Ernest G. Swigert

1892-1986

Ernie Swigert is remembered as one of Portland's leading industrialists. The son of the founder of ESCO (Electric Steel Foundry), Swigert himself worked to help the company grow before he branched off and started Hyster Company. ESCO is known for high-quality steel castings and earth-moving equipment, and Hyster for its lift trucks sold worldwide. But many people would be surprised to discover the role ESCO, Hyster and Ernie Swigert have played in the timber industry throughout the Northwest.

Ernest Goodnough Swigert was born August 4, 1892, in Portland, Oregon, the second of three sons. His mother, Rena Goodnough Swigert, was the daughter of Ira Goodnough, a Portland contractor who built many of the city's major buildings, including the first Multnomah County Courthouse. Ernest's father, C.F. Swigert, was president of the Pacific Bridge Company, which erected bridges throughout the Pacific Northwest and California. C.F. directed the construction of most of the first bridges across Portland's Willamette River, as well as the piers for the famous Golden Gate and Bay bridges in San Francisco.

C.F. Swigert also owned the City & Suburban Railroad, one of Portland's turn-of-the-century streetcar lines. In order to obtain replacement parts for his trolleys, and to provide castings for the growing logging and sawmill market, Swigert decided to establish his own steel foundry in Portland. In July, 1913 the Electric Steel Foundry was created. It has grown into ESCO Corporation, a world leader in earth-

moving equipment and steel casting technology.

Ernie Swigert was a student at Harvard University when his father established the Electric Steel Foundry back in Portland. With the foundry business in mind, Ernie changed his major to study the science of metals, and graduated from Harvard in 1915 with a bachelor of science in metallurgy. He started in the foundry as a molder's apprentice, learning the art of packing specially-mixed sands, setting cores and watching molten steel take the shape of trolley wheels, gears and other steel castings. Just as he was getting the feel of being a foundryman, World War I interrupted his young career. Swigert went off to serve as a pilot in the U.S. Army Air Corps, and after his discharge returned home to find the foundry had expanded its products to the logging industry, among other applications.

During the 1920s, Swigert began to travel the Pacific Northwest as a salesman, calling on sawmills and logging outfits, as well as construction projects, mines, and anywhere else he thought there might be a need for steel castings. A very personable and tireless salesman, Swigert knew that if ESCO was going to survive, it needed to find new business and broaden its product offering.

The intervening years saw ESCO travel down a road that, though not smooth, may have been cleared of stumps and logs with its own timber-rigging products.

Manufacturers of logging and sawmill equipment were the first customers to be served by Electric Steel Foundry when it started operations in 1914. In those days logging was done by railroad. Logs were dragged to the loading sites by skidding rigs and donkey engines. The days of the high lead and tractor logging were yet to come.

The Rigging Division, first known as Logging-Sawmill and later as the Logging and Wire Rope Division, can truthfully be called ESCO's oldest product division. In the old days, most logging rigging and equipment were made of forgings. Castings were considered too dangerous to use in the woods. After ESCO began producing manganese steel in the early 1920s, the company began a successful campaign to convert Northwest loggers from the use of forged rigging to Manganese castings. Little by little, ESCO rigging products were put into logging camps, often on a trial basis. They gained popularity as loggers learned of the extreme toughness and shock resistance of cast manganese steel, under even the most severe conditions.

In 1925, ESCO undertook the manufacture of the now famous Bardon hook. This is a simple but ingenious device for connecting the loop of a choker rope by means of a ferrule on one end of the line, slipped into a cavity in the hook. Today the Bardon hook is standard equipment in most logging operations. Other products such as butt hooks, multiple drawbar hooks, and various rope sockets were developed using the Bardon hook principle. With the event of tractor logging in the 1920s, ESCO and Willamette Iron and Steel Company developed the first logging arches. These are still manufactured by Hyster Company.

The Logging and Wire Rope Division was officially established in 1932 when ESCO became the distributor in the West for wire rope produced by American Chain and

Cable Company. Wire rope sales later became a separate entity, and ESCO sales of wire rope were discontinued in 1958.

"For the first 20 years or so, logging products were a big part of our business," says Henry T. Swigert, Ernest's son and current chairman of ESCO. "Then, as ESCO grew, our business became more specialized because of an ever-widening market, but logging and rigging products are still a main emphasis of ESCO."

Even today, choker hooks and other hardware are still manufactured by ESCO to meet the changing technology of the Northwest's vital logging industry.

As the company's top salesman, Swigert made innumerable friends and contacts, and gained an intricate understanding of the needs of the industry. He carried that knowledge over into a new company.

Hyster was formed in January 1929 when ESCO President C.F. Swigert decided the best way to develop two promising products for the forest industry – a logging arch and a lumber carrier – would be to set up a separate company to pursue that market. The new company, drawn from the resources of ESCO, Ersted Machinery and Willamette Iron & Steel Company, was initially named Willamette-Ersted Company. Ernest Swigert was named the first president, and right from the start he was "Ernie" to everyone in the office or on the shop floor, where his active interest led him to firsthand knowledge of all the company's products and the way they were made.

One of the company's products was a winch, or hoist, called a "Hyster." It was called that because a foreman in the woods or on a loading platform would wait for the load to be engaged, then tell the winch operator to "Hoist'er." A frequent lapse in pronunciation did the rest, and the coined name was officially adopted in 1934.

During the 1930s, the company expanded its line of carriers, winches and logging arches. Responding to a market need to mechanically move and stack lumber, the company developed a straddle carrier with forks – the world's first "forklift." Built upon sturdy tractor frames, the early lift trucks found applications not only in lumber mills but throughout the industry.

Swigert proved himself to be a strong, capable and enthusiastic leader. In spite of the challenge of launching a new business in the midst of the Great Depression, Swigert's experience and contacts as an ESCO salesman helped the young company survive tough economic times. During World War II, Hyster lift trucks, straddle carriers, cranes and winches were vital to the war effort. To meet the demand, Swigert and the board decided to open a second manufacturing plant in Danville in 1946.

Hyster's aggressive expansion reflected the competitive drive of its president. Swigert was known for his desire to win and he pushed to the limit, whether it was tennis, bridge or business. With a quick hand and eye, Swigert was a natural athlete. As quarterback, he was a member of Harvard's undefeated football team in 1914. He threw himself into sports and hobbies with the same characteristic energy and determination to win that he demonstrated with his companies.

Swigert's competitive nature was matched by an independent streak that held in high regard the capitalist system which allowed entrepreneurs like he and his father to establish their companies and work hard to make them successful. Throughout his life, Swigert devoted himself to preserving the republic by encouraging Americans to support conservative political platforms and candidates. He decried the growth of government, the increase in welfare programs, and the "evil" of income and inheritance taxes. He seized every opportunity and many different forums to urge businessmen to become personally involved in the political process and to fight against the dismantling of capitalism, and to uphold the American way of life.

"The theme of his entire life was supporting the free enterprise system," says his son Henry. "He cherished the system we have where anybody with ability and persistence can, in this country, go a long way. He found no other country in the world that could match that, and he worked very hard to preserve and encourage it here in ours."

Swigert was not a man to talk without backing up his words with actions. When he encouraged other businessmen to get involved in what they believed in, he was only promoting that they follow his lead. While his main focus was building Hyster into a world-class manufacturer, Swigert continued to serve ESCO as a corporate officer. Through the 1950s and '60s, he served in many capacities at the local and regional level of the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM). In 1958 he was elected president of the prestigious organization – the first person from the Pacific Northwest to be so chosen. He took a year of absence from Hyster and moved to New York. He logged thousands of miles traveling, and after his return was named honorary life vice president of NAM.

In 1961, at age 69, Swigert became chairman of the board of Hyster, and under his guidance it continued to flourish in the '60s and '70s. By 1965 foreign manufacturing operations had been established in The Netherlands, Scotland, Australia, Canada, Belgium, South Africa and Brazil. On its 50th anniversary, Hyster's world-wide payroll had surpassed 8,000 employees and annual sales exceeded $400 million. Swigert's little shop had, in half a century, grown into an international giant in lift trucks, construction equipment and material handling systems. His own company's success was a stellar example of the free enterprise ideal that Ernie so ardently preached. It was also a credit to his never-ending drive for the top, to be successful, to be the best.

But Ernest Swigert never forgot his roots. A widely traveled man, who saw the best of many lands, Swigert chose to live all his 94 years in his birthplace of Portland, Oregon. And the area gave its native son the potential to establish a company and achieve great success. Logging equipment for the region-wide forest industry was part of the founding products that gave both ESCO and Hyster a firm foothold in their markets. Swigert felt the connections to the forest so strongly that he was one of the founding members of the Western Forestry Center (now World Forestry Center) when it was established in 1971.

Swigert stepped down from the chairmanship of Hyster's board of directors in 1971, at the age of 79. He remained an

officer and director of ESCO until 1984. In 1978 he was inducted into the Oregon Business Executives Hall of Fame. Two years later, the Associated Oregon Industries named him the first recipient of the Oregon Pioneer Award, recognizing his 50 years as an industrial leader. These are only two of the many awards and honors bestowed on Swigert during his active and distinguished life.

Swigert was not the only one to follow his father into business. His older brother, Fred, became an ESCO employee in 1914 and succeeded his father as president in 1935. His younger brother, William became president of Pacific Bridge Co. Ernest Swigert was married to his wife, Frances, for 65 years and they raised four children. Their third born, Henry, also followed his father into the business and became ESCO's chairman of the board in January, 1979.

Ernest G. Swigert died November 23, 1986, at his home in Portland, where he had lived so vitally and worked so aggressively. He made an indelible mark on the community, the forest products industry, and left the world a better place for his having been there.