A WALK IN THE WOODS

Steve, Dave, Carl & Keith Townsend

National Outstanding Tree Farmers of the Year

BY TOM GRESHAM

This year's National Tree Farmers of the Year were born into sustainable forestry.

Tree farming is a way of life for Steve, Dave, Carl, and Keith Townsend. The family property in Pierce County, Washington, which their grandfather, Robert Wise, purchased in 1954, has been like another member of the family, a home away from home that required their regular care and attention—and that always gets it.

"All of us grew up on the property," Dave said. "I didn't know that vacations were anything different than going up to the Tree Farm until I was 14—vacations and weekends were always at the Tree Farm. Initially, it was Steve and I—we're the oldest—there with Grandpa. We always had a mission, and he always gave us jobs that we could do."

Wise was born and raised in Iowa with few large trees in sight. When he moved to Seattle, Washington in 1920, he instantly fell in love with the tall trees. When he purchased 160 acres in the foothills of Mt. Rainier in 1954—adding another 120 adjacent acres the following year—he was determined that it would be an inter-generational family legacy of growing big, tall trees.

His grandsons and their families have worked hard to continue that legacy, and their decades-long dedication to the Coburg Tree Farm, which was certified as a Tree Farm by the American Tree Farm Systems in 1955, has earned them this year's recognition as National Outstanding Tree Farmers of the Year. Steve said the brothers have simply understood from the time they were kids that it was critical to respect the land and prioritize its well-being.

"It's always been an important part of life," Steve said. "It gets into your blood. After a while, you begin to realize that you don't own this property—you work for it."

After Wise died, the Townsend brothers' parents, Ivan and Lane, took over and soon implemented additional active forest management practices. They built a cabin and logging roads, and all four brothers have been engaged as forest management efforts grew more extensive and sophisticated.

The Townsends' thirteen management units feature many various age classes and occasional harvests. Dave and Carl, pictured here, are two of four brothers who play an active role in caring for the Tree Farm.

The Townsends' parents, who were honored as Tree Farmers of the Year in both Washington and the Western Region in 1977, made sure their sons not only worked on the property but that they understood the reasons for the work.

"They instilled in us everything that we needed to be doing for tree farming, for growing trees, for protecting the trees," Keith said.

Carl remembered that a forester helped the family put together a more detailed management plan in the 1970s, giving their efforts a strategic framework.

"After that, we had a lot of areas that we set up for thinning," Carl said. "We had our first clear-cut area. It was a small number of very large trees, Douglas fir, on 16 acres. We did the clear cut there. They rooted out all the vine maple that was there, and then we planted the trees by hand ourselves. That was the first big tree planting that we did. Those trees are now big, and many of them have been thinned out and harvested."

The Townsends do most of the work on the property themselves on weekends or for longer spells in the summer, but major management practices like harvests and planting are now contracted out. Consequently, projects can take a while to complete, but the brothers and their families revel in the hands-on nature of the work. They also find satisfaction in the progress the forest has seen, even appreciating the inherently slow nature of it.

"It's fun to watch the different plantations grow over time and become a forest," Keith said. "There's something special about looking at these trees and thinking I planted these trees and I've harvested some, and now it's a beautiful forest."

Community engagement is an important component of the Townsends' management of the land. For instance, the Boy Scouts hike and camp on the land and sometimes help with Douglas fir pruning and alder slashing. The Townsends look for ways to use their resources to contribute in a variety of ways, such as the year they donated 100 Christmas trees to a local food bank so they could be shared with families in need.

Photos taken over the decades are a testament to the multi-generational stewardship of Coburg Tree Farm.

The Townsends' parents were active with the Pierce County Chapter of the Washington Farm Forestry. Dave served as president for ten years, and Steve currently serves as treasurer of the organization. Keith and his wife, Yvonne, are active with the Washington Tree Farm program and today serve as co-vice chairs for the group.

"It's been gratifying to be a part of those organizations and to host other foresters, such as for field days, and to share our stories, our successes and our failures," Keith said. "We can help others, and we can learn a lot, too."

The Townsend brothers' respective families grew up on the farm just as they did, and their children and grandchildren continue to visit it. Over the years, they have bicycled on the gravel logging roads, held scavenger hunts, played in the creek and participated in extensive work parties. "They all have their own favorite places and favorite things to do," Keith said. "And that's great."

Over the years, the key to the Townsends' forestry plan has been setting up 13 separate management zones, allowing them to have different, graduated ages of their stands. It leads to manageable harvests and plantations, as well as an occasional but sustainable yield, to help financially support the property.

"Sustainable forestry goes hand in hand with the family legacy," Carl said. "Sustainable forestry means a sustainable family legacy."

Dave remembered when he was young asking his father how not to get lost on the property, and his father told him to look for the pruned trees. Dave realized then that there was a distinctive quality to the property that marked its boundaries—its trees were diligently cared for. And there remains a distinctive quality today.

"We had a very distinctive footprint early on in our management activities and then going through the various harvests, and now each one of the harvest areas and plantation areas have a very distinctive age range of the trees," Dave said. "It's like we have 13 different pieces of property, each of which has its own character. There's a lot of similarities to them, because most of it is Douglas fir, but you've got trees that still either have their nets, or areas where the nets are gone and none of them have been pruned, and then other areas that have basically become a canopy forest. Then we go through and we prune it, and then it's opened up again—and then the branches grow back together again. You can walk through the property at any one time and see that cycle repeating itself. Over the decades, each particular plantation goes through this cycle of its growth and development, and we get to witness it. That's special."