

The Rise of Rae

George Rae, a founder of Inman-Poulsen Lumber Company, provides a unique view of Oregon's timber history

By Roy Widing



Elizabeth Maxwell at Catalina Island, California—less than two years before her marriage to George Rae. Caption reads 'My Catch At Catalina Cal Dec 21st 1912. Man is identified as Capt. Geo. Bosch. Photo courtesy of Melba Tillitson

On a bluff overlooking the Willamette River in Portland, Ore., stands a stunning tomb built for two. Opened annually and known simply as the 'Rae Room,' the ornate structure houses a pair of enormous marble sarcophagi. Within one, rests a timber baron named George Rae. In the other, is his beloved second wife, Elizabeth. Accompanying the couple are clues to one of the Northwest's more interesting stories of love, lumber, lucre, and lawsuits.

In 1869, as the United States was rebuilding after the Civil War, 26-year-old George Rae emigrated from Scotland. In 1875, the same year he became a citizen, he took 20-year-old Charlotte ('Lottie') as his wife.

The couple found their way to Portland, or 'Stumptown,' and George worked his way up the timber industry with different firms. In 1890, he partnered with Robert Inman, Johan Poulsen, and Job Hatfield to co-found what would become the fabulously successful Inman-Poulsen Lumber Company.



Each co-founder brought a wealth of experience to their startup company. Other factors contributed to their success in the competitive sawmill trade, including their diverse — yet complimentary — personalities and a shared aptitude for hard work. The original Inman-Poulsen company charter states their primary business was to ‘sell and deal in lumber and building material.’ But while Inman-Poulsen acquired timber holdings, work camps, and even a few small railroad lines, their ‘bread and butter’ income was derived from lumber processed at their Portland sawmill on the east bank of the Willamette River. From there, Inman-Poulsen’s processed lumber made its way down the Willamette to the Columbia River, then across the globe.

The Inman-Poulsen Lumber Company suffered plenty of challenges, including union strikes and the Thanksgiving Day fire in 1896, which destroyed the entire mill. Amazingly, within two months, the firm had rebuilt their facilities and doubled production. In 1906, the San Francisco earthquake and fire sharply escalated lumber demand. That year, Inman-Poulsen helped meet the need by setting a single circular sawmill production world record.

The Timberman reported the mill was in operation 22 hours a day, and in May 1906, they set an astounding monthly record of 13,300,000 feet cut. That same month, the mill set another record — 565,000 feet of lumber cut in one day.

The firm became Oregon’s single largest employer and a source of fantastic wealth for its co-founders. Rae and partners enjoyed a bountiful lifestyle with all the finer things in life, like breathtaking homes — many of which still stand today.

George and Lottie adopted a young girl named Maud. Maud Rae attended parochial school in Salem, Ore., and later married T.S. Emerson, the son of a wealthy Seattle businessman. Illness took its toll on George’s wife, Lottie. She spent time in several mental hospitals and was eventually committed to Oregon State Hospital (known as the Oregon State Insane Asylum until 1907), where she died in 1913. By this time, George had developed a close friendship with his assistant, Miss Elizabeth Maxwell. Though Elizabeth later defended, under oath, the appropriateness of her relationship with George, their frequent travels together stirred considerable controversy. In 1914, George married Elizabeth in high style at Portland’s grand Multnomah Hotel.

George died four years later and was initially buried at Portland’s Riverview Cemetery next to Lottie. Worthy of a spy novel, George’s body was exhumed and spirited across the Willamette River to his final resting place in the Rae Room. But it wasn’t ‘graveyard hopscotch’ that made George Rae front page news. Instead, it was the very public legal battle over his massive estate. In one corner, was his adopted daughter Maud and son-in-law, T.S. Emerson. In the other corner, was his second wife, Elizabeth.

During the course of the legal war, accusations got personal, and eventually the case was appealed all the way to the Oregon State Supreme Court. But in 1920, before a final decision was made, both parties agreed to a settlement. The Inman-Poulsen Lumber Company continued until 1954, when it was purchased by Georgia-Pacific, thus ending a fascinating chapter of Northwest sawmill history.

*To read the full and fascinating story about George Rae and the Inman-Poulsen Lumber Company, the new book, *Whispers from the Rae Room*, by Roy Widing, can be ordered online at www.lulu.com/roywiding.*

