

Early supporters crucial to success

By BOB CUMMINGS
Staff Writer

Several people played key roles early in the recovery of the public lots, but a former assistant attorney general who now runs a family liquor business in Texas deserves top honors.

It was Lee Schepps who first suggested that the cutting rights the state had sold a century before had expired.

Schepps, a Texas native, based his contention on numerous court decisions in the far west, where similar timber deeds had been interpreted as meaning only the timber that existed at the time of the sale.

Maine officials had always assumed that the century-old deeds granted perpetual rights to the public lands and that the state owned only the minerals under the soil.

That had been the contention of then Forestry Commissioner Austin Wilkins in a report to the Legislature in 1963. With the sale of the timber and grass rights, Maine was "left only a vested state equity in the soil," he had written.

Schepps had been assigned to investigate the lots by then Attorney General

lobbed state officials and legislators to act to preserve them.

Gov. Joseph E. Brennan singled out Sprague and Schepps for special praise when he announced the last big settlement of the state claims in May.

"These people are truly the genesis of what comes before us today," Brennan said. "This is a great achievement."

But others played important roles. Former state Sen. Harrison L. Richardson served as chairman of a special public lands committee of the Legislature and pushed for the return of the lands through two legislative sessions.

His championing of the public lots may have cost him the governorship, for he had raised the ire of the paper industry and was narrowly defeated in the 1974 Republican gubernatorial primary by Erwin. The election eventually was won by conservative James B. Longley.

A Richardson bill that would have terminated the cutting rights by legislative fiat was defeated after a bitter fight, but it paved the way for the first out-of-court settlements of the long dispute.



Richardson



Wilk

James Erwin following a series of stories in the Gannett newspapers that first called widespread attention to the lands.

He had insisted that "a distinct possibility" existed that the cutting rights had expired.

A decade later the Supreme Court agreed.

Edward Sprague, a retired woods worker and diesel mechanic, was also a key figure in the early days of the dispute. More than anyone else he pushed the idea of the public lots and

Great Northern Paper Co. first broke the deadlock by voluntarily returning 60,000 of the 90,000 acres of cutting rights it had claimed.

Ironically, Great Northern was both the first and one of the last of the major companies to settle.

The delay proved expensive. The final exchange to face the Legislature this spring gives the state 38,235 acres of Great Northern lands worth \$7.2 million, some \$2.3 million of which represents a penalty for the wood the company had harvested after the cutting rights expired.

Others who contributed to the final return of the states land legacy include James Haskell, former director of the Land Use Regulation Commission, and Martin Wilk, an Augusta attorney.

Wilk, a Brunswick town councillor, first argued the public lands suit while an assistant attorney general and stayed on after switching to private practice to argue the matter before the Supreme Court and to serve as the state's chief negotiator for the final settlements.

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June 4, 1984, Portland Press Herald. Early supporters crucial to success, by Bob Cummings.