



## *Owen Robertson Cheatham*

**1903-1970**

When Benjamin Franklin labored earnestly to help Thomas Jefferson with the difficult job of drafting the Declaration of Independence in 1775, he could not have realized that about 150 years later, in 1927, a great-great-great-great nephew would outline a personal doctrine of independence that would result in the founding of one of America's industrial giants.

Ben Franklin's distant nephew was Owen Robertson Cheatham and the industrial giant is Georgia-Pacific Corporation.

First appearances are certainly deceiving. When first meeting Owen Cheatham, one was inclined to peg him as a quiet, scholarly man – a true gentleman of the old South. His soft voice and gentle eyes were reminiscent of mint juleps and Southern belles on the lawns of the old plantation. It's true that Mr. Cheatham was a real gentleman and scholar. It's also true that he was hard as nails and a rough and tumble fighter, the likes of which are seldom seen today.

Lynchburg is a small city just about dead center in Virginia. It was an important supply base for the Confederate army during the Civil War and Lee surrendered to U.S. Grant, just 20 miles away at Appomattox. Owen Cheatham was born on the family farm near Lynchburg in 1903. He attended public schools in Campbell County, Virginia, and, in 1925 at the age of 22, he slammed shut his schoolbooks and, with an impatience that was to mark his every future move, set out to seek his fortune. There is an old expression, "fortunes don't grow on trees." Owen Robertson Cheatham knew better – and he soon proved that point emphatically!

With \$6,000 in savings in his hip pocket, he arranged financing of another \$6,000 and, with characteristic boldness, opened the doors of Georgia-Pacific in September, 1927. Headquarters were in a tiny, clapboard building in Augusta, Georgia.

Georgia-Pacific sales of lumber, domestically and overseas, were spectacular right from the beginning. The

Great Depression cast a pall of gloom over the U.S. but only served to stimulate the fierce determination of the young Southerner. To be sure, he scrambled! But he saw to it that Georgia-Pacific burgeoned and by 1946, the Company owned and operated lumber mills throughout the South and had sales offices in key U.S. cities and in a number of foreign countries.

Owen Cheatham has been referred to as “Mr. Plywood” because in 1947, he pushed Georgia-Pacific into the plywood business by purchase of several West Coast plywood plants. Today, G-P is the world’s largest producer of hardwood and softwood plywood of all kinds and operates over 30 plywood and veneer plants in the United States, Philippines and Brazil. Plywood is just one of Georgia-Pacific’s products. The Company manufactures and markets thousands of products of plywood, pulp and paper, chemicals, gypsum, specialty wood products as well as natural gas and metallurgical coal. The Company has several hundred plants, over 100 building materials distribution centers and 55 foreign outlets in Free World countries. The real strength of G-P is timber – billions of board feet owned or controlled in some of the finest timber growing lands on earth.

For 40 years, Owen Cheatham guided the destinies of Georgia-Pacific. He left active management under the Company’s mandatory retirement plan on December 31, 1967, at the age of 65. In reminiscing over his 40 years with G-P, he was more than a little nostalgic and mused. “I can’t say that the 40 years were any bed of roses but they were a lot of fun. Working with trees is working with life. It is always a great thrill to me to see tiny seedlings

grow into magnificent forests – and to realize that this cycle will go on forever. Trees become like a man’s family. You like to see them prosper and create a heritage for distant generations.

Probably one of Owen Cheatham’s greatest attributes was his ability to pick out good people and then inspire them to efforts above and beyond the normal call of duty. He was always proud of his management team and frequently stated, “The greatest strength of any enterprise is the people who lead it. At Georgia-Pacific we have about the best team possible.”

Despite the many pressures of a lifetime of business crisis, Owen Cheatham found time to participate in many civic and cultural undertakings. As National Campaign Chairman for the Heart Fund in 1966, he directed the campaign to new records and, as a result of this success, was named National Campaign Chairman for 1967. He was a Director of Boy’s Clubs of America, Metropolitan Opera Association and was a Trustee of the Advisory Board to the Center for Advanced Studies in the Sciences at the University of Virginia. Mr. Cheatham was also a Trustee of the Forestry School of Duke University, the Georgia-Pacific Educational Foundation and the Owen Cheatham Foundation.

The Owen Cheatham Foundation owns the Salvador Dali “Art-In-Jewels” collection, which it loans to museums and other charitable, educational and religious institutions throughout the world to assist them in their fundraising activities. The combination of conservative Owen Cheatham and avant-garde Dali would not appear on the surface to be destined for great success. But evidently the imaginative natures of the two men led

them to mutual respect. The collection of Dali jewels grew over the years and provides financial aid to many worthy causes.

Recognition for his industrial genius came to Owen Cheatham through many honors. He received honorary degrees from Presbyterian College, Clemson University, University of Portland, University of the South and Lewis and Clark College.

He was a Delegate from the United States to the 10<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Scientific Organization in Sao Paulo, Brazil. He was Vice Chairman of the America-Spain Committee of the Spanish Institute and was awarded the Cross of the Order of Naval Merit by the Spanish Navy.

Owen Robertson Cheatham died in Eugene, Oregon on October 34, 1970, and is buried in the New Concord Presbyterian churchyard in Campbell County, Virginia.