

SOPHISTICATED LIVING

{Louisville's Finest}



slmag.net

Nov/Dec 2018
five dollars

TIMELESS

Bittners celebrates 165 years of creating beautiful spaces

Written by Bridget Williams / Photography by Andrew Kung

In 1854, while Britain and France were allied against Russia during the Crimean War, a 25-year-old German immigrant and woodworker hung out his shingle in Victorian-era Louisville, establishing Kentucky's first interior design firm. By all accounts an unassuming man dedicated to his family, his craft and his adopted community, Gustave Bittner likely could not have imagined that his eponymous startup would flourish to become one of the oldest continually operating design firms in the United States.

If Gustave found himself within the elegant Main Street confines of the interior design firm that still bears his name today, he would likely marvel at the shiny and the new, and feel a camaraderie with the antiques and antiquities on display throughout the appointment-only design studio. Continuing past the inspiring and covetable vignettes, his eyes would delight in spying his original sign, which has been given a place of proper prominence above the entrance to the Bittners' woodworking shop. Stepping though the doors, Gustave would soon discover that while technology has certainly changed in 165 years, the talented artisans engaged in creating heirloom-quality furniture share the same commitment to excellence that has been the hallmark of the company from its inception.

Bittners remained a family-owned business for 128 years; in 1982 it was purchased by Owsley Brown Frazier, his mother Amelia Brown Frazier, and his daughter Laura Frazier. Laura assumed the role of chairman in 1993.

A key piece of the company's current leadership puzzle came together in the early 2000s with the addition of Douglas Riddle, who was lured away from a career in the fashion world, to become president and COO. Under his leadership, Riddle has guided the

company through tumultuous transitions, keeping pace with the ever-evolving world of interior design, which has metamorphized from being heavily focused on retail, to a more client-centric approach. "I am so pleased how Bittners has evolved from our rich cultural history to a cutting-edge modern design firm," said Laura. "We are constantly changing and expanding our vision, which is why we are still a leader in our industry today."

Engaged in both residential and commercial design, custom woodworking and restoration for clients throughout Kentucky and as far away as California, Riddle says the heart and soul of the company remains its creative and committed staff. "Collectively, our design team is one of the best in the industry," said Riddle, who added that having the full support of Laura Frazier enables "wonderful things to happen."

To help mark the company's 165th anniversary, we sat down with a group of Bittners all-stars—Lori Andriot, Amy Cimba, Libby Rush, Betsy Wall and Ron Wolz—to dish on design, and what it means to be a part of the Bittners legacy.

Lori Andriot said it is "hard to believe" that she's been at the company since 1991. The affable Amy Cimba recalls her first day on the job at Bittners—Valentine's Day in 2000—with great clarity. "We celebrated a wedding of one of our delivery guys, Chester, in the carpet room," she recalled. "It was a great way to start!" Libby Rush boasts two terms at the firm, the first from 1977-1985 and then again in 2010 to the present. Betsy Wall, whose mantra is "less is more," joined Bittners in 1990. Regular readers of *Sophisticated Living* will be familiar with Ron Wolz, whose residential projects have been featured more than any other designer over the past 15 years.

Douglas Riddle, President and COO,
with Chairman Laura Frazier



*Left to Right: Lori Andriot, Chad Cobb,
Sue Davidson, Ron Wolz, Libby Rush,
Weasy MacLean, Lori Kommor,
Amy Cimba, Betsy Wall
Photo by Robert Burge*





Bittners team members, including residential and corporate interior designers and support staff. Photos by Robert Burge.

SL: What drew you to the field of interior design?

Andriot: Pure instinct. I have been interested in design for as long as I can remember, and have always known that I was destined for this career. To this day I love what I do and am exhilarated by each opportunity. I am truly blessed to be able to do what I love every day.

Cimba: First, the beauty and creativity. I love everything about it. I love meeting people and their families and being part of making their most intimate environment comfortable and memorable for their families. I watch their children grow up and I get to make it beautiful for them. It is a serious moment of trust on many levels.

Rush: I have a background in art history, and this interest brought me to Bittners in 1977. I have a love of antiques and fine craftsmanship...what better place to be at that time than Bittners. This love developed slowly into interiors, and I am now able to blend my knowledge of history, furniture, fabrics and color into unique projects for clients.

Wolz: I've always had a desire to create something beautiful, and interior design gave me the opportunity to do that.

SL: Do you have a design philosophy?

Andriot: I don't have a specific design philosophy, rather a toolbox that I have developed over the years that I draw on to help create an environment that is unique to each of my clients and that reflects the way they live their lives. I believe that a home

should have a soul that mirrors the personality of its owners and resonates with them on an emotional level.

Quality is also very important to me. I truly believe that details make a significant impact on the end result. With these things in mind, I strive to create an honest warmth to a space and then throw in a few unexpected details just to keep it interesting.

Cimba: I am part of a young (ha - getting older every day) family and I know how a young, busy family operates. I love to design for real everyday use, but I ALWAYS want it to look great too. So, casual chic is really important for me. It's how I live, it's how I entertain, and I want my clients to really use their spaces.

Rush: I like to focus on architecture and the lifestyle of the client who will live there. Every home has a story. I hope that my interiors exude a sense of hospitality, lifestyle and comfort.

There are many hats that I wear as a designer and being a problem solver often becomes more critical than the design itself. I ran the design business Ewald Design Associates with Giampaolo Bianconcini for 25 years. The challenges of running all aspects of a small business has honed my organizational skills. This skill set bodes well for design projects as there are many juggling aspects to every job.

Wolz: More is seldom better. Editing takes a good room to great. I love the work of Albert Hadley, Juan Montoya, Michael Smith and Miles Redd. I find inspiration daily from Douglas Riddle...he'd effortlessly chic.





Master craftsmen in the on-site woodworking studio carry on a tradition started by Gustave Bittner in 1854. Photo by Robert Burge.



A Bittners-made table in the design studio.

SL: What moments would be part of your career highlight reel?

Andriot: Highlights are both the personal relationships that have blossomed with clients and colleagues over the years, and the excitement of collaboration on different residences across the United States.

Cimba: The absolute highlights in my career have been the people that I get to work with and be around. Specifically, the other amazing talents that surround me. I had the pleasure of working with design legend, Ben Small, and every day I get to be inspired by Douglas Riddle, Betsy Wall, Ron Wolz, Lori Andriot, Brian Keenan and so many other amazing designers in our office. Our building is teeming with amazing creativity and talents, and it is exceptionally inspiring to be included in their company, everyday!

Rush: A highlight of my career has been to work with multiple generations of a family. It is rewarding to know that I am able to share in the design aesthetic of their homes. A love of travel has also been a keen influence on me, and I am able to go to different parts of the country to assist with interiors. What a JOY!

Wall: I treasure my clients and the close personal relationships we form based on mutual trust and respect.

Wolz: It is so rewarding to complete a project and then seeing how your client's family enjoys the space!

SL: What do you see as the future of design?

Cimba: I think design will always be evolving yet cyclical. Fabrics are becoming more and more user friendly, and technology is really playing a part in that evolution. It's a constantly changing field and we, as designers, have to really stay ahead of the movement.

Rush: The design industry is cyclical. I have seen swings from contemporary, through transitional to traditional and back again. The classical-traditional style seems to be making a comeback. I hope that the future will see designers embracing history and interpreting in a new, amazing ways.

Wolz: I think design will become more important in the future. With a new generation of clients coming of age, we will see them desiring to make a smaller footprint in our world; with

that comes living in smaller spaces, so curating the right mix of function and aesthetics will become paramount.

SL: What makes Bittners stand apart from other design firms?

Andriot: It has been so fun to be a part of the many transitions over the 27 years I've been with Bittners. By far the most inspiring has been since Douglas Riddle has become our visionary leader. I am thrilled to be part of such a wonderful company. It's an honor to be among such a phenomenally talented and successful design team. Along with our unlimited design resources, we are fortunate to have a great support staff, a professional delivery team and a gifted group of cabinet makers and refinishers.

Cimba: There really is nothing like Bittners. I have clients all over the country who would say the same thing. It is the best of all possible ingredients. We have such a rich history that we cherish, and as a designer I have every possible resource at my fingertips, thanks to Laura Frazier who absolutely loves this company. We are led by the visionary Douglas Riddle, who is an unbelievable talent and leader, and who constantly keeps us fresh and inspired. We

have the best group of craftsmen possible under our roof, who can build the most amazing heirloom-quality pieces.

I have such an incredible and finetuned support staff, encompassing project management, accounting, receiving and delivery. I could not be a great designer without all of these people, but because of them, my only job is design and designing well. It is such an incredible place and I am beyond honored to be part of this great history.

Rush: The designers, the support staff, service to clients, the inventory, the cabinet shop and its craftsmen, the delivery team, and the leadership! The desire to be the BEST in every category listed above sets us apart from the other design firms. It's a team!!

Wall: The ability to collaborate with other top designers, combined with a large inventory and excellent support staff. It is a very professionally operated firm with a rich history and unsurpassed reputation.

Wolz: The rich history of Bittners was built on exceptional quality and outstanding service. We are constantly striving to improve, and that's what makes us one of the best design firms in the country. 