

## FOREWORD

### CAN'T NEVER COULD DO ANYTHING

When Lynn Herbert called me from Oregon in the spring of 2004 to ask if I was interested in writing his father's story, I was both flattered and stunned. No one had ever entrusted such a valuable cargo to my care. Frankly, I wasn't sure I was up to the task because I'd never written a book before. How do you start? *Where* do you start?

We started with dinner at the Valley River Inn in Eugene, Oregon—Lynn, his wife, Charlotte, and I—talking through our ideas on what the Milt Herbert story was and who we thought might be interested in reading it.

I learned early on that Lynn wanted the story told for their children, Julia and Alex; a small audience to say the very least. He thought there might be other audiences down the road somewhere, but he wasn't sure where they were.

Charlotte saw Milt's story as a fine example of period history, which it surely is. She would sense this more than Lynn or I because she is a well educated, well read woman who is heavily involved in libraries and educational work in Oregon.

I saw a story I hoped college students—especially business or finance majors—might take to heart. But how do you write a book about a man who apparently never wrote letters, shuns publicity, doesn't like to talk about himself, much less have his picture taken, and in 50-some years in business never felt the need to write a business plan? Not easily—as I was to learn over many panic-filled months.

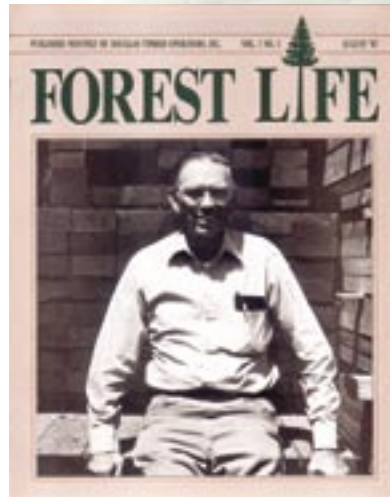
Milt and I first met on a beastly hot July morning in the summer of 1987. I had driven from Grants Pass, Oregon north to Riddle to interview him for the August issue of *Forest Life*, a monthly forestry magazine that I

was publishing under the aegis of Douglas Timber Operators, a Roseburg-based timber group that champions the interests of family-owned sawmills scattered across Douglas County from Roseburg south to Glendale and west to the Oregon coast.

By the summer of '87 Milt was already an icon among western Oregon lumbermen, most of whom got their start in this timber-rich region in the early hours following the Second World War. Milt's early innings were spent hunched over a portable sawmill on Winberry Creek east of Eugene. It was May 1947 and he was 19 years old. Save for three hours of instruction, which cost him \$9, he knew absolutely nothing about logging, saw milling or the two-wheel portable mill that he helped assemble in the winter of 1946 in a rented garage in Eugene.

I don't recall what I expected to learn from Milt, but I confess I was as unprepared for the man I met as I suspect he was for his first day on the job on Winberry Creek, east of Eugene, Oregon, where Milt sawed his first lumber in the spring of 1947. He was—and still is—unlike any other sawmill owner I know, and I know most of them in the West. If someone had lined him up beside his crew for a photo I could not have picked him out of the pack because there was nothing about him that set him apart from them. He even had a pair of well worn work gloves stuffed in his back pocket. At least a half-dozen times during our day together, he pulled his gloves on to help someone he thought could use a hand. Twice he stopped his pickup to toss discarded lunch sacks in the back.

Years later, Milt's logging superintendent Wyatt Hendrick told me that



Milt on the cover of *Forest Life* in 1987

in 33 years he had never heard Milt ask an employee to do something he would not do himself. Picking up garbage in the log yard was just his way of setting an example for his crew to follow; his way of reminding them that, amid logs, lumber and sawdust accidental trash fires can destroy a life's work in a matter of minutes.

I had trouble squaring the seeming mismatch between Milt's soft-spoken demeanor and his whirlwind pace. He never stopped. In fact, I don't recall ever setting foot in his office. The entire interview took place on the run. First we drove through the log yard, then we walked through the mill and the lumber stacks; then we doubled back on our route. My note-taking skills were no match for his encyclopedic knowledge or the ear-splitting noise inside the mill. And I fared no better in the cab of his pickup. It is virtually impossible to scribble, much less write legibly, while rattling across wash boards on sun-hardened logging roads. Everything in Milt's pickup vibrated, including me.

Most of what I was able to write down that day I jotted down over lunch at the Three J's Truck Stop in Canyonville. Milt bought. In the years since our first meeting I've learned it is not possible to buy lunch for Milt Herbert. When you are with him you are his guest. Don't ask, even if all you want to do is leave a tip. You can't.

So the storyline here—as in 1987—is pretty straightforward: small town boy from Elmira, Oregon gets into saw milling because he needs a job. He heads for California with his young wife and baby daughter, but never gets further than Canyonville, less than a hundred miles south of Eugene. He builds Herbert Lumber Company's first mill on Day's Creek, just east of Canyonville in 1948. In 1962 he moves the mill to its present location near Riddle. Despite enormous turmoil in the industry, Milt's employees have never missed a payday.

But our story takes an unexpected turn in 1953 when Milt becomes the youngest founding member of the South Umpqua State Bank board of directors. That his investment will subsequently make him a very

wealthy man never occurs to him. Mainly he's bothered by the fact that Roseburg banks, which are nearly an hour away, often refuse to cash sawmill paychecks; such is the fly-by-night nature of saw milling in Douglas County in the late 1940s. So mill workers are forced to cash their paychecks in bars, which let them drink on credit. Milt would prefer that all the money make it home to buy groceries and school clothes. He reckons that having a bank in Canyonville, run by local folks, will help solve this problem.

Today, the renamed Umpqua Bank is Oregon's largest homegrown bank, with \$7.5 billion in assets and 137 branches in three states. CEO Ray Davis praises Milt's legacy. "More than anyone else, he is the guy who laid the foundation for what we are today."

In the '50s Milt also becomes an active member of numerous Canyonville and Riddle civic groups, and over the years contributes countless hours of his time and Lord only knows how much lumber and money to various community projects. He also reaches out to the lumber fraternity he has joined—becoming the quiet voice of reason that somehow always finds a way to calm the waters near the end of often stormy meetings with his more volatile brethren. He becomes—as one of them would say years later—"our prince."

Small wonder then that when Milt found out that Lynn and I had conspired to tell his life's story, he asked me why on earth anyone would want to read about him. And for the longest time, I struggled to find an answer in myself that didn't sound like I was pandering. It wasn't that he hadn't lived a life worth emulating. It was that I didn't see what the story was. And I might never have seen it had it not been for Milt's help. He was much too polite to simply say, "Jim, I really don't want you to write a story about me, but if you and Lynn are going to do this, here is what I want you to say." That would have made it easy—but as I was to learn from long-time Herbert employees, including several retirees—it would not have been Milt's style. He is a master at guiding people to the right conclusion without them being aware of his subtle influence.

“Give a good man a sharp tool and get out of his way,” seems to have been the sum total of Milt’s employee relations handbook. But no such handbook exists at Herbert Lumber. Milt learned as he went along, applying lessons learned from his parents and others who influenced his early life. And he taught others by his own good example.

So it was that whenever Milt and I sat down to talk he would give me sharp tools in the form of ideas or observations pertinent to my questions. Many a morning I felt like I was the one being interviewed, not him; such was the depth and flow of our often exhausting conversations. And then came the morning when I suddenly realized he had lifted me on to a larger stage. And there we were together, talking about how advancements in forestry, logging and saw milling technology had transformed the lumber industry after the Second World War, making it possible for young men like him to fashion businesses that could serve not just the country’s burgeoning post-war need for lumber but also its urgent need for peacetime employment.

Of course, I already knew this history in a textbook sense, but I never knew it in the deeply personal sense that it was coming to me now from a man I very much admired who had lived the story for his entire working life.

Milt would ask me about our story only one more time. It happened months later over coffee at McDonalds, just down the road from the mill. “Tell me again what you are doing here,” he said. “We are working on the story of the Herbert Lumber Company,” I said. “Of course we will have to tell our readers a few things about you, but we are also going to write about a company that takes big old trees that are well beyond their prime, and don’t have many years left to live, and transforms them into beautiful, appearance grade wood products that homeowners can enjoy for generations to come. I think there is a metaphor here about life, but I don’t yet know exactly what it is.” And then, after pausing to give him time to consider what I had said, I added, “Besides, I think the story will make a nice marketing piece for future generations of Herberts.” After a moment, he

smiled and nodded his approval. It was the last time he ever asked me what I was doing.

I resolved in that moment that the Milt Herbert story was really the Herbert Lumber Company story which is, in turn, a small but not insignificant dot in an alignment of constellations that trace the history of this nation's use, management and conservation of its forest resources. That Milt is a gifted thinker and a brilliant analyst with people and marketing skills few possess is undeniably true. So too is the fact that he could have succeeded in almost any business, but he didn't choose almost any business. He chose saw milling, despite knowing almost nothing about its brutally competitive nature or its wild market gyrations; chose it because, in 1948, it was drenched in the sweet smell of opportunity. All you had to do was pay attention to the details—and work hard. Milt Herbert excelled at both.

Our title was Lynn's idea. "The word 'can't' is not in my father's vocabulary," he told me one evening over pizza in Canyonville. "Can't never could do anything" was the saying he used to remind my sister and me that no goal in life is beyond our reach if we were willing to apply ourselves, work hard and maintain a positive attitude."

But keeping a positive attitude is no guarantee of great riches because life isn't a level playing field. Milt readily admits that Lady Luck shined on him more than once. But getting rich was never his goal. Doing good work for its own sake was. Solving problems in the mill, at the bank or downtown became its own reward. Everything else came as secondary.

Can't never could do anything also seems to be about the closest thing to a business plan that Milt ever fashioned: a five-word creed for a man and a company that are indivisible from one another. And he applied his life's philosophy as passionately in his outreach to his community as he did in his sawmill. The sawing speeds that came with ever advancing saw milling technology never appealed to him. Early on he decided he would be more comfortable going slow enough to catch all the value there was in every log he bought. He did the same thing with people who crossed his path. "No

matter how busy he was he always had time to help you sort out a problem,” said Rich Stratton, who came to work for Milt in 1957—and at 71 still has no plan to retire.

In many ways Milt Herbert is the spitting image of my late father: a quiet man whose unassuming manner masked his considerable intellect. Although Dad never went beyond the eighth grade, a common malady among schoolboys forced into labor lines when the stock market crashed in 1929, he rose from his ditch digger beginnings to become construction superintendent for one of the great mining companies in American history. Like Milt, Dad possessed problem solving skills that seemed to leap out of nowhere. And although we weren't Catholic, he was summoned to more Italian homes in Kellogg, Idaho in the hour of death than was Father King. Such was the depth of caring others perceived in him. He loved his family, his community and the Masonic Lodge in that order. He died amid the descending darkness of Alzheimer's disease in 1986. Hardly a day passes without my thinking of him, so having the opportunity to wrap my arms around Milt's story has been its own therapy.

My father—and my mother—make several cameo appearances (always italicized) in this story of Milt's life, not because I wanted them there but because Lynn wanted them there. We'd joked many times about how we could have switched bedrooms in our boyhoods without our parents ever noticing, such were the similarities in the daily routines and expectations in the Herbert and Petersen households. And in both households there was one similarity that was difficult for inquisitive boys to understand: a barrier of silence that cautioned against asking too many questions about things that had no bearing on daily life. Very simply, our parents never talked much about themselves. Nor did they encourage the kind of prying questions kids so often ask their parents today.

I suppose there are many reasons why people of our parent's era rarely talked about their lives—great hardship being one of the bigger ones. But nearly everyone in the country fell on hard times during the Great

Depression. It wasn't until the post-World War II building boom began that people started to put their lives back together in a material way. But my father's silence could not be broken, so it was not until after his death that I learned from his younger sister that the reason he never talked about his own father was that he was heartbroken by his passing, and his burial on Dad's thirteenth birthday, August 3, 1928. For the next year he would refuse to take his seat at the family dining room table. What a blessing it is that no such silence ever befell Milt. Even though he never got completely comfortable with the idea that Lynn and I were telling his story, he graciously welcomed me to every corner of his life, only occasionally asking if all the fuss over his life was really necessary.

In the course of interviewing many who know Milt, I was amazed by the number of them who told me he was their best friend. And I suspect Milt is a best friend to many who value his wisdom and his quiet warmth. But I never had to ask him who his best friend is because it was so obvious from the first moment I met Arlene, his soul mate for 60 years. They make quite a pair, he starting sentences in answer to my questions about their life together, and she finishing them, the same way so many lifetime partners I know do. I'd like to think my own parents would have fallen into this rhythm in their later years, but they never had the chance to grow old together. Breast cancer struck down my mother two months after she turned sixty-seven, eighteen months before Dad died in a nursing home, leaving still more questions for which there are no answers that I can pass along to my own son.

I am not the first writer to attempt to tell Milt's story. That honor belongs to the late Dr. Charles Pyron, a University of Oregon business professor and employee relations consultant whom Milt hired in 1967 to help with supervisory training at the mill. Not many mills of that era used consultants in such a capacity, but Milt saw great value in having supervisors who could make good personnel decisions on their own. When I interviewed Dr. Pyron over dinner at Springfield's Outback Steak House,

he readily conceded he had probably learned more about management from Milt than Milt had learned from him.

I have a copy of Dr. Pyron's March 2005 draft manuscript, "*The Mellow Maverick: An Examination of Transformational and Entrepreneurial Leadership, as reflected in the Life and Work of Milton Herbert.*" Although most of the manuscript deals with management theories that are of no interest to me, I was fascinated by the fact that a big time college professor found such magnetism in Milt's plain brown wrapper style. It is testimony to the fact that he hit his stride early in life, never saw a need to change, and has always been very comfortable in his own skin.

No wonder it is so hard to separate Milt the man and the company he built. They are identical in thought, word and deed. And to a considerable degree, the mammoth Umpqua Bank, which Milt helped start, still bears the indelible imprints of his people skills, his extraordinary attention to detail and his genius for the obvious. Why aren't all banks like Umpqua's Pearl District branch in downtown Portland? Name me another branch bank where you can brush up on your yoga in the evening, take knitting lessons or enjoy a Hawaiian luau or an evening showing of Italian and Greek art? Can you water your dog at the front door of your bank? Some pretty imaginative people put Pearl together, but it was Milt who set the tone, who understood the importance of weaving the bank into the social fabric of the community, much as its Umpqua founders had in Canyonville, Oregon in 1953. And it was Milt who encouraged a new generation of bankers and marketers to think about what they needed to do to overcome the outwardly stodgy and impersonal nature of banking through simple acts of kindness that make people want to come into the Pearl branch and buy something!

Milt is 81 now. Although no longer actively involved in the day to day operation of the lumber company he built from scratch, he still enjoys going to work most days, if only to leaf through the order file to see who is buying what. Besides, there is something cathartic about small sawmills that bear the character marks of time and achievement. Some say it is the

intoxicating aroma of fresh sawdust. Maybe so, but I am mesmerized by the noisy cadence of man and machine that accompanies the slow motion transformation of big old logs into beautiful lumber. I suspect Milt is too. How I wish I could also share the private joy he must surely feel in knowing that he and his oldest employees have become best friends over their long years together. They would do anything for one another.

I also believe Milt enjoys watching Lynn work. What father wouldn't be pleased to watch his son compass the family business into the future? He laments physical frailties that make it impossible for him to get out into the mill as much as he did when he was younger. Time was when he knew the first names of every employee and the names of their wives and children. Not anymore. Age has intervened.

When I interviewed him in 1987 he knew his customers so well that he was able to tell me where each unmarked lumber stack in the yard was headed. I doubt he could do it today because he isn't around enough. But because he has been a salesman since he was a teenager he still relishes calling on his oldest customers from time to time. "Our customers became our friends and our friends became our customers," he explains matter-of-factly. "Lumber may be our product, but personal service is what we sell."

So here you have it: *Can't Never Could Do Anything*; a short, sweet story about the life and times of Milt Herbert. Lynn and I hope you enjoy it.