



William Swindells, Sr.

1905-1985

Bill Swindells, Sr. took a small lumber operation in the mid-Willamette Valley and, along with several business partners, developed the structure for what is today, Willamette Industries, Inc. During his tenure as president and chairman of the board, from 1948-1976, Willamette Industries grew from three sawmills to a highly integrated forest products company manufacturing lumber, plywood, particleboard, pulp, paper, corrugated containers, paper bags and business forms at 51 plants in 10 states with earnings of \$41.7 million on sales of \$546 million.

Bill Swindells was born on February 8, 1905 in Baltimore, Maryland, to Edward James and Anna Baton Swindells. The family moved to Portland, Oregon in 1912. His father, a self-made architect and designer, was in the wood working business, making and selling fine store fixtures.

After attending Ainsworth School and being graduated from Lincoln High, Swindells went to the University of Oregon for one year. He then transferred to Lehigh University, taking a degree in civil engineering. His first job in 1926 was as a salesman with Grand Rapids Store Equipment Company, where his father worked, which took him to a sales territory in Arizona and Southern California.

Swindells married his childhood sweetheart, Irene Gerlinger, in 1929. They had two sons, Bill Swindells, Jr. and George Swindells.

George Gerlinger liked what he saw in his new son-in-law and soon offered him the chance to buy into the Willamette Valley Lumber Co. and learn the business from the ground up.

Swindells took a pay cut to start working in the woods outside Dallas, Oregon as a choker setter, but was soon given his own logging “side” to operate. He worked in the woods and supervised Willamette Valley’s woods operation until 1935 when he was named manager of the Corvallis Lumber Company’s sawmill.

Concern about running out of timber in the Coast Range soon led Swindells to investigate the acquisition of timber in the Cascades. The company purchased over 13,000 acres east of Albany and Swindells supervised the development of Oregon’s first private mainline logging road. In the mid-1940’s, he was instrumental in negotiating a long-term contract with the Hill family interests to log their lands in the Cascades. This resulted in the construction of the Willamette National Lumber Co., just east of Sweet Home at Foster.

When George Gerlinger died in 1948, Swindells took the helm of the family’s related companies, which consisted of timberlands and mills in Foster, Dallas and Corvallis. In the early 1950s, the company purchased an interest in the Santiam Lumber Company, which had sawmills in Lebanon and Sweet Home. Two years later, the two companies expanded the business with the purchase of Western Veneer and Plywood in Griggs, Oregon.

These related operations produced huge quantities of chips, so Swindells commissioned studies on the construction of a paper mill to use these chips internally. In 1954, the company teamed up with a former Container Corporation executive, Ira Keller, to form Western Kraft Corp. for the construction of a paper mill in Albany.

This began a period of tremendous growth for the company as Swindells sought to take advantage of market opportunities. Corrugated container plants to use kraft paper produced at Albany were constructed in Oregon, Washington and California. Additional plywood plants were constructed to take advantage of a growing market.

Ever conscious of the need to make the most of every available scrap of wood fiber, Swindells began investigating the technology involved in the manufacture of particleboard in the late 1950s. He purchased manufacturing equipment from Germany that showed tremendous advances over domestic particleboard manufacturing technology. The Duraflake plant in Albany, Oregon, the largest in the U.S. at that time, set the standard for particleboard manufacture, moving it from a novelty item to a building industry staple.

The South claimed the company’s attention in the 1960s. A paper mill in Kentucky and the launching of a number of joint ventures in plywood manufacture in Louisiana became the new platforms for Willamette’s growth. A plant to manufacture bags in the West and a number of eastern and mid-western corrugated container plants followed. In 1967 all of the related companies combined to form Willamette Industries, Inc.

There were nearly 400 employees at company sawmills when Bill Swindells took over in 1948. He felt his position as a major employer created a “basic community obligation,” to maintain a continuous and uninterrupted payroll in the community, an obligation he continued to take seriously up until the time of his retirement at the age of 70, at which time the company employed 7300.

He once summed up his philosophy of doing business: “I learned the hard way. I learned simple things like not to bluff. I learned very early that any kind of commitment, written or otherwise, was vital to keep. I don’t think I have ever, in my business career, gone back on anybody. That is really the basis of my philosophy. You don’t mislead people. You had better be direct and have people know where you stand clearly.”

During his business career, Swindells was very involved with Lewis and Clark College and its Northwestern School of Law, serving as a trustee for the college for many years. He was also on the boards of directors of a number of non-profit associations, including Good Samaritan Hospital, The Oregon Graduate Center and the Good Samaritan Neurological Foundation as well as a number of businesses, including Southern Pacific, the First National Bank of Oregon and Western Bancorporation.

But after his retirement, he took on philanthropic work with the same enthusiasm that he had devoted to Willamette. He started the Oregon Community Foundation, one of the largest foundations in the U.S., which serves the educational, cultural, medical research, social and civic needs in Oregon.

At the time of his death, he was survived by his wife, the former Elizabeth Pownall Finkbeiner; his two sons, Bill and George Swindells; and his daughter Anne Finkbeiner Crumpacker.