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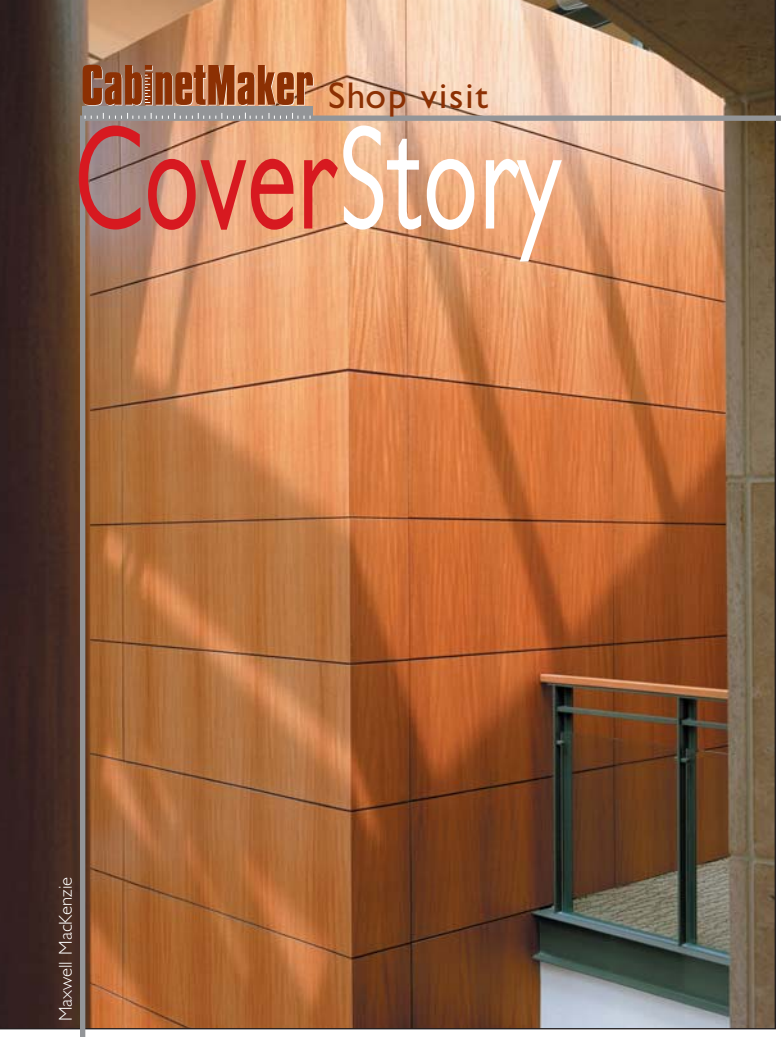

Maxwell MacKenzie

Creating a look — *The beauty of this wall is the result of careful attention to matching and sequencing the individual slices of veneer.*

Veneer work revives shop

Switching from cabinetmaking to architectural veneer panel production spurs company to solid sales and growth

Story and photos by Linda Ohm
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Shop Snapshot

Company: S.J. Morse Co.
Location: Capon Bridge, W.V.
Founded: 1979
Proprietor: Stephen Morse
Primary product: Custom architectural veneer panels
Employees: 15
Annual sales: $3 million
Shop size: 10,000 square feet
Key equipment:
- Kuper guillotine clipper
- Kuper splicer
- Joos press
- Butfering sander
- Holz-Her vertical panel saw

Web site: www.sjmorse.com

S.J. Morse Co. in Capon Bridge, W.V., started out as a cabinet shop doing high-end cabinets and commercial projects, but in the early '90s the owner realized he was slowly going out of business.

"No matter how fast I worked and how fast I made it, somebody could underbid me and I'd be out," says owner Stephen Morse. "And then we'd get a job, we'd be excited and then wonder what we forgot. Because we knew the reason we got the job is because we were going to lose money."

Frustration with that recurring situation cried out for a change. Switching to veneer panel production offered not only relief from that problem but new business opportunities as well, says Morse.

S.J. Morse Co. grew into veneer work slowly. The company actually started doing veneer panels simply because it couldn't get the product it needed for the jobs it was doing. Those first efforts relied on a vacuum bag to produce panels. "We would do three panels a day with a vacuum bag and we thought we were really pumping it out," says Morse. But, he says that the process gave the company a taste for doing it, producing exactly what it wanted.

Opportunity knocks

Morse might have stayed with that low level of technology and production for veneer panels if it hadn't been for another business effort that failed. An attempt to break into the library furniture arena failed to materialize and threatened the entire company. But a couple of customers asked the company to produce veneer panels for them. The work kept the company on its feet until it realized that doing architectural veneer panel production could result in enough work to support the business.

As luck would have it, at the same time, an experienced sales represen-

Dedicated to veneer — *This part of the 10,000-square-foot shop is dedicated to processing veneer components into architectural veneer panels. Beyond this room is an area where curved panels and panels that require more preparation are handled. Adjacent to the processing areas is a storage area.*

Establishing an order — *Stuart Eiland, vice president of operations, and owner Stephen Morse (right) do a preliminary examination of the flitch when it arrives. The individual bundles of veneer are restacked to make panels that represent the same synoptic relationship.*

tative, Joe Penaz, approached the company offering his services. He was the right guy at the right time, says Morse.

"Instantly, we were busy. He was our credibility," says Morse. "He knew the business and knew it really well. And everybody in the business trusted him, so he was a tremendous asset and he continues to be."

Getting a competitive edge

The first thing S.J. Morse had to do was to stop building cabinets. Morse didn't want to appear to be in competition with the very same companies he hoped would become his veneer panel customers.

The changeover took time. One of the first things in the shop to go was the finishing department. Morse took into account the space needed for finishing, the chemicals and waste involved and how little finishing would actually be required. Because the company would be producing primarily oversized panels to be finished by the purchaser, the finishing area became nonessential. And when his finisher of 12 years quit, that made the process even easier.

Initially, the company's veneer production used the same equipment it already had in place for cabinetmaking. When it first began making panels, it used an Altendorf F45 sliding table saw to cut the edges of the veneer and a Butfering sander to sand the faces of the panels. In 1992, a 4 x 8 electric Joos press replaced the vacuum bag. Morse also brought in a small Kuper zig-zag stitcher for splicing together veneer components.

In 1998, the company upgraded to a Joos 5 x 10 press. In 2000, the company further upgraded, purchasing a Kuper 4200mm guillotine cutter and a Kuper splicer. For better panel processing, the company bought a Holz-Her vertical panel saw with automatic feed in 2002, as well as a used Brandt edgebander.

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High-end veneer work requires special attention

If you were to look at a veneer face panel that was available from the local hardware superstore and one of the panels in the same species produced by S.J. Morse Co., located in Capon Bridge, W.V., you might be hard pressed to tell the difference initially, says Stuart Eiland, vice president of operations. But because of the architectural values that are put into the selection process involving sequencing and balancing, they're radically different, and if the panels were put side by side on a wall, there would be a very noticeable difference.

"The architectural panel work that we do often uses resources that we and our clients and architects like to think of as unique," says Eiland. "In many cases we're using veneer flitches picked out by an architect two years ago."

The term flitch is often misused, says Eiland. It refers to a group or segment of veneer pieces that make up parts of a log. "There are a lot of resources that are dedicated to the selection and specification of, in some cases, a very specific flitch," he says. Some architects not only choose a specific species, but write the flitch and log number into a contract.

Clipping flitches — *Each veneer flitch is clipped sequentially and in a balanced way to the desired size on the Kuper guillotine by Chris Strother. He numbers each panel's worth of veneer.*

Putting the pieces together — *Nancy Gardner puts together the individual veneer components in sequence. When she finishes she signs off on it. Every employee has to assess the work at every stage and sign off on it.*

One piece of equipment that Morse anticipates will be beneficial to all employees is the most recent purchase, a Tawi overhead vacuum lift and crane bought through Ex-Factory.

Making a panel

But having all the right equipment in place is only a part of the story, Morse has found. The process typically begins when the architect of a project issues veneer specifications, something that happens well before the veneer bundles are shipped to S.J. Morse (see Distinctive veneers, pg. 37).

As soon as each flitch of veneer arrives, Stuart Eiland, vice president of operations, or Morse himself do a preliminary examination of the raw material for sequencing and consistency.

"Going through this process of review, you recognize visually, with a lot of experience, that bundle one actually is directly adjacent with bundle seven," says Eiland. "So you're restacking the log basically the way it should be stacked in a sequential order and its separate parts. You can't combine veneer from two different parts in the same elevation."

Careful attention to matching and sequencing the individual slices of veneer at this stage is important to the final look of the project, Morse says. "They could go in the same room, but they couldn't go on the same wall," he says.

This sequencing and matching is carried through production, including clipping, splicing and glue-up. "Each station signs off on each panel," says Morse. "Every employee has to look at and assess the work at each stage. It's always better to catch something at the earliest possible moment, but it's still a heck of a lot better to catch it before the client does."

Although most of the company's veneer work is in flat panels, some 20 percent is devoted to curved work. Curved panels are shaped on custom forms the company fabricates. Each form has two matching frames with ribs going both vertically and horizontally to produce smooth, even curves. Although the company designs and assembles the forms, the radiused parts are outsourced to a company with CNC capabilities. □

Marketing a sustainable product

Because Stephen Morse, owner of S.J. Morse Co., is very interested in sustainable products and the issues they address, the company has developed trim that uses an FSC-certified face and a wheatboard core. Wheatboard is a substrate created from wheat straw, a byproduct of harvested wheat, and formaldehyde-free resins. That makes it a good choice for public buildings because it's a zero off-gas and it's great for people with formaldehyde sensitivities, says Morse.

The trim uses a simplified version of the process used in manufacturing custom veneer panels, except there are no matching issues. It is sold primarily as a part of a custom package that might include a number of custom panels and trim. Morse says that in some applications it might be considered too expensive.

To promote the trim, Morse participated in the Home by Design Showhouse exhibited at the International Builders' Show in Las Vegas in January 2004. Not only was it a chance for Morse to be involved with a host of energy-efficient and sustainable products, but also it provided immediate industry feedback.