



Plywood in Retrospect

# THE ELLIOTT BAY MILL COMPANY

No. 6 in a series of  
monographs on the  
history of west coast  
plywood plants

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Harrison Clark

**Plywood in Retrospect:** This, the sixth in a series of historical monographs, is dedicated to the memory of Harrison Clark, author of the first five monographs in this series. He left a partly written draft for this one when he passed on in April 1968. Harrison was one of the early plywood pioneers, starting in 1922 with the old Tacoma Veneer Co. (Now North Pacific Plywood.) He assisted in the organization of the DFPA in 1933, serving as secretary and continuing with them until he retired in 1963 as Assistant Director. In 1964 he was a prime mover in forming the Plywood Pioneers' Association, serving as Secretary-Treasurer until his passing.

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Nelson S. Perkins, Secretary-Treasurer  
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Special thanks are due Russell E. Neumann, who has been of great assistance in furnishing information on the expansion of Elliott Bay Mill Co. and its subsidiaries, and in reviewing and correcting the manuscript. I wish to express my appreciation also to V. L. Pinkerton for information he so helpfully supplied.

First to consider fir plywood manufacture as a separate industry, the Elliott Bay Mill Company also was in the forefront of many other plywood industry developments and activities such as new machinery, new marketing methods, standards and industry-wide fir plywood promotion.

# The Elliott Bay Mill Company

In 1919, Gus Bartells, after 26 years of service with Wheeler-Osgood of Tacoma (where in 1912 he supervised the building of that company's plywood department) envisioned the manufacture of plywood as a separate industry and not merely as a department of a large producer of doors.

He wanted to get eight or ten plywood men to invest from \$10,000 to \$25,000 each in a sort of joint worker-owned partnership plan. He had in mind a large, plywood plant, which would produce plywood to be sold on the open market for the several industrial and building materials uses that had been developing.

Bartells' quest for financial assistance had little success until he met Craig L. Spencer, treasurer of the Elliott Bay Mill Company of Seattle, Washington and head of their logging operations.

Mr. Spencer, after looking over the plywood department of Wheeler-Osgood at Tacoma and discussing the idea with C. C. Maryott, the president of Elliott Bay Mill Co., told Mr. Bartells, "Never mind looking for any more money. We'll finance the whole deal." That is how Seattle, in 1920, got its first plywood plant.

Mr. Bartells designed and supervised the building of the panel plant. He profited from his years at Wheeler-Osgood and incorporated the latest in plywood machinery. Within a few weeks after starting, the plant was producing about a million and a half feet of plywood each month.

The site of the new plant was on the Duwamish waterway, an arm of Elliott Bay from which the company had derived its name, and was alongside the company's sawmill. The two plants shared the log pond, where peelers were selected from the sawmill rafts, hoisted to the log deck and cut into peeler block lengths. These blocks were then placed in one of the six steam vats where they remained for a minimum of 48 hours. They were brought next to the peeler-block deck where the bark was easily removed from the hot blocks with a spade.

Among the principal items of equipment for this new plant was an eight-foot Coe lathe, which fed onto one long veneer tray or table from which it was handfed into the single hand-operated green-end clipper.

There were two 100-foot four-deck Coe dryers. The glue room had two Perkins glue spreaders that kept the one Francis hydraulic press busy.

The finishing room was equipped with double rip saws, multiple cross-cut saws and two three-drum single-deck sanders. A spacious warehouse and a convenient shipping

department rounded out the facilities for this modern plywood mill. It was one to be proud of and the people of Elliott Bay were just that.

The plant was completed and started operations late in 1920 as a separate division, including sales, of the Elliott Bay Mill Company. The sawmill and lumber manufacturing, and sales departments of the parent company continued for the most part entirely separate from the plywood activities, cooperating wherever expedient to do so.

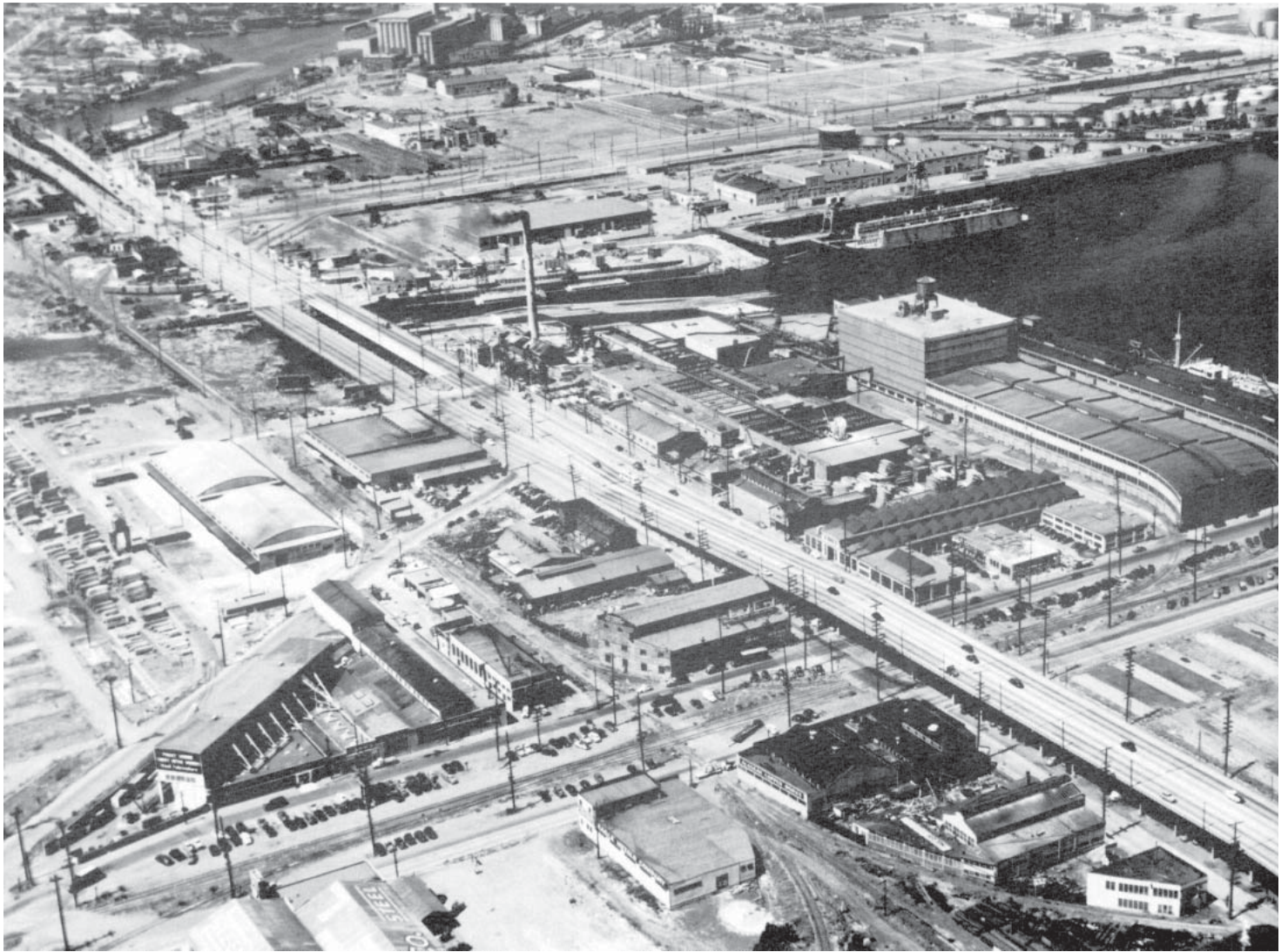
At that time, C. C. (Charles) Maryott was president of Elliott Bay Mill Company and acting head, handling primarily the manufacturing end, with Mr. Spencer (who was also treasurer) in charge of logging. Mr. Bartells was at first plywood General Manager as well as Sales Manager and became a corporate Vice-President in 1920. The Secretary was John Forrest.

A. R. (Arthur) Welsh, later associated with Harbor Plywood and West Coast Plywood, had started as the lathe operator, but was promptly made superintendent. W. J. "Bill" Miller, who had his early veneer training at Sedro Wooley, was one of the first employees and was made night foreman about a year later when the second shift was added.

Since Elliott Bay had no affiliations with any door or other panel operation, Bartells immediately had to establish his outlets. He took to the road soon after the plant opened, traveling through the Middle West and as far east as Boston, then down the East Coast and through the South, westward to Los Angeles and, after making numerous stops, returned home with an established line of dealerships. Some of these were exclusive representatives, others were established panel jobbers who added Elliott Bay to their list of suppliers.

Among these early connections were: J. C. Deacon; R. C. Clark Veneer Corp.; J. A. Gauger Company; Chicago Veneer Company; J. J. Martzick Company of Chicago; U. S. Plywood in New York; Claus Panel Company in Cleveland; George L. Waetjen & Co., in Milwaukee; Louis Riecke in New Orleans; E. J. Stanton, Los Angeles; Homer Maris, San Francisco; and New England Cab Co., Boston. Acquiring such an impressive list of sales outlets was a notable achievement, particularly for one who had built his reputation as a production man. It demonstrated Gus Bartells' versatility and ability.

And so the plywood division of Elliott Bay Mill Company was firmly established. Meanwhile, Art Welsh had been lured to Sedro Wooley, but Mr. Bartells had prevailed upon



his friend Kurt Steinhart, day foreman at Wheeler-Osgood, to come to Elliott Bay as superintendent. Dewey Yates had joined the company and was employed in the accounting department.

Gus Bartells was definitely promotion-minded and explored the industrial field for new uses in order to expand the market. In addition to being one of the first companies to establish a chain of jobber-customers, Elliott Bay was one of the first to set up sales "promotion" men in the various territories, catering primarily to the industrial field. In the Middle West he had Henry Simons, in Southern California De Esleie, and in Northern California Lloyd Harris.

Also in the early twenties, Gus made a trip to England to survey market possibilities, which resulted in Elliott Bay's becoming one of the first in the export market. He established an agency arrangement with Flatau Dick, who developed a sizable and lucrative market for Elliott Bay in England for several years.

The fir plywood industry in 1920 was a great deal different from present plywood industry production. In the first place, the principal grade was "good two sides" with a small amount of "good one side." Everything was one-piece faces, without patches. In the early '20's the maximum size was 36" x 84". Plywood was sold in "bracket sizes" based

on widths. The first bracket, which carried the lowest price, included widths up to 24". The next bracket contained widths over 24" and up to and including 36". Later on a width bracket up to 48" was added.

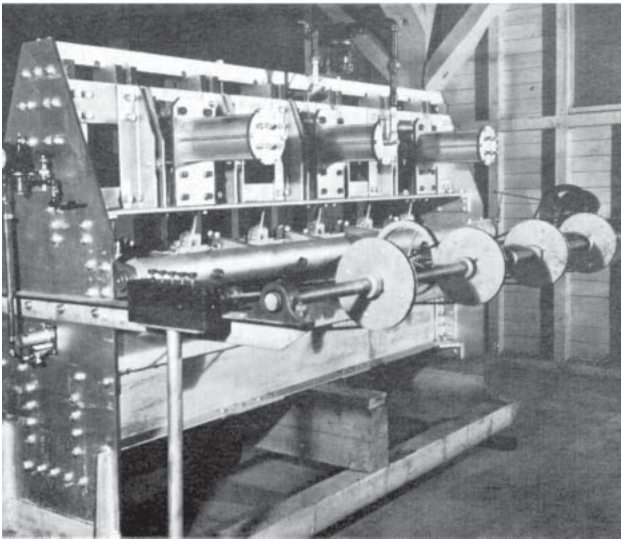
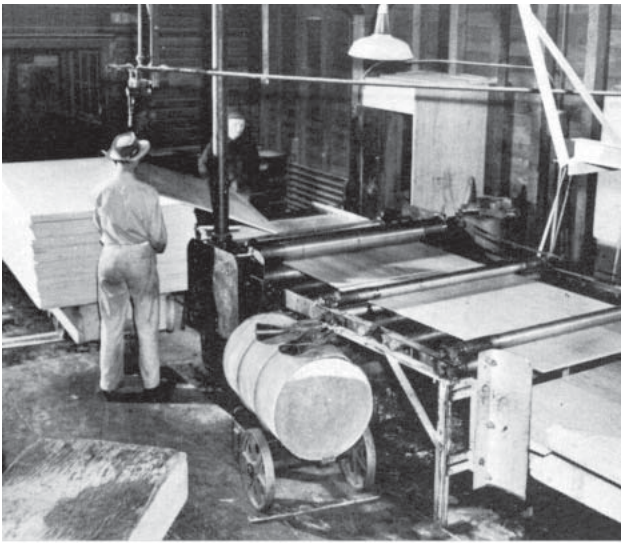
It was customary on the part of many distributors, in those days, to carry sizes starting at 12" and increasing by two-inch multiples to at least 30", and then jumping to 36", and then to 48", when that was available.

In addition to the small amount of "good one side" produced there were occasional cars of so-called drawer bottoms, or reject door panels available. The "good two side" door panel was the backbone of the business. In those days many of the eastern door factories bought fir door panel cut-to-size and built the stiles and rails of pine.

Cut-to-size plywood was sold in car lots to luggage manufacturers and also went into general industrial fields. One of the early uses was three-ply fir panels for shelving in kitchen cabinets. The kitchen cabinet manufacturers in Indiana bought this material in car load lots.

Along toward the middle and late twenties, the 96" lengths came into existence, but, in the main, they were priced at \$10 a thousand extra over the shorter lengths.

In 1927, Charlie Maryott died and Craig Spencer became President of Elliott Bay Mill Company. Russ



Aerial photograph (left) shows Elliott Bay Mill Company in 1947. Main plant and offices are in the center with the plywood plant at upper left on the edge of the Duwamish Waterway. The plywood sealing machine (top center) and the Elliott Bay Clipper (bottom center) are examples of the firm's interest in machinery development. Seated on a jitney at the Buckley logging show (above) are V. L. Pinkerton at the left, Russ Neumann center flanked by two of the Peterson brothers, and Craig Spencer's grandson at the right.

Neumann who had joined the company in 1924 as a young engineer was appointed Treasurer and Dewey Yates became Secretary.

In the fall of that year, a merger of sales was promoted by Portland Manufacturing Company of Portland, Oregon; the Walton Veneer Company of Everett, Washington; the Washington Veneer Company of Olympia, Washington; and the Elliott Bay Mill Company of Seattle. Mr. Bartells was selected to manage this newly formed sales organization known as Pacific Coast Plywood Manufacturers, Inc., which had the exclusive sale of the production of the four parties to the merger.

The organization became operative early in 1928 and resulted in several personnel changes at Elliott Bay, as well as the three other firms. The main office was established in Seattle where Mr. Bartells maintained his headquarters. Harrison Clark was transferred from Walton in Everett to be Bartell's assistant in Seattle. L. J. "Jim" Walby, who was Portland Manufacturing Company's Chicago sales representative, was placed in charge of east coast sales with headquarters in New York. Raleigh Chinn, Walton's Chicago sales representative, was placed in charge of Mid-West sales, with headquarters in Chicago. Henry Simons, Elliott Bay's industrial specialist in the Mid-West, also

worked out of Chicago. De Esle and Lloyd Harris continued to represent PCPM from Los Angeles and San Francisco respectively.

In production some changes were also necessary. Mr. Bartells officially separated himself from Elliott Bay and, to avoid any taint of conflict of interest, sold his stock holdings to Neumann and Spencer. Bruce Clark, who at that time was both General Manager and Sales Manager at Waltons, and who had built the Tacoma Veneer Co., was induced to transfer and accept the position with Elliott Bay as General Manager of the Plywood Division. Kurt Steinhart remained as Superintendent of plywood production, but when he left in 1929 was replaced by Bill Miller.

The organization got off to a good start. Business was booming and the meeting of customer shipping dates was the big problem of the moment. One occasion to be noted was the shipping of a single forty-car train of plywood from the West Coast to Chicago. The idea for this evidently originated with Don Davis Sr., of Aetna Plywood. It was a cooperative promotional project between Pacific Coast Plywood Manufacturers, the Northern Pacific Railroad Company, and R. C. Clark Veneer Company.

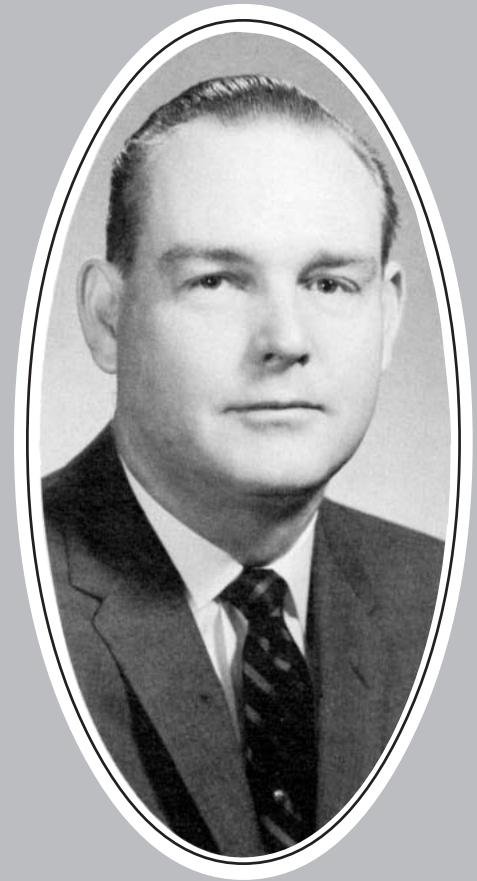
The latter had branches in Indianapolis, Cleveland, Buffalo, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Atlanta.



Gus Bartells



W. J. Miller



D. A. Ireton

The branches were allocated their requirements and their salesmen concentrated on industrial customers so that sufficient specifications were assembled to meet the N.P.'s requirement of forty full cars of plywood for an exclusive train. The Seattle office of PCPM worked with each of the four plant managers on meeting the required shipping date so that on February 1, 1929, the forty-car train, with a banner on each car, started east right on schedule.

The boom days didn't last, however, and the market crash of October 19, 1929, signaled the beginning of the long, severe recession and depression that followed. When orders did not keep up with production and curtailment became necessary, the production managers became restless and began to make separate sales deals outside the organization. A conference of top management of the four companies was called and it was decided to disband PCPM and each company re-establish its own sales force. This, however, was only temporary.

Early in 1930 Craig Spencer, Tom Autzen, and Eslie Walton, three of the principals of PCPM, and Harry Nicolai, President of Tacoma Veneer, began consideration of a complete merger of the four organizations. The thought was that by a complete merger the advantages of the large sales company could be retained and its disadvantages overcome. The result was the organization of Oregon-Washington Plywood Company.

Harry Nicolai was named president and headquarters

were established in Portland, Oregon. Fred Keinzel, sales manager for Nicolai's Door Company, was made sales manager for the new company. Personnel was again shuffled and business of the new company began October 1, 1930.

Unfortunately, the timing for the merger was not right. The recession deepened into depression, and within a single year the four companies took back their separate entities and Craig Spencer re-established the plywood division of Elliott Bay Mill Company. Bruce Clark continued as general manager as well as sales manager, and Bill Miller continued as superintendent. The next two years were difficult ones. Production was down to 25 per cent of capacity, but by 1933 buying began to return and the plywood business began to resume the growth pattern of the late '20's.

In June, 1933, Bruce Clark was made a vice president. He continued as general manager and made Dewey Yates his assistant in the sales department (Yates continued as Corporate Secretary).

The sale of plywood by Elliott Bay was mainly through mill representatives to independent stocking jobbers, with some sales of cut-up plywood to luggage and trunk manufacturers in the local trade area. During its earlier days, Elliott Bay sold its plywood mostly to millwork and door manufacturers. Later as its advantages for industrial uses became known, plywood went into boxes, crating,



C. C. Maryott



Craig Spencer



Russ Neumann

furniture and the like, and then, in the early thirties, into wallboard. This, of course, was prior to the great plywood industry expansion that started in the late thirties.

The next ten years was a period of steady growth as the industry recovered from the depression and, with intensive cooperative trade promotion programs, entered a period of rapid growth.

New pieces of mill equipment were added and replacements were made as new and more efficient designs were developed. Superintendent Bill Miller had his hand in several of these improvements. He developed the Elliott Bay clipper, an automatic green veneer clipper used in many of today's more modern plants. This was followed with one of the first edge- gluers to be used in the production of fir plywood and also with a mechanism attached to the glue spreader by which edge-glued core stock could be supported as the glue was being applied. Accordingly, Elliott Bay manufactured solid core panels for a number of years while other mills showed little interest and some claimed it couldn't be done! These innovations lead to the development by several plants of a system of

forming and using one-piece core in their panels.

The Elliott Bay Mill Company, founded by Maryott and Spencer as co-owners, had experienced many changes since its origin as a sawmill in 1910, with timber from Dungeness Split supplied by the Dungeness Logging Co. When that timber was cut out, about 1920, they formed the Crocker Lake Logging Co., and in the early twenties started the Buckley Logging Co., whose holdings were cut out around 1944. Then Spencer, together with three former logging associates, the Peterson brothers (E. G., B. B., and O. R.) formed the Eagle Gorge Logging Co. To this group were added V. L. Pinkerton, bookkeeper and assistant to Craig Spencer in his varied log procurement ventures, and John W. Harvey who in later years became manager of the Elliott Bay Lumber Company sales organization. After the death of Mr. Spencer the logging operation continued to supply the Elliott Bay Mill Company until timber was exhausted in 1955.\*

Up to the time of his death, Mr. Spencer had been the dominant factor in all of these logging operations and was known and respected through the industry.

\*All that remains of the parent company's log movements facilities is the D Street Rafting Company in Tacoma where the Buckley and Eagle Gorge Co., logs were dumped and rafted from 1925 to 1955. This facility was taken over and expanded by V. L. Pinkerton in 1955 at the close of the Eagle Gorge Company's operations and is still in operation to this day. The Buckley Logging Company and the Eagle Gorge Logging Company were strictly railroad operations using no trucking facilities whatsoever. Perhaps the last all-railroad show to operate in this state and perhaps anywhere in the Pacific Northwest was the Eagle Gorge Logging Co.

In 1930, the sawmill at Elliott Bay was torn down and moved to Buckley, Washington, where a Swedish gang mill was used, with an all-hemlock production from the Buckley logging camp, under John Workman.

Since dry kilns and the planing mill had been left at Elliott Bay, they were used to turn out mouldings and flat finish by a new division of the Elliott Bay Mill Co., established in 1930 under Russ Neumann and H. E. Olson. A few years later, about 1935, another Elliott Bay company known as Elliott Bay Plywood Machines Company was organized and today, 23 years later, is still operating under Elliott Bay's career man, Bill Miller.

The plywood division, as we have seen, was started late in 1919 and continued to operate for many years. As early as 1925 or so, Craig Spencer had been dubious as to the future of the fir plywood industry. It was using primarily the largest, choicest trees for clear veneer and Spencer, as an experienced logger, had seen their several logging companies cut out and move to new locations. In 1946, Elliott Bay had set up a green veneer plant at Myrtle Point, Oregon, as a new source of fir veneer, but in 1956, the plant was sold to Textron who later sold to Georgia-Pacific.

After World War II, as more and more plywood plants were built, and log supply became an increasingly critical production factor, Elliott Bay Mill Co. decided to investigate Philippine timber as a source for both lumber and plywood. As a result, in 1947, the Basilan Lumber Company was organized in the Philippines to produce logs and lumber for shipment to the Seattle mill.

Shortly thereafter, in 1949, Craig Spencer passed away. With his passing, Russell A. Neumann assumed the reins and continued the expansion of Elliott Bay in Far East hardwoods.

In 1950, Elliott Bay Mill Company went to British North Borneo and established the Kennedy Bay Timber Co., Ltd. (a British corporation) where they logged red and white Serayah. From these two companies grew the Associated Timber Industries of Hong Kong, selling logs to various foreign countries. The logs were handled through two shipping corporations, Pacific-Marine and the Capricorn Corporation, also based in Hong Kong. D. A. Ireton was president and managing director of all these activities, working in cooperation with and under the direction of the Seattle-based parent, Elliott Bay Mill Company, of which R. A. Neumann was president and general manager.

With an assured source of supply for Philippine and other tropical hardwoods, Elliott Bay phased out of the fir plywood picture and by late 1949 was producing hardwood plywood exclusively. Most of it was 1/4" lauan wallboard (So.1S) with fir core.

Several domestic species, including birch, cherry, walnut, and oak, as well as African mahogany and a few South American species were also used. Two hot presses for exterior plywood had been installed in 1946 and quality

Philippine plywood with sliced faces was produced in Marine Grade.

It wasn't too long before foreign competition caused a market price drop from about \$135/M for 1/4" W.B. to about \$80/M, and eventually made Stateside manufacture of rotary lauan plywood uneconomic.

Finally, Russ Neumann and his Seattle and foreign associates decided the time had come to liquidate their holdings. The site was on a busy arterial – Spokane Street bisected the plant and reduced its efficiency. The site had become valuable waterfront property and was desired by the Port of Seattle. Moreover, the plant was old and parts of it were becoming obsolete.

Accordingly, in 1966 the five Far Eastern Elliott Bay companies were sold to the Weyerhaeuser Company.

In 1967 the Elliott Bay Lumber Company was liquidated and sold to Simpson Timber Company.

Then in 1968 the plywood plant was liquidated. However, the Elliott Bay Plywood Machines Company, equipment manufacturer (with Bill Miller still acting as manager); The Elliott Bay Lumber Co., Inc.; Woodtape (a specialty manufacturer); and the Elliott Bay Mill Corporation (engaged in plywood and lumber import) still remain, as active entities based in Seattle.

Thus passed into history the Elliott Bay Mill Company, the parent company of numerous related domestic and foreign companies which operated in the wood products industry from 1909 to 1968.

As the "Port of Seattle Reporter" so aptly stated, "Although Elliott Bay Mill is no longer on the scene, it has left its mark on the industry as a pioneer in plywood manufacture and as one of the world's largest producers of hardwood plywood and lumber."

A final word should be added as to Elliott Bay's activities in the fir plywood industry. It was always a strong believer in cooperation among the manufacturers in the development of markets and the marketing of its products. It had a hand in the development of the first standard grading rules used by the four members of PCPM in 1928, which lead to the development of the first published Commercial Standard in 1933. It was a party to the first cooperative industry promotional program started in 1930. It was a member of the Douglas Fir Plywood Association (now American Plywood Association) when it was formed on May 17, 1933. It explored with the other industry members the establishment of "Rule of Fair Trade Practice" under the Department of Commerce in 1936. It was a member of Pacific Forest Industries, a plywood export organization formed under the Webb-Pomerene Act in 1935 to promote and sell plywood in the foreign markets, and became, finally, an outstanding pioneer in the Far East; harvesting, processing and merchandising hardwood timber species for worldwide distribution. It continued as a staunch supporter of DFPA as long as the mill remained a producer of Douglas Fir plywood.