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Interviewee: John McMahon  
Interviewer: Clark Grant  
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John McMahon: My undergraduate degree was received with the class of 1960 and then I returned a couple years later and completed a Masters of Forestry in the spring of 1964. Subsequently, I went to work for Weyerhaeuser Company, mostly in Washington State. I retired from Weyerhaeuser Company in 2001 after spending most of my career with that company.

Clark Grant: You had a long career with them.

JM: Right, yes.

CG: What initially drew you to forestry? Why forestry?

JM: Well, you know, I grew up in Connecticut. And during the years when I was growing up I spent some time in Northern New England—Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine. Had some exposure to forested areas and a limited exposure to logging and forestry per se. It’s just something that attracted my attention from a very early age, so, by the time I was half way into high school, I was pretty well decided that that’s what I wanted to study in college.

CG: For those that don’t know, when you’re a forester, how much of your time is spent in the woods? Out there walking around?

JM: Well, in the early years—the early, early career positions—in my case, a great deal of time was spent in the woods doing forest inventory work, timber cruising, road location, supervising regeneration projects, and pre-commercial and commercial thinning projects—a whole range of field activities. Later, evolving from that into “supervisional” logging operations. So for, say, the first ten years, at least half the time was spent in the field. Subsequently, I became more office-bound and (laughs) got to the point being able to spend a day in the field on a trip of one kind or another was a real luxury. I finished my career, the last half of my career, was basically corporate headquarters staff. Responsible for timberland operations of various kinds and staff work in support of our forestry operations.

CG: Did you prefer the office work?

JM: Well, I guess a true forester always prefers being able to spend substantial amount of time in the field. On the other hand, I got to the point where I understood the importance of the staff work in making the operation go, so that had its own satisfactions.
CG: And what about your education here? What memories do you have of that?

JM: A couple of things, a couple of observations I made. I think in speaking to a student group several years ago here, I recall saying, “I can’t think of one course that I took in the forestry curriculum that I didn’t have some use for and application for on the job.” And I’d still say that today. That very directly pertains to all the forestry courses, but I also gained a lot of benefit from a lot of the cross campus courses too. Everything from economics to English to—there’s nothing I would say I wasted my time taking while I was here.

The second thing I would say is, I completed my masters and when I did my masters in forestry, I took as many courses in the business school as I could—accounting, and business law, and business finance. Those courses also served me very well in a private sector career. I was either working—in the later stages of my career—I was either working with or for attorneys, and MBAs, and people from universities across the country. I always felt my University of Montana education served me very well in working with people from other schools and other disciplines. I never once felt that I was at a disadvantage.

CG: How have you seen the school change in subsequent years?

JM: Well certainly there’s a broader set of curriculum offerings than there was during the years when I was in school. And that’s appropriate and necessary. Secondly, in the years after I graduated, the world changed a great deal—particularly in the United States—as it relates to how forestry is practiced on the ground, and the factors that have to be considered and taken into account, and the decision making process. So it’s a more complex world today in the forestry arena and the school’s had to broaden its offerings to accommodate these demands that students are going to be faced with on the job today.

CG: Do you have advice for students in the forestry program here now?

JM: Well, I would answer that question this way. In my own case, it served me well to—what I’ll say—act or operate as a generalist during my undergraduate years. When I finished my undergraduate degree, I had a pretty fair idea that I was going to be private-sector oriented, so I used the graduate work to gain some specialization and pick up courses that I couldn’t get as undergraduate. Like accounting, for example—business law, business finance. So, I guess that would be my basic advice to an undergraduate, would be to keep your options open during your undergraduate years and don’t try to become specialized too early. But, then by the time you finish your B.S. degree, you probably have a more clear idea what direction you’d like to go and what kind of employment opportunities you’d like to seek and that’s where specialization helps.

Now, having said that, the other major observation I would observe over the course of my career is the technical aspects of your forestry education are what you’re likely to use in the early years on the job, in your employment. But as time goes on—and time being beginning five
to ten years out of school—as you move into supervisory roles then your interpersonal skills, your ability to work in teams, your ability to understand the big picture of whatever organization you’re employed by—become more significant than your particular technical specialty was. Really your opportunities are unlimited in an organizational sense as long as you’re willing—as long as you wish to and are willing to step away from your technical specialty and embrace more supervision and management roles. I guess I didn’t understand that while I was in school or as a new graduate. That’s something you learn as your career evolves. The other thing I would say is if you’re willing to accept those supervisory and managerial responsibilities, then your career path has a lot more diverse opportunities.

CG: I’m hoping too you can speak about the nature of forestry itself as an industry. What I’m thinking of is, how long it takes trees to grow, and then you cut them. You have to be very strategic do you not?

JM: Oh you do, very definitively. Forestry probably has one of the longer time horizons, in a planning sense, of any other industry I can readily think of. On the other hand, it’s short enough so that—for example, trees that I planted or supervised the planting of in my lifetime have already reached harvest age. Planted early in my career that have already been harvested. That’s even more true in the Southeastern U.S. than in the West Coast or Rocky Mountain region. Even on the West Coast in the Douglas fir region, I could make the same statement. It is long term, and most people I know like that dimension of the job. The other thing I would add to that, though, is that whether you’re employed in the public sector, federal or state agency, or private sector, the concept of sustainable forestry is much more widely understood and embraced today than it was in the early years of my career. There the concept really only was used in reference to sustainable harvest of timber over time. Whereas now, sustainable forestry is understood more broadly to include not only sustainable harvest of timber, but sustainable management of all the associated resources, be it fish, wildlife, you know, ecosystems. So that’s kind of an overarching principle today.

CG: How many trees, if you had to guess, would you say you’ve personally or overseen the planting of?

JM: Literally millions, yes. Both West and South. Northwest U.S.—Washington, Oregon—and many of the Southeastern states. You could make the same statement relative to harvesting because, in the course of my career, I supervised the production of large volumes of Douglas fir, and loblolly pine, and western red cedar, and hemlock. My career was such that I had responsibilities for both aspects of the forest management, all aspects of the forest management task over the years.

CG: So when you look at a Douglas fir it’s probably way different than when I look at one?

JM: Well, I still you know, I’ll always have—having spent a lot of time in Montana and gone to school in Montana—I still get a little bit of a heartbeat, an uptick in my heartbeat, when I see a
good looking ponderosa pine. On the other hand, having spent so many times in the Douglas fir region, there’s nothing that’s really more stimulating to the soul than seeing a good stand of Douglas fir reproduction ten, fifteen, twenty years old. As well as the older age classes, including old-growth. But young-growth Douglas fir is pretty exciting to see.

[End of Interview]