

A labor of lumber for Albrechts

By JIM PARKER
Of The Post and Courier staff

A few years ago, Richard Keene toured the Smithsonian Institution with his family and saw something familiar — a vintage band saw.

Southern Lumber & Millwork Corp., where he is shop foreman, had such a machine.

But there was a difference between the museum piece and the Southern Lumber one: "Ours worked," said Joye Shuler, head of bookkeeping.

The company has since replaced the band saw although it still uses a 1920s wood planer.

But make no mistake, Southern Lumber also has the latest equipment.

The business, which has been connected with the Albrecht family since its founding 57 years ago, just spent \$120,000 on high-speed equipment to make intricate mouldings for homes from the historic district to Kiawah Island.

"We want to go to the top of the line in quality millwork," said Ben Albrecht, vice president and yard foreman.

But while the machines are a mix of old and new, they are all part of Southern Lumber's time-honored speciality:

Business REVIEW

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Data

■ **Company:** Southern Lumber & Millwork Corp.

■ **Founded:** 1940, by Herman Albrecht Jr.

■ **Location:** 2031 King St. in Charleston.

■ **Business:** Custom millwork, building materials and lumber.

■ **Employees:** 53.

■ **Family connection:** Albrecht's son Herman III is president, son Ben is vice president and daughter Joye Shuler is secretary/treasurer. A third son, Tommy, headed millwork sales until he died in 1983. His son Will now heads millwork sales. Ben's son Ben Jr. runs the computer system.

■ **Business ties:** Major dealer of Orangeburg-based Cox treated lumber. Long-time business relationship with Berlin G. Myers Lumber Corp. in Summerville.

custom design.

Examples of the company's work over the years include hand-assembled mantles, spiral staircases and columns, a walkway bridge at Magnolia Gardens, mouldings in the Francis Marion Hotel, and the wooden ring that cadets walk through when they graduate from The Citadel.

Southern Lumber's skill at custom crafting sets the company apart from mainstream hardware chains.

"It's the special millwork they can't handle," president Herman Albrecht III said.

Yet even with this market niche, Southern Lumber was put to the test in 1995 when it lost a \$1 million contract due to the closing of the Charleston Naval Shipyard.

The contract represented 20 percent of the company's business. "Of course, we had to make a few changes," Shuler said.

So, in July 1995, the company branched into selling Weather Shield brand windows and doors. Charlie Henry handles the Weather Shield sales. In less than two years, the business accounts for 10 percent to 15 percent of total sales, nearly making up for the shipyard contract.

That same year, the company remodeled its sales office and showroom for the first time in 50 years.

Southern Lumber expanded the retail section, which has hardware supplies and displays of accessories such as custom doors, entrance frames, staircases and ornate

wood mouldings.

Will Albrecht, who heads millwork sales, said the business has nearly 200 types of crown mouldings, lattices and other types and can make special ones if they are not in stock.

Many of the accessories are set up as they would look in a house — you can open and walk through the doors, for instance.

In all, Southern Lumber has 30 different types of wood in stock from ash to yellow pine and including mahogany, cedar, red oak, walnut, teak and cypress.

The inventory, \$1.2 million worth, is stored in 10 sheds dotting the 7-acre property. David Baxley is in charge of inventory.

About 60 percent of the company's business is with contractors, and 40 percent with homeowners and other retail customers.

Herman Albrecht Jr., a builder and millwork veteran, founded Southern Lumber & Millwork in 1940. He recorded monthly sales totals in a black-bound ledger that Shuler continues to update to this day. In 1940, the company reported \$220,000 in sales, about half the total in a slow month now.

R.D. Rike, a former mill salesman, became partner in 1941. The business was at 160 East Bay St. before moving to King Street in the Charleston Neck area in 1945. Albrecht bought out Rike in 1961.

Albrecht died in 1990. Today, his children and grandchildren carry on the business. Also, his wife, 78-year-old Eloise, works as a bookkeeper.



Staff Photo by Grant Natties

Three generations of the Albrecht family work at Southern Lumber.

The family atmosphere goes beyond the Albrechts. Allen Sellers, yard foreman, joined the company in 1959. His sons, Mylarde and Jerry, came on board in 1979 and 1980. Andrew Johnson is a 20-year veteran and son Rob-

ert has been with the company 14 years. Jonette Hegwood's father John Reeves worked from the 1940s until retiring in 1989.

Several employees have worked their way up through the ranks to top posts.