



Thomas Barlow Walker

1840 - 1928

A pioneer and visionary on many counts, Thomas Barlow Walker—better known as T.B. Walker—rose from modest beginnings to become one of the most successful businessmen in America. He applied natural talent, self-education, and perseverance to become a highly successful lumberman and esteemed civic leader in Minneapolis. A man ahead of his times, Walker was an early American champion of forest conservation. He also contributed significantly to education, arts, and the progressive treatment of employees. His legacy today stretches from timberlands in California to the world-famous Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Walker was born in Xenia, Ohio, on February 1, 1840, the son of Platt Walker and Anstis Barlow Walker. He was the middle of five children.

After the death of his father in 1849, his mother remarried and the family later moved to Berea, Ohio, near Cleveland. Walker enrolled in Baldwin University in Berea, expecting to earn money between terms to pay his way. Although financial hardship prevented him from completing his course of study, he continued to educate himself and read widely.

Naturally business-minded, Walker entered into his first timber venture at the age of 19 to help pay for his education. He purchased, cut, and sold local timber, perhaps with the assistance of fellow Baldwin students. This first timber business was short lived, but it provided valuable experience and a glimpse of future possibilities.

After leaving school, Walker was hired by Fletcher Hulet as a traveling salesman of grindstones, for which Berea is still known. On one sales trip—to Paris, Illinois—he saw that a local railroad company needed ties and other lumber products. Walker launched a new business to meet this need, purchasing timberlands, hiring work crews, and fulfilling his contract with the railroad. Within 18 months, however, the railroad failed. Walker returned to Berea and worked for a time as a schoolteacher.

The outbreak of the Civil War disrupted life in Ohio, and Walker joined an artillery company. For reasons unknown—perhaps simply frustrated by delays in assembling the company in Cleveland—Walker headed west again in search of employment. Hearing favorable mention of the promising new town of Minneapolis, Walker moved there in 1862 and began to lay the foundation for his successful future.

Almost as soon as he arrived in Minneapolis, Walker signed on as a land surveyor on government and railroad projects. During the next decade, he was often gone for months at a time on surveying trips. As he surveyed the pine forests of northern Minnesota, seeing this vast natural resource firsthand, he noted which timberland areas had the greatest commercial potential.

After a year in Minnesota, Walker briefly returned to Berea to marry Harriet Granger Hulet (b. 1841), his former employer's daughter, on November 19, 1863. The couple settled in Minneapolis the following spring. They had eight children, born between 1864 and 1882.

Though he had little money of his own, in 1867, Walker—along with several business partners—began to purchase Minnesota timberlands. In 1877, he acquired his first mill, located on 1st Avenue North in Minneapolis, on the Mississippi River. A few years later, in 1883, he founded the Red River Lumber Company (RRLC), named for the river that forms much of the border between Minnesota and what soon became North Dakota. Eventually, Walker built sawmills on both sides of the river.

While in Minneapolis, he established and strengthened a wide range of business and civic ties. Though business took Walker far from Minneapolis, he remained very active in the growing city.

Walker also became interested in the fine arts. He began to collect paintings in 1874, and in 1879, he opened a room in his home for public viewing of his favorite paintings. He made several additions to his home to display more art, and by 1915, as many as 100,000 people viewed his collection annually. This was the kernel of what is today Minneapolis's world-renowned Walker Art Center.

Walker was also instrumental in the founding of the free Minneapolis Public Library. As a self-made and largely self-educated man, Walker recognized that any person had the potential for self-improvement, especially with access to books. Minneapolis had a private subscription library with publicly traded shares—the Minneapolis Athenæum—that primarily served the city's elite. Walker purchased shares and then strongly advocated for the institution's conversion to a free public library, funded by property taxes. He won this effort and the Minneapolis Public Library was officially established in 1885. Walker was a director and president of the library board for more than 40 years, from its founding until his death in 1928.

Walker was also a director and significant patron of the Minnesota Academy of Science. On his travels, he sometimes collected specimens—including coral, shells, and taxidermied animals—and provided them to the Academy.

Walker's ventures were usually ambitious, but not always uniformly successful. In 1886, he and two partners launched a land investment business to develop St. Louis Park, a suburb west of Minneapolis. The venture suffered during the Panic of 1893, a severe economic depression that stretched into 1897. Walker, however, was not a stock speculator, and so he and his family avoided the worst impacts of boom-and-bust cycles.

Recognizing that his Minnesota land holdings would eventually be depleted of timber, Walker began to investigate opportunities to the west. He and his RRLC partner John E. Andrus eventually settled on the rugged forestlands of northeastern California, near Mount Shasta. The company began acquiring California land in 1894, eventually accumulating more than 900,000 acres in the state.

Walker understood that patience and foresight were essential to his business: RRLC did not begin harvesting timber in California until 1912, nearly 20 years after its first purchases in the area.

In the meantime, Walker remained as active as ever in Minnesota—both in Minneapolis and in rural timber operations. While Walker of course aimed to run profitable businesses, he also cared deeply for the welfare of rank-and-file employees. His commitment to employees in part reflected the growing focus on social reform in America as the nation industrialized and disputes arose between workers and employers.

As part of his effort to improve the lives of workers, Walker dedicated himself to creating virtuous—and alcohol-free—communities in the mill towns supported by his operations. He developed the town of Akeley—named for business partner Healy Akeley—in north-central Minnesota and built a mill there, rejecting a plan to build in another town because of the prevalence of liquor and prostitution. Walker and his partners owned the land of Akeley and some of the surrounding area, and deeds on land sales stipulated that alcohol could not be sold. Liquor, however, could be obtained in nearby settlements, so Walker's prohibition policy was not entirely successful.

While kindness to workers was good business, Walker's focus on social welfare, temperance, and philanthropy was also a reflection of his strong commitment to the Methodist Church. In addition to serving in the leadership of Methodist organizations, Walker was a trustee of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) of Minneapolis. While Walker's dedication to helping others was a distinct trait of his character, Methodism's emphasis on service and good works provided a framework for his actions. It also made

him strict on some counts: for instance, he did not permit dancing at his home.

By all accounts, Walker instilled loyalty in his employees. Frank Kline—who cruised timber, oversaw construction, and managed logging contracts—remained Walker's trusted, right-hand man for decades. While he spent much of his time in northern Minnesota, Kline lived at the Walker residence while in Minneapolis.

In January 1912, RRLC signed an exclusive deal with Southern Pacific Railroad to haul lumber from the company's northern California holdings. Walker now drew on his community-building experience when he planned the northern California company town of Westwood, southeast of Mount Lassen. New construction included a lumber mill, as well as houses, dormitories, a hotel, a school, a hospital, a theater, a store, and churches. The company also owned and operated the town's utilities.

For safety and efficiency, Walker invested in electrifying his mill and other operations. During this period, steam-driven mills and logging often resulted in calamitous fires. It helped that Walker cut a deal with Pacific Gas & Electric that allowed the California power company to build a dam and generators on RRLC property in exchange for low-cost energy.

RRLC was also innovative in its promotion of the new Westwood business. Archie—Walker's youngest son and the company's secretary (and later president)—worked with a former logger turned writer named William Laughhead to develop advertising pamphlets about "Mr. Paul Bunyan of Westwood, California." While Bunyan stories were partially based on logging camp tall tales, Laughhead provided Bunyan's blue ox with the name "Babe," and made both characters giants. It was RRLC's promotions that made Bunyan a recognizable and enduring folk hero.

Walker was also ahead of his times in recognizing that forest conservation was ecologically and socially responsible, as well as good for business. In 1905, well before RRLC began cutting timber in California, the *New York Commercial* reported on his forestry plans in the state, contrasting him to others in the industry: "[I]nstead of denuding the land completely of standing timber, as is done by the ordinary western lumber man, a systematic plan of forestry involving the felling of only the more merchantable standing timber is to be adopted. Under this system the life of his forests will be extended indefinitely and a perpetual source of revenue will be maintained in them." Walker also wrote about the topic and presented papers supporting forest conservation to the U.S. Department of the Interior, members of Congress, and others.

While Walker made trips to California, he maintained his primary residence and RRLC's headquarters in Minneapolis. Walker's son Clinton—but not Walker himself—was present for the ceremonial cutting of the first tree used to build Westwood. At about this time, Walker retired from day-to-day management of RRLC and turned various business responsibilities over to his sons.

Walker kept his hand in business and civic activities even in his later years. Sadly, after 53 years of marriage, Harriet Walker passed away during a trip to New York in 1917. Walker died at home in Minneapolis on July 28, 1928, at the age of 88.

In 1944, sixteen years after Walker's death, the Westwood mill and town properties were sold. Descendants of T.B. Walker retained forestlands in California and to this day maintain Walker's spirit of conservation in the operations of family-owned Shasta Forests Timberlands, Red River Forests, and Lassen Forest, which together comprise more than 285,000 acres.