teams, to plan the most modern sawmill possible that also would be one of the largest in existence at the time. And finally, they directed a model town to be built near the mill to house its 1,500 employees and their families. That was in July 1905.

Able as Bill Deary was as general manager of the entire operation, the directors soon realized the three-ring circus he was directing was too heavy a load for one man. So, they sent him an assistant, Allison W. Laird, a personable, 40-year-old banker from the lumber town of Winona, Minnesota. Deary, who always had preferred the outdoor end of the business, was agreeable, and relieved.

However, he and Laird together worked the initial phase of planning the town, but once that was done, Deary willingly turned the job of completing and running it over to Laird. As the new assistant general manager, he set about making Potlatch another Pullman, Illinois, the model town in which Pullman cars were originally built under then unheard of good working conditions. He was convinced a similar policy at Potlatch, would, like Biblical bread thrown upon the waters, be returned to management in better services by employees.

Seventy years ago, sawmill and mining towns everywhere in the United States were about the most squalid imaginable, and unfortunately, some aren't too much better today. What Laird didn't want was a town like Harrison, Idaho, for example, on Coeur d'Alene Lake. In 1904 it had seven lumber mills, four shingle mills, 16 saloons, a surplus of gambling and ill repute establishments, shack housing, few retail stores, one school, several struggling churches, and a minimum of medical and health services.



Pioneer Cabin on the Mill Site

Potlatch would be different, Laird vowed, and it was. From the beginning, gambling and sales of liquor were banned. So was organized prostitution, which was then, and still is, taken for granted, especially in mill towns with a lot of single men. The Company kept it out through its housing monopoly. There was no private housing, not even squatters' shacks to buy or rent.

The speed with which the railroad and huge sawmill complex were built was almost beyond belief. The mill was in working condition in less than a year, without the help of today's sophisticated machinery. Everything was done by hand, with hundreds upon hundreds of workers using picks, shovels, and wheelbarrows. They did have the help of horses pulling plows, scrapers, and wagons, the latter two of "shirttailful" capacity.

There were separate crews working simultaneously on virtually all of the 13 major buildings and projects of the mill

and railroad. These included the sawmill; power plant; steam and electric generating plant (which also supplied the town); a giant refuse burner; dry kilns; a 65-acre drying yard laced with narrow gauge railway tracks connecting with all parts of the mill; a huge planing shed with its own power plant; a vast dry shed; the main office; mill machine shop; roundhouse, railroad machine shop, car repair shop and depot. The band sawmill, when completed was claimed by its builders to be the largest entirely under one roof in the world. Its capacity was 350,000 board feet of rough lumber in a 10-hour shift.

To me, one of the most intriguing buildings in the mill area was the horse barn, undoubtedly the largest and best operated within hundreds of miles. It had stall space for possibly 100 horses. In the early 1900s, when gasoline engines were still new, horses were used for all general hauling in town, including delivery of slab wood fuel to homes. There still was a need for horses at the mill because electric locomotives weren't always available to haul loaded cars out of the way or spot empties where needed.

Horse Barn

All the mill construction was on a wide meadow in which the meandering Palouse River was dammed for a large log pond. The town, only half completed when the mill began operating September 11, 1906, overlooked the mill complex from two low hills at the east edge of the flat.

The residence district surrounding the downtown area was a block up from the depot. Two large, two-story buildings dominated the core area, the company store and company bank. Not far from them were the hotel, the confectionary store and the first of three large frame boarding houses for single men. Two blocks up the hill was the Union Protestant church, and not far from it the elementary school and the Catholic church. All these building surrounded by 275 frame houses built for employees, covered an area 10 blocks long, east and west, and six blocks wide.

Southeast of the store, on a smaller hill, a section of larger and better homes was built for management personnel. It was known as "Nob Hill." To supply the mill and town with water, the company built a million gallon capacity concrete reservoir on the highest point in town. Water was pumped from two artesian wells drilled close to the mill power plant and distributed through 10 miles of water mains. One hundred fire hydrants were installed for fire protection. Several fire stations were built, and volunteer fire crews recruited and trained. The town's fire loss record was enviously low.

Cedar Street

As a sawmill town, Potlatch naturally had wooden sidewalks. They were well made initially, and well maintained for many years. Wooden walks made it possible to bridge small gullies and still hold normal levels or grades. Several such structures resembled early day wooden railroad trestles. There must have been 20 miles of wooden walks in Potlatch. The only concrete sidewalks were on the west and north sides of the store and bank buildings, a block each way.

In an effort to beautify the town, the Company planted trees in the Nob Hill Park and along the streets, and since the town's inhabitants were accustomed to the Midwest and familiar with deciduous trees, the Company maintained a nursery for seedling trees. The streets were named Pine, Locust, Cedar, Oak, Elm and Maple. Potlatch residents jokingly said their first letters stood for, "Potlatch Lumber Company Owns Everything, Maybe."

Along with a water distribution system, the Company supplied electricity to all public buildings, and to all homes. It also piped steam to heat the public buildings, and the managerial homes on Nob Hill, again at a very reasonable rate. It franchised a garbage and sewage disposal service to a farmer. He did the collecting with what we called "honey wagons," for wasteland burial.

Owning, as it did, every building in town, the Company had a large and efficient maintenance or townsite department. For its nearly 300 rental homes, this service was included in the rent the occupants paid. If anything went wrong, all they had to do was telephone the townsite department, and it would send out a man or crew to do whatever was necessary, and usually quite promptly especially on Nob Hill. Still another service the Company provided was police protection. This was a one-man department, a town constable who doubled as a county deputy sheriff. He had little to do other than harass bootleggers and occasional noisy drunks.

There actually were four distinct categories of housing in Potlatch. Most imposing were the substantial and spacious homes for management people on Nob Hill. They were completely modern, with full basements and three or four bedrooms. They compared with the better homes in our Corbin Park area and rented for $40 a month, plus $10 for steam heat and $1 for water.

Next, in Class 2, was a smaller group of rather substantial homes close to the school and both churches. They were modern, but not steam heated, and rented in the $20 to $24 range. Class 3, and by far the majority, were houses of three to even eight rooms to fit various family sizes. They had running water, an ample woodshed and attached privy next to the alley. At appointed times, possibly every two months, a night crew emptied the drawer and treated it with a deodorant.

These houses rented for $2 month per room. Thus, a three room house rented for $6 and a six -roomer for $12.00. A news story in the October 17, 1909, issue of the (Spokane) Spokesman-Review reported Potlatch was "sponsoring matrimony" in

that no houses would be rented to single persons; to qualify as a renter, "man had to have a wife."

Unfortunately, there was a Class 4, the very small houses near the foot of the hill below Pine Street. They generally were reserved for the various national groups such as Greeks, Italians and Japanese. So, there was an element of segregation in evidence, but generally these people preferred to live close together in less expensive housing. Their rent probably was about half as much as for Class 3 houses. As far as I know, there were no Blacks in Potlatch up to the time I lost communication with it in 1930.
For single men, there were three boarding houses, very large frame buildings housing sometimes 100 or more men each. They had running hot and cold water, steam heat, but otherwise were not modern. They were very important during the early years of the development, but gradually lost favor as more of the workers became family men. The first one to be abandoned was converted into a movie theater in the mid 1910's, and the second made into a hospital about 1918.

Boarding House #1

What visitors from out of town probably best remembered about Potlatch was the Company store, the Potlatch Mercantile Company, or to us, the Merc. It was the Crescent[1] of the Palouse Country when I was young and rightly so; first, for its size, two floors and a full basement about 250 by 300 feet in dimensions; and second, the remarkable variety of goods it stocked.

It sold just about everything. Departments I remember were groceries, meats, women's wear, men's furnishings, shoes, furniture, home furnishings, hardware, millinery, drugs, jewelry, candy, and a soda fountain. It had sufficient space for its departments, so it didn't look junky. It boasted an efficient freight elevator and one of the first refrigeration plants in the Inland Empire. As the years passed, it was continually remodeled and upgraded.

Mercantile, Opera House and Union Church

[1] Spokane's leading department store.

In its early years it didn't handle farm implements, but it soon became apparent that to serve a rural area adequately, such a department was needed. So, a new building was added for it south of the store. It also stocked many common logging supplies. The first post office had space in the store building but was moved to larger quarters in 1911.

Until the first temporary service station began operating in Potlatch in 1915, the only place in town where petroleum products could be purchased was at the Merc's hardware department. To take delivery, buyers had to drive to a bunkerlike brick building nearly a block away from the store and nearest dwelling. The reason, of course, was danger of explosions and fires.

All early gasoline and oil came in five-gallon cans, same as kerosene. We bought kerosene often from the Merc for our lamps and lanterns, and later gasoline for our Coleman lamp and water pump engine. Before 1915 gasoline had to be poured into automobile tanks from five-gallon cans and filtered through a chamois skin in the funnel.

In 1906, cars were strictly a toy for the wealthy, and for several years there couldn't have been more than two in Potlatch at the time. By 1917, Model T Fords were being shipped to Potlatch annually by freight carloads; and a thriving garage business had been established. Potlatch as well as the whole nation had acquired wheels, and never would be the same again.

The Merc really found its place in the sun in 1909 when Mr. Laird hired A.A. McDonald as its new manager. He stayed until 1921 and was responsible for the store's most profitable and colorful era. To broaden its service area, he soon began conducting special sales four or five times a year. They usually were two day affairs, with loads of special buys in every department, and a free box lunch at noon in the lodge hall or opera house above the bank next door.

McDonald advertised heavily in the area's weekly newspapers, especially The Palouse Republic, which was published nearest to Potlatch. In it he usually bought two pages of space, and at least one time as much as four. These ads were reprinted on colored paper stock of almost cardboard weight and then tacked on crossroad signposts for 20 miles in every direction.

The crowds such advertising attracted were fantastic for a town no larger than Potlatch. At specified times during the day, McDonald held drawings for prizes the store supplied. In the evening, another free lunch and a free dance were provided. He used these devices to relieve congestion in the store and to keep buyers in a spending mood.

Colt Sale

Another service he inaugurated was free parking for customers' teams, buggies, and wagons. This was a large, L-shaped livery shed built not far from the store. It had stalls for 12 to 15 teams and rigs to tie up for the full day, if necessary. Their exposed sides opened to the east and north, thus giving teams protection from the weather. Close to the entrance of this facility was a large water trough.

An adjacent building provided free tieing-up space for about 15 saddle horses. Several hundred feet of extra hitching racks were handily provided at rear and one side of the store. During some of the Merc's sales days, as many as 265 teams and rigs were tied up around the store, and at noon the Merc even gave the horses free feed!

One year the Merc sponsored a Fourth of July celebration for which it built an outdoor dance floor on a vacant lot just west of the store. At a later sale, an automobile – the flashiest and most popular make then on the market – was locked into a fixed orbit around the dance floor. All day long customers were given free rides in it a real attraction back in 1914.

Another sales day featured a horse show. Farmers from near and far entered their best horses or teams groomed to the "Nth" degree to compete for attractive prizes the Merc offered. Another time, Buster Brown, a midget nationally known as the advertising symbol for a shoe company of the same name, was the special attraction.

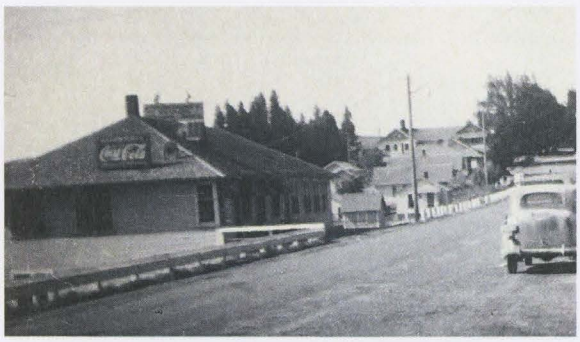
eling Force and Delivery Wagons of the Potlatch Mercantile Company. Potlatch, Idaho.

The December sales day, of course, always featured Santa Claus being escorted to town in a fancy rig or sleigh drawn by a beautiful team of horses from the company barn. Tall, sandy-haired Adolph Bye always seemed to be the driver, wearing a long back coat, white collar, and black tie, and of course, a stove pipe hat. All children received bags of candy and nuts, and possibly a Christmas stocking filled with inexpensive trinkets.

These events were money making schemes for the Merc; but they also helped provide the attractive, exciting atmosphere of a community of real importance. They cemented relations between townspeople and rural folk. Even though the Merc's customers ended up paying the costs of such promotional efforts, the sales days helped a community its residence grew to love.

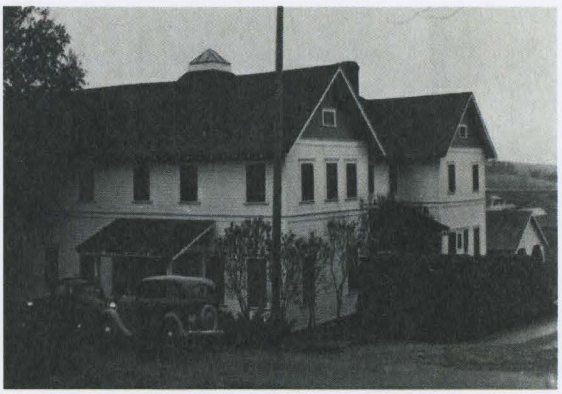
I should explain Potlatch wasn't absolutely a 100 per cent company town. Laird did permit a few independent or franchised entrepreneurs to operate in his domain. Pete Wagner had the first barber shop and was still there when I left. He hired his own help and was very successful. Mr. and Mrs. Clyde Fisher ran the Merc's jewelry department until they retired and moved to Spokane. A shoe repair shop was provided space in the implement building built about 1911. When a vacancy occurred in this shop in the 1920s, Ted Saad came from Spokane to operate it. He retired a few years ago.

The Company built and rented a confectionary store building which also housed a pool hall and a cream collection station. Waltzer's independent blacksmith shop was a block from the depot. Until the coming of the automobile, it did a flourishing business. Felix Stapleton took over management of the Merc's auto parts and service business, and 1917 moved into a new garage building on Main Street. As usual, A. A. McDonald made a big occasion of it with a sales day, complete with free noon lunch and dance that night. In 1919, Stapleton bought into the business, and in 1926, took it over completely.



For years there was a bakery adjacent to the Boarding House No. 2 which must have been an independent operation. I am sure the moving picture theater was run by a regular company employee on a moonlighting basis. In the early years, an independent tailor was recruited to take care of the company executive and supervisory personnel's clothing needs. One such man was A.P. Detlof,one of the best in his profession. He moved to Spokane, where he had a shop until he retired.

In 1911, an office building was erected across from a later built garage to house the post office, the physician, and the dentist. The latter rented his space and charged patients for his services. Dr. J.W. Thompson, the company physician, oversaw a health service program which provided care and treatment in case of accidental injury. All company employees were covered, in all divisions, but not their spouses or children. From what I've been able to learn, this program was satisfactory as far as it went, and helped lay the basis for more complete family plans in later years. Dr. Thompson was permitted to treat non-company patients on a fee basis.



Green Boarding House, later the hospital

The company hospital was originally at Bovill, which meant Potlatch patients had to go there by train. A Dr. Hein of Palouse, as a company employee, maintained an office and very small hospital in Potlatch for a day or two a week for a few of the town's early years. It was next to the hotel in a small building later taken over by the town's library. In

about 1918, the hospital in Bovill was closed, and a replacement opened in Potlatch in the vacant No. 2 boarding house.

Through special arrangements with state and county school authorities, the Company was given virtually complete control of the town's school system. It paid the same county and state taxes all other property owners did, and in addition, assumed all school costs. Mr. Laird, as school board president, insisted the Potlatch schools be the best possible and not limited to a three-R curriculum. He wanted the whole gamut of that day, including separate room and teacher for each grade as soon as enrollment allowed.

One justification for this policy was that it would help induce high quality management and supervisory people to move to an unproved frontier town. Mr. Laird and his fellow management directors had two advantages most school boards lack: Personnel management experience enabling them to select best qualified teachers, and a higher salary scale than other schools in the area. Potlatch teachers were paid almost as much as those in Spokane. As a result, Potlatch attracted top caliber, dedicated teachers.

In November 1906, the town's first school opened with 150 children in temporary quarters. The following year the school moved to a new three-story building which eventually housed the eight lower grades and the manual training department. In the first few years the few high school students were assigned to unused rooms. Two seniors made up the school's first high school graduating class, in 1912.

Physical training, home economics, manual training, art and music were a part of the curriculum from the beginning. After the Company built a large community gymnasium in 1916, all P.E. classes were scheduled there, as were all competitive sports. Potlatch High

The boys dress up. 1928

School eventually earned an enviable reputation in athletics, especially in the early 1920's when Rich Fox was the coach.

He had been an outstanding basketball star at the University of Idaho,

Potlatch has special art and music teachers long before most of the larger cities in the Pacific Northwest did. Mr. Laird saw nothing wrong in pressuring teachers to participate in civic activities. I saw a telegram he sent to a surprised newly elected special music teacher for 1924-25 informing her that leading the church choir would be one of her duties. A fringe benefit the single women teachers appreciated was an attractive, furnished house in which they lived cooperatively at minimum expense. All school employees went to the company bank at the end of each month to sign for their checks.

First High School

The first superintendent was a "Professor" Reese. He was there for several years and was succeeded by a quick tempered, stub armed Mr. Houston who stayed only one year. Fred Lukens, who succeeded him was an excellent administrator who remained for many years. From Potlatch he went to Grangeville, then to Boise as secretary of state. He was the author of a text on Idaho government, a required course in the eighth-grade curriculum.

My family moved to our farm four miles from Potlatch in 1908. My two older brothers attended a local two-room country school. Our parents immediately wanted better schooling for us, so they sent us to Potlatch at $3 tuition per month each through the eighth grade. High school tuition was the responsibility of our local school district. For six of us, attending school over a period of 18 years, that was considerable extra expense, but we and our parents felt it was a fine investment.

All 12 years I was in the Potlatch system, it emphasized regular attendance and punctuality. Rooms meeting prescribed percentages in both received rewards of half and quarter day vacations the last day of each month. Non qualifiers worked until the 4 o'clock dismissal bell. I'm still benefiting from those early formed habits.

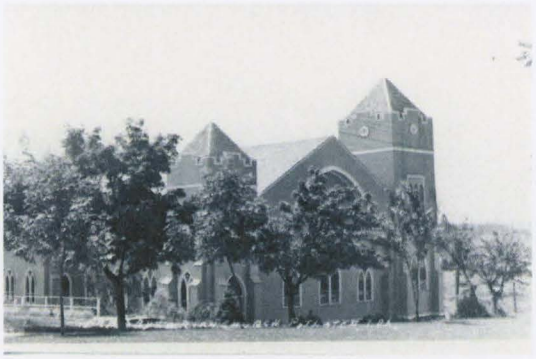
One remarkable school-related incident I vividly remember happened when I was in the sixth grade. Two families had just arrived direct from Sweden. So, Monday morning, here came six or seven immigrant cousins to school. In an ordinary school system that would have caused consternation. In Potlatch, it was almost commonplace.

The newcomers were sent to Ruth Hall's first grade room, where there were larger and adjustable desks for just such contingencies. Ruth was no bigger than a minute, but she had a knack for putting such youngsters, and all others, at their

ease. She taught them to read and speak English, and within six weeks two or three had advanced to my sixth grade room, and before long were challenging the best of us in class competition!

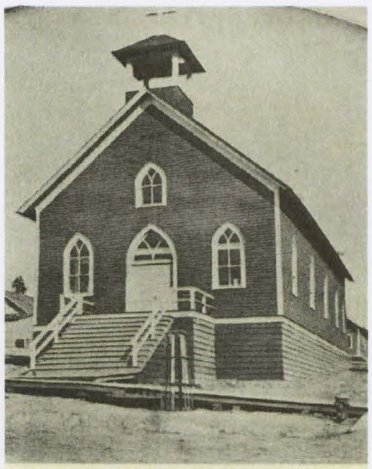
Ruth Hall and several other teachers also ran a night school for many of the Company's newly arrived foreign workers who wanted to learn to speak and write English. It was a service that helped hundred of immigrants in their transition to becoming loyal Americans. Ruth Hall started first grade at Potlatch in 1909 and retired in 1937. I was privileged to have her as my first grade teacher.

It became apparent in 1912 that high school students needed their own building. Because the Protestant church was then too small for its congregation, Mr. Laird talked his superiors into building a new church and converting the old one into a high school. The new church, of all wood construction, rivaled in size, beauty, and completeness any of our existing churches of that time in Spokane. By using the side Sunday school rooms and raising four or five sliding doors, its seating capacity could be increased to about 1,000 people. It became the civic auditorium as well as the church sanctuary, and all public events of a dignified nature were held there. It cost $25,000 to build, all donated to the community by the Company.



Union Church

In two years of probing for what made Potlatch tick, I discovered the Catholic priest and Protestant minister both were on the Company's payroll, at least during the community's early years. One of the Sunday school rooms of the church was the first home of the town's public library. It was open several afternoons a week, with Mrs. Jessie Metcalf in charge as librarian. By 1930 it had grown to the point it had to be moved to Dr. Hein's old office next to the hotel.



CATHOLIC CHURCH.

It was from the Catholic church that Bill Deary was buried in 1913. The year before, when one of his good friends lost a young daughter in an epidemic, Deary grieved because the little body had to be taken to the church and from there to the cemetery in the company store's delivery wagon. One detail the Company had overlooked was to buy a hearse. This so saddened Deary that he immediately ordered one. It was drawn by two beautifully matched and outfitted horses. Adolph Bye again was the driver, wearing his long black coat, white collar, black tie and top hat. The irony of this story is that the hearse wasn't needed again until Deary's own funeral, a year later.

There were many Japanese in Potlatch by 1920. The Company built a large

completely modern boarding house for them, which they ran themselves. In this facility they had imported their homeland custom of integrated toilets. I worked for my brother on an extensive milk delivery route when I was in high school and had one toilet in the building spotted for emergencies. Once I was about to enter when a cute Japanese kitchen maid emerged. She immediately greeted me with a smiling, "Tee hee, you have to go go nearly every day, don't you?"

Japanese families weren't big milk users. They almost always bought it by the pint, one or two per family, never by quarts. The Japanese were happy and industrious people, and so appreciative of any courtesy or recognition we natives showed them. I had occasion to use the services of a Japanese laundry woman who did hand washing in her home. She always would have some little gift wrapped ready for a customer when he brought her his laundry, and another when he picked it up.

Nor did the Japanese forget Mr. and Mrs. Laird on Christmas morning! I'm sure the first time they brought their gifts to their "benefactor" and his wife, the Lairds were completely overwhelmed. I was told virtually every Japanese family in Potlatch made a Christmas pilgrimage to the Laird home each Christmas in their early years.

Hundreds of Chinese laborers were used in building the company railroad, but the only Chinese I remember being in Potlatch in 1924 was the cook at the hotel to which we delivered five gallons of milk and possibly a quart of cream daily. I often stopped to visit with him a few moments. Each time he would point to two pieces of pie on a plate on the window sill that I had to pass returning to our delivery wagon, one for me and one for my partner. That was a great lift at the route's half way point.

In the early years we used horses to pull our delivery wagon. No more efficient power for a delivery vehicle has ever been devised. Two of us would make runs back and forth to the houses. The team soon learned the route and would go just as far necessary to meet us two or three houses down the street, and there stop and wait for us. The horses learned to go to opposite sides of streets to save us extra walking.

Another Potlatch route experience I remember concerns my farmer father, who was a good butcher. Two or three times during the winter we would have a butchering bee. The next day he would load the wagon or sled with the quartered cuts of beef or pork and head for town, to drive up and down the streets shouting his wares. Housewives could come out and order whatever they wanted, and he would cut, weigh, and sell it to them at a considerable discount over the Merc's prices.

Sometimes he would come home with several hundred dollars stuffed in his pockets after such trips. Mr. Laird and the store manager were aware of this competition, but they never questioned it. I'm sure it was a part of their good will policy to keep workers happy. Imagine health authorities allowing such peddling today!

Twenty or 30 recent emigrants from Greece formed another ethnic group in Potlatch. They lived two or three together in the smaller Class 4 homes. Usually they were quiet, mannerly good workers. We always understood such men sent a considerable part of their wages back home to families each month. I'm sure there were never Greek families there. One such Greek was Tony Giannou, who

still has the shoe shine concession in the basement of the Davenport Hotel. He came from Greece in 1913, stayed in Potlatch until 1942 when he moved to Spokane. He was married in 1944, and since has reared a family of five children.

The many Italians in Potlatch were a different story. They too, usually were very good workers, but assertive and volatile. I believe most of them were family men. The Italian youngsters took advantage of the free boxing lessons at the company gym. Because I was too busy with farm chores, I didn't learn the art of self-defense, so in fights with Italian boys I'm sure I never was victorious.

By far the greater proportion of common laborers the Company hired were Scandinavians. Many had come from mills of the Midwest, but more came from Norway and Sweden. What wonderful memories all of us Potlatchers have of those fine people! They were so kind, generous, and friendly that it was a wonder my partner and I ever got through our milk delivery routes on time. Many would have hot coffee and cookies waiting for us, especially on sub-zero days.

Life in Potlatch, as I remember it, was pleasant, but certainly different in towns and cities in which I have lived since then. Potlatch residents up to 1951 had absolutely no voice in town affairs. They could vote on county, state, and national issues but not on matters dealing with the administration of their town. That was handled solely by Mr. Laird, who was a benevolent dictator.

Living there only as a student, I didn't have a chance to determine if the smothering effect of living in a completely controlled environment, like a laboratory animal, would be upsetting. I did have several stints at mill work during summer months. The only jobs I could get were on night shifts, involving such deadly monotonous duties as making sure boards from a big saw carriage fell cleanly on the delivery rollers, throwing off scraps from the edging saws, or running a corrugator in the box factory. Those experiences convinced me that I had to break out of that working class into something with more variety and a more secure future.

The Company virtually ran the lives of its employees as shown by its payroll deduction system. Payday was the 10th of each month. Workers stood in line at the pay window and were handed envelopes containing what was left of their monthly wages in currency and coins, to the exact penny. Often there wasn't much left, after deductions had been taken out for rent, water, electricity, steam heat for those in executive housing, slab wood and mill ends for the less affluent, company store charge account, medical insurance and hospitalization, telephone, garage and any advances made since the previous payday in the form of coupon books.

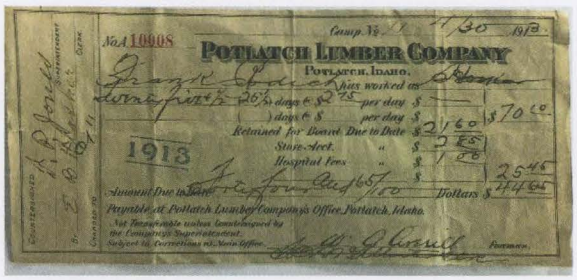
They came in $5, $10, and $20 denominations, and were usable in any business establishment in town. With coupons you could pay for a haircut or shave, eat at the hotel or confectionary, or play cards or pool, buy bakery products, or get your shoes repaired and buy jewelry. These concessionaires in turn used the coupons to pay their company bills.

Most of the common laborers lived a pretty much hand to mouth existence, especially the young single workers. They nearly always ended the month with very little cash in their pay envelopes but could draw coupons on their next pay day immediately. This would take care of their during-the-week expenses, but after cars became common, they would need money for weekend trips to Palouse, Lewiston, Moscow, or Spokane. Some concessionaires took advantage of this practice by buying up coupon books for cash at a 20 percent discount. The Company didn't engage in this racket; it merely looked the other way until things eventually got out of hand and had to be stopped.

Potlatch employees could determine immediately from the schedule of deductions what it cost them and their families to live. A modern finance company with a budget advisor would have little to do in Potlatch. The Company had already done it. For many people, this procedure was a comforting one, and even a parental service. For others it was repugnant. They lost all the thrill of paying their own bills and managing their own finances.

The Company certainly had a sure thing going for itself, and few workers were able to leave Potlatch owing it money. It could be quite a shock for a family, after living in Potlach for several years, to move to an open community and have to start exercising the disciplines necessary to come out even or ahead financially at the end of every month.

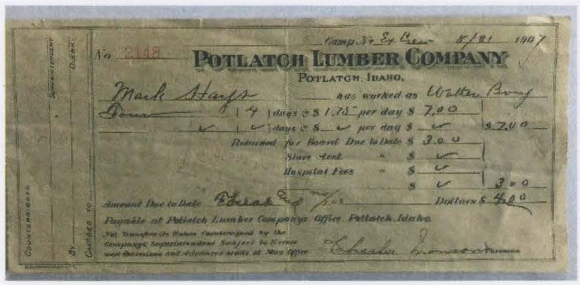
I had poor luck finding any really accurate figures on the Company's pay scale. Common labor initially was paid about $1 for a 10 hour day. This was rather consistent, at least through 1912. Tony Giannou came in 1913 and worked in the mill for $2 a day. I found another Potlatch resident who said he started to work in 1916 at 17 ½ cents an hour for a 10 hour day. Skilled workers were paid more, of course. A millwright got $3 a day and his assistant $2. Alice Hodge's father was a building contractor in 1911.



His time books show he paid his head carpenter $3.50 a day and other carpenters $2.50. A really ambitious man, or a two-man team, could double or even triple earnings working on contract. This practice, gyppoing, was in no way unique to Potlatch. It was universal in the lumbering and mining industries, and still is a common incentive system.

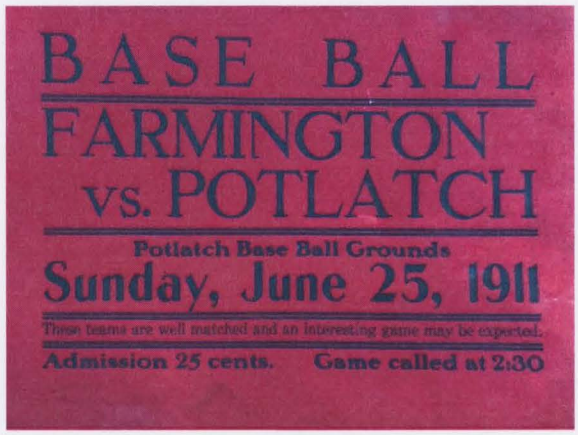
So, I have concluded it wasn't higher pay that attracted workers to Potlatch. It had to be the fringe benefits that went along with their jobs. It is difficult to translate any set of earnings to make a comparison

with today's incomes. One typical Potlach worker reported on in Laird, Norton's "Timber Roots" was Carl Olson Hegg who came to Potlatch in 1914 as a grader on the green chain.


POTLATCH LUMBER COMPANY
POTLATCH, IDAHO.

When interviewed in 1956, he said he was proud of having "raised six children and put them through college". I was privileged to have several of his grandsons as band students, and they surely were tops. Both fathers were well known and successful ministers.

Through my many interviews with Potlatchers who lived during the Laird years, a story along the following pattern kept coming up: Mr. Laird became very much loved by most residents. There was also a deep respect for him and in some cases, a fear. The common story seems always to involve an incorrigible youngster who was causing trouble both at school and in the community. It was usually resolved by the father taking the boy to the woodshed, not for the usual punishment, but to be admonished that he and his whole family were in serious trouble because of his actions. Unless he immediately mended his ways, Mr. Laird would fire the father and the family would have to move elsewhere. The implication always was that to avoid such an ultimate disaster, the young offender mended his ways.



Potlatch residents were enthusiastic sports fans. The Company built an athletic field on the flat close to the horse barn, complete with covered bleachers. In 1910, Mr. Laird hired Walter Gamble, a promising baseball player from the East, to organize and train a town team. He did such an outstanding job of it that Potlatch became a strong baseball town. Gamble stayed on to make a career with the Company. He quickly rose in the managerial ranks, and before long was in charge of the company railroad system.

No team ever had more loyal supporters than the Potlatch players did. Once a large amount of money was raised to induce two major league teams to play a game in Potlatch. The Company maintained a free gymnasium for its employees and employed a qualified instructor to supervise it and teach the school physical education classes.

He also was the boxing instructor and conducted many classes because the sport was popular locally. When the first gymnasium burned down in 1916 it was replaced with a beautiful and spacious new one costing $16,000. It became the town center for both athletic and social occasions.

Potlatch had other recreational opportunities. For those who liked hiking, there were many scenic jaunts from which to choose. Before cars became common, families could hire a team and rig from a livery stable just over the hill from Potlatch. For hunters, the area was heaven. Between 1916 and the mid 1920's there were several winters when ice skating and bobsledding were excellent. The Company had a splash dam on the Palouse River just east of Nob Hill. The pond usually was empty of logs in the winter, and I can remember several times when hardy skaters had smooth ice as far as Princeton, nearly four miles distant.

Such winters brought out the most daring adventurers, the bobsledders. From the top of a steep residence area hill, they charted a run down through six street intersections and over a flat, swampy area near the warehouses. Sometimes the sledders ended up across the railway, a half mile from their starting point. They attained unbelievable speeds, but the bumps and jumps at the street crossings took their toll of injured. I still shudder at some of the close calls we had with teams, and even trains!

Another winter activity we enjoyed was a ride in a horse-drawn bobsled to some home where a chili or oyster stew treat would be waiting. Sometimes we played parlor games or danced, but the real fun was riding in the sled to the accompaniment of jingling sleigh bells and squealing sled runners. Being a farm boy, I usually furnished the sled, team, and straw. After the round trip, I still had to go home, but that was easy. I just started the team out, tied up the reins, crawled under the blankets and slept until the horses stopped at our barn door.

When both log ponds were filled in the spring, another favorite sport was "walking the logs." Although generally forbidden by parents, it was great fun, and we young Potlatchers became quite proficient at it. I don't remember any drownings.

I left Potlatch in 1926, which was a good year for the Company. In 1929, an economic slowdown that was the prelude to the Great Depression began to be felt in all the lumber producing areas across the country. Coupled with that was the tragic death of Mr. Laird in April 1931, after unsuccessful treatment for cancer. By this time, the Depression was taking in toll in bankruptcies everywhere. The Potlatch Lumber Company, the Rutledge Lumber Co., Couer d'Alene, and the Clearwater Timber Company of Lewiston narrowly managed to avert financial disaster by merging as Potlatch Forests,

Inc. on April 29, 1931, with headquarters in Lewiston.

Some masterful moves by the new management salvaged all three operations, and eventually they prospered. By the early 1950's the new firm had decided it was time to step out of the town management business. Then Potlatch for the first time, became self governing, with residents owning property. After that, "life in Potlatch" did become different from what it was when I lived there under Mr. Laird's paternalism. But its original sawmill has been operating all these years, manufacturing finished and dimension lumber, but not in the quantities it did up to the 1931 reorganization. The mill now has 184 men and women employees.

In appearance, Potlatch has changed comparatively little since I left it 50 years ago. Most of the mill buildings are still there, and in use, as a subsidiary unit of the Potlatch, Inc., operation in Lewiston. Logs from the back country to the east now are hauled to the mill on trucks, but the finished lumber is shipped out on the railroad. As on most other railroads, passenger trains were discontinued many years ago, and its freight tonnage is only a fraction of what it once was.

The original sawmill, the planing mill and the dry kilns are still in use, but more economical electrical motors have been substituted for the original Corliss steam engines. The Washington Water Power Company bought the town's electrical distribution system a good many years ago and now supplies the town and mill's power. The giant refuse burner still stands, but no longer wastefully burns sawdust, chips, and scraps. Those byproducts are trucked to the Lewiston mill, where they are transformed into fiberboard, Presto Logs, and other profitable byproducts.

BANK, POST OFFICE AND OPERA HOUSE.

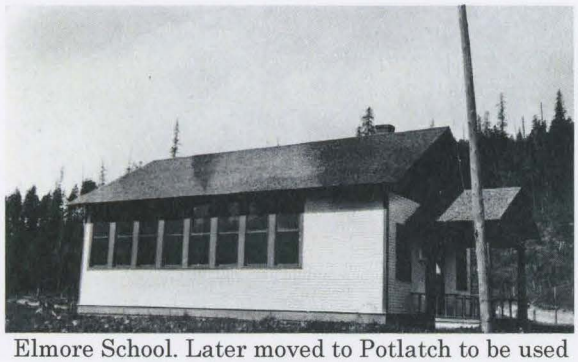
The company store, the company bank next door, and the large Union Protestant church all burned in the last 18 years. The church was rebuilt but on a much smaller scale, and a modern but small shopping center now occupies the space where the Merc and the bank stood. The Potlatch bank is now a branch of the Idaho First National Bank. The hotel was torn down about 30 years ago when its dwindling patronage finally made it unprofitable.

The school system has undergone the greatest change of any institution. State directives requiring that large contingent areas be combined into consolidated districts came into effect in the late 1940's. It was the school problem which speeded up the Company's disposal of the last of its townsite property in the early

1950's. This was because Idaho law allows only property owners to vote in school elections involving money raising. Once the decision had been made to build consolidated schools serving the surrounding countryside as well as the town proper, the Company cooperated by making by making total private ownership of the townsite property possible.

The result of this consolidation was a complete replacement of all school buildings with the modern spread out type so popular today. Sixty years ago, it often took us an hour each way to drive our team and back to and from school. Now a modern fleet of comfortable busses hauls students from two to three times as far in a fraction of the time.

Potlatch still must be a pleasant and satisfying place to live. This can be attested to from the fact that at least 20 of my former school associates have continued to live there through all the intervening years and are still there in retirement.



Elmore School. Later moved to Potlatch to be used for sixth grade classes.

Growing up in Potlatch was one of the best things that possibly could have happened to me. It was a clean, wholesome town, with virtually no drinking, gambling, and crime. We had one constable, with little to do, and no attorney. Mr. Laird and his associates from the very beginning had planned to build such a completely model town that it would attract high quality personnel. That objective was met to the fullest, and I, as a product of the community experiment, was greatly enriched by contact with those superior people in every department of the operation.

The church had a much greater influence on me that I then realized. It was impressive both by its physical size and grandeur and its large congregation. Numbers and bigness are factors which always have done things to me. Mrs. Laird was my first Sunday School teacher, and it was at church that I had my first and most frequent distant contacts with Mr. Laird. It was there that I started my musical career, which was nothing more than pumping a giant reed organ from behind a screen, but it was musically oriented.

Some of my most vivid and pleasant memories are those connected with the Mercantile Company and the many sales events it sponsored. We moved to our farm near Potlatch in 1908 when I was just three. This was in pre-radio and pre-television days. I probably didn't see my first movie until several years later. I had plenty of books and magazines, and we always had the standby mail order catalogs.

All these were just eye openers. I always like to see real things. Then A.A. McDonald came upon the scene and began his four or five times a year sales. These were big experiences for a farm boy, I'm sure I was never the same after any of them. The Merc fascinated me. I loved to watch it operate and improve year by year. No wonder one of the town's residents was unimpressed when, on a trip to Chicago, he was shown through Marshall Fields. "It's just bigger than the Merc" was his reaction.

From the Potlatch schools I received an academic foundation that could have been equaled or bettered only by large city school systems. I had superb, dedicated teachers who taught in a curriculum ahead of its time in this region. They made me want to learn. I remember well the efforts and encouragement of special music teachers from the sixth grade on through high school. By the time I was in high school, I had been well prepared in the rudiments of music and could read it with ease. Prominent parts in two operettas further deepened my interest in music. One special music teacher offered to give me piano lessons free if I would just buy the necessary books. During my last two years in high school, I had a particularly talented teacher. She was an accomplished violinist, and also the first in Potlatch to teach instrumental music.

That seemed to be just what I had been waiting for, as I always had wanted to play a horn. It was decided I could do well on a cornet, but from my financial standpoint, it had just as well have been a Stanley Steamer. I finally heard of a farm family several miles from our place that had a horn I might borrow. It turned out to be a cheap, hard to blow Czechoslovakian instrument, but I got a start on it, and before the end of the year somehow acquired a good, first grade horn.

During my senior year, our seven-piece Potlatch high school orchestra was the talk of the town, and by June, I already had enrolled for the fall semester in music education at the University of Idaho. A musical fuse was ignited in me at Potlatch that was to burn for 40 years. During that time, it was my privilege to lead thousands of school youngsters to drink of the wonders of playing a musical instrument. That was the ultimate test that I, as a sociological guinea pig in Mr. Laird's Potlatch experiment, passed with flying colors.

One minor aspect of living in a mill town was the commanding sound of the ever present mill whistles. The main one at Potlatch had a resonant, throaty tone loud enough to be heard easily at our farm four miles from town. Modern mills and locomotives employ strident air horns which never produced tones equaling those from steam whistles.

The first whistle was three long blasts at 5:30 a.m., presumably to waken mill workers for a new day. At 6:50, a smaller one announced the big engines were starting, and promptly at 7:00 the Big Ben again sounded to burst the whole mill complex into full production. At noon the big whistle blew again, and the same starting sequence was repeated at 12:50 and 1:00. The final whistle blew at 4:00, and if a night shift were working, only the small whistle sounded.

Potlatch, Idaho – taken in the fall of 1954 by Western Air Photo. Note: Bottom center is the elementary gym under construction. Photo courtesy of Wilbur Wright.

I realize that mill whistles have been criticized as an invasion of privacy, and by some as being insulting. As one Potlatcher who heard those deep throated mellow tones every working day for 17 years, I loved them and think back on them with nostalgia. I well remember how long and wildly the whistle blew at the time of the World War I armistice

signing, and how I ran half a mile across our farm to tell my father what it meant.

My last memories of Potlatch, and the ones I seem most often to recall, are of walking down the Main Street hill at noon against the traffic of at least 300 mill, store and office workers walking home for lunch. Almost every worker could get home and back for a hot lunch if he or she wished, as many did. I remember best how genuinely happy those workers were. This happiness undoubtedly was responsible for their friendliness. They all called each other by first names, and it was plainly evident that they really meant the friendly greetings.

Of course, this can be said of many small towns even today, but it was so concentrated in Potlatch because of everyone's schedule being tied up with the one main activity of the community, the Potlatch Lumber Company. I'm still convinced Mr. Laird's keen interest in each one of us, his fatherly advice, and even his insistence that we bow to his will were exactly what I needed up to the time I left.

RAY K. HARRIS taught instrumental music and directed bands at four Idaho high schools before joining the Spokane school system in 1942: two years at Kamiah, one at Grangeville, then a year out for a master's degree at the University of Idaho, followed by two years at Genesee and seven at Sandpoint, In Spokane he headed the all-city grade school band and summer music programs. When he retired in 1965, he had four 150- to 200-piece combined grade school bands, their members constantly competing for chances to move up or down in the chair orders. His summer school program featured these bands in several evening concerts in city parks, with him directing all 1,400 to 1,600 musicians in grand finale numbers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Most of the material for this paper has been gleaned through scores of interviews and friendly visits with both present and former Potlatch residents. That search began in earnest more than two years ago, but since leaving Potlatch 50 years ago, I never missed a chance to add to my knowledge of the town's early history. My first and most valuable source was Elizabeth Laird Ainsworth of Oakland, California. She still sends me bits of information when they come to her and has constantly been helpful and encouraging.

Others who have been of major help are Amelia Horskotte Burk, Alice Carr Hodge, Lillian Compton Olson, H.H. Hanson, Walter Gamble, Joe Cada and Mrs. Earl Renfrew.

I am especially indebted to Allison Decker, son of Arlie Decker, a former Spokane Westerner who was a son-in-law of Mr. Laird and a member of the company's management team until the 1931 reorganization. He loaned me some of his father's books and papers.

Printed sources I found most helpful are "Timber Roots, the Laird, Norton Story" by Kohlmeyer; "Timber and Men, The Weyerhaeuser Story" by Hidy, Hills and Nevins; and two newspapers, the Palouse Republic and The (Spokane) Spokesman-Review.

Farewell to the Potlatch Mill
by Keith Petersen

Author's note: In May 1983, four members of the Historical Society -- John Talbott, Mary Reed, Carol Young, and I -- spent several days covering the grounds of the Potlatch mill site, trying to gain some impressions of the place. Many of the photos illustrating this article are part of an excellent series of over 250 John took while documenting the site. We would like to thank Paul Tobin and the Potlatch Corporation for generously allowing us to traipse through the mill and for partially funding the photographic project. I would also like to thank him for his friendly conversations during the winter days which I spent going over the company's records. I am indebted to the National Endowment for the Humanities for a grant which made this research possible.

Simply put, the Potlatch mill site is huge. Somewhere near the middle of the plant sits a weathered ramp which Washington, Idaho, and Montana Railroad ties rolled out of the sawmill. From this vantage point you are directly north of the sawmill proper, a three-story building over a football field long, the largest white pine mill in the world when built in 1905. To the west is the green chain, nearly 400 feet long. Upwards of 16 men pulled on this chain, sorting and sizing freshly cut, "green" lumber. To the northwest stands the staker where green lumber was separated for the dry kilns. Beyond this is a secondary power plant, the planing mill, four storage sheds, head office, lunch room, and the blacksmith and repair shops.

An impressive grouping, but much cannot be seen from here. Two large, two-story brick buildings, each 40 feet wide and nearly 200 feet long, greet visitors at the mill's entrance. One stored hogged fuel for steam which powered the mill and part of the town. The other, the power plant, has five boilers made, as steel plates on their sides say, for "The Potlatch Lumber Company by the Muskegon, Michigan Boiler Works, 1906." This was the largest belt-drive sawmill in the world. The central belt, five feet wide, five cowhides thick, was anchored in the power plant. West of here the Palouse River gurgles over the concrete remains of a splash dam which backed water for a log pond. North of the green chain are tracks separating the "green" side of the plant from the "dry." Here a mechanical loader moved lumber from the stacker to one of 24 dry kilns, each 100 feet long. Beyond the kilns are several other large storage sheds and east of the planing mill is the loading platform, over 500 feet in length with seventeen 45-foot high storage buildings attached.

To have walked over the site is to get some feel for the enormity of what Midwestern lumbermen built here. It is quickly obvious that wood was not precious in 1905. Support beams in the sawmill are 14-by-24 inches. In many places cribbed walls of double-rowed two-by-fours sit on their side the narrow way and are stacked over 40 feet high. Most floors are constructed mosaic fashion with butt ends of two inch lumber intricately laid to form beautiful patterns.

At its best the mill's architecture is cathedral-like. Storage shed Number 2 is a 260 foot long expanse of open beam, unpainted wood construction with a mosaic wooden floor. One wall is made of thousands of cribbed two-by-fours and the ceiling is weathered to a cedar-red. This doesn't seem a storage shed so much as an advertisement in *Architectural Digest* extolling the virtues of natural wood. All support columns have a beaver-like gnawed look to them – evidence that the building's aesthetics were little appreciated by Hyster drivers hurrying to stack quotas before shift's end.

On a warm day in June, I visited the plant trying to capture some impressions of a

place I had spent many years researching. A rotting 6-by-6 on the railroad tie slide gave way as I sat down, and I moved to a more secure support. I was observing the place nearly two years after the last shift cut lumber here. A cool southwest breeze carried the faint sounds of the river. Swallows swooped nearby, miniature dive-bombers, warning that this was now their territory. Their mud nests lined the eaves of the sawmill. Occasionally I heard a truck on Highway 95. Some were probably log trucks, passing the mill by. A compressor kicked on and off irregularly in the background. Except for this, all was quiet.

A one-word description of the view from where I sat is impossible but desolate comes to mind. Clover, pigweed, and thistles infringed upon the grounds. I ran my hand over the horizontal siding of the sawmill and got a handful of paint chips and slivers. The green chain has a bad sag, and many of the plant's sheet metal roofs are rust red. The only people about were the watchmen, and if I squinted so I couldn't tell exactly what the buildings were, I got an impression of a deserted Hollywood set from a prison movie.

Two brief notices tacked to an abandoned bulletin board gave a thumbnail sketch of the plant's recent history.

> June 3, 1981. R.E. Vassar, Plant Manager, to all employees: Because of the depressed lumber market conditions, Potlatch Unit will not operate on Fridays until further notice.
>
> August 13, 1981. R.E. Vassar to all employees: The Idaho Department of Employment in Moscow has agreed to process applications for unemployment in Potlatch.

At home that afternoon I retrieved a few clippings, refreshing my memory. A Lewiston *Tribune* story, August 13, 1981, announced the temporary closure of the mill. The February 6, 1982, edition of the paper noted the Corporation's statement that the mill would be closed through 1982. Finally, the *Tribune* reported that on a cold day in March 1983 a Corporate official, in a five-minute presentation to the unit's 200 employees, announced that the mill would be closed permanently.

All things which end have beginnings, and the Potlatch mill's beginning was more optimistic than its ending. The popular connection of the Palouse country – vast treeless expanses with rich crops of wheat, peas, and lentils – ignores the fact that the area's first major industry was sawmilling. Lumbering has continued to be an important cog in the Palouse economic wheel for over a century. The region's first settlers needed timber for fuel, fencing, and buildings, and the first emigrants moved to areas where lumber could be easily obtained.

The areas first sawmill, constructed in Colfax in 1871, was a crude affair with a blade locals said went up one day and down the next. By the 1880s Palouse City out-distanced all rival towns as the leading timber center of the region. Log drives on the Palouse River brought raw material to the town's three sawmills. Through the last three decades of the 19th century lumbering remained a small businessman's enterprise in the Palouse. The Palouse River Lumber Company in Palouse City was by far the biggest concern. But the immense stands of timber had not gone unnoticed by Mid-western lumbermen, who dramatically changed the area's sawmilling.

William Deary, born in Canada in the 1850s, was a squat, broad-bodied, deep-chested

man 5'9" tall, who wore size 8E shoes, had a 17 ½ inch collar and weighted over 200 pounds – ballooning to 350 when he retired from active woods work. In the 1880s, Deary moved to Wisconsin and, in 1895 struck a partnership with J.B. Kehl, a moderately successful flour miller and timberland trader. For reasons not entirely clear, Frederick Weyerhaeuser, Midwestern lumber baron supreme befriended Kehl, and when Kehl and Deary became partners, Weyerhaeuser took a liking to the Canadian lumberjack.

Understanding Midwestern lumbering in this period is akin to reading a Russian novel. An amazing conglomerate of timber families – principally the Lairds, Nortons, Mussers, Denkmans, and Weyerhaeusers – virtually controlled the lumber market. The families were close acquaintances, frequently intermarried, and usually sat on each other's boards of directors. Because Weyerhaeuser was the titular head of the group, these lumber interests were popularly known as "The Weyerhaeuser Conglomerate," although they were active in dozens of individual businesses.

In 1899 these families combined with the Deary/Hehl interests to form the Northland Pine Company. Kehl was President, Deary General Manager, and the firm immediately began purchasing timberland in northern Minnesota. Due to considerable unforeseen competition, the Northland Pine Company was unable to show hoped-for profits and dispatched Deary on two six-month journeys to the south to investigate possibilities there. At the conclusion of his second trip, Deary arrived in Spokane and heard of a state timberland sale in Latah County. After scouting the area, he sent back glowing reports on the size and quality of white pine in the region. At the Northland Directors' meeting in May 1901, Weyerhaeuser moved that Deary be given a free hand to purchase Idaho timberlands, a motion which passed unanimously.

Weyerhaeuser had been introduced to the rich Idaho resources six months earlier, when he traveled to Sandpoint and helped organize the Humbird Lumber Company. He then journeyed to Moscow to meet with Charles O. Brown and his son Nat. C.O. Brown, a "State of Mainer," first became interested in Idaho white pine when viewing the state's impressive display at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. He shortly thereafter moved to Idaho, and when Weyerhaeuser arrived in 1900 showed the lumber baron some fine tracts of timber, including the 207 foot high "White Pine King" near Bovill. Suitably impressed, Weyerhaeuser sanctioned the purchase of over 40, 000 acres of timberland on the Clearwater River and encouraged the formation of the Clearwater Timber Company.

By the time Deary was authorized to spend $100,000 to acquire timberlands north of the Clearwater he found a crowded field. Henry Turrish, another prominent Midwestern lumberman and shrewd judge of timber-lands, was busily buying stumpage for the Wisconsin Log and Lumber Company. Turrish and Deary engaged in friendly but fierce completion for state timberlands in Latah County. Employing two expert cruisers, William Helmer, and Andrew Bloom, Deary prepared for the state sale held in July 1901. But Turrish outbid him and purchased 400,000,000 feet for slightly over $100,000. After the sale, Turrrish magnanimously offered the Northland Pine Company one-half share in the holdings. There was considerable debate at the Northland stockholders' meeting regarding the advisability of joining Turrish. Some pointed out that the state limited logging activities on the land to 20 years, hardly

enough for the total harvest, while others mentioned the inaccessibility of navigable streams, necessitation to construction of an expensive railroad. After listening to the debate for a considerable time Weyerhaeuser rose, observed that the consensus seemed to be "that the company better buy the half interest," and so moved. Deary seconded and the motion passed unanimously.

After the first sale Deary and Turrish pooled resources in Idaho investments. Finally, in February 1903, all interested parties agreed to consolidate the holdings of the Northland Pine and Wisconsin Log and Lumber companies into a new firm known as the Potlatch Lumber company. Charles A Weyerhaeuser – Fredericks' son – was elected President, Turrish, Vice President, with Deary hired as General Manager.

The new company moved into the Palouse in a big way driving small concerns out of business. But their first moves were not without controversy at Directors' meetings.

In 1903 Deary and Charles Weyerhaeuser heard that the Palouse River Lumber Company mill and timber holdings would soon be for sale. The two were interested, but some stockholders wondered whether the Potlatch Lumber Company should get involved in manufacturing. The Laird, Norton, and Musser interests especially were concerned about the high cost of constructing sawmills and railroads but were a minority. In the early spring of 1903, the company purchased the Palouse River Lumber company for $265,000 and immediately began making improvements on its Palouse Plant. In 1904 the company paid $125,000 for William Codd's timber holdings in Latah County and his Colfax sawmill and promptly closed the mill.

As early as September 1902, Kehl and Deary scouted Latah County woods, planning a route for the logging railroad they were convinced would eventually be built. After the Potlatch Lumber Company was formed, Deary unsuccessfully tried to convince the Northern Pacific Railroad to construct a line into the timber. Failing this, the company decided to build its own road. It would start in Palouse, end in Montana and forever by the name Washington, Idaho, and Montana Railway, despite the fact that the track never got further than Bovill.

Palouse businessmen were ecstatic when hearing that the Weyerhaeusers had purchased their town sawmill and now planned to make Palouse the terminus for a new railroad. From 1903 to 1908 the community thrived, on the order of many of the great western boom towns. A flour mill, brewery, brick plant, and national chain store moved in. Real estate values rose. The city fathers banned brothels from Main Street and encouraged town beautification. Fresh fruit was delivered door to door.

In 1905, the Potlatch Lumber Company announced it would build a new mill and company town ten miles east of Palouse. Palouse residents were shocked, but boosters tried to maintain optimism. Announced the *Palouse Republic*, "As soon as the large mill is established, the company will give employment to about 2000 men the year round. The cost of the operations of the Potlatch Lumber Company along the Palouse river will far exceed $1,000,000 per year, all of which will be spent through Palouse, the company headquarters and banking point."

It was not to be. The company found it more prudent to maintain its headquarters and banking facilities in its own town. In 1910 the company closed the Palouse sawmill and

in 1911 operations at the planing mill stopped. "People say the loss will kill the town," the *Palouse Republic* valiantly reported. "Not so. It was expected that as uncut timber went farther and farther away it was inevitable Palouse would not be the best place. Possibly Palouse has expected too much from the sawmill. It has run in fits and starts, lumber income has been good but not continuous, therefore sometimes it has bad effects. If the mill goes maybe something more permanent will come in."

Northing did, and the Palouse boom was over. The logging history of one Palouse town ended with the construction of the new Potlatch mill, but the history of another was just beginning.

The lumber company directors sought an expert mill builder to construct their new plant and found one in W.A. Wilkinson of Minneapolis. Wilkinson's grandson "Bud" was later to distinguish himself as a football coach at the University of Oklahoma, but at the turn of the century W.A. was the pride of the family, supervising sawmill construction from coast to coast. And he charged dearly for his services. "I told him that I considered $7500 ample," wrote Charles Weyerhaeuser to a friend. "But he practically told me that if we did not want him for $10,000 that he would rather do small jobs by contract for other people, which he claims pays him better." Ten thousand dollars he got. The company also had to find $300,000 for construction of the mill itself – a mill that was in some ways obsolete from the start.

Wilkinson's brother-in-law challenged him to build an electrically driven mill and go down in history as a pioneer in the lumber industry. But ideas died hard with W.A. and he chose to construct a mill power by steam, driven by belts and shafts. It was the largest white pine mill in the world, and probably the last large one built with full shaft power delivery.

Quite a sight it was, though, and optimism reigned supreme. "Our new mill began sawing on Monday," wrote Allison W. Laird, Assistant General Manager in September 1906, "and is doing nice work." The *Palouse Republic* was more graphic:

> Tuesday of this week after six days of preliminary test, ... The big mill of the Potlatch Lumber Company was in full operation and turning out lumber as though the ground on which it is located, no more than a stubble field ten months ago, had never known anything else than the vibration of the mill's multitude of machinery in restless operation.

Cut lumber it did, and for a time it seemed the rosy expectations of Midwestern lumber barons would be upheld. But the Potlatch Lumber Company faced financial difficulty almost from the beginning. The Palouse River and other area streams were unpredictable, even when splash dams were constructed, necessitating the building of the expensive W.I. & M. Railroad and numerous spur lines. In 1909, at Deary's suggestion the company constructed another large mill at Elk River, but it never showed the profits expected. Deary like to "cut clean as we go," but such clearcutting of often unprofitable tracts was costly. Faced with these and other difficulties, the company had a hard time selling stock. As early as November 1907, barely a year after the mill rumbled to a start, Deary was ordered to lay-off men and curtail work. "These are times ... that men have to save every cent that can possibly be saved," Deary informed his mill superintendent. For the next few years, the company's profits

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roller-coastered, but its books never showed consistent black ink.

In 1913, after a long illness, William Deary died. His death came as a blow to those who worked under and admired him, and even the company directors recognized that he had indelibly stamped his impression on the firm. He was a man of "great force and energy," they noted, "of unusual native ability … of patience and industry, of tenacity … and of dauntless courage." High tribute but missing from the list was "financial acumen." For some time, the directors had questioned Deary's managerial abilities. As Weyerhaeuser's son later wrote, "William Deary was a good logger and perhaps was a good woodsman, but he knew very little about any phase of the lumber business after the log arrived at the sawmill." Deary was replaced by his assistant A. W. Laird – a banker by training – and the company looked forward to better times.

But better times were not to come quickly. In August 1913 Laird wired the directors that business was poor and requested $100,000 to balance the books. In 1921 he wrote that business was "at low ebb" and announced that both the Potlatch and Elk River mills were shut down, casualties of the post-World War I depression. Although the mill closures were temporary, the financial difficulties were not. Potlatch stockholders became increasingly disenchanted. J.P. Weyerhaeuser even suggested that the company divest itself of its company town because the non-logging interests of the firm were proving to be an economic burden.

It was not simply the Potlatch Lumber Company that was in trouble. While the Weyerhaeuser conglomerate had moved into Idaho with great expectations, based upon their hopes of the profitability of white pine, things just had not worked out Idaho's rugged terrain made logging difficult and expensive. Southern pine was shipped to market cheaper than Idaho lumber. The construction of the Panama Canal tremendously increased the value of Douglas fir harvested in Washington Oregon, correspondingly decreasing the value of Idaho pine.

As early as 1926 members of the conglomerate began discussion of the possibility of merging their north Idaho interests – the Edward Rutledge Timber Company in Coeur d'Alene, the Clearwater Timber Company in Lewiston, and the Potlatch Lumber company – into one concern. The depression of the late 1920s spurred this move, and in 1931 the north Idaho Weyerhaeuser interests merged to form Potlatch Forests, Incorporated, with headquarters in Lewiston. While the merger streamlined operations, it was not a quick fix.

In the fall of 1932, the Potlatch unit mill was closed, and many town residents believed the merger meant the end of their town. In words reminiscent of statements made 50 years later, R.E. Irwin, Assistant manager of the Potlatch unit, stated that the closure was "only temporary until the conditions of the lumber business adjust themselves."

Irwin's' prophecy was accurate, and the mill opened again, although business throughout the 1930s was slow. The company scratched for every dollar. In 1933 it marketed a Home Carpenter Kit and later sawed play blocks for children. Still, in only one year during the 1930s did the company turn a profit. It was not until the 1940s and the build up for World War II that Potlatch Forests showed consistent profits.

In the early 1950s the company sold its interest in the town of Potlatch to businesses and homeowners. Town residents have always been fearful of the impact of a mill closure on their community. After all, when first built the mill was almost obsolete, and the company felt it would be profitable only for 50 years. Thus in 1950 the American Guide Series book on Idaho predicted that Potlatch "will doubtless steadily decline until it is little more than a store and gas station." But the mill did not close after 50 years, and the town continued to thrive after the company sold it. In the 1970s the Potlatch Corporation – the latest appellation for the original Potlatch Lumber Company, a "Fortune 500" firm with international headquarters in San Francisco – gambled and changed the Potlatch mill from one that could cut a variety of dimensional lumber to one specializing in two-by-fours. As long as the housing market stayed strong the gamble paid off, but when housing declined the mill was closed – first temporarily, then permanently. The largest white pine sawmill in the world is now being dismantled by salvage firms.

The periodic rumors about the town dying resurfaced after the final mill closure But Potlatch is approaching its 80th birthday. Its residents have grown accustomed to booms and busts. They are a gritty bunch who don't put much stock in rumor. They have heard them all before. While Potlatch is proud of its past, and learns from it, it does not live there. The community is now working with the Clearwater Economic Development Association on redevelopment schemes that will utilize the community's unique history, while providing for a new economic base for a permanent future.

Almost unwillingly I left the mill on that June day. One last time I walked through and under the kilns, ran my hands over the tools in the blacksmith shop, wondered at the size of the head rigs, watched the Palouse River glide over the splash dam, and clambered to the top of the Muskegon-made boilers. I was saddened. This place, which I had seldom seen when operating, had a indescribable fascination for me even when all was quiet. I envisioned Bill Deary and Allison Laird here, walking through the same buildings, shouting over the deafening roar of machinery. I thought of folks like Art Sundberg who worked their entire life time here. All my hours in musty archives and obscure libraries, all the time spent talking to people and thinking about the place finally had meaning. I was, at last, during my final solitary tour, able to comprehend what it was that had been done here, and how this plant had affected the lives of so many

I reluctantly started my car and drove past the gate where the watchman waved, past the sign proudly proclaiming 798 safe days worked, past the rusted tracks and weathered depot of the W.I. & M. I stopped before turning onto Highway 95 for the trip home and glanced at the two huge boulders in front of the old gymnasium which stand as a memorial to Bill Deary. They seemed a fitting permanent tribute to a massive man and, and a massive idea.

Bibliographical Note

Most of the primary material for this article came from two large collections: the Weyerhaeuser Company Archives in Tacoma, and the Potlatch Corporation papers in Potlatch. The George F. Jewett papers at the University of Idaho Library are useful, especially for the history of the company after the 1931 merger. Two other major collections are available to researchers – the W.I.& M. Railway Company papers which were donated to the

Latah County Historical Society and are housed in the University Library and the Laird, North Company papers in Seattle. The Latah County Historical Society oral history collection contains several interviews with Potlatch mill workers and the *Palouse Republic* dutifully carried news about Potlatch developments.

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Ed. Note: Through courtesy of Jack Gruber and Paul Tobin of the Potlatch Corporation and with the help of Keith Petersen, the papers in Potlatch mentioned in the first paragraph above have been donated to the University of Idaho Library where they will be organized and calendared (i.e., listed) for the use of students and research workers.

Keith Petersen, an independent historian, lives in Pullman and is a former Director of the Latah County Historical Society.

This article appeared in the Fall 1983 issue of *Latah Legacy, the Quarterly Journal of the Latah County Historical Society.* It is reprinted here with permission of the author.


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MUSKEGON BOILER WORKS
MUSKEGON, MICH. 1938