



Charles E. Dant

1878-1945

Charles E. Dant is the classic example of success for the rugged individualist in American business. Born with the best possible constellation of character assets a businessman could hope to have, including intelligence and the courage to make the most of opportunities, he had an innate ability to instill confidence even in strangers. Also, having the integrity to follow through on commitments led directly to the powerful reputation he earned.

Dant was born on January 15, 1878 on a farm in Fairgrove, Michigan. His first job away from the farm was when he was fourteen, and he was employed to turn the crank on an ice cream machine. It was the only job he ever had outside of the lumber business. Not long after this first successful venture away from the farm, he moved to Bay City, Michigan where he went to work for the Ross Lumber Company. By the time he was seventeen, he had talked Mr. Ross into letting him travel the countryside by bicycle selling lumber.

During the next few years, he explored and tuned his selling skills. Beyond intelligence, courage, confidence and integrity, there was much more. Handsome good looks, black hair, sparkling eyes and rosy-hued cheeks created an attractive demeanor that seemed to appeal to the better side of just about everyone.

Dant knew how to use the strong mind he'd been given, too. Figures came easily for him and by being able to calculate board foot volume faster than a potential buyer, he opened the door to a lot of sales for himself. He had formulas, tables, and pertinent facts memorized, and had fun impressing people with his mental dexterity. His style was expansive as well as quick. He had a tremendously resourceful attitude that enabled him to see obstacles as challenges to be met. Charles Dant worked hard for the Ross Lumber Company. He married Mabelle Moore, his sweetheart of many years, in 1899 and their first son, Tom, was born in 1901. In that same year, Frederick Ross asked Dant to travel west to Oregon to explore the prospect

of expanding his company by adding a Portland, Oregon office. It was on this West Coast trip that Dant began to see how vast the opportunities could be in the lumber business in Portland. As it turned out, Ross himself was unable to make the move to Portland, but there was no turning back for Dant. He established an office in Portland on his own as a lumber broker. At first he knew no one so he visited the mills, found out what surplus they had ready to market and found buyers. He developed strong relationships with several mills and it was the start he needed. His sales were to lumber yards in California so he traveled considerably. Mabelle had joined him in Portland in 1903, and she proved to be a great source of strength and support for him. There were four more children: Dorothy, Robert, Jack and Kathryn, though with his intense travel schedule, Dant had little time for family life in those early years.

One evening at a friend's house, he met C.S. Russell, a retired accountant from Minneapolis living in Portland. As good as Dant was at figures and at dealing in lumber, he hated keeping the books. Since he knew this was an essential part of his business, and since Russell provided a conservative and steady outlook, they formed Dant and Russell in 1906. The association proved to be a great success. Their lumber business prospered.

In 1914, Dant met Carl Seitz of China Import Export Lumber Company of Shanghai, China. They both were in the U.S. traveling by train and Dant, taking the advantage of the confines of train travel, won Seitz's confidence enough to discover that Seitz had two schooners in port, both laden with Japanese oak. The oak had been ordered by someone in the U.S. who had defaulted and Seitz was finding it difficult to sell the lumber. Dant offered to help and made short and impressive work of the sale. Dant strengthened his relationship with the China Import Export Company, worked his way into the company and eventually gained control after World War I. He was operating Dant and Russell, brokering lumber to the China Import Export Company, when he began having trouble booking shipping space.

Without excellent access to shipping for his lumber sales he knew his business would eventually fail. His success had been such that he had inspired resentment among those of lesser accomplishment and there clearly was conspiracy to block his access to shipping. His route around this obstacle was characteristically resourceful and bold. Dant drew together a group of Portland businessmen to buy control of Columbia Pacific Shipping Company and he operated and developed it into the best possible transportation for lumber sales. In 1928, the Columbia Pacific Company became the States Steamship Company. Though Dant did very well in the shipping business, he always saw it merely as a means to an end; the ships had to have cargo. Without cargo, there was no need for the ships.

By the early 1930s, Dant had acquired an international reputation as a reliable supplier of quality lumber at competitive prices. He had developed sales relationships with lumber agents in China, Japan, Australia, England, Africa, Chile and Argentina. He was a gifted and shrewd businessman. He rode the lumber market successfully through two world wars and all the obstacles his competitors could throw his way. According to G.B. McLeod, an executive with one of Dant and Russell's major competitors, the Hammond Lumber Company, Dant was "a steam engine with clothes on."

For most of his life, he walked to work regularly, four or five miles every day, only giving up the practice during his last few years when he moved to the Washington side of the Columbia River.

He always enjoyed fishing on Oregon's Deschutes River and during his later years would have his chauffeur drive him and his favorite fishing companion, H.B. VanDuzer, to Maupin where the two would set out to go fishing. It was on his way home from one of these fishing excursions with VanDuzer in May of 1945 that Charles Dant met with a peaceful and natural death.

An irony of Dant's story is that, because of his preference for operating his business quietly in Portland, he was better known internationally than he was at home.

C.C. Crow, publisher of various lumber digests and market analyses, knew Dant for 30 years, and had this to say of him,

“He was a hard worker. His life was living proof that America is a land of

opportunity. He was a formidable fighter – fair but ruthless. Anyone who tried to crowd him or pick on him did so at his own peril. He never went to conferences, didn't believe in trade associations and the like. He preferred to operate alone. In a business battle, he was tremendously resourceful – full of tricks. He almost always won”.