

Weyerhaeuser Sr., great-grandson of timber company founder, dies

By PAUL ROBERTS
Seattle Times

George Weyerhaeuser Sr., the fourth-generation timber family scion who ran one of America's largest forestry firms and was briefly one of America's most famous kidnapping victims, died June 11, his family confirmed. He was 95.

Weyerhaeuser Sr., whose father, grandfather and great-grandfather also led the timber company that carries the family name, served as CEO from 1966 to 1991 and board chair until 1999.

Over that period, the Weyerhaeuser company became famous for a technology-driven high-yield forestry model that boosted output and transformed the industry, but which also earned the enmity of many environmentalists in the Pacific Northwest and elsewhere.

Yet Weyerhaeuser Sr. is perhaps more famous for another role: As an 8-year-old in 1935, he was kidnapped in broad daylight off a Tacoma, Washington, street, kept in a pit in the woods and released after only his family paid a ransom of \$200,000 in unmarked bills.

He would later downplay the impacts of the abduction and frenzied aftermath. But his daughter, Leilee Weyerhaeuser, said the experience deeply affected his outlook on life.

"I think that incident forced him to reckon with who he really was at a very young age, and he realized how he could get through it," Leilee Weyerhaeuser said.

That lesson certainly applied to his own life.

On top of his nearly six decades with the timber firm, Weyerhaeuser Sr. also found time to serve on boards at Boeing, Safeco, the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco, the Rand Corporation, and Chevron, among others. He was also a key supporter for Weyerhaeuser King County Aquatic Center, which was a central venue in the 1990 Seattle Goodwill Games.

George Hunt Walker Weyerhaeuser was born July 8, 1926, in Seattle, to Helen (Walker) Weyerhaeuser and John Philip Weyerhaeuser Jr., grandson of company co-founder Frederick Weyerhaeuser.

Twenty six years earlier, Frederick Weyerhaeuser and 15 partners had paid \$5.4 million to the Northern Pacific Railway for just over 1,400 square miles of forestland in Washington state. The deal was "the largest private land transaction in American history to that time," according to the company.

By the mid-1920s, the company operated 22 mills, a lumber distribution center and a steamship company.

In May 1935, when young Weyer-



Gary Stewart/AP Photo

George Weyerhaeuser Sr., right, gently alerts President Ronald Reagan that his scheduled time to depart has arrived during a visit to a log export facility in 1984 in Tacoma.

haeuser was 8, his grandfather, John P. Weyerhaeuser Sr., died. It was his obituary, which detailed the family's timber wealth, that reportedly inspired the kidnapping plot by William Dainard, 33, Harmon Metz Waley, 23, and Margaret Eldora Thulin, 19.

On the afternoon of May 24, Weyerhaeuser Sr. was on his way home from Lowell Elementary School in Tacoma when he was snatched by two men in a 1927 Buick. The kidnapers drove him to a secluded woods and put him in a freshly dug pit where he was held in handcuffs.

His family soon received a ransom demand for \$200,000 in old \$20, \$10 and \$5 bills. Once the money had been gathered, his father was instructed to run a personal ad in the Seattle Post-Intelligencer that read, "We are ready. Percy Minnie."

On June 1, after eight days imprisonment in earthen pits, car trunks, closets and even a Uneda cracker carton, Weyerhaeuser Sr. was left on the side of a forest road near Issaquah, Washington, with two blankets and a dollar.

After walking to a farmhouse where a family was sitting down to breakfast, he was reunited with his family.

But the ordeal wasn't over. The kidnapping had made the national news, thanks to a reporter who maneuvered to interview Weyerhaeuser Sr. even before he returned to his family, and the result was a "media frenzy," said Leilee Weyerhaeuser.

"He had told us that for him, the

worst trauma came from being encircled by reporters with cameras and questions and microphones," she said. "As a little boy, trying to face that kind of media presence was really difficult."

Weyerhaeuser Sr. himself played the stoic. During a 1969 interview with Sports Illustrated, he suggested that the kidnapping had a bigger effect on his family than it had on him.

"A (young) boy is a pretty adaptable organism," he said. "He can adjust himself to conditions in a way no adult could. It didn't affect me personally as much as anyone looking back on it might think."

But Leilee Weyerhaeuser thinks the incident taught her father to be forward-looking. Challenges that "would be discouraging to some people, he would be looking for the way to go into the future and have it be better," she said.

That applied to people, too. When one of the kidnapers was released from prison, Weyerhaeuser Sr. hired the man.

"He did me no harm," Weyerhaeuser Sr. said of the man during a 2016 interview with radio station KUOW. "And he was only in his 20s."

In his teen years, Weyerhaeuser Sr. spent summers working for his family company, often as a manual laborer in the woods and mills. He served in the U.S. Navy in World War II and, after graduating from Yale University, continued working his way up through the timber business.

In 1948, Weyerhaeuser Sr. married

Wendy Wagner, whose family had been in the timber business, and the couple had six children: Leilee, George Jr., Sue, Phyllis, David and Merrill. George Jr. died of a heart attack in 2013. Wendy Weyerhaeuser died in 2014.

In the late 1950s, Weyerhaeuser Sr. entered the executive ranks at company headquarters in downtown Tacoma, as an assistant to the executive vice president, but quickly moved up. In 1966, at age 39, he became chief executive officer and president.

During his tenure, the company launched several major initiatives.

In 1967, Weyerhaeuser rolled out its high-yield forestry strategy — essentially, a continuous process of logging and regeneration that included replanting clear-cuts within a year of harvest; fertilizers and herbicides; thinning; and breeding more productive, faster-growing seedlings.

By the 1990s, Weyerhaeuser operations in the Pacific Northwest were producing twice the timber volumes of their natural counterparts, according to a 1997 report by the World Resources Institute.

He was also heavily involved in the design of the company's 425-acre corporate campus in Federal Way, which opened in 1971 to international acclaim as one of the first suburban headquarters.

Weyerhaeuser Sr.'s executive career was also marked by major challenges and controversy. The 1980 eruption of Mount St. Helens flattened 68,000 acres of timber land and forced a massive salvage operation. Environmental activists pressured the company to end or limit logging on some of its millions of acres of forest as a way to protect wildlife habitat.

Weyerhaeuser Sr., who was succeeded by Jack Creighton in 1991, is believed to be the last family member to serve in company management.

In 2021, the company reported net earnings of \$2.6 billion on sales of \$10.2 billion.

Weyerhaeuser Sr. wasn't entirely satisfied with the direction of the company or the industry after he stepped down.

He was unhappy with the company's decision to sell the Federal Way campus and move its current location to Seattle's Pioneer Square, in 2016. "He thought it was terrible," Leilee Weyerhaeuser said.

Weyerhaeuser Sr. also questioned the industry's growing focus on Wall Street, share price and short-term results, which he saw as ill-suited in a business whose products took decades to mature. As someone who had worked in the mills and forests, "he was never thinking that Wall Street knew how businesses should be run."

A memorial service is being planned.

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