



Clark County

Revesz/Witter

Pete Revesz and his wife Jane Witter Revesz, her sister Lee Witter Kahn and their children currently manage the Witter Family Tree farm. Its colorful history dates back to Great Grandfather John Fletcher. In 1870, John moved to Clark County to establish a prune ranch on the banks of the Columbia River. Lee tells the story, “It was all in big Douglas fir which they cut down and dynamited the stumps. For some of the prune ranchers, the Doug fir was a liability rather than an asset. Some of it was just like a weed.”

Their grandfather Albert Fletcher was two years old when his father John Fletcher headed west. Albert grew up farming and continued fruit ranching on his father’s property. Winifred Fletcher (Jane and Lee’s mother) was born in 1897 and grew up on the fruit ranch with two other siblings. Between WWI, WWII and the Depression, the Fletchers lost their ranch, but not before farming had penetrated Winifred’s soul. Lee describes her mother’s interest in tree farming, “She was very enthusiastic from the first, sort of a Scarlet O’Hara yearning for land.”

Jane adds, “Mother was the real hands-on farmer. Later with the trees, mother did an awful lot of seedling planting, alder control, bud capping, hack and squirt. She was always out with her little hatchet, every day of her life.”

Leon and Winifred

Their father, Leon Evan Witter, was born December 22, 1895 and raised in Park Rapids, Minnesota, a timber and farming community. After serving time in WWI, he returned and finished his degree in dentistry at the University of Minnesota. In the early 1920s, Leon headed west to join his family. They had moved to escape tuberculin health problems inherited from earlier generations who had been imprisoned during the Civil War, and the Pacific Northwest was considered a benign climate for tuberculosis. Dr. Witter first came to Bellingham, Washington, then moved to Yacolt, Washington.

Yacolt, once a boom logging town, was ravaged by the big 1902 fire, also known as the Yacolt Burn. Winifred Fletcher had gone into nursing and was working at the hospital in Yacolt when she met Leon. They married in 1924. Lee, “When they got married, they didn’t get mother an engagement ring, but bought land instead.”

Leon and Winifred began purchasing land, the first, in partnership with Charlie Cole on the

East Fork. The Cole Witter Road, east of the Heisson Bridge remains a testament to that partnership. Lee recalls her parents' ventures, "At that time they weren't into tree farming, but were always watching the trees and dad was forming the idea. He kept saying that some day this will all be big timber again, because he had seen it in Minnesota."

Much of their property was burned-over land. Their first real tree farm purchase was Tum Tum Mountain from Weyerhaeuser in Chelatchie Prairie, Washington. Most of it had been logged and was reseeded. Jane, "He used to say from that timber he used the money to purchase all his other tree farms... Dad always loved land more than dentistry."

The Witters are considered one of the founding families of the Clark County Farm Forestry. After witnessing the complications and hazards of deforestation in Minnesota, Leon saw the value in reforestation. He spent much of his spare time with seedling release on burnt-over land. The Witters were awarded Tree Farmers of the Year in 1962 and 1985.

Pete and Jane

As a young man, Pete Revesz stepped off the boat in Manhattan with an English vocabulary of 300 words. He had left Hungary as a first-generation immigrant in America. He enrolled at the University of Denver, where he earned a degree in engineering. Pete became an American citizen while in the U.S. Army. After the Army, he headed to California to look for work, "But as fate would have it, my car broke down as I was barely getting into Denver. So I stayed in Denver and got myself a wife."

Jane Witter graduated from Battle Ground High School and attended the University of Portland, earning a degree in nursing. When she realized there was a shortage of nurses in Denver, she headed there with a friend to seek adventure and work. She found both, and met Pete.

Jane and Pete traveled back and forth from Colorado to Washington to help on Jane's parent's tree farm. Jane, "We were spending more and more time commuting to Clark County, doing planting and control, logging and so forth. After a point you come to the conclusion tree farming can take your entire life." Jane and Pete joined the Clark County Farm Forestry in the 1970s.

The two moved back to Clark County in the early 1990s, where they settled to work, care for their family and take up the role of tree farmer full time. They have been active in the local chapter ever since. Both have served on the local board and Pete recently finished a term as chapter president. Pete feels being active politically is part of the democratic process and it's a civic responsibility to take part in shaping farm forestry. He finds the politics of tree farming and the desire to work the land a juggling act. Pete, "Some people may look at it as political activity, but we're looking at it more as, 'we better do it, because if we don't, who will?'" Pete and Jane were Clark County Tree Farmers of the Year in 2003.

Louis and Lee

Lee Witter graduated from Battle Ground High School then got a degree in teaching. She met her husband Louis Kahn in 1976, who was also a teacher and had a tree farm in King County near North Bend. Lee, “My husband’s tree farm is close to development, which correlates to a lot of financial pressure on the land. It’s in an area that is rapidly being developed, so it’s difficult to maintain as a tree farm. But we think it will work out. We do what we can to keep up with the issues: writing letters, attending legislative debates and Louis served on the Rural Forest Commission in King County until his recent death.” Lee has since replaced Louis on the board.

Between the two families there are about 1,000 acres of land that they manage themselves. Some of the sections reseeded themselves. Some are primarily Douglas fir. Other properties have a mixture of stands.

Pete, “We tried to go back with Doug fir, but after a while you realize that mother nature destines certain creek beds and others to be alder and you can spend the rest of your life trying to grow fir on it but it’s going to go back to alder just because it likes to be alder. We are quite at peace that if this is going to be alder, it’s part of what is now called the biodiversity.”

The Witter family tree farm has been heavily affected by the riparian regulations. Lee, “Our father said to always buy land with water on it. At the time it seemed very good advice, but it has turned out to have a dark side because there’s an awful lot tied up in riparian zones and culvert issues. Our tree farm in North Bend has five creeks running diagonally across. Louis left the bigger timber along the creeks. I remember dad saying something about if you need to help a grandchild with college or something you can fall a couple of big trees. But now you can’t, because they are all within the 150-foot buffers. It’s a cloudy financial picture. Passion has to be present to tree farm.”

Expressing concern for the future of tree farming in the next generation, Pete adds, “I don’t see that it would be right to ask our children to subsidize. It may not completely provide a living for a tree farmer, but to expect the tree farmer, just out of the goodness of their heart, to subsidize for his trees is not reasonable. We hope that there will be the wisdom in the regulatory arena to let us do what is right for the land.”

Although they express frustration with regulatory handicaps on their land, Jane, Pete and Lee still feel there is hope for the future of the Witter Family Tree Farm. Walking on the trails and seeing the efforts put into timber management, you can see the love and passion they share. It’s a passion that was started and has been passed on through the generations.

WITTER FAMILY TREE FARM

Leon Evan Witter, 1895 - 1987

Winifred Fletcher Witter, 1897 - 1994

Jane Witter Revesz, born August 26, 1934

Peter Revesz, born April 24, 1929

Lee Witter Kahn, born November 3, 1932

Louis Kahn, 1922 - 2002

Peter Revesz: President Clark County Farm Forestry, 2000-2002

CCFFA Tree Farmers of the Year, 1962 and 1985

