

William McClellan Ritter



William McClellan Ritter was born in 1864 on a farm in Pennsylvania, and died at his home in Washington, D.C., in 1952. His father owned a water-driven sawmill and at the age of 12, Ritter was determined to become a lumberman. He was later advised that the coming railroads were going to open up vast tracts of timber in the West Virginia.

Ritter came to the state at the age of 26 with \$1,700 he had saved. Within a week, he had purchased a one-third interest in 1,000 acres of timber. Soon after, he was shipping timber out of Bluefield. He soon expanded into McDowell and Mingo counties and set up his own sawmills. He acquired rights to large tracts in six southeast states, and purchased interests in the coal and rail industries. He made what was probably the first million-dollar timber deal in West Virginia history when he bought tracts in Wyoming and Raleigh counties. W.M. Ritter Lumber Company eventually grew to become the world's largest hardwood lumber company.

Ritter was called to serve as an adviser to War Industries Board Chairman Bernard Baruch during World War I. He served as President of the National Hardwood Lumber Association, and was Treasurer of the National Lumber Manufacturers Association.

In 1940, he was honored with a golden anniversary dinner for 300 to mark his 50 years in the industry. The master of ceremonies noted that Ritter had modernized the industry, and that he had manufactured more than three billion board feet of lumber during his career, enough to load a train 2,000 miles long.

His lumber operations revolutionized the economies and social lives of many remote mountain communities in West Virginia. His company published a monthly magazine that routinely featured employee spotlights, and he was well-known to take good care of his employees.

In his book, *The Lumber Business*, he wrote, "Confer the benefit, do not wait to receive it." In December of 1924, he made his words into reality when he gifted \$3 million worth of personal stock (more than \$44.5 million in 2020 dollars) to a trust fund for employees. The deed made national headlines and Ritter was subsequently invited to the White House by President Coolidge.