

Frederick Rutherford Tebb

1900-1979

Frederick Rutherford Tebb was the crucial link that merged three generations of Tebbs into a thriving family lumber business. From humble beginnings in 1895 in a Nashville, Tennessee retail lumber store, the Tebb family progressively prospered and ultimately built Fred Tebb & Sons Incorporated in Tacoma, Washington, known worldwide for superior Alaskan Sitka spruce specialty products.

Frederick Rutherford Tebb, known as “Fritz” by his friends, was born August 27, 1900, in Bruton, Alabama. His family moved to the west coast when his father accepted a job with Booth-Kelly Lumber Co. at Eugene, Oregon. Fred attended Oregon Agricultural College in Corvallis (now Oregon State University), graduating in 1924. He was a member of the Phi Delta Theta fraternity.

Sports were an important part of Fred’s college life. As a star pitcher on the baseball team and one of the best ends in the intercollegiate football conference, Fred displayed the drive and leadership which would later be the hallmarks of his business career.

In 1927 Fred Tebb married Claire Haniger. The couple had two sons, Thomas H. Tebb, now the president of Fred Tebb & Sons, Inc., and the late Paul F. Tebb, who was involved in the family business until his death in 1979. Fred’s sons admired and followed their father’s career choice, first graduating from Oregon State University and then joining the family business.

Fred continued his interest in sports by becoming a golfer and a pilot. He was a member of the Tacoma Golf and Country Club, a member and past president of the Linden Golf Club and a member of the Propeller Club. Fred was also an active member and past president of the Tacoma Rotary Club.

Fred Tebb & Sons, Inc. is one of the few companies in the United States that deals almost exclusively with Alaskan Sitka spruce. Mills in Ketchikan, Wrangell, and Petersburg produce the high grade Sitka spruce cants that are barged to the company’s Tacoma “concentration” yard. The cants are then milled for specific orders by subcontractors.

Fred Tebb was an expert at selling Alaskan Sitka spruce. He took great care with the special wood and appreciated its unique qualities. For its weight, Sitka spruce is the strongest wood in the world. The resilient strength combined with the wood’s long fiber and uniform grain give it unsurpassed tonal qualities. As a result, the wood is in demand by guitar and organ manufacturers. The singular qualities of the Sitka spruce makes for unusual requests requiring orders to meet exact specifications. One such request was an order from Texas for two inch-by-twelve-foot pieces of spruce to be used in crafting a pleasure cruiser.

The marketing of Alaskan Sitka spruce products proved always to be exciting and challenging to Fred Tebb. Although spruce does not sell in massive volume due to its unusual qualities, it does meet the exacting needs of certain manufacturers. Some of the sophisticated end uses of Tebb's production included helicopter blades, masts for sailing yachts and pipe organs.

Never routine, Tebb's business continually stimulated his imagination. He developed a customized sprinkler system that misted the wood during its drying period, reducing losses by ten percent and resulting in a superior finished product.

Fred Tebb learned the spruce products business from his father, Thomas W. Tebb. The elder Tebb was appointed by President Wilson to act as the United States government's agent in acquiring spruce for airplane construction during World War I. During World War II, T.W. Tebb's company again provided large quantities of Sitka spruce for this purpose.

Fred Tebb joined his father's business, Pacific Lumber Agency, in 1924 upon graduating from college. His brother Neal came to work at the family business in 1940.

The Pacific Lumber Agency (P.L.A.) had originally been a marketing organization for the mills in the Grays Harbor and Willapa Harbor areas. After purchasing the controlling stock of the P.L.A., T.W. Tebb and his partner, A.F. Davenport, moved their operations to Sumner, Washington. The Sumner plant became a large concentration yard and remanufacturing plant covering twelve acres with shed capacity for eight million board feet.

The partners had long dreamed of promoting and selling short length lumber. T.W. Tebb's market research discovered that these short items could be sold in quantity. With installation of four Moore dry kilns, the P.L.A. was soon drying seven hundred thousand feet a month and beginning to accept large orders. By 1926 they were marketing over thirty million board feet a year. The Pacific Lumber Agency soon earned the reputation as the best source of supply for short uppers in the entire country. West Coast mills were able to eliminate their surplus accumulation of short lengths by shipping them to T.W. Tebb.

Throughout his adult lifetime, until his death in 1979, Frederick Rutherford Tebb built a successful business reputation that his family continues to uphold and perpetuate for future generations.