

Plywood in Retrospect

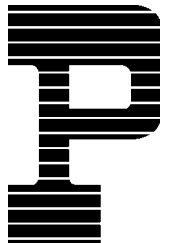
THE BUFFELEN LUMBER & MANUFACTURING COMPANY

No. 5 in a series of
monographs on the
history of west coast
plywood plants

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John Buffelen

Plywood in Retrospect This, the fifth monograph in the historical series, concerns itself with another Tacoma door manufacturing company that joined the fast growing plywood industry – the Buffelen Lumber & Manufacturing Company.

J. Philip Simpson who was associated with the Buffelen Company for more than forty years has been a great help to me in supplying data. I wish also to acknowledge the assistance of the many others that have furnished material including Frank Smith, Frank Neal, A. E. Anderson, Mike Fechko,

Henry Mertz, A. C. Peterson, R. W. Austin, and John Penberthy.

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The inborn spirit of adventure and the Dutch characteristic of determination were qualities of John Buffelen that brought TACOMA ITS SECOND PLYWOOD PLANT.

The Buffelen Lumber & Manufacturing Company

John Buffelen, a native of Holland, was born August 26, 1864. At the age of twenty-two he came to the United States and located in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where he learned the woodworking and remanufacturing business.

In 1901 he came to Tacoma, Washington, and in 1908 became a stockholder in Washington Manufacturing Company, makers of architectural specialties and cabinets, and was instrumental in starting that firm in the manufacture of porch columns. In the next several years he became more and more interested in house door manufacturing and, as a personal venture, purchased a small sawmill known as the Raze Lumber Company on Hylebos Creek on the Tacoma Tide Flats.

He rebuilt the sawmill and added a modern door factory. The organization he thus founded he named the Buffelen Lumber & Manufacturing Company and it started operations in late February 1913, the first carload of doors was shipped on March 1. The factory had a capacity of 800 doors daily.

By 1915, the procurement of plywood door panels was becoming a major problem, the demand exceeding the available supply, so the addition of a plywood department was decided upon and production started by early 1916.

The plywood plant was located adjacent to the sawmill and west of the door factory. In fact, the lathe and clipper were located almost under a part of the sawmill structure.

Steam tunnel vats were constructed to steam the veneer blocks. A seven-foot Capitol lathe, feeding onto a single tray, carried the veneers to the hand-operated clipper. The veneers were loaded onto hand trucks and taken to an adjacent building which contained two 12-plate Merritt Plate Veneer Re-Driers.

The veneers coming out of these driers were so hot it was necessary to stand them on end for a short time to cool before stacking in trucks to be graded. The face veneers were paired up and taken to the glue spreader, where the panels were built up in batches and were inserted in the

hydraulic press where the necessary pressure was applied and the batch clamped together.

The glued-up batches were allowed to stand or "set" for 24 hours after which the panels were sized, placed on a conveyor belt and transported to the door factory stock warehouse, where they remained until needed for door production.

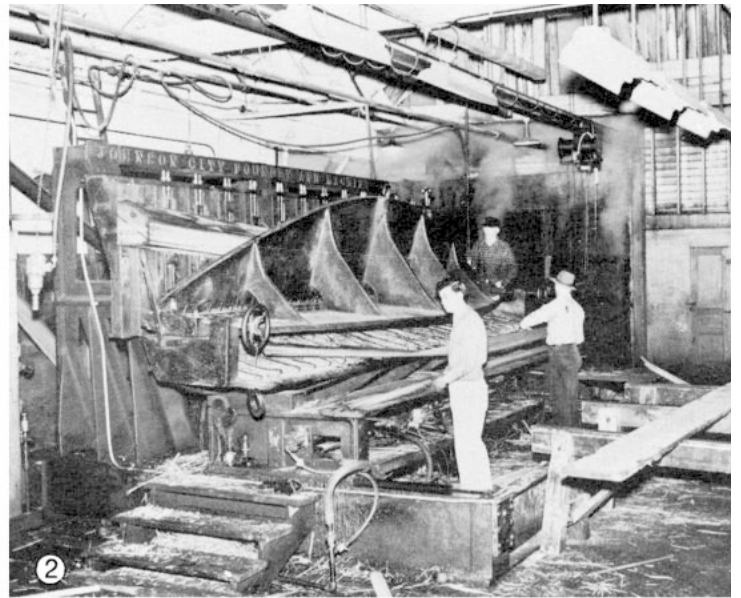
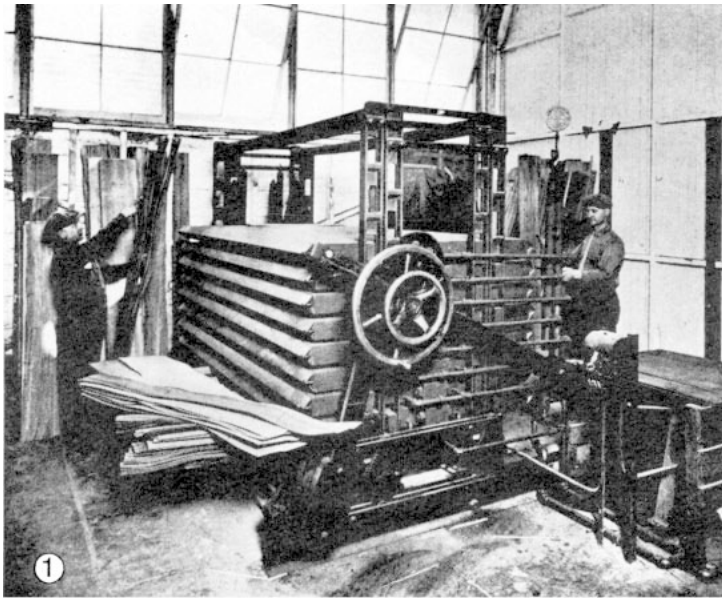
John Buffelen was the President and General Manager of the Company. R. McAusland was assistant to Mr. Buffelen, in general charge of production. Charles Hall was Superintendent of door production and Superintendent of the plywood plant was L. Marsh.

The plywood department specialized in the production of door panels for the door factory, and sold on the outside only the accumulation of lower grade drawer bottom stock. By 1919, the demand upon the West Coast mills for fir door panels from the Mid-Western and Eastern door factories was so strong that Mr. Buffelen decided to build a new and more modern plywood plant, in order to increase production and cater to that trade.

The site picked was to the north and west of the sawmill, the door factory and the original plywood department. The building was designed so the plant could be expanded as business justified. This new plant was equipped with a new eight-foot Capitol lathe, a Proctor-Swartz drier, a Perkins glue spreader and a Francis hydraulic press, hand veneer dry clippers, new trim saws and sanders – in other words, a complete new plant.

The old plant remained intact for awhile to augment the production of panels from the new plant, if required. Buffelen Lumber & Manufacturing Company became one of the principal suppliers of fir door panels for such Eastern millwork organizations as Curtis Sash & Door, Farley-Loetscher, Rock Island Sash and Door, Morgan Millwork Company, and Roach & Musser Company.

Early in the 1920's, Mr. Buffelen decided it would be both practical and profitable to produce doors and door panels



The original Buffelen plant was equipped with a Merritt Re-Drier similar to the one illustrated (1). The company's 16-foot slicer (2) was the first large plywood production slicer on the West Coast. Huge Douglas fir logs (3) were common in the early days at Buffelen. To secure Alder logs Buffelen promoted (4) farm lot logging. First shipload of Philippine mahogany logs (5) to the West Coast was for Buffelen. Phil Simpson (6), Vice President and General Manager of Buffelen for over 30 years.

from some of our Western hardwood which could compete with the low priced Eastern hardwood doors of gum and birch. Alder was selected as the proper wood. There was a good supply of logs available and experiments had revealed that it responded well to rotary peeling in the lathe. The project was a success and Buffelen Lumber and Manufacturing Company became the first West Coast stock door company to enter into the hardwood field.

After a few short years the supply of good alder logs became so unreliable that a new raw material was sought and experiments with the so-called Philippine mahogany woods were conducted. These experiments were so successful that it was determined to switch the hardwood production entirely to the Philippine woods and again Buffelen Manufacturing achieved a first.

This success led to another first for Buffelen. The beauty of the veneers that were produced from slicing led to experiments on fir, cedar and spruce. The edge grain veneers so produced were exciting enough to encourage the purchase and installation of the West Coast plywood industry's first production veneer slicer, the production of vertical grain plywood panels, and their use in both the fir and hardwood doors.

In 1921, John Buffelen made the acquaintance of J. Phil Simpson through their mutual activities in some of the committees involved in Tacoma civic enterprises. Phil Simpson was at the time Secretary-Treasurer of the Tacoma Gas Company. Mr. Buffelen offered Phil an attractive proposition. Phil accepted, and on the 12th day of February, 1923, J. P. Simpson started on a long and successful career in the plywood and door industry. Phil started as Treasurer and assistant to John Buffelen.

At the time of Phil's coming with Buffelen, John Buffelen was President and General Manager. A. P. Judson was his assistant in general charge of production; Herman Tenzler was Sales Manager; David Crockett was General Superintendent. In the plywood factory "Lou" Marsh was day foreman and Charles Jacob night foreman.

Encouraged by the acceptance of the Western hardwood and experimental Philippine mahogany doors, a complete new hardwood plywood department was planned and built. The location of this department lay in the area between the door factory, the sawmill and the fir plywood plant. Some of the older buildings which housed the original plywood department were incorporated.

The new hardwood department had its own complete line of equipment including its own lathe, a new 16-foot veneer slicer, a new Coe drier, and the necessary glue spreaders, hydraulic presses, trim saws and sanders. Also included

were the so-called "hot boxes" (tunnel driers) for redrying the hardwood panels. A twenty-opening hot press was later added.

In August of 1924, Buffelen received its first large shipment of Philippine logs, direct from the islands, by boat, and by early 1925 the new hardwood department was in full swing. It should be noted that Mr. Buffelen personally sold to Mr. Lawrence Ottinger, then President of United States Plywood Company, their first straight carload of Philippine mahogany panels. Fred Bader was the first foreman for this new hardwood department and was followed by John McMillan.

During the late 1920's, Mr. Buffelen expressed a desire to retire from active management of the company. Through the leadership of Frank C. Neal – Mr. Buffelen's attorney, and Phil Simpson, the Lauan Investment Corporation was formed. Mr. Neal was President, Mr. Simpson was Vice President and General Manager. Among stockholders and the directors were a number of men prominent in Tacoma and Northwest lumbering and financial circles.

In 1928, the Lauan Investment Corporation purchased Mr. Buffelen's interests and in September took over the operation which continued under the name of Buffelen Lumber & Manufacturing Company. Except for a short time during the depression in the early 1930's, when Mr. Buffelen returned as an advisor, this sale concluded his connection with the company.

A number of men who later became prominent in plywood circles got their start or were early associated with Buffelen Lumber & Manufacturing Company in the early days. In addition to those previously mentioned, there were, in production, William C. Hobart, Frank Smith, Andrew J. Honzel, George Holm and Henry L. Mertz. In sales were Fred L. Johnson, Charles Bevel and A. C. "Art" Peterson.

It was early in 1930 when Henry L. Mertz arrived in Tacoma from Oshkosh, Wisconsin, where he had for a number of years been associated with the Paine Lumber Company. It was his belief that the future of the lumber remanufacturing business was on the West Coast, not Wisconsin. There was an opening at Buffelen – Charles Bevel, who had succeeded Herman Tenzler as Sales Manager, was leaving to enter the jobbing business in Portland, Oregon – Henry was hired as Sales Manager and assumed his duties on February 1, 1930.

The depression, which started early in the 1930's, was severe and with all West Coast lumbering manufacturing operations it was touch and go. Buffelen was no exception, but managed to weather the storm.

Following the depression an era of technological advances came into the lumber remanufacturing business. These included high speed tools with direct motor drives or with variable speed or enclosed reduction "V" belts, new type electric switches and solenoid controlled valves; all labor saving devices. "Automation" had arrived. Following considerable discussion, the management decided to invest more money and energy in plant, equipment and cost improvement.

Because of Mertz's prior and wide experience in plant operation with the Paine Lumber Company, he was assigned to the job of modernizing the operation and was transferred from Sales Manager to General Superintendent. This occurred in 1936. Mike Fechko was made Assistant General Superintendent and they made a good team. The improvement program was successful, with the appraised value as well as the efficiency being nearly tripled in a short span of years.

With the decision to modernize the plant facilities came the necessity to expand its sales from a policy of merely disposing of its low-grade by-products from its main operation, the production of doors and door panels, to one of active entrance into the commercial plywood market.

Arthur C. Peterson, who had joined Buffelen in November, 1930 as an assistant to Henry Mertz, was elevated to Sales Manager when Mertz was transferred to production.

Like other plywood manufacturing firms that had started as adjuncts to the door business, their principal outlets were the door jobbers. Buffelen continued on a one-hundred percent jobber policy but expanded to include many of the fast-growing list of plywood jobbers among their customers. "Art" continued as Sales Manager until 1955, a span of nearly twenty-five years, during which time he saw many new developments in the products and markets for plywood.

Another new product first for Buffelen was the development of the plastic-faced panel, or what is today called overlaid plywood. It is an interesting story, the details of which would require more space than is available here, so I must be brief.

During the period of World War II – 1941 to 1945 – the plywood industry turned almost one-hundred percent of its production to the war effort. All industry was cooperating and the nerve center was the War Production Board in Washington, D. C. The chemical division of the W.P.B. was concerned with a problem of trim waste of plastic materials used in making helmets, and had asked the Kimberly-Clark Company of Nennah, Wisconsin, to study the problem. They, in turn, had given the research work to Lawrence College in Appleton, Wisconsin.

Jacques Willis at that time was one of Buffelen's sales representatives in that territory. He learned of the problem from his daughter who was attending Lawrence. He had an idea and followed his lead through to Kimberly-Clark, where he suggested the possibility of using the material as an overlay for plywood. They showed real interest, so Jacques called Phil Simpson, who agreed to experiment and see if it was possible.

Kimberly-Clark shipped some of the material to Buffelen. Henry Mertz went to the Borden Company in Seattle and the Douglas Fir Plywood Association laboratory in Tacoma, which had small hot presses for experimental use, and was successful in welding the material to small panels of about one-foot square.

These samples were sent to Jacques who showed them to the U. S. Air Corps procurement office at Dayton, Ohio, to see if they had use for such a panel. They were very impressed and referred Jacques to the Washington, D.C. headquarters, where he and Phil Simpson met with Emory Moore who was at the time serving his country as a procurement officer. He and his people saw great possibilities in such a panel and wanted Phil to determine the practicability of making 4' x 8' panels. Phil agreed.

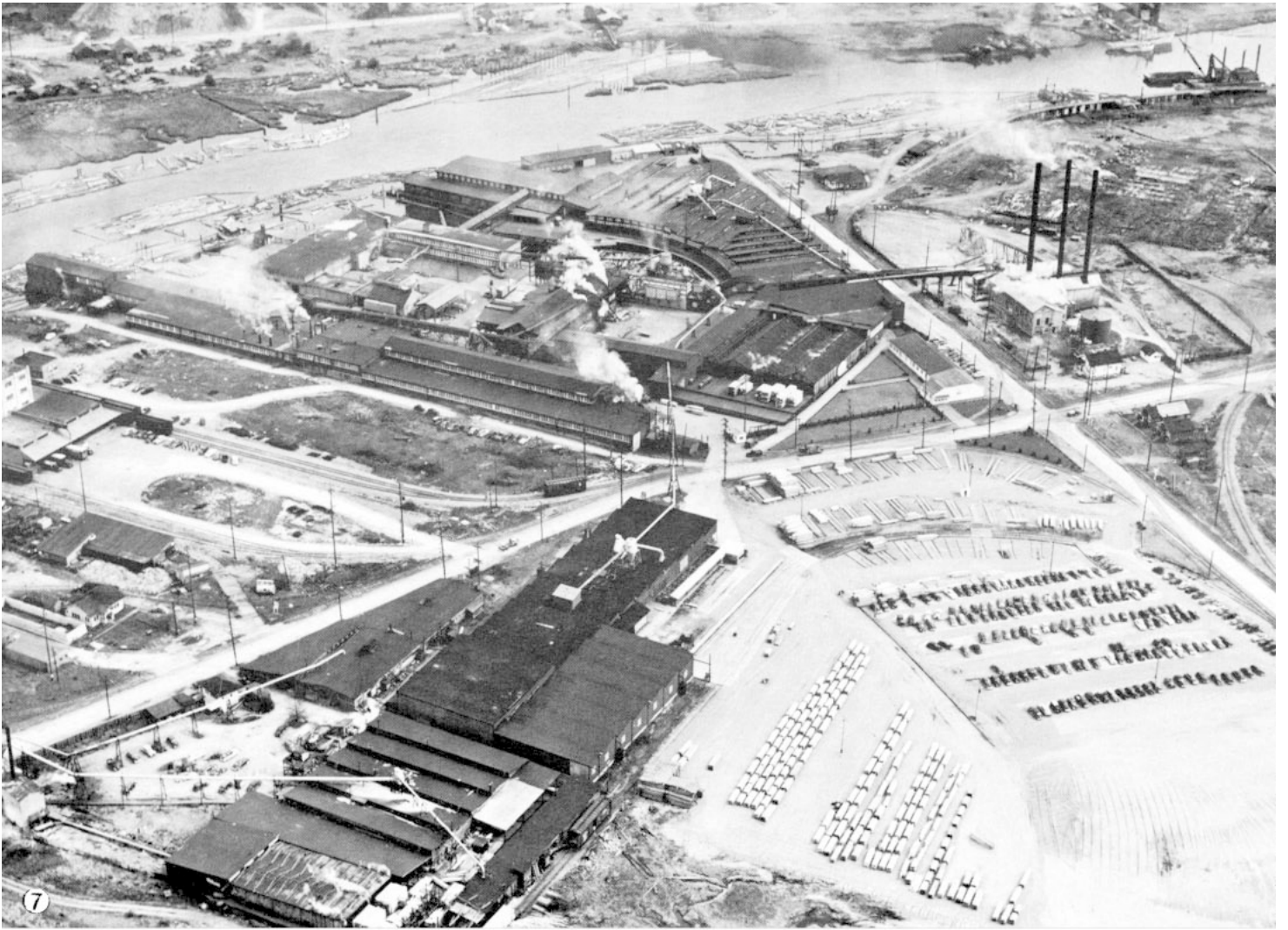
Kimberly-Clark produced a small quantity of the overlay material and sent it, with two of their research men to Tacoma to assist Buffelen in applying it to the 4' x 8' panels.

There followed a fortnight of frustration. All experimental work was done on the graveyard shift. Phi Simpson, Henry Mertz, the two Kimberly-Clark technicians and a hand-picked crew met each night at midnight and often labored until morning. This night work was necessary in order not to disrupt the important regular production schedules.

The first charge of panels placed in the then relatively new twenty-opening hot press literally blew up upon opening the press. The moisture in the panels on which the plastic overlay was applied had turned to steam under pressure and when the pressure was released the explosion blew the panels apart.

However, after persistent trial and error, all problems were overcome and the making of a plastic-faced overlaid plywood panel had become a reality. Jacques Willis named his new product "Inderon."

The Air Corps was delighted. They found so many uses for it that the next problem was supply. Buffelen Lumber & Manufacturing made all they could without destroying its other business. Phil and Jacques interested Ed Westman of Washington Veneer and Wheeler-Osgood in



Air view of Buffelen plant in the early 40's (7) shows main plant complex upper center with plywood plant at left. Log pond (8) showing fir and Philippine mahogany logs. Inderon, the first Medium Density Overlaid plywood, coming out of 20-opening hot press (9). Jacques Willis (10) was the originator of Inderon. Henry Mertz (11) led in the modernization of Buffelen plant in the middle 30's. Art Peterson (12) took over as Sales Manager in 1936 when Mertz became General Superintendent.

also producing the product. Between them, they were able to meet the Army's needs.

In 1947, a group of Californians, headed by Alexis E. Post and S. C. Pohlman, approached the Lauan Investment Company with an offer to buy. After months of negotiating, a sale was consummated and in March, 1940, the new owner took over and renamed the operation the Buffelen Manufacturing Company.

Mr. Post was President, Mr. Pohlman was Vice President and General Manager. Phil Simpson retained a financial interest in the new company, and, at the request of the new owners, remained as Vice President and assistant to Mr. Pohlman who was unfamiliar with the lumbering industry, having had a business background in the iron and steel industry. After a couple of years, Mr. Pohlman found his interest in steel greater than lumber and retired from active management, so Phil Simpson returned as General Manager.

Like other lumber remanufacturing operations in the Puget Sound area, Buffelen had turned to Oregon to bolster its dwindling supply of timber. They had established a sawmill at Batterson, Oregon and a green veneer plant at Culp Creek, Oregon.

In 1948, Mertz resigned to take a position as Vice President and General Manager of the Stevenson Plywood Corporation of Stevenson, Washington. M. J. "Mike" Fechko was elevated to General Superintendent, Art Peterson continued as Sales Manager. R. W. Austin was Art's assistant and the very active sales staff consisted of R. A. McGrath, Midwestern representative; Paul Peltier, East Coast; R. J. Cunningham, Southern territory; E. W. Wheelock, California. Herb Anstedt took over on the East Coast upon Peltier's death. Dwight Wood was assistant to Phil Simpson.

The next change in ownership came in 1955. On May 19, Buffelen Manufacturing Company formally announced the intent to liquidate the company and to close down all production operations not later than August 15, 1955. The reason given was the inadequate supply of timber in the Puget Sound area.

Plans were immediately made by some of the employees to form a worker "Co-op." Dwight Wood was made Chairman of the organizational group. The Buffelen Woodworking Company, a worker-owned cooperative company, was formed and five-hundred shares, at \$4,000 per share, were subscribed. The Buffelen Manufacturing

Company's Tacoma plant and raw material inventory were purchased. Timber and timberland were not included. Arrangements were made with a local bank for working capital and the Tacoma mill was again in production November 2, 1955.

L. Spike Aaby was President of the new company, Dwight Wood was General Manager and Walt Faulk, General Superintendent. Sales were to be handled by the Buffelen Sales Company which was organized by Phil Simpson; Phil was President, R. W. Austin, Vice President and John Penberthy, Secretary-Treasurer. A ten-year sales agreement and contract was entered into.

The first years of operation by the worker group were not a bed of roses. Conflict of interests, uncertain sources of raw material, inadequate financial reserves, troublesome market conditions all plagued the new company, and contributed to frequent changes in management. The condition also brought about changes in operations. The big sawmill was down, then followed the closing of the planing mill and the fir plywood department. These were dismantled and the equipment sold.

The firm, however, over the years had established an excellent reputation on its door products, particularly in certain specialty items, such as solid and hollow core flush doors. These products, during the highly competitive period of the late 50's and early 60's, helped to weather the storms as did quality production in the hardwood plywood plant. A major item for several years was Philippine mahogany faced, special marine grade plywood which was sold to some of the nation's largest pleasure boat manufacturers.

Come 1965, and Phil Simpson's desire to retire from active business after more than forty years association with the Buffelen operations, the Buffelen Sales Company was dissolved. A new sales arrangement was made with Northwest Door and Plywood Sales Company, of which Herman Tenzler is President.

Orville Olsen is presently President of the Buffelen Woodworking Company; Peter DeFotis is its General Manager; Mike Fechko is Superintendent of door production and Harold McCormack, of plywood. Today, after more than fifty years, "Buffelen's" continues as one of Tacoma's basic industries and one of the important suppliers of doors and hardwood plywood for the nation's building industry.