

New England Woodcraft

A Foot Up on the Competition

Story and photos by Maria Buteux Reade

HARMON AND MAXINE THURSTON FOUNDED New England Woodcraft on three principles: Treat people well. Make an honest product. Enjoy your family and friends. (A fourth? Get outside and play.) This company may be one of Vermont's best-kept secrets, a family-run business with 140 employees...and no time clock. For 45 years, these men and women have made solid institutional furniture out of New England hardwoods: desks, beds, bureaus, closets, bookcases, chairs, sofas, coffee tables. "The only problem is that our products last too darn long so people aren't replacing them fast enough!" Harmon joked.

Those simple tenets set the tone for all that transpires in the 82,000-square-foot factory located in Forest Dale, a few miles from the center of Brandon.

TREAT PEOPLE WELL

"We don't have time clocks here," said Harmon Thurston, who started the company in 1961 with his beloved wife, Maxine. "The factory floor opens at 6:00 a.m. and people show up to do their jobs. I always treated my employees as I would want to be treated. I never wanted to work under a time clock, so why should they? If people worked as hard to make things simple as they do

to make things difficult, the world would be much nicer."

Of the 140 people on payroll, 39 have been there for more than 20 years. If the company had time cards, you would see familiar surnames, with multiple generations of parents and siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles, all dedicated to crafting furniture.

Adam Harrison, 32, has been with the company for 15 years. "I started during my senior year in high school and stayed on. My dad (Mike Harrison), uncle, and cousin all work here as well. The company allows us the flexibility to balance family needs and work responsibilities. They also provide professional development support to help us with technical training if our job entails it. I've been to Atlanta and Michigan for software training and even Italy to learn more about the CNC (computer numeric control) machine I operate. New England Woodcraft provides a great opportunity for the community because the company hires college kids and high school

PHOTO COURTESY OF CHARLIE THURSTON



Harmon and Maxine Thurston started New England Woodcraft circa 1961 in their garage in Brandon, using a Sears and Roebuck table saw, a drill, and hand tools to make benches and footstools. Today, while it is still a family-run business, it employs 140 people in an 82,000-square-foot factory.

seniors during vacations, and it's possible to turn a summer job into a legitimate career."

Gary Reichert signed on in 2003 and echoes Adam's sentiments. What keeps him here? "There's a family focus, the opposite of a corporate factory mentality. Harmon told me when I interviewed that if he wanted to treat us like cattle, he'd stick a bell around our necks. They simply trust us to put in our 40 hours and get our work done."

A HERITAGE IN WOOD

The Thurston family has worked with wood for nearly a century. Harmon grew up on a farm in Rumford, Maine and helped his father log pulpwood with teams of draft horses in the 1930s. Harmon earned his degree in forestry from the University of Maine where he met and courted the vivacious Maxine, who was studying business administration. The couple married in 1954 and moved to Brandon in 1958.

New England Woodcraft evolved out of a simple footstool. "Maxine wanted to put her feet up during pregnancy. We couldn't find a colonial-style footstool so I made her one. Ever since then, I guess you could say we had a foot up on the competition," Harmon said with his impish smile. "Maxine built this company as much as I did. It's been a true family business from the beginning." The company started small with footstools and benches Harmon built in his garage on West Seminary Street in Brandon. His equipment? A Sears and Roebuck table saw, hand drills, and a screwdriver. And plenty of gumption.

"We entered all the craft shows in the area and agreed to make anything that a customer wanted," Harmon recalled. "Even if I didn't know how to make it, I could always learn!" In the fall of 1961, the Thurstons put what limited money they had into an ad in *Yankee Magazine* and ran it for 18 months. That generated buzz and opened up new markets. They sold to colleges, military bases, and Workbench retail stores in New York until that company closed in 2005. New England Woodcraft currently ships furniture around the world, with 30 to 40 freight trucks pulling out of the Forest Dale factory each week.

"If Harmon is the backbone of the company, Maxine was the cornerstone," according to Bob Gearwar, an employee of 27 years who works in purchasing. "They rounded each other completely." Sadly, Maxine passed away in 2013. Together the couple tended to all aspects of the business; Harmon focused on the construction and machinery while Maxine concentrated on the business end and employees' needs. "Maxine was fully devoted to this company as well as to raising our four children," Harmon said. "Whenever I got discouraged, she would hold both of us up. We never would have succeeded without each other."

Over the course of 20 years, the company evolved and expanded into new facilities in Brandon, eventually moving all the operations to neighboring Forest Dale. In 1984, they built a 32,000-square-foot assembly shop in Forest Dale. Unfortunately, in July 1985, faulty wiring caused a fire that destroyed a storage warehouse and a Quonset hut housing the machining operations. Quick action saved the new assembly building, and in true Vermont fashion, the team pulled together and shipped out a load of furniture in six days. This Herculean task proved the company was alive and here to stay. In 1986, they built a new structure where the warehouse and Quonset hut had been.

Out on the factory floor, men and women ply their trade on



Harmon's son, Charlie Thurston (left), who runs the company, poses with employee Mike Harrison (center) and Harmon (who is 90 and still comes to work daily) on the production floor.



"You do what you need to make it all work," said Harmon. "I'm proud that my employees and family share that same value."



Roland Audette operating a planer inside the furniture factory. Of the 140 employees here, 39 of them have worked here for more than 20 years.



The Forest Dale factory is well organized and kept in immaculate condition. “We’re still making furniture in the U.S. with American products,” says Charlie, “and that’s rare.” Martha Dutton (below) assembles components for a table.



state-of-the-art equipment, a far cry from Harmon’s Sears and Roebuck hand tools. Amidst the labyrinth of machinery and thrum of wood being processed and transformed into furniture, the pace is steady, not hectic. People look up and smile at a visitor touring the facility and return to their task. Everything is neat and orderly, reflecting a well-organized business. It is no wonder people enjoy this atmosphere of camaraderie.

A TRUE FAMILY BUSINESS

“You do what you need to make it all work. I’m proud that my employees and family share that same value,” Harmon said. The four Thurston kids—Lee, Lynn, Charlie, and Jeff—were shaped by the business to varying degrees. Lee moved to California in the early 1980s and started building furniture, replicating what he learned to produce in Vermont. After a successful 25 years, he shifted to boat building. His sister, Lynn, helped him establish his furniture business in 1983 before she pursued her true love of farming. She now brokers sales for Maine blueberries on a commercial scale.

Charlie Thurston refers to himself as an S.O.B.—Son of the Boss, that is. He has essentially worked at New England Woodcraft his entire life and now runs the company. Jeff’s forte is sales, and he helped develop the college and military markets. In 2005, he created an offshoot of the family business called Thor’s Elegance. “This allows us to use New England Woodcraft’s manufacturing capabilities to design new products for retail in addition to our institutional accounts,” Jeff explained. The premium quality pieces, made primarily of cherry and maple with lacquer finishes, are sold directly to furniture stores. All the furniture is milled and manufactured in the Brandon workshop, which has 15 or so employees.



Dan Dragon (left) and Dick Shortsleeves hold an end table that is partway through the finishing process. Dick is one of the original New England Woodcraft employees.



This furniture is built to last; here, worker Fran Carty clamps together furniture components during assembly. Furniture is offered in a wide variety of styles, woods, and finishes; drawers of dressers and tables are made using traditional, dovetailed joinery.

GET OUTSIDE AND PLAY

An album of photographs reveals a family who relishes the outdoors. Seventy years of Nordic and alpine skiing, fishing, hiking, trekking, camping, and picnicking in all seasons. When adventure called, Maxine and Harmon embraced the opportunity. These humble New Englanders explored the globe, treasuring rugged beauty across the United States and Canada, as well as throughout Europe, China, Burma, Nepal, India, Thailand, and Laos.

It is clear the couple loved to mingle with the locals, enjoying their foods and traditions; visiting workshops of weavers and furniture makers; and listening to musicians play native instruments. “Thanks to Charlie running the shop, we were able to travel and see the world,” Harmon said gratefully. The Thurstons also remain devoted to their farm in Shoreham where the extended family migrates as often as they can.

Now in his 90th year, Harmon Thurston still comes to work every day. Although he eschews the computer, he continues to weigh in on decisions. His employees greet him warmly and swap playful banter when he heads out to the factory floor. Harmon’s Yankee persistence infuses the ethos of the company.

“We’re still making furniture in the U.S. with American products, and that’s becoming more rare,” said his son Charlie. “We face the ongoing challenge of competition from overseas imports, but our quality speaks for itself.” By adhering to a few simple principles, New England Woodcraft has come a long way from footstools made in a garage. 🪵

Maria Buteux Reade has a home along the Battenkill River in Arlington, VT. After 27 years teaching English, she now balances freelance writing with work at Someday Farm in East Dorset.

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JUST THE FACTS

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