



By STEVE KAUFMAN  
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What would Gustave Bittner think if he walked through the door bearing his name and into the offices of the company he started 160 years ago?

Douglas Riddle, Bittners’ president and chief operating officer, laughed. That’s a really good question! “I think he’d be amazed that it’s all still around today,” Riddle said after a pause. “And I think he’d be proud of what’s become of it.”

Casual observers might be surprised at Bittners’ history. Some Louisvillians are still shocked, for example, to learn that Bittners actually custom-produces most of the furniture it places in clients’ homes. Many are also surprised to learn that Bittners does a large commercial business, designing and furnishing corporate suites,

executive offices and work spaces.

It’s not so surprising, though, if you study who Gustave Bittner was in 1854, when he opened his doors for business, nor if you familiarize yourself with the innovative people who’ve succeeded him: his descendants, then the Frazier family, and now Riddle.

Gustave Bittner was an accomplished carpenter and cabinetmaker when he arrived in Louisville in 1852. Though only 25, he had extensive training as a woodworker in his native Pratzten in the German state of Silesia.

Silesia is coal and zinc country, but it’s also well-forested, and woodworking was not an uncommon apprenticeship for a young German boy.

In 1848, much of Central Europe was rife with the violent liberal revolutionary uprisings that consumed Prussia, France, Austria, Italy, Greece and other countries, and so the 19-year-old fled to the U.S. on the Bremen Line’s large, fully rigged sailing ship, The Copernicus.

In 1852, he stepped onto the docks of New Orleans. But he soon made his way upriver to Louisville, and in 1854 he opened a custom furniture and cabinet-making shop on South Brook Street (probably near Liberty).

He thrived there for 40 years before passing away in 1895, at 66. His youngest son, William C. Bittner, took over the business, extending it into design consulting.

“I believe his customers must have asked him for design advice along with the furniture they were buying, and he saw that could become a natural evolution for the business,” Riddle speculated.

William also moved to larger spaces at 427 S. First St. in 1909 and added an in-house upholsterer in 1915. “Another area of growth,” Riddle said. “There was a demand for upholstered furniture, so why not keep it all in-house?”

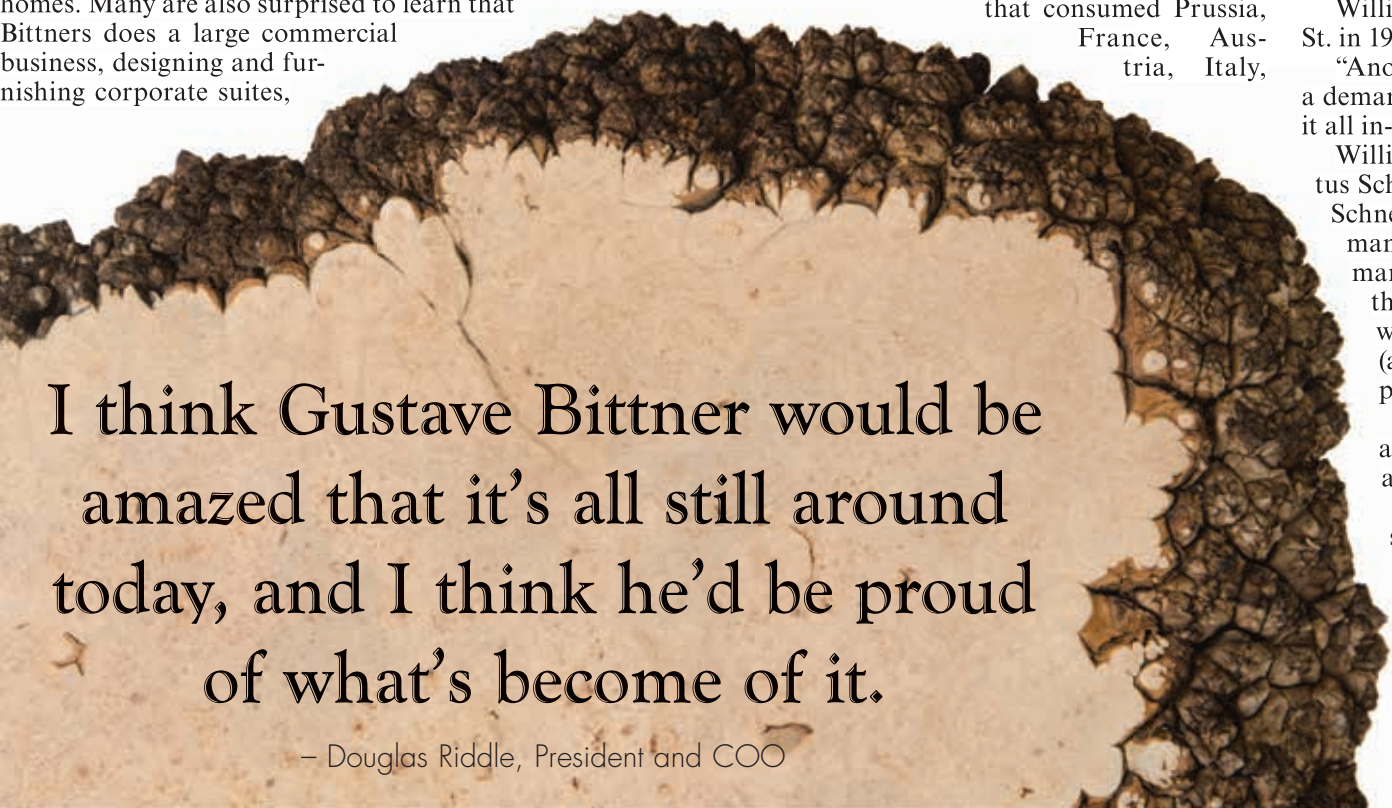
William retired in 1953 at 81, and son-in-law Cle-tus Schneider became president and owner. In 1957, Schneider’s signal achievement was hiring shop manager Hubert Schuwey, a young master craftsman born and trained in Switzerland, to set up the country’s only apprenticeship program in woodcarving, cabinetmaking and marquetry (applying pieces of veneer to form decorative patterns and designs).

“The youngest person in the shop when I arrived was 67,” recalled Schuwey, who was 28 at the time.

Schuwey began seeking promising trade school and high school students who were recommended by their shop teachers. He also began hiring women as finishers. “They just had the feeling for it,” he recalled.

Soon, the shop’s output was growing.

“That was the beginning of a real show-room for the merchandise we made to be sold off our floor,” Riddle said.



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– Douglas Riddle, President and COO

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# RECLAIMING THE PAST

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A lot of those green practices show up in the Bittners wood shop. Despite Bittners' reputation as one of the foremost design firms in Louisville – an arbiter of good taste and elegant design – its custom wood shop is still at the heart of the business.

The current manager of the shop is Brian Keenan, who joined the company in 1985 when he was 19, right out of high school. He was one of those hired by Hubert Schuwy, whom he recalled being intimidating, but also very encouraging.

Quality was always first, Keenan recalled of his apprenticeship under Schuwy. "He never let anything go out the door that wasn't exact," he said. "If you had to redo it, you stuck to it until it was done right."

But doing it right in a timely manner to meet schedules and customers' expectations was also an important skill.

"It's a business, after all," Keenan said. "My salary was affected by the speed of my work." Keenan said many people came through the shop in his 28 years who didn't get it.

"People have to break down the work they're doing into steps," he said. "If they can't visualize the steps, and they're skipping around in the process, it's much harder to go back and correct something that's been missed."

"You have to be a detailed person to put out the quality that we require."

That, Keenan said, is the honor and integrity of the company: to make sure the product is done right, to stand behind it, and to correct or redo it if it isn't up to standards.

"If you regard this as just a job, you won't succeed here," he said.

Part of that success is the love of seeing that raw lumber being cut and turned into the end product.

"It's a joy to see the beauty of the finished piece when it's done right," he said.

As shop manager for the past eight years, Keenan now gets to see the entire process, starting with the original idea as it comes into the door, which is very rewarding to him. But, he said, "I still love working the wood!"

He likes to give customers a tour of the shop so they can see everything that goes into the finished custom piece and why it is such a special product.

"It's not a cookie-cutter process of pulling different pieces off the shelf and putting them together," he said.

While the shop has plenty of computer programming, "we still do all our own hand-drawing," he added.

Keenan actually goes out and secures the raw logs that go into all the pieces. Today, many of these are reclaimed pieces

secured from old barns, vacant homes that are being torn down, construction sites, or trees felled after a storm.

"I look for an interesting color and pattern of the grain," he said. "We can't have too much moisture in the wood, and of course structural damage and bug infestation are not acceptable. But knots and burling give it character."

He said the shop has reclaimed a number of boards from the Whiskey Row construction site, and also logs pulled from the bottom of lakes – especially larger bodies of water, like the Great Lakes.

"It's so cold at the bottom that the wood hasn't rotted away," he said.

This wood takes longer to dry, but the structural integrity is good and the color changes – from time, water and algae – are dramatic.

"It has the original beauty of the wood that God gave it," Keenan said.

One of Riddle's signature achievements was expanding the headquarters building in 2012 by incorporating adjacent buildings the company owned and was leasing out. A courtyard and garden were added, designed by landscape architect Jon Carlotis.

And Riddle created Club 1854, a testimonial to Bittners' history that also serves as a hospitality area for customers.

When The Frazier History Museum prepared its "Top Drawer: 150 Years of Bittners" exhibition 10 years ago, "curators came here to look through our archives, and we found some original drawings of furniture the company had made for Louisville's first families. We had them restored and framed, and they now hang in our office," Riddle said.

So what would Gustave Bittner think? He'd see that his name has become an honored brand – though, "he'd probably be a little shocked at some of the modern pieces," Riddle said. "It's not just brown furniture anymore."

Riddle said the company always burned the Bittners name on the bottom of the furniture so it wouldn't be seen. More and more, though, especially on some of the pieces that use the irregularity of reclaimed wood, the Bittners name is burned on the top of the piece.

"That began in fashion, with companies like Gucci and Louis Vuitton putting their names or logos on the outside," Riddle said. "But it has to be a strong brand and you have to have the confidence that people want the name to appear, that they see value in it."

"When Bittners burns the name in its pieces for everyone to see, the clients tell us they love it. I think Gustave Bittner would appreciate that."

Photos By ROBERT BURGE | Contributing Photographer and CHRIS HUMPHREYS | The Voice-Tribune

