

Prineville Millwork Co.

1946-1947

The first moulding plant in the central Oregon area was started in 1946 by my father, George Martin Morisette. One would think, then, that I had plenty of details for this operation but that is not the case. Although age ten is old enough to remember what one's father is doing, my relationship with my father was not one that made me privy to what he did. But some things I do remember—and others I have discovered.

Dad was in partnership in this venture with my Mother's uncle, Orrin Mills. Sometime in 1945, Orrin and his brother Darrell sold their Paulina-Suplee ranches (Mills Land and Live-stock Company) to Bob Sartaine. Darrell moved to Red Bluff, California, but Orrin went no further than Prineville. Orrin and Dad knew each other quite well, as my family traveled to the ranch at the base of Snow Mountain twice a year: deer season and for a week or two during the summer.

I can recall no conversations between Uncle Orrin and Dad about the prospects of opening a sash and door factory (as moulding plants were called in those days), but they must have taken place; you don't jump into something like this without some advance planning. Orrin had money (we always thought of him as "rich," yet when he died in 1971 he was totally broke; perhaps my Father was partially responsible for Orrin's financial reverses) and maybe Dad made a good pitch. Whatever the negotiations, my family left Metzger (west of Portland) and moved into a small, bed-bug-infested, primitive house on Lincoln Drive in Melrose Acres. It was here that I would become familiar with that little building some distance from the house: the family privy. Probably schoolwork and religious studies kept me busy and away from the plant site so I don't

have any memories of how the plant went up.¹ For the time, it was a large building for Prineville (it is still standing today).

The main building, which was located on Uncle Orrin's property across Highway 26 from the infamous Casino night club and not far from Ochoco Creek, was filled with machinery all of which made a terrible racket when running. The entire plant was powered by one large electric motor that was located just inside the entrance somewhere up in the rafters. This motor drove a large flywheel to which a good-sized belt was attached. The belt extended the length of the main room. At each machine other, smaller, flywheels were attached and drove all of the other machines. To run one machine the entire propulsion system had to be running (although each machine could be started or stopped individually).

Very soon after the machinery was installed and operating, it must have been obvious that the building was too small because a lean-to shed was quickly attached on the south side of the main building. Perhaps "lean-to shed" doesn't adequately describe this addition because it was substantial. As best as I can remember, this addition contained a number of saws, all of which were driven by the main power system.

The life of this new company appears to have been very short, maybe two or three years. Once the plant was in operation Dad, began work on the family house. This was also built on land obtain from Orrin Mills. The house still stands today and would have been directly across the road from the Casino. We moved into the house after the exterior walls were completed, but we didn't stay long. Something happened between Orrin and Dad and the family soon found itself back in Portland and Dad once again working for

1. I had just discovered the beauty and mystery of the Catholic church and jumped into a concentrated study; Catechism became my side-line.

Don Johnson's used car lot. During all the years following the collapse of the business, it never dawned on me to ask anyone what happened. By the time I grew curious there was no one left to answer my questions. I have some theories—none of which are directly related to the business—only some of which will be told here since I'm going to tell other families dirty laundry stories.²

The plant was probably sold but I haven't been able to learn to whom. By 1950 the family—less Dad—was back in Prineville and I remember that the plant was still just as I last saw it when we left a year or two before. Completed window frames were stacked ready for shipment; sawdust awaited disposal; paperwork still sat on the office desk. Electricity was still available and I can remember how startled I was when I dared to throw the main power switch and the propulsion system took off. I killed the power immediately, but if you know anything about that type of system you will understand that it took several minutes for all the wheels and belts to come to a stop.

What a waste; all that labor, materials and money just down the drain. What a hardship on the men who worked there, some of whom had relocated long distances to work with Dad. How different my life might have been had the business succeeded. Yet I have no desire to have my life changed in any way. I sometimes think how things might have been as the son of a rich lumber re-manufacturer but I don't think on it long, because the chance that I might have ended up like other sons of rich lumbermen makes me quite happy that things are the way they are.

There was an interesting part of the business that I would like to tell you about. For all practical purposes, this was a real family business. Orrin didn't work at the plant, but in addition to my Dad, there were my uncles Archie and Clyde Telfer, Matt Burke (Dad's brother-in-law), and maybe others too. When the business folded

Archie stayed in Prineville and continued to work in the timber business. What happened to the others, I have no idea.

In the July 25, 1946 issue of the *Central Oregon* appeared the following report:

MILLWORK PLANT NEARLY READY Sash and Door Factory First in District

The Prineville Millwork company, central Oregon's first sash and door factory, is expected to start operations within the next few days. The new plant is near the Ochoco highway about one mile east of Prineville. It is to be operated by Orrin Mills, formerly of Paulina, and George Morissette of Portland.

Construction of a building to house the plant was started in May and a complete plant, formerly in operation at Silverton, Oregon, was purchased by the new company. The special equipment shipped to Prineville and installed in the new building includes a sander, band saw, door press, moulding sticker, sash sticker, jointer, single and tenner, shaper, lathe and planers.

Power lines to supply the new plant are now being installed by the Pacific Power & Light company, and it was expected that power could be turned on at the plant before the end of the week. As soon as the machinery is put into operation, the first task of the new company will be to produce doors and windows to complete the building. A crew of four will be employed for the present.

So what happened to cause this apparently going concern to fail? Well, it wasn't lack of business, nor was it "lack of timber." My Father's personal life—his life away from his family—was his downfall.

Dad has always been a "ladies man" and a drinker. He was also a huge braggart. As a businessman, a first-time businessman at that, there

2. Sometimes dirty laundry is important to an operation's success. So it was in my Father's case. Had he kept his mind on his business rather than his "hobbies" his business would probably have succeeded and his employees would not have lost their employment when the business failed. So, too, with the Hudspeth empire, about which you will read in detail elsewhere in this book. There are many similarities between these two men, booze being one.

was plenty to brag about. Dad bragged everywhere but his greatest “performances” must have taken place at the Eagles’ Lodge in Portland. It was here that he met a blond bomb-shell cocktail hostess that captured his heart—or at least captured some organ.

Dad began to make numerous “business trips” to Portland and while I don’t know the details of these trips, Orrin Mills must have. It was, as best as I can determine, Dad’s immoral behavior that caused Orrin to withdraw financial support for Prineville Millwork Company. In Orrin’s eyes, it wasn’t just Dad’s philandering that was a problem. Dad was using company money to finance his Portland escapades.

In an attempt to learn more about Dad’s fall from grace, I called a long-time friend of Dad’s in Portland. This man, who shall remain nameless, didn’t remember too much (he was quite a bit younger than Dad) but he did remember this (which I’ll paraphrase):

One time after the business failed, your dad and I were talking. As usual, he was bragging. He said, “You know, I blew \$43,500 dollars on my trips to Portland and I’d do it again given a chance.”

Forty-three thousand dollars was a heap of money back in 1947; Dad must have had a really great time. There he was, off in Portland, entertaining his friends, while Uncle Orrin was back in

Prineville tending to his yard. If Orrin made many investments of this nature it is no wonder that he died penniless.

After Dad lost the business and the family moved back to Portland, life in the Morisette household got worse. Dad decided that his blond bombshell was more desirable than his family and he divorced my Mother. Needless to say, the family’s life then got a lot worse.

I’m tempted to continue with Dad’s way of doing things (he was to inflict damage on others too) but maybe I shouldn’t vent my emotions here. So that is enough Morisette dirty laundry.

No photographs are know to exist of the plant, building or site. The building still stands today. I haven’t tried to learn who owns the place. But the man living in the house my dad started delivers gravel to me when my rural, hermit roads get bad. He is the same man that bought the house next door (on the east) that Uncle Orrin had bought when he first moved to town from the ranch.

Years later, when I was a sophomore in high school, Uncle Orrin sold the “little white house” to my mother. I lived there until entering the Navy in January 1954. The saying “chicks never stray far from the nest” seems more true the older I get.

And that is as close as this writer ever came to being *in* the timber business.

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Yes, I know; it's a dumb address. Physically I live in Post but the mail comes out of Prineville so my address must say Prineville.

My telephone number has a Paulina prefix and that confuses even me—