



William Swindells, Jr.

1930-

During his tenure as chief executive officer, William “Bill” Swindells, Jr., led Willamette Industries through a period of astounding growth making it one of the top ten forest products producers in the United States. Under his guidance, from 1981 to 1995, the company grew from less than \$1 billion to more than \$3 billion in annual sales. It nearly doubled in size, increasing from 59 plants in 14 states to 91 plants in 21 states. Swindells also more than doubled the company’s timberland holdings from 555,000 acres to 1.2 million acres.

Bill Swindells was born in Oakland, California, on September 16, 1930, to William and Irene Swindells (formerly Gerlinger). At the time, his father worked for the Grand Rapids Store Equipment Company and covered a sales territory that included Arizona and Southern California. During that same year, George Gerlinger offered his son-in-law, William Swindells, Sr., a chance to buy an interest in the Willamette Valley Lumber Co. Accepting the offer, which meant taking a cut in pay, the senior Swindells moved his young family to Dallas, Oregon, and began work in the woods as a choker setter.

But the times were not easy as the nation’s Great Depression had begun. Still, the company’s efficiency and resourceful marketing allowed it to operate regularly during the Depression years. It closed only one time during that period because of lack of logs. The mill made a slight profit in 1931, with sales of little more than \$1 million. The company then produced a variety of specialty products and provided wood chips and hog fuel to nearby paper mills.

The onset of World War II in 1941 prompted William Swindells, Sr., to move his family from Dallas to Portland, Oregon. There he would be closer to the center of commerce as the war effort stirred rapid change in the wood products industries.

In 1946, at the age of sixteen, the younger Swindells began working in the woods as part of a road construction crew for the recently formed Willamette National Lumber Co. in Foster, Oregon. William Swindells, Sr. formed the company to mill logs from the newly acquired cutting rights to the Hill family timber interests, acquired during the James Hill legacy of the Great Northern Railroad, in the western Cascade Mountains.

Swindells attended Lincoln High School in Portland, where he graduated in 1948. He then attended Amherst College for two years, after which he transferred to Stanford. In 1953, he graduated from Stanford with a bachelor's degree in industrial engineering.

Shortly after graduation, Swindells entered the U.S. Air Force and served as a second lieutenant in the closing months of the Korean War.

His first full time job was in 1953 as assistant to the company's log buyer. He soon moved into the lumber manufacturing business.

By 1964, Swindells was appointed to oversee the newly formed venture Brooks-Willamette Corporation in Bend, Oregon. The company was created to take advantage of the region's pine resources to produce particleboard and plywood.

At the same time, aside from his busy professional life, Swindells also had a family to raise. He married Ann Johnston on March 19, 1955. They had four children: William R., Jean, Leslie and Charles.

In 1967, Swindells was named to the board of directors and became vice president of plants and manufacturing when Willamette Industries, Inc. was formed from a variety of related companies.

The merger of Willamette Valley Lumber Co. with other related facilities consolidated the various holdings of sawmills, veneer and plywood plants, retail lumberyards, paper manufacturing, timberlands, and a particleboard facility. Plants were located in Oregon, California and Louisiana. During its first full year of operation, the new corporation posted sales of \$141.7 million.

During the period 1967 to 1980, Willamette Industries made rapid advances in southern wood products, purchasing and forming joint ventures with the region's existing plywood and lumber operations. The company also bought several timberland holdings, helping provide a steady supply of raw materials. By 1980, Willamette's operations in the South had grown from a single plant to one of seven plywood plants, four sawmills, a particleboard plant, veneer plant, paper mill, chipping facilities and 250,000 acres of timberlands.

Also during that same period, Willamette expanded its paper and kraft operations nationwide, and initiated several industry innovations in the manufacture and use of packaging materials.

The corporation's western division also grew through improved operations, value-added products, and increased retail operations.

In 1980, Swindells was promoted to president and chief executive officer. In quick succession, he rose to Willamette's top positions, being named chief executive officer in 1981 and then chairman of the board in 1985.

Under Swindells' leadership, Willamette Industries further advanced two hallmarks of its success – the full utilization of its fiber resources and vertical integration. To make more efficient use of the company's wood resources, Swindells expanded the product line to include medium density fiberboard, laminated veneer lumber, wood I-beams, laminated beams and oriented strand board.

In its paper operations, the company grew from a single fine paper mill to four mills with an accompanying network of fine paper converting facilities. In addition, Swindells oversaw the doubling of production in Willamette's brown paper converting operations.

He continued to cultivate the company's vertical integration in Louisiana and developed a whole new vertically-integrated region in the Carolinas. Through this process, Willamette Industries maintains complete quality control, from growth of the tree to finished product.

During his youth, Bill Swindells was told by his grandfather, George Gerlinger that if he wanted to pursue a career in the timber industry, he'd most likely have to pursue that interest in Brazil, because of the perceived future lack of northwest timber. Yet, during Swindells' lifetime, sustainable forestry in the Pacific Northwest moved from theory to reality, with Willamette Industries being one of its foremost practitioners.

Having always logged conservatively, the company was able to manage its lands sustainably. Prompt reforestation, fertilization, thinning, and development of improved seed sources were all forwarded under Swindells' leadership. As federal timber policies changed, he directed the painful yet necessary closing of the company's federal timber-dependent Oregon operations. That decision resulted in the company's Oregon operations becoming 75 percent self-sufficient in timber supply, strengthening their future.

Swindells best described his own business philosophy: "A lot of common sense and good luck has gotten us through . I think an awful lot of people give too little credit to being in the right place at the right time. I was lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time and seize the opportunity. We try to be ready when an opportunity appears so we can take advantage of it."

Despite the pressing demands on his time, Swindells continued his commitment to and involvement in many community and civic activities, serving as Chairman of the Board of Trustees of Willamette University and serving on the boards of Cedars Development Foundation of Marin, California; Oregon Health & Sciences University Foundation; Oregon Historical Society; Oregon Wildlife Heritage Foundation; the World Forestry Center and the House of Umoja.

He kept his business interests, too, as Chairman of the Board of Willamette Industries and serving on the boards of Standard Insurance Company, Airborne Express and Oregon Steel Mills.

From his simple beginnings as a woods worker and having followed a career that spanned nearly half a century, Bill Swindells retired from Willamette Industries in 1995. Through his insight, innovation, vision, and lifetime dedication to the industry, Swindells turned Willamette Industries into a leader in forest products manufacturing and timberland management.