

OUR WESTERN DRY KILN CLUBS, PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

By Edwin Knight

Our Western dry kiln clubs meet jointly today for the 17th time to discuss the techniques of lumber seasoning, to renew old friendships and to make new ones. The formal part of our programs are very valuable to us, as there we get the help of specialists who give us the latest information in research and development in the field of lumber seasoning. Equally valuable are those informal discussions among old friends and new, where we often get the answers to problems that have been troublesome.

Regrettably, in the last year or two some of our clubs seem to be in deep trouble trying to keep going. This situation must be rectified, but in the meantime, it has brought up the question from some of our management people, why have a kiln club? There are several reasons for belonging to a kiln club, but the most important reason seems to me is the fact that here we work cooperatively instead of alone in the secrecy that once marked kiln drying as an art to be shared with no one. In the kiln club, we are no longer held back by our own narrow views, but share the knowledge that is available world-wide to those who seek it. Obviously, it is through our kiln clubs that we have the opportunity to learn of the advances that are so necessary if lumber is to survive competitively with other building products.

The first Western kiln club to be established was organized in 1934, not the first kiln club in the United States, but one of the very early ones. A group of Klamath Falls, Oregon, kiln men met locally, at first as the Klamath Kiln Operators Club. When the organization enlarged to cover a much wider area the name was changed to the Southern Oregon-Northern California Dry Kiln Club. The late Albert Hermann of the former Western Pine Association was so interested in this group that he attended as many of their early meetings as he had time to spare from his other duties. Many good lumbermen have belonged to this club, far too many to be mentioned here. But an example of their caliber can be found in our good friend Heber Radcliffe, with the McCloud River Lumber Company when he retired, who has been so helpful to the kiln club movement through the years.

The next club to organize in the Western area was the West Coast Dry Kiln Club founded in 1940. Three people, Arthur Motett, D. F. Hill and L. A. "Shorty" Nelson were largely responsible for its organization. From a charter membership of 15, this club has now grown to 104 members. Several of the original charter members are still active in the club. As you know, this is our host club this year, as they have been several times in the past. A top-notch group, this club has been most active since its inception.

The year 1943 marked the start of the Redwood Seasoning Committee, formed to study the kiln and air drying problems of the California Redwood Region. The minutes of their first meeting lists 15 people present, only one of whom, Mr. Dwight Felt, of the Simpson Lumber, Co., Arcata, California,

is still actively engaged in the seasoning of Redwood lumber. This club has done an outstanding job in their area and in taking part in the joint activities of our western dry kiln clubs.

The next club to be organized got their start when three kiln foremen, Phil Reinmuth, Lyle Williams and George Stilwell from different Potlatch Forests plants, visited a Southern Oregon-Northern California Club meeting in Klamath Falls. Enthused by what they learned, they organized a Washington-Idaho and Montana Dry Kiln Club. The first meeting was held in Spokane, Washington, in November 1947 with six charter members. From this meager beginning, the club has grown to about 65 members.

Northern California members were handy to the Klamath Falls area where many were affiliated with this group. Central California, considerably further away, had a large number of people interested in seasoning but lacked the benefit of a local club. The idea of a club there took hold when several kiln men from the area attended a kiln course in San Francisco in 1947 conducted by the U. S. Forest Products Laboratory. The following year they organized under the name of the Central California Dry Kiln Club. This club got off to a good start and has maintained a good level of activity since. Carl Rasmussen, formerly with the Western Pine Association, gave considerable assistance to this club in its infancy. Harvey Smith of the California Forest Range and Experiment Station became their secretary in their second year and held that post continuously for the next 12 years, an outstanding record of service.

Eastern Oregon-Southern Idaho Dry Kiln Club was organized in that area in the early 1950's. Many of their members came from the fringes of two adjoining clubs in order to attend meetings closer to home. An active spark plug in this group, as long as his health permitted, was Lee Kincaid of the Boise-Payette Co., now Boise Cascade Corporation. From management in that company a strong early booster was the late Irving Lysted, who though not directly involved in seasoning, nevertheless, saw the value of this type of group effort.

In 1951 hardwood importers in the Los Angeles area met informally to discuss the seasoning problems of these species. The late George Beckman, impressed with the value of the dry kiln clubs, asked Harvey Smith to come to Los Angeles and help them get a club started. Bob Inglis became their secretary the second year and held that job efficiently for many years until he moved to Spokane. Bob tells me that the group had the help of many fine people, among whom was Arthur Koehler, formerly of the U. S. Forest Products Laboratory and later a consultant in the Los Angeles area. You may recall that it was Arthur Koehler who helped solve the Lindbergh kidnapping case by matching parts of the pieces of wood from the ladder used by the kidnapper. This group was strongly represented by management who realized that competitors can be really "good guys" when working for a common cause.

Further away geographically from our coastal lumber seasoning activities are kiln men from the states of Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado and Utah. An interesting sidelight about the organization of this group as a kiln club was told to me recently. Jim Pinneo, kiln foreman at Southwest Forest Industries at McNary, attended a kiln course soon after Lyle Winkel of the Western Pine Association conducted a one-day seasoning course in Winslow, Arizona. This planted the seed. But the idea didn't really sprout until Herb Dennis, a strong kiln member from Oregon, moved into the area and worked on the people there to take some action in forming a club in the year 1954.

I have no information on our kiln clubs to the north of us in Canada. We do appreciate it though when they have attended our joint meetings. Representatives from the Canadian area have generously participated several times on our program and for this we are grateful.

This brings me to the point of mentioning the activities of our Western kiln clubs in their joint meetings each year. We are not formally organized as are the individual clubs. At each joint meeting the president of the host club generally acts as chairman at an annual officer's breakfast. At these breakfast meetings the club officers have formulated plans for the coming joint activities of the group

and a bid or bids are made by club representatives for the next joint meetings.

Our first joint meeting was held in 1949. This was a three club affair with the Moore Dry Kiln Company as host. In 1951, a six club, no-host meeting was held in Corvallis, Oregon, but each year since one of the clubs has been selected to be the next year's host. It has been the policy to hold meetings alternately in a northern and a southern city of the area as far as is practically possible. On the whole, the joint meetings have been very successful and the quality of the programs is consistently good. A glance at this year's program will show you what I mean.

What about the present state of our Western dry kiln clubs? As might be expected there is both weakness and strength. This year weakness seems to be the rule. Several clubs have been relatively inactive the past year to two. Southern California Lumber Seasoning Association disbanded two years ago because of reduced membership. The remaining members meet informally on occasion but not as a club. The same is true of the Southwest Dry Kiln Club. I am told that the Redwood Seasoning Committee has been almost dormant the last two years, also true of the Eastern-Oregon-Southern Idaho group. The Southern Oregon-Northern California Club has done very well until this year when activity has seemed to reach a low ebb. Perhaps one way to start the ball rolling again would be to hold meetings annually for awhile instead of quarterly. This is being contemplated by the Redwood Seasoning Committee.

We can expect a change in drive at times, especially when no pressing kiln club problems are calling for attention. But I cannot believe that we have begun to perfect our kiln drying processes to the point where we can disband these useful meetings. There are many new methods calling for analysis. I know of no better way to separate the true from the phony than through the combined experience of our working kiln operators. We can rely on research organizations to set up basic studies, but the final analysis must come from you on the job.

One way to build up interest in the kiln club would be to work up better meetings. Give each meeting the benefit of better planning with more practical programs geared to the needs of the club members. Give these meetings better publicity by well written advance notices. Send each member and his manager a meeting notice well ahead of the meeting date.

This will take more than casual planning. It seems to me that our most successful clubs have often had the help of professionally trained people from other organizations. Much as we might wish that all kiln club officers would come from the ranks of our kiln operators, we may as well face the truth that we should seek outside guidance when available. A look at our most active clubs will demonstrate the value of this type of assistance.

Your host club has Charlie Kozlik of the Oregon State University-Forest Products Laboratory as secretary. He is the program chairman of this year's meeting and has done an equally fine job for his club during the years that he has served. In past years, Harvey Smith of the southwest Forest Range and Experiment Station was a great help to the Central California Dry Kiln Club. This year they have Dr. Helmuth Resch of the California Forest Laboratory as secretary. These men have been a real help and the clubs are grateful to them for it.

A recent development that may give our clubs a boost is the offer of the Western Wood Products Association to assist the clubs in this Western region with the printing of their kiln club notices and similar papers. Thus, a secretary can be chosen for a club on his merits regardless of his access to facilities to get this printing and mailing job done.

I hesitate to forecast the future of our Western kiln clubs. So much depends on so many things which can make or break them. The good work that has been done and is being done by our clubs is legion. The potential is there, certainly, but may never be developed without a concerted effort. I feel certain that given a helping hand and a will to improve, our kiln clubs will meet the need as it arises. A small extra effort from each one of you may be all that is needed to turn the tide. The future is in your hands.