

James A. Malarkey

1872-1948

James A. Malarkey founded M & M Woodworking Company in Portland in 1918 with six hundred dollars capital. When he died 30 years later, M & M was the largest manufacturer of plywood and doors in the world. The company was subsequently sold and the M & M name died.

James Alfred Malarkey was born to Charles A. and Catherine Agnes O'Neil Malarkey on 11 June 1872 in New York City. About a year later, they moved to Portland where two brothers of Charles lived. James's father became a commission merchant and participated in a number of business ventures including Columbia River Paper Company. James was educated in Catholic schools, becoming especially proficient in mathematics. He began working part time for his father when only eleven years old. His interest in business gradually overcame his interest in school, until, at age fifteen, he became a full-time clerk at Cleveland Oil and Paint Company, which his father owned. In addition to paints, Cleveland manufactured and retailed sash, doors and millwork. James advanced to bookkeeper and later to treasurer of the company.

Meanwhile James had married Fannie Emma (Kitty) Holman, a member of a prominent Portland family. Timber was unsettled. Cleveland Oil and Paint was sold. He moved to Astoria with his young family, and there he owned and operated a sash and door mill until it was destroyed by fire. He returned to Portland and acquired an interest in Acme Planing Mill. During the nationwide financial panic of 1907, he also became a

department manager at Central Door and Lumber Company of Portland, remaining there for eleven years. In 1918, James Malarkey was forty-six years old. His elder son, Huntington, was in the army. At home still were son Herbert and daughters Mary and Helen. In that year of generally unfavorably business conditions James Malarkey took a decisive step. He purchased a local millwork company for a small cash investment plus assumption of debts owed to a bank. He renamed it M & M Woodworking Company.

The infant M & M mill was powered by an old Corliss steam engine. The product line, which Malarkey of necessity continued for a time, was components for Portland shipyards: spruce deck plugs, locust belaying pins, wooden pulleys and mast hoops (oak rings to which rigging was attached). After World War I shipbuilding in Portland declined, Malarkey began searching for new products to manufacture. Electric irons were just coming into high use, and an ingeniously simple, folding, wooden ironing board had been invented. On contract, M & M began manufacturing the patent ironing boards, becoming almost overnight one of the largest producers in the country. As the 1920s, advanced Americans began to take to the automobile. Automobiles, the bodies of which were wood-framed, were far more vulnerable to weather than now (waterproof plywood had not been invented, and needed garages. Houses until then did not have garages, and as fast as automobiles were built, garages were built. Garages needed doors, and James Malarkey stepped up to fill

the need. Garage doors led to the manufacturer of house doors, and by the end of the twenties, Malarkey was among the major producers in the Pacific Northwest. Door manufacture led to plywood, which was beginning to supplant solid-wood panels in doors. In order to control its plywood supply M & M built in 1920-30 a plywood mill in Longview, Washington. In the 1930s, M & M acquired National Tank and Pipe Company in North Portland, a manufacturer of wood irrigation flumes and water storage tanks. They acquired a defunct Portland manufacturer of plywood, rebuilding it as the Plywood Division of M & M. They also remodeled the Longview plywood plant and built a third plywood plant at Albany, Oregon. There they installed a giant, electronic, high-frequency hot press that "welded" wood veneers together and was capable of producing panels nine inches thick. The Albany mill increased total M & M plywood production to almost seventy million board feet, at that time more than ten percent of the total production of the fir plywood industry. Then, to free M & M of the vexations of the fluctuating costs and supply of plywood adhesives, a glue division was formed. Chemists and production people were hired and M & M became virtually independent of outside sources.

The United States entry into World War II found M & M with modern and highly efficient plants able to supply the war effort with plywood for PT torpedo boards, crash boats, aircraft rescue boats, assault boats, minesweepers, landing barges, export freight cars, airplanes and pontoon bridges and treadways. Toward the end of the war M & M, which had always bought all logs on the open market, began to invest in standing timber. During the next decade, M & M acquired timber reserves totaling one billion

feet in Oregon and two billion feet in the redwood country of Northern California. M & M continued to expand, acquiring a green veneer mill at Idanha, Oregon; a new plywood mill in Eureka, California; a half-interest in a Springfield, Oregon lumber mill to supply rough stock for the tank, pipe and door divisions; and a new plywood plant at Lyons, Oregon to replace the old Longview plant.

In 1948 M & M Woodworking went public, but with the Malarkey family retaining controlling interest. Two days after final confirmation of the underwriting James Malarkey died aged seventy-six. Seven years later M & M was sold for more than fifty million dollars. James Malarkey, starting with belaying pins and ironing boards, had built a company comprising twelve operating divisions at nine locations in Oregon and California, and with sales offices in six states servicing five thousand dealers across the nation.