Fred W. Fields

1923-2011

It's indeed worth noting when a 148 year old company---the world leader in its area of expertise---records in its "Official History" that the date of hire of a particular young employee was "very significant". Such is the case with Coe Manufacturing Company and their "very significant" hire, Fred W. Fields. On November 20, 1947, Coe hired a young man who would become the company's owner, president and chief executive officer 30 years later. His dedication, hard work, leadership, progressive thinking, and collaboration abilities have kept Coe at the forefront of wood products machinery manufacturing; and propelled the company through the technology age, working shoulder to shoulder with the wood products industry to meet the challenges of the past 20 years.

Fred Fields learned about hard work growing up on his family farm in Indiana. At 10 years old, he and his 12-year-old brother farmed the 100-acre spread for eight years during the Depression while their father worked full-time for General Motors to make ends meet. After high school, Fred attended Ball and Indiana Universities. World War II began and he joined the Air Force, spending 3-1/2 years mainly training and teaching navigation and instrument flying. During his service year, he was assigned to Oklahoma A & M, Rhode Island State College, and several specialized Air Force training centers. After the War ended, Fred finished his engineering studies at Purdue University.

While in high school, college and the service, Fred played football, baseball and participated in track. He was an outstanding athlete. He credits his involvement in team sports for giving him the foundation for collaboratively working with others, setting high standards, and always reaching for superior performance---the keys to building Coe into the prestigious company it is today.

After college Fred's first job was project engineer for a construction company that was building a plant in his hometown for National Gypsum Company and Coe was the principal machinery supplier. When the plant was completed, Fred joined Coe Manufacturing Company of Painesville, Ohio, who was recognized even then as the world's leading veneer and plywood

machinery manufacturer. His initial job was in the engineering group, but he soon advanced to Field & Sales Engineering. When machinery was purchased from Coe, it was shipped in bulk, to be assembled at the respective plants. Coe provided a team of engineers and technicians to work closely with plant personnel to erect the machinery, and provide whatever onsite modification was needed. This intensive field support built long-lasting customer relationships, and was also significant because many of Coe's engineers and technicians later reached senior ranks in the company.

Fred's early field engineering experience took him all around the world: New England, the southern U.S., Eastern Canada, Europe, East and West Africa, and Mexico. It was an experience of extremes: contending with the most primitive tools and equipment known to man (in Africa and Mexico), to encountering the highest technological advancements of the time (in North America).

After five years, Fred was moved to sales and engineering, and transferred to Portland. He briefly left Coe in 1951 to join Conway & Fields Company, and served as sales agents for Coe plywood machinery and parts in the western USA. Coe ultimately bought out Conway & Fields in 1959, and Fred returned as Coe's West Coast manager. (Significantly, the acquisition also made Coe sales agent for several other industrial manufacturers, including companies producing cranes, feeding and handling machinery, special instruments, and plywood presses).

Fred's new position engaged him in some major projects throughout the Northwest and western Canada, and provided him with fairly intense exposure to the forest products industry. He became involved with significant lumber and plywood producers of world stature including M & M Woodworking Company, Roseburg Lumber Company, Weyerhaeuser Company, Georgia Pacific Corporation, MacMillan Bloedel, Canadian Forest Products, Crown Zellerbach, Medford Corporation, Boise Cascade, and 25 major co-op producers. Fred looks at these years as a major highlight of his career.

During the late 50s and early 60s, the particleboard industry was growing rapidly, and the plywood industry was maintaining the boom it initiated at the end of the war. Other manufacturers entered the market. Competition was intense. Fred had long advocated a plant on the West Coast to bring manufacturing closer to large numbers of good customers. In 1960 Coe built its first plant outside of Painesville---in Portland. Fred managed this construction project.

In 1961, Fred was named Coe's Vice President and served on the Executive Committee. This was a stepping stone for the major events that followed, including four major expansions of the Portland plant and key company acquisitions. The purchase in the 60s of Skoog Manufacturing Co. (makers of veneer patch machines), and Tidland Manufacturing Co., (producers of a wide belt sander line for finishing plywood and other panel products), exemplified Coe's expanding diversification.

Coe's long and extensive reputation for innovative designs and development work, often in cooperation with other companies in joint venture projects is well established. During these years Fred participated directly in almost all of Coe's numerous research and development endeavors, whether as inventor, team member, or financial backer. In the 1999 American Plywood Association monograph on Coe Manufacturing Co., Fred noted, "Collaboration with the great people of the plywood industry has been one of the most satisfying aspects of my own career."

In 1976 Fred acquired Coe, and became president in 1977. Coincidentally, this was also the dawn of the Computer Age in the wood products industry, and behind Fred's leadership and expertise the company was poised to launch into it---and it did. Much of the computer-controlled automation in today's plywood and lumber business stems from Coe's early innovations, developed with laser and other camera scanning apparatus.

By the late 70s it was obvious that the previous rapid rate of plywood growth couldn't continue and that timber availability and log diameters would decrease. The ultimate usage of every log would be essential. Coe had already foreseen this in the mid-70s, and had researched and engineered new machinery for retrofit. One of their most important innovations at this time was the development of the X-Y veneer lathe charger, which provided the means to peel more logs per minute, with more usable veneer per log, at great labor savings.

The first computerized lathe charger was developed in 1978 using lasers, cameras, fiber optics, and hydraulic systems, which turned basic machinery into high-speed efficient equipment, enabling the panel industry to improve log yield by upwards of 35%. Shortly thereafter, Coe innovations for complete sawing, edging, trimming and planer mill optimization became a key to greater fiber recovery.

Many other uses of computer technology have been developed by Coe for lathe controls, clipper scanners, automatic handling systems, dryer controls, patching, gluing, pressing, sawing and sanding systems. Coe's deep involvement in this development has helped producers set new standards for making plywood, composition boards, and lumber.

Characteristic of their expertise and prestige, Coe was selected by the U.S. government in 1979 as one of the first American companies to demonstrate manufacturing technology to senior representatives from the Peoples Republic of China.

Throughout the 80s, key acquisitions behind Fred's leadership and foresight, provided Coe with additional inroads into the plywood, lumber and particleboard industry, resulting in the ability to produce machinery for virtually every aspect of a solid wood products plant. Companies acquired included:
1981, Georgia-Pacific's machinery manufacturing facility in Portland providing technology in automated layup of veneer into plywood;

1982, Nosler Scanner Company, an established source of laser-beam technology, needed for accurate displacement measuring of logs and other shapes;

1982, Moore International, producers of dry kilns and lumber sorting machinery; Klamath Iron Works and Morvue Electronics;

1984, Washington Iron Works, with a world-wide reputation in the design and manufacture of particleboard, hardboard, oriented strand board (OSB), and medium density fiberboard machinery;

1984, Ward Systems, manufacturers of moisture detectors, providing technology and equipment to monitor and control moisture present in all products dried in the field of lumber veneer, gypsum and fiber wallboards;

1985, Albany International Industries, Inc., providing equipment for sawing and chipping, computerized and convention sawmill systems;

1985, Saab Systems' Forest Products, pioneers of high tech hardware and software for edgers, trimmers and cant optimizers;

1989, Mann-Russell Electronics, pioneers in radio frequency powered electronic machinery for edge gluing of veneer, laminated beams, blockboard panels, finger-jointed lumber, and particleboard;

1992, Prescott Iron Works, producers of sawmill machinery;

1997, Pathex Ltd., producers of rubber presses and composition board presses.

Further evidence of the company's dedication to maintaining and improving its reputation as a single-source supplier is Coe's large multidisciplinary staff of engineers and workmen (some 750 in number). Mechanical, electrical, and electronic engineers, computer scientists, supporting mathematicians and physicists, all work to meet the challenges brought by new levels of technology. Behind Fred's leadership, expertise, and commitment to teamwork, Coe Manufacturing has positioned itself to enter into and lead the field in the manufacture of new machinery for the production of a widening array of engineered wood products.

"Fred has seized every opportunity that's presented itself and turned it into something constructive," noted John Hampton, World Forestry Center Executive Board Chairman when Fred was inducted into the WFC's Memorial Chest with a Living Memorial in January 2000. "Few people have the absolute dedication and focus to their business that Fred does."

Long active in their community, Fred and his wife Sue both served as trustees for Portland universities. For more than a decade, Fred served on the Board of Trustees at Lewis & Clark College, and Sue was a trustee at the University of Portland. Fred's commitment to Lewis & Clark can be seen in the Fred W. Fields Center for the Visual Arts, a 25,000 square-foot campus building, which he funded. The building houses studio art space, a large dark room, a drawing porch, fine arts faculty offices, a graphic design lab and a student art gallery. Fred was proud to see the completion of a project that will accommodate the work of artists for years to come. As a trustee at the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry and the Columbia River Maritime Museum, Fred also supported the education of young people and the general public.

Fred took an active role in professional leadership as well. He served for eight years as a Board Member of Associated Oregon Industries and 12 years for U. S. National Bank. Fred also provided expert counsel as a member of the Advisory Committee to the Wood Materials & Engineering Laboratory at Washington State University in Pullman, Washington. He also served on the Advisory Committee to the president of Lake Erie College in Painesville, Ohio.

A true leader of industry, genuinely and generously committed to his community, Fred Fields certainly fulfilled John Hampton's observation: "It would seem that Fred decided a long time ago that he was going to get the maximum amount of utilization out of the time he has on earth."