

Clark County

Paul Wessler

“I came to Clark County in June of 1946 as a county extension agent in horticulture and had the responsibility for everything that grows, including moss on the roof. We had a wide variety of horticulture enterprises in our county. No large volumes, but a large variety, one of which was farm forestry. I was interested in that, having grown up in the woods out on the Olympic Peninsula.”

At 92, old-timer Paul Wessler is sharp as a tack. He has slowed down a bit, but it hasn't diminished his passion for forestry. On his table are boxes of photographs, each labeled by year and decade. They serve as visual aids as he recounts his life story.

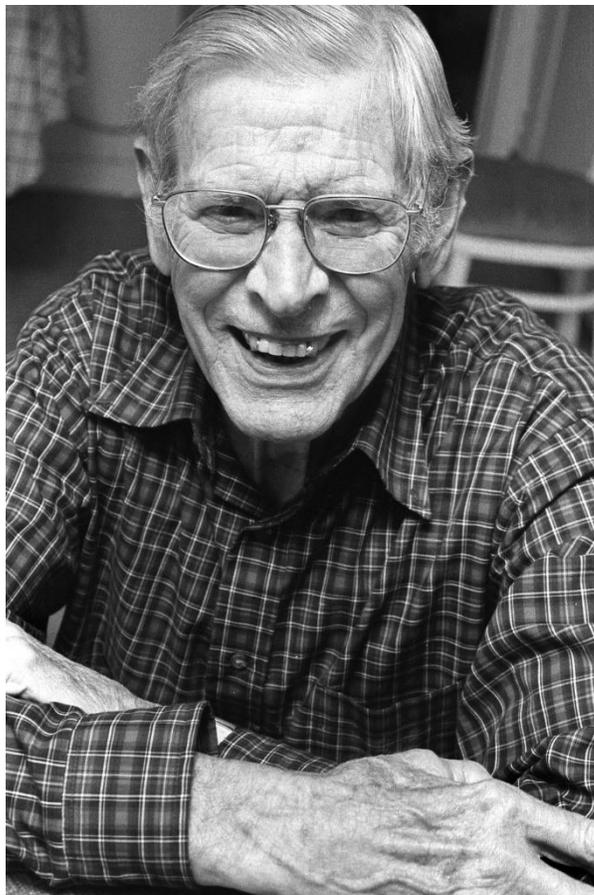
Paul grew up on his father's homestead, which consisted of 160 acres near the Ozette Lake area, 15 miles south of Neah Bay, Washington. The remote community didn't have a school, so Paul left home to get his high school diploma. Working for his room and board, he spent two years in Marysville and his senior year in Seattle studying. He graduated in 1931.

In the black heart of the depression, jobs were hard to find and Paul spent the next five years living at the homestead where he helped his father put in a cranberry marsh and other odd jobs. Paul reflects, “Marking time, I was just working on the ranch doing little jobs, cutting brush on the county road, working at a local saw mill, trying to earn some money.”

At one point his sister convinced him to go to summer school. “Those were hard times. You worked for 35 cents an hour minimum wage. Had my sister not jarred me loose, I might still be out there. That got me started and I stayed on a year at Bellingham and then I went over to Washington State University (WSU) at Pullman. Graduated there in 1941 with a degree in agriculture and education. Immediately after graduation, I took employment in Whatcom County where I was a vocational agriculture teacher.

“Meanwhile, I had gotten married in the summer of '42 to Pauline Johnson. Then the draft board wanted me. I didn't like the idea, so I joined the Navy. They sent me to several different training schools because they had given me an aptitude test. The test indicated that this old moss back had some aptitude in mechanics. I didn't have the math, but they wanted to make an electronics technician out of me. It was typical of the service to take someone like that and change their course completely. They sent me to Chicago, Houston, and Corpus Christi, Texas. Then someone said, ‘My gosh, you have a college degree, you ought to put in for a commission,’ which I did and got. From there I went to Panama.”

Returning from military duty, Paul went back to WSU for a semester, moving to Clark County in June of 1946. Paul, “I had shifted from teaching in the classroom to teaching in the field. Extension is also teaching. Of course, as I indicated being a horticulture agent involved



everything that grows including peppermint, holly, pears, prunes, berries and forestry. I got acquainted with Walter Ek, a tree farm management pioneer living north of Battle Ground, Ralph Roffler who was an extension agent from Lewis County, and George England, also a Lewis County tree farmer.” Paul claims that this was his initiation with the southwest Washington tree farmers.

Sometime in 1950, Paul became involved with the Clark Skamania County Tree Farmers. Its membership was close to 30 people at the time. Fred Pratt and Walter Ek were key people in planning and officiating the semi-annual meetings. Wesseler reflects, “Representatives from Lewis County would come down to share information about their program, encouraging this embryonic nucleus down here. There was very little in the way of literature or recommendations; we didn’t have the publications that we have now.”

In 1960, Paul became a tree farmer when his father gave him two 40-acre sections of the homestead near Ozette. “I kept that for about 20 years. It was two-thirds marsh bog. The timber on it was around the perimeter. With the regulations that were coming into effect at that time, you had to leave a buffer between the waterway, the wetland and the upland. That left hardly anything for marketable timber, so I sold it.

It seemed impractical to hold it, pay the taxes and not have any prospect of future harvest. I think the timber people who bought it were using it as a trade off. That was a process being done by some of the timber companies. In order to cut timber on a good sight, they would have to give up equivalent acreage to be left as conservation area,” says Paul of his short-lived tree farm days.

Paul believes that some regulations are beneficial, but that the whole picture needs more study. “I think that ‘enviros’ are justified in asking for preservation of some virgin stands, the oldest trees, because now the commercial rotation, as it is called, is down to 40 or 50 years. There’s never going to be old trees that are 400-500 years old. If we’re going to have some of those to look at as monuments then they should be saved. I don’t think that justifies saving trees that are only 2’ or 3’ in diameter.”

Continuing Paul states, “I have seen a lot of nice big spruce and cedar that’s now gone. Some ‘gypo’ loggers were just high graders. They would take only the straight logs, nice Peter logs, old growth. They would damage as much as they took out because of the way they’d harvest. High-lead rigging, the big steam donkeys just pull through and wipe the slate clean so there’s hardly anything left now. Loggers are taking out sticks now. There aren’t any more log trucks. They’re all stick trucks. The re-growth method was very slow. Now they’re replanting as they cut.”

Paul is still a member of the Clark County Farm Forestry, attends the annual potlucks and has no regrets for his years spent as an extension agent for the State of Washington. Becoming a widower in 2000, Paul concentrates on keeping house. The memories lighten the winter days. His advice to future generations is, “Plan for the future. A young person can wait 40 to 50 years for a crop. It’s best to have a good day job; one has to live while waiting for trees to grow.”

Paul Wesseler, born May 28, 1913 (Seattle, WA)
Pauline Wesseler, born May 1917
Member Clark County Farm Forestry Association
Washington State Grange
Master Gardener
Friendship Force International