

Canada's Red Cedar Shingle Industry

Excerpts from an interview with Charles Plant conducted by Elwood R. Maunder, 1 May 1974

Elwood R. Maunder was executive director of the Forest History Society from 1952 until 1978. During his long tenure, he conducted nearly two hundred interviews with educators, government officials, and people in the private sector. Maunder's interview with Charles Plant, excerpts of which are printed below, focused on Plant's role in promoting British Columbia's red cedar shingle industry. In 1910, at age nineteen, Plant moved with his family from Great Britain to Canada. He landed his first job in the forest products field with Arrow Lakes Lumber Company, an American-owned operation located in the Kootenay district of British Columbia. There he began a long career in sales and mill management. Plant was widely recognized as an imaginative salesman, and he opened new markets for lumber and other British Columbia forest products. In the mid-1920s Bloedel, Stewart and Welch moved to make the Red Band Mill an all-Canadian operation; they hired Plant in 1930 to promote Red Band's shingle products. Plant soon became known in the trade as "Red Band Charlie."

Elwood R. Maunder: You have been a member of the Consolidated Red Cedar Shingle Association of British Columbia. You retired from your directorship in that organization when you retired from Bloedel, Stewart and Welch in 1956. Was your work with the B. C. association contemporary with that of the Shingle Bureau?

Charles Plant: Yes. Before the Red Cedar Shingle Bureau began its main activities, the Consolidated Red Cedar Shingle Association was the body that went on a promotional program with its own British Columbia members, advocating their shingles under the registered trade name of Edgwood. It was quite successful for a period of two years. The members contributed so much per square of shingles produced to promote shingles in individual areas in the United States under this trademark. Texas was one of the places concentrated upon. The dues of the association supported the advertising program at twenty-five cents a square—a lot of money in those days. It was quite successful. As harder times came along, some of the members felt twenty-five cents placed too hard a burden on their total costs, and the activity gradually decreased. Edgwood activities ceased about 1929.

I remember the date because I joined the Bloedel, Stewart and Welch company in 1930, at the tag end of the Edgwood campaign. The Bloedel company was making a brand of shingles called Red Band Shingles. My first year with the com-

pany began with promoting Red Band Shingles and moving away from the group effort under the name Edgwood.

Edgwood had been the competitor to some extent, I suppose, of Rite-Grade?

No. I would say Edgwood succeeded Rite-Grade. The Rite-Grade effort ceased, and we discontinued using Rite-Grade labels. There is no Rite-Grade today, nor has there been for many years. The Rite-Grade certainly ceased at the beginning of what came to be known as the Certigrade movement.

When the Red Cedar Shingle Bureau commenced, the very first head of the organization was Arthur Bevan, its secretary-manager. Shortly after he left the organization, we needed a new manager. I recall being on the board that year. Leo Black was president of the bureau, and he found a man he thought would be suitable. William Woodbridge was that man. He had been associated with trade papers. I believe Woodbridge offered his services as secretary-manager on a trial basis because things at that time were very upset. As I recall, he began on a very modest salary. Shortly after Bill Woodbridge became secretary-manager of the Red Cedar Shingle Bureau, he developed the name Certigrade to use on our labels.

The key to success was the label. It became imperative that the new members of the organization have their shingles

inspected. If the shingles were not in compliance with the rules and okayed regularly by their inspectors, they couldn't obtain and use the label. The program was to use the promotional pull of the name Certigrade in our advertising which would make any ambitious manufacturer want to produce shingles up to grade.

How far back in time and with what associations do you relate inspections?

I can't relate inspections earlier than the days of the Red Cedar Shingle Bureau, although there may have been inspections earlier. My particular activities in those days were more in the sales field in the East, so I can't vouch for the accuracy of the statement. Official inspectors, as they were called by the Red Cedar Shingle Bureau, were always a factor from the bureau's earliest days.

We had our own inspector who looked after the many British Columbia mills, Guy Fessenden. There were other inspectors who covered all areas under chief inspector Fred Monte. He supervised all inspectors and saw to it there was uniformity in the inspecting process. Each inspection was very thorough, and a report copy was left with the management to show where the inspector had found a blemish or off-grade errors in particular bundles of shingles. We knew from which machine a particular bundle was made. If a bundle of shingles was found to be off-grade, the management could follow up and correct the individual who was responsible. Inspectors often found the odd shingle here and there that was improperly placed. The grading rules did provide a small tolerance for human error, but the aim was always for one hundred percent perfection. They were pretty strict about that. Of course, the grading also had to be applied to the lower grades. The Number 2 shingles had their rules and were also inspected. In the marketplace, the Number 2 shingles were used for less important areas than the roof. The key to that inspection system was the issuance of a label. The labels were only granted to members in good standing. With trademarking and inspection, there was standardization and a great improvement in the whole shingle picture.

Have there always been certain producers outside the realm of the association who have been less than concerned about standards and who have merely put their product out as best they can?

Yes. We had a few in British Columbia who chose not to belong. That's not to say they wanted to make their shingles of a poorer grade. They simply weren't inclined to join, and as a result were not issued labels. It was, of course, the aim of all the supporters to have everybody in the industry join. However, we had to tolerate a few nonjoiners.

How would you characterize the trade promotion of your industry over the years?

I was proud of it.

You felt the industry did a very good job?

No question about it. We also held ourselves together during very difficult times. Those Depression years were tough for everybody, and pennies were important to us. We did a moderate amount of promotion even when our funds were very meager. We kept together and, as things improved, increased our dues, so we were able to increase the amount of promotional work. This was a combination of advertising in trade papers, for instance, but to a great extent it was the personal work of fieldmen. The trustees believed in the importance of the men out on the road contacting people and telling them of the advantages of shingles and helping them combat local problems, such as antishingle legislation. We found that fieldmen were the most important activity to maintain.

Do you mean that the fieldmen would pick up threats before you?

Yes, and we could then attempt to stop them. There were also building exhibits where we cooperated with local interests to show methods of application and the use of shingles and explained their advantages.

Bill Woodbridge was the first extremely competent, able manager to put these things across. He developed ideas. I'll give you one which comes to mind. The Federal Housing Administration was putting on a national homes proposition of some kind that involved the building of a home in Washington, D.C., as sample type of building for which loans would be approved. Bill Woodbridge conceived the idea and authorities agreed to call it the Certigrade home because it had Certigrade shingles on it. The Certigrade home received a terrific amount of publicity we didn't have to pay for. I have a bit of information here:

Although the number of homes financed with FHA-underwritten mortgages has declined to less than 10% of the total, the Federal Housing Administration, which passed its 40th birthday recently, has had a profound influence on house construction during its existence. When started in 1934 during the depression, FHA's amortized mortgage program suddenly made home ownership available to the masses. It has insured 11 million homes, 24,000 multi-family structures, and 31 million home improvement projects. It is interesting to recall that the very first FHA-insured home was a highly promoted all-shingled house, called The Certigrade Home, built by your Bureau in Arlington, Virginia. A small-scale model of the house was displayed on the floor of the U.S. Senate and alluded to in remarks by then-Senator Homer T. Bone of Washington State. It happened 40 years ago, back in 1934.

Woodbridge was very clever at this type of activity. He had a way of getting around with government people in Washington, D.C.



Cut-off saws prepare cedar bolts for shingle making at Vancouver's Red Band Mill. All photographs accompanying this article are from the Forest History Society archives.

I recall an instance during the time of wartime controls. We were being properly price-regulated. I was on a trip at the time, I think I was in Boston. Woodbridge had to go to Washington on business in connection with these government projects. He wanted several of the trustees to meet him there to assist him. He particularly wanted me to be there as a Canadian to demonstrate that he was representing an international association with members on both sides of the border. Woodbridge wanted me there, not to do anything, but simply to be there to show I was a representative of a Canadian company.

Your presidency of the bureau was in 1947 and 1948. Until that time, there had been five presidents—you were the sixth. Thereafter, every presidency alternated between Canada and the U.S. Is that now established tradition?

That has become pretty well established tradition now. It took awhile to arrive at that point, but we Canadians were finally accepted on a par.

How would you compare different industrial associations, like the Red Cedar Shingle Bureau, with other associations that

you know, in respect to progressiveness, imagination, and cohesiveness among the members?

The association that was most cohesive I knew in the lumber field was the Pacific Lumber Inspection Bureau. I've got to think in terms of two periods, before 1930 and after 1930. Prior to 1930, I was with the Vancouver Lumber Company where I worked with lumber as well as shingles. After 1930, my personal activity was in shingles. I can think more comprehensively about the lumber associations prior to 1930 than I can since.

Let's consider the period prior to 1930.

I recall that prior to 1930 in British Columbia we had a lumber association called the British Columbia Manufacturers' Association. They promoted their products by sending delegations to such countries as England and Australia. While in these countries, they met timber people and discussed and promoted the product. There was nothing to hold them together, nor did they spend any money in major trade promotional work in those days. They did have to spend money in the Pacific Lumber Inspection Bureau to make sure the lumber shipped abroad was properly inspected, because a PLIB certificate became part of an overseas transaction. A foreign buyer wanted to make sure the mill producing the order qualified according to grades which were certified.

They were as successful as any other organization, but promotional work by other groups varied. I recall considerable effort made by the West Coast group during a period when a lot of money was spent for advertising. I don't recall whether the British Columbia mills participated in that at all.

Back in 1916, 1917, and 1918, the Shingle Branch of the West Coast Lumbermen's Association spent \$100,000 on advertising over the three-year period.

Recently in British Columbia greater strides have been made in promotion than in former years. We have now amalgamated all associations under the Council of Forest Industries. Formerly, we had the loggers association, the lumbermen's association, the shingle association, and comparatively recently there has been a merging of all those into a council. There is also a plywood association. The plywood people have produced excellent advertising copy and plans for the promotion of plywood. I would say there is no comparison between the amount of money used in the olden days and that used today by lumber people in British Columbia for promotion of wood products all over the world. But I'm not up-to-date.

You can speak about the attitude of your superiors and the companies for which you worked. Was it difficult to obtain money from them for promoting sales? You were a pioneer from the Vancouver Lumber Company in exploring the potential markets.

It was hard, very hard, to pry dollars out of management for associated efforts. They wanted to go at it in their own way. In shingles, they would rather spend money promoting their own brand by going into the field, obtaining a good representative, and helping him with a certain area. That's what I used to do. I would try to find the right sort of people in a place like Texas, where you could count on customers to stay with you and work with you. You would agree to supply them with merchandise, if they would agree to provide you with the business and promote the product locally. In those days, we emphasized individual effort rather than collective effort. The money left for a collective effort such as Certigrade was very small.

I suppose it was, in part, the fact that the old nineteenth-century concept of individual free enterprise was still dominant in the minds of the people running the business.

We were great individualists in my youth, and when I was growing up in the business there was tremendous competition.



Dressing the bolt in preparation for making shingles.

It took time for the industry to grow sophisticated enough to recognize its greatest competition was not from within, but from without.

Exactly, that was so true. It's absolutely the fact in connection with shingles because there was such a huge market for our product. Our competition was not each other; it was the asphalt, the substitute people. Those people were our enemies. We should have been putting shoulder to shoulder and unifying our efforts to tell the world of our good product. We eventually succeeded in accomplishing that.

We standardized our products and standardized our pack. The pack was a great stumbling block at first. It took a couple of years to straighten out that matter. We finally resolved those questions. The acceptance of a grade in commercial standards was a preliminary to the subsequent associated efforts for promotion.

I presume you credit people like Professor Grondal at the University of Washington for greatly advancing these ideas in the course of counseling with people in the industry?

Yes, he was a great help. I credit the wisdom of the operators and their own good common sense primarily because, after all, they had the money and the plants. They saw the logs in the water which had to be converted to the best advantage. It took a decision on their part more than anyone else.

Who do you give credit for that kind of statesmanlike thinking back in those early days? Who were the principals whom you remember most vividly as being the wiser men of their industry?

The men I knew mostly were on the Canadian side. Henry Mackin with the Canadian Western Lumber Company was one. My boss, Ed Sanders, of the Vancouver Lumber Company was another. Mr. Hunting and his partner, Mr. Merritt, were leaders. They operated a large mill. In the shingle field, a good leader was a man by the name of Carl Culter. He was the principal of the Hammond Cedar Company of Hammond, B.C. He was a man of fine leadership, and there are others.

What about freight rates? You've lived through a period when they've had considerable influence and impact on the industry.

Rates were usually increasing as the years went by. I recall the association had their committees which met with the railways to discuss details of minimum weights. Mr. Henry Olwell used to head that particular committee for the Red Cedar Shingle Bureau.

For a time, there was a battle of freight rates, which gradually went down to encourage the return freight from the West.

For example, the first freight rate I can recall in the early days of my association with the Vancouver Lumber Company was the lumber rate from Vancouver to Winnipeg. It was forty cents per hundred pounds and that was the commodity rate for lumber to that part of the country. There

was a considerably higher rate to an area like Toronto, which I don't remember. The bulk of our lumber in those days went to the prairies on a commodity rate which was forty cents. I don't know what it is now, but it advanced progressively over the years. I think the rate to Minneapolis in those days was about forty-five cents. The cars had to be loaded to full visible capacity and the railroads imposed a higher rate for shingles because a carload of shingles weighed less than a carload of lumber. Those differentials were the factors which occupied the attention of the Consolidated Red Cedar Shingle Association. We were always advocating the most economical rate obtainable. The railroads, on the other hand, wanted a certain amount for a car; that's why we had to pay a higher rate.

Was production in British Columbia slower than in the U.S.?

The volume of shingles made in the United States at that time was much greater than the volume of shingles made in B.C. The production of shingles in the United States by individual sawyers and packers was probably greater. Grading rules existed at the time whereby you could make wide shingles by permitting flat grain and edge-grain. A workman putting them into bundles could make a great many more American shingles per day than a Canadian or any other nationality could because of our Edge Grain grading rules requirement.

Back in those early days, wasn't there great competition among shingle weavers to produce at a record pace per day? Do you remember the competition existing at that time?

Yes. The volume produced by some of the shingle weavers in the United States was really remarkable. Their efficiency and speed and the nature of the timber was such in those days that they could and actually did make exceptionally good records for themselves. They did it with the basic objective of making more money. This was a piece-work operation. The individual's incentive was to develop a skill. They did very well. We had that to some extent in Canada too.

The sawyer is the man who operates a machine. He initiates the speed of the machine. His skill of producing a maximum volume in a given number of hours is dependent on his own quickness in observing defects and cutting them out properly, continuing to work, and at the same time making a good shingle. He sets the tempo. The man at the next stage is the packer. He must be able to keep up with the sawyer because he's got to keep his bins clear. If the sawyer cuts at too fast a rate for the packer, the bins would overflow, and the operation would be interfered with. The packer and the sawyer worked in pairs. For instance, you'd find on a number one machine, the sawyer at the number one position is probably the most skillful operator, and the number one packer would be his partner. They all vary just as human efficiency varies. It varied from day to day because of the varied production and the varied quality of the timber itself.

Frequently, sawyers who were very quick and efficient would complain to the management because the timber wasn't good enough for them. We couldn't help the timber. We had to take the logs from the boom as they came along. They were cut into the proper length of blocks and had to be disposed of. The volume of production by individual was affected by the quality of the timber with which he had to work.

What were the problems in the British Columbia mills you were connected with in regard to governmental policies?

The mill I was first connected with was the Vancouver Lumber Company. We didn't own sufficient timber limits to do much logging. We were primarily log buyers. People like Bloedel, Stewart and Welch, and Merrill and Wilson were primarily loggers. They obtained their licenses from the provincial government and paid the annual fees for retaining them. When the area on which they had a certain license was logged, all timber had to be scaled by government scalers. The quantity and quality of the logs in a specific boom became what they called a government scale. That was the basis for a transaction upon which the government imposed a royalty. The royalty had to be paid as a first obligation of the producer. It was a royalty that varied according to the grade of log and the species and the time. As time moved on, the governments increased their royalties. That was the system in those days.

Has it changed much?

Oh, yes. It's somewhat different now, but the government still collects royalties. It's too involved a subject for me even to touch on. The new systems now have timber farms and timber licenses and pulpwood licenses, and the whole business is infinitely better controlled for the benefit of people who really own the timber and for reforestation for future generations.

Wasn't the Honorable J. V. Clyne very much involved?

I don't think so, but H. R. MacMillan was. There was an important judge by the name of Sloan who's dead now. He conducted a big inquiry into the status of the industry. He made recommendations to the government after very exhaustive inquiries as to what should be done. From his recommendations in the "Sloan Report" there came an entirely new setup for handling timber in British Columbia. To some extent there have been changes and it's under constant surveillance.

Would you say there is much tighter government control of the situation here?

Yes, as far as I know, but I can't compare it with the United States.

Over the years, the technology of the lumber industry has developed from primitive logging methods to increasing mechanization. There is growing sophistication in lumber mills and pulp and paper mills. What about the shingle industry? How much has it changed over the years?

My quick and short answer is, surprisingly little. The upright saw that was used to manufacture shingles is still used to make shingles.

That goes back more than fifty years?

It goes back a long, long way. There may have been some minor refinements and improvements of the machine itself, but that basic principle has not changed. I think the reason is because in every shingle that is made, and in every single slice or two of that saw through the block, the human eye has to be used to decide what to do and what not to do. They haven't any technology that can beat that yet.

Has there been less automation in the shingle manufacturing business than in the lumber business as a whole?

I think so. You see, the objective of making a perfect shingle, a good edge-grain shingle, consists in taking the slice of wood first and then cutting out any defects and leaving a part there as a good shingle. The sawyer's eye has to be used to decide whether to cut various parts off. The objective is to cut off no more than the defect. If he cuts off too much, he wastes timber. The human eye is still the basic factor which governs that particular man's operation and, if technology can cut out a piece of rot here, a knot here, or a split there, it's something that hasn't been invented yet.

Of course, that same factor applies to making lumber also, where the eye of the sawyer is the key to the whole thing.

That's perfectly true.

Over the years a variety of cooperative plans have been introduced in certain mills in the Pacific Northwest whereby the worker has shared the responsibility of running the mill and the earnings. Have there been similar plans here in Canada?

Not that I know of. I can't recall a single one. I do recall an instance in 1936 when the mill I was responsible for was faced with a situation of quotas whereby we could ship only so many shingles to the United States. Price regulations were in effect at that particular time. We could sell only so many shingles at such and such a price. Then we had to close it down. I recall we made a proposition to our own employees that we would try to operate an additional period during the time we couldn't ship to the United States, and sell the additional part in Canada at a lower price because of a lower price regulation in Canada. We discussed this with the men but they didn't wish to cooperate. We didn't succeed in that little venture of cooperation, but that's not quite the same. I don't know of any profit sharing.



Giving the shingles a final trimming before packaging.

What would you have to say in general about labor/management relations in the B.C. shingle industry over the years of your involvement?

In the early days, management ran the plant. We employed the men and we didn't have any unions.

When did organized labor begin?

Organized labor came when the IWA [International Woodworkers of America] became established in British Columbia sometime in the forties.

Prior to that there was no union in Canada?

We didn't have unions in the thirties, that's for sure.

Did you ever have strikes in the early days?

We had a strike in 1936. We had four or five years of serious depression in the early thirties. In 1936 we had a strike in the mill for which I was in charge. It wasn't a strike of our own employees so much as an influence of outsiders who were trying to get our men to strike. They were what we called Communists. They didn't like the big company. I remember they tried to pick on Bloedel, Stewart and Welch because we were promoting the lower wage during the additional period operation. They heard about that and thought we were cutting wages. They all struck and made it very unpleasant. They didn't so much strike as surround the mill with pickets so that our own men couldn't go to work. We called it a strike. It stopped the operations for quite awhile. There were no labor unions until the forties, I'm sure.

What procedure is followed in negotiating contracts with labor in the later days of your time in the business? Was it done on a company basis or on an industry-wide basis?

We did it on an industry-wide basis. We had a company that is now called the Forest Industry Relations. All the mills joined together and appointed negotiators to handle arrangements with the unions with a view to getting an industry-wide agreement which was uniform for everybody. We didn't have our own individual mill unions.

It was an industry agreement that had to be negotiated through the organization that represented all of us, and the unions that represented labor. As a result of their negotiations, an industry-wide basic agreement was adopted. Basic things such as the hours of work, wages, and holidays were all settled on an industry-wide basis. This system has maintained as long as I can remember and still exists.

Were the workers in the industry a rather mobile lot who moved around from one company to another or was your labor force stable?

The labor force in the shingle field was very stable in my day. On the contrary, the labor force in the logging camps was not necessarily stable. There would be much more moving around by a logger in the woods than there would be by a man who worked in town and went to work at the mill. He had a home to go to and he was a steady employee who stayed with us. ▲