

GEORGE MARRA: A REMINISCENCE

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Is it George, or is it Alan? One of the privileges of my young professional life was getting acquainted with those who were moving into leadership roles in the field of wood science and technology in the early 1950s. Two of them were named Marra. They were twin brothers and I really felt that I was getting well into the field when I learned to identify them when I met them separately. It was my good fortune to be able to associate with them over many years of professional and personal friendship. I was asked to write something for “Old Growth” about George and will emphasize that, but the full story should be about the twins and their unique contributions to the effective use of wood and through the models they provided for humanity, integrity, creativity, and perspective in the wood science community. I’ll leave the full story for another time. . . .

I first crossed paths with George, though very lightly, in 1941. I was just beginning life as a freshman at the then New York State College of Forestry at Syracuse, while George was completing his M.S. thesis under Prof. Harry P. Brown, who would later become my major professor also. The attack by the Japanese at Pearl Harbor in December that year triggered events that sent us in different directions. While I was slogging through Western Europe in the U.S. Army infantry, George was applying his wood technology to advancement of the use of wood in the war effort at home. After the war, George went on to Duke to work on his doctorate, while I went back to Syracuse to learn something about wood technology from H.P. Brown and his colleagues, then on to Michigan for master’s work. There I had the opportunity to get reacquainted with Alan, who was applying his wood technology to the improved architectural use of wood.

George finished his doctoral work *in absentia* while on the faculty at West Virginia University. Then, as I was gaining experience in applying wood technology to the manufacture of television cabinets for RCA Victor, he moved to Washington State University to head up the wood technology program there. I moved on to the USDA Forest Products Laboratory in Madison (FPL) as George began to build up the strong program at Washington State in wood-based composites, nondestructive testing, and building systems. I remember him telling me once as we interacted during those years “I don’t want to do everything. I just want to work on a few key things and do them best.” He did very well and his program was highly respected for its valuable contributions to the field. He was driven by a determination that the research be useful to the industry as well as scientifically sound. I recall especially working at FPL with George and some of his WSU faculty on developing the concept of relating bending stiffness to bending strength and extending this to structural lumber testing, a concept that led to the machine stress rating systems currently in wide use in the lumber industry. We also worked together on the developing field of wood-based composites, a field in which WSU was generating a high degree of competence and leadership. George’s creative approach is exemplified by the “Table of Wood Elements” he conceived in 1969 as a basis for new approaches to wood-based composites (Fig. 1). Going to the fundamentals and applying them to real problems and opportunities were typical of George’s approach to advancing wood technology.

At Washington State, George began to demonstrate the attention to good writing that eventually brought us into closer association.

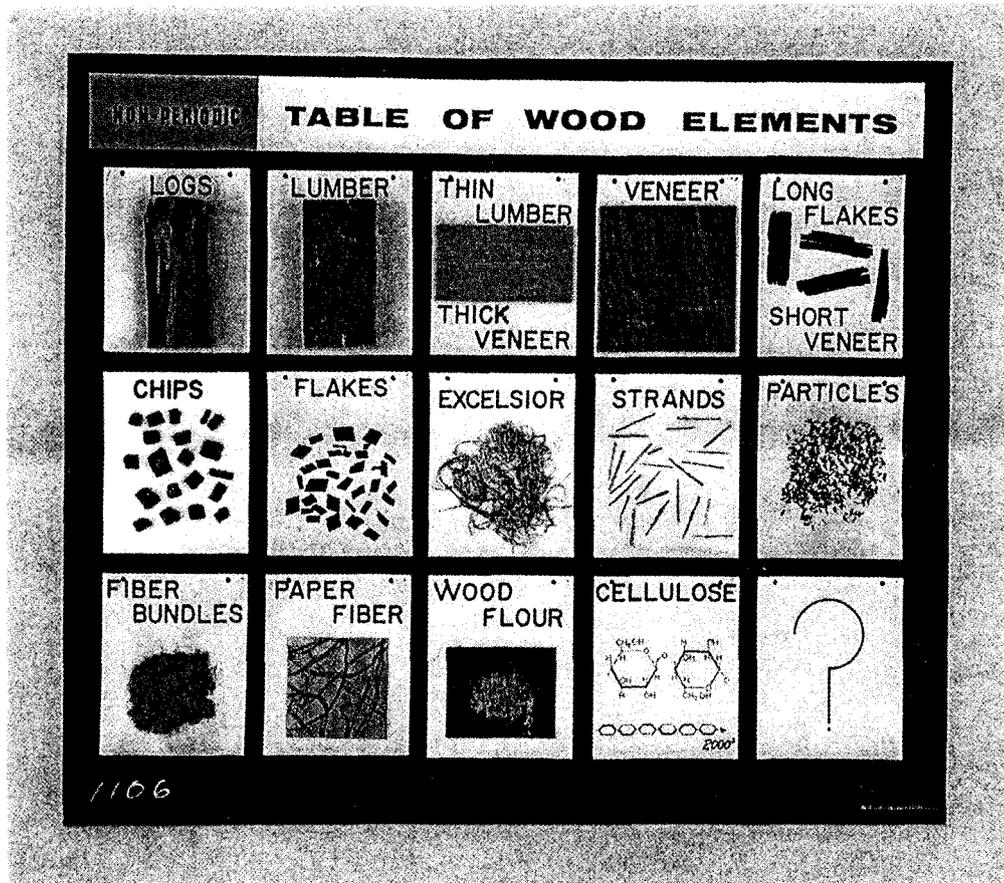


Fig. 1. Table of wood elements.

He was obsessed with the quality of research reports, working them over until the objectives, methods, and results were clear and the significance of the new knowledge readily apparent. In the late 1970s, I was Director of the FPL and also much concerned that the variety of excellent research there be presented for use in a way that would be understandable and applicable to more effective use and conservation of wood. Doing this is not always an easy task for a scientist to master in the eagerness to get on with new research. My awareness of George's research leadership and his devotion to good writing made me wonder how it might be possible to bring him to Madison to infuse this into our staff. What made it possible was the Intergovernmental Personnel Act Mobility Program of 1970 (IPA). That

Act encouraged and facilitated temporary interchanges of state university and federal government officials in assignments that would work to the advantage of both parties. George was Assistant Dean for Research in the College of Engineering at Washington State. Under the provisions of IPA, George came to Madison in May 1980 and worked with me as my Deputy Director for three years. During that time, George became a good friend to me and others of the FPL staff, carried on the banjo picking he had begun as a young man, and coached the staff in good writing. His display of well-done research reports, his "Publication of the Month" awards, and his demonstrations of the value of good writing had a major impact on the quality of research planning and writing at FPL. The principles he documented

then and held up as guides to good writing form the basis for judging papers for the "George Marra Award," presented annually for the best paper published in *Wood and Fiber Science*.

George left FPL in May 1983 with a par-

titleboard banjo and an enduring legacy of friendship and dedication to the finest in wood science and technology. He passed away a few months later, but his legacy carries on throughout the profession and the industry. It has been my privilege to be part of it.