

LOUIS IRION

Title: Owner

Business: Irion Lumber Co.

Location: Wellsboro, Pa.

Services: Hardwood supplier and sawmill

Source for: Cherry, tiger maple, flame birch, walnut and mahogany

Resume: 35 years as a furniture maker and lumber dealer

Quotable: "To have evolved from a furniture maker all the way back to the point of operating a sawmill, it's been something we've really enjoyed."

'LUMBER HEAVEN'

As a furniture maker, Louis Irion discovered how difficult it was to find wide, matched boards. Now his Irion Lumber Co. helps other woodworkers find what he couldn't.

BY JENNIFER HICKS

STAFF WRITER

Change has been good for Louis Irion, who established Irion Lumber Co. in rural Wellsboro, Pa., in 1997. The niche business caters to small custom furniture and architectural millwork shops, supplying wide and figured lumber from single boards to matched sets and lumber flitches from the same log, as well as extra heavy stock, crotches and other unusual pieces of wood.

Irion ran a furniture shop for nearly 20 years before becoming a full-time lumber dealer and sawmill operator. As a result, he has a unique insight to the needs of his customers.

"Our strength is the fact that we have been involved in the lumber business for so long, and have the background in the furniture business. That really has been much more of an asset than we ever realized because we also understand the processes that go with wood," he said.

The company stocks more than 100,000 bf of cherry, tiger maple, flame birch, walnut, mahogany and other hardwoods. Irion estimates the value of his inventory at three-quarters of a million dollars.

The business sits on a 300-acre farm, located in the heart of the infamous cherry belt of North-Central, Pa., which is abundant with other quality hardwoods as well. With 80 percent of customers from out of state, it's clear to Irion that good wood is hard to find. That's why he and his wife, Wanda, routinely visit sawmills and log broker facilities, normally within a 100-mile radius, to hand-pick stock.

Wide lumber exists

Irion said furniture makers often don't know the type of wood he sells is available.

"I hear so many times that woodworkers can't find wide lumber, let alone matching sets of the same, and it isn't that scarce. You just have to know where to look for it, and probably pay a little more," he said.

While attending an industrial arts class at Millersville University in Millersville, Pa., in 1972, Irion searched and couldn't find the right crotch-walnut panel for the main door of a grandfather clock he was making. Since every tree has a crotch, Irion knew the piece was somewhere. He gave up that search and became focused on wood availability in gener-

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Louis Irion, owner of Irion Lumber Co. in Wellsboro, Pa., and employee Myron Yoder (right) pull an extra-wide board from an extensive inventory.

PHOTOS: FOREST MCMULLIN/REDUX PLUS

Louis Irion cuts a walnut log on his Breezewood bandsaw mill.



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al. After graduating, Irion took an apprenticeship with his father, Louis Irion, Jr., at the Berwin Furniture Shop in Berwin, Pa.

His father made several 18th-century dining room chairs for the White House during the Kennedy Administration, and was acquainted with George Nakashima and Wharton Esherick. Irion grew to know and appreciate the philosophies of the two, as well as that of James Krenov. All stressed how the beauty of wood enhances the final product, Irion said.

In 1977 Irion founded his own busi-

ness, Irion Co. Furniture Makers of Paoli, Pa., which restored 18th-century originals, and built period-style replicas. Wood for those projects was obtained from a gamut of commercial sawmills and lumber suppliers. But he encountered a lack of matching sets, which was critical.

"When you look at the old stuff, you see part of the harmony is the fact that it was made from the same tree, and they typically used wide lumber rather than smaller pieces glued together," Irion said.

As Irion developed sources looking for the right lumber for the period-style designs, he knew he was on to something. The thriving furniture business eventually expanded to 25 full-time employees, which was Irion's cue to move on.

"It basically came to the point where we just had too much to do, Wanda and I, and we decided we just wanted to concentrate on the lumber end," Irion said.

In 1995 Irion sold the furniture company to longtime employees and established Irion Lumber. From the get-go, he knew his background in furniture would distinguish him from his competitors.

Location, location

Irion purchased the Wellsboro property in 1994, and opened Irion Lumber in 1997. More than just a picturesque countryside, the area is the strongest hardwood region in the state for quality and quantity. In the late 1800s developers clear-cut and abandoned the land, which later grew back as a hardwood forest, with cherry the dominant species. Also, the central location offers a good growing climate, according to Irion.

Three white German shepherds run about the property, ready to greet visitors who come to browse the wood selection. The boards are stored in the dozen barn-like storage buildings. Each shelved structure contains the same mixed board collection as the other, a strategic layout.

"The threat of fire is always there in the lumber business, and that way if we were to have a fire here, we wouldn't be wiped out," Irion said.

Trucks regularly deliver green lumber and exit with deliveries. Part-time worker Tom Lauber transports boards to and from the trucks at the mills and the yard. Karl Gunderson works in the yard full-time, transporting lumber to and from the kiln.

Green lumber is first air-dried down to 20 percent, then stacked in the insulated dehumidification kiln. The temperature in the kiln averages 120 degrees, which is low compared to commercial kilns, Irion said. The gentle, low-heat process prevents defects. Three large fans create proper air circulation.

Boards are sorted and marked after coming out of the kiln. Wide clear sorts, usually matching from the same log, are stacked together for large projects such as chests. Smaller sorts of figured wood and crotches are grouped for smaller matching set projects, tops and panels. Remaining plain, narrow lumber is kept in matches as grade lum-

PHOTO: JENNIFER HICKS

ber for various purposes such as rails and stiles, feet and moldings.

Sawmill on premises

Irion purchased his Breezewood band sawmill four years ago off a supplier who purchased a bigger mill. Kept under a covered barn-like structure without walls, it features a 26"-wide cutting capacity. Irion likes being part of the lumber-producing process, where he can cut pieces to the thickness he wants. But he only mills about 10 percent of what he sells.

"We don't try to pretend that we're loggers, but we do go out and cut down trees, and take some wood off our own property," he said.

Metal objects, including nails and fence pieces, occasionally turn up in the logs. In an effort to protect his expensive blade, Irion uses a metal detector on suspicious logs, or checks them for unusual color resulting from a chemical reaction with the metal. He then cuts out any bad sections with a chainsaw. Walnut logs tend to have more metal than other species, according to Irion, who said it's an open grown tree, often located at the edge of pastures and yards where fences and signs are secured.

A mud saw is the last line of defense for Irion's blade. The attachment is designed to ride ahead of the blade, to knock off abrasive mud and stone.

Visitors and friends take most of the sawmill waste for their wood stoves and small projects. Irion also donates log scraps and various shorts to the Wellsboro school district.

Satisfied customers

Customers commonly refer to Irion Lumber as lumber heaven. They pay for their own deliveries sent common carrier, at an average of 25 cents per bf.

Dan Moshein, owner of Dorset Custom Furniture in Dorset, Vt., spends between \$10,000 and \$20,000 per year on cherry, mahogany, walnut and curly maple at Irion's.

"I like the personal service. I'll send them a drawing and a cut list, and they'll call back and explain what they're sending," he said.

Mark Emirzian, owner of Mark T. Emirzian Mastercraftsmen of Wilbraham, Mass., is a 10-year customer who spends \$20,000 annually on matching wide boards for 18th-century reproduction furniture.

"I needed a reliable supply of tiger maple and quality cherry, and he can supply it," he said, adding that Irion's wide boards from the same tree enhance the quality of his work.

Emirzian makes lots of candle-stand tabletops ranging from 14" to 19" in diameter. "The only way I'll do those is by using one piece. The figure changes too much if you try to glue pieces together."

Call for directions

Irion constantly focuses on keeping business small to maintain quality, and does not foresee hiring more employees. He never allows unselected bundles

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Irion Lumber Co. is a family-run business. Here, Louis and his wife, Wanda, load the kiln.

This Chippendale-style Philadelphia highboy, made of mahogany with crotch mahogany door fronts, was built by Irion Co. Furniture Makers as a showroom display. Irion kept it when he sold the business, and it now sits in his dining room.



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of lumber to come in by any means.

"We try to keep the business very small because we're really particular about the quality of the business. We hand-pick almost everything we bring in," Irion said.

Irion usually pays a premium to select his own wood and have suppliers custom cut it to his specifications. Most suppliers are within a two-hour drive, several of whom Irion has known for decades. The one exception is with the mahogany, which comes from Peru. The most valuable lesson in working with lumber, Irion said, is that business is only as good as its sources.

Of the 80 percent of the products shipped across the United States, 40 percent goes to New England. Irion said cherry and tiger maple are popular with customers out west who don't have it so readily available in their regions. About 20 customers are designated as regulars. The rest can be occasional clients or first-time buyers. There is a shipping minimum of 200 bf, but no minimum for purchases made at the yard.

Anyone is welcome to shop at the yard on a self-serve basis. However, calling ahead is recommended. The dirt road leading up to his driveway is difficult to find in the mountainous area. Farmhouses, barns and rolled hay barrels scattered over the vast land are extremely vague landmarks. In many instances the police department has had to contact the Irions and let them know travelers had gotten lost looking for his place.

"We really are the 'stealth lumber company'. People go to the Chamber of Commerce and ask people in town where we're at," Irion said proudly.

Myron Yoder, 24, of Mansfield, Pa., is Irion's right-hand man. Hired three years ago, he handles customers and prepares deliveries. Yoder said the business is advertised in several specialty woodworking publications, but the strength of its reputation is word of mouth.

"We take the work out of finding the material. A lot of customers don't want to take the time to go to a lumberyard and search through hundreds of board feet to find a piece," Yoder said.

Everyday reminders

Irion's house is furnished entirely with items built by the Irions and workers from Irion Co. Furniture Makers. Most are 18th-century highboys, chests, cupboards, tables, beds and clocks. Miniature replicas around a foot high stand next to their larger counterparts. The miniatures, scaled precisely off originals, were hallmarks of Irion's father.

All of the custom pieces in the house remind Irion of the trials of selling furniture.

"We just always found that it was very difficult making a living making furniture. So, certainly in comparison to that, the lumber business has been a lot better for us," he said, adding he felt his former workers were paid too little for their advanced skills.

"I hope to never have to sell another piece of furniture," he said.

But an extensive hand tool and machinery collection in a shop attached to the office of the main warehouse shows quite a bit of furniture making goes on there. The Irion family, friends and employees use it when making random pieces at their leisure.

And that clock, the one Irion couldn't find the crotch walnut piece for, stands in the office the next room over. Though Irion can now get crotch walnut at the drop of a dime, he leaves the clock uncorrected as a reminder to never take wood for granted. ■

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