



manufacturing
TODAY
SPRING 2010

IMPERIAL WOODWORKS PRODUCES 2,000 TO 3,000 LINEAR FEET OF CHURCH PEWS WEEKLY TO MEET DEMAND.

PASS THE PEWS

IMPERIAL WOODWORKS IS PROUD TO BE IN THE SAME BUSINESS AS ITS RELIGION'S FOUNDER. **BY RUSS GAGER**

Throughout Christianity, the image of a carpenter has had special resonance because it was Christ's occupation. So those manufacturing wooden church furniture would have to hold a special place in their communities.

Nevertheless, Imperial Woodworks Inc. also has to be run like a modern manufacturing business. "Our industry is dominated by privately owned, smaller companies," President Steve Smith explains. "There are no General Motors, no Ford Motors out

there. These are all companies that started small. Some of us have grown – some have not. We're primarily in the church furniture business."

Woodworking traditionally has been an industry with a low barrier of entry. "You have a guy with a table saw and a table router, and he's in the church furniture business," Smith concedes. Imperial Woodworks' entry into the business was 50 years ago in 1960, in a little metal building in Waco, Texas. In 1990, the company

built a new factory, and in 2003, it purchased a competitor on the West Coast. This increased the company's volume by one-third overnight.

Further expansion occurred in Waco in 2005 that enabled Imperial Woodworks to centralize its manufacturing there and close down the factory in California. In February 2009, Imperial Woodworks purchased the assets of another small church furniture manufacturing company. "With that came \$800,000 worth of volume and products we didn't have before," Smith relates. "That was a nice add-on at a period of time when things were slowing down.

"There's probably in our industry three or four of us that are size-wise fairly large," Smith notes. "We're not the largest in the business by any stretch of the imagination. You can make lots of high-quality products – the challenge today is finding the market for them."

HEWING PEWS

The majority of Imperial Woodworks' products are manufactured in Waco, Smith says, including all the pews. Company employees have to produce 2,000 to 3,000 lineal feet of pews weekly to meet the company's goals.

The lumber used in most of the company's products originates in the northern United States or Appalachian Mountains. Smith estimates 90 percent of it is red oak, but cherry and maple also are popular. Imperial Woodworks offers a dozen different standard wood stain colors.

Because of the low quantities of certain products it manufactures, Imperial often relies on traditional production techniques. "We still do an incredible amount of hand work – the reason being every job I do is different," Smith says. "All our jobs are unique – there's not one job that's going to be the same as another. Our industry is not one of those that lends itself to a high degree of automation."

Nevertheless, automation is used where it clearly exceeds human capabilities. "The primary thing we've got today is a CNC and Windows front-end on a panel saw," he reports. "We've got two CNC routers that do all our heavy routing – one is a six-head machine and another has tool changers. It's all computer-driven equipment. The quality and consistency is excellent and exceeds anything we could have done before we had that equipment.

"We've got wide-belt sanders with a computer drive controller that gives you the ability to control what you want there," he continues. "That's a big difference today in operations the size of ours. Profile sanding equipment, molders and CNC routers – those are the kinds of things we've added that help us do a better job.

We've invested probably in the last five to seven years somewhere in the neighborhood of \$500,000 for different types of equipment like that."

LOAVES AND FISHES

Imperial Woodworks has done the next best thing to multiplying loaves and fishes with its suppliers. "I get a job today, and a short lead time is three to four months, but it's not uncommon where someone calls and says they need it in 45 days," Smith relates. Suppliers are key to being able to meet such deadlines.

Employees provide quality control. "The primary thing I'm a believer in is: We do a lot of handwork, and you teach your people that, 'You're my first line of quality control,'" he says. "Each respective foreman has the authority to kick it back and doesn't

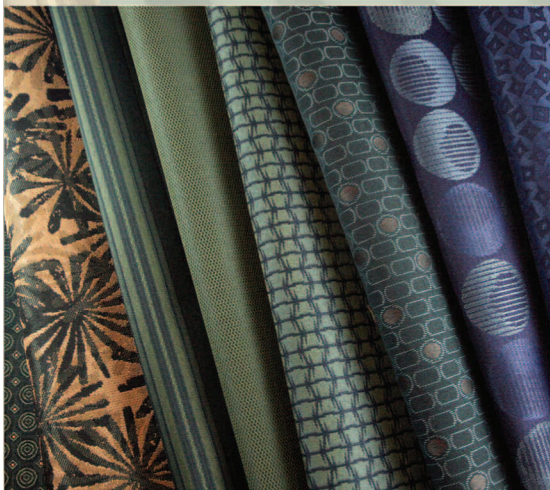
have to let it go to the finish room until it's done correctly. This procedure is followed in each department."

To maintain growth, Imperial Woodworks has been working outside of its ecclesiastical base. "The largest job we've ever done is a courtroom project in San Bernardino County, Calif.," Smith reports.

"In today's market, you have to be more aggressive in looking for business," he asserts. "Opportunities you might have walked past before, you don't have that luxury anymore. We bought the company in California and increased by one-third overnight. We are a small, family owned business, and those are growing pains that are not a lot of fun. We strive to grow our business, but look for growth that's controllable and something you can manage easily." **mt**

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