

ALL IN PERSPECTIVE

at
Continental

The licence plate on his silver Mercedes is CCC-CSS. Owner Bill Volk says it stands for Continental Custom Cabinets — Continental Sales and Service. Bruce Donald, project manager and chief estimator, says it stands for Continental Custom Cabinets — Can't Stand Still. Donald knows of what he speaks; stop to talk to someone or take a picture while touring the London, Ont. shop with the 71-year-old Volk and, chances are, when you turn around he won't be there. He will be behind an old edgebander, straightening up a pile of parts no one else can see, fiddling with the clamps on a glued-up arch, or helping two men move a cabinet. He is in the shop at 5:00 every morning, and it is not hard to see why.

Volk approaches everyone and every situation with a sparkle in his eye, an insolent grin and a sense of humour that acknowledges none of the stereotypes of the reserved and serious businessman. Volk's desk, obviously rarely used, sits as an afterthought in a corner of Continen-

tal's large, print-strewn boardroom. Above it hangs a picture of him as Elvis, dancing, with a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken in one hand and a bottle of scotch in the other.

He claims, with glee (and not a shred of truth), he has no idea what is going on with the sales and financial side of the company because Donald handles it all. Volk knows what is going on, but he has masterminded the perfect situation where he gets to spend almost all of his time in the shop, tackling interesting challenges in commercial, custom millwork, while Donald and Volk's son, Peter, wrestle with the headaches of managing a \$10 million-per-year business.

Volk came to Canada in 1958, two months ahead of his draft notice for a mandatory term of service in the German military. "My plan was to come here for a couple years, make my fortune and go back a millionaire," Volk remembers. "It did not really work out that way." A tool and die maker by trade, Volk had trouble



working in the southern Ontario automotive sector because of his poor English and unfamiliarity with Imperial measurement. He found work at Art Cabinet Shop refinishing furniture. Some of the chairs he worked on are still in St. Peter's Basilica in downtown London. "I was getting 90 cents an hour," Volk recalls. "I said I needed more money, I was going to leave. [The owner] says, 'Why are you leaving? I gave you raises.' And I said, 'Yes, but each one is five cents, five cents, five cents — I want more.'" Volk left to partner with fellow countryman, Fred Neubauer,



Nelson Pacheco (left), Ian Strahan (centre) and Caleb Dunlop load up a shipment for Bluewater Health Sciences in Sarnia, Ont. Continental has found a niche in cabinetry for health care.

and Felix Tamasi, first renting space in their shop, then, with their help, building his own at the back of the house he bought in 1965. That space is still part of Continental today.

One of Volk's early projects was supplying kitchens to some local high-rises. "Oh, boy, did I make money," he says. "I developed a knockdown system for cabinets and took them to the apartment building using my old station wagon. I cut all the parts and gables and everything and prefinished them, then I assembled everything there. The safety people were not so strong in those days. All of a sudden

I made four times as much money. I was amazed. I liked that and that is why I did not give it up."

As lucrative as the residential business was, Volk watched it change over the years. "Customers used to be so happy," he says. "Now, if there is a tiny scratch, they complain." He is also daunted by the ever-increasing piles of paperwork. "An old woodworker like me, we do everything on feel and memory," he says. "But when you get older, the memory starts to go." These days, the paperwork falls to Donald, and even he is finding it hard to keep up. "It used to be that

the contractor would let you know about any changes he thought would affect you," Donald explains. "But now I guess they realize that a change to electrical might affect something for the millwork, so they send you everything. Then there is LEED and FSC. Whether you agree with them or not, you have to play the game." Donald's long experience with the fine print in commercial proposals has allowed him to protect the company from unprofitable situations. "A lot of guys will look at a million-dollar project and say, "Great, I can live off this for a year," he says. "But if they



John Campanaro has been with the company 30 years. He is one of several Continental workers with over 20 years' service.



Volk buys laminated counter blanks and Ruth McDonald cuts and joins them. Her son, Aaron, is working with her in the department for the summer.

look a little further, they will see that the project is spaced out over three years. What then?"

Continental now has about 60,000 square feet of manufacturing space divided between the two locations and employs 30 people. Volk's plant is like his overall approach to business: rambling, patched together on the fly, certainly not anything of which

an industrial designer or efficiency expert would approve, but functional and, most of all, paid for. Volk credits his care in not overextending himself as a main reason why he has survived for 50 years while others with deeper pockets and bigger dreams have vanished. Perspective and pragmatism are his great strengths; he scoffs at perfectionists. "One fellow told me he had trailers on semis going to Flori-

da and California," he says. "He said he knew his truck would be on Main Street in Florida at 4:30 in the afternoon to unload cabinets. Come on, you are not that perfect. It is impressive, but it does not make sense. How can it be when we cannot get a truck to Toronto on time with the traffic?" Better, in Volk's model, to manage expectations with customers and build a safety cushion into margins to

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Refusing to allow perfect to be the enemy of good has not prevented Volk from meeting technical challenges as great as any in the industry. In 2000, Continental refurbished Roy Thompson Hall in Toronto, building and installing two suspended canopies that weighed over 20 tons each and several, 3,500-pound, bulkhead reduction panels made with seven layers of curved OSB and covered with 1/10-inch maple veneer that had to be sandblasted to an acoustical specification. That work got Donald invited to consult for the Miami Performing Arts Center on its renovation, and has spurred a number of new opportunities. Though he has delivered projects in the U.S., Bahamas and Japan, Volk has preferred to stay local. That may be changing. The company has over \$3 million of work quoted in New York City.


Volk's healthy skepticism toward well-laid plans extends to his hiring practices, where he prefers a mix of intuition and gut feeling to detailed

vetting. If the shop needs people, Volk will give anyone about whom he has a good feeling a chance. "It is not scientific, it is common sense," he explains. "We take chances. Sometimes we get a bad boy but mostly it works. Some people say I am too easy, too nice. I say, one bad apple in the basket makes it look bad. If the other 99 are good, just throw that one away."

Donald chides him for his trusting approach, but Volk firmly believes that he gains more in morale and loyalty than he loses to bad employee behaviour.

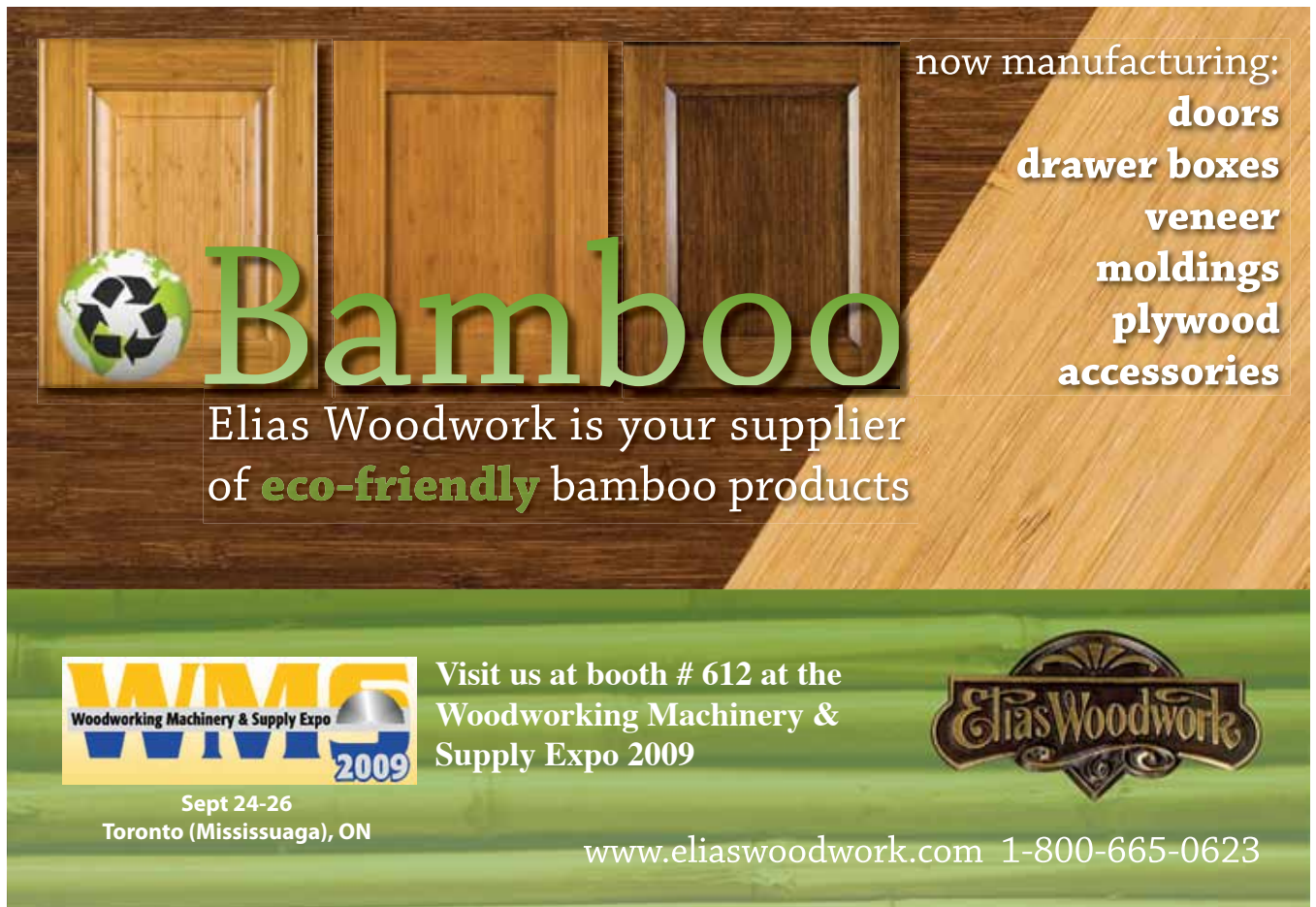
Donald's entry into the company was a victory for Volk's unorthodox approach to hiring. He started with Continental and was there for less than a month before he told Volk he wanted to take another offer. "He was not impressed," Volk remembers. "He expected it to be more business-like." Still, Volk's intuition told him Donald would be back. He bet him a bottle of scotch he'd be back within a year. The company Donald joined

shut down the commercial side of its business shortly after he got there. "I saw the writing on the wall,"

Donald says. "But I waited a week past the year before I called." In the 16 years since, Donald has leveraged his extensive contacts with the likes of Ellis Don and PCL into lucrative and high-profile, commercial contracts. The company's business is now 90 percent commercial, and its production queue is filled for the next two years, mostly with work for hospitals. Driven and detail-oriented, Donald is the perfect foil for Volk's free-wheeling style. "I cannot see myself doing what I do in any other company," he says. "I cannot see myself having the freedom." 



Donald Volk




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