



Wallace Ellsworth Difford

1890-1968

W.E. Difford – “Mr. Plywood” – did more than any other single individual to build the modern plywood industry. Indeed, for all wood products he is recognized as the “father” of much of the research and promotion which have made wood products manufacturing a major force in the national economy. The story of his career is a fascinating record of achievement.

Life History

Wallace Ellsworth Difford was born March 25, 1890, at Belvidere, Illinois. He attended the University of Chicago on a scholarship and graduated with a BA degree. He won a law degree from Chicago’s Kent College and was admitted to the bar at Texarkana, Arkansas in 1914. He practiced for a short while in Texas, but was quickly attracted to the fields of advertising and promotion.

After initial experience in newspaper advertising, he joined the advertising department of the Firestone and Rubber Co. He became the youngest branch manager in the company’s history at the age of 29.

In 1913, he married Gladys Forrer of Washington, D.C. and Belvidere, Illinois. There are four children in the marriage, and 12 grandchildren.

He joined an ailing Kentucky brickworks as sales manager in 1922 and created success. Six years later he became sales head of a cabinet and millwork company with branches in several states.

He took a management course in trade association work at Northwestern University, Chicago, and was ready when the Louisville Retail Lumber Dealers Association called for his assistance during the depression. He put the association firmly on its feet, and later took over the management of the Kentucky Retail Lumber Dealers Association.

Difford's success as a trade association executive obtained for him the presidency of W.J. Hughes and Son, one of the largest sash and door jobbers in the South. When he took over, the firm was in deep financial trouble. He introduced West Coast millwork to the Southeast and was so successful that the company was bought by competitive interests.

Although he was asked to remain as president, Difford instead undertook a national market survey in 1937 for the West Coast fir door manufacturers. His work was so well-received that he was made managing director of the Fir Door Institute, the industry's trade association with headquarters in Tacoma, Washington. Later, in 1938, he was asked to direct the promotion program and other activities of the struggling Douglas Fir Plywood Association, which had been reorganized two years previously.

Difford gave up his position with the door manufacturers to devote all his time to developing a program of recovery and expansion for the fir plywood industry, which was suffering from a severe downturn in the market. He completely reorganized the industry's promotion program and helped create a new concept in industry-wide quality control.

As chief executive of the Douglas Fir Plywood Association over a period covering nearly 25 years, Difford watched the industry grow from an annual production rate of only 650 million square feet to more than nine billion square feet at the time of his retirement in 1962. The basic program of sales promotion, marketing, quality control, and research that he established still forms the keystone of plywood promotion today.

Difford's period of service with the Plywood Association was broken in 1946, when he resigned to establish W.E. Difford and Sons, a wholesale plywood and lumber marketing development company in Seattle. In 1952, he was asked to come back to the Association as its managing director, and he remained with it until his retirement.

In later years he was active in a wide range of community service projects and until shortly before his death on October 8, 1968, was executive director of the Central Association of Tacoma, dedicated to the improvement of the city's central business district.

He was a member of Sigma Nu and Phi Delta Phi legal fraternity.

W.E. Difford in perspective: An extraordinary leader

To do all that he did in a crowded life, "Diff" needed many special qualities, among them those of vision, persuasion and tenacity. Above all, he displayed courage and extraordinary leadership.

To quote The Plywood Age, an excellent history of the softwood plywood industry's first 50 years by Robert M. Cour, Difford was "a healer of the sick." Mr. Cour wrote that "Diff" had come by his name through a long and varied career, leading ailing businesses out of the wilderness and into the profit side of the ledger. A dynamic personal leader, Difford built a nationwide reputation with his innovations in marketing, sales promotion and merchandising... his yardstick: Will the idea create sales?

He consistently fought for the development of basic and applied research programs that would contribute to the strength of the plywood industry. In the early days of the Plywood Association, he won industry support for and organized Plywood Research Foundation to do basic research in wood and in plywood production methods.

Under Difford's influence, the Plywood Association expanded its research effort with the significant enlargement of its Tacoma laboratory for plywood products research and engineering research in plywood structural application. This led to the development of a series of new products and new finishes that have contributed substantially to the expansion of the industry's basic markets. The Plywood Association laboratories took the lead with design methods and specifications for a host of engineered plywood components – from single stress skin panels to highly sophisticated engineered applications such as folded plates and plywood space planes. Concurrent with this, Difford pioneered the establishment of basic standards and quality control procedures for engineered plywood components through Plywood Fabricator Service, Inc., which produced expanding markets for plywood and a new construction technology.

Difford personally managed the development of a continuing overall promotion program on behalf of the plywood industry. He pioneered many new concepts in dealer merchandising and plywood product advertising. He spearheaded the development of the market for second homes in the U.S. The Plywood Association's promotion in this area has been one of the major factors in the development of demand. Difford also sparked the Association's research and design program in the area of retirement homes.

His entire life and business career epitomized the "can do" philosophy. Typical was his action in November 1960, when he startled his staff by announcing that the Plywood Association would design and build a retirement demonstration home for the White House Conference on Aging – due to start a scant seven weeks away in the following January. But on January 11, after the first House of Freedom had been open five days to conference delegates, Difford accepted congratulations from President Eisenhower at a reception in the White House. In the seven-week period the Association staff had located a downtown lot and built the house, designed from the bottom up so efficiently that hundreds of identical models have since been sold.

Under Difford's guidance, the Plywood Association was the first element in the entire forest products industry to muster the resources to tell the story of wood and plywood through sponsorship of a mass-audience television program – the high caliber David Brinkley's Journal.

His influence lives on

Mr. Plywood, the man with the magic touch, lives on in the forceful programs of today's vigorous and still expanding plywood industry – an industry confident of its own future and the leaders now guiding it, but equally sure that it will never meet his like again.