

C. R. Smith Comes to Coos Bay

Charles Robinson Smith was looking at his company's future. The twentieth century had just begun, and Smith—everyone called him “C. R.”—was touring the coast of Oregon looking for raw materials for his company's woodenware factories. He saw Oregon's Coast Range, mountains thick with massive spruce, hemlock, and Douglas-fir. He saw rivers big enough to float the huge logs to sawmills.

At some point in his travels he saw the final piece of the puzzle: a natural harbor on the Pacific, close to the timber, big enough for large ships, and surrounded by enough level land to accommodate the mills, yards, and docks he intended to build. It was called Coos Bay.

C. R. was a man of vision, an archetypal Midwest American industrialist known for his wit, drive, boundless energy, and big plans. He, along with his brother Henry, had inherited the Menasha Wooden Ware Company—a leading Midwest maker of wooden barrels, pails, tubs, and kegs—from their parents, Elsha Dickinson Smith and Julia Ann Mowry, a strong-willed and hardworking couple who founded and built the firm at Menasha, Wisconsin, during the last half of the nineteenth century.

C. R., a Princeton graduate whose classmates included Woodrow Wilson, took active control of the company in 1899 at age forty-four and immediately began plans for expansion. Growth could not happen on the scale he wanted without access to new timber. The great forests of Minnesota, Michigan, and Wisconsin were being cut fast, and his company would soon run out of the wood needed to feed the nation's growing demand.

So C. R. looked west.

In 1903 he purchased land and timber rights in Idaho. In 1905 he bought the first of many tracts of timberland in Coos County, Oregon, and acquired 225 square miles (144,000 acres) of timberland along Canada's Saskatchewan River from Herman Finger, forming the Finger Lumber Company, Ltd. Substantial investments were made in the Saskatchewan area, including building a sawmill and planing mill. Finger Lumber was reported to have had a standing timber inventory in excess of 600 million board feet growing on their property.

In 1911 C. R. acquired the Southern Oregon Company, a major forest products company in Coos County, Oregon, with its substantial timberlands, along with their big sawmill in Empire City, a tugboat, a rail line, and a couple of stores. The timber from these purchases was originally acquired to supply a major portion of the lumber needs of Menasha as C. R. began contemplating expanding his woodenware factories out west.

On his trips to the Pacific Northwest C. R. undoubtedly found traveling difficult as he reached the hinterlands. Ocean beaches often provided the only efficient public roadway along the rugged Oregon and Washington coasts and travelers were required to use ferries to cross the frequent river estuaries.



Coos County old-growth (Courtesy of Warren Dick)



Charles Robinson (C. R.) Smith
President of Menasha Wooden
Ware Company 1899–1916



C. R. Smith inspecting Menasha logs stored in a
lake in the Midwest (Courtesy of Lydia Smith)