

Plywood in Retrospect

# THE WHEELER OSGOOD COMPANY

No. 2 in a series of  
monographs on the  
history of west coast  
plywood plants



Published by the Plywood Pioneers Association

September, 1967

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George M. Osgood  
Vice President



W. C. Wheeler  
President



T. E. Ripley  
Secretary

Wheeler, Osgood  
Company 1902



Harry Osgood  
Shipping Clerk



W. T. Ripley  
Superintendent



George J. Osgood  
Accountant

**Plywood in Retrospect.** The response to the first monograph on the history of the Portland Manufacturing Company published by the Plywood Pioneers Association has been most gratifying. For that reason, the Association has decided to continue these essays on early plywood producers as often as time and resources permit. The accompanying history of The Wheeler Osgood Company is the second in this series.

The story presented here is based on material gathered from many sources. I wish to make grateful acknowledgment to Norman O. Cruver, Robert W. Anderson, Sr., Art C. Peterson, Dillard C. Salley and Paul M. Smith for their valuable assistance. Other sources include recorded interviews with Gus Bartells, W. S. Nurenberg, George J. Osgood and others from the files of the American Plywood Association. Our thanks also to Mrs. A. B. Howe, Robert Warnick, Mrs. Ralph Brindley and the Washington State Historical Society for photographs used as illustrations.

This publication is made possible through the valuable assistance of the Douglas Fir Plywood Association and the cooperation of the staff of the American Plywood Association.

Grateful acknowledgment is also made to those members of the American Plywood Association who, through their contributions to the Plywood Pioneer historical fund, have also made continuation of this project possible.

HARRISON CLARK  
Secretary  
Plywood Pioneers Association

Born in a period of frenetic frontier boom, The Wheeler Osgood Company of Tacoma weathered panic and fire with a series of historic innovations that saw...

# Plywood Established in Washington State

The year 1889 in Tacoma, Washington, was a time of optimistic promise for land developers and real estate promoters as the so-called City of Destiny scrambled for its place in the sun in the booming economy of the country's last frontier.

Reports of the frenetic pace of building in the city fired the imaginations of two enterprising lowans, William C. Wheeler, a restless Civil War veteran of Dubuque, Iowa, and George R. Osgood of Des Moines.

Together, they established Wheeler, Osgood & Company in the autumn of 1889 to produce Douglas fir and cedar doors, sash, blinds, interior finish and millwork for the local trade. Conditions for the enterprise could not have been more favorable and the venture prospered from the start.

Osgood's two sons were among the first employees. George J. was bookkeeper and Harry ran the shipping room. D. D. Clarke of Portland, Oregon, soon became a partner in the company.

William T. Ripley, the son of a well-to-do Vermont banker, had come West seeking the kind of opportunity for expansion unavailable at the time in the East. He became the infant company's first superintendent. Young Ripley early displayed a talent for organization as he assembled one of the best millwork manufacturing crews in the region.

Two years later, Thomas E. Ripley followed his brother West. Tom Ripley was a young man possessed of little more than a liberal arts degree from Yale and a wardrobe more suitable for lawn parties than logging. As young Tom Ripley often conceded later, his father literally bought him his first job as secretary of the company.

By 1893, the company had grown so fast it employed 150 first-rate workmen in a well-planned manufacturing layout covering a floor space of 29,500 square feet. Then came disaster. The great House of Baring in London blew up and the repercussions of the crash shook the financial community around the world.

Panic swept Tacoma, and Wheeler, Osgood & Company felt the full brunt of depression as Tacoma's once booming building business ground to a halt.

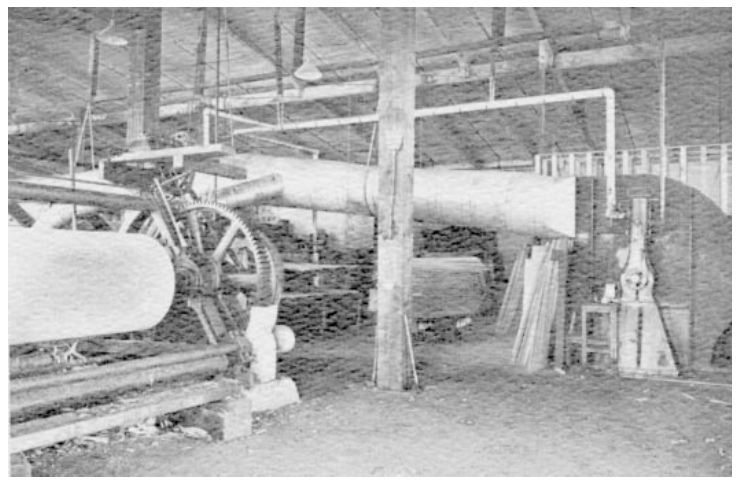
It was at this time that the young dilettante from Yale proved his mettle. Tom Ripley, in addition to his work as secretary, had begun selling the plant's output to builders in and around Tacoma.

When this source of sales dried up, Ripley packed two suitcases with samples and an empty order book and boarded a Pullman for the East. There he literally canvassed the New England market door-to-door for orders. His efforts produced enough business to get the plant running once again. And during the next 10 years Ripley continued to build a national market for the plant's output. By 1902, Wheeler, Osgood & Company had established a commanding position as one of the largest quality sash and door mills on the Coast.

At 3 a.m. on September 25, 1902, disaster struck again. This time it was fire. Within an hour, the great plant was a charred and smoking ruin. The loss was over \$150,000. Some 285 men were thrown out of work. Nevertheless, the principals decided to reorganize and rebuild.

In 1903, the concern was reincorporated under the name of The Wheeler-Osgood Company. William C. Wheeler was president; Thomas E. Ripley, vice president and general manager; G. R. Osgood, second vice president; W. C. Wheeler, Jr., secretary, and R. H. Clarke, son of D. D. Clarke, treasurer. An efficient new plant was built at the site of the original plant.

At the turn of the century, developments in stock door manufacturing in the East forecast the birth of the plywood industry on the West Coast. In 1904, Paine Lumber Company of Oshkosh, Wisconsin, created a veneer mill for the production of rotary-cut veneer. This was the first veneer mill to be used exclusively in door manufacture, and in 1908 they introduced the two-panel door and called it the "Klimax" door.



Crew and equipment in original veneer plant.



W. S. Nurenburg



George J. Osgood



Ralph Brindley



George H. Osgood

The West Coast door manufacturers, including The Wheeler-Osgood Company, began making the two-panel door. Portland Manufacturing Company was their source of supply for the veneer panels. By late 1909, Wheeler-Osgood was giving serious consideration to establishing its own veneer mill. Mr. Harris Warnick, a trusted Wheeler-Osgood foreman and a skilled craftsman from England and Montreal, got a job with Portland Manufacturing Company in Portland, to learn their method of panel production. Before Wheeler-Osgood could start construction of their own veneer panel department, the Portland Manufacturing plant burned, leaving Wheeler-Osgood and other West Coast door manufacturers without a source of supply.

Under the imaginative direction of plant superintendent Gus Bartells, Wheeler-Osgood took immediate action. Bartells had started with the company as a floor sweeper in 1893, fresh out of school. He was now entrusted with the job of designing and building the new veneer panel department, but that would take time.

To meet the emergency, Bartells and Warnick improvised the necessary gluing, pressing, and other essential equipment. A contract was made with the Hazne Lumber & Box Company to furnish the veneer. Within a few weeks after the Portland fire in February, 1910, Wheeler-Osgood was producing its own veneer panels. Warnick was made foreman of panel production.

In the meantime, construction of the new panel department proceeded but progress was slow as all key items of equipment had to be built in the East and shipped to Tacoma. However, under the careful supervision of Bartells, construction was completed early in 1912. Production began in the new plant under the watchful eye of Warnick, who remained with Wheeler-Osgood until 1918. The lathe was a St. Joe and the dryer a Coe, the first of that make to be installed on the Pacific Coast.

In 1912, W. S. "Bill" Nurenborg visited The Wheeler-Osgood Company. Ripley, still a vice president and general manager, and Ralph H. Clarke, treasurer and director of sales, were inspecting some of the new fir plywood panels in Clarke's office. Nurenborg was asked if he thought he could sell fir panels in the East. Nurenborg was confident he could do it. "WSN," as Nurenborg became known, was hired at the handsome salary of \$125.00 monthly and expenses. He remained with Wheeler-Osgood for approximately twenty years. This contact established "WSN" as the first man to introduce fir panels to the trade east of the Rockies and helped establish his reputation as a super salesman of the plywood industry.

In 1915, Thomas E. Ripley was made president. The Wheeler-Osgood Company was an early developer of Douglas fir products, including doors, sash, blinds and plywood, and Ripley played a leading part in opening new markets for these products both in this country and abroad, making several trips to Europe between 1915 and 1924.

In about 1918, the company decided to concentrate its efforts on volume production of stock doors and, to a lesser degree, plywood, eliminating all millwork and local custom business. President Ripley contacted George J. Osgood. Osgood had left Wheeler-Osgood in 1907 to team up with Henry McCleary in establishing the McCleary Timber Company, where he remained until 1915. Ripley prevailed upon him to return to Wheeler-Osgood Company. Osgood agreed, provided the old factory was rebuilt and modernized for a streamlined production operation.

In 1919, Osgood returned as vice president and general manager, with his very good friend and associate at McCleary Timber Company, William C. Hobart, whom he considered the best mill man in the country. They rebuilt the plant practically from the ground up. The plant was soon producing an average of 10,000 doors a day. Plywood production was also increased but the major portion of that production still went into door panels.

At the time of rebuilding, Ripley was president; George J. Osgood, vice president and general manager; William C. Hobart, general superintendent; H. E. York, assistant general superintendent; Kurt Steinhart, plywood foreman; Robert Reedy, sales manager; and Norman O. Cruver, office manager.

H. E. York succeeded Hobart as general superintendent, and Ralph Brindley became York's assistant. Adolph Gaines succeeded Kurt Steinhart as foreman of the plywood department, and later George H. Osgood, a son of George J., was promoted to manager of plywood production.

In the decade of the Roaring Twenties, the manufacture of plywood, sparked by a continuing flow of new developments in the production process, grew from a sideline into an industry in its own right. Wheeler-Osgood was one of the most prolific incubators of these developments during this period.

George H. Osgood and Adolph Gaines developed the roller pressure bar which made it possible to eliminate steaming of logs before peeling. This cut costs by eliminating the need for expensive steam vats and freed space in the plant for other uses. However, elimination of steaming created a problem in barking. So Gaines and Bill Kilde invented a way to utilize the old lathe which was not then in use as a barker. This was the forerunner of the modern barker.

The deluge system for fire control in the veneer dryers was first developed and tested at WOCO. George H. Osgood worked long and hard in developing a protein type glue, using peanut meal as the principal ingredient, to replace the U. S. Forest Products Laboratory's casein formula glue then in common use. At about this time, I. F. Lauchs developed the famous soybean glue which proved superior and less expensive.

At a somewhat later date, Vick Anderson and Gaines developed a defect and patch cutter and the hot press for patching face stock on exterior plywood. Anderson also developed the "Vick Anderson" automatic clipper.

There were several developments especially applicable to the manufacturing of doors, so we will not cover them in the story. Much of the credit for these new developments goes to Ralph Brindley who had become general superintendent after York died. Brindley created and encouraged an atmosphere of innovation and experiment through the period that helped keep Wheeler-Osgood out in front of the industry.

Wheeler-Osgood personnel also pioneered new concepts in sales policy during the period. The company's major contribution in this area was the so-called "jobber policy," a natural extension of the company's method of selling doors, its main product. Under this policy the company refused to undercut its most important customers by limiting sales only to wholesalers with adequate warehouse facilities capable of mounting aggressive local sales efforts. This concept was imitated and followed by a majority of producers for many years and to this day remains the basic sales policy of many independent manufacturers.

Back in 1912 when Nurenburg undertook the task of introducing fir plywood to the eastern markets, he went first to the large millwork jobbers. His first sale was to J. J. Nartzik, a Chicago millwork jobber. Fessedden Hall of Philadelphia was another. These sales were for fifty to one-hundred panels to be included with a car of doors. His first carload contained fifty different consignees.

Another "first" for Nurenburg: in 1912 he sold New England Cabinet Company 1000 square feet of 1/4" below-grade, good one-side, to be used for bottoms of drawers in kitchen cabinets. In placing the order with the home office, he called it "Drawer Bottom Grade" which became the official name in general use in the industry for several years. During the early 1920's, three grades of plywood were considered standard: Good 2 sides; Good 1 side and Drawer Bottom.

With the expansion of Wheeler-Osgood production of stock doors and plywood in the twenties, expansion of its sales effort was necessary. This led to the establishment of company sales offices located in various market centers. The home office was in Tacoma. Robert Reedy was sales manager and

R. W. "Bob" Anderson, one of his assistants, was assigned mainly to plywood.

During this period, Harry Osgood moved to Spokane, Washington and covered the Inland Empire, consisting of Eastern Washington, Idaho, Montana, the Dakotas and Minnesota. Robert S. Osgood located in Los Angeles and covered Southern California and the Southwest. Nurenburg operated out of Chicago with all the central part of the country as his territory. In the late twenties, Bill became a vice president and sales manager directing the company's network of sales offices from his eastern headquarters.

A. C. "Art" Peterson went to Chicago and made the industrial trade his specialty. Lee Duvall covered the entire northeast from his New York office. Larry J. Woodson started the San Francisco office to cover that area. Lionel J. Phillips maintained the Memphis office covering the southeast. Bryant Hanby was at Dallas, Texas, covering the South Central states. Paul M. Smith covered Western Washington, Oregon, parts of Idaho, Wyoming, Colorado and Utah.

In 1925, when Ed Westman started production in his Washington Veneer Co. at Olympia, he granted exclusive sales rights to Wheeler-Osgood Company. However, in 1926, Ed changed his affiliation to Pacific Coast Plywood Manufacturers, a sales company with headquarters in Seattle, Washington, under the direction of Gus Bartells in conjunction with Portland Manufacturing, Elliott Bay Mill Co., and Walton Veneer Company.

In the late twenties, during the stock market boom and just before the crash, a wave of mergers swept the country. It became the thing to do, and in mid-year 1929, The Wheeler-Osgood Company and Nicolai Door Company agreed to merge. The company elected to purchase Nicolai on a stock and mortgage basis. Wheeler-Osgood capital stock was issued to Nicolai for one-half the plant value. Nicolai Door Company was given a mortgage for the balance of the plant value. The officers of the merged company included:

- George J. Osgood ..... President
  - E. J. Calloway ..... Vice President
  - Harry T. Nicolai ..... Vice President
  - N. O. Cruver ..... Treasurer
  - W. C. Wheeler, Jr. .... Secretary
- (All officers were directors)

This merger had hardly been consummated when the market crash of 1929 occurred. In 1930, the depression that followed the crash deepened. As building slowed to a walk, demand for doors faded rapidly. It was decided impractical to keep both factories running, so the Nicolai plant at Portland was closed. By 1932, conditions forced Wheeler-Osgood to close the whole Tacoma operation, with the exception of the Philippine Hardwood Lumber Department.

By early 1934, there was some revival in both door and plywood demand. Wheeler-Osgood had become delinquent with its bond and mortgage holders, bank loans and preferred stock. So a new corporation was formed, called Wheeler-Osgood Sales Corporation, which was granted banking credit. A five-year management and sales contract with the existing company was signed. The participants in this venture were E. J. Calloway, W. M. MacArthur, Lionel J. Phillips, Ralph Brindley and Norman O. Cruver. Both the plywood and door plants were put back into production. Ralph Brindley was in charge of all production and Adolph Gaines continued in charge of plywood production under Ralph. Later, H. W. "Hal" McCleary became assistant to Ralph Brindley.

In 1935, Wheeler-Osgood suffered its second serious fire which started in one of the veneer dryers. One hundred firemen and seventy-five employees battled the flames.

The damage was limited to the veneer department. Again in 1942 the plywood section of the plant was destroyed by a \$100,000 fire and was immediately rebuilt.

In 1939, the company was able to reorganize and merge the sales company back into The Wheeler Osgood Company. The Nicolai plant and operation were returned to Harry Nicolai. Gene Calloway was vice president and general manager; Dan J. Young succeeded Calloway, and in 1941, Dan Young

resigned and Norman O. Cruver was elected vice president and general manager. H. "Adolph" Gaines became general superintendent following Ralph Brindley's death in 1939.

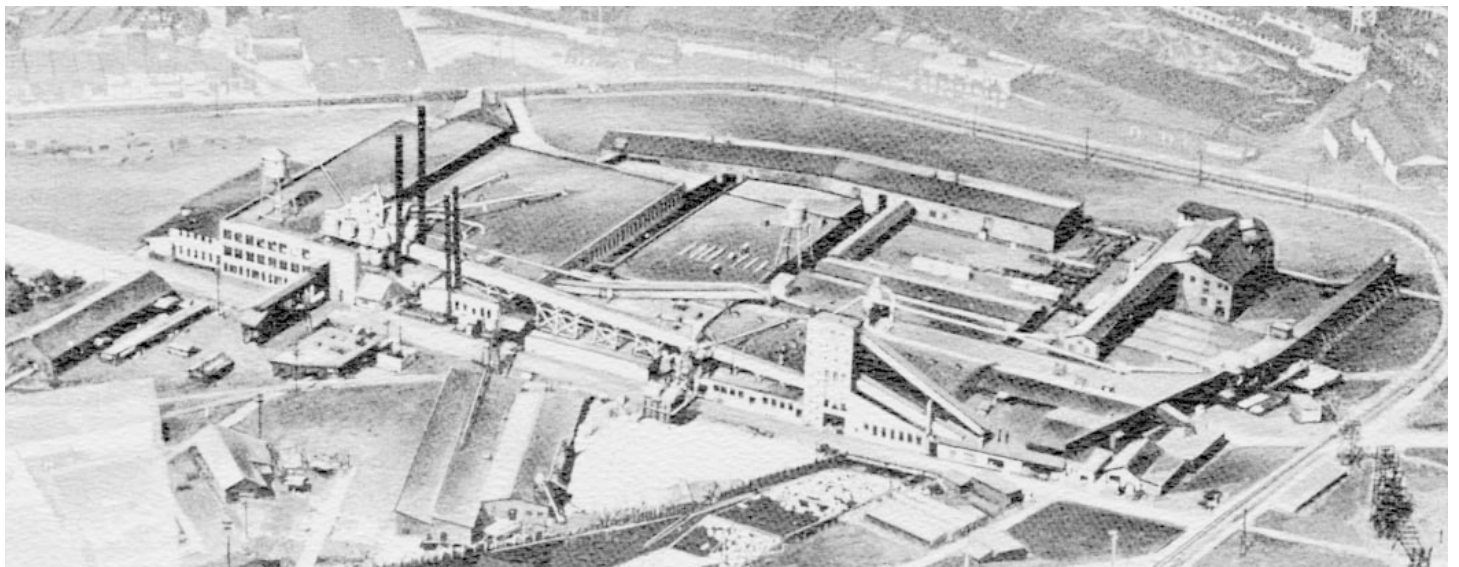
This arrangement carried on through World War II to 1947. Then a corporation by the name of Cruver, MacArthur and Phillips purchased control of The Wheeler Osgood Company and re-organized it on a basis of public financing. All of Wheeler Osgood's debts were paid off, and the company was in a strong financial position to expand operations during the post-war building boom. Norman Cruver became president and general manager; Paul M. Smith, vice president and secretary; Lionel Phillips and W. M. MacArthur were vice presidents; and John F. Cushing, treasurer. A. L. "Red" Shepro succeeded Adolph Gaines as general superintendent and Conrad Gaines was in charge of the plywood department.

Like other woodworking plants on Puget Sound in Washington, Wheeler Osgood now began to look to Oregon for timber in order to continue its operations.

Down near Myrtle Creek, Oregon, Ed Sund had located a block of timber and interested J. H. "Henry" Gonyea in joining with him in acquiring it and building a new sawmill and plywood plant at Myrtle Creek. The project proved to be more than Mr. Gonyea wished to undertake alone. Mutual friends



Norman O. Cruver, President, and the plant as it appeared from the air in 1948.



advised Wheeler Osgood of the situation. Negotiations were started and in the fall of 1947, the firms of the Fir Manufacturing Co. of Myrtle Creek and The Wheeler Osgood Co. of Tacoma completed a merger. The new plywood plant at Myrtle Creek was completed by the merged organization and started operations.

At the time of the merger, Ed Sund was general manager with special emphasis on the logging operation. Mr. Clark Van Fleet was manager of plywood operation and Carl Jacobson, plywood superintendent.

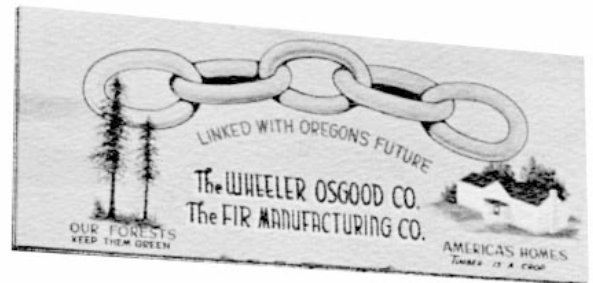
Late in 1948, Paul M. Smith was sent from Tacoma to Myrtle Creek to take over general management of the operations, replacing Ed Sund and Clark Van Fleet. Carl Jacobson had become interested in a new plywood venture at Grants Pass, Oregon and had resigned as superintendent. He was replaced by Adolph Paul. Smith remained at Myrtle Creek until November

of 1949 when he was recalled to Tacoma and Douglas McCann took over management of the Myrtle Creek operations.

Back in Tacoma in June of 1950, Henry Gonyea was elected president of Wheeler Osgood, replacing Cruver. Lionel Phillips and William MacArthur remained as vice presidents; Paul Smith as vice president, secretary and general sales manager. Dick Salley joined the company as a board member and general manager and Conrad Gaines was superintendent of plywood production.

The Wheeler Osgood Company prospered in 1949 and 1950 but the plant in Tacoma was showing its age. In 1951 it was decided to close the Tacoma plant and liquidate The Wheeler Osgood Co. Its assets were sold, and the Tacoma plant closed its doors in November of 1951, thus ending more than a half-century as one of the most important factors in Tacoma's industrial growth and history.

The merger of  
the Wheeler, Osgood Co.  
and the  
Fir Manufacturing  
Company.



Norman O. Cruver, President, Wheeler Osgood (left) and J. H. "Henry" Gonyea, President, Fir Manufacturing.  
Banner used at ceremonies commemorating the merger.  
Paul M. Smith, Plant Manager (inset).  
Aerial view of Fir Manufacturing Company's plant in 1947 at the time of merger.

