Great teachers and mentors, initiative and optimism, and a commitment to achievement and excellence helped James L. “Jim” Rombach rise to a highly respected, industry-leading forester. After a career spanning four decades, with extensive projects, companies—Weyerhaeuser. Jim remains active in promoting productive forests, land stewardship, and forestry education. Indeed, Jim was offered an appointment by the Forest Service, but he was impressed with the Weyerhaeuser Company’s vision for land stewardship and intensive forest management. He wanted to be part of this effort and accepted an offer to join Weyerhaeuser’s Coos Bay engineering crew. After a short time, he was promoted to District Manager, overseeing multiple projects.

While Jim’s career with Weyerhaeuser was off to a successfull start, he recognized that men of his age and capabilities were needed in the U.S. Armed Forces as the nation increased its commitment to the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam). Therefore, in 1968, Jim and another Weyerhaeuser employee, Major General John E. Fife, IV, were assigned to duty in Vietnam with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and posted to Fort Lewis, Washington. There, he was offered the opportunity to form and lead the first land clearing team (LCT) in Vietnam.

The 27th Engineer Battalion was part of the 25th Infantry Division, equipped with a two-ton Sherman “Rosie Plow,” Jim’s LCT—known as “the 27th”—played a critical role in multiple major combat operations, including Operations Coastal and Ironside. Because LCTs entered dense jungle areas ahead of other troops, this assignment was extremely dangerous. In two of every three soldiers in LCTs became casualties. Later, he served as Operations Officer for the 168th Engineer Battalion (Combat). The 27th was a highly decorated unit. Jim’s leadership, experience with heavy equipment, and knowledge of forestry engineering all contributed to the accomplishments of the 27th.

For his service in Vietnam, Jim was awarded three Bronze Stars (two with the “V” device for Valor), an Air Medal, and other honors. He came back to Coos Bay in 1969, where he served as District Forester for Weyerhaeuser. His next promotion— to Willamette Area Forester—made him the youngest person with this position in the history of the company. His many responsibilities included coordinating with other landowners and government agencies on the Willamette district operations and related issues. He subsequently served as the Willamette Regional Forest Engineer. This position entailed forest planning, engineering, and a range of other duties.

Jim’s next promotion—to Southwest Washington Regional Forest Engineer in 1976—signified his career with one of the most dramatic and destructive natural events in U.S. history: the 1980 eruption of Mount St. Helens.

Weyerhaeuser was the largest private sector landowner in the Mount St. Helens area, operating what was estimated to be the largest integrated timberlands, pulp/paper, and mill operation in the nation. When Mount St. Helens set off warning signs—earthquakes and smaller eruptions—beginning in March, 1980—the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) had the lead in assessing and monitoring the volcano. Jim worked alongside other Weyerhaeuser executives as the company coordinated with a wide range of local, state, and federal government agencies that had roles at Mount St. Helens.

The tragic eruption hit on Sunday morning, May 18, creating devastation on an enormous scale. Lives were lost; homes, roads, and bridges were destroyed, and nearly 150,000 acres of public and private land—with 68,000 acres belonging to Weyerhaeuser—were devastated. The Trout Lake, Celilo, and Columbia Rivers were also affected by enormous amounts of debris, sediment, and ash. In the aftermath of the unprecedented event, Jim worked tirelessly as a member of Weyerhaeuser’s management team on recovery, salvage, and restoration. Safety—a fundamental priority for Weyerhaeuser—was monitored by environmental geologists and other experts determined that certain areas could be safely approached. Weyerhaeuser began to salvage fallen timber and replant. Eventually the company refined the recovery plan, restoring more than 45,000 acres with over 18 million seedlings.

Jim also served in Mount St. Helens land use discussions that set a long-term vision for the area. How would this tragic event be memorialized? How would the land be managed to provide for sustainable forestry and public safety, as well as tourism and recreation? Weyerhaeuser joined with other landowners in advocating that the volcano itself and the surrounding public forestlands be set aside as a national park. In August 1982, Congress established the Mount St. Helens National Volcanic Monument, under the management of the USFS. Following the committee’s recommendation, on August 30, 1982, President Ronald Reagan signed into law the St. Helens eruption, Weyerhaeuser widened its responsibilities in the Northwest. Recognizing the natural connectedness of forests with over-increasing oversight of the company’s northwest forestry operations, including Woods Manager for the Willamette Region. In addition to fulfilling his operational responsibilities, he served as a leader of the Forest Management Committee of the Oregon Forest Industries Council and helped guide forest policy and Oregon state forestry practices.

In 1995, Jim became Director of Forestry for Weyerhaeuser Western Timberlands, which encompassed more than two million acres in Oregon and Washington. Though Jim left Weyerhaeuser, he hardly slowed his pace—and he kept forestry at the heart of his activities. Jim had previously served as an advisor to community college and high school forestry programs. Now, he focused more intensely on helping to develop future generations of foresters by working on several educational initiatives. In 2001, he co-founded the Oregon Natural Resources Education Fund, which raises and distributes funding for high school forestry programs. In honor of high school teachers who made a difference in his life, Jim also supports a motivational teacher recognition program at his alma mater, Del Norte High School in Crescent City, California. He and his family also support a scholarship that recognizes the academic and civic achievements of students, including students at Prospect High School in Prospect, Oregon—Mary Ann Rombach’s hometown.

Jim’s “retirement” includes extensive participation in forestry programs and forest management as well. He plays an active role in the American Tree Farm System and has served for many years as a judge for the Oregon Small Woodland Association in helping to select Outstanding Tree Farms. He also participates on a team managing forests owned by the Cascade Pacific Council of the Boy Scouts of America. In addition, Jim dedicates significant time to advising local, state, and federal government agencies and other organizations about forestry issues, with a special focus on the potential costs and impacts of wildfire. He served for three years on a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service committee reviewing stewardship grant proposals. Retirement has also provided Jim with the chance to travel extensively and pursue his interests in Pre-Columbian and Western American history. He has visited historic ghost towns and Native American sites throughout the West, walked among ancient mists in Mexico and Guatemala, and sailed rivers in the U.S. and Latin America. Over the years, Jim’s professional work also took him to Russia, Germany, Mexico, Costa Rica, and Chile.

Over the course of his career, Jim received numerous honors and awards. In 2008, in recognition of his sustained promotion of forestry and volunteer service, Jim was awarded the prestigious John A. Beale Memorial Award from the Society of American Foresters. Weyerhaeuser’s engineering employees, Jim helped the company extend its century-plus commitment to responsible forest stewardship. As important, Jim shared his expertise and energy widely, acting as a true ambassador for the benefits of healthy forests. Bob Tokarsky, retired supervisor of the Gifford Pinchot National Forest, called Jim’s contributions significant, “He is a visionary forester who continues to contribute to the field to this day.”

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