Plywood in Retrospect

THE WALTON VENEER COMPANY

No. 10 in a series of
monographs on the
history of West Coast
plywood plants

Clyde Walton

E. Q. Walton

PREFACE

Most of the background information for the Walton Veneer Company story was compiled during 1970 by Gus N. Arneson, veteran plywood executive and technical expert to whom I am deeply indebted.

After lengthy interviews with several former Walton Veneer key personnel, including Dick Walton, Gordon Vincent, Raleigh Chinn and Jewell Lowe, Gus furnished a comprehensive series of notes and numerous photographs, all of which are being preserved. It has remained merely to rearrange and edit the notes, eliminating a few of the more pungent personal comments offered by several of those interviewed.

All Plywood Pioneers will appreciate Gus Arneson's generous efforts as well as the cooperation of those mentioned above.

Grateful acknowledgement is made to those Pioneers and members of American Plywood Association whose contributions to the Pioneers' Historical Fund have helped make this project possible.

Finally, special acknowledgement is made to both American Plywood Association, whose valuable assistance has made these publications possible, and to its ever-helpful staff, especially Mrs. Liz Dutton for editing, Tom Tavernor for layout and typesetting and Mrs. Ruth Bogan for manuscript typing.

THE WALTON VENEER COMPANY

The Walton Veneer Company of Everett, Washington (chronologically twelfth in the growing list of fir plywood manufacturers) started production in July, 1924. The founders were three Walton brothers: Ed, Clyde and "E.Q." (Eslie Q.), sons of P.T. Walton, a banker and rancher who had been advised to go into the lumber business by his good friend R.A. Long of Long-Bell Lumber Company. "P.T." died in 1908, leaving an estate consisting of the successful Walton Lumber Company of Oklahoma, with some 37 retail yards, among other assets.

Although the sons maintained control of the lumber company until its liquidation in 1923, Clyde, soon followed by E.Q., sought greener pastures as early as 1912 when they moved to the Pacific Northwest, settling in Everett, Washington.

There, within a few months, they bought a bankrupt mill, renovated it and formed a new Walton Lumber Company. Clyde became the president, with E.Q. taking an active part. Evidently the damp winters discouraged E.Q., because in 1920 he departed for Atlanta, Georgia, but within three years he returned to Everett to stay. Apparently Clyde's stories on the prospects of the budding plywood industry and plywood's potential as a versatile industrial and construction material had lured his brother back to help organize a plywood company.

The Waltons had ample capital for such a venture, as well as years of rewarding experience in lumber production and sales. During the fall of 1923, after a thorough study of the fir plywood industry, they decided to build a "veneer" plant.

Key Personnel

Their immediate requirement was for men experienced in veneer plant construction and operation. The word soon spread around the industry. Jewell Lowe, a highly competent plant superintendent from Weed, California, and the recently bankrupt Veneer Products Company of Tacoma, called on the Waltons, taking his brother Don with him. After an all-day session, it was agreed that the new mill would need someone with experience in plywood sales as well as in production. Jewell suggested they talk with Bruce Clark, who had been manager of the defunct Veneer Products Company in Tacoma. Bruce not only was knowledgeable as to sales but had production experience with hardwood veneers and plywood in the East, as well as with pine plywood at Weed, California. An interview was arranged and after another lengthy discussion, the Waltons appointed Bruce general manager of the prospective plant, with Jewell Lowe as plant superintendent and his righthand man.

Articles of Incorporation

Articles of Incorporation of the Walton Veneer Company, dated January 2, 1924, were signed by E.Q. Walton and Clyde Walton. They, with their brother Ed, were named in the Articles as "The Trustees who shall manage the concerns of the company for the period of six months . . . "

It seems, however, that Eslie (or E.Q. as he preferred to be called) became the active head of the veneer company, with Clyde running the adjacent sawmill. After liquidating the Oklahoma Company, Ed Walton became secretary-treasurer of the new company. He appears in a mill group photographic circa 1926, along with E.Q., Bruce Clark and others.

Meanwhile, ground was broken and construction started late in 1923 and pushed hard, despite a wet and cold winter.

The site adjoined the Walton sawmill and permitted streamlined production from the log lift on the Snohomish River straight through to the loading track over which three

In front of Walton Veneer office, about 1926. Shown in the back row are Ed Walton (far left); E.Q. Walton and Bruce Clark (fifth and fourth from right).

railroads (Great Northern, Northern Pacific and Milwaukee) operated. The mill was dubbed a "Henry Ford type plant."

The main building was 60 ft. by 938 ft., with double sawtooth roof supported by wood trusses, 15 feet on centers, spanning 30 feet from the side walls to a line of center posts running the full length of the building. It was realized that when all the machinery and equipment were installed and production under way, the actual manufacturing area of about 42,000 square feet would be crowded. The building was so constructed that, as the need developed, a second story could be added under the exceptionally high roof. Eventually all except the peeler room were double-decked and more space was provided at the shipping end of the mill.

Major Equipment

When Walton Veneer started production in July, 1924, the major equipment included:*

1	Chain drag saw on a float
2	Six-ton hoists on a single monorail
7	10' x 60' steam vats
1	108" x 102" St. Joe lathe
1	74" x 50' green veneer table
1	Fenalson clipper with 20' table
1	Coe, four-line, 105' dryer
2	Merritt dry clippers
1	American Woodwork Machine Co. rip saw
1	Beach Mfg. Co. core saw
1	Chas. E. Francis glue mixer
2	Chas. E. Francis glue spreaders
1	48" x 108" hydraulic press
1	48" Wilkins-Challoner rip saw
1	Yates Mfg. Co. eight-drum sander
1	Baxter Whitney novelty saw
400	Chas. E. Francis factory trucks
1	Williams Patent Crusher & Pulverizer Co. hog
2	300 hp Stirling boilers

*Gus Arneson relates: "For this record of the original machinery and equipment we are indebted to Raleigh Chinn who, as a young man learning the business, had the enterprise to keep a notebook; and, as a busy and successful sales executive through a long career, had the foresight to save it."

It was then a modern cold press mill. A decade passed before hot pressing was introduced to the industry.

At the start, the key men were Bruce Clark, general manager; Jewell Lowe, superintendent; Bruce's father, an old hardwood man who was Jewell's assistant for a couple of years until he retired; Don Lowe, day shift foreman; and Gordon Vincent (who had begun work at the mill just a month earlier), glue room foreman. The first lathe men were Silas Lee and Lea DeUltro. Harrison Clark (no relation but married to Bruce's sister Myrtle), who had started his plywood career at Veneer Products in Tacoma and later was to play a prominent part in Plywood Association affairs, worked in the stock room.

Raleigh Chinn, who within a year or so became Walton's principal sales representative, started his career at Walton by running a level during construction of the mill. As a young forestry graduate from the University of Washington where he had studied surveying, he worked a short time at Veneer Products under Bruce Clark and briefly at Elliott Bay Mill Company. When Raleigh reported at Walton, Jewell Lowe, who was running levels himself, decided to test the young college-bred lad by deliberately changing the leveling screws to put the instrument out of adjustment. Then he handed it to Raleigh, inviting him to set it up. Raleigh did so, quickly and accurately, and secured his job.

When the mill started a few months later, Raleigh was put in charge of a small graveyard crew, matching veneer faces and backs for the morning shift. One night, he and a couple of young helpers worked so energetically that they filled every hand truck in the mill with veneer and went home quite proud of their successful labors. Superintendent Jewell Lowe, however, arriving early in the morning, took a dim view of the results and relates he was "mad as hell" because there wasn't a single empty truck to start normal mill operations. Soon after, Raleigh became a day-shift glue mixer.

Production

The first items produced were caul boards and heavy "plates" or press boards to facilitate the lay-up and cold

Gordon Vincent
(about 1948)

pressing of the veneer "package" into plywood panels. Caul boards, five to a package, consisted of five-ply, 1/7- inch veneer; press boards – placed of course at bottom of package and at the top – were of three-ply lumber, with faces of 1 x 4 V. G. flooring, glued to a core of 2" x 8" common. Gordon Vincent, Raleigh Chinn and Bud Walton (son of Ed) all worked on this first assignment.

The Walton Veneer Company was well financed and the owners equipped their plant with the best items available for efficient plywood production. Both E.Q. and Bruce Clark kept themselves well posted on the latest industry practices, through visits to other plants and from information picked up at industry meetings. Ideas from machinery salesmen and such well-known glue company representatives as Wes Shelley and Bill Burns, a cousin of Bruce's, also helped.

Management and mill personnel, continually seeking ways and means to improve accepted practices, developed several significant innovations. For example, they built what is thought to be the first conveyor to carry veneer from a dryer. Jewell Lowe evidently designed and installed it, for it was inelegantly referred to as "Lowe's manure spreader." It consisted of wood slats bolted to clanking chains that traveled 250 feet per minute and transferred the dried veneer to other chains moving in a 90° direction at 60 feet per minute. Although it damaged considerable veneer and made an unholy racket, the basic idea was good and was soon improved by changing the slats and chains to belts that fed off perpendicular to the dryer. A cooler was also added.

Walton also was one of the first mills to steam logs (as distinct from heating in hot water) before peeling. This was probably because there were steaming vats at both Veneer Products Company and Weed, where Bruce Clark and Jewell Lowe had been in charge.

The dryer, as usual, was a production bottleneck – a condition aggravated by weekly shut downs for cleaning and oiling. Bud Walton tried using oil cups with tubes running to the bearings. This was so successful that the dryer could be run four to five weeks between shut downs.

Bruce Clark was unsuccessful in attempts to cool the veneer from the dryer with ventilating fans, but the idea unquestionably led to the use of coolers in modern veneer dryers.

When the new eight-drum sander was found to be snipping the corners of warped panels, Superintendent Lowe figured out a design change which overcame the defect. The modification was incorporated in all later designs by the sander manufacturer, but Jewell says he is still waiting for their "thank you" note.

Production volume was small at first, but by November 1, 1924, had increased steadily to 45M feet daily on a 3/8" basis, or better than a million feet a month.

The mill primarily started making door panels for Nicolai Door, Malarkeys, Robinson and Nord. Columbia Door of Portland bought large quantities of 9/16" panels of three-ply, 3/16" veneer, which were sharply beveled on the edges and used for garage doors.

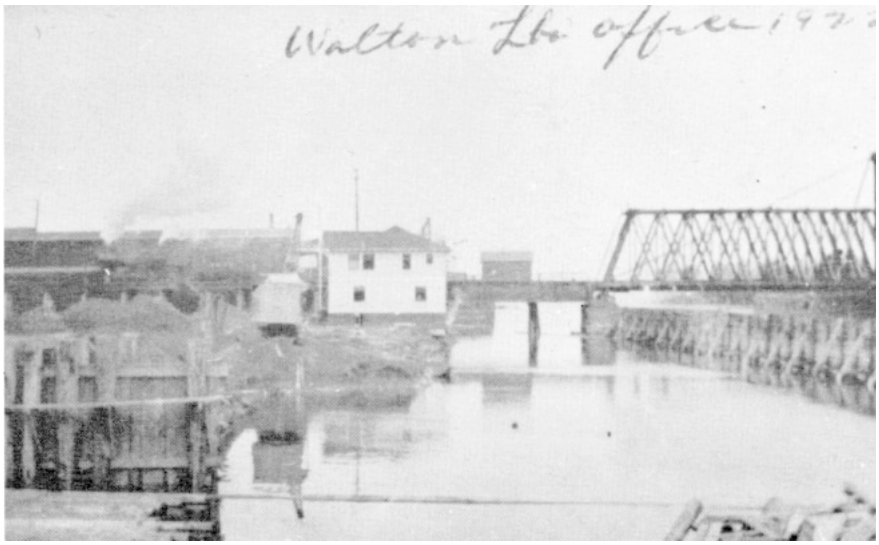
Other important items were trunk and auto stock, cut to various sizes as specified. This all required meticulous coordination of mill operations with production orders to utilize the veneer efficiently, beginning at the drag saw and continuing through all phases to final loading of the panels. This was fairly typical of the early, well-run plywood plants before the huge plywood boom beginning in the late thirties forced the industry mainly into the relatively simple volume production of 4 x 8 panels, over half of it from "highballing" sheathing plants.

In 1924, Jewell Lowe returned to Weed, California, to accept a position with Red River Lumber Company. His brother Don carried on as Walton superintendent for eight months before leaving. Then Bruce Clark's father took over for a short time before failing health forced him to quit. Finally, on January 1, 1926, Gordon Vincent became superintendent, a position he held for nearly 30 years until the plant was ultimately sold to the employees.

Meanwhile, early in 1925, Walton made a sales arrangement with Chicago Veneer Company whereby they would sell Walton's plywood to the eastern market. When asked by Chicago Veneer to recommend a knowledgeable plywood salesman to help them, E.Q. recommended Raleigh Chinn. Raleigh had spent a year in the plant and was well versed in details of production costs. He attracted

Raleigh Chinn
(about 1940)

Jewell Lowe
(about 1924)



Walton Lumber Company office near Everett. Jewell Lowe drove a nail in the corner of this building to serve as reference point for leveling piling for the new Walton Veneer mill.

management's attention with his enthusiasm, energy and genial personality. (He also attracted management's attention, it must be admitted, by flooding the glue loft when he dozed off one morning while filling the glue mixer with water.)

Not long after Chinn's arrival in Chicago, he began making carload sales and building up volume business for various industrial uses – cabinets, refrigerators, wardrobe trunks, truck bodies – common enough uses later, but entirely new fields at that time.

This proved profitable for his Chicago employers and, of course, for Walton Veneer, but not especially for Raleigh who returned to Everett somewhat disillusioned.

After talking with E.Q., he was offered a new assignment in Chicago as manager of a new Walton Veneer branch office. Reluctant to return to the Midwest, he was finally persuaded by Bruce Clark, and an announcement of Chinn's new position was sent to the trade in August, 1926. Walton's sales in the Midwest and East soon increased as carload orders were booked with large industrials and with a number of jobbers such as Don Davis of R.C. Clark Veneer Company, who recognized fir plywood's potential and started promoting and selling it.

As plywood demand grew, Walton Veneer undertook the first of various major plant improvements to increase volume and efficiency. A green veneer clipper was installed in 1927, together with a four-line green veneer storage table and conveyor and, in addition, a Coe dry clipper.

A few years later, in 1934, the lathe was remodeled to accommodate a 114-inch knife which could peel 9-foot blocks, chiefly for the highly popular "ping pong" tables. In 1937, a still larger lathe with a 132-inch knife was installed, followed by a second dryer in 1940. About that time, the ropes in the old conveyor were replaced by belts, thus eliminating a continual source of trouble and expense.

Cooperative Sales Efforts

E.Q. Walton had always been an excellent cooperator in moves to help the plywood industry. In September, 1924, just after Walton started manufacturing, E.Q. had joined with half a dozen other mills to form the Pacific Coast Plywood Manufacturers Association (the forerunner of DFPA and APA) and offered $5,000 toward a $50,000 industry advertising campaign. The group soon disbanded without any accomplishment.

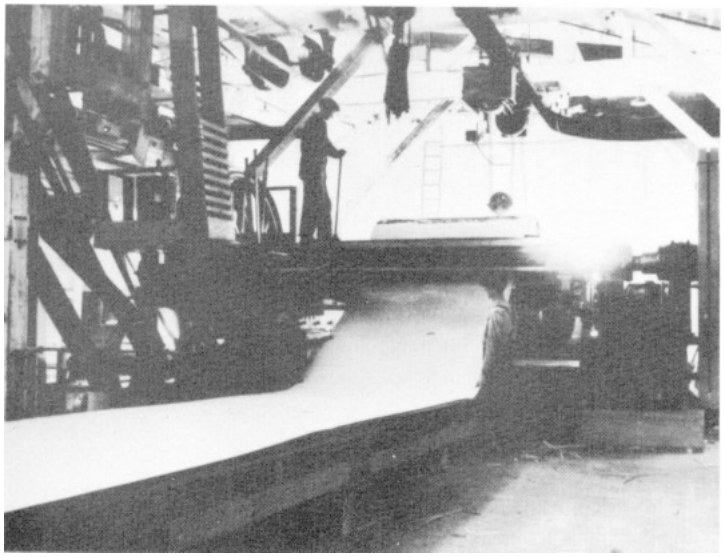
On December 29, 1927, Walton Veneer, along with Portland Manufacturing, Elliott Bay, and Washington Veneer, incorporated as the P.C.P.M., Inc. (Pacific Coast Plywood Manufacturers, Inc.) to promote "efficient manufacturing, uniform quality and expanded sales." Washington Veneer Company, however, never actually participated.

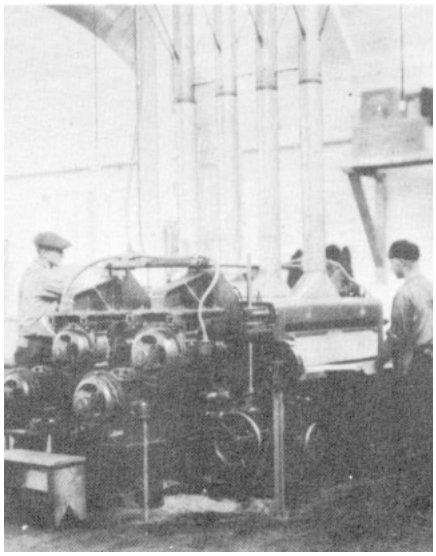
P.C.P.M., Inc. was launched with enthusiasm and high hopes. In February, 1928, it opened a Chicago sales office with H. E. Simon and Raleigh Chinn in charge there, and Jim Walby in New York. Business was good for a while.

Back home, however, dissensions arose within P.C.P.M. as jealousies and suspicions grew over allocation of orders and the competence of "the other fellow" to produce good plywood. One bright spot was the brainchild of Don Davis who, seeing much publicity about the shipment of an entire trainload of lumber, decided a 40-car train of fir plywood could also bring much needed publicity and perhaps some profit to the industry. With the cooperation of the Northern Pacific Railway Co., he sold the idea to the P.C.P.M., Inc. On February 1, 1929, the 40-car train, carrying a bright banner on each car, left the West Coast for Chicago, where all the plywood was sorted out and delivered, although not without difficulties.

A tide, however, was running against the mill combination. Competition from other mills was growing and

Richard E. “Dick” Walton in 1962, when he was president of Walton Plywood, Inc.





The Walton Veneer Company mill, soon after start-up in 1924. Photo at left shows the 108" x 102" St. Joe lathe, remodeled in 1934 to accommodate a 114-inch knife. At the right is the eight-drum sander.

orders from Chicago and other areas slackened. When the stock market crashed in October, 1929, a decision to disband the P.C.P.M., Inc. soon followed. Early in 1930, the three active plywood companies resumed their separate corporate entities. About this time also, Bruce Clark left Walton to become both general manager and sales manager for Elliott Bay Mill Company’s Plywood Division.

In the same hectic period, Raleigh Chinn, who was still selling for Walton, developed a most unusual and profitable account with a man named Grunow, partner in a small concern building transformers for a large nationally known radio manufacturer. The latter rejected a 10,000 unit shipment of transformers from Grunow, a blow severe enough to bankrupt him. Instead, he decided to build his own radios* in a console that could be sold for $150, or half the price of the cheapest radios then available.

Raleigh heard of Grunow through Col. Knight of Albany Veneer, who was furnishing hardwood to him. Raleigh learned from Grunow that he needed two cars of plywood for cabinet shelves but that he was short of cash. Raleigh phoned E.Q. who agreed to gamble and Walton shipped the needed plywood.

The upshot was that Walton got paid in full. Furthermore, as Grunow’s firm grew, Walton shipped them two cars of plywood weekly for a number of years and at good prices, despite the frantic efforts and howls of competitors who knew they could furnish panels cheaper. Grunow, however, remained loyal to Walton, saying, “They gambled when I needed help, and they’ll continue to get my business.”

*Grigsby-Gunow Company – Majestic Radios.

The Oregon-Washington Plywood Company Merger

The next attempt at combining industry talent occurred in September, 1930, when Harry Nicolai’s Tacoma Veneer Company* effected a merger with Tom Autzen’s Portland Manufacturing Company, Craig Spencer’s Elliot Bay Mill Company, and the Walton Veneer Company under the name of Oregon-Washington Plywood Company, with main offices and general sales headquarters in Portland, Oregon. Harry Nicolai became president and Fred Keinzel, sales manager from Nicolai’s Door Company, was placed in charge of sales.

The basic idea of the merger was to consolidate sales and to allocate production orders to the member mill that currently could produce most efficiently the sizes and quantities of plywood needed. Theoretically, the idea seemed excellent, but once again there was no single dynamic leadership to build a unified organization.

Dissension arose, undoubtedly aggravated by rumbles of a collapsing economy. There simply wasn’t enough business to keep the mills operating. Within a year (in October, 1931) both Tom Autzen and Craig Spencer withdrew their mills, leaving the Oregon-Washington Plywood Company with only its Tacoma and Everett plants. Each of these retained a certain amount of individuality, although functioning as O-W mills. O-W struggled valiantly through the Depression years, even though salaries the first year were cut in half.

Simon and Chinn, who had been selling effectively for Walton, then P.C.P.M. and then again with Walton, were put in charge of a Chicago sales office for O-W. Jim Walby represented O-W in New York. In 1934, sales headquarters were moved from Portland to Chicago, with Keinzel in charge.

*A reorganization of the former Veneer Products Company.

Shortly after this, Chinn met Jacques Willis who had been in his hair as a competitor from the first. Willis had been promoting and selling plywood in pool cars to the farm market through sash and door jobbers. There had been a question as to who was entitled to credit for certain sales, but during a long discussion at lunch, differences were settled. As a consequence, Raleigh Chinn resigned from O-W and with Willis formed a partnership known as C-W Plywood Company, which grew to be one of the most successful commission outfits in the plywood industry.

During the next few years, as the country emerged from the Depression, the fir plywood industry with its well-supported association (DFPA) began to prosper. Although O-W also benefited, Nicolai, who had wanted to close his Walton plant during the Depression, finally offered in 1942 to sell it back to the Waltons. E.Q. thought they couldn't buy for lack of money, but his older, more impetuous brother Clyde said "The hell we can't; we'll raise the money." They did, and the Everett plant became Walton Plywood Company with the three brothers and several of their sons as sole stockholders.

In 1946 the plywood company and E.Q.'s stock therein were purchased by the Walton Lumber Company, wholly owned by the Walton family.

The plywood plant was operated by the Walton Lumber Company until 1952, when it was reorganized as Walton Plywood, Inc., with Richard E. (Dick) Walton, E.Q.'s son, as president. Two sons-in-law of Clyde Walton, Henry Fletcher and H. E. Secoy, became vice president and secretary respectively. Each had been a long-time business associate of Clyde and E.Q.

The company prospered under the new management, particularly when it started producing "specialties" with its 5' x 10', 20-opening hot plate press, installed in April, 1951. These specialties included medium and high density plastic overlays up to 5' x 10', marine grades, a patented medium density overlay siding called "Everside," and cottonwood-faced fir plywood, widely used as underlayment for hardwood.

Nevertheless, in 1955, the plant was sold to the employees, who had organized a co-op under the name Washington Plywood Company. Walton Plywood, Inc., was retained as its sales organization. Al Braedt, Walton's office manager, became general manager, but died within five months. Gordon Vincent, Walton's plant superintendent since 1926, agreed to continue as such "until they got going" but soon retired.

The new company was never too successful and finally liquidated in 1961. The plant and properties were sold to Moe Michelson, an old-timer in the machinery salvage business in the Everett area. The dry end of the mill was operated for a short time during the market flurry of 1963 under a joint venture of Michelson and Robinson Plywood and Timber Company. As the market declined, they shut down the presses for the last time and, in the opinion of Moe, too late. He has been heard to say: "I never lost so much money so fast as during my short venture in the plywood business."

Michelson scrapped the machinery in 1967, sold the buildings and land to Simpson Lee Paper Company whose plant was adjoining. The buildings were razed in 1968, the swampy ground filled, and the property became a dry land log-sorting area for Simpson Lee.

The last traces of the original Walton Veneer Company founded in 1923 had disappeared forever.