



Thorpe Babcock

1885-1979

In 1907 Thorpe Babcock, a native of Massachusetts and fresh from Yale Law School, took Horace Greeley's advice to "Go West, Young Man." What young Babcock found in the West were some hard times, unforgettable experiences, and a career that linked him for 26 years to the booming timber industry.

Babcock's life in the West eventually led him to serve as secretary of the West Coast Lumbermen's Association from 1911 to 1917 and as vice president and general manager of the Northwestern Lumber Company in Hoquiam, Washington, from 1917 to 1929. In addition, he was a charter member of the Western Forestry Center (now World Forestry Center).

Babcock chose to team up with the timber industry shortly after he moved to Washington. He worked as a general laborer in the lumber business, as a lumber salesman, and as a buyer for Seattle wholesalers. However, he didn't forget his training in the law. He studied for the Washington bar exam and was admitted to the bar. However, according to a short autobiography written in 1964, Babcock made a decision early to stay with the timber business.

"I was definitely sold on the lumber business and determined to stay with it. That was the year an experiment was put into effect by a group of manufacturers. They organized what was called the Lumbermen's Information Bureau. Certainly, an all-inclusive name that could mean anything. Actually, it was an interesting study in psychology."

Babcock became secretary of the Seattle bureau and began publishing a letter outlining the daily sales of each member.

"Whoever conceived the idea of the bureaus figured that if a manufacturer learned by this source that his neighbor had made a sale at a higher price than he had been asking, he would raise his price. The interesting thing is that it worked and was a huge success. But, and here comes the big but, with all the psychology which made it work to hasten the upward movement of a rising

market, the law of supply and demand paid no attention to the bureaus and ground relentlessly on. Thus, when the market turned the corner and began to go down, all the sales managers got the message much sooner because of the services of their Information Bureaus. Result: The toboggan gained speed.”

In 1911, Babcock became secretary of the Pacific Coast Lumber Manufacturers Association, later known as the West Coast Lumbermen’s Association, which represented Washington and Oregon manufacturers. Among the activities he supervised were railroad freight rates, legislative proposals, tariffs, statistical information, labor relations and advertising. It was in the latter area that Babcock had one of his revealing and amusing professional experiences.

The association was confronted by two Chicago advertising men, Crosby and Rockwell, interested in getting the message about uses of western wood products to the consumer. The highly-charged team had succeeded in selling a wood products association in the South an advertising campaign on the virtues of the cypress tree. They hoped to do the same for the Douglas fir, spruce, cedar, and hemlock trees of the West. Babcock and the association agreed to their plan.

“At last we raised enough money to make a start and moved to the next phase. What was the plan of action, what form would the copy take, what were our best talking points. Crosby and Rockwell put me through the third degree. They were searching and hoping for an inspiration that might lead to a slogan. As I rambled on about the merits of our woods (the campaign was to include all four), I got to raving about cedar. I said it had the same lasting qualities as cypress, was ideal for shingles and siding, and the peculiar, delightful aroma of the wood dispelled moths, thus protecting clothes. That did it. They wanted to hear more. Like hounds on a scent, they bored in for the kill. And what a kill it turned out to be! In my innocence, I bragged on until they envisioned moths fleeing in droves at the first whiff.”

The advertising team had its gimmick. A housewife, thrilled to be rid of moths without any smelly mothballs, would answer a cedar ad by writing the association and getting a small bag filled with cedar shavings to try in her home. The first national ad was placed in the Literary Digest. Babcock’s staff readied a small number of bags of shavings. Babcock was not prepared for what followed.

“On the first day after the appearance of the ad, when the mail from the East could reach our office, I went there early. No one had preceded me and the door was locked. I placed my key in the lock, turned the handle and made the usual motion of opening the door. It wouldn’t budge. Something was blocking it. I pushed harder and squeezed my way in. There on the floor was a stack of mail that must have taken the postman half an hour to drop through the slot. I couldn’t believe my eyes. In the next few days, the volume mounted and there I was, totally unprepared to follow through.”

Babcock quickly located a good source of cedar shavings, increased his staff, rented extra office space, and thereby met the incredible demand.

Babcock worked with and met countless people during his years in the industry and he came to respect most of them for their accomplishments and their integrity.

“Rugged individualism was probably the outstanding characteristic (of these men). They were fundamentally honest in every sense of the word. By the very nature of the business, they were always dealing in large sums of money. Particularly in water-borne business, cargoes of lumber would run into the thousands of dollars. They thought nothing of buying and selling twenty, thirty or more thousands of dollars worth of lumber over the telephone. Written confirmations that followed were merely routine. Each other knew the other would perform.”

In 1917 Babcock’s career took a new direction; he met Charles H. Jones, owner of the Northwestern Lumber Company. Shortly thereafter, Babcock was offered, and accepted, the position of vice-president and manager of the company.

The job broadened Babcock’s knowledge of lumber manufacturing. There were two separate logging operations, a sawmill, a shingle mill, a box shook factory, and a plant that produced stock for sash and door manufacturers.

The company was involved in spruce production used for airplane construction during World War I. It was one of two mills on Grays Harbor designated by the government to cut that species. All spruce logs were allocated to its mill. It meant some unconventional problems for the company and Babcock.

“Something not generally known, or, as far as I know, ever recorded, happened during the late months of the war. Along with the manager of the other mill cutting spruce, I was called to a meeting in a hotel in Aberdeen. We were taken in an atmosphere of great secrecy to a private room. There we were introduced to three men wearing strange uniforms. They turned out to be airplane pilots who had been serving actively at the front in Europe. One was Italian, one English, and one French. They had been brought all the way over for one purpose. They had a message for the spruce division of the Signal Corps, led by Colonel Disque. That message was that unless spruce production was greatly increased to make possible the production of more airplanes, the war was lost. These men told us that Germany had so many more planes than the Allies that they could observe all our preparations and movements, while we had no such advantage. The result was devastating to our forces, and the only solution seemed to be more planes. That called for more spruce.”

Babcock secured from the army, a contingent of soldiers to work in the mill, helping to speed up spruce production. Two days later, the mill burned to the ground.

“Two branches of government investigating the fire were inclined to think it was the work of enemy agents. There was a lot of evidence pointing to such a conclusion. In the face of government

competition for every item entering into construction, we started to rebuild immediately and were operating again within six months.”

In the meantime, another mill had been assigned to cut spruce. With five other men, Babcock bought stock in the mill belonging to Jones’ widow, but they over committed themselves in buying timber and eventually were financially impacted by falling lumber prices. They sold out and Babcock was without a job.

He worked for a time as a stockbroker in Seattle, until the 1929 stock market crash. He gathered his wife and three children and moved to California.

“The big depression had started. It was 1930. No one was hiring anyone. Everywhere retrenchment and an effort to survive was the order of the day. I wallowed about punch drunk by the suddenness of the reverse in my fortunes. Months went by, what resources I had were dwindling. I could see the end fast approaching.”

But the only end that came was an end to his bad luck. Babcock landed a job in Los Angeles with a mortgage company. Soon he was working as a property manager and eventually established his own property management business. He stayed in the business for 45 years.

Babcock and his wife, Mabel, whom he married September 19, 1911, spent their retirement years in Pasadena and Pacific Grove, California. They had three children, Dorothy Phillips of Veneta, Oregon; Fenton Babcock of Vienna, Virginia; and Milton Thorpe Babcock of Santa Ana, California. The Babcocks spent their retirement traveling, playing golf, and he enjoyed woodworking projects in his shop. Babcock was the last living founding member of the College Club of Seattle and was active in the All Saints Church in Pasadena.

Babcock died at his Pacific Grove home in 1979. In his later years, looking back on his life, he felt he and his family were fortunate.

“Life has certainly been kind to us and we are deeply grateful.”