

Birth of a Tree Farmer – Doug Stinson

My wife and I live on a tree farm on a ridge above the Cowlitz River thirty miles west of Mount Saint Helens. This morning I built a fire in our woodstove, did my yoga, and went to work in the woods, as I do everyday. I drove my pickup out to a thirty-year-old alder stand about a half mile from the house. I cut down brush and stunted trees to open an old trail in anticipation of some young visitors later this summer. After I burned a tank of gas, (at 87, this is my daily limit), I rigged up a 100 foot rope to rappel down a particularly steep part of the trail. Everyday I wake up and feel immensely grateful to be here on our family's farm, Cowlitz Ridge Tree Farm. The dream for this farm began in the Missouri Ozarks.



My wife, Fae Marie, and me on our tree farm.

I was raised in Mountain View, Missouri, on a hardscrabble farm. My mother was a loving woman who was fond of the forest and wildflowers, and my father a hard working man who always managed to keep food on the table.

In the late 1940s, when I was a teenager, the Missouri Conservation Commission took on a new mission. At the time, farmers were burning forests to create grasslands for grazing animals. The Commission wanted to eliminate grazing on forest land and began promoting growing timber as a crop. The Commission constructed a fire lookout three miles from our farm and an active fire crew quickly responded to any smoke. They also started planting shortleaf pine on state forest land. My buddies and I loved to climb the lookout, and as I watched the pine grow, I decided I wanted to plant my own. My folks gave me ten acres on a rocky hillside, and at fifteen I planted my first forest. I knew then I would be a forester.

The summer after my senior year in high school, I worked the wheat harvest in Kansas for a family called Boylan. I had mentioned my plans to go to college and study forestry, but as fall approached, I wasn't taking any steps toward leaving. One night after dinner, Mrs. Boylan said, "Douglas, you need to go to school. We'd love for you to stay, but it's more important to go to school." I packed up my stuff and drove my 1931 Model A back to Missouri. I sold the car and my mother took me to the University of Missouri at Columbia. It was two weeks after the start of the school year, but somehow, they let me in.

In 1952, after my freshman year, I came to Sutherlin, Oregon, to work on a fire suppression crew with the Douglas Forest Protective Association. Our fire camp was located in Upper Hinkle Creek next to a Weyerhaeuser logging camp. The fire boss, Lloyd Thorton, quickly whipped the crew into shape running us through forest trails and cutting endless cords of firewood. Our tools

were cross cut saws, wedges and splitting mauls. The summer was a hot one, and it wasn't long before I saw my first crown fire.

I was on one of several crews sent to battle a fire burning near the logging camp. A large cold deck of logs was down in a steep canyon. Lloyd sent a buddy and me into the canyon with a fire pump and hose to spray water from a creek onto the cold deck. Just before we dropped down into the canyon, Lloyd grabbed my shoulder and said, "If you see any smoke coming out of the cold deck, drop everything and get up to the ridge as fast as you can."

After one hour of spraying the deck of logs, I saw a whisp and then two minutes later, a larger plume of smoke. Lloyd's words flew through my mind: we shut off the pump and scrambled up to the ridge. Within five minutes of reaching the top, the cold deck exploded and flames roared toward us through the tops of the trees. Dodging flying embers, we jumped into the fire trucks and headed to the next ridge, several miles off, where we finally managed to control the fire.

During my sophomore year in college, another forestry friend and I went to see the movie "Red Skies Over Montana." As we walked out of the movie I said, "I want to be a smokejumper." He said, "Me, too." He jumped McCall in 1953 and I rookied Cave Junction in 1954.

Oregon was love at first sight: big timber, mountains and rivers. I knew I wanted to live and work in the Pacific Northwest. I started dreaming of my own patch of forest land.

Upon graduating with a degree in Forestry, I had the choice of being drafted into the Army or joining a service of choice. I chose the Marine Corps, arriving at Quantico on January 1, 1956, for Officer Candidate School. I served four years with time in Japan, Okinawa, and the Philippines.

After leaving the Corps, another Marine and I decided to homestead in Alaska. It was 1959 – Alaska had just become a state and there was free land. Our plan was to make a fortune near Talkeetna. To keep the land, 160 acres each, we were required to build a small shack, clear ten acres of brush, and plant a crop. We spent two months bushwacking and camping while looking for possible farm sites. The land was low quality and no markets existed for any crop and we decided against our plan. But "the fishin' and huntin'" was good.

I moved to Juneau and got a job as a Junior Forester with the Forest Service. In the fall of 1959, I transferred to Ketchikan where I met a beautiful auburn haired teacher named Fae Marie, who became my bride. We lived in logging camps in Edna Bay and Craig, Alaska and soon had two children, Steve and Ann.



A newspaper clipping of a Forest Service firefighting exercise in Edna Bay.

We loved our “kingdom by the sea,” but there is very little private land in Southeastern Alaska and my urge to become a tree farmer was growing. We purchased 640 acres of timberland near Bonners Ferry, Idaho, and I planned to get a job nearby. But plans do not always work out; there were no “nearby” jobs, and I went to work as a timber cruiser for US Plywood in Roseburg, Oregon. We sold the Idaho land and purchased 200 acres in Roseburg. Our third child, Julie, was born there.

In 1970, US Plywood asked me to move to Washington State. After two years in Seattle, we found our land above the Cowlitz River in Toledo, Washington. Since our marriage in 1960, Fae Marie and I had moved twelve times. It was time to settle down. We built a house in 1971 and it has been our home since.

In 1973, we did our first logging in Toledo and I was hooked. With the profit, we were able to purchase more acreage in Mossyrock, Washington. By that point, I had a few guidelines for purchasing new ground: no steep ground (maximum side slope of 40%), no more than 30 miles from home and high quality soil. With the purchase of land near Mossyrock, I was getting a very strong desire to become a full-time tree farmer, but I still needed outside income. Tree farming is a long-term business; tree farmers are usually timber rich and cash poor.

The children were 11, 9 and 7 when we moved to the tree farm and soon learned to work pulling tansy, mulching trees and planting trees – there is always work to do on a farm. I think our children learned to read in the woods; we mulched newly planted seedlings with newspaper. On Saturdays we would all be out mulching and suddenly I’d realize it was a little too quiet. I’d look around to see them reading *Dear Abby*, the local sports news, or national politics.

In 1978, I left US Plywood to work for Conifer Pacific, a small veneer and plywood company near Elma, Washington. Conifer Pacific did not own timberland; we purchased US Forest Timber sales to sustain our mills. I was in charge of timber procurement and the logging operations. My plan was to do this work for five years. Due to the major economic downturn in the 1980s, I stayed thirteen.

In 1990, at 57 years old, it was time to fish or cut bait. I traded my shares in Conifer Pacific for the owner’s half interest in a 320 acre timberland we had purchased together. He threw in a D-4 Cat and a pickup and I was in business. With this addition, we had four tracts totaling 1,200 acres.

In 1994, we named our forest Cowlitz Ridge Tree Farm and drew up our first management plan. At that time, our son, Steve, was finishing his degree in Environmental Science at Evergreen and Julie was completing a degree in Forest Resources at Oregon State University. We put our heads together and wrote our goals:

To earn a living;

To live in balance with nature, a “partnership with nature”; and

To educate the public and other landowners on the values of good forest stewardship.

We base our philosophy on the belief that diversity in our forests is important. Timber, watershed, soil health, wildlife and recreation are values integrated into our management plan.

We believe that through the integration of these values we will be leaving the land in better ecological condition than when it was purchased. All waters on the tree farm drain to the Cowlitz River, a steelhead, chinook and coho salmon stream. Forests like ours are essential to providing clean, cool water for fish.

In 1998, Steve received a Masters Degree in Silviculture from the University of Washington. I was so pleased he had decided to follow in my tracks as a forester and tree farmer. He took Cowlitz Ridge Tree Farm to a new level. He was instrumental in converting a 33-year-old Douglas Fir Stand, severely infected with root rot, into a Ponderosa Pine and Western Red Cedar plantation. He started the practice of leaving snags in clearcuts to attract woodpeckers and other birds. He negotiated with state and federal agencies to procure alternate plans, allowing us to log closer to streams while still protecting the fish.

We worked together every day for many years. On one small logging job (two to three acres) Steve fell the trees and I yarded the logs with our Model 21 Garrett Skidder. It was very satisfying for us, a father/son team, to produce a load of logs. We hired a self-loading log truck to move the logs to the mill. Many times at the end of a long day, we would relax in our wood fired sauna, drink a beer and plan out our next Cowlitz Ridge adventure. The sauna became our “think tank.”



Steve and I logging

One idea we discussed often was how to pass the tree farm to the next generation. In 2012, we created a Limited Liability Corporation (LLC) as the legal entity to govern the tree farm. At that time Fae Marie and I transferred the tree farm to Steve, Ann and Julie. Steve became the manager and we continued working together daily.

Late in 2012, after experiencing discomfort he thought was a hernia, Steve was diagnosed with leiomyosarcoma, an aggressive soft tissue cancer. After two years of a bitter fight, he passed away at 52. His death was an earthquake to our family.

We decided to dissolve the 2012 LLC. In the end, two parcels were sold to Port Blakely Tree Farms, a 175-year-old forest resource company with a reputation for “doing the right thing.” We are very happy our land will remain in timber. In 2016, Ann and Lou Jean, my daughter-in-law, formed a new LLC with the remaining tracts. I am the senior advisor for long-term planning and handle much of the day to day work.

As the three of us work in the forest, tending seedlings, or thinning young trees, we see deer, elk, coyotes, porcupines and evidence of black bears and cougars. Eagles, Osprey hawks, Red-tailed hawks, ravens, wild pigeons, swallows, mourning doves, Saw Whet Owls and pileated woodpeckers go about their daily lives in the trees.

This year, I discovered a Red-tailed hawk nest 85 feet up in a Cottonwood tree. The adult hawks feed in a twelve acre clear cut we logged in 2018 and fly a half mile to their nest. I have placed two chairs in the woods out of sight of the nest where Fae Marie and I come to watch the nest in the evenings.

As I've lived in the forest with my hands in the dirt every day, I've become a keen observer. Two major changes have occurred since 1971: Our annual rainfall has decreased, and our summers are longer and drier. Every morning at seven, for the past thirty years, I've recorded the rainfall; the average from 1990-2017 was 53 inches. In 2018, we received only 41 inches, a 23% decrease. In 2019, the rainfall was only 35 inches, a 34% decrease. In the seventies, it was standard practice to move logging operations from dirt roads to rocked roads by the 15th of September; now loggers run on dirt roads through October without being mudded out.

That's a plus for the loggers, but the lack of rain and increased, sustained heat is stressing our native tree species. Douglas Fir, Western Red Cedar, and Red Alder are all under duress. Trees are like humans, when their immune system is weakened, they are vulnerable to disease. This lack of moisture is particularly a problem on droughty sites, like our Toledo site. The soil here is a glacial outwash with about one foot of topsoil, then twenty feet of gravel and sand. This lies on top of hardpan clay. Rain perks too fast through the gravel, then, when it hits the impenetrable clay, flows horizontally.

We have seen increased damage from laminated root rot, fir twig weevil, and a variety of fungi, all "opportunistic" diseases that attack stressed trees. With adequate rain, trees can still grow well, but with our reduced rainfall we have begun to change species. Eight years ago, we planted one hundred acres of westside Ponderosa Pine; the seed source is the Willamette Valley. A little known fact is that the earliest mills in the Willamette Valley cut Ponderosa Pine. Our pine is doing well.

In January of this year, we thinned a ninety-year-old stand in order to remove dead and dying Western Red Cedar. This is the first time mature cedars have died on this tract in our fifty year ownership. We replanted with drought resistant species – Incense Cedar, Port Orford Cedar, and Western White Pine, mixed in with Douglas Fir and Western Red Cedar.



Enjoying a forest bath with my grand-niece.

We love visitors to come walk through our woods. We let the forest tell its own story as they walk the trails. If you'd like to come visit, please drop me a line at treeman@toledotel.com.

I am most grateful to my daughter, Ann, for giving of her time and skills to make this article happen.