

Cowlitz County

Jim Kirkland

“On that Silver Lake property of mine, we had a terrible bear problem. Every time I’d go out in the morning I’d see trees freshly chewed off at the bottom. They’re pure white when they get chewed off, easy to spot. The bears chewed the bark off the trees just as high as they could reach. It would kill the tree. They were really taking me, so I had to develop a bear trap. I did a very good job of that. Brought one home once [a bear]. Had a large wooden fence and I tied the bear up to it.

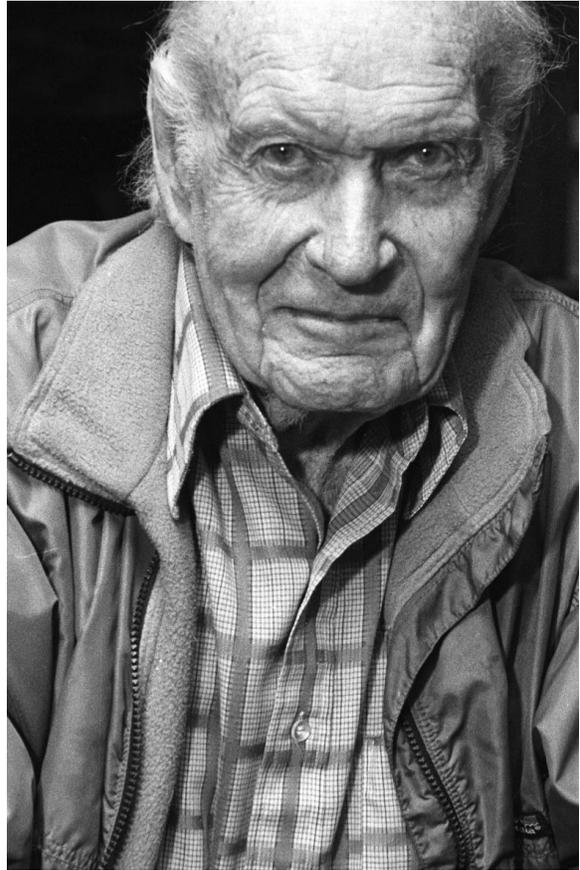
Jim Kirkland’s bear story reveals creative thinking when faced with almost anything, a trait shared by most tree farmers. He continues, “The first thing I know, I had the damndest collection of people around there. I knew someone might get hurt so I lassoed it back up, put it in the back of my pickup truck and took it down to the Portland Zoo. That’s where that bear ended up.”

Jim’s son Mark Kirkland tells the story from the spectator’s point of view, “Every kid on the street was amazed. Dad had a yearling cub tied to our fence and it was not a happy camper. The bear got to live to be fat and happy at the zoo. You should’ve seen the looks we got driving down the freeway with the bear in the back of the pickup truck tied up with a rope.”

A textured, colorful man with a scratchy voice and the gift of gab, Jim rambles on with story after story. Born January 25, 1915 in Corvallis, Oregon, Jim was the first in his family to be born outside of Scotland. Jim’s father Andrew, a mason by trade, was lured to the states after the big fire in San Francisco in the early part of the century. Later he migrated north to work on other structures, including Oregon State University in Corvallis.

Jim graduated from Corvallis High School in 1933, and then went on to Western Oregon State College to become a teacher. Jim describes his three-year teaching career, “I think I graduated on a Friday and was working on a Monday at Alsea, Oregon. I taught seventh and eighth grade, then taught at a training school for boys in Woodburn, Oregon.” He worked at Willamette Iron and Steel as a superintendent, but it wasn’t enough to keep him busy. Jim, “I heard about this skating rink up in Kelso, Washington, that was for sale, so I bought it. Built a new one in Longview. Ran that for 30 years, then quit and got out of it.”

In the mid-fifties Jim purchased his first property, 74 acres at \$35 an acre. Jim, “That got me started because I bought a lot of acreage at those prices, then they skyrocketed. I should have borrowed more money and bought more of it, but I wasn’t the borrowing kind. I knew the old saying, ‘they don’t make any more land.’ With the population growing and the economy on the upswing, I figured it was a good investment and I couldn’t go wrong on it.”



What started as 74 acres is now 1,000 plus or minus a few acres. Being a forestland owner, Jim came to know Farm Forester Chuck Chambers, who encouraged Jim to become part of Washington Farm Forestry Association in Cowlitz County. “He helped me out on my forestland and encouraged me to get in there, got me going on it. Chuck Chambers was an instigator,” says Jim.

Mark adds, “His energy was infectious, it really was. He was an organizer. Without his drive I don’t think this area chapter would’ve gotten off the ground.”

Jim, “We planted everything that wasn’t growing into a tree. You bet. Every piece of land had some forestry and some land that wasn’t doing so good. So, I planted it. Now, I’ve harvested trees I had planted.”

Being a mid-century property owner, Jim Kirkland hadn’t felt the impact of regulations. His son Mark who is now managing the property has and had a lot to say on how it has affected their view and the way they manage the land. “Every few years I have to wade through a mass of paperwork to figure out how much of that property is going to be able to pay for itself and how much I’m donating to the state.” Mark openly expresses his frustration as a small landowner.

Mark, “In Cowlitz County, because of our geographical location on the Columbia River relative to salt water, we have, I believe, eight or nine listed species of fish in our area. All our land in the Cowlitz and Lewis Counties are tributaries to this area. So we are in a position of having the most listed species possible on our timberland of any geographic area in the state of Washington. That’s had a real impact and it’s been an uphill fight all the way. I would tell my grandkids to try to keep it in timber, but if you don’t think you can make it in timber and the regulations are such that it’s a little bit easier to do development, then maybe that is what needs to be done. That’s something I hate to say. I would love to see it passed down and kept in timber forever.”

Moving away from regulations, Jim tells how he got into Christmas tree farming, “Every time we bought land, there’d always be a part where the owner had farmed it for crops or hay. I considered those cleared areas for Christmas tree production, a cash crop that come on sooner than a timber crop. That got me into the Christmas tree business pretty good. We still farm the same areas we started out with. We just harvest and replace all the time.”

At its peak, they maintained about 80 acres of Christmas trees. Now it’s down to a little over 40 acres. Mark, “For one guy that’s pretty labor intensive. He started by hauling trees down to Los Angeles in 1933.”

Jim, “1933, ‘34, ‘35. There weren’t such a thing as a cultured tree then. They were all just wild trees. We went through and picked out the bushiest ones, paid a penny, penny and half a piece at the most, and took them down there and sold them for a dollar a foot. We could get about 1,800 of them on a semi-load in those days. Today you can only get about 400. Bushy trees are about all you can sell now. You have to get more money for them somehow.

The Kirkland’s have allowed elementary school tours on the farm as well as tours with the Farm Forestry. “Everyone had to come out and see that \$30,000 culvert. We had tours on different management styles, thinning, basil pruning, that kind of stuff. Christmas tree tours too. We’ve made our land fairly available for education. I’m a big believer in that,” Mark states enthusiastically.

Jim Kirkland was awarded the 1963 Tree Farmer of the Year and in the early ‘80s was featured in *Sunset* magazine as “Timber Jim” demonstrating a battery-powered pruner. Jim, “I didn’t use it much. I did it all with a knife, by hand. You can’t beat the old ‘hand with the knife’ business. You can do a better job.”

KIRKLAND TREE FARMS

Jim Kirkland, born January 25, 1915

Geneva O'Brien, 1918 - 2004

President Cowlitz County Farm Forestry, 1985 - 1987

VP/Treasurer CCFFA, 1987-1990

Cowlitz County Farm Forestry Association Tree Farmer of the Year, 1963

Sunset magazine, 1983