

The Sumner Steam Engines of Everett, Washington

By Robert T. Rhode

The mystery engine in John Spalding's column in the previous issue of *Engineers and Engines Magazine* is a Sumner. The same photograph has been passed back and forth among steam aficionados for many years. The late Thomas "Tom" Stebritz once shared a print of the image. As Tom lived in Algona, Iowa, I always assumed that the Sumner engine was named for Sumner, Iowa. I was wrong.

Brothers Frederick W. Sumner and Thomas B. Sumner were born in Waupun, Wisconsin, in 1850 and 1857 respectively. Their father, F. A. Sumner, was from Boston; their mother, Emily Case, from Montpelier, Vermont. The Sumner brothers attended school in Waupun and in Hutchinson, Minnesota, where their family moved in 1867. Hutchinson was a village of log cabins. F. A. worked briefly in merchandising before becoming a farmer. Thomas apprenticed as a machinist; Frederick, as a molder. Both learned their craft in an iron foundry.

The brothers rented a shop in Hutchinson and gained patronage through good work. They produced plows, harrows, portable engines, and sleighs. Their mother passed away in 1889; their father lived two decades longer.

In 1892, Frederick and Thomas took the advice of the legendary railroad executive James J. Hill and moved their business and their employees to Everett, Washington, where the brothers bought ten acres on the east bank of the Snohomish River at the end of the Everett Avenue Bridge. Everett was barely a city back then. Soon, Thomas and Frederick had built a molding room, machine shop, and casting factory. Their first contract was to manufacture six ore cars for the Monte

Cristo mines. After struggling through the Panic of 1893, the brothers found business so booming that they added buildings. During the 1897 Gold Rush, the firm sold steel mining equipment. The Sumner Iron Works rapidly became one of the largest of its kind on the Pacific Coast.

In the early years, the plant employed as many as two hundred workers. The Everett and Monte Cristo Railway transported products from the iron works. Thomas assumed the responsibilities of general manager. He served as an Everett councilman and was elected to the state senate. He and his wife, Elva Frazier, originally from Milwaukee, raised four children. Frederick became president of the Sumner Iron Works. He also served as president of the Robbins Transfer & Storage Company of Everett, with his brother Thomas as vice president.

The Sumner Iron Works built saw mills, shingle mills, and donkey engines, as well as machinery to make boxes. The donkeys bore the trade name Miller's Giant. They had horizontal return-flue boilers from the Oil City Boiler Works of Oil City, Pennsylvania, which, incidentally, was the same company that built the boilers for Erie City Iron Works engines. The yarders had vertical boilers and one or two drums. In 1910, Sumner signed a mutually beneficial agreement with Washington Iron Works to quit the logging machinery business. On the 14th of April in 1913, fire destroyed the factory. The brothers rebuilt across the river at 41st and 3rd Streets in Lowell, which adjoined Everett to the south. By 1914, business at the new plant was back to full production.

During the First World War, the factory built steam engines and ship

machinery for the military. Following the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, marine, cannery, and mill machinery became the firm's featured products. In that same year, Sumner Iron Works merged with McElvie and Alton Engineering Company of Vancouver, British Columbia, and Summerton, to the south of Vancouver, became the site of a new plant in addition to the Everett facility. Thomas' sons, George and Frank, ran the two facilities. In the 1930s, a group of Everett businessmen purchased the company, which was a leading producer of pulp mill machinery. Sumner Iron Works built marine equipment during World War II. In 1962, Black Clawson acquired the Sumner Iron Works. By 1985, the firm had transformed into the Acrowood Corporation.

Frederick and Thomas began their careers with only two hundred dollars, yet they formed one of the largest foundries on the Pacific Coast.

Frederick passed away in 1927; Thomas, in 1934.

The information in this article is primarily from three sources: pages 441 and 442 of Volume 3 in the series of books titled *Washington, West of the Cascades*; John A. Taubeneck's research posted online at Vintage Machinery; and Margaret Riddle's essay posted at HistoryLink.org.

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