

Oral History Interview with

OBERLIN J. EVENSON

April 28, 1999

Interviewer: Robert G. Wright

Transcriber: Betty J. Stevens

This is an interview for the San Diego Maritime Museum and possibly the San Diego Historical Society with Mr. Oberlin J. Evenson who was involved with the log rafts that came down from Oregon and Washington to San Diego back in the 30's and 40's. Address: 580 San Geronimo in Pt. Loma, Phone 223-3448. My name is Robert G. Wright. Date: April 28, 1999. We are doing this interview at his home. He was also involved with the American Products and Benson Lumber Co.

RW Could you give me your full name.

OE Oberlin Jerome Evenson.

RW Where were you born?

OE I was born in Seattle, Washington on March 26, 1919.

RW That makes you 80 years old now. Did you go to school in Seattle?

OE No, I did not. We moved from Seattle, after the war, to Clatskanie, Oregon. I spent most of my childhood there.

RW That's where the Benson Lumber Timber Co. had their office? Did you come down here to go to the Army and Navy Academy?

OE Yes, in 1935.

RW You did your elementary school and so forth in Clatskanie, Oregon? Was it a good idea to send you down here to the Army and Navy?

OE I think it was because I probably got a little better education than I would have in Clatskanie.

RW Did you have family here too?

OE I had two uncles down here. And my grandfather spent some time down here because he was with Benson Lumber Co. He owned and ran the Benson Lumber Co. His name was O.J. I was named after him.

RW Did you spend three years at the academy?

OE Two years. Then I went to the University of Oregon. I went to Oregon State first for two years, then I had to transfer because I had a Business Administration degree and Oregon State couldn't do that, so they asked me to go to the

University of Oregon in Eugene. Oregon State is in Corvallis.

RW Did you feel that you were going to be part of the lumber business - were you sort of programming yourself in that direction?

OE Businesswise, yes.

RW Then the war came on.

OE Yes, and I was called before graduation day, but they graduated me anyway.

RW You were in ROTC?

OE Yes. I was in the Third Infantry Division in North Africa. I stayed with that Division the entire time of the war. I was over there for 3-1/2 years. I made seven amphibious landings under fire.

RW Do you know about the origin of the Benson Lumber Co.?

OE When they put this log ramp together, my grandfather had them put timber and stuff to build a mill down here to saw up these rafts and he rode down with the tug on the first one and decided everything was fine. My grandfather built the mill in 1908. From that time on Benson Timber Co. was making these rafts. We would make 3 or 4 rafts a year and then they would tow these rafts during the summer, when the weather was the best.

RW How did lumber get down here before the rafts?

OE It would have to come by rail. We still get lumber by rail down here.

RW It seems like that would be costly and time-consuming.

OE Most of the rafts got down here in 20 days but the thing is that the rafts also provided the cutoff stuff from the rafts provided wood for fire stoves around here and also sawdust was being burned. So there was a possibility of selling all that.

RW Nothing went to waste.

OE I shouldn't say that because we had a burner and some of that had to be burned.

RW I assume what happened - your grandfather conceived this

- idea of the log rafts because of the inefficiency of the railroads.
- OE Yes, it took so long to get down here and the cost of the railroad was pretty high.
- RW Do you have any idea of how he was able to free this up?
- OE There were other people making rafts but none of them like this. There are different types of rafts. The raft that you take the logs out of to build this raft is just a single layer - as I was saying there are several kinds of rafts.
- RW Meaning there were different sizes?
- OE Yes, some of them were built square and lashed together, but the rafts that were used to tow logs from all over on the river to build this raft- because 6 million pieces is a lot of wood. They are towed up and down the river. These rafts are sold to various mills on the river and some of the logs were not all the logs that came from Benson Timber Co. Some of them were from other timber companies around here.
- RW In other words, you are saying that in the Columbia River, this idea of rafts was created up there, only on a smaller scale. And your Grandfather decided to go to the larger size to bring them down here.
- OE There was another engineer here, by the name of Fastabend. He and my grandfather worked on this thing, so that was where the idea came from on that.
- RW Were they Douglas fir? But there was also cedar.
- OE And also some cedar poles -- we would make a deck load of them. And also there were fir poles, used for telephone poles.
- RW I didn't realize that they had a deck load on top. I assume that the deck load on top was smaller logs like fir and so forth.
- OE And sometimes the poles are small and tall, like telephone poles and grows into this particular type of ground. So that's where you get those poles.
- RW If your grandfather started the Benson Lumber Co. in Oregon, is it still in existence up there?
- OE Yes.
- RW His brothers started the mill down here. They must have

seen that San Diego couldn't help but grow.

OE Well, there wasn't another mill within 200 or 300 miles of here.

RW Did they have rafts going to San Francisco? Or Los Angeles?

OE No, it all came straight down here, except when a raft would break in two. We lost two rafts and they were towed in sections into Mendocino. The rafts were insured.

RW Each raft - they must have charged a good fee for that.

OE We were having pretty good success. We shipped over 100 of them down here and only two were lost.

RW What was your part in those days? You didn't really get involved with any of this until you got out of the army?

OE Prior to the army, during the summer, I was working on these rafts. In 1936-37.

RW So you saw them being made up then? How did they make up the rafts? I know what it says in the scrapbook but

OE There is a crib that has to be put together and the logs are laid into this crib and it gradually fills up to the point where the raft is completed and then tie the chains around it. And if they are going to put a deck load on it they put it on at that time.

RW The crib was sort of like a dry dock and chains were laying on the bottom and up the side. Then a crane would life up the logs and lay them down, lengthwise, until they got as many as they felt they could take. Then the chains were brought over.

OE With a turnbuckle to put them together. They would pull them up tight and the put a large shackle. Turnbuckles rust at sea and you can't undo them. There was a lot of chain that was available that came off old ships. Anchor chains.

RW So when the raft was made up, one side of the crib would open up and they would float it off. Then also they came in different lengths?

OE No, they were all the same length. The only thing that varied was when they put the logs on the end pieces, sometimes they would stick out 20 or 30 feet beyond the end of the crib.

- RW This Benson Lumber card says "different sizes".
- OE They were 52 feet wide, 1000 feet long and contained about 6 million feet of lumber and had over 200 tons of binding chain and it draw 24 to 30 feet of water, depending on the size of the raft. The height above water is only 12 feet. They towed it over 1,000 miles by tug.
- RW Was that the Hercules?
- OE There were several - the Sea Lion is the one I know of.
- RW Did you own the Sea Lion?
- OE They were all from the same tugs - each tug had a different time.
- RW But they didn't belong to Benson Timber?
- OE No, we hired that.
- RW Were those tugs steam?
- OE Yes.
- RW You said it takes about 20 days to get down here and it was towed to the Benson Lumber Yard.
- OE Yes, came right past the front door here. There might be 2 or 3 rafts in there at that time and they worked only one raft at a time. They wouldn't take the chains off the rafts as soon as they got here.
- RW Were the logs taken off by a crane or would they come off in a chute?
- OE They came up on a chute. They would release these logs and then they would contain them with a boom - boom sticks which are just logs tied together with chains on the end in order to keep them..... These logs are all in the boom chain and they are headed over to the mill.
- RW Earlier you described something that was interesting. The fact that they had chains wrapped around the diameter of the raft, but also there was a chain that went down the length of the raft.
- OE That's right. That was simply the towing chain. The chain was long enough that when it was being towed the chain would take up the shock between the tug and the raft and the waves.

RW What were the average length of the logs?

OE Some of them were over 100 feet long. And that raft will not stay together unless they are at least 100 feet long.

RW What I am driving at - if you have one log 100 feet long and then you have another one alongside about half way.

OE It would be jockeyed back and forth. When they are loading that raft, there are several ways to put the logs. The taper in the log is what keeps the raft together.

RW One log would be tapered going aft and the other tapered forward.

OE It keeps them together. The bark was still on them. That was used for fuel here in San Diego.

RW You were mentioning that there wasn't any waste. The bark was used for fuel, sawdust.

OE I have a picture here of all the fuel.

RW The mill had its own generator. It was burning the scrap wood -- they had a chimney and they were generating their own electricity in order to power the saws.

OE They would also sell the electricity to San Diego Gas and Electric.

RW This was October 19, 1940.

OE They had a huge fire, somewhere in the 30's.

RW Why did the mill close down?

OE There was more than one reason. Shortly after this we lost a raft that broke in two. One of the reasons the raft broke in two was because Benson Timber Co. was no longer logging by railroad. We were logging by truck and trailer and we were limited to how long of logs we could haul. We decided that there was no way to keep those rafts together unless we did get the long logs. So they closed that down. Then the city wanted this area, so there were a lot of problems there. Also, I think it was during the war period, when it was difficult to keep people to do the work. The handwriting was on the wall.

RW I assume that if everything was normal--since this was essentially a war zone along here--they could still bring

the log rafts down anyway. Did Benson Timber Co. own a lot of acreage up there?

OE Yes, about 20,000 acres.

RW They sold that off too?

OE My grandfather logged it off and my brother is logging it right now.

RW When your grandfather logged it off, was he planting trees?

OE No, but we've been logging it for over 20 years and we've been replanting trees.

RW The reason I asked, my wife and I drove through the Olympic Peninsula, we could see whole acres logged off but nothing done about replacing them.

OE Even if they logged it off yesterday and replanted it tomorrow, you couldn't see, unless you have a very good eye, where they planted it because the plants are so low to the ground, they look like regular grass. Of course, in five years you would be amazed how much it has grown.

RW We are talking about the fact that you can log off and if you replanted that area you log off it takes 65 years to come back with loggable timber. But for newspaper we could be done in five years.

OE Yes, it's a different species. We are not going to run out of trees because we are planting more than we are cutting all the time. We are logging on the 65-year cycle in the 20,000 acres we have up there.

RW By doing the 65-year cycle this is for your children. Do you have children?

OE Yes, I have two daughters that are married. I have four grandchildren and all but two of them have gone through college already.

RW Are you a full owner or share with somebody else?

OE My brother and I own -- there are three corporations up there that own the 20,000 acres -- my Uncle Frank is one of them and Clarence Evenson is one up there.

RW Benson was a partner with your grandfather.

OE It was S. Benson and O. J. Evenson. It was Benson Timber

and Benson Lumber Co. and my grandfather was involved in both. The one in Oregon and the one in California.

RW So Benson and Evenson were partners of Benson Timber and the Benson Lumber Mill in San Diego. Now, who was Benson?

OE Simon Benson lived in Portland, Oregon. He owned the Benson Hotel and he put all the drinking fountains on the streets in Portland. He was quite a guy. I never met him.

RW So he was more of an investor and your family were more on the lumber end.

OE Yes, we've always been in the logging end.

RW Evenson and Benson money built the mill down here. And then it was phased out by 10th Ave. You still bring down barges of lumber and you have nothing to do with that.

OE No, we were buying it and selling it like that too with American Products Inc.

RW What's with the American Products, Inc.?

OE We were in business the same time that Benson Lumber was in business and we were on the piece of property where the Convention Center is now. Foot of 4th St. Across Harbor Drive. We had at one time about 9 million feet of lumber stored on that area. We were in the wholesale lumber business then.

RW Why did you use the word lumber in the title?

OE I don't know. I think my uncle thought of it. For some reason we've never used our name on businesses we had and I think it was because my grandfather thought it would be easier to sell if you didn't have your name on it.

RW You wholesaled lumber? Like Dixieline?

OE This was in the 40's when there wasn't too much lumber around either and we would buy.....there were about 100 lumber yards in San Diego County at that time - now you have about 5 or 6. But the smaller yards couldn't afford to get a carload of lumber just to get certain sizes they wanted, so we were offering them the ability to buy exactly what they needed without having to take a whole carload to get it.

RW This was cut lumber?

OE Yes, 2 x 4's, 2 x 6's, 2 x 8's. Everything. 6 x 6 and up.

RW Is there a curing time on lumber?

OE I think that by the time you cut the tree and from the time it becomes lumber, quite a bit of time goes by and the weather down here dries it out right away. In the east you are better off with kiln dried lumber because the moisture content is so low.

RW I know there was a startup time, after the war was over, there was a demand for housing but there was a startup time of getting lumber down here. So it was really the late 40's or early 50's that things start up for your company - American Products.

OE American Products were doing all the wholesale. At that time some of these other yards- a small yard like Dixie would get a big job for the government and then they could afford to buy carloads of lumber and they would order 5 or 10 carloads of lumber down here. And that's the way they grew. Western was doing the same thing. But there was also a problem of getting a government o.k. to buy that lumber because these mills that were all over had to have a government permit in order to ship it because the government had control of it because they were trying to build these government buildings and such so they had to have a pretty good hand on it.

RW I know when Clairemont went in. Did you supply the lumber for Clairemont?

OE Yes, we supplied quite a bit up there. Tavares was the developer and Ervin Kahn the other one.

RW Is American Products still in existence?

OE No, American Products or American Mill. Neither one of them are in existence. They closed out. We moved down to Chula Vista and we were there from 1970 to about 1985 and then we closed the business and sold the property. The lumber industry just went to pot. We were trying to do custom milling which was very difficult to do any volume.

RW If I remember, there were sort of cycles.

OE Yes, always has been.

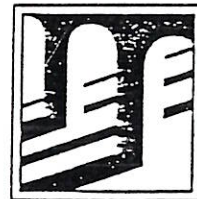
RW There was a lot of building in the 50's -- you couldn't sell a house in the 60's.

OE That's exactly right, the lumber industry has always gone in cycles.

RW Let me say, thank you for the Society and the Maritime Museum. We'll get some photos copied and I'll get them back to you real quick.

INDEX

	<u>Page #</u>
American Products	1, 9, 10
Benson Lbr. Co.	1-4, 6, 7
Fastaband	4
Hercules	6
Ervin Kahn	10
Sea Lion	6
Tavares	10



SAN DIEGO
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY

P. O. Box 81825
San Diego, CA 92138

I hereby give and grant to the SAN DIEGO HISTORICAL SOCIETY, as a donation for such scholarly and educational purposes as the SOCIETY shall determine, the tape recordings and their contents as listed below. I understand that transcriptions of these recordings will be available to qualified researchers in the Society Archives.

DESCRIPTION:

THIS INTERVIEW IS ABOUT THE BRISON
LUMBER CO. AND THE LOG RAFTS THAT
WERE BROUGHT DOWN FROM OREGON

Cherlin J. Trueman
Signature of Narrator

580 SAN GORGONIO
Address of Narrator

ROBERT G. WRIGHT
Signature of Interviewer

223 3448

6823 BELLE GLADE
Address of Interviewer
S.D. 92119 4638380

28 APRIL 99
Date of Agreement