

Nils Hult

1913-1985

Nils Hult was born on September 30, 1913 in Colton, Oregon, the fourth and youngest child of Julius and Freda Hult. The Hult family was in the logging business in Colton, where they started by hand, building a small circular sawmill on Milk Creek. At the tender age of six, Nils began his logging career in front of horse drawn logs with a bucket of grease on skid road. This was not a job for the meek at heart. The 'grease boy' ran close to the great bulls that pulled tons of giant logs. "The grease boy's job was never easy or joyful. He needed to be agile and quick, ready to swab more grease on the track or throw a bucket of sand on the skids, should things seem to be getting out of hand. If he dallied he could tangle disastrously with the bulls."
(Land of the Multnomahs; p. 52)

At the onset of the Great Depression, Julius moved the family to Lowell, Oregon and then to a lath and veneer plant in Horton. The business was established as a partnership between Julius, Freda and their sons, Carrol and Nils. Although they had found a new site, the move had drained the family pocketbooks. Borrowing against an old Chevy they managed to find such essentials as oil, some files, a belt and some steam pipe. The Hults started production but still faced hardship paying their men. Times were hard, but if anyone was in real trouble the Hult family always managed a few dollars to support family and employees.

Slowly production increased and the family began to realize the potential of the Northwest timber industry. From this small operation they established a mill that would produce 100,000 board feet a day, a lath mill, a veneer plant, and a stud mill on 19,000 acres of timberland. From humble beginnings in Horton, Nils had built the

family company into a timber industry empire.

Nils married a lumberman's daughter, Jewel Bauman, on August 7, 1938 and started his own family. Their first daughter, Linda Evodia, was born on September 26, 1940, followed by four more girls: Jane Carolyn, October 16, 1942; Gretchen Natalie, July 7, 1945; Carol Christine, February 1, 1947; and finally Victoria Alexandra on November 2, 1957.

While Nils was busy with his family and a fast growing business, he always had time to give back to the industry that he loved. Through the years he served the local industry as President of the West Coast Lumbermen's Association, the Industrial Forestry Association, the Pacific Logging Congress, the Western Lane Forest Production Association, the Timber Operators Council, and the National Lumber Manufacturers Association. He served in many capacities at the national level within the National Forest Products Association and was given their Industry Stewardship Award in 1967 for his work in changing the structure of the industry with the formation of the Western Wood Products Association. His image and stature were large in the industry as he tried to broaden perspectives and bring together different factions. As stated by John Hampton, CEO of Hampton Affiliates, "He set a remarkable example for those of us who were rookies on the farm team. I never heard him say a harsh word about anyone. People knew that Nils was honest and straightforward, and that he did not beat around the bush but called a spade a spade. He had character and a heart to match his immense stature.

After the death of his father in 1963, Nils made the difficult decision to sell the Hult Lumber and Plywood Company. He wrote, "Most of you can understand my deep personal regret at leaving the company and you. From my boyhood on, it has literally been my life as you have been my friends." From that point, Nels and Jewel lived in Eugene to raise their girls and became among the most significant contributors to that growing community.

Nils stretched his giving to all aspects of the community. He was a founding director of the Citizens Bank, served as chairman of the Lane Council of Government's economic development committee, and as an advisory board member to the Salvation Army. In 1963 the Salvation Army, from its headquarters in London, presented Nils with the Wally Award for his "unselfish and devoted service on behalf of the less fortunate through his work with the Salvation Army." In 1975 this native Oregonian served as President of the Oregon Historical Society. He worked many years on the board of the Oregon Trail Council of the Boy Scouts of America and served as President in 1979-80. In 1983, the Boy Scouts presented Nils with their highest national honor, the Silver Beaver Award. Perhaps Nils was most proud of his seventeen years of service on the board of directors of Pacific Northwest Bell.

As a token of the high esteem in which he was held, Nils was named Eugene's First Citizen in 1980. "Nils was a quiet person, a tower of strength where he served his community, outspoken on causes that concerned him, a benevolent man who helped many people, a gracious man who was loved by many, and a family man through and through." (Edwin Barker; Register Guard, 1985).

Nils and Jewel put all five of their daughters through the University of Oregon. When Nils was one of the first to receive the U of O Pioneer Award in 1979, he was described as a

"man with an uncommon commitment to the university." Jewel Hult, also a graduate of the U of O, helped charter the President's Associates, an organization that cultivates donors for athletics, building projects, foreign student scholarships, KWAX public radio and the University Museum of Art.

In 1982, Nils and Jewel made a contribution that changed the map of Northwest culture. Their $3 million donation anchored the construction of a performing arts center in Eugene and built a permanent endowment for the performing arts. In 1983, Nils stated, "The center is the finest facility on the Pacific Coast and we've got to support it." The Hult Center serves as a magnet for national and international artists that might otherwise bypass the Willamette Valley. It has changed the way the community of Eugene sees itself and the way it interacts with the rest of the world. The Hult Center has led Eugene's transition from a small mill town to a burgeoning city, with a well-known commitment to the arts.

In 1985, as he and his wife were ready to embark on a vacation through the Panama Canal, Nils Hult passed away. Mayor and friend Brian Obie remembered, "The human side of the man tends to sink in when you think about him, especially his graciousness. A fascinating part about Nils was that in addition to the strength that came from building a business and an empire, there was this humility and willingness to share himself with just anybody."
(Register Guard; 1995)

Nils Hult made a significant impact in Oregon history. He was more than a great lumberman or civic leader. His legacy is not in the dollars he donated to various organizations. Nils Hult looked at that edge of the Willamette Valley and felt something bigger. It was home. He adored working countless hours elbow to elbow with majestic trees, strong rivers and dark wet clouds. He craved public markets and social services. Oregon was as much a part of him as the very family he raised. It inspired him to reach beyond the average citizen's duty. Nils wanted to make Oregon vibrant with promise for the future. A visionary for a generous and thoughtful community of farmers, scholars and performers, Nels Hult brought integrity and commitment to every endeavor.