



JEFFERSON

DESK & FURNITURE CO., LTD.

By CANDACE ATKINS

In a town where buildings are restored instead of remodeled, a firm dedicated to an enduring, hand-crafted product somehow seems perfectly suited.

Capitola, a community aware of the past and wary of "high rise" would naturally welcome the Jefferson Desk and Furniture Company, Ltd., a small enterprise where the wooden creations of skilled hands are designed "to outlive all of us."

Owner Ray Wilhelmsen, 47, is a former vice president for Mervyns who had what he called "a super career" in retailing. His decision to buy the furniture manufacturing company after retiring from the department store chain, "was a happy accident — it was a case of love."

"The world was open to me," he said. "My background has nothing to do with manufacturing — it was just a spark. I had no idea I would be involved in furniture manufacturing," he said.

His wife and a partner in the business, Joanne, 43, said, "I just followed along. I had no idea I was about to learn so much." A former teacher by profession, she now performs a variety of office duties for the company.

The couple and their children, Jim, 15 and Stacey, 12, live near the harbor in Santa Cruz.

Wilhelmsen says he's like "a kid in a candy shop" with his business. "I love it, all of it," he said. "I love the smell of the wood, the look, the feel. I love the furniture, I love watching it being constructed."

Started as a cottage industry in Live Oak in 1977, the plant is now located at 420 Kennedy Drive, next to Highway 1. There are some 35 employees on the manufacturing side, and an office staff of five. All but one are Santa Cruz County residents, and all, according to Wilhelmsen, "see themselves as guardians of (Jefferson furniture) quality."

"We need a kind of (employee who is an) artisan to work here. We are very selective about who we hire — we need to be."

Most of the crew are young people in their 20's and 30's, and Wilhelmsen insists "I certainly don't intimidate them — If someone has something to say to me, they march up and say it. Employees always point out their concerns."

In addition, his personal transition from a corporate vice president to the owner of a small factory has taught him valuable lessons in human nature, he said.

"I came from a longstanding executive corporate environment," he said. "I wondered what my reaction would be to the staff at Jefferson Desk — and the fact is, I love them. They have their own standards, they know how to have fun and how to live — they're individuals and have chosen a simple lifestyle that is completely different than the pressure-filled environment I was used to. There is a sense of community here, it's very much a family feeling. Believe me, I didn't mandate it."

"That is one of the additional benefits I hadn't counted on, coming from a group (of fellow executives) who were so concerned with financial success and upward mobility. At Jefferson Desk, we have the opportunity of being human with one another — and it's very good."

The company produces roll- and flat top desks, filing cabinets, typing stands and credenzas, which Wilhelmsen describes as "antique reproduction." All of the furniture, he said, is solid red oak and high quality oak veneers. Designs are exclusive to Jefferson, and are developed "with the same approach that was used more than 75 years ago."

The company is best known for its large rolltops, which are produced in three sizes. The desks are similar, but according to Wilhelmsen, "there are no small versions of one desk."

"Each desk has its own style and styling approach," he said. "There are special qualities to each size that will set it apart from the others."

There are at least 276 components in the large rolltops, and each piece, said Wilhelmsen, "is handled, machined by hand and assembled by hand."

From start to finish, Wilhelmsen said a desk will take about six weeks to produce.

"From a material standpoint, we overbuild our product," he said. "But that's the only way I'd have it. We're always working on improvements and new designs, and we can adapt minor detail changes on a running basis."

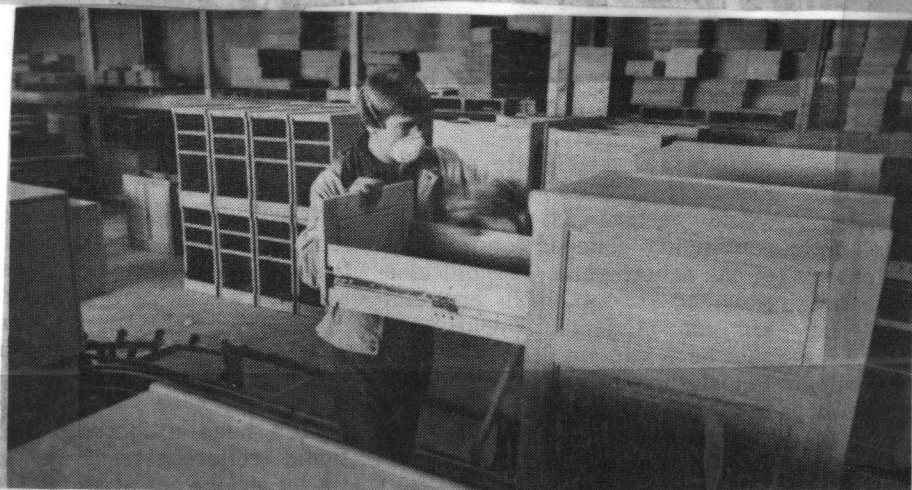
New designs are never produced at anyone's whim, said Wilhelmsen. In fact, a new style or major change is "like birthing an elephant," he said. Customer suggestions are frequently what he called "the genesis for change," and from there, it is often a development process of six months before a prototype is introduced.

But even for established, successful styles, his cost variations can be tremendous in wood as well as the custom brass fixtures, drawer slide hardware and finishing materials, he said.

"From purchase to purchase, you just never know," he said. We stick with the price we set for our furniture, so the slim planned profit margins we set for ourselves can easily disappear. Sure, it can keep you up all night."

The desks produced for today's market are constructed with the same amount of hand labor and individual attention as those made singly when Jefferson Desk was a cottage operation. The only difference, said Wilhelmsen, is the size of the power tools used to construct the furniture, and the larger scale of production.

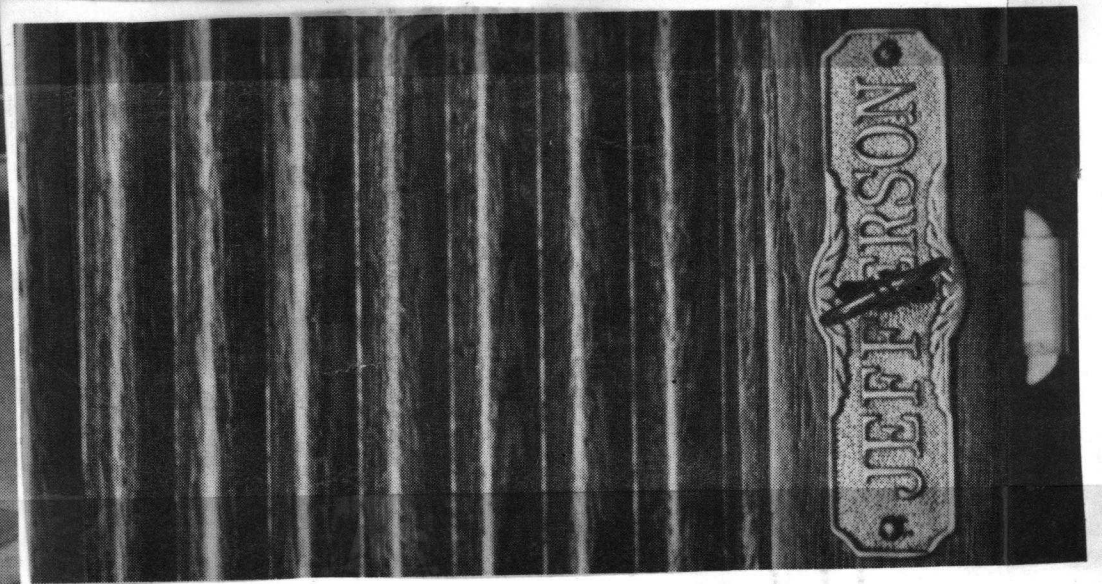
As a businessman, Wilhelmsen feels oak furniture manufacture is a smart choice. "Oak is beloved, it's Americana," said Wilhelmsen. "It was the main wood used in furniture before the turn of the century, and people still want it. They feel good with oak — it's such a dramatic wood, there are tremendous grain variations. There is nothing quite like it."



Industry to 1990

Some 600 pieces of Jefferson furniture are produced and sold each month. And each gets the same amount of individual attention as those built singly when the business was a cottage operation.

Above center, Kevin Marcum lacquers a finished roll top desk.



Photography by Kurt Ellison