

Leonard E. Wilkinson

1913-1978

“Slim and happy-go-lucky describes Leonard. He is thoughtful, practical, methodical, alert and cheerful. We know he will be a success in life.” So went an entry in Leonard E. Wilkinson’s high school yearbook from Mount Carmel, Pennsylvania, in 1932.

Prophetic words, for Wilkinson (or Wilky, as he was nicknamed by personal friends) went on to become a highly successful lumber businessman.

Throughout high school he worked for his father as a carpenter. By the time he graduated from high school in 1932, he had a dozen carpenters working for him.

Hard-driving and ambitious, Wilky dreamed of owning and operating his own lumber mill. With his wife, Victoria, and two sons, David and Leonard, he moved to Yuba City, California, where he owned and operated a planing mill from 1947 until 1952., when he had to file bankruptcy and move back to Pennsylvania. This didn’t deter him from his original goal of owning and operating a successful lumber mill. Gaining valuable experience, he became the general manager of a millwork manufacturing operation in Allentown, Pennsylvania, in 1955.

Then in 1958, with \$150,000 borrowed from his Pennsylvania friends, Wilky moved his family to Prineville, Oregon, to start Coin Millwork Company, which manufactured door frames, K-D window frames, and millwork. Just as the business was beginning to do well a devastating fire leveled the new mill. Lacking an insurance policy to pay for damages, he went back to his friends in Pennsylvania and told them that he would double the interest payments if they would lend him another \$200,000 to get started again. His friends had enough faith in him to lend him the money.

Armed with new funds and a firm resolve, Wilky rebuilt Coin Millworks. In only 12 years his business grew from seven employees to over eight hundred workers with an annual payroll of \$2 million. By speeding up production with his own machines and systems he produced moulding, door and window frames fast enough to bring gross annual sales to over \$25 million. At one time the millwork operation was cutting over 320,000 board feet of pine lumber per day and shipping over twenty railroad cars of finished millwork per week. It was the largest millwork operation in one location in the world.

Even though his long working hours left him little time to mix with friends, his millwork operation had achieved a certain amount of notability for him. By April, 1976, he and his wife, Victoria, were among twelve “qualified purchasers” invited to a closed auction to consider purchasing a diamond second only in beauty, size, and quality to the famed Hope diamond. Wilkinson sent his wife to the sale even though she said she didn’t want the inch-wide, 116 faceted gem because it was “too splashy.” However, she joined the bidding which began at \$200,000 and bought the stone for \$430,000. Then in 1977, the Wilkinsons donated the 67.89-carat, champagne-colored diamond to the Smithsonian Institution. The gem is estimated to be worth more than \$1 million.

In the last years of his life, ill health forced Wilkinson to sell the millwork operation. It was sold to the Bendix Corporation of Southland, Michigan, in July, 1977. After Wilkinson’s death in February, 1978, his family retained ownership of the sawmill until 1979, when it was sold to the Jeld-Wenn Corporation of Klamath Falls, Oregon.

Friends and relatives attributed Wilkinson’s success in his business venture to determination, perseverance, and a genuine love of people. He often said that a successful businessman is one who is able to communicate at the workers’ level. Through teamwork, he felt, anything could be accomplished. Wilkinson believed that a man’s greatest accomplishment was to gain the respect of other people, and that respect was earned and not given. During his lifetime Leonard won the respect of people from all walks of life – from presidents of large corporations to men cleaning the floors of his plant.

Wilkinson was on the board of directors of the National Woodworkers Manufacturing Association from 1962-64. He was also an active member of the National Sash and Jobbers Association.