

Cowlitz County

John Nelson

John Nelson had the drive and vision of a locomotive on track. His vision and involvement helped in the formation of a plan for tree farmers to gift their timberland for the benefit of charitable purposes, enabling perpetual usage as timberland instead of being sold into development. The program was set up to fund tree farm and forest-related issues. John was one of the first to contribute to the trust fund through a 37-acre gift with 65 year-old trees on it.

John was born in 1912 as the son of a physician and wheat rancher in Tekoa, Washington. He attended Washington State University from 1929 to 1933. John, “1933 was the depths of the depression when the banks all closed and I was playing trombone in a college pep band.”

He went on to Chicago to attend Rush Medical School and interned at Cook County Hospital. “It was a select place to do your internship. I had no job and I was a westerner who wanted to get back to the west, so I applied through a medical placement bureau then came out and took my state boards in Seattle.

“During that time they sent me telegrams of places where they need doctors. One of the locations was a position in Longview, which had an opening for a county physician,” recounts John. “The year was 1939 and the job was a county physician with a 20-bed hospital and 5,000 indigent patients.” John worked 7-day weeks and 20-hour days with little or no respite. “I lived in the Monticello hotel for \$30 a month, ate at Jerry Patents Drug Store for a dollar a day and saved my money.”

He took a job at Custer’s Battle Field in Eastern Montana on a reservation of 1,500 Native Americans. John, “Cowboy country. I bought some cowboy boots. There was a little town on the edge of the reservation called Hardin, Montana. Everybody had silver dollars. It was a great experience living and working there. I stayed one year, but knew I was just going downhill with not much to do. I then came back here and went into private practice.” When John returned to Longview, he met his future wife Maxine on Valentine’s Day. They married October 8, 1941.

Three months later Pearl Harbor was bombed. Nelson volunteered his services in the Medical Corp and spent four years in the service. When his enlistment was over, he returned to Longview and his medical practice, which he maintained for the next 37 years.

A ham radio enthusiast, John got into tree farming through his 10-year search for land to place an antenna. In 1968, a patient who was responding to his quest introduced him to a 270-acre parcel stocked with Douglas fir trees, a house, shop, barn and some cattle. John, “I looked at it, then came home and talked to my wife. She wasn’t very enthusiastic, but I bought it lock



stock and barrel. I didn't know a heifer from a steer. From there I spent all my time fussing with that farm, and I'm still doing it. It's an excellent tree farm with 65-year old Douglas fir."

John dedicated his spare time to building up the ranch with 60 head of cattle. He went to the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) with general questions and was introduced to a farm forester. John, "They assigned a dandy fellow to me who spent a month working up a forest plan. There were about 10 to 15 different plots that he cruised and classified by species, size, and what needed to be done. We've done a whale of a lot under supervision of the DNR's original plan and with the help of the extension service. It's a credited plan that's been used all my 32 years farming."

John was introduced to the WFFA through Frank Hallet, a friend from Castle Rock who encouraged him to get involved. John, "The best friends I have are all people like Chan Noerenberg. The people you meet when you get into forestry are just amazing. All your friends are interested in the same thing. That was my whole career. I don't think I fussed with a ham radio since I bought the place."

John attended state meetings and served as the president of the local chapter, "I don't know who the officer was before me. I went down to California to see my daughter and while I was gone they voted me president of the local chapter."

John has served as state treasurer and chairman and instigator of the Estate Planning Committee, and has been a finalist as tree farmer of the year. He has built up and restocked fishponds and planted thousands of trees, and his land has been used to provide educational tours for groups throughout Washington and Oregon.

Under the Gift Tax Exclusion, John has given all of his land to his children and grandchildren through the J.A. Nelson Family Farm Trust. Tree farming became a life-long passion and a gift he has passed on to his family and to others through separate trusts.

Since this interview, John passed away, but the humor and passion he shared with the causes he believed in will benefit generations to come.

"You know every little hill, every little crevice, every little stream, every tree and its species, the good trees and the trees where it's non productive" – Dr. John Nelson

Dr. John A. Nelson, 1912 - 2003

Maxine Hays, 1915 - 2004

Cowlitz County Tree Farmer of the Year, mid-1990s

President, Cowlitz County Chapter

Treasurer WFFA, 1979 to 1985

Estate Planning Committee