

Kiln Direct Helps Abeel Custom Millwork Master the Details

By Carolee Anita Boyles

When Jack Abeel got his degree in commercial art, he didn't know he would spend his career restoring historic buildings. But his degree has stood him in good stead in his career, and he has earned a reputation as a master craftsman at restoration.

Recently Jack, who owns Jack Abeel Custom Millwork, added a Kiln Direct kiln to his operation. He said the addition of the kiln is allowing him to have greater control over the fine details of some of the woodwork he does.

Jack had an interest in fine woodworking from an early age.

"Growing up, I was always interested in making things," Jack said. "I ended up going to Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond and getting a degree in commercial art and design. When I went there it was called Richmond Professional Institute, but they changed the name the last year I was there, so I was in the first class that graduated from VCU."

While he was in school, Jack worked as a bricklayer's apprentice during the summers. By the time he graduated from college he also had his journeyman's card in bricklaying.

Of course, this was during the Vietnam War, and eight days after graduation, Jack received a draft notice from the US government.

"I joined the Air Force and served for four years," he said. "I ended up going to Thailand."

When he returned from his tour of duty, Jack started working on historic buildings. He started out work as a bricklayer, but soon his interest turned to the details of



Abeel Custom Millwork purchased a 8,000 board foot Kiln-Direct kiln dry kiln. Jack Abeel is very happy with his new kiln and the advice that Niels Jorgensen has given him.

the fine woodworking in the old houses on which he was working, and he started Jack Abeel Custom Millwork.

"The millwork end of the process was lacking," he said. "There just wasn't anybody who could replicate things to look like the original. I knew I could do it, so I started doing that as well as brick work. I ended up getting out of the brick business because it's just so hard on your body. I've been doing millwork for something between 25 and 30 years now."

Although commercial art seems like an odd degree for someone who works in the forest industry, it's been a huge benefit to his business. Jack said it helps him com-

municate with architects involved in restoration projects.

"I'm able to talk visually with architects, because they're visual people," he said. "We talk with pencils in our hands rather than trying to explain everything. It's often easier to draw something than to explain it."

In the time that Jack has been doing millwork, his company has grown into an integral part of the history preservation and restoration community of Virginia.

"I work for a number of places and people," he said. "Having an eye for design, and knowing what looks good, makes my work a lot better than many people's.

We're located in the historic district of Virginia, where there are many plantations. Colonial Williamsburg is here, and people are very aware of older places and very appreciative of them."

Jack never knows what the next client is going to want.

"It seems like everyone wants something out of the ordinary," he said. "No two days are alike, and no two jobs are alike. That keeps what I do very interesting and very fresh."

Jack's location puts him close to the forest resource base that he needs to create the high grade millwork necessary for accurate restoration of buildings.

"We're about 8 miles out from Petersburg and 30 miles south of Richmond," Jack said. "It's a fairly rural area, with a lot of farmlands and woodlands. The woodlands here are mixed pines and hardwoods, and are a combination of private land and timber company land."

For a long time, Jack said, local lumber mills worked with him to find, cut and dry the kinds of material that he needed to match specific demands for many jobs. Then the economics of the area changed and many of the mills closed.

"There are very few lumber mills left in this area," he said. "So I bought a sawmill and started cutting my own lumber. Then three or four years ago, in order to expedite the process, I decided I needed to get a kiln so I could control everything from the tree to the finished product."

Jack started by building a kiln from scratch, but he wasn't happy with it.

"I just didn't know enough about it," he said. "I made a big room and put heat and a dehumidifier in it, and was drying wood that way. But it took a long time to get it dry, so I decided to just buy a kiln."

The kiln he purchased was an 8000 board foot capacity kiln from Kiln-Direct in North Carolina. It's a kiln that company owner Niels Jorgensen specifically designed for small lumber companies that are looking for an industrial-type kiln with the controller and equipment capacities normally only found on large industrial kilns.

"I saw Kiln-Direct at an annual forestry show in Richmond, Virginia," Jack said. "Niels had a couple of kilns set up and they looked pretty nice, so I talked to the reps there and liked what I saw. Then I rode down to North Carolina to where they make them and spent a day down there looking at them and talking to Niels."

After the trip down, Jack bought the



Finished parts include a variety of custom millwork, including moldings and window frames.

kiln. Once it was delivered, Niels' father Valde Jorgensen came to set it up and get it started running.

"All of the Jorgensens are delightful people," Jack said. "Everything went very smoothly. It was really exciting to get it loaded up and running. I dry mostly pine, cypress and poplar, and we set up programs on the computer to do different sizes of those three woods. It's really very easy; I

just load the kiln and come in on the computer and fill in how many feet I have and the moisture content I want, and click, and it's off and running."

Jack has been very happy with the Kiln-Direct kiln.

"It allows me to find what I need, saw it into the sizes that I need, and then get it dried for my customers in a timely manner," he said. "And Kiln-Direct has been



Jack Abeel removing dried lumber from his new Kiln-Direct dry kiln. Custom Millwork saws its logs to length and size on a Wood-Mizer LT70.



Jack Abeel standing in front of hardwood timbers.

really great to work with. When I've had a question, there's always been someone there who could answer it, and that means a lot."

When Jack says that he likes to control the entire process from tree to millwork, he means just that. Sometimes he has a logger cut trees for him, and sometimes he goes into the woods and cuts the tree or trees down himself.

"I have several big landowners who have really nice forest lands and who work with me," Jack said. "There's one landowner in particular who I tell what I need, and he will go out and pick the exact tree or trees for me. Some clients, such as Colonial Williamsburg, have very specific needs, and by doing things the way I do them I'm able to provide exactly what those clients need."

Once Jack has the logs back at his shop, he puts them on his WoodMizer LT70 sawmill and cuts the logs to the length and

size that he needs.

"Then I put them on a rack that I built that let's me stick them as they're cut," he said. "We let them air dry for a short period of time and then put them in the kiln."

After the lumber is dry, and depending on the job, Jack puts the dry lumber on one of several milling and profile grinding machines in his shop. He has a number of pieces of equipment in his shop, including a Wadkin moulder, a couple of profile grinders, routers, mortisers, shapers, belt sanders and several other very specialized pieces of cutting equipment.

"I have everything to do whatever the customer needs to have done," he said. "I have probably as well equipped a shop as you'll find anywhere in the country. Most everything we do is either mortised and tenoned or pegged. We do top notch work."

In fact, Jack goes beyond just custom millwork. He also does timber framing, and occasionally will even take on moving an old house.

"When we do that, we take the house apart piece by piece and put it back up," he said. "We restore the whole house. On those jobs we may cut molding, wainscoting, door frames, doors, paneling, stairs.....anything that comes along. Right now we're doing a pretty good sized job right on Central Park in Manhattan that's an apartment renovation on an apartment building that was built in 1903. On this particular job the architect is in California."

Having the Kiln-Direct kiln has made preparing lumber for milling for all his jobs much more convenient, Jack said.

"It gives me the ability to say 'Yes, we can do that,' any time someone calls, and without wondering if I can find whatever it is," he said. "In this day and time everyone wants to sell you what they have instead of giving you what you want. I want to satisfy my customers, so I try to give them what they want, and the Kiln-Direct has helped me do that."

Because he focuses so completely on the craftsman aspect of the business, Jack relies heavily on his wife Anne to run the rest of the business.

"She takes care of everything," he said. "I do the work and she does the rest. We met at school, and she was an art major too."

That interest in the arts has spilled over into the Abeels' family life. They raised two daughters who also have the "art" gene, and created a family bluegrass band called, appropriately, "The Abeels."

"We played for years," Jack said.

"Now we have grandkids and some of them play, but the family band has kind of folded because the girls have moved and have kids they need to spend time with, so we don't play much any more. When we were playing regularly we played in Nashville several times and played all over the country and in Canada."

Neither one of his daughters seems poised to take over Abeel's Custom Millwork.

"One of them is an artist, and the other one is a physicist," Jack said. "But after all of that, the physicist owns a day care center in Richmond. We're not sure why we sent her to school for physics if she was going to open a day care center, but she's done real well with it."

Perhaps, though, the business is going to skip a generation; one of Jack's granddaughters is very interested in what the company does.

"She's 14, and she says she wants to work for me this summer," he said. "Regardless of what she decides, though, they're all just brilliant kids and we're really proud of them."

Jack said he loves what he does, and although he doesn't see the business growing any, he said the number of employees he has does expand and contract according to the needs of the clients he has at any given time.

"The last three years, work has been very slim," he said. "We've never had a dry spell like the one we've been in. But right now we're as busy as we can be. We don't know how long that's going to last, but we're thankful for it." At this point, Jack said, he would like for the recession to come to an end and for business to return to its normal volume.

Since he is now 64, Jack would like to have someone start to take over the business.

"I have several good employees who have been with me for 20 years or better, and I hoped maybe they could ease into it, but when things started slowing down, I've felt lucky to be able to keep them working," he said.

What he likes the most about what he does, Jack said, is meeting people and doing a job that nobody else can do.

"Every job is a challenge," he said. "I like not having a routine. Since we're not a production type manufacturer, everything is different and that keeps it interesting. When someone calls I never know what I'm in for."

