



Plywood in Retrospect

ROBINSON PLYWOOD & TIMBER CO.

No.13 in a series of
monographs on the
history of West Coast
plywood plants

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Thomas Robinson

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This, the story of Robinson Plywood & Timber Company, is the 13th in a series of historical monographs concerning Douglas fir plywood mills during the infancy of the industry.

The company, organized in 1889 by Thomas Robinson, is still a family enterprise, operated now by his grandsons.

Much of the background information in this monograph came from Jack S. Robinson and from the files of the American Plywood Association. My thanks go to all those who helped with compiling and publishing the material.

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ROBINSON PLYWOOD & TIMBER CO.

Thomas Robinson, founder of the Robinson Plywood Company, was born in Dublin, Ireland, shortly after the American Civil War. When only about seven years old, he moved to the United States with his parents who settled near Germantown, Pennsylvania.

As Tom grew up, he developed into a skillful mechanic and then became a traveling salesman for the Power Machine Co. Ambitious and restless he soon decided better opportunities for success lay to the far west and about 1887, with his wife whom he had met in Germantown, he moved to Tacoma, Washington. There he found ready employment in a millwork concern and quickly became foreman and then a machinery salesman. Possessed of initiative and inventiveness, Tom was confident he could succeed with a millwork plant of his own and after investigating various areas, decided that Everett, Washington offered the best opportunity for his projected enterprise.

Accordingly, in 1889, Robinson organized the Robinson Manufacturing Co. and by 1891 started production in Everett's first millwork plant, built along the waterfront. It is related he broke a leg while unloading machinery for his plant, but apparently this didn't slow him down much. Neither did the panic of 1893 and the subsequent brief depression. Tom Robinson increased his business and soon added a small sawmill to supply his door stock requirements. In 1900 he decided it was imperative to be adjacent to deep water where he could have his own pier so ships could be moored close to his plant. Accordingly, he sold his property (an area now occupied by Scott Paper Company) to the North Star Timber Co. and moved his machinery and equipment two blocks north.

Evidently in those days there wasn't much to move. The next year, on September 24, 1901, he incorporated as the Robinson Manufacturing Co., a designation that lasted until 1948.

A few years later, about 1904-05, he started to manufacture fir doors, mostly three-and five-panel at first, but as business increased he expanded into various custom-built items, eight-panel front doors, and other specialties. Meanwhile, a large pier had been constructed alongside his plant.

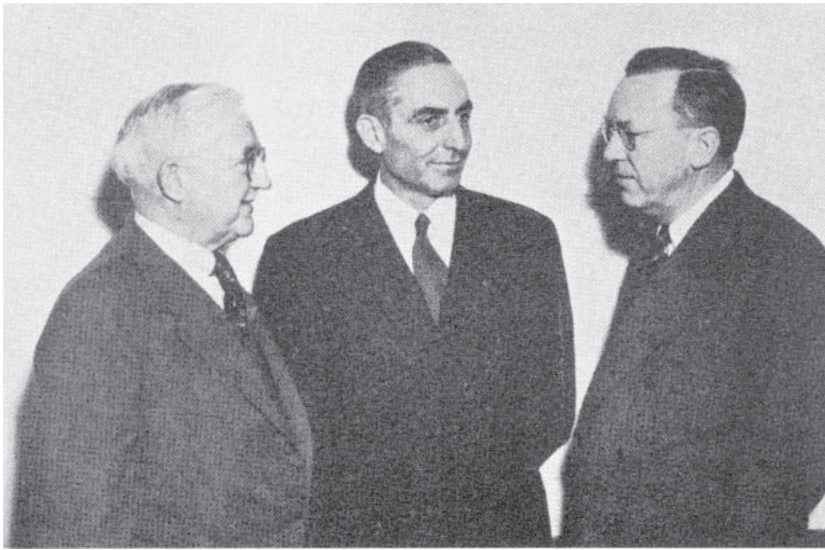
In those days and in fact for many years after, Tom Robinson practically lived in the shop, but always maintaining his dignity by wearing a conventional business suit, with necktie, under his coveralls. Intrigued by anything mechanical, he was always experimenting with new ideas for improving processes, machinery, and equipment.

This bent toward inventiveness was passed on to his sons Jack R. Robinson, born in 1893 and his brother Ted R. Robinson, born in 1900. Both boys as they grew up became familiar figures around the plant and gradually acquired an intimate knowledge of all operations. Jack's son, Jack S. relates that his grandfather had a Packard which, in Jack R's opinion, "he didn't drive too well." Jack used to remove one or two parts from the motor and carry them in his pocket so his dad couldn't wreck the car. Jack S. also relates how his father, age about 15, in the Packard raced the interurban carrying his father, Tom, to Seattle where they had a big contract for all the millwork in a new hotel.

Through the years, more than 50 patents were granted to Robinsons, including Tom's invention of the Coe Clipper, an automatic loader, an automatic off-bearer, and Tom's paper-tape machine, to name only a few.

Jack and Ted also developed a gear shift for their lathe, using sprockets, so that veneer thickness could be changed without stopping the lathe.

When Robinson started to make doors he decided also to make his own door panels. Accordingly he installed a cold press and arranged to get green veneer from Wheeler-



E.W. Daniels, Harbor Plywood Corp.; George H. Royer, Smith Wood Products, Inc.; and Jack R. Robinson (right), son of Robinson Manufacturing Company's founder. (From *West Coast Lumberman* June 1945)

Osgood in Tacoma, the Portland Manufacturing Co. and Sedro-Woolley door plants. The veneer was dried by hanging on clips in a "hot room." Later, a wire-mesh Proctor dryer was installed.

The manufacture of door panels at the Robinson's plant led to the almost inevitable development that occurred in a number of competing door plants, namely, a plant devoted to the manufacture of Douglas fir plywood in a multitude of sizes and thicknesses.

World War I, however, delayed that step as Robinson concentrated on the war effort by producing countless thousands of wire-bound boxes for shipping war material and supplies overseas. With that job accomplished, peacetime activities were resumed, but the glamorous aura of plywood was spreading over the Pacific Northwest and Tom Robinson "wanted in."

Plywood Begins at Robinson's

During 1920 a "conventional" cold press plywood plant was installed, with a 10-ft. lathe, the existing 4-ft. x 8-ft. cold press and glue spreaders, the old Proctor dryer, hand clipper and a six-drum Yates-American sander. As far as possible, other equipment, including belt sanders, dryers, elevators, and even panel cut-off saws, were manufactured and assembled by the plant mechanics and crew.

Logs were barked with axes as was customary before mechanical barkers were introduced.

The chief product was the 1/4-in., 4-ft. x 8-ft. panel although numerous cut-up sizes for a host of industrial uses, such as cabinets, luggage, and crates, were increasingly in demand. As mentioned in Monograph No. 2, the Wheeler-Osgood Story, W.S. (Bill) Nurnburg had introduced 1/4-in. fir panels to the eastern trade as early as 1912 and, as he reports in a letter of September 11, 1972, to the author, actually used the **wallboard** grade designation. The initial order, however, was used for the bottoms of cabinet drawers – one-piece faces, clear – so Bill called it the Drawer Bottom grade, a name that hit the popular fancy and became an industry-wide standard designation for many years.

The introduction of 1/4-in., 4-ft. x 8-ft. fir plywood as a wall and ceiling panel came later, about 1928, when Ed Westman of Washington Veneer Co.* started shipping carloads of it to Chicago, thanks to the enterprise of Don Davis, Sr. of the R.C. Clark Veneer Co. there.

One item popular with many mills was a 5-ft. x 10-ft. panel with a simple knockdown plywood frame, for table tennis. These were originally promoted by several mills as "ping pong" tables until the owners of that copyrighted name began demanding a royalty for its use.

Robinson converted their 4-ft. x 8-ft. press to a 5-ft. x 10-ft. by using angle irons and clamps on the overhang to provide necessary gluing pressure on the oversize panels.

During the decade beginning with 1920, Robinson Manufacturing Co. enjoyed the prosperity of the budding plywood industry, along with the growing demand for doors as the housing market boomed. By 1925, Tom's sons Jack (then 32 years old) and Ted (at 25) were taking an active part in the plant management. Ted had obtained a B.A. degree from the University of Washington but was interested mostly in the production end, while Jack was assisting in the administrative problems. All seemed well until October 1929, when the silk shirt era and the business boom suddenly ended with the fateful stock market crash. The worldwide postwar inflation had run its course and the pall of depression that engulfed Europe as an aftermath of World War I soon settled over the United States, exacting a tragic toll on one business after another.

The Robinson Company suffered severely during the depression years, for as related by Jack S., one of the founders grandsons, "everything pretty much went down the drain." The plant kept running, desperately turning out any kind of panel or cut-up product for which Jack Spencer, the Sales Manager, could find a market. The crews worked for half wages, plus a precarious monthly bonus on the other half or a total of about 32-1/2 cents an hour. At one time,

*See Washington Veneer Co. story, No. 11 in this historical series.

when there was no money to pay even this, arrangements were made with a grocery company so that the men could get food. It was touch and go but it was better than quitting entirely. Finally, Robinson got a bank loan through the First National Bank of Everett which then not only put one of its own executives on the Robinson Company Board of Directors, but also handled the payroll for awhile.

When the NRA was created in 1933 business conditions, although greatly confused, received a psychological impetus and started to improve. Two years later, in May 1935, when the U.S. Supreme Court (in the famous "chicken case") declared most of the NRA unconstitutional, business had started to shake itself out of the doldrums and economic conditions began to stabilize somewhat.

The plywood industry, still a comparative infant in 1934-35, then had to endure a long and bitter strike that affected all its mills. With this finally settled, Douglas fir plywood started on the long road toward prosperity, slowly at first and then with a sustained rush as the industry in 1938 hired W.E. Difford as Managing Director of the fledgling Douglas Fir Plywood Association. He reorganized this trade association with a broad program of promotion, advertising, inspection and quality control, research, and engineering. These activities were all financed by a special trade promotion contract entered into by all but a few "free loading" mills.

Jack Robinson who was, in effect, running the Robinson Company then, with Ted Robinson handling production, subscribed wholeheartedly to the promotion campaign and many years later, at a festive social gathering in Everett, introduced Diff to some close friends as "the man who made us a million dollars." Nevertheless, Jack would never join the Association (DFPA), evidently a bit fearful of a "cease and desist" court order stemming from certain lumber and door activities.

As the plywood market began to expand in the late 1930's and sales increased, the Robinson Manufacturing Co. started to modernize its plywood mill, mostly under Ted Robinson's supervision.

Growth

With additions and improvements, production capacity increased, as revealed by figures obtained from the *Timberman* magazine, in its regular annual *Plywood Review*. For example, in 1935, capacity was listed as 35 million sq. ft. (3/8-in. basis), along with mention of a 108-in. lathe and one Coe and one Proctor dryer.

Two years later (December 1937) a nine-section five-line Coe dryer replaced the old wire-mesh Proctor. By 1939, a Robinson Company ad in the *Timberman* pictured a new 15-opening 4-ft. x 10-ft. Williams-White hot press "for producing Exterior-type panels with a waterproof phenolic resin glueline." Supplementing this installation, Tom Robinson with his two sons and Coe Company engineers cooperated in designing an automatic press loader which was so successful that the Coe Company manufactured and sold similar loaders for hot presses in other mills.

Shortly thereafter, Ted Robinson established a small quality control laboratory in the plant, telling this author "we want to check our results with those you report from samples taken by your DFPA inspectors to make sure our quality is okay." (See footnote.)

In 1939-40, a modern green end was installed at the Everett plant, with a new 8-ft. lathe placed alongside the old 10-ft. lathe. Four lines of dryers were added in the mill as well as an eight-drum Yates-American sander. Capacity at that period was listed as 75 million.

In 1941, Thomas Robinson, founder of the company, passed away. A true plywood pioneer, he had seen his original millwork plant grow to include a small sawmill, a large door plant, and finally a plywood mill that became one of the more successful units in the industry. His success had required

Footnote: It should be noted that the DFPA, through laboratory research and analysis of many thousands of outdoor exposure samples, had developed reliable correlation between the performance of such samples and of lab specimens subjected to standard boiling and breaking tests. All mills qualifying for use of DFPA grade-trademarks had to pass continuously the test requirements. This procedure was effective in screening out inferior production.



Jack S. Robinson, grandson of founder Thomas Robinson. (1972 photo)

vision and courage, business and mechanical ability, salesmanship and perseverance, all characteristics which Tom possessed and in no small measure passed on to his two sons, Jack R. and Ted. Both were experienced, well trained and capable. Jack took over as President and General Manager, with Ted in charge of production.

George Rasmussen had been plant superintendent for a number of years, but was succeeded in the mid-1930's by Andy Honzel. Andy left late in 1941 for a period at Northwest Door Co., Tacoma, and then became manager of the plywood plant at Klamath Falls, where pine, hardwoods and some Douglas fir, were used. Carl Oliver, who had been Robinson's assistant general manager for many years, succeeded Honzel for a short time until Henry Kobervig was appointed plant superintendent, serving throughout World War II. Jack S. Robinson, son of Jack R., had been familiar with plywood plant operation from his early teens and when only 16 was the first one to operate the big loading crane when the new green end was built. It was natural, therefore, upon his return from four years' service in the U.S. Navy, that he be moved into the job of plant superintendent where he was under the expert eye of his Uncle Ted.

Sales Policy

Except for a small amount of local retail sales, the Robinson Company sold its plywood products and doors to various plywood jobbers in the principal U.S. marketing areas, although its lumber products were sold primarily to industrials and wholesalers.

The first sales manager employed by Tom Robinson was Diller Fratt's father. Diller, retired in Florida and a well-known member of the Plywood Pioneers Association, served for a number of years in the Weyerhaeuser Company's plywood division in Tacoma. Succeeding Mr. Fratt was Lou Reichman, who left in the early thirties to become plywood sales manager also with Weyerhaeuser. Lou, in turn, was followed at the Robinson plant by John Spencer, who handled a trying job during the war, carrying on until his death, October 19, 1945.

Bob Irving then became sales manager, serving in that capacity for almost twenty years, until he retired in 1965.

Soon after Tom Robinson died in 1941, and his sons Jack (as President) and Ted (as Production Manager) took over Robinson operations, they were faced with their share of the industrial turmoil engendered by the treacherous attack and disaster at Pearl Harbor; The United States immediately entered World War II and the Congress set up a rigid war economy. Innumerable materials and supplies were strictly rationed. Plywood was one of many designated as a "critical" material. Priorities were established for sales to the Armed Forces and prices were fixed by the government.

Production was hampered as many employees patriotically volunteered for service and others were willing draftees. Despite the restrictions of a war economy and the early amateurish mistakes of a government trying to bring some order out of the general chaos, the country as a whole cooperated magnificently. Robinson Manufacturing Co., like other plywood mills, did its part in furnishing plywood quotas for government requests and despite all difficulties carried on doggedly, optimistically planning for the future after an Allied victory over Japan and Germany.

Timber Supply

As early as 1942, the Robinsons realized first that the current practice of most plywood mills; i.e., open market purchase of peeler logs, was becoming increasingly difficult and second, that a reliable source of logs and veneers was vital to the continuation of their several production operations. Accordingly, to assure a reliable source of the necessary raw material, the Robinson Company in 1942 began buying timber and, more important, an interest in a number of timber and logging companies in Washington. In other cases, they purchased stock or subscribed to stock in new companies formed to produce logs suitable for plywood. In recognition of this policy which was continued during the next few years, the company name was changed on November 17, 1948 to Robinson Plywood & Timber Company.

Ted Robinson, grandson of founder Thomas Robinson. (1972 photo)



Reconstruction

When the war ended, the Robinsons were able to obtain a one-million dollar loan from the Reconstruction Finance Corporation. With these funds available, they made a number of significant plant changes. The plywood mill was extended to accommodate four new Coe dryers, a new boiler was installed, a dry kiln for door stock was rebuilt, and later an Elliott Bay (Bill Miller's design) hot drum for drying veneer was added. In the January 1949 issue of the *Timberman's Annual Plywood Review*, a 16-ft. slicer for hardboards, as well as V.G. fir and hemlock veneer, was listed as a 1948 addition. In the same issue, the *Review* reported that the new green-end of the Three Rivers Plywood & Timber Company at Darrington, Washington, would soon be producing veneer for the Robinsons in Everett. They had moved their old 8-ft. Coe lathe to the Three Rivers plant in which they had a substantial interest and with whom they had contracted to purchase all of its green veneer.

During 1948, Jack and Ted Robinson, along with other members of the family who were shareholders in the company, decided to offer to the public 105,000 shares of authorized but unissued treasury stock. According to the prospectus drawn up for this transaction, these shares represented slightly over 20 percent of the stock already issued, all of which was owned in various amounts by the Robinson family. The funds for the new stock were to be used principally as part payment for options in 50 percent of the Conifer Timber Co., on which Robinsons already owned a half interest and which was a substantial source of log supply. The balance of the new proceeds from the stock sale were to be added to the company's capital account. Apparently objections were raised against the stock offering for it never materialized.

Meanwhile, the years following the close of World War II were profitable ones for the Robinsons and other plywood mills and labor wanted "its share" of the profits. Every year or two, as contracts expired and new ones were negotiated, considerable wrangling developed. Jack and Ted had grown up in the mill and knew most, if not all, of the company's

employees. During the war, a feeling of teamwork and an "esprit de corps" to beat the Nazis and the Japs developed in the plant. As war pressures eased, however, the friendly attitudes between management and employees seemed slowly to disintegrate. Labor arguments arose, becoming bitter at times, so that Jack and Ted began to feel life would be pleasanter if the employees themselves bought and ran the mill and assumed the responsibilities and worries of management. Jack also felt such a move would alleviate an inheritance tax problem if anything were to happen to him. Thus, the idea of a worker-owned or "co-op" plant was born and soon materialized. Several cooperative plywood mills, following the original Olympia Veneer co-op, had proved successful, and Jack Robinson liked the idea of giving some of his old employees a chance to share in the profitable venture.

In late 1949, Jackson Beaman, then Sales Manager at Southern Oregon Plywood, learned of the Robinson situation through Emory Moore, a long-time business associate and a friend of both Beaman and the Robinsons. Emory took Jackson to Everett for a meeting with Jack and Ted. One year later to the day, Beaman, armed with a 90-day option to form a co-op out of Robinson Plywood & Timber Co., started selling stock in the new company. Within 13 days he sold a million dollars worth or about three hundred shares at \$3,500 each thus assuring formation of the Everett Plywood & Door Company, as the new co-op was to be called.

The unions, disturbed at the loss of members to the capitalistic" worker-owned plan, bucked the stock selling campaign at every turn and apparently persuaded many of the old mill men not to participate.

The stock, even though limited to one share per person, was oversubscribed and in March 1951, the new co-op was in business. The old sawmill was not included in the sale and was soon dismantled by the Robinsons who sold the machinery and equipment.

Sales

Sales for the new co-op were handled by Jack Sr. and

Ted Robinson with Bob Irving, who had been Robinson's Sales Manager from 1946 to 1951, continuing as such with the co-op. When Everett Plywood took over the complete handling of its own sales in 1959, Irving continued as Sales Manager until his retirement in 1965. Under the mill's present policy, about 80 percent of their production is sold to plywood wholesalers; 10 percent goes to large lumber yards in the eastern United States; and the remaining 10 percent to local retail outlets. The present sales manager is "Dot" Askins, believed to be the only woman now* occupying such a position in the plywood industry.

Plant Capacity

Although listed as 84 million in 1945, it was only 60 million according to the *Timberman* in its January 1952 *Annual Plywood Review*. This figure was increased to 75 million in 1954, and on up to 100 million in 1960, a large part of which consisted of birch, Philippine mahogany, and other hardwoods.

In 1972, Everett Plywood produced 98 million ft. of Douglas fir plywood and about 24 million ft. of hardwood, most of which (89 percent) was birch, with assorted species such as oak, cherry, and walnut for the remainder.

The fir plywood consisted of 75 percent sanded grades, 8 percent C-D, and the remainder in specialty siding.

*Many of the older Plywood Pioneers will recall with nostalgia the efficient and dynamic Isabel O'Hara of M & M Plywood in Portland, some 30 to 40 years ago.

Management

George Rakness was brought in as the first General Manager but reported, "I wound up selling shares from an office in the Everett business district." Nevertheless, he served as Manager through part of 1952.

Others who served as Manager of the Everett Plywood & Door Company during the next 21 years included a number who have been well-known in the industry. A complete list follows, with approximate dates of tenure.

1. George M. Rakness, 4/15/51-4/19/52
2. Herb Yorkston, 4/1/52-(termination date unavailable)
3. John F. Cushing, 8/1/52-(termination date unavailable)
4. Andy Honzel, 12/11/54-4/30/57
5. Keith Gunderson, 5/1/57-1/31/59
6. Joe Smith, 1/22/59-8/31/60
7. Howard Garrison, 4/1/60-4/18/63
8. Oscar A. Eklund, 4/8/63-6/10/65
9. Charles Merchant, 6/26/65-3/31/67
10. Berchal G. Monteith, 6/29/66-3/31/67
11. Oscar A. Eklund, 4/10/67-9/29/67
12. Albert Smith, 10/23/67-10/15/69
13. Ivan R. Vrooman, 5/19/69-7/1/70
14. Jack Lantwel, 9/1/70-4/1/71
15. Earl Shinn (Acting Manager), 4/1/71-1/31/72
16. Elmer Hall, 1/31/72 — a plywood veteran with managerial experience at M & M, Astoria, and Fort Vancouver among others, is currently General Manager (June 1973).