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Kuiken Brothers Co. Celebrates Centennial

Leading supplier of quality lumber, millwork and building materials has constructed a strong legacy in New Jersey.

By Anthony Birritteri, Editor-in-Chief

Sitting in his Midland Park office, one of nine Kuiken Brothers Company locations in Northern New Jersey and New York State, Doug Kuiken is surrounded by 100 years of family history. Memorabilia rests on 20-foot-long glass shelves that run the length of an entire wall. They are filled with awards, citations, family photos, catalogs, old product line samples and other mementos that mark a history of achievement for a fourth-generation family-run business. Today, this business is the largest independently run lumber dealer in New Jersey.

This \$100-million company has survived two World Wars, the Great Depression, the most recent Great Recession and other turbulent times in our nation's history as it always has: through "honesty, integrity, hard work and paying attention," says Kuiken, who is company president. "It's a culture we haven't strayed far from since our founding."

Kuiken Brothers has never strayed from its motto of "Get it right." Additionally, it has avoided the pitfalls that many family-owned businesses face, such as internal squabbles, jealousies and succession issues, by keeping business and family concerns separate. "Has it been totally harmonious from day one? Of course not, but in discussing business, we leave the family aspect out of it. Even though many of us have the same last name, we check that at the door," Kuiken says.

What also helps is that Kuiken Brothers is a large business, with various locations and different product lines. "With the growth of the company, there were enough areas for people [family members] to do what they wanted to do and function and perform important roles in management," Kuiken explains.

The Kuiken ancestors can be proud of the achievements the company and family have made. The American side of the family's history dates back to 1890 when three young Kuiken brothers, Nicholas, Dirk and Henry, emigrated with their parents from Holland to settle in Fair Lawn. The brothers, along with their cousin Richard (Richard was already in this country before his three cousins arrived) became involved in residential and commercial construction by 1912, the year Nicholas registered the Kuiken Brothers Company name. When obtaining building materials for construction became difficult in 1921, the brothers decided to open their own lumberyard and mill. There,

they began building windows, doors and sashes, in addition to machining lumber.

The family soon became involved in politics and banking. In 1929, Nicholas founded and became president of Fair Lawn Radburn Trust Company, which later merged with National Community Bank and is now part of The Bank of New York. He was also one of the founders of the Fair Lawn Building and Loan Association, which became the Columbia Savings and Loan Association (now Columbia Bank). With an eye towards public service, Nicholas served as mayor of Fair Lawn for two terms and from 1932 to 1941, he served as a Bergen County Freeholder.

In the late 1960s, Evan Kuiken, son of Nicholas and brother of Edward (Doug Kuiken's father) helped found Fair Lawn State Bank (now Valley National Bank).

Doug Kuiken became president

of Kuiken Brothers in 2002, when his Uncle Evan stepped down from the post. He had previously served as vice president. "I grew up with sawdust in my veins," he says, recalling his childhood and the days he and his cousins would build go-carts in the Fair Lawn lumberyard. By age 12, Kuiken was working for the company by unloading lumber from trucks.

Through the years the business expanded its product line and the number of its locations.

According to Kuiken, "If you roll back the clock 100 years, lumber products are entirely different from today. Back then it was all cut by hand [on location]. Today, lumber is being shipped in by rail from large mills on the West Coast." It's no longer wood products, either, but composites, synthetics and PVC panels and boards.

The broad range of products found at Kuiken Brothers stores include: resi-



Doug Kuiken stands proudly amidst lumber products at Kuiken Brothers Company's Succasunna location, which opened last year.

I think the market has gotten better and we will see growth going forward ... I won't call it robust growth. It will be slow and steady, and that's okay."

On the commercial side, he says the market never took the big dip people thought it would take. "I don't think there was the degree of leverage and subprime loans on the commercial real estate side. A lot of commercial property owners tightened their belts, but the vacancy rates never got out of hand. They are now beginning to spend a little more on renovation and rehab work," he says.

Coping with DEP regulations made it difficult for many builders to get their projects underway, and Kuiken Brothers had firsthand experience in this matter. Obtaining DEP approvals to construct the Succasunna site took almost four years.

Today, he sees the regulatory environment in the state as friendlier (see related story in this issue on DEP becoming business friendly). He adds that the Christie Administration, overall, is trying to break down the barriers to business growth and expansion. "We need to be sensitive about the environment, but the pendulum had swung too far to one side. The right balance today is close to being struck," he says.

Kuiken keeps abreast of state issues as chairman of the Board of Trustees of the New Jersey Business & Industry Association and the Board of Directors of New Jersey Manufacturers Insurance Company. He has been a board member of both organizations since 2003. "NJBIA is the voice of business in Trenton. While business owners are focused on their day-to-day operations and transactions, NJBIA is in Trenton lobbying on our behalf. It has our back," he says.

Regarding NJM, Kuiken says it is a "best in class" insurance company, underscored by the fact that *Consumer*

Reports named it the No. 1 auto insurance company in the nation.

"NJM will be celebrating its 100th anniversary in 2013. NJBIA celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2010. Kuiken Brothers is sandwiched in the middle with our 100th anniversary. These entities stand on a foundation built many years ago. What they have in common is a culture of integrity and honesty."

Kuiken says reaching the 100th anniversary milestone gives him a tremendous sense of pride. However, "it is only a moment in time. Every minute something new happens. We need to keep moving forward."

As for what is up and coming in this anniversary year, a book on the history of Kuiken Brothers and its contributions to the Tri-State area is being written by Jon Kuiken, one of the fourth generation Kuiken family members. In November, the company will hold a Product Expo at the Sheraton Crossroads in Mahwah, where the company's core customers - professional builders, remodelers, architects and designers - will learn about the latest products and building techniques through product displays and educational seminars. The event drew 1,400 attendees at the last event.

ProSales magazine, the preeminent trade journal for building materials dealers, recently named Kuiken Brothers the "2012 Dealer of the Year," unexpected icing on the company's anniversary cake.

"That's a nice validation of what we are trying to do here," Kuiken says.

There will be more challenges and opportunities for the company as it enters the threshold of the next 100 years. "The plan is to continue to grow and expand with new outlets and products ... to continue differentiating ourselves from our peer group. We are the largest independent lumber dealer in New Jersey. It's a position we like and want to maintain." NJB

DEP TRANSFORMATION: CONTINUED FROM PAGE 50

According to Martin, the new goals are to ensure that the rate of environmental improvements in the state keep pace with current and future conditions. "The environmental and public health issues we face today are not the same as they were when the agency first began. Using our same responses to today's challenges may not provide similar results," he says.

Besides taking what is learned from the Barnegat Bay approach and implementing those processes at other state watersheds, the goals include:

- Taking a comprehensive regional approach to environmental management.
- Restoring and enhancing protection in environmentally overburdened communities.
- Establishing a financially viable and stable system with dedicated funding to sustain state parks.
- Developing a renewable energy strategy for public health, environmental protection and economic vitality.

Overall, Martin says he is proud of the transformation occurring at the DEP. "I believe we have an organization that is focused on protecting our air, water and natural resources. We are doing things better, but we still have a long way to go. I am not naïve to believe we are done. The good thing about the DEP is that we have a lot of phenomenal people. It's an extremely educated group that is committed to the environment," he says. "What they need is leadership and that is what I feel I have brought to this organization." NJB

CORRECTION: In the February issue, the name of Sun National Bank's president and CEO was incorrectly spelled (page 43). His name should have read "Thomas X. Geisel".

dential and commercial interior and exterior building materials, plywood and panels, kitchen cabinetry, windows, doors and miscellaneous millwork, decking products, railing systems, tools, hardware and fasteners, flooring and moulding.

In August of last year, the company introduced the KB Classical Moulding Collection. This includes 65 in-stock, historically-inspired moulding designs or "profiles." The collection, classified by style including Early American, Georgian, Federal, Greek Revival and

6,000-square-foot window, kitchen and millwork showroom which opened in 2006.

Kuiken says the location is a high volume site that also functions as a distribution center for the rest of the company's lumberyards thanks to on-site rail service via the Morristown and Erie line.

Rail service is integral to Kuiken Brothers because it enables the company to purchase lumber directly from lumber mills, which ensures quality and keeps costs down. Each year, the

some of the state's well-known commercial and residential construction firms via a 75-vehicle fleet, which includes flatbeds, box/millwork vans, tractor trailers, flatbeds with moffets (forklifts on the back) as well as boom trucks. Currently, about 80 percent of its business is serving residential builders. Kuiken hopes to grow the commercial side at a faster pace.

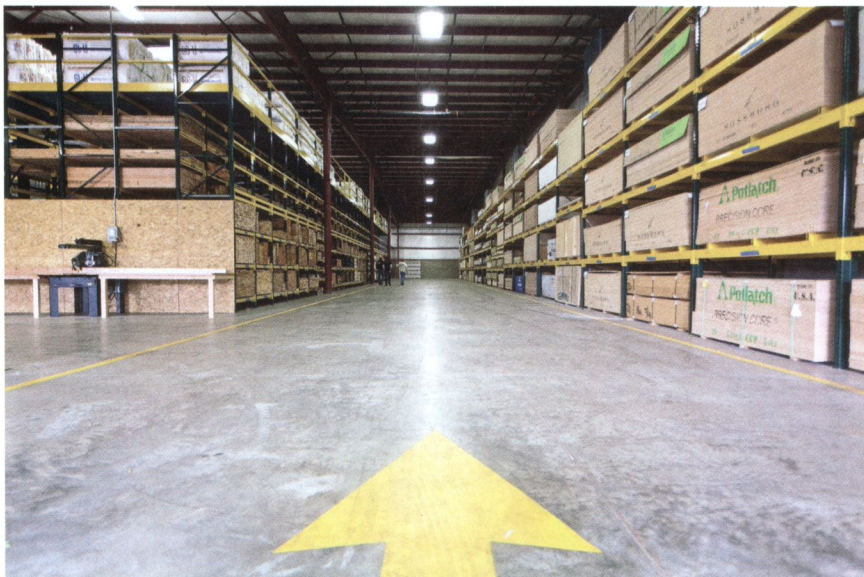
Asked how the company manages to compete against the big-box home improvement stores such as Home Depot and Lowe's, Kuiken explains that while the big-box stores function primarily for the consumer or the "do it yourselves," Kuiken Brothers' clients need the expertise that its 240 employees can provide. "There are products that we sell that need the expertise to back it up," he says. "We have people who have worked for us for many years. They are the window experts, the millwork experts, the lumber experts... our clients need these people so they can get it right day in and day out. Where we compete is with our devotion to the professional trades people."

Kuiken says the greatest hindrances to the company's growth have been the recent recession and coping with an onerous regulatory environment.

In coping with the recession, Kuiken says the company did what most other businesses did: "Mind expenses," he says. "We didn't have mass layoffs, but reduced our workforce through attrition. We worked harder for less, but we lived to fight another day."

"The underlying fact is that we are a very conservative company. We leave money in the business and have a strong balance sheet. In the last business cycle, if you didn't have that and you were highly leveraged, you were in trouble."

He says there was an uptick in residential construction during the last quarter of 2011. "I'm trying to determine if that is a new trend or just a blip."



This Kuiken Brothers' dry warehouse is a drive-through lumberyard, making pick-up extremely convenient for customers, especially during winter months.

Colonial Revival, encompasses a range of crown, casing, base, chair-rail and panel models. The line was mentioned in a recent issue of *This Old House* magazine as one of the "Top 100: Best New Home Products of 2011."

As for company locations, Kuiken Brothers opened its ninth facility last summer in Succasunna in Morris County. The retail site features a 12-acre, state-of-the-art, drive-through lumber and building materials facility. It is adjacent to the company's

company receives and unloads more than 500 rail cars with an assortment of building products.

In total, Kuiken Brothers has eight locations in New Jersey: Fair Lawn, Emerson, Midland Park, Ogdensburg, Wantage, Garfield, Succasunna and Roseland. There is also a store in Warwick, New York, which came about with the purchase of two Conklin Strong facilities (the second site is in New Jersey).

The company delivers products to