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# TRIBUTE VIDEO HONORING ED POMMERENING TELLS THE CONSERVATION SUCCESS STORY OF HOW HE REFORESTED THE SILVER VALLEY

By Steve Stuebner

When Ed Pommerening came to the Silver Valley in Northern Idaho in the early 1970s, he came around a corner of a forested mountain highway, and whole mountainsides of bare, raw soil rose above the valley, completely devoid of trees.



"The first time when we turned the Pinehurst corner, I always said I thank the good Lord that I wasn't driving, because it's what we used to call in Vietnam, a flashback," said Ed Pommerening, a professional forester, recently deceased, who single-handedly led the effort to Reforest the Silver Valley.

Pommerening served in the 101st Airborne Division during the Vietnam War, searching for pilots who had gone missing in enemy territory. "The flashbacks were really ugly, they kind of hurt you badly, to a point physically too, but it was a flashback of what I had seen in Vietnam, with spraying Agent Orange and then dropping



*This photo was taken when the Bunker Hill smelter was still operational. You can see the bare mountain-sides above, with the newly created contours clearly visible, which were carved into the landscape to prevent erosion. The contours were completed prior to areas being planted with tree seedlings. (Courtesy State of Idaho)*

Napalm, which causes the big fires – it starts a fire and burns everything and all you see is bare ground."

After he left Vietnam, he never wanted to see that image again. "With the flashback, you're back in Vietnam, and that's the bad thing," he said.

In 1971, Pommerening was hired by the Bunker Hill Mining Co. to work on reforesting those bare hillsides in the Silver Valley. He had a master's in forestry from the University of Idaho. Through his innovative leadership, including hiring students from local high schools and growing seedlings year-round in the mines, they reforested 18 square miles of the Silver Valley, on both sides of the highway, with a diversity of coniferous tree species from 1974-1993.

The mountains in the Silver Valley are now a carpet of green.

Pommerening's remarkable story was featured recently in a video produced by Matthew Bane for the Kootenai-Shoshone Farm Bureau, the Idaho Farm Bureau, and Kootenai-Shoshone Soil and Water Conservation District. The documentary video is titled "Reforestation of Silver Valley." Run time is 25 minutes. It's available on YouTube.

"Well, we feel it's a story that needs to be told for all of Idaho," said Joe Dobson, Kootenai-Shoshone Farm Bureau President, in the video. " People kind of forget about North Idaho, and the past history of the Bunker Hill, but it's an amazing project here with the reforestation of basically the Silver Valley area."

The video was shown at the most recent Division 1 meeting of the Idaho Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts (IASCD).

"It's important for people to know that all of the reforestation work pre-dates the Superfund stuff," says Laurin Scarcello, who serves on the Kootenai-Shoshone Board of Supervisors.





*Ed Pommerening checking on the growth of seedlings planted in recent years. (Courtesy Idaho Farm Bureau)*

Pommerening was board president of the K-S SWCD when Scarcello joined the board. "I got to know Ed – he was a very interesting fellow. It's truly remarkable what he accomplished in the Silver Valley."

***Brief history***

Noah Kellogg discovered the Bunker Hill ore body in 1885 on a mule, perusing the natural resources in the area for gold or silver. The town of Kellogg became a boom town. Numerous underground mines were quickly developed in the valley. Since the early days, the mines have produced approximately 1.2 billion ounces of silver.

"Bunker Hill was one of the largest mining, smelting and refining operations in the world, producing about a hundred thousand annual tons of lead equivalent amount of zinc, about 10 million ounces of silver and considerable amounts of by-product medals like cadmium," said Bunker Hill CEO Jack Kendrick in the video.

Environmental controls on the smelters were primitive back in the day, so large amounts of heavy metals contaminated the soils surrounding the smelters. But that's not what killed the trees.

Pommerening explains that it was large amounts of Sulphur dioxide from the lead smelter that killed the trees in the valley during World War II. The smelter reportedly produced as much as one-third of the lead used to make bullets for the U.S. military during the war.

"Well, the fault of it was really the lead smelter and the zinc plant putting out sulfur dioxide into the air. The Conifer trees can't stand because it kills the needles and the needles fall off," he says.

"The biggest thing that happened was at the start of World War II, the Department of Defense wanted to make Bunker Hill produce 5,000 tons of lead a day, and they were only going to produce 1,000 (tons) that they wanted, and so the Department of Defense came in and took over the lead smelter.

"When they did that, there was so much SO2 that got into the air, that it killed a lot of these trees."

***Pommerening not daunted by the Reforestation challenge***

"I thought we could do it right at the start," he says.

Everybody was worried about the soils, he recalls. From his experience in Vietnam, he had seen forests get destroyed by napalm, but he was amazed how quickly they grew back in a wet environment. "I figured this couldn't be much worse."

Before beginning mass planting, he set up test plots and tested the soil pH.

"We took soil samples from the surface, and then down to two inches, then down to four inches, down to six and by the time we got to eight inches, the pH of the soil was just right at what the pH of all the native conifer patches that there are as far as the forests go," he says.



*Pommerening grew millions of tree seedlings in a greenhouse deep inside the Bunker Hill mine. The underground setting provided a constant temperature of 75 degrees, allowing him to raise seedlings year-round. (Courtesy Carol Roberts)*

So they planned to plant the seedlings about 10-12 inches deep. They were getting an 80 percent success rate at some of the test plots. Seedling plugs held together with plastic containers did the best.

"We lost a lot of trees only because of erosion factors on the bare hillsides," he says.

In the meantime, Bunker Hill hired people to contour the bare hillsides with D-8 dozers in the 18 square mile area (3 miles by 6 miles) to prepare them for planting.

Pommerening grew millions of tree seedlings in trays deep inside the Bunker Hill mine, where it was a constant 76 degree temperature.

"Once we got going, it become one of the easiest jobs I had," he says. "Coming out here from the middle of April to the first of July, planting trees with 85 kids. Essentially in the summertime, we were working on 24 hours a day, seven days a week, a whole pile of the kids had tents up there, and they just stayed there, uh it was uh quite a deal!"

Each person was responsible for planting 200 trees per day.

Pommerening made a special point of hiring kids who had lost their fathers in the Sunshine Mine disaster in May of 1972, when 91 miners died, trapped inside the mine after a fire broke out. Bunker Hill paid the kids what their fathers would have made working in the mines - $11 to $13/hour.

"That was good money back then!" Scarcello notes.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) moved into the area in 1985. Gulf Resources & Chemical Corp., the last owners of Bunker Hill, were ordered by the EPA to pay for extensive environmental studies. Asarco, Hecla Mining Co., Sunshine Mining Co., and Coeur d' Alene Mines were also charged with the responsibility and costs of replacing contaminated dirt. Kellogg soon became the largest EPA Superfund Site in the United States.

Pommerening said the EPA forced him to stop growing seedlings in the mines, and the planting operation got stalled for a number of years in the 1980s. But they got back into full-scale operation between 1989-1993.

Carol Woolum Roberts wrote about Silver Valley history in her blog, titled, "Kellogg's Second Chance."

She saw Pommerening as a local hero, giving the valley hope for a future after the mining era slowed down.

"By the end of 1993, Pommerening and his crew were responsible for planting 2.8 million trees amongst 5,000 acres," she wrote. "The hills throughout the Silver Valley that once looked like large dirt mounds have significantly changed. Today there are many species that can be found in the green hills of Kellogg. Ponderosa Pine, White Pine, Quaking Aspen, Ocean Spray, Ceanothus, Snow Berry and grasses flourish throughout the reforested area."

Roberts notes that Kellogg and Wallace have been discovered as a year-round tourist destination with Silver Mountain Ski and Summer Resort, the Trail of the Coeur d'Alenes for bike riding, the Route of the Hiawatha rail-trail nearby as another attraction, golf, and more.

"Because of the reforested hillsides, Kellogg is slowly being restored to the original beauty the Schitsu'umsh once appreciated when they lived along the banks of the Coeur d'Alene River. Wetlands are springing forth on



*This is a similar view of the Silver Valley landscape shown on page 2, except the smelter is gone, and the trees are more than 50 years old now on the mountains above. (courtesy State of Idaho)*

this former marshy area, wildlife is returning to the hills, and fish are now being seen in the once-milky white river that flows through town.

"I marvel at the hillsides of my youth, and how well the earth can regenerate itself when the pollution and contaminates are gone, and nature can run its course. It is truly a miracle."

Linda Rider, a Kootenai-Shoshone Farm Bureau secretary and a Silver Valley native, was glad to see Pommerening receive recognition in the Farm Bureau video.

"Ed has never been recognized for what he has done," Rider says. "I was well aware of some of that was going on, I just didn't have all the pieces, and so that's why we thought it was so important to tell this story … because for some of us who had lived in the community, you might say, we didn't know the story."

Approaching Kellogg from either direction today on Interstate 90, the mountains are densely forested in all directions. Perhaps there should be a bronze statue created some day in his honor.

Pommerening died on Christmas eve in 2022, at the age of 75, several months after the video was released on the Idaho Farm Bureau's YouTube channel. So the video became a tribute in his honor, inspired by the Kootenai-Shoshone Farm Bureau, the Idaho Farm Bureau, and K-S SWCD.

Bob Flagor, a K-S SWCD Supervisor, works on Monarch butterfly conservation in the Coeur d'Alene area. He radio-tagged a butterfly recently, and named it Ed Pommerening. That butterfly is doing well, Flagor says. It's currently flying around in the Fresno, Calif., area.

"Ed is flying free."

To watch the video, go to https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t8BDwR7UetQ

*Steve Stuebner writes for Conservation the Idaho Way on a regular basis.*

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