



Thorold "Thorry" H. Gunnensen

1940-2018

Thorry Gunnensen was a man equally at home in the forest and at sea. With bold thinking, charisma and technological innovation, he charted new territories in both the Australian timber industry and sailing community.

Born on November 29, 1940, Thorry owes his timber and sailing heritage to his great-grandfather Gunner Gunnensen who was a merchant sea captain from Norway. In the 1870s, Captain Gunnensen sailed to Australia aboard 'Helga'. This voyage was one of the first times Baltic timber was imported to Australia. Then in 1879, seeing the business opportunities available in the timber industry, Captain Gunnensen established a timber wholesale business that bore his name, Gunnensen.

Today, 140 years later, the company is still helmed by the Gunnensen family and has offices located in Melbourne, Sydney, Newcastle, Brisbane, Townsville, Cairns, Adelaide, Perth and Auckland, New Zealand. However, the company was not always the largest distributor in Australia of the latest forest products. When Gunnensen first launched the business, domestic sawmilling was the company's single specialty. Through its related business Softwood Products Pty. Ltd., which later became Softwood Holdings Limited, Gunnensen manufactured the box shooks used in the low-grade pine wooden boxes needed by the troops in World War II. In time, Softwood Holdings Limited became a dominant player in the pine industry and the largest sawmiller in Australia.

In the late 1960s, following the untimely death of their father Harvey, Thorry and his brother Peter became the next generation of Gunnensens to take the helm of the company. Their foresight and leadership would transform the company as it grew rapidly. The brothers foresaw that consumer and technological advances would affect not only Gunnensen but also the forest products industry as a whole, so they championed diversification. Their first merger was in 1964 with Marbut, which expanded Gunnensen's operations into the manufacture of parquet flooring, moulding and door manufacturing. Acquisitions of Presswell Panels in 1978 and Hi Dap in 1982 diversified the company further in its manufacturing capacities.

In reflecting upon this period, Thorry said that it was "the takeover decade" with a number of companies being acquired or assets divested. Unfortunately, Gunnensen saw Softwood Holdings acquired by CSR in 1987, and many of its manufacturing facilities were sold as the company focused on developing its distribution channels. Thorry remarked that he felt vindicated making the difficult decision to change Gunnensen's business model from manufacturer to distributor after seeing the company become even better positioned. A merger with Timbermark in 2001 expanded its product catalogue even further.

With their commitment to technological innovation and a focus on building relationships domestically and overseas, Thorry and his brother Peter would establish Gunnensen as the largest independent Australian owned distributor of wood-based panel products, timber and decorative surface materials in Australia.

In 2008, Thorry and Peter retired from their leadership positions and handed the reins over to the next generation of Gunnensens—Nils Koren as Managing Director and Thorry's son, Nils Gunnensen, as Executive Director. Yet Thorry could not fully walk away from a company that he had guided with a steady hand for over forty years. He remained executive chairman until finally

stepping down in 2017. A year later Gunnensen lost the second of its visionary leaders when Thorry passed away in February 2018 at the age of seventy-seven; Peter died in 2012.

At Thorry's funeral, Bob Northey said that the brothers managed the business, "with a brilliance and a success that arose out of their perceptive capacity for opportunity and a determination to build the family business into a leading timber company not only in Australia, but also with substantial interests overseas. In a tightly competitive environment, Thorry and Peter led the company team by ensuring it was at the forefront of technological applications in product development and distribution."

Thorry was a passionate advocate in elevating Australia's timber and forest products industry to the benefit of the entire industry, not just Gunnensen. He was chairman of the Forest and Wood Products Research and Development Council, as well as the chairman and founding director of the National Association of Forest Industries. Thorry successfully built the partnerships needed to create and sustain these organizations through his extensive contacts and charisma. These partnerships were possible in part because of Thorry's generous spirit and his willingness to mentor.

As an alumnus of the University of Melbourne, Thorry garnered support through his industry relationships for the university's undergraduate, post graduate and research programs. He was instrumental in securing the Cooperative Research Centre (CRC) for Innovative Wood Manufacturing and served as its chairman. One notable research outcome was discovering that microwaving timber, both hardwood and softwood, allows it to take a preservative or resin more easily before being compressed to its original shape. In praising the creation of the CRC, Professor Karen Day, a dean at the University of Melbourne said, "Thorry's extraordinary skills in achieving unanimous agreement between industry and university members of the CRC (twelve organizations in total) remain legendary among the diverse CRC partners."

Always looking beyond the shore, Thorry believed in the importance of global engagement and collaboration. In the late 1980s, he joined the World Forestry Center Board of Directors. The impact of his presence—his articulate speech, knowledge of key issues, energy, intellectual depth and passion for forestry—quickly defined him as a leader. Thorry served on the board for nineteen years, from 1989 to 2008 and was chairperson from 1997 to 2000. Since he could not pass up the chance to showcase Australia's forest industry to visitors, under his tenure Thorry hosted two annual board meetings in Australia. With support of the JW Gottstein Trust, the World Forestry Center launched the Australian Fellowship at the World Forest Institute and eventually sponsored many Fellows from Australia for over a decade. Thorry's relationship with the World Forestry Center continued even after he left the board and up until his passing; he was an honorary director from 2008 to 2018.

In 2002, in recognition of his service and promotion of a sustainable forest products industry, Thorry was awarded the Member of the Order of Australia (AM), which recognizes the achievement or meritorious service of Australian citizens and other individuals. Shortly thereafter, in 2007 the World Forestry Center awarded Thorry its Harry A. Merlo Award, an award given to individuals who demonstrate the extraordinary commitment to forest stewardship for the purposes of producing resources for

building materials.

Thorry's dedication to Australia's timber industry was not the only arena in which he left his mark. He was not even ten when he fell in love with sailing, following in his father and great-grandfather's footsteps. Thorry joined Davey's Bay Yacht Club, and one of his first sailing adventures was aboard the thirty-six-foot schooner 'Tahoe'. Moving to the United Kingdom during the mid-1960s to pursue post-graduate study at the University of Southampton afforded him the opportunity to make many lifetime sailing friendships. One of those friends was Major Bill Tilman who introduced Thorry to ocean racing and cruising, as well as the Royal Cruising Club.

Upon his return to Australia, Thorry immersed himself in the Australian racing scene. He joined the Royal Brighton Yacht Club and met Professor Peter Jourbert, who became a mentor and friend. Over the next two decades, Thorry invested in becoming a skilled sailor. As a member of Jourbert's crew, he participated in five Sydney Hobart races before striking out on his own. In 1988, he purchased the 'Gumblossom,' which he sailed in a number of regattas. One such notable race was from Tasmania to New Zealand in 1990, which earned Thorry the Royal Brighton Yacht Club's inaugural cruising yachtsman of the year award.

With his custom designed sloop 'Tilting at Windmills,' Thorry raced in many Sydney Hobart and Melbourne Hobart yacht races. One notable achievement was placing second overall in the 2003 Sydney Hobart race. When Thorry was not racing, he also enjoyed cruising around the world. He visited the Pacific Islands, New Zealand, and circumnavigated the South Island. From 2007 to 2010, he explored the Baltic east, the United Kingdom, and up into the Arctic Circle. For his cruise of the Arctic Circle in 2009, which lasted four months and nearly 4,000 nautical miles, Thorry received the Royal Cruising Club's Romola Cup for most outstanding cruise of any duration and was the first Australian yachtsman to receive this award in the Romola Cup's 100-year history.

In spite of his professional and sailing commitments, Thorry never shirked from his civic duties. He served on the council of the Geelong Grammar School, which he attended. For over forty years, he was a member of both the Melbourne Club and the Melbourne Beefsteak Club. Thorry was also a member of the Davey's Bay Yacht Club, serving on its committee and earning the title of Rear Commodore. Along with Peter, he was a trustee of the JW Gottstein Memorial Trust, which was created in 1971 and provides fellowships to employees in the forest products industry who wish to further their education. Peter served as chairman for several decades, and Thorry was one of the first Gottstein fellows.

Thorry Gunnensen's pioneering trails in business, research and education left a lasting imprint on forestry, both at home and abroad. But it was his inimitable, larger than life personality and his commitment to his personal relationships, which is most admired. Throughout all his traveling for work and sailing, he remained devoted to his extensive family that include his younger sister Helen, his wife Joanne of twenty-five years, five children—Sarah, Jenny, Nils, Lissa, and Sverre—and twelve grandchildren. In his eulogy, Bob Northey shared what one of Thorry's children said in regard to their father: "Dad has always been counted on to somehow carve out of a busy schedule special time with each of us... somehow making precious time for us and it is lovely when he does."