

Stil-Van Lumber Company

Paulina
Upper Falls
Halfway

1946-1947
1947-1949
1949-1957

The war was over and Jack Vandever could get on with his life. It wasn't that he had no life during the war but it wasn't the life that he wanted. Now he could get back to his dreams.

When Japan bombed Pearl Harbor Jack knew that he had to be part of the effort to beat down the foe. College graduation was near (Jack was in his senior year), but Jack quit and enlisted in the U.S. Navy; Jack and ten of his fraternity brothers. Jack wanted to be a fighter pilot so off he went to Monmouth, Illinois, for training. But upon graduation from flight school, Jack learned that the Navy had an excess of pilots and he was sent back to San Diego, a simple gob (enlisted man). This was early 1942.¹

But with the war over, and a marriage nearing, Jack needed to start being a provider. Finishing college was out; working was in. Jack talked over the future with his longtime friend, M.D. Stilwell.² Out of that conversation came a plan: the young men would start a sawmill. Although Jack had no experience at sawmilling, M.D. had some; not much, but some. M.D. said that he would sell his automobile service station and take the money to invest in the lumber business. Jack, penniless, young, and inexperienced, went to his father, Dr. J.C. Vandever for help.

Dr. Vandever was very strict about money but he and Jack worked out a formal loan agreement and Jack had the \$20,000 he needed to put with M.D.'s \$20,000. Enough to start a sawmill? Apparently it was, in those frantic days following The War to End All Wars. (Jack's success in the timber business was marked by the early retirement of his loan.)

When Jack and M.D. decided to get into the sawmill business, they made an important decision, a decision that would guide their business from beginning to end. That decision was to cut only private timber. That decision would limit the locations where they could successfully operate. No one now remembers why the duo made that decision. Buying private timber was easier than being involved in the bidding for government timber, but it did limit where one could operate.

Decisions made, the next order of business was to get the equipment. Much of what they found was navy surplus—down in San Diego—and there was a lot of it around. The first items to be acquired were a cat, a truck, and a gasoline engine. The next task was finding some private timber to harvest.

M.D., always the timber locator, somehow learned that Ruby Barkshire has a good stand on her ranch north of Paulina. M.D. made an offer that Ruby accepted. The company was in business—nearly in business. The mill still had to be set up.

The equipment the men bought for this first effort would serve them well. That equipment was used at all three mill sites. The engine, at both the first and second mill, was the sole source of power; it drove all the mill machinery.

In the years surrounding 1946, Paulina was more of a town than it is today. Be that as it may, Paulina, and the mill site especially, was in the boonies. Jack, M.D., and a crew of three boarded with Ruby during the week. On weekends—most weekends anyway—everyone went home. For most, home was Bend.

1. Jack became a radioman and served in Japan, arriving three days after The Bomb was dropped on Nagasaki.
2. Marion Dale Stillwell, but almost everyone called him M.D.



The first sawmill at Paulina was a crude but functional operation. Individuals are, left to right, Jack Vandevent, unknown (man in white shirt and tie), Dr. J.C. Vandevent, Joyce L. Vandevent, and M.D. Stillwell. (All photos from Joyce Vandevent-Brown collection.)

Some who saw this first effort might have called the operation a “stump-jumper” mill.³ That it may have been, but it would become a lot more. Not at Paulina, but later.

The private timber at Paulina lasted for only one year. During that year M.D. found a section of private timber near Upper Falls on the North Fork Crooked River. That section of land is still privately owned and surrounded by Ochoco National Forest land to the west, north, and east, and BLM land to the south. With cutting rights to a new stand of timber, the mill was dismantled and loaded onto the company truck and moved to the new site. Because the company only had one



Joyce & Jack on their wedding day.

truck, the move took several trips. This truck was a work horse, hauling lumber from the mill site into Prineville. The logs were skidded by the Cat from where they were felled to the mill; no mill pond was used.

Some will remember that the road between Paulina and Prineville in those days was not much to brag about (Paulina did not get power until the mid-1950s). That one truck must have been on the go most of the time.

M.D. Stillwell aboard one of the items of war surplus equipment MD and Jack bought in San Diego. Photograph was taken in Bend.



3. A “stump-jumper” usually refers to a choker setter. Sometimes the term is used to describe a high-wheeled log wagon. But then again, the term is sometimes used to refer to a small, rinky-dink operation. Walter F. McCulloch, *Woods Words*; Portland: Oregon Historical Society & Champoege Press, 1958.



Jack Vandeventer at the Prineville lumber yard.

The mill at Upper Falls (not exactly at Upper Falls but that is the closest well-known landmark) was a more sophisticated affair. Although all of the original equipment was put to use, that equipment was supplemented with additional equipment—probably more surplus. The new mill could not operate with a crew of five. Additional men were hired and the crew now numbered 10 or 12, depending on the season. And no Ruby Barkshire to care for the crew; a cook was now part of the full-time crew.

A genuine sawmill camp was built, bunkhouse, cookhouse, outhouse, and other support buildings. The site was somewhat more isolated than the Paulina site but wives and families did visit on weekends and the men still made weekend trips home when they could be spared. The production record for this second mill has been lost to history but it was sufficient to motivate Jack and M.D. to establish a retail lumber yard in Prineville. This they did, near the railroad tracks



on the north edge of town (exact site not known). Business was going so well that the duo hired Jim Buyers and his truck to haul lumber into Prineville.⁴ Now there were two trucks hauling lumber from mill to yard. Having the lumber yard had side benefits for Jack: he now commuted to work, returning to Bend and his family each evening.

The haul from Upper Falls into Prineville was even worse than the haul from Paulina. The distance may have been shorter (as the crow flies) but the road was worse, and the hills more steep and frequent. During the winter months it was necessary, many times, to winch the truck from tree-to-tree over certain parts of the route. Automobiles didn't fare any better but since they didn't have their own winches it was usually the company Cat that rescued cars.

These were high times in the lumber industry. Every mill easily sold every board they could manufacture. Stil-Van was on a roll. Jack quickly caught on to the lumber selling business and the calls for lumber came in faster than the mill could turn logs into lumber.

4. Who provided the original sketch of the Site #2 location.



In the photo at the far left you see the log pond. The photographer was standing at the mill-end of the pond. In the photo just left the photographer was standing in the pond looking up what was once the log chute into the sawmill.

From the collection of
Joyce Vandeventer-Brown

Additional photographs from Joyce's collection of the Upper Falls site can be seen at the end of this chapter.

Business was so good that by 1949 the available private timber was once again exhausted. But M.D. had not been idle in his quest for private timber. This time, M.D.'s find was near Halfway, Oregon. This move would be a big one, not only in terms of equipment but also in terms of family relocations. All of the mill equipment and rolling stock made the move to Halfway.

But, as with the mill at Upper Falls, the mill at Halfway was a vast improvement over its predecessor. But Halfway presented a problem of its own; it had no shipping point. The closest railhead was at Robinette on the Powder River where it flows into the Snake.⁵ The lumber was trucked to the railhead, loaded on box cars and brought to Vale for drying and shipment.

Because of this, Jack and Joyce moved to Vale, Oregon, where Jack would supervise the lumber yard and direct the company's sales efforts. By this time, Jack and M.D. had acquired a third partner, John Pengilly. The three agreed that Jack could best contribute to the business by managing the yard and sales.

Vale is a long trip from Halfway but the location provided an advantage: heat for drying lumber. This was important because the company had never built dry kilns.

The relocation of the operation to Halfway, in some respects, made things easier. A mill camp, and all that a camp requires, was no longer needed. The crew and their families could now live in town, making everyone more happy.

Even though the company was running smoothly, Jack began to see that profits weren't adequate to support the three partners. Jack and Joyce had a talk, and with Joyce's support, Jack decided that he would sell his interest in the mill to M.D. and John. Jack's desire to leave the company was fed by the knowledge that he could do better on his own—and do a better job for Stil-Van Lumber Company at the same time. The experience he had gained since 1946 made him see that lumber brokering was just the place in the timber industry that was meant for him.

Jack knew that this change would require that he broaden his horizons. He was prepared to travel, when necessary, the entire Northwest in his search of lumber to broker. Jack had thought out his decision well, and he did travel the Northwest, and he found lumber to sell; lots of lumber. He also traveled the entire country selling the Northwest's lumber. With only \$1,000 in the bank when he gave up his partnership, he set up an office in the basement of the Vale house and that

5. Robinette no longer exists. When the U.S. Corps of Engineers built the Brownlee Dam on the Snake River, the resulting reservoir flooded the town.



In about 1986, some friends of Joyce visited Halfway and took the above photo. By this time the Ellingson Lumber Co. had ceased operating the plant (1972). The equipment was sold. Those white objects on the ground to the left of the building are probably bee hives.

was that. Jack was a lumber broker. But these humble beginnings would not last for long; the business grew and grew rapidly.

But lumber brokering was not all that occupied Jack. An opportunity presented itself that Jack could not resist. The Idaho Pine Sawmill in Meridian, Idaho, wanted Jack to be their exclusive salesman. A deal was struck, and in the early spring of 1954, the Vandeverts moved to Meridian. Jack would continue as an independent lumber broker, yet manage all the sales for Idaho Pine. Jack was now the exclusive sale point for

The Stil-Van/Ellingson Lumber company wigwam burner was still standing in 2000 much as it was in this 1986 photograph.



both Stil-Van Lumber Company and Idaho Pine Sawmill. Being located in Meridian was good for Jack's brokerage business as it put him in frequent contact with an even larger number of sawmills, many of whom he came to represent.

In Meridian, Jack graduated from a basement office to a *real* office in rented space above the grocery store. He named his new business "Meridian Pine Company." To keep things simple, Jack had continued to call himself Stil-Van Lumber Company, but in Meridian things were different. Jack needed an identity separate from Stil-Van.

Things started rolling. Jack began traveling. The business grew, not only in volume, but also in other ways. Idaho Pine offered Jack their cut-up plant and Jack accepted. Now he was in the timber business in several ways. The cut-up plant had a very valuable asset: dry kilns. Jack could now offer to kiln dry lumber for his many clients that had none. For most applications, kiln dried lumber is of a higher quality than is air dried lumber. Jack was now able to provide a value-added service and that helped the young business' bottom line. But the addition of the cut-up plant was more than Jack could handle on his own so he took a partner, Ed Lemon.

Joyce Vandevert-Brown, Jack's widow, continues the story:



Meridian Pine Co., Meridian Idaho. From official company files, compliments of Joyce Vandevent-Brown.

There was about a 12 year period there where Jack Vandevent was making all kinds of money through his brains and his hard work. He made many trips to sell lumber; New York, New Jersey, Texas, Georgia. Once a year he would be gone an entire month making his tours down there to get rid of all the lumber that he could get into Meridian. It was all shipped out by rail; we were on the railroad. We sold select pine that all of the New York people wanted. Beautiful pine lumber that, of course, is priceless back in the east. So he had no problems getting rid of that.

By then, his office staff had grown to three. He had a teletype... He had all the modern equipment that he could get in to

help him with the business because it had grown so tremendously. He was working many, too many hours; loving every minute of it. He was a man who got out of bed every morning, started singing, and he never stopped. He loved his work and he loved his family.

Jack bought another cut-up plant in Nampa, Idaho, called Meridian Wood Products, in the late 50's. He tried to operate both, the one in Meridian and Nampa, and found he could not do all of this; not enough time for both the remanufacturing plants and the brokerage business, so he sold the Nampa operation to M.D. Stilwell. M.D. hired a friend, Harry Lenton, to manage it.

Jack bought a sawmill in Ironside, Oregon, and the man who owned it operated it until they ran out of timber. Jack sold all the lumber and dismantled the mill and sold the equipment.

At that time [Jack] was also part owner of a rock quarry business at Jordan Valley, Oregon. This quarry provided decorative rock used on the exterior of new homes. Also, he began buying land in the Boise Valley—many, many acres—near Meridian. He wanted to get involved with shopping centers as they were just starting in that area, so he had plans for the land. His father asked him to get in on the Bend TV cable business that was starting up here in Bend and Jack was one of the original seven who began Bend Cable TV Co., along with Dr. Vandever....

Then, with no warning, on January 4, 1964, Jack Vandever died. Each year, since leaving Bend, Jack met up with friends from Bend for a bird hunting trip. He left his home, saying good-bye to his family, on New Years Day. Joyce would never talk to Jack again.

Friends called Joyce on January 4th from the Ontario hospital; Jack was in a coma. Joyce called M.D.'s wife, Jean, in Boise (where they were now living) and asked if she would drive Joyce to Ontario; she did. Joyce arrived at the



This is the main house at the Barkshire Ranch where some of the men on the Stil-Van crew took room and board. This house still stands today (2003).

hospital at 1 PM; Jack died at 6 PM without regaining consciousness. A tragedy in every respect.

But there is more, less personal, information about Stil-Van Lumber Company that needs to be told before concluding this chapter.

In 1959 the Brownlee Dam was completed on the Snake River, a few miles upstream of where the Powder River joins the Snake. The reservoir created by the dam flooded the railhead at Robinette. Rather than finding a new shipping facility, M.D. decided to sell the company and that was the end of Stil-Van Lumber Company. He sold the entire operation to the Ellingson Lumber Company of Baker City in February of 1963. M.D. had other motivations for selling.

Because the reservoir behind the Brownlee Dam destroyed the rail shipping facilities at Robinette, Stil-Van Lumber Company received financial consideration. It was a rather large amount. M.D. moved on to Boise and built the Down Towner Motel.

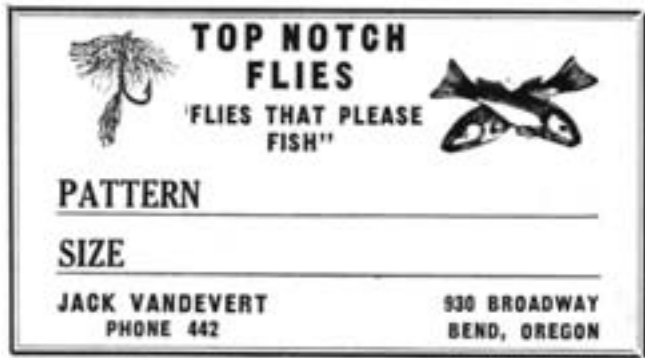
With the purchase of Stil-Van Lumber Company's facilities at Halfway, Ellingson also received the remaining timber cutting rights that Stil-Van had purchased. Ellingson cut the Stil-Van timber, most of which was processed at the Ellingson mill in Baker City. By 1972 the former Stil-Van Lumber Company facility was no longer in operation. Ellingson dismantled most of the plant. But still standing today is the wigwam burner. Some other rubble remains.

Following Jack's death, all of his business interests were dissolved.

Stil-Van Lumber Company Photo Album



These photos of the first Stil-Van mill site on the Ruby Barkshire ranch were taken about 1986. There were several such sites as this but they may be gone by now (2003). Joyce could never remember who took the photos but it was a friend. Joyce had not been on that trip.



Jack was an avid and expert tier of flies. The card at the left is from probably from the mid- to late 1940's.

At site 2, Upper Falls, the country was rugged and beautiful. The photographer was standing on the banks of the North Fork of Crooked River aiming his camera across the river. Deep in the shadows, about mid-photo, are the remains of the cook shack.



GREEN GOLD



Rugged country, no doubt about that. This property is on private land and because of abuses by the public the owners no longer permit visitors. This is the North Fork of Crooked River but it is unclear which direction the camera is facing: up or down river.

Upper Falls is not an easy trip, especially when Stil-Van operated there. So the crew lived on site during the week—and some even through the weekend. Below is the mess hall as seen in 1986.





By the 1980s not much remained at Halfway of the Stil-Van operation. Vandevent had left the company by this time and had separate interests, mostly in Idaho.

When the lake behind Brownlee Dam began to fill, Stil-Van's railhead disappeared under the water at Robinette. For a brief time lumber was hauled to Meridian but proved to be too costly. The company had a very successful run over the years.

