

# Walter A. Woodard

1889-1971

Dreams of gold fortunes spun through the Bohemia Mountains in southwestern Oregon a hundred years ago. Miners caught-up in gold-dust fever flocked to the area. But as the yellow nuggets vanished, another fortune lured those willing to sweat, to put their very lives at stake. The *green gold*, forestry.

Untamed land and a new chance at life brought many immigrants to the Oregon of 1900. Among them was an 11-year-old boy whose dreams extended beyond daily chores and penny licorice. “Giant,” other boys nicknamed him. While they played, Walter A. Woodard was already at work, helping his father and two brothers chop, saw wood, cut, and sell poles and pilings. He knew he was beginning an important career.

When his oldest brother had saved enough money to buy a partnership in a new local timber company, young Woodard went to work in their mill, learning all he could. His brother sold out, but Woodard stayed on, eagerly absorbing all in the in’s-and-out’s of mill operation.

As logging boomed in Western Oregon, wanderlust gripped him and he began traveling from mill to mill, noting new ways of construction and production, helping build new mills, working in completed ones. He wandered south to large California mills, carefully scrutinizing the procedures of giant-scale processing.

World War I unfolded. Woodard watched the demand for lumber spiral while new machinery and parts grew scarce. After the war, he bought some timber land near his Cottage Grove home town and rebuilt the mill he had once known so well. His ambition attracted the glance of N.B. Bradley & Sons, a partnership from Michigan with holdings throughout the United States. With Woodard’s technical skill and Bradley’s tremendous financial resources, an alliance was formed – a new mill operation in Cottage Grove, the Walter A. Woodard Lumber Company.

From the start, Woodard had a policy he would never abandon – attract top people by paying good wages. He also emphasized safety. As a young man, he had lost all the fingers of his left hand to a blade accident, and as a result, was insistent on both installing the best equipment and having his men use it properly. Workers also mused that being caught for carelessness by Woodard was nearly as bad as an accident itself. They also found him adamant on fire prevention. He had seen too many mills-and-fortunes burn to the ground.

By offering them the best facilities he could, Woodard expected his workers to perform. No laziness was tolerated. His foremen saw him as a firm and demanding boss, never hesitating to say what he thought about an issue, but very fair. They never questioned his control, nor his decision to insist on top quality and service from all production lines. And they watched his company prosper.

Along with the Great Depression of the Thirties began an era of *timber politics*. Woodard soon found himself struggling against unfair assessment of his timber land, unjust competition of imported wood, organized movements to regulate production and labor. These, he regarded, were out-of-sorts with the pioneering freedom to build his business he had known up to that time.

As the depression grew, small mills collapsed like toothpicks. Woodard's held on, weathering a stiff lesson he had learned about over-expansion and finance. To meet expenses, Woodard at times would pay wages out of his own pocket, as well as not take pay for himself.

A second war brought huge demands for lumber. Homes and commercial construction kept post-war demand high. His company now wholly-owned, he pridefully had one of the most efficient in the industry. He never wasted half-an-inch of space, and was constantly out on the floor, searching for bottlenecks and production weaknesses. Thriving on motion study, he often visited other mills to clock their times and beat them with his own.

Woodard's innovations gave his company a great asset. He had been one of the first to replace steam donkeys with logging railroads, and then diesel trucks; and steam-powered plants with diesel power. He had also developed new equipment, including two patented machines still in production today: an advance system of pulling green and dry veneer and a photoelectric cell device to automatically center logs onto a plywood veneer peeler.

Post-war years were the era of social responsibility. Woodard had deep regard for his home town and wanted to do something special. During the war, his company had purchased a lot. In July, 1950, he presented the town with a fine library – a project that unexpectedly resulted in national acclaim for the Woodard's: the Sixth Biennial Citation by *Who's Who in America*, 1953.

And there were other projects. Woodard helped provide a hospital for a town that had none and land for a city baseball park. Also a Woodard Foundation was established for improvement projects to make the Cottage Grove area a finer place to live.

As the lens focused on the 1950s, Woodard began to worry. Nearby timber had grown quite scarce. His two sons, raised in the lumber business, had both joined the company which was in its financial heyday. His older son, Alton, had become vice president and manager of logging operations, while his younger, Carlton, had taken over as president in 1954, leaving Woodard, as Chairman of the Board, to ponder long-range planning and policy matters. But giant timber concerns were already operating on three sides of the company. Woodard knew future growth among them would be limited. On assurance that the mill and its workers would be kept in operation for the economic good of the community, Woodard sold the concern to Weyerhaeuser in December, 1956.

A \$15,000 company had blossomed into a multi-million dollar operation including lumber and plywood mills, 55,000 acres of timber land, 37 company houses and a 60-acre log pond. Ninety-eight percent of his wood product market was national. Woodard, who was then nearly 70 years old, had seen over 50 years of evolution in the timber industry, and would live to see over 15 more before his death in 1971. More than one billion board feet of lumber had passed through his company's machines. And he realized that the new complexities that shape corporate economies had closed the era when a rugged individualist could build his own timber fortune.

*Green gold* is still processed from vast stretches of Oregon hills. Yet no Oregonian can forget the men like Walter A. Woodard who from solitary grubstakes and hand-built mills, carved many a prosperous community today out of a timber core.