



THE LEGENDS & LEGACY OF A FAMILY BUSINESS

The Beginning

HOW IT ALL STARTED

As Truitt & White celebrates 75 years of providing lumber and building materials throughout the San Francisco Bay Area, the three-generation business honors founders and family patriarchs George Truitt and Robert White, who were determined to build their business and their families, while helping a war-weary community build or rebuild their homes and their lives.

Eau Claire, Wisconsin native Robert James White graduated from high school, anxious to get out on his own. Yet, in 1931, the eldest of five was advancing into adulthood during the depths of the Great Depression, an untenable time to secure employment and self-sufficiency. Although he managed to piece together enough work to sustain himself, his sights were set on going to college.

Well before the advent of a college admissions process, White jumped into the passenger seat of his friend's jalopy, and the pair drove to the Twin

Cities, and parked in front of the administration building at the University of Minnesota. White went inside, met with the registrar, and signed up to be a student. Then he pieced together a series of odd jobs to put himself through school, and completed his education in business administration in 1936.

Although White was able to find postgraduate employment, in September 1939, WWII broke out. It would mean the end of the Great Depression

“ George and Robert were determined to build their business and their families, all while helping a war-weary community build or rebuild their homes and lives. “

and of life as he knew it. Robert White joined the Navy. Those who enlisted, rather than waiting to be drafted, had more choice in where they were sent. White was selected for the materials supply division and sent to “supply officer training school” at Harvard, a year-long course that had quickly been condensed to several weeks. Officer enrollment was considerable, hours were long, and time was of the essence. A war was on, and officers needed to be trained and on the job as quickly as possible.



Lieutenant Robert White was sent to the Naval Supply Center in Oakland, California, where he and his fellow officers supervised an enormous warehouse, filled with lumber and building supplies. Their urgent assignment was to manage the operations behind procuring, organizing, and shipping building materials throughout the Pacific.

As the war moved among the various islands in the Pacific Ocean, every few weeks, new military bases had to be built. On behalf of barracks and mess halls, warehouses and maintenance buildings, offices and airplane hangars, White and his crew had to ship the lumber and other building materials as fast as humanly possible. Officer White learned a lot, particularly under the direction of his superior officer George Truitt.

Over the course of three or four years, Truitt and White worked well together and felt purpose and appreciation for the work they were doing. Although Truitt was from Texas and White, from Wisconsin, they began to wonder if the Bay Area might be the place to remain and raise families, and if lumber might provide a lucrative livelihood.

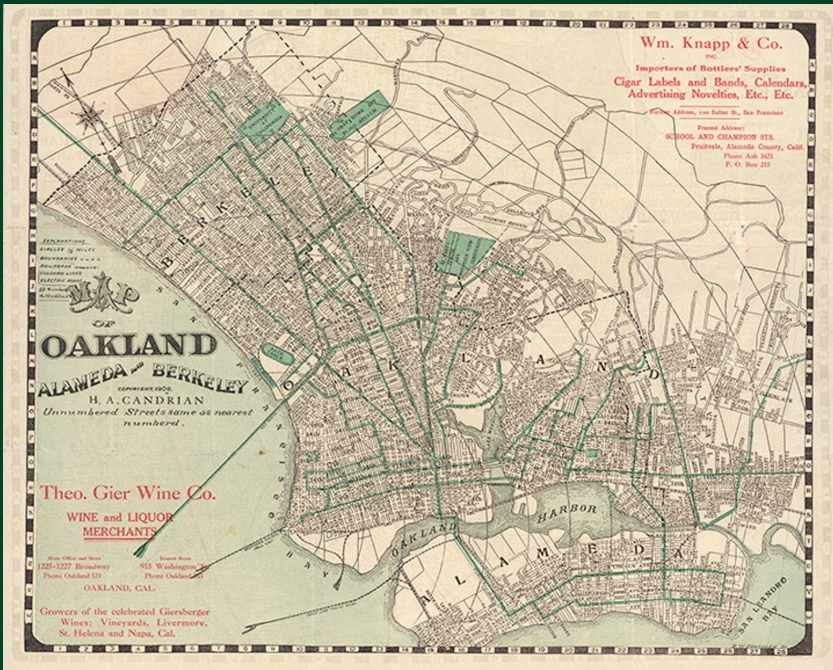
Building a Business

BECOMING PARTNERS

WWII ransomed lives, hopes, and dreams, altering the course of everyone it touched for generations to come. Among many who lived to tell about it, the war instilled a steely determination to lay a new foundation for the future of their families. While the war ended in September 1945, the restoration of a nation had yet to begin.

Whatever naval officers George Truitt and Robert White had hoped and dreamed of doing with their lives before the war, afterwards, neither they nor their wives had the desire to return to their home states. White’s wife, Rose, had come to California from her native Minnesota, and the couple had married in Berkeley, via a simple ceremony, as was customary during wartime. They settled in a modest home in Albany and soon began a family, which would grow to include four children: Jim, Joanna, Dan, and Warren.

George Truitt, also married, was discharged from the Navy shortly after White. The comrades, who had developed savvy skills in procuring lumber and other building supplies during the war, decided to establish their own company in Berkeley, under the auspices of Truitt & White.



Some 15 years White’s senior, Truitt, whose family had owned three lumber yards in Texas before the war, still had connections in the industry and a store of materials and equipment he could contribute to a Bay Area business, including a truck, tools, and office furniture. He also had the financial wherewithal to provide the startup funding for the new lumberyard.

To their benefit, the postwar demand for building-materials suppliers was significant. Building supplies, however, were scarce and rationed. Particularly lumber. White, the junior partner in the business, was assigned to get in his car, accompanied by a suitcase filled with cash, and drive to small lumber mills throughout Northern California. His standard greeting was, “I have cash; do you have anything you can sell me?” If so, he’d arrange the sale, and the mill would arrange the shipping.

The initial inventory that launched Truitt & White consisted of military-surplus fencing and tools White procured at an auction in Stockton. Although unsure what they would do with enough snow fencing to fill two boxcars, the need for building materials generated an immediate market for fencing and anything else they could come up with.

“As soon as someone found Truitt & White had fence boards, they made an offer for the entire lot,” said



Robert and Rose White

“As soon as someone found Truitt & White had fence boards, they made an offer for the entire lot”

grandson Brian White, who shares his role in the company with cousin Zack White, as vice president of sales and purchasing. “George and Robert made the savvy decision to sell off the boards a few at a time, instead, to build a customer base. Given the scarcity of lumber and funds, they might have grabbed the big, immediate sale. But they were looking to build a business, not just secure a single sale.”

Finding two boxcars filled with fence boards was fortuitous. Deciding to sell them to a broad customer base was prescient. It is this mentality of customer service, paired with quality products, that has kept Truitt & White in business for 75 years.

Robert White’s wife Rose, an accountant, brought her expertise into the business, working in an office set up in a prefabricated fishing cabin her husband and his crew built in Berkeley. The space served the business well for some 30 years until, in the late seventies, the office was replaced by an expansive, contemporary building just across the street.

“In the late ‘70s or early ‘80s,” said son Dan White, “we were able to build a brand-new warehouse while operating out of our original setting. When the new site was ready, all we had to do was move across the street.”
The move was part of a redevelopment project in

Berkeley, where the company swapped the land, took ownership of the new parcel, and built their existing building. As soon as they moved, the old site transferred ownership to the City of Berkeley, with the intent to redevelop older, smaller sites into an industrial zone. The redevelopment agency and its project are now a thing of the past.

“At our original location, we had a small building,” White said. “I was told it was a model home for a tract development, which ended up on our site. We had our office, sales office, and a small hardware store. I



George Truitt

don’t know how many customers said someone should open a comprehensive hardware store across the street, so we did, and greatly enlarged our inventory.”

Dedicated to contractors, Truitt & White has always carried builders’ hardware. Still, it took a while to determine what inventory to provide and how to fill the huge, new space. Now a comprehensive hardware store, the company is always looking to maximize space to house their diverse inventory. The company’s original site is now the location for Truitt & White Window & Door Showroom.

“During the first energy crisis in the late ‘60s and early ‘70s,” said White, “nobody had dual-paned windows. While they were commonplace in the colder parts of the country, most people in California had never even heard of them. All of a sudden, because of the energy crisis, people became interested. So we got interested, quickly discovering that it’s a tricky business, which requires a lot of expertise.”

True to tradition, Truitt & White took the time and trouble to learn about dual-paned

windows, sending their staff to training, so they could build it into to a significant part of their business.

“Today,” said White, “glass is 20% of our total business, most of it in windows, and also doors. We’ve grown organically over the years. We started small, but as construction needs have developed, and the industry has introduced solutions, we’ve gotten on board, and have trained to become experts in the product, so we could expand and grow to better serve our customers.”



Robert White

Coming Full Circle

WORKING WITH THE NAVY

George Truitt and Robert White sourced several early customers among fellow Navy veterans. Retired Admiral Chester Nimitz, for whom San Francisco Bay Area Interstate 880 was named, also settled in Berkeley at the conclusion of his services in the Pacific, and relied on Truitt & White for his building supplies. He presented the partners with an autographed photo of himself aboard the USS Missouri, where he had signed the instruments of surrender. The legendary photograph remains a family treasure.

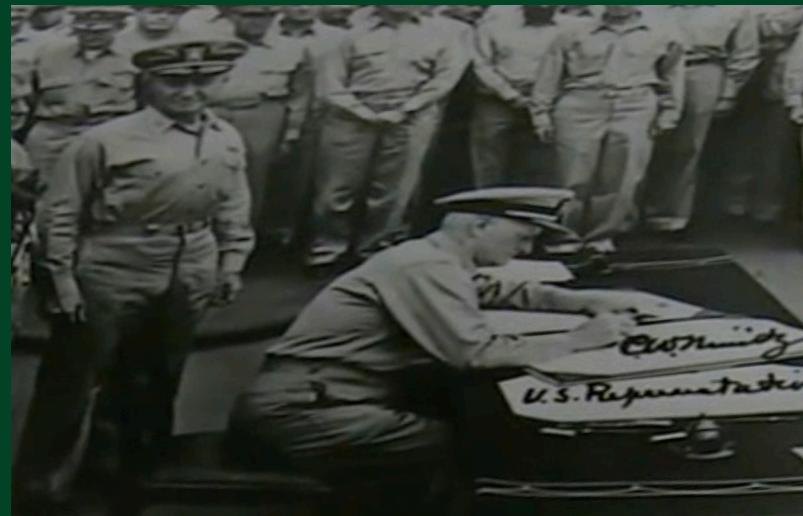
“Once Admiral Nimitz learned that both my dad and George Truitt were Navy men,” said Warren White, “he started coming by the business. He’d sit in their office and talk with them over a cup of coffee, about life before, during, and after the war.”

Truitt & White actually developed significant commerce with the Navy, which lasted some 15 years. In a small office that housed two sales desks, one for a general manager and a second for an assistant, the space seemed well suited for the scale

of business at the time, until a call came from one of the Navy departments in Oakland. They were looking for a particular, hard-to-find door, which Truitt & White was able to locate.

“Before they finished the sales transaction, one of our guys said, ‘I’ll bet you buy a lot more than one door.’ He pursued it,” said Dan White, “and secured a tremendous opportunity for a small lumber yard like ours to start selling regularly to the Navy.”

The Navy, says White, is complicated to deal with. They have a very specific way of operating. Truitt & White took the time and trouble to learn how their system works and follow it.



The Navy had strict requirements on how building supplies were packaged for shipping, either crated or palletized, and protected with plastic. Using a stencil machine, Truitt & White printed a label for every package, which had 10 to 15 lines, recording the names of each facility, some of which included complex alpha-numeric characters. If they got one wrong, it would have been a disaster. The same was true for the considerable amount of paperwork that accompanied each order.

“We dedicated three or four staff to handle the transactions,” White said, “which became about 10% of our whole business. It was both productive and nostalgic since a lot of materials were being shipped to Guam, Japan, The Philippines, and other bases all over The Pacific.”

Although tedious and time-consuming, working with the Navy was advantageous and, at times, fun, says White. It also was temporary.

“We sold the Navy some unusual stuff,” said White, “including railcars of 12x12 oak timbers from Indiana. Yet, in the 1990s, the Navy started closing bases. As their lumber needs dwindled, so did our business. We’d come full circle to the days when our dad and George Truitt were supplying naval bases during the War.”



Robert White

“Working with the Navy was nostalgic since materials were being shipped to Guam, Japan, the Phillipines, and all over the Pacific.”

Becoming a Family Business

THE NEXT GENERATIONS

Every member of the Truitt and White families who ever spent time in the business, began by pushing a broom. Beginning around age 8 or 10, the kids would come down to the lumberyard to sweep floors, stock shelves, and feel involved and engaged in the family enterprise. At first, the place was akin to camp, a rustic wonderland that offered a little grit and grime, and a growing sense of the lumber industry they had been born into.

"My dad had the foresight to bring his kids into the business in a way that was fun and made us proud to be a part of it," said Dan White, the third of four children born to Robert White, and current CFO and Chairman of the company. "He didn't spoil us; we were actually working – cleaning up, following someone around the yard, helping and learning, something most kids that age don't get to do. I loved it."

Dan White still remembers the WWII Army Surplus Jeep his dad and George Truitt bought, on which they welded racks to carry lumber across the yard.

"We drove that Jeep around the yard," he said, "moving lumber from one end of the property to another. It was a cool thing to have an Army Jeep; I learned to drive it when I was around 12. I don't know that anyone ever taught me how to drive. Eventually we couldn't get parts for it, so it had to go."



As he grew older, White spent more and more time at the lumber yard, until his teens, when he devoted his energies between weekdays at Bishop O'Dowd High School and Saturdays at Truitt & White. Following graduation, he went on to study business at Santa Clara University. Unsure of his career trajectory but certain he didn't want to go into the family business, he went on to San Diego State in pursuit of his MBA.

"My main goal was to live on the beach," he said, "but I managed to get additional education at the same time. I went on to become a CPA and got a job at Price Waterhouse in Oakland, still convinced I didn't want to go into the family business."

White has always appreciated that his father, while open to having his children go into the lumber business, never pushed them to pursue his dream. He always said it was their decision.

"The real reason I didn't want to work for Truitt & White," said White, "was that I so admired what George and my dad had done, starting a business from nothing, using their hands and their heads to make it happen, and then growing the business with quality, trained staff and a

savvy management style. I wanted to launch something like that on my own."

Dan White became an auditor. This meant every two weeks or so, he was in a different location,



"I so admired what George and my Dad had done, starting a business from nothing"

which gave him a larger window on the world. With that kind of business exposure, he began to see his father’s company from a different perspective and realized the best career option for him had been there his whole life. He wanted to join the family firm.

“I realized it would be just as much of a challenge to take the business from the first generation to the second,” he said, “as it would be to start something new. I told my parents, if the offer was still there, I’d like to go into the lumber business. They were both pleased.”

By that time, Dan’s younger brother, Warren White, who’d also commenced from Santa Clara University with a degree in business, had already made a commitment to the family business, for which he currently serves as president.

“Dan and I have been at this a long time,” said Warren White. “The lumber business is in our blood. What’s not to love about running your own business? Of course there have always been challenges, but in business, those create the opportunities to grow and change. George Truitt and our father started something that has provided a good life for our family.”

Although Warren White had followed his brother’s footsteps through college, unlike Dan, he always knew he wanted to return home to run the family business.

“Since Dan spent a few years as a CPA for Price Waterhouse,” said Warren, “when he came back to work with us, he brought a lot of valuable skills to the company.”



Post-war Oakland, California



Testament to Truitt & White

WHAT'S IN A NAME

Once the United States entered WWII, George Truitt moved his wife and 7-year-old son George Edwin, Jr. from Wichita Falls to Oakland, to assume his post at the Naval Supply Center. After the war ended his son, who went by “Ed,” hung out at the lumber yard, and helped with clean-up and shelf stocking. Yet ultimately, the lumber business was not his passionate pursuit. However, he did follow his dad’s lead into the Navy.

While pursuing a degree in chemical engineering from Stanford, Ed Truitt participated in the Naval ROTC program. Following graduation, he married Sally Thompson in 1957, and the couple moved to San Diego, where he fulfilled his commitment upon a Navy picket destroyer in the Pacific. He then returned to Stanford to earn his MBA, and went to work for Hewlett Packard, with which he built a 30-year career in electronics.

“Ed Truitt was welcome to join the business,” said Dan White, “but, in the early sixties, his career went in a different direction. When his father passed away, that left no Truitts in the business, so we acquired that half of the company.”

The White family could have changed the name of the business. However, White Brothers Mill had been in business in Oakland since 1872, and San Francisco’s White Cap building materials supplier had been in operation since 1976. Besides, Truitt & White had created a reputation for excellence and a strong following of clients. The White family elected to preserve the name and the brand.

“When you have good name recognition and established clientele,” said White, “it’s worth keeping consistency in the company while honoring its origins.”

Well into his eighties, Robert White still donned a coat and tie, and went down weekly to the lumber yard to check on his investment. He died in the fall of 2002, one month shy of his 90th birthday, leaving his wife, Rose, of 58 years, as well as four children, 10 grandchildren, and a thriving business sustained by three generations, with a fourth now beginning to pick up a broom.



Well into his eighties, Robert White still donned a coat and tie, and went down weekly to the lumber yard.

“It’s worth keeping consistency in the company while honoring its origins.”

Robert White was not only the head of a family business and the patriarch of a growing family, he also was a community leader, who stood at the helm of many charitable organizations. A charter member of the West Berkeley Lions Club, he served as president in 1949. Six years later, in 1955, he became president of the Berkeley Manufacturers Association. He was president of the Bishop O’Dowd High School Parents Club while his children were in attendance, from 1968-1970. White also was a charter member of the Santa Clara University President’s Club, and president of the Catholic Men’s Serra Club. And, he was active with Family Aid to Catholic Education, providing financial assistance to those in need. All while providing the tools of the trade to help build his community.

Setbacks but not Shutdowns

CHALLENGES AND PERSEVERANCE

While any industry can be vulnerable to the economic impact of world events, during its 75 years in business, Truitt & White has endured or embraced the effects of national and world events and their impact. Consider the catastrophe and commerce of war. Although George Truitt and Robert White had weathered WWII, their business endured the Korean War (1950-1963), the Vietnam War (1955-1975), and Desert Storm (1990-1991), among others.

There also have been the dynamics of presidential elections and governance, the gas crisis of the 1970s, the recessions of the early 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, plus the Space Program, the crisis of racial divides, and the impact of terrorism, and the pandemic. The company also has kept pace with the advent and development of personal computers and the Internet, with both pros and cons for commerce.

During the 2008-2009 Recession, Truitt & White was forced to reduce their payroll from a reported 120 employees to 80, which upset customers, who had established trusted relationships with dedicated staff.

“I spent most of my day talking with angry customers,” said Warren White. “But, at the end of the day, they seemed to understand the importance of keeping our doors open to them. They trusted we were positioning the company to endure the recession and come out stronger. And, we did.”

The event to which a lumber company may be the most vulnerable, is fire.

“Truitt & White has endured or embraced the effects of world and national events.”

In October 1991, a small fire began on a private property in the Oakland hills. The winds were so intense and the grasslands so dry that within an hour, nearly 800 buildings were on fire. By the time the firestorm burned out five days later, it had consumed 2.5 square miles of mostly residential neighborhoods, destroying 3,469 houses, condos, and apartment units, sacrificing the lives of 25 residents and injuring another 150 people.

“As the fire raged on, we could see what was going on in the hills,” said Warren White. “It was a true firestorm, and houses were actually exploding. The heartache of knowing what everybody was going through up there was overwhelming. Nobody wants to leave their home, but they had to, with no warning. And, unfortunately, the speed and intensity of the inferno caused a lot of confusion and problems for people trying to escape.”

The aftermath of the fire was an intense and frustrating time, as rebuilding began, complicated by a lot of new codes and restrictions. It also was an odd dynamic to have a sudden building boom begin out of tragedy, and during a recession. A lot of contractors, unfamiliar



Rebuilding in the Oakland Hills. Photo courtesy NPR

“As the fire raged on, we could see what was going on in the hills.”

with the terrain and the architectural aesthetic of the Oakland and Berkeley hills, came in from outside area, trying to get work by under-bidding local contractors.

Truitt & White was busy getting lumber and materials deliveries out to job sites, while customers were faced with issues introduced by lawsuits and insurance claims.

Nearly 26 years later, in 2017, a small fire burned closer to home when the company caught fire but did not burn down. By the grace of some higher governance and a mighty fine sprinkler system, the electrical fire went out, leaving more smoke and sprinkler damage than destruction. Nevertheless, the company had to close its hardware store for a year while it underwent a year-long renovation.

“The amount of customers who continued to work with us, and the volume of business we achieved, despite going from a 12,000 sq. ft. hardware store to a makeshift space in our warehouse was so gratifying,” said Brian White. “It was a testament to quality products and customer loyalty. I think we made lemonade out of lemons; we now have an exceptional hardware store that would have happened organically, over much more time.”

Another event causing significant impact on family-owned companies and chain stores has been the advent of “big box” or warehouse retailers. These super stores have the economic capacity and the space to buy in bulk and house their materials, which they can translate to better retail prices passed on to the customer. This could pose a threat to a company like Truitt & White, but only among those who could compete with 75 years of consummate customer service and the development of a specific niche in their industry.



“As a family-owned retailer, we buy lumber through distributors and sometimes direct from mills,” said Brian White. “We’re buying wholesale and selling retail to people who work in the trades and know exactly what they want. We’re set up for the trades, but we’re open to the public, so anyone can come in, and we’ll be equally helpful to homeowners, contractors, and trades people.”

When Brian White talks to friends, family, and customers about the Truitt & White culture and commitment to customer service, he finds they sense a certain confidence when coming in, clear about what they want, or able to browse and consider what they need, with customer support from staff.

“We’re happy to work with homeowners,” he said, “but most of our experience is in working with contractors. It’s great that we get to build relationships with people through customer service. Contractors in the San Francisco Bay Area come from so many different backgrounds, which invites such a rich experience through our interaction. Customers quickly become colleagues, and many feel like family.”

That kind of dynamic isn’t a part of the “big box” retail experience. For many contractors, Truitt & White is a daily routine. Contractors tend to start their day at the lumber yard, gather materials, and head out to the job site. A little later in the day, they figure out what else they need, says White, and head back over to Truitt & White. Many customers are come in two or three times a day.

“Contractors and laborers often spend months working on a job, and then move on to another job, somewhere else. Our lumber yard,” said White, “is the constant, the continuity, the place they go every day, where they see people they know. It’s their go-to place, their community, their source. It’s not work, it’s not home; it’s another place to go to, where it’s familiar, and people feel like they belong.”

When customers have the opportunity to shop in a store where everybody knows their name, their projects, and their proclivities, they tend to linger, have a cup of coffee, bring staff up to date on family and business dynamics,. They buy local and often, building relationships and houses.

Legacy & Longevity

TO THE BUSINESS BORN

A true testament to the strength and relevance of a business through time is a multi-generational commitment to the company. With each new era, the White family has introduced its children to the business like a rite of passage, teaching them it is an extension of the family, while creating the culture of commerce. And each generation brings something new, contemporary, and current to the company, which extends its path into the future.

A third generation of lumber barons was born to the Truitt & White dynasty when Dan and Patty White introduced their children, Brian, Mike, and Katie to the family, and Warren and Diana White added sons Zack and Jake.

Mike White is a physician, specializing in sports medicine, and Katie White is involved in the lumber business but has other pursuits. Brian White shares the vice presidency of purchasing and sales with

cousin Zack White. And Jake White, also a member of Truitt & White, serves as vice president of operations. And so, it continues.

Having grown up in the context of a family business, Brian White always believed he would one-day become the legacy of his grandfather's company. But first, he wanted an experience that took him beyond the San Francisco Bay Area. Admittedly, it took him a year to acclimate to the climate and culture of the East Coast, but by the time he graduated from Boston College, with a degree in business and history, he loved

“I could travel a couple hundred miles, meet people who’d had an interaction with our company, and always receive a positive comment.”

both Beantown and his time there. Yet, in that he ultimately planned to live and work in his native community, he felt he also needed a West Coast education. This led him to UCLA to achieve his MBA, before heading home to work for Truitt & White.

“While growing up and after college,” he said, “I could travel a couple hundred miles from home, meet people who’d had an interaction with our company, and always

receive a positive comment, such as ‘Your guys were professional’, ‘You sold quality products’ or ‘I loved working with the company.’ This always meant a lot to me and was a big part of why I wanted to come back and be part of that legacy.”

White and his wife, Cristina Piechocki, now have two young sons he looks forward to introducing to the business, once they’re big enough to stock shelves and push a broom.



Dan White, Katie White, Brian White, Jake White, Zack White, and Warren White, with company officers Leo and Riley.

As a child, Brian’s cousin, Zack White wanted to become a professional baseball player. When that didn’t work out, he considered going into architecture. He remains fascinated by building design, yet he knew, when he went off to Chico State to major in business management, that he was building upon his knowledge of a business he had explored since he was 10 years old with a broom in his hand.

“I’d always liked the lumber and building supply business,” he said, “and I liked being at the lumberyard in Berkeley. I grew up knowing a lot of employees who are still with the company, which has created a continuity and additional layer of the legacy of this business.”

Zack remembers, as a boy, watching his grandfather, Robert White, walk the property, interacting with customers and staff, shaking hands, taking an interest, establishing relationships. He appreciated his grandfather’s blend of business sense and social savvy, and he learned the value of both.

“I still hear stories from people who tell me what a great man my grandfather was in his consideration for customers, and the thoughtful things he would

do for employees,” Zack said. “This is why we have a lot of long-tenured employees. My grandfather established a culture of consideration early on.”

He also remembers the 20 training videos his grandfather had him and his cousin Brian and brother Jake watch in his office. At the time, he imagined the shows were provided to entertain them. It wasn’t until he was older that he understood they were to teach, to indoctrinate the kids into the world of building materials and hardware.

Although he had taken his work seriously during his high school years and college summers, Zack knew, in returning to the company in 2008 to



work full time as a vice president of sales, his role would become considerably more consequential. He appreciates now, how hard he worked when he was younger, to establish relationships with employees he would one-day rely on, so they would trust he was trained to run the business.

“Sometimes tough decisions have to be made on behalf of the business, apart from the family,” he said. “I’ve tried to prove myself

to other employees, to ensure that I am an experienced and dedicated leader, not merely someone named White, who was given the keys to the castle. My grandfather had no sense of entitlement, and he instilled that in us.”

White hopes to foster this same mentality and commitment to the business in the young son and daughter he and wife Whitney have added to the White family tree.



Truitt & White - a Timeline



- 1897 George E. Truitt was born in Wichita Falls, Texas
- 1912 Robert White was born in Eau Claire, Wisconsin
- 1931 Robert White graduates from high school during the Great Depression
- 1934 George E. Truitt, Jr. is born in Wichita Falls
- 1936 Robert White graduates from the University of Minnesota with a degree in business administration
- 1939 WWII breaks out. Robert White enlists in the Navy and is stationed at the Naval Supply Center in Oakland; senior officer George Truitt, also stationed at the supply center, moves his wife and 7-year-old son George Edwin Jr. (Ed) to Oakland
- 1944 Robert and Rose White marry
- 1945 V-E Day
- 1946 George Truitt & Robert White establish Truitt & White hardware & lumber company
- 1953 Son Dan White is born
- 1956 Son Warren White is born
- 1975 The company secures a lucrative 15-year contract with the Navy
- 1977 George E. Truitt passes away
- 1984 Grandson Brian White is born
- 1986 Grandson Zack White is born
- 1986 Grandson Mike White is born
- 1988 Grandson Jake White is born
- 1989 Granddaughter Katie White is born
- 1991 The Oakland Hills firestorm sacrifices 3,469 dwellings and launches a building boom
- 1999 Octogenarian Robert White still dons a coat and tie, and regularly visits the lumber yard
- 2002 Robert White passes away, one month shy of 90
- 2008 Brian White becomes vice president of sales and purchasing
- 2008 Zack White becomes vice president of sales and purchasing
- 2008 Jake White becomes vice president of operations
- 2017 Electrical fire threatens but doesn't devastate the lumber company
- 2019 George E. Truitt, Jr. passes away
- 2020 The COVID pandemic threatens closure, but the business is deemed essential

Keeping Current

STAYING AHEAD OF THE TIMES

Truitt & White was established as a lumber and building-materials retailer, whose staff provide product knowledge and expertise to building contractors to foster success in their construction jobs. Although the company serves some ground-up construction projects, it caters to the remodeler contractor, says Zack White, particularly in a community of older homes that warrant repairs and updates. Nevertheless, following the tenet of their grandfather, Robert White, to always remain relevant and just ahead of the curve, Brian and Zack White have worked to become ever-more tech savvy, as leaders in the industry.

When George Truitt and Robert White established their company, everything was calculated and documented via pencil and paper. Keeping pace with progress, in 1982, sons Dan and Warren White hired a computer programmer to develop and manage a system of commerce well before it

was commonplace in the industry. When grandsons Brian and Zack White joined the team, they made the commitment to upgrade a 35-year-old computer system into a state-of-the-art program. Considerable research led them to implement BisTrack by Epicor, the industry leader in business management software for lumber and building materials.

“My cousin and I have worked hard during the last 10 years to bring the company

“ We are dedicated to moving the company forward, but we also want to be respectful of the people before us, who laid the foundation of this company and achieved considerable success“

up to current technology standards and keep us there,” said Zack White. “By implementing a new ERP (enterprise resource planning) system, we have automated our business processes, providing insights and internal controls regarding accounting, manufacturing, supply chain, sales, marketing, and human resources.”

It’s important, he says, to stay just ahead of the curve in both product and technology, to better manage the business, make it easier for customers to shop with Truitt & White, and to provide the highest-quality materials and service.

“We are dedicated to moving the company forward,” said Brian White, “but we also want to be respectful of the people before us, who laid the foundation of this company and achieved considerable success.”

Building upon experience, while working to convince people that change is an inevitable process worth investing in, requires an alchemy of intelligence and compassion in action.

It requires respect, says White, for the longevity of the company, the people who invested their lives in that, and those who will work together to do so, going forward.



Zack White



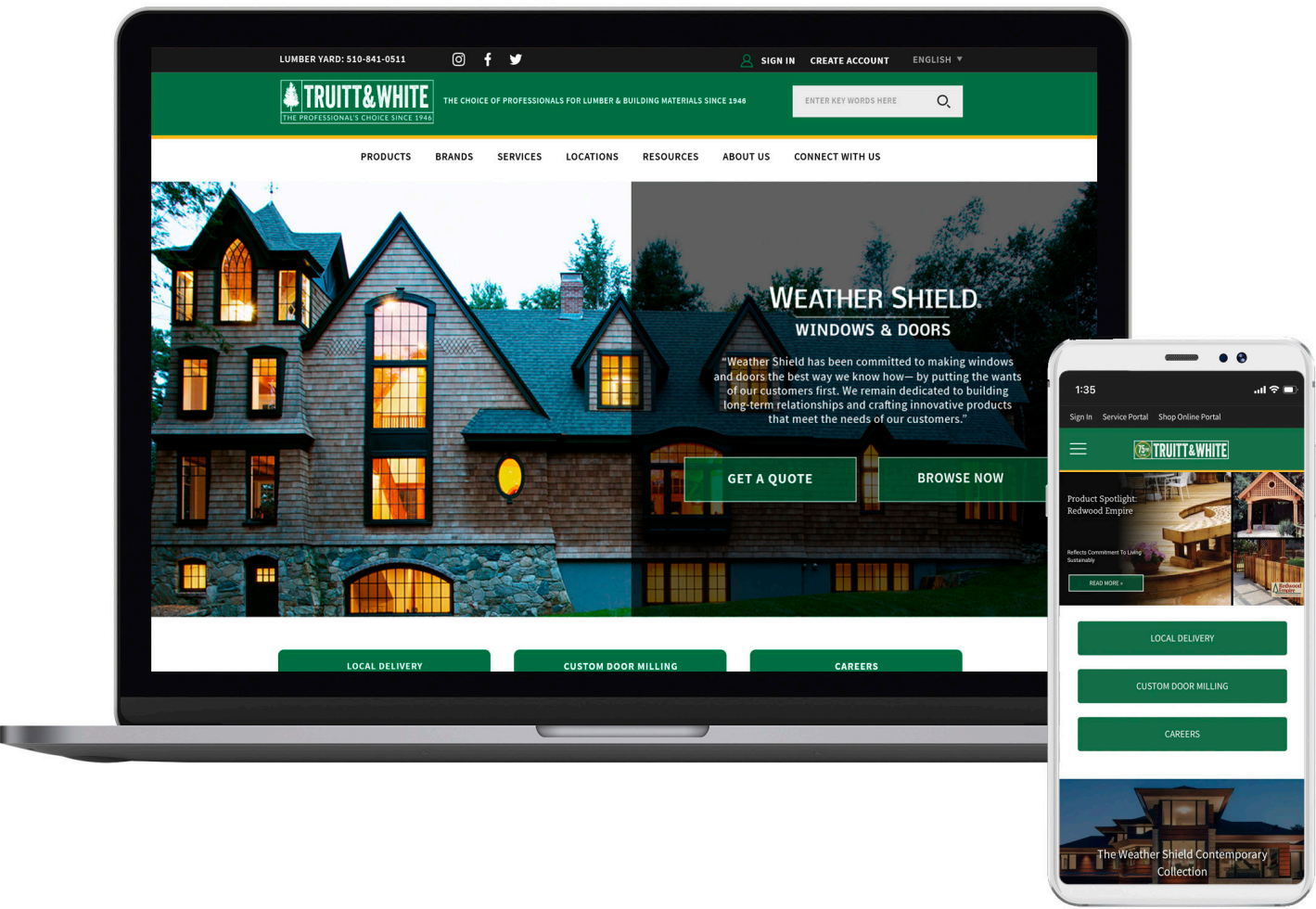
Brian White

“I typically have been involved in the lumber and building materials side of the business,” said Zack White, “but in recent years, I’ve become more involved in purchasing and the tech side of the business, as well. We are not siloed in this company. We all wear a lot of hats at Truitt & White, which makes it a true joint effort.”

A key benefit of this multi-generational company is the ability to manage the dynamics of time through more than seven decades, to remain balanced on the leading edge of the building industry. The wisdom and experience of senior Whites, paired with the training and contemporary vision of subsequent generations keeps them current, while looking forward to remain relevant.

“We pride ourselves on quality products, and the knowledge and expertise required to source and provide them,” said White. “We set the highest standard in quality and in customer service, something our fathers and grandfather instilled in us. Our goal is to get people on the job as quickly as possible, with the products and knowledge they need to do their work well. As long as we do that, we’ll be in business another 75 years or more”.

“The wisdom and experience of senior Whites, paired with the training and contemporary vision of subsequent generations, keeps them current, while looking forward to remain relevant.”



In keeping with the times, Truitt & White launched a new website in 2021, making browsing and ordering on a laptop, desktop, tablet, or smart phone an easier and more attractive experience, even on the go.

Making Progress

MAINTAINING CORE VALUES

Sometimes, the best way to move forward is to stop. Making time to take stock of the situation, to assess where the company stands, and the processes and practices that got it there, can provide perspective on the right direction to head, next.

Brian, Zack, and Jake White invested a year in looking back along the trajectory of Truitt & White, including their grandfather’s intentions in establishing the company, and what it has provided, achieved, and stood for in the community. From that process, they developed a contemporary mission statement, built upon core values they identified for their family and their business.

“This is important to a 75-year-old company,” said Brian White. “A lot of our core values seem obvious to the person who has worked for the company for 30 years, but as people retire, and new staff come on board, we need to ensure



Team member Riley

they understand who we are and how we operate, that they’re doing things the way we want them done, and why.”

It isn't easy to explain the “right and wrong” ways to do things. But if this is presented in the context of core company values, employees have the opportunity to learn, to understand, and to buy in.

“ Provide expertise, product knowledge, and quality materials, offer patience and assistance, and focus on the highest and best solutions for the customer.”

Truitt & White Core Values



“This doesn’t cover everything about our company we want our crew to understand and uphold,” said Brian White, “but if we can live up to these six core values, we can continue to have a successful, enduring company where people are happy to come to work and do good business.”

There is a reason the management team introduced their concepts of engagement, not as ideas, not as rules, but as core values. It is not merely what they do, but who they are as a successful family-run business.

“We’re really inspired to continually become a better operation, a better company,” White said. “There is always potential to improve, to build the best version of Truitt & White, particularly if we remain mindful that our products and practices determine what we can become.”

What’s more important, he says, than our house, our home; the place where we live our lives and make all our memories with our family.

“It may be a small part,” he said, “but we play a significant part in what houses people in the San Francisco Bay Area. Our crew should take pride in that.”

“There is always potential to improve, to build the best version of Truitt & White, particularly if we remain mindful that our products and practices determine what we can become.”



Truitt & White proudly feature Marvin windows



Truitt & White Over the Years



Family Dynamics

REMEMBER WHO YOU ARE AND WHAT YOU REPRESENT

Sometimes it's wonderful to work with people you love and enjoy outside the business, and other times, it can be challenging to navigate a difference of vision or opinion while toggling between professional and personal relationships. Working with family can help cement commitment or create fissures in the foundation. Unless you remember who you are, what you represent, and that family always comes first.

"When you're family," said Zack White, a father of two young children, "it's usually best to be open and speak candidly. Yet that can diminish the kind of diplomacy expected among employees. We toggle between the professional persona and the family dynamic."

At the end of the day, the family bond is

intact, so much so that discussions about the business often intrude at the dinner table. Invariably, someone, often a spouse, suggests it be saved for the office, and invites a return to family matters.

"Not everyone seated at the dinner table spent the day at Truitt & White. "Those who didn't", said White, "intercede to give us a chance to talk about other activities and events in the family."

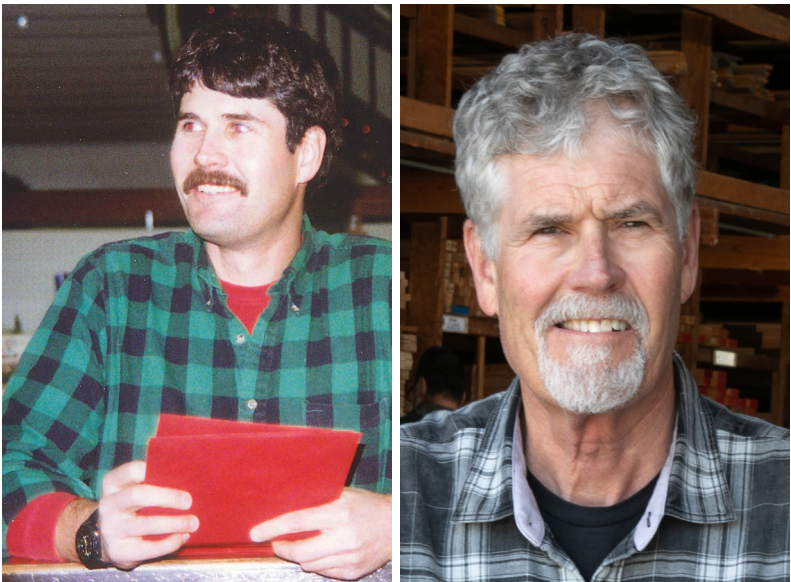
Still, the world of Truitt & White is never far from the minds of family members. Just as patriarch Robert White continued to stroll the now 8-acre property housing a lumber yard, hardware store, warehouse, and showroom in his senior years, his sons, Dan and Warren White imagine, they too, will maintain a presence in the business once their sons take the helm.

"My dad, Warren, is onsite every day and very much enjoys coming in to work," said Zack White. "As with our grandfather, my brother Jake and I can imagine picking him up when he's older, some 20 years down the road, and bringing him down to the yard to check things out and greet everyone."

Like his cousin Brian and brother Zack before him, Jake White also grew up coming to the Truitt & White lumber yard well before he was old enough to contribute to the business. But it gave him a sense of place, of belonging and, as he grew older, the opportunity to learn about the world of work, even if it meant just stocking the shelves he was tall enough to reach.

During his high school summers and between semesters at college, Jake returned to Berkeley to work in the family business and earn money for school. Although he developed a deep appreciation for the family firm, he pursued a personal interest in school, studying criminal justice. Toward the end of college, he interned with the DA's office, focusing on criminal prosecution, which led him to law school at John F. Kennedy University College of Law.

Ultimately, Jake decided to return to the family business and became Vice President of Operations, overseeing the day-to-day functions of the company.



Warren White



Jake White

“Because of my law background,” he said, “I’ve been thrust into an HR role, focusing on personnel issues and employment law. Sometimes I’m talking about collaboration, and other times, it’s all about conflict resolution and mediation. In general, our crew works very well together, so I also can turn my attention to a rough truck engine or how well a forklift is working.”

As with most members of a multi-generational family business, Jake White understands the proclivity for sibling or cousin conflict and rivalry, as well as concerns from customers who have been doing business with Truitt & White for 20, 30, 40, 50 years.

“We are definitely a super family-oriented business, not just family owned,” he said, “and our customers respond to that. We have developed a closeness among extended family and long-term employees, which makes our family feel bigger. We also have an affinity with customers who come in, often daily, to drink coffee, hang out, chat, and not always to buy something. They just want to be a part of the place. And we appreciate that.”

The crew at Truitt & White take employee morale and customer service seriously, endeavoring to do all they can to help folks feel valued, appreciated, an integral part of the team.

“When we have staff who have suffered a loss or struggled in some way, particularly during the pandemic,” said Jake White, “we step in to offer support. When employees feel like family, when they know the company has their back, they take ownership of their work, put forth more effort, and offer better service, which translates to satisfied customers.”

Being more closely connected to customers and crew sets the company apart from the ‘big box’ stores that can’t create a culture of compassion.

Jake proposed to his fiancé, Libby, a bilingual elementary school teacher, in nearby Briones Regional Park, where the two like to hike. There they were, with nothing more than their dogs, the view, and each other, so he seized the moment. Perhaps, after the pandemic, they’ll plan a wedding, and maybe he’ll find time to take the Bar exam.



Construction & Covid

In a testament to time, perseverance, and progressive management, Truitt & White has managed to survive recessions, fires, politics, and now, a pandemic.

"I can remember meeting with our crew," said Warren White, "to talk about how we would get through the COVID closure and how we could stay in business with our doors shut, as everyone was mandated to shelter in place. I also remember sitting at home at night, listening to the news and hearing that hardware stores might remain open. 'We've got one', I thought; we can remain open".

The concept of essential business came into play, and Truitt & White qualified, which meant they could keep their doors open and their staff employed. Nevertheless, for the first few months, the family saw their commerce cut in half.

By June 2020, once construction projects got the clearance to resume, business took off. With so many people stuck at home, wanting to fix up their homes, create home offices, or finally address home improvements, Truitt & White became the go-to destination to get it done.

"While sourcing products became problematic due to COVID closures, we saw prices quadruple on building materials," White said. "Since then, prices came back down on a lot of items, such as lumber and plywood, but we still have issues with shipping and supply chains."

Lead times for windows and doors went from four to six weeks, to upwards of 16 weeks. Imagine trying to schedule a building project, says White, and suddenly it's going to take three or four months to get materials. Even appliances became problematic because of a shortage of computer chips and other materials. The term "pandemic" became a comprehensive concept in construction.

"And yet," said White, "we're still here. Our business is very busy, and we hope that will continue. This industry is always a roller coaster. We're either making that slow climb or careening downward, but we always rise. Through all the challenges, we've tried to maintain our core values of providing quality building materials and having well-trained people who can take care of our customers. This has enabled us to survive a lot of unforeseen challenges. And to learn that we can."



Looking Forward

A MEASURE OF IMMORTALITY

The beauty of a multi-generational family business is some measure of immortality. The Whites have long invested in family first, creating a culture and commitment to their heritage and the legacy formed with each new generation. It is on this foundation that their business was forged, which gives them a sturdy platform on which to handle challenges and opportunities. Because each new generation brings with them a solid commitment, contemporary business training, and a progressive vision for the business, it endures in each new era.

“It’s wonderful to have the next generation come into the business,” Dan White said. “It’s also tricky, for a lot of reasons, to keep a business going from one generation to the next. It has to be the right combination and the right number of people to balance management and assume all necessary roles.”

Sometimes a company has too many family members at the helm, he says, and the business becomes impossible to run. Truitt & White, he believes, has a good number of people and a complementary dynamic among them. The siblings and cousins work well together. Everyone has found their niche, he says, among all the different areas that need to be addressed.

Yet not all roles are covered by the owners of the business, he says, nor should they be. By building a qualified staff, the company can better manage a hierarchy of roles, while extending the sense of commitment and camaraderie inherent in a family business.

“Generational businesses are a bit of an anachronism, a thing of the past,” said Warren White. “I think what keeps us going into our third generation is that we’ve been hands on since the beginning, and now it’s ingrained in our kids. They like the business. They believe in their family and this business, which makes a big difference.”

In addition, White believes one of the greatest assets in their family business is their employees. Truitt & White has a long history of young people

coming to work for the company and eventually retiring from the business.

“We have a pool of people,” he said, “who have been with us for 40 years. I believe this is because they are a valued part of our family business, and they enjoy working in that kind of atmosphere. This makes a great difference for our customers, who know our employees and make friends with them, even sharing time outside of work. It makes for a good dynamic and a stronger business.”

Dan White agrees that the building industry and the business his family has built around it have fostered a wonderful life.

“If I we were starting a business from scratch,” he said, “I don’t know what other field I might have gone into. It’s a marvelous business. We deal with an incredible group of customers, as well as great people we get to work with every day.”

“The construction industry is a hands-on business”, he says, “so it feels like we’re really doing something productive. Watching a big load of lumber roll in on the back of our trucks is still exciting, and doing something productive with it is rewarding”.

“I realize there are a lot of high-paying important jobs in the tech world that people want to get into,” said White, “but I can’t get into a business that makes a tiny chip, and I can’t see what it does. The lumber business is much more tangible. We see our lumber change an empty lot into a house, a home. And that’s meaningful.”

Recently, the fourth generation of the Truitt & White lineage has begun hanging out at the lumberyard, broom in hand, to learn about the culture of the company into which they were born.

“Generational businesses are a bit of an anachronism, a thing of the past. I think what keeps us going into our third generation is that we’ve been hands on since the beginning, and now it’s ingrained in our kids.”



The White family honors both George Truitt and their patriarch, Robert White, for their savvy and skill in establishing an enduring family business. They also appreciate and acknowledge their devoted Truitt & White team and customers as an integral part of their longevity, with the promise of a commitment to the same leadership and dedication to excellence by each subsequent generation who joins the family firm.

RESEARCHED AND WRITTEN BY LISA CRAWFORD WATSON
DESIGN BY SUSIE ACHESON