

Curt Frederick Setzer

1883-1968

Curt Fredrick Setzer, with only sixth grade formal education, created a lumber and box shook empire in California that included four large mills and over 75,000 acres in timberlands. His cost-and waste-saving formula, "Plane 'em Thick, Rip 'em Wide," set new operating standards for the industry and established Curt as the leading pioneer in the manufacture of box shook.

The youngest of 13 children, he was born in Leipzig, East Germany on March 29, 1883, where his father owned a brewery company. When Curt was six months old, the family moved to America and settled in St. Paul, Minnesota. After fires wiped out their breweries in Bismarck, North Dakota and St. Paul, the family immediately changed from a comfortable well-to-do life to the ranks of the very poor.

The lure of gold prompted Curt's father, Otto Setzer, to move his family to Red Bluff, California in 1888. However, the dreams of riches from finding a lost mine never panned out. In 1893, the Setzer clan moved again to Klamathon, Siskiyou County, California, where the Pioneer Box Company was starting up. In the summer of 1894 at age 11, Curt was making 50 cents for an 11-hour day tailing off the cleat machine. He was so small that he had to stand on a packing crate, earning his nickname "Shrimp."

In 1897, with the closure of Klamathon mill, Curt became what he described as a "lumber bum" working in the box factories in Igema, Upton, Sisson and Mott, finally ending up at the Terry Lumber Company in Bella Vista,

Shasta County, California. At the age of 18, he was made a foreman. During the five years he held that position Terry Lumber consistently showed the lowest cost on manufacturing and the least waste of all the companies represented by The Pine Box Company in San Francisco.

In 1906, the first fully-electric box factory on the coast was being built in Grants Pass, Oregon and the owners were looking for a foreman. Curt was recommended. He accepted the challenge and operated the plant successfully for about six months before the panic of 1906 set in. Suddenly there was no money and everyone began issuing script. Grants Pass Lumber Company had to close.

His next job was foreman of the C.A. Smith Lumber Company in Bay Point, California and it was there that he met the local school teacher, Hazel H. Hardie. They were married on September 11, 1909. Throughout his life, he attributed a large measure of his success to Hazel who also became his business partner.

In 1910, they moved to Klamath Falls, Oregon where Curt was offered a position of general manager of the new Chelsea Box and Lumber Company. The plant began operation on July 4, 1917, and by the end of 1918 was able to declare a 36 percent stock dividend. Curt would buy whatever stock he could find available in the company. In 1919, even with an increase in the price of lumber, Chelsea declared a 48 percent dividend

Curt Setzer was the first to employ women in the box factories. In 1919 his wife Hazel

would often complain about the shortage of help and asked if she could give a hand. Hazel talked two other wives into working with her, tailing off the band resaw and cutting dried fruit shook. Mrs. Setzer only worked one week, but this started women working in all the factories in Klamath Falls.

In 1921, with the birth of their third child, the Setzers planned on leaving Klamath Falls in search of a new factory location. The California Prune and Apricot Growers Association bought Curt's interest in Chelsea, and in 1923 the family moved to Sacramento. There, he formed the Sacramento Box and Lumber Company. Curt was manager, president, factory foreman, lumber buyer and box shook salesman. He worked 12 to 13 hours a day and came back every evening to make certain the night foreman clearly understood all of the orders which were to be shipped.

In 1927, the plant, lumberyard, warehouse, all but the office, burned to the ground. Adversity translated into challenge for Curt, and, in 1928, he bought the machinery from LaMoine Box and Lumber Company, moved it to a new site and formed Setzer Box Company.

Curt was always looking for ways to maximize efficiency and cut costs. In those days, green lumber was moved around the yard by hand. Curt knew there had to be a better way. They had a small electric Yale forklift in the warehouse which was used to pile shook and Presto Logs. Curt wondered if it would also be possible to pile lumber with a front lift truck. Two heavy "H" beams 16 feet long were attached to the front power trane of a large straddle lumber truck. Of the three companies building straddle trucks, only the Willamette Hyster Company of

Portland, Oregon, thought the idea would work. While he did not take time to patent his idea, he did receive royalty checks from Hyster Company for similar machines they built for others.

Curt Setzer vastly improved the manner in which lumber was sorted in the mill and the yard by installing sets of gravity rollers that made handling much easier and saved labor costs. A patent was issued, and the Moore Dry Kiln Company was licensed to manufacture the sorter. The Willamette Utility End Lift Carriers and the Setzer/Moore Lumber Handling Systems were soon in use throughout the industry, thereby changing the entire method of handling lumber to the front forklift system.

In 1934, sawmills were built in Sacramento and Greenville, California. To handle a constantly increasing acreage of timberland holdings, another sawmill was built in Elk Creek, California. In 1951, Curt gave control of Setzer Forest Products, Inc. to his two sons. In 1952, upon completion of his term as president of the National Wooden Box Association, he retired to Santa Cruz, California.

Curt Fredrick Setzer was no "Shrimp" in the history of American forestry. During his 50-year career, over one billion feet of box shook was cut with a savings by his method of an average of 11 percent or 124,080,000 board feet.

Mr. Setzer was a member of the Pasatiempo Golf and Country Club in Santa Cruz, Del Paso Country Club in Sacramento, the Ben Ali Shrine and the Royal Order of Jesters, California Lodge #6 B.P.O.E. and the Sacramento Rotary Club. He was also involved with the Boy Scouts and provided a

lodge for them. Today, the Setzer Foundation continues to furnish funds for areas as diverse as marine biology and hospital cardiac units.

“The amassing of an empire and a great fortune has not been to me a job of painful drudgery and heartache, but more one of the incidental side benefits that must accompany great creative drive and uncompromising integrity.” This was box shook’s leading manufacturer.