

O'Neil Family Tree Farm History

On June 1st, 1944, the O'Neil timberlands were certified by the American Tree Farm System as Tree Farm #12 in the nation. But the story starts long before that...

Charles Israel O'Neil arrived in Kalispell on January 22nd, 1895. "C.I." had been invited by James Coram to manage the Butte and Montana Commercial Company lumber yard on the corner of 4th Street and Main. He brought his younger brother, Clinton Dewitt O'Neil, along on the train ride from Belt, Montana. C.I. found the town of Kalispell, population 1,500, to have "over forty licensed saloons and an untold number of houses of prostitution", but sensed great opportunity in the lumber industry. He took the job.

C.I. was adventurous and had a good head for business opportunity. Back in July of 1891, at age 22, he left his parents and siblings in Rich Hill, Missouri, to take a job in Monarch, Montana, with Dubach Lumber. Younger brother C.D. was eager to join him and arrived in 1894 when C.I. was living in Belt. Now they were in Kalispell and C.I. O'Neil began his involvement in the early Flathead Valley lumber trade.

By 1896, C.I. had purchased the Butte and Montana Commercial Company lumber yard in Kalispell. Brother C.D. was the first employee. C.D. and James Byrne of Great Falls became investors. Over the next 10 years, C.I. was busy buying ownership in lumber mills, such as Northwestern Lumber on the Stillwater river and Dawson Lumber in Libby (later sold to J. Neils). He opened O'Neil Lumber yards in Whitefish, Great Falls, and Havre. He purchased lots in the Kalispell townsite and resold them with a 24' x 24' house built on them. All the while, he was buying timberland.



O'Neil Lumber, 4th and Main, Kalispell, MT, ca. 1898

He never bought timber without a personal inspection. Much of the land was homestead properties. Farming in the forest is well-nigh impossible, but many folks filed for a homestead in the Flathead Valley,

“proved up” the land, sold it for cash, and moved on. Much of the current O’Neil timberlands west of Kalispell in the Rhodes Draw and McMannamy Draw areas were purchased from homesteaders.

C.I. married Kathryn Fingado in 1904. Kathryn’s family had homesteaded in the Rollins area. C.I. and Kathryn had 5 children: Sylvia, Lawrence, Charles, John, and Isabelle. John later lost his life in World War II.

Although C.I. was an adventurer, travelling to Fort Steele B.C. on the “Fort Steele Trail”, climbing Mt. Grinnell with “Death on the Trail” Reynolds, riding his bicycle solo to Yellowstone park from Kalispell, his health began to suffer. In the winter of 1905-1906, C.I. made many trips up the Stillwater river to check logging camps and direct the construction of a dam on Lower Stillwater lake. Travel was by sleigh and he slept on logging camp floors. He ended up with shooting pains in his fingers and toes, pneumonia, and possibly, tuberculosis. He was advised by his doctor to spend some time in a warmer, drier climate to restore his health.

C.I., wife Kathryn, and daughter Sylvia spent the winter of 1906-1907 in California. Over the next 10 years, a few more trips to California were made, most notably being their California trip in 1915. That year, C.I. decided to travel to California by car. He purchased an automobile and then hand-crafted custom wooden boxes to attach to the fenders for storing their tent, cooking supplies, food, bedding, and auto repair parts. He and Kathryn loaded their 4 children, ranging in age from 10 to 2 years old, and set out for Pomona, CA. It took weeks to get there, driving on unmarked, muddy wagon roads and camping wherever there was a level spot and water. It took 4 days just to drive from Kalispell to Spokane!

By 1918, the decision was made to leave Montana and move permanently to Pomona, CA. C.I. largely sold off all of his interests in Montana lumber yards and mills, keeping his timber holdings. This might have been the end of O’Neil activity in the Flathead Valley, were it not for his second son, Charles Henry.

Charles Henry “Chuck” O’Neil was 9 years old when the family moved to Pomona. He enjoyed his boyhood in Southern California, playing in the lemon and almond groves, travelling through the rural countryside on trolley rail lines, watching silent movies being filmed, etc., but he was already a dedicated lumberman. As soon as he graduated from Pomona High in 1928, he went back to Montana to enroll in the University of Montana Forestry program. He worked for the Forest Service in the summer fighting fire. Chuck received his Forestry Degree four years later in 1932.

Upon graduation, deep in the Depression, Chuck was hired by the Forest Service. To his disappointment, his assignment was not hands-on forestry work, but that of a Forest Service detective in the Fortine area. He was given a car and fishing gear and told to hang around the woods looking for suspicious people. During the depression, out-of-work men would light fires in the woods and then apply for fire-fighting work with the Forest Service. Chuck left this job to become City Engineer in Kalispell. He bought some equipment and started a custom planning operation on the NE corner of Main Street and East Montana Street. He operated a lumber mill near Ashley Creek at the south end of 8th Avenue West, known as “Montana Forest Products”.



Chuck O'Neil's planing operation on the NE corner of Main & East Montana Streets in the 1930's. The building later housed Kroger-Noble Lumber and The Bikology.

INVOICE					
CHAS. H. O'NEIL					
MONTANA FOREST PRODUCTS					
LUMBER, POSTS, POLES, PILING AND WOOD					
KALISPELL, MONTANA, _____					193_____
M _____					
TERMS: CASH					
PIECES	ITEMS	FEET	PRICE	AMOUNT	

Montana Forest Products invoice sheet from the 1930's

During this time, Chuck met a girl from the Lower Valley, Wynona Webster. Wynona's dad was the engineer at Somers Lumber Co. Chuck and Wynona were married on June 24, 1937. C.I. and Kathryn followed the old tradition of primogeniture, the eldest son (Larry) inherits the family assets. Using the profits from his lumbering operations, Chuck and Wynona started buying as much timberland as they could afford from C.I., most of it in the Rhodes Draw area. It took them over a year and a half just to set aside enough money to buy a Philco radio! Chuck and Wynona started their family with daughter Lorene in 1938. As time went on, the family grew to include Nancy, Charlene, and John.

Meanwhile, back in California, Chuck's brother, Larry, had graduated with a Business Degree. In the early 1940's, C.I. decided to provide cash and assets to launch a family lumber business. Chuck would manage the operations and forestry end of the business and brother Larry would move back to Kalispell to take care of the finances and accounting. C.I.'s wife, Kathryn, and daughters Sylvia and Isabel in California would be shareholders. The new company was incorporated as Forest Products and the new lumber mill was built at the west end of Second Street.

Chuck and Larry grew the business, eventually buying out all the family shares to leave them as 50/50 partners in Forest Products. They continued to buy timberland and also purchased the Kal-Mont Lumber Co. mill in the early 1960's.

During the nearly 40-year operation of Forest Products and Kal-Mont mills, Chuck remained deeply interested and involved with forestry. Along with the American Tree Farm System, he was active in many forestry and wood products organizations, including the Society of American Foresters. He travelled to Europe to benchmark their intensive forest management practices, especially in the Scandinavian countries. He was a strong proponent of selective harvesting methods in a time when few were willing to accept the lower return.

By 1980, Forest Products owned roughly 12,000 acres of timberland. Ironically, Chuck was never fully able to manage those timberlands the way he wanted to. Due to the low cost-basis on much of the inherited timber, capital gains tax was naturally high at harvest. Because of the high tax rates, Larry often resisted Chuck's recommendations for managing and harvesting company lands. Much of the O'Neil land was significantly under-harvested throughout the 1940 to 1980 timeframe.

Besides the under-utilized timberlands, business went generally well for Forest Products and Kal-Mont. Chuck's son, John, became involved in managing the Forest Products mill throughout the 1970's and into the 1980's. John provided good support until leaving to pursue other opportunities. However, in September of 1981, Chuck's brother, Larry, passed away. Market conditions, operating and estate debt, and the legal nature of their corporate structure combined to make it unfeasible at that point to continue operating the mills. Shutting down the Forest Products and Kal-Mont mill operations was a devastating blow to Chuck and Wynona, especially as they considered their many long-time employees.

Negotiations to divide the assets began immediately with Larry's heirs. Chuck's daughter, Charlene, left her teaching, paralegal, and commercial fishing careers in Washington state to support Chuck and Wynona in Kalispell. Daughter Nancy worked daily from San Diego and made frequent trips to Kalispell to iron out the deal. In the end, Chuck and Wynona retained ownership of the two sawmills and approximately 6,000 acres of timberland.

Out of the divided assets of Forest Products, a new family partnership began, intending to carry on the O'Neil legacy in forestry. With Char and Nancy's help, "Montana Forest Products" was incorporated on November 17, 1982. You could almost say "re-incorporated", as this was the business name Chuck had used in the 1930's. All of Chuck and Wynona's children were set up as shareholders, and all grandchildren were given shares in 1983. Chuck and Char worked side by side every day at the old Forest Products office, managing the timberlands, leasing portions of the mill sites, working easement issues, etc. They created a financially stable and inclusive family business.

By 1987, Larry O'Neil's heirs had sold 6,200 acres of inherited timberland to F.H. Stoltze Land & Lumber. This sale was beneficial to Montana Forest Products, as these lands were interspersed with MFP timberlands. It allowed Montana Forest Products to work with a single landowner having similar family-based forest management philosophies. F.H. Stoltze has been a valuable partner in managing Montana Forest Products lands for 3 decades.

Chuck and Wynona gifted some of their private timberland and some Montana Forest Products timberland to their children over the years. In 1997, all of the grandchildren were gifted 20 acres of timberland, giving these following generations a personal tie to the forest management legacy.

Chuck never retired from his life of forestry and lumber. He worked daily at the office until his late 80's, with Char by his side. In December of 2001, Wynona passed away. Less than a year later, Chuck passed away at age 92 in August of 2002.



Chuck and Wynona O'Neil

Char continued to manage Montana Forest Products after Chuck's passing. With help from her siblings, especially Nancy, the family partnership continued to manage existing timber stands and acquire additional lands. F.H. Stoltze provided sound forestry guidance and handled the harvest operations.

A successful family forest must inspire its younger generations to be involved. To this end, Char and Nancy set up the first family "Day in the Woods" event in 2004. Every year since then, Chuck and Wynona's children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren get together and spend the day on the family timberlands. Typical events include visiting active harvest sites, pulling deer screens from recent plantings, viewing troubled stands, and discussing management options. Ron Buentenmeier and the Stoltze crew have added much to these events over the years, teaching tree identification, the basics of forest biology and management, and instilling the value of owning and managing forest land.

Montana Forest Products was extremely fortunate to benefit from Ron Buentenmeier's legendary wealth of knowledge and experience. When Ron retired from F.H. Stoltze, he agreed to become Resource Manager for Montana Forest Products. Ron started managing MFP stands on June 1, 2008 and also began educating the family on how to self-manage the timberlands. That same year, each of the

children and grandchildren were each gifted an additional 20 acres family timberland, adding a greater individual connection to the family history of forestry.



Charlene O'Neil and Ron Buentenmeier install a Forest Stewardship sign at the 2013 Montana Forest Products "Day in the Woods"

With Ron's guidance, the next generation of the C.H. O'Neil family has taken on management. In August of 2009, Garren Hartman (husband of grandchild Sarah Jayne O'Neil) was asked to join in managing Montana Forest Products. He is now the General Manager. Grandson Jordan O'Neil joined the Montana Forest Product management team full time in June of 2014. Both completed a number of forest management and stewardship programs, including becoming Accredited Logging Professionals. Garren and Jordan harvest nearly all of the Montana Forest Products sustainable yield of 1.25 million board feet annually. Montana Forest Products was also a partner in starting Custom Beams and Milling LLC in 2017. The beam mill is set up on MFP land and utilizes Montana Forest Products logs.

The family of Charles H. O'Neil was proud to mark 75 years as an ATFS certified tree farm in 2019, but also proud that the O'Neil legacy in the Flathead Valley lumber industry marks 125 years in 2020. Chuck and Wynona's 4 children, 7 grandchildren, and 12 great-grandchildren will continue careful stewardship of the lands and maintain their long-term management outlook for future O'Neil generations.

