

Hama Hama Tree Farm

**Three Generations of Family Managers:
Bart Robbins, Dave Robbins, Adam James**

Washington Applicant for
2009 Western Regional Tree Farmer of the Year



Every tree farm has its own special story. Here is ours.

January 2009



HAMA HAMA®

Est. 1922

The Beginning



3 generations: 1st, Bart (middle on left), 2nd, Dave (middle on right), 3rd, Jesse Bloomfield, Adam James, Hank Bloomfield, Tom James

The story of the Hama Hama Company is the story of an industrial company that managed to survive both the liquidation of old growth timber and the Great Depression, and begin anew as a sustainable and diversified family-run tree farm. The story begins with a man named Daniel Robbins, in the late 19th century, in St. Paul, Minnesota. Daniel worked as a construction superintendent for railroad magnate and “Empire Builder” J.J. Hill, who exhorted everyone around him to buy land in the newly-opened American West. Encouraged by his boss, Daniel began buying land out west, sight unseen, including a 60,000 acre parcel of wheat land in North Dakota and a 5,000 acre timbered tract along Hood Canal, in Washington State.

When Daniel Robbins died unexpectedly in 1905, he left behind a significant estate. His executor and only son, Harry M. Robbins, then 25 years old, was charged with liquidating his father’s assets in order to provide for his mother and 5 sisters. For three years Harry Robbins traveled in the west, learning about his family’s properties and trying to decide how to manage them. He ended up selling all the land except the Hood Canal tract, whose value, he was told by a forester, could be best realized by logging the old growth.

In 1922 Harry M. Robbins organized and incorporated the Hama Hama Logging Company. Three years later, to consolidate his property and provide waterfront access for the railroad, he bought the tidelands at the mouth of the Hama Hama River, and land from homesteaders, including the Seven-Eleven Ranch located in the lower valley. Eventually he accumulated 10,000 acres. He had the good fortune to be starting a railroad logging company just as a nearby logging company, the Discovery Bay Company, was finishing up. He hired the entire Discovery Bay crew, and purchased much of the equipment. The locomotives, rail cars, donkey yarders, cables and rigging were all barged down Hood Canal to the mouth of the Hama Hama River.

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The Company employed 250 to 300 men, some with families, working out of two different camps over the years, plus the log booming crew. The logs were dumped and rafted at the mouth of the river, then towed to the Pope and Talbot mill at Port Gamble. The Company produced, on average, about one million board feet of logs per week, or 50 million feet a year, for ten years. It was a standard sized operation for its day. During the Company's heyday, there was a schoolhouse in the nearby town of Eldon, a hotel along the Canal at the mouth of the river, and a dance hall in the valley itself.



**HH Logging Camp, c. 1925, by Darius Kinsey
Whatcom Museum #13662**

The Company finished logging in 1932, just at the start of the Great Depression. By the time the last logs were dumped into the Canal to be shipped to the mill, the price had dropped from \$18 per thousand board feet (\$18/M) to \$8/M. The Depression was tough on everybody. The Company let go of all of the crew except one busted-up brakeman, Nels Morken, who stayed on with his wife Stella as farm caretaker and dairyman.

During the Depression, cutover timberland was worth about \$1 an acre, if you could find a buyer. And the property taxes on the Hama Hama land were about the same, \$1 an acre. So, like many others, H. M. Robbins simply stopped paying taxes on the bulk of the property, which then reverted to County ownership, and has since become State Department of Natural Resources "county trust" lands. The 2500 acres that he chose to hang on to remains surrounded by those state lands. Given his Depression-era thinking, he felt that the valley-bottom property he retained could become a haven for the family someday.

Forward to another generation: In the mid-50's, Harry's youngest child, Bart Robbins (now the 3rd generation) made a decision with long lasting consequences: to quit his job in Oregon at Umpqua Plywood, move his young family to the Hama Hama Farm, and try to make a go of it. H.M. Robbins told Bart that he would pay his salary for 6 months, and that if he could not make a living the family would have to sell the farm, because they couldn't afford to pay the taxes anymore.

At that time, there were few trees to speak of, only scattered small reproduction, and so Bart had to improvise. For six months a year, he caught shrimp in the Canal, pulling 20 pots by hand morning and evening and running a shrimp delivery into Seattle during the day. He cut and baled Christmas Trees, and recalls getting 98 cents for each bale (one bale equals 24 lineal feet) of Christmas trees delivered to the Shelton railhead, about 40 minutes away. He scoured the valley for cedar to sell as shake bolts and for scrap iron leftover from the logging operation. He also noticed that there were volunteer, non-native Pacific oysters growing on the tideflats at the mouth of the Hama Hama, and he began including Hama Hama oysters on his shrimp delivery trips into Seattle. Budgeting for the bi-annual property taxes was always a looming difficulty.

Meanwhile, the timber base was quietly doing what it does, with or without the attention of man: growing. Bart had a forester from Shelton do an early inventory, in 1957, and help formulate a forest management plan, the farm having been Tree Farm Certified in 1953. There were remnants of Old Growth left that were too small or out of the way for the railroad, and some 500 acres of older second growth which had been ox-logged in the 1880s by some very hardy early pioneers in Hood Canal.

So from 1959 to 1964, Bart ran a small three-man operation, skidding logs with an old D-4 Cat and arch to a portable sawmill, where they were squared into cants to sell.

In 1972, Bart's son David (4th generation) quit college to work on the home place, with the trees as his primary interest. A forester from Shelton, Guy Lusignan, was hired to do another inventory and develop a sustainable tree farming program. They started out with thinnings, thinnings, and more thinnings. Dave realized that in following Lusignan around the woods, he was getting his forestry education, and what was paid to him was just tuition.

In those years Dave, Bart, and a cousin, Robbie Dore, were the logging and roadbuilding crew. They also did all the pre-commercial thinning, and most of the planting. They began working some clearcuts into the mix in 1978, and since have added some acreage, growing the farm to its present 4300 acres.

How We Farm

Hood Canal is primarily Douglas-fir country (perhaps 90%), with the balance split between western hemlock, western red cedar, red alder, and bigleaf maple. Our soil types are on the "bony" side: mostly glaciated hardpans and gravels with some pockets of actual dirt thrown in. They average a low site 3, capable of growing a 100 foot or less tree in 50-years. Hood Canal timber has a good reputation among mill owners and foreign log buyers, as the slow growing conditions produce high quality timber with clean boles and a tight ring count.

Given that it takes a long time to produce a decent sized tree on such land, we opted for a long, 75 year harvest rotation. Now that some of the managed stands are coming of age, and especially those on better soils, it's clear that we'll be managing some of the farm on shorter rotations, perhaps as early as 45 years, similar to the big industrial tree farms around here.

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One of the problems on this tree farm is root rot, and a decade or so ago we started planting root rot resistant species, such as alder and cedar, in the affected areas following a clearcut. We feel that one of our best forestry tools is pre-commercial thinning. We try to thin to 300 stems per acre at about age 12 to 14. Then, on the right site land, we normally do a commercial thinning at about age 30, to 180 stems per acre.

We did broadcast slash burns on our clearcuts from 1978 to 1988 when it became too difficult due to smoke management policies that were brought on by the national Clean Air Act. One benefit of stopping that practice (aside from less stress!) is that we found we could leave the small understory cedar, and just plant around them. They get shocked with the light, but they do recover.

For the past several years, we've hired a processor whenever possible to fall and process at the stump. This leaves the slash out in the unit to decompose, reducing the need to burn slash, and we just skid bunches of processed logs.

Typically, Dave runs the truck-mounted log loader, and one of his nephews will skid and occasionally fall and buck. Four of the nephews have worked in the woods over the years, and now one is running the oyster business, another is getting his master's degree in forestry, and a third is working as a forester for a large timber company. A niece who began working on the tideflats as a teenager is now managing the retail seafood store.

In the last 20 years, 800 acres have been harvested, about 40 acres per year. In addition 700 acres have been precommercially thinned, 900 acres have been commercially thinned, and vegetation control of Himalayan blackberry, big leaf maple, willow, and madrona has been done on an "as need" basis on all of the clearcut acreage.

Inventories that have been done over the years show that the standing volume has tripled, and at the same time, 40 million board feet has been harvested, a good testimony to the growth capacity of the land.

1952 cruise had	9 million board feet
1975	14 million board feet
1990	23 million board feet
2000	27 million board feet



Dave's nephews Tom, Jesse, Adam in 2003

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In the 2008 clearcut known as the Madrona Ridge Unit, we found about a dozen conky old growth, which we were able to leave as habitat trees. Dave has initiated a conversation with Washington Dept. of Fish and Wildlife to the effect that we should not be penalized should these trees attract an endangered marbled murrelet, or some other rare creature, for the simple reason that its very presence would show that it approves of our forest management practices. But that seems to be a slow moving, and one sided, conversation.



View from Madrona Ridge towards cow barn

Community Outreach

Helena Robbins, wife of Harry (2nd generation), was a particular proponent of girl scouting in the Northwest. In the early 1920s, Helena and Harry decided to help the Scouts start a camp on Hood Canal. The Hama Hama Logging Company sold 480 acres to the Scouts, including about 1.5 miles of Hood Canal waterfront, for 10 dollars per acre, which was the going rate at the time. Then Harry and Helena made a personal donation to the Scouts so the organization could afford to buy the land. In their honor, the Scouts named the camp "Camp Robbinswold", and it's been a functional and very beautiful camp ever since, giving many girls over the years an appreciation for Hood Canal and the outdoors.

In the 1970s, the Scouts needed to raise money and considered selling Camp Robbinswold. Bart and Dave, together with a forester from Shelton, convinced the Scouts that they could turn the Camp into a financial resource by managing its timber. Since then, the Scouts have conducted several profitable clearcuts on Camp Robbinswold.

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The Hama Hama Company has also helped educate local children about the benefits of tree farming. Dave started doing tours for the fifth grade class at Hood Canal School in the mid-90s. The tour was called “Forests and Fish” well before Washington State’s “Forest and Fish” Forest Practices Act was developed in 1999. The tours give the kids many opportunities, including the chance to see salmon spawning in the Hama Hama River. The company ownership includes the entire anadromous fish-bearing reach of the Hama Hama, as well as John’s Creek, a tributary with some excellent salmon habitat.

When the kids see a spawned-out dog salmon, with its big teeth and hooked jaw, their attention is riveted, just as it is when they taste an oyster, fresh off the beach, and learn that shellfish depends upon clean water. The message is simple and pounded home: That good forestry and good aquatic habitat can go hand in hand.

In the early 1990s the Hama Hama Company formed a partnership with Long Live the Kings (LLTK), a non-profit environmental group, with the goal of rehabilitating all of the Hama Hama River’s native fish runs. LLTK is a local group dedicated to the idea that fish can be brought back through low-cost methods, such as routing water from natural spring tributaries into remote site incubators, where the juvenile salmon hatch before swimming downstream to a pond until they are ready to move into the stream.



Hood Canal 5th Grader preparing to eat an oyster

LLTK chose the Hama Hama River because the salmon habitat was still good, and because there was only one landowner to “partner” with. LLTK’s work over the past 12 years has resulted in the number of steelhead redds (or nests) in the river increasing ten-fold. In 2005, the Hama Hama Company was recognized by Shared Strategy for Puget Sound, a salmon-enhancement group, for its commitment to native salmon recovery.

The farm has also hosted tours for the local chapter of the Washington Farm Forestry Association, and in the summer of 2007 we hosted the Western Washington Family Forest Owners Field Day, which is put on by the Dept. of Natural Resources and Washington State University Extension Service, with financial support from the American Tree Farm System and several other sponsors. It was a successful educational event attended by over 200 people.

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Dave has also been active on the Mason County Noxious Weed Board, and has been a volunteer with the local fire department for almost 30 years, serving as fire department chief for half that time. Annie Robbins, Dave's wife, has been an active volunteer at Hood Canal School for the past decade, and recently helped coordinate the landscaping work for the new school building.

Special places on the farm

The special places that come to mind all seem to be related to the river. Starting at the lowest point, and working upstream, you can see the drop-off where the tideflats disappear into the depths of Hood Canal. Here you find eel grass and geoducks, moon snails and sea cucumbers, and it's pretty special for people of all ages to explore that edge.

Then, moving upstream toward the Olympics, you cross highly productive oyster and clam ground in the middle of the estuary. As you get higher, these give way to mudflats, and then marsh sod. When the tide is right this is prime duck hunting territory.



A Moon snail on the HH Co. tideflats



Looking upriver over the Salt Marsh

Across Highway 101 the salt marsh sod gradually gives way to trees. Most of the trees in this intertidal area are Sitka spruce, interspersed with a few giant cottonwoods, and woven with old flood channels that make for a wonderful place to canoe at high tide. There are about 40 acres of this hightide swampland, and we used to hunt ducks there, but later decided it's too

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special for that, so we designated it the “Bird Sanctuary.” River otters, blue herons, elk, and many other animals all enjoy this spot. A footbridge crosses the river just upstream from the Bird Sanctuary, but still in the intertidal zone. It’s a wonderful place to sit on a fall afternoon, as the setting sun warms your back, and watch the salmon working their way upstream.

At about one mile up, after the river has meandered through some hayfields, you come to where John’s Creek joins the river. In the late sixties, the family decided to set aside an area at the mouth of John’s Creek in honor of Harry Robbins. “Grandfather’s Park” encompasses 18 acres of bottomland that was ox-logged in the 1880s and regenerated naturally with Douglas fir and some cedar. The 120-year old fir are now between 200 and 220 feet tall, some around five feet DBH, and they’re footed with bracken fern, salal, and small understory cedar. Visitors walking through Grandfather’s Park have seen elk, deer, and the occasional cougar. We have a policy of salvaging some of the mortality, and allowing some to turn into large snags. In 1990, Dave logged a small patch of dying alder in one corner of the Park, converting it to redwood and sequoia. He thinks of this as his favorite experiment: the redwoods, now 18 years old and very happy in their microsite, are as large as nearby fir trees twice their age

Another half mile upstream, the Hama Hama flows through several deep pools, including the family-favorite Blue Pool. For a mile past the Blue Pool the river flows through a rock canyon, with lots of remnant old growth and giant boulders. It makes for a difficult, scrambling hike. Steelhead can get all the way through the canyon, up to the base of a 60 foot waterfall. But it takes a hardy fish to do it: there’s some 300 feet of elevation gain during that mile. A boy who fishes that stretch for steelhead every winter with his Dad forms memories that last a lifetime.

Passing the torch

This family corporation has a good history, so far, of being able to get through the generational shifts. Perhaps that’s due in part to having been incorporated in 1922, which gave us shares that can be passed from one generation to another. There are now 42 stockholders, and the growing family meets once a year for a “family and business” meeting. We also have an all family, nine-member Board of Directors which guides the company managers and plans for the future.



Dave Robbins in Grandfather's Park, 2008



Robbins Family, August 2008

But perhaps of greater importance is the recognition that hands-on work by the younger set seems to vest them with an interest in the long-term success of the company. Whether they are planting trees, or pre-commercial thinning, or digging seed clams for transplant, working on the farm teaches a youngster 1) the basics of how to work, and 2) the importance of a long term outlook. Eventually the weight of the legacy and the heritage begin to exert a pull. And the hope remains for another generation, and another.



Dave Robbins and daughter Clara