

Thad Wende – Wende Woodworking

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

The business executive and his wife are building their dream home. For the kitchen, they are preparing to order fancy cabinets from Italy. But they decide to make a change. They end up with beautiful cabinets for less money by sourcing those cabinets from an expert cabinetmaker in rural Kansas. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Thad Wende is founder and owner of Wende Woodworking in Mayetta, Kansas. He came by his woodworking skills naturally from his father who was a do-it-yourselfer.

"My dad was one of those guys who didn't hire anybody to do anything around the house," Thad said. "If something was going to be done, we had to figure it out and do it ourselves. We grew up around concrete and lumber," Thad said.

In high school, Thad spent lots of time in woods shop. He planned to go to Pittsburg State for a wood tech degree, but his cabinet-making business grew. In 1996, he formed Wende Woodworking LLC and started doing projects in his dad's family's garage.

One day Thad went to an auction where he purchased a hinge machine. Inside the machine was a book titled "How To Make European-Style Cabinetry." Thad read the book cover to cover and it had a tremendous influence on him. The book may have been more valuable than the machine itself.

European styling uses lots of panels of plywoods and composites and has sleek hardware which gives the cabinets the modern, contemporary look. Demand for Wende Woodworking cabinets continued to grow.

Thad learned about Blum, a major hinge manufacturing company in North Carolina which pioneered the concept of dynamic space in designing kitchens. Thad Wende is now the only certified dynamic space fabricator and has the only such showroom in the Midwest.

Custom-made cabinets have become the specialty of Wende Woodworking. "We are what I describe as a job-at-a-time shop," Thad said. Whether in a remodel or new construction, Thad will design the cabinetry with the client and then build it to suit. Wende Woodworking will deliver and install.

In 2007, Thad built a 10,000 square foot shop to go with his 3,000 square foot house.

Thad partnered with a company in Topeka to acquire a sophisticated computer-controlled router which could do fabulous designs and handle wood very efficiently. Once a design is created and assigned a bar code, the operator can select the file and the machine will use a vacuum device to load a single sheet at a time and automatically custom-cut the design.

"It's pretty high-tech for redneck Mayetta," Thad said with a smile. Mayetta is a rural community of 312 people. Now, that's rural.

"Thanks to the router, our revenues grew one and a half times," Thad said. He works at staying current on the latest trends in hardware and materials and attracts customers through word-of-mouth. "All our business comes from referrals," Thad said. "We believe we have a unique skill set and we understand our customers' needs. We're fortunate to have great clients with great ideas."

Thad enjoys the challenge of designing different cabinets for his customers. "My brain would go numb if I was doing the same thing every time," he said.

Examples of Thad's work can be viewed online at www.houzz.com/wendewood.

One day Thad was called in to meet a couple who wanted some built-in cabinets in their library. It was a business executive and his wife who were building their dream home. "What are you doing for the cabinets in the kitchen?" Thad asked. The couple explained that they were ordering cabinets from Italy. Thad offered to prepare a bid but they explained that they had already paid a retainer for the Italian cabinet company. "If you don't mind, I'd still like to prepare a bid," Thad said. He designed and prepared some creative ideas in cabinets and in the end, earned the bid.

We commend Thad Wende of Wende Woodworking for making a difference with entrepreneurship in cabinetmaking. Will such a business benefit the rural economy? It definitely would.

And there's more. Remember that company which Wende Woodworking partnered with in Topeka? We'll learn about that next week.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.