



Clark County

## **Walter & Alice Ek**

“We milked cows from 1948 to 1955, but I was more interested in the forest growing on our place.” Walter Ek recalls how he transitioned from dairy to tree farming. I began to do some thinning and releasing trees that were about 20 feet tall and 2 to 3 inches in diameter. There were probably several thousand to the acre. By cutting the trees and seeing how much better they looked, I became interested in getting some books and studying. Even though we were milking cows at the time, I felt that if we’re going to farm in this country, why not farm Douglas firs, because they grow naturally.”

From that time Walter has been passionate about growing trees. A soft-spoken, well-informed man, Walter’s life revolves around his forest and family. He and his wife Alice come from Finnish descent and dairy backgrounds. Alice grew up near Hancock, Michigan, on a dairy farm and Walter grew up in Mist, Oregon. They met when Walter took a road trip in 1940 to Michigan. Walter, “We were married before I went into the service. It was WWII and I served in the Air Transport Command in Hawaii. After the war we were looking for a farm to milk cows. Of all things, we bought this place. It was better suited for trees than cows, but we didn’t know it at the time.”

The Eks had a dairy farm of 25 cows, barely enough to sustain the family. Expansion was expensive, involving milk tanks, irrigation, and more cows. Walter decided to check with the local farm forester, Maurice Kelley, to see if it was feasible to chip the wood from small thinnings to make bedding for the cows. It wasn’t. Walter, “He spent an afternoon walking through my woods and showing me what could be done, how income can come from the forest.

The big thing was that he gave me that little book *Your Trees, a Crop*, published by the Washington State Board of Forestry.

Walter, “If I read it once, I read it ten times. It was so interesting. It gave the potential and possibilities of Douglas fir in the Pacific Coast region. It hit me like a ton of bricks. With other types of farming, if you thinned to get a better final crop, by and large you threw the thinned pieces away. With Douglas fir, you can thin, take out defective trees, take out crooked trees, take out trees that are too tight, and get an income from it.”

Walter was hooked and began to manage his own land while acquiring more. His first tree farming purchase was in the Yacolt burn. Because the young trees had little market value at the time, the land was priced at \$20 an acre. Still, Walter couldn’t afford it. When the banks turned him down, because young timberland was considered unimproved land and not suitable for collateral, he approached his good friend Dr. Witter with his dilemma. Witter offered to loan him the money to purchase the property. Walter, “That was the big change for us. We were able to get started with enough land to be a full-time family tree farm. Dr. Witter’s offer was just real, real special.”

Walter’s tree farm goal was one step closer. Another milestone was when they sold their dairy cows, despite comments that it was unheard of to make a living working young trees. Undaunted, Walter had a vision and proceeded to learn the business of tree farming. He read books and tapped into the knowledge of educated foresters and soil conservationists. Leo Isaac, author of *Better Douglas Fir Forest by Better Seed*, took an interest in Walter’s quest and invited him to his Portland office. Leo introduced Walter to the staff as, “...an honest to goodness tree farmer.”

Walter reflects on Leo’s advice, “Cut trees so when you look up in the sky the branches aren’t running together. When they start to run together heavily, the roots are doing the same thing and the tree is in trouble. When you do your thinning, just cut so the tips of branches are just touching each other a little bit, or more apart where it will be two or three years before they get together, because the roots will do the same thing. That way, you will keep a healthy forest.’ I was so thankful I got that information early enough to apply it to the work I was doing. I still use it as a gauge on how to thin.”

In the early 1950s Walter and a handful of other farmers started attending meetings at the extension office, first with Maurice Kelley and then Fred Pratt serving as farm foresters. Their involvement with the Western Washington Farm Forestry (now the WFFA) included organizing the first tree sale and initiating public education programs. Walter extended his timber growing activities to Olympia by helping to present the independent tree farmer’s political point of view. By 1958 he was attending state meetings.

By this time he was president of the state association and worked with a group on the ad valorem tax, a tax that motivated timber-bearing landowners to cut their trees to avoid tax penalties. They studied timber taxation all over the United States and devised a plan to present to the legislature. The bill that passed represents current taxation for tree farmers. Walter modestly states, “If there’s any one thing that the Farm Forestry Association has done, we can all be thankful that we don’t have the old tax system still in effect, where people would be cutting timber to save on taxes.”

Walter was involved with numerous other legislative changes, but felt the elimination of the ad valorem tax and supporting the establishment of the Larch Mountain Honor Camp were the two largest accomplishments for the Clark County Farm Forestry Association (CCFFA) and WFFA during that time.

Walter and Alice have instilled their love of the land in their children, several beginning their own tree farms in the area. The Eks extend an open invitation to anyone interested in touring their tree farm, especially environmental activists, so that anyone can experience the results of over 50 years of forest stewardship.

Walter, “A stand, may start out with 1,000 trees. Left alone for 100 years it would probably have 60 to 70 trees left. The rest would die as the more progressive trees crowded them out. This is what tree farming is all about, managing the timber, taking out defective trees and selling them. It’s also about taking out other trees in later thinning that have extremely good value as poles or saw logs in order to release the other trees and to keep the stand healthy. That should be the primary purpose of anyone with a tree farm, to thin the woods so the stand remains healthy.”

#### EK TREE FARM

Walter Ek, born January 22, 1921

Alice Levanen Ek, born March 5, 1922

Founder Clark County Farm Forestry Association

President WFFA, 1962

Washington State Tree Farmer of the Year, 1955