Wendt, Richard L. (1931-2010)

Richard L. Wendt, of Klamath Falls, was a founder of JELD-WEN, Inc., one of Oregon's biggest companies. By the 1990s, the company was the largest maker of windows and doors in the world. Wendt, a publicity-shy individual who continued to live in the same modest ranch-style home after accumulating a personal fortune estimated at $700 million, was known by many Klamath Falls residents as much for his community involvement as for his wealth. Conversely, to union members, public employees, and other Oregonians who battled against the causes and candidates he funded, Wendt became a symbol of what they perceived as the out-sized influence that conservative millionaires had on the state's politics.

Wendt was born in Dubuque, Iowa, in 1931. In 1953, he graduated from Iowa State University, where he lettered in track and field, and then served a stint in the U.S. Air Force. In 1957, while working for Caradco, a window and door maker headquartered in Dubuque, Wendt moved to Klamath Falls as manager of the company's frame plant. When Caradco decided to close its Oregon operation, Wendt and four junior partners bought the plant and in 1960 started JELD-WEN, Inc. The first half of the firm's name was an acronym formed by the first letters of the given names of four Wendt family members.

The company would have a profound effect on the economy of Klamath County and elsewhere. With a handful of employees, Wendt started JELD-WEN in Caradco's old Klamath Falls window and doorframe factory. By 2010, JELD-WEN employed over 3,500 people in Oregon and had nearly 20,000 employees worldwide. Wendt also had extensive timber holdings, and he developed Oregon's Eagle Crest and Running *Y* destination resorts.

Wendt prided himself on his work ethic and believed that all capable individuals should have a job. His personal campaign to remove people from welfare rolls and put them to work led to the 1990 Oregon Ballot Measure 7, aimed at providing welfare recipients with low-wage private-sector jobs that would be subsidized by the state. Labor leaders considered Wendt's proposal to be a form of union-busting and opposed it. Transformed into Oregon's JOBS Plus program following passage of Measure 7, the plan became a state-sponsored, on-the-job training program in which employers are permitted to pay eligible JOBS Plus workers less than the minimum wage.

Wendt founded the American Institute for Full Employment in 1994 to promote full employment through Jobs-PLUS-type placement companies across the country. The Institute, which was highlighted by anti-tax lobbyist Grover Norquist of Americans for Tax Reform as a like-minded organization, can be characterized as libertarian-conservative in its economic philosophy. Wendt, a supporter of the privatization of Social Security who believed in an essentially unregulated free-enterprise system, contributed substantially (estimated at over $2 million) to promote passage of state initiatives put forward by Oregon political activist Bill Sizemore. He was a major backer of Sizemore's failed gubernatorial run and of Republican Kevin Mannix's subsequent unsuccessful run for governor. Wendt wielded political influence in Klamath County, leading some liberal opponents to characterize Klamath Falls as Wendt's "company town."

Wendt's charitable foundation funded endeavors across the country, with over $25 million granted in Oregon. In 2002, Wendt offered the Oregon Institute of Technology $75 million to leave Oregon's state system of higher education and become a private school, an offer that OIT turned down. Advancing the arts was among his favorite nonpolitical causes. He served lengthy terms on several boards, including the Merle West Medical Center in Klamath Falls and the Oregon Shakespeare Festival Association in Ashland.

JELD-WEN experienced success from the 1970s into the 2010s, including opening large operations in Canada and the United Kingdom. The economic downturn that began in the late 2000s hit JELD-WEN hard, and the company sold off its resorts and other nonmanufacturing operations. Soon after Wendt's death from a stroke in 2010, a majority share of the company was sold to Onex, a Canadian holding company.

Written by Jeff LaLande

Further Reading:

"Klamath Falls Millionaire pushes 'Jobs Plus' Agenda." *Northwest Labor Press*. April 16, 1999.

Wendt obituaries: *Klamath Falls Herald and News,* August 17, 2010; The *Oregonian,* August 16, 2010; *Business Week*, August 16, 2010.

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