



# *Al Disdero*

1913--2002

It's been said, "Cut Al Disdero with a knife and he will most certainly bleed sawdust!" Such is Al's intense belief in and dedication to lumber and its capabilities. This commitment and his ability to care and share quality knowledge and products during a career that spanned six decades, left its impact on the Northwest's lumber industry as well as its skyline.

Al was born in the lumber community of Linnton, Oregon in 1913. His father worked in the woods and mills that stretched along the Willamette and Columbia Rivers. The Disdero family moved to St. Helens in 1919 when Al's father went to work at the Charles A McCormick Lumber Company. Al learned about hard work early on when his mother arranged for him to work summers on a dairy farm while he was in grade school. Several years later he worked for a local grocer, learning good business practices and lessons that re-enforced his parents' already instilled ethics of honesty, hard work, and "doing things the right way---not the cheap way".

When the Depression hit, youth Al's age left school to find work. Unfortunately, once they found a paying job, they didn't return to

school. The St. Helens School Board devised a plan that gave students school credits and pay in exchange for working at legitimate jobs in the community.

Al was placed at Copeland Lumber Yard where he learned about lumber by standing it up in bins, pulling contractor orders, and delivering it to job sites.

About this time Al read a book about logging and timber operations. A true story about the Northwest's logging camps and mills, it painted an indelible picture for the young man. He would later reflect, "I realized that the people in those camps and in those mills had an honest respect for every tree. With the lumber they were responsible for, they were helping to build the Northwest and the nation. I saw that there was more to the lumber business than just ringing up a sale. There is an attachment---you are part of the future of something being built that lasts."

Al graduated from high school in 1932 and Joe Copeland made him manager of his St. Helens Yard. He was just 19 years old. Not too long after, Al married Mina Anliker, a

local schoolteacher. Their son Barry became a contractor.

To enhance his new professional responsibilities, Al enrolled at the University of Oregon Extension School's Business Management Program in Portland. Every Monday, Wednesday and Friday nights for three years, he left work at 5:30 and drove to Portland to attend class from 6:30 to 9:00. The drive back to St. Helens found him arriving home around midnight.

In 1935, Al moved to the main Copeland offices in Portland. But with a never-ending thirst for knowledge about lumber, he soon accepted an opportunity to train as a salesman for Weyerhaeuser, and went to work at the company's Longview, Washington plant. There he learned the "Weyerhaeuser Way", with his first stop---a stint at the cargo dock. The next step placed him working in inventory, followed by an assignment at the planing mill where finish lumber was produced. It was here that Al developed a deep appreciation for high quality lumber. The huge Douglas fir logs processed by Weyerhaeuser yielded truckloads of defect-free lumber and high quality timbers.

Choosing not to take a Weyerhaeuser sales job that would have relocated him to Minnesota in 1936, Al went instead to Portland, joining two former Weyerhaeuser employees who had just started Qualser (Quality/Service) Lumber Co., a wholesale business. Al was the company's manager.

In the beginning Al found little appreciation for the high quality, kiln-dried lumber that he wanted to sell. "It was a left-over attitude of the Depression," Al later explained. "Buyers had always been more price-conscious than quality-conscious. To them a 2x4 was a 2x4, and the less it cost, the better." It didn't help either, that there were six competitive mills within Portland's city limits.

Al's experience and knowledge of high-quality wood and its capabilities convinced him that local builders and architects simply

didn't understand lumber, and all they needed was some counseling on its values. And counsel he did! With Al's expert advice and high-quality lumber inventory including kiln-dried decking and dimension, and endmatched and 4-square lines, the area's top builders began buying from Qualser. In just one year, the company grew to 9 employees and was serving most of the lumber needs in the Portland-Vancouver area.

Successful at getting his message across to his Qualser customers, Al began to look for a way to make his products available to a larger group of people. His idea was to build a wholesale distribution company that would maintain an inventory of high quality finish lumber and specialty building products. He opened Disdero Lumber Company in 1953 in Portland.

Early on, Al spent much of his time bumping along the narrow, unkempt roads that connected the Pacific Northwest mills, looking at stacks of lumber and purchasing the best materials he could find for his inventory. To compliment the clear, vertical grain Douglas fir that would be the focal point of his product line, Al chose selects and finish in high quality Western red cedar, Mountain Hemlock, Engelmann Spruce, and Ponderosa Pine.

Al enthusiastically promoted lumber for both commercial and residential construction, believing that quality building products provided great value since they lasted indefinitely and seldom needed replacement. The company held regular informational parties at their warehouse where architects and builders could actually see the Disdero products and learn from Al and his staff about their characteristics, grades, and proper use. As time went on, more and more architects, contractors, manufacturers and retail lumbermen came to Al for reliable advice on their lumber dealings.

World renowned Portland architect Pietro Belluschi often consulted with Al and his staff because of their up-to-date product information and samples which gave him the

opportunity to actually examine products first-hand. Up to then, it had been necessary for Beluschi to spend time searching for information and reading about options. He told Al that his company filled a “real void”.

The Portland Builders Exchange Co-Op was another avenue Al used to spread the word about wood. Co-Op members (builders and suppliers) inspected blueprints and specifications, and bid on jobs. Al was the voice that hadn't been heard before: an advocate for the use and superiority of timber products. He was always available for consultation, and his advice was freely given, with no obligation to buy Disdero lumber products. However, his reputation, business sense and varied line of top quality products always made Al a top contender for jobs.

One of Al's famous Christmas traditions was to send new customers a push-button 3-D Viewmaster viewer containing a 20-photo history of their particular construction job. Whenever Al was in the field he snapped color photos of a job he had supplied. He gave over a thousand start-to-finish photo records to Disdero customers. His team would use the photos as a way to display their products to prospects.

Disdero Lumber Company grew, and when Al sold it in 1976, it had 25 employees and markets throughout the entire west coast and Hawaii.

Respect, admiration and reputation resulted in a number of industry-wide positions for Al: President of the Portland Hoo-Hoo Club in 1949; Past president (2 terms), board member, secretary, vice-president of the Builders Exchange during the 50's; former Director and current Honorary Director of the World

Forestry Center. He continues as Director of Disdero Lumber Company.

Al was one of the planners of the World Forestry Center and was instrumental in its construction. As with others involved in the late 60's, he was excited about building a showcase for the lumber industry. He joined in the money-raising effort, helped select an architect and contractor, and was key in obtaining building materials and overseeing construction. In fact, during construction, Al stopped by the building site each morning to keep tabs on the project's progress and, as he had done throughout the industry for over 30 years, answered questions and offered guidance.

Al's generosity over the years is evident in his involvement with the Boy Scouts, March of Dimes, Izaak Walton League, United Way, and Rinehart Hospital in Wheeler on the Oregon coast. He continues to volunteer for Portland's Meals on Wheels program, delivering meals to seniors.

In 1990 the Portland Wholesale Lumberman's Association honored Al as their “Portland Lumberman of the Year”. Words from his introduction echoed the genuine gratitude from both his industry as well as his community: Al Disdero is “a man whose name is synonymous with forest products of the highest quality...In fact, the name of our Lumberman of the Year conjures up visions of knot-free, vertical grain lumber; of magnificent Glulam beams; and of timeless buildings that appear stronger and more elegant as they age. No man has been a more determined advocate for wood as a quality building product...A generous man who gives freely of himself, his knowledge, and his ability to get things done.”