

Out of the woods: Bob Freres devoted his life to family lumber business

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Bob Freres grew up in the timber industry — literally. Born July 20, 1929, he spent his early childhood in a logging camp on the North Fork of the Santiam River and learned to read and write in a one-room schoolhouse in Lyons.

“He’d catch a log truck down to Oakdale School and probably catch one back,” said his son Rob, the third-generation president of Freres Lumber, the wood products company founded in 1922 by family patriarch T.G. Freres, Bob’s father and Rob’s grandfather.

Bob Freres died Nov. 4 at the age of 90, continuing to work in the family business almost to the end, his son recalled.

“It was his life.”

Growing up in a Western Oregon logging camp could be a rough-and-tumble existence for a young boy, and Bob Freres had some close calls, including a near miss involving a wigwam burner at the family’s sawmill when he was 5 or 6.

“He got caught up in a conveyor and was being hauled up into the wigwam burner,” Rob said. “Somebody saw him and turned off the conveyor.”

In the 1940s, Freres Lumber moved its operations from the North Santiam Canyon to the town of Lyons. In 1959, with demand for plywood growing, the company decided to branch out by investing in a joint venture to manufacture veneer.

In the years that followed, Freres Lumber continued to build its veneer business, eventually becoming the largest independent veneer producer on the West Coast.



Bob Freres led Freres Lumber from 1968 until his death earlier this month.
— PHOTO COURTESY OF FRERES LUMBER

With Bob Freres taking a leading role (with plenty of help from his brother Ted), first as president beginning in 1968 and then as chairman and CEO after his father’s death in 1979, the company continued to grow. Today it has six plants and employs 475 people.



Bob Freres, right, with siblings Bud and Phyllis in 1940.
— PHOTO COURTESY OF FRERES LUMBER

Part of Freres Lumber's success can be attributed to the company's willingness to experiment with new technology, from laser optimization equipment to heat treatment of veneer logs. The latest example of that is the company's pioneering foray into mass plywood panels, an innovative product designed to replace traditional concrete-and-steel construction in midrise and highrise buildings.

"Plywood has lost 90% of the residential market to a cheaper substitute, oriented strand board," Rob Freres said. "We wanted to get away from being a commodity product price taker and become a specialty product price maker."

It was Rob and his uncle Ted (who died last year) who pushed to build the mass plywood panel plant, which opened in late 2017, Rob said.

His father, he recalled, was somewhat dubious about the venture, worried that the first-of-its-kind product might take too long to gain widespread market acceptance. But he thinks his dad would be pleased with the way MPP is starting to catch on with architects, engineers and builders.

"He could see the great potential," Rob said. "He was just anxious to see it take off and succeed."

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