

Beautiful Doors Get Their Start in Chippewa Falls

Final in a series

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The deep brown wooden doors are nothing short of gorgeous.

They're made of a native wood harvested deep in the Amazonian forest.

When shipped and installed in a U.S. home, a set of these doors can run \$8,000 – or more.

And the company producing the doors got its start thanks to a connection in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin.

Dr. David Crane, a Chippewa Falls dentist, has been leading a humanitarian mission to Bolivia for the past 19 years. In recent years, the group has been headquartered at the Hotel Diplomat in downtown Cochabamba.

Over the years, Dr. Crane has gotten to know a lot of Bolivians in high places. One of those is Felix Martinez, owner of the Hotel Diplomat.

In the course of their meetings, the two men spoke of things their two countries had in common. Seeing that Dr. Crane is from the north woods of Wisconsin, and that his family once owned and operated Crane Lumber, the topic of wood products came up.

Dr. Crane invited Mr. Martinez to Chippewa Falls to tour wood manufacturing companies. Mr. Martinez took up the offer in 1994. With his family's longtime connection with the lumber industry, Dr. Crane had no problem setting up appointments. The two men visited several manufacturing companies, talking to executives, taking pictures of operations, and learning more about the process of turning raw lumber into finished product.

Mr. Martinez returned to Bolivia, and set up a company – Martinez Ultra Tech Doors, or UTD, in 1995. It now operates six days a week, and employs 142 employees.

Despite being based in a Third World country, UTD embraces a unique concept that makes its finished products highly desirable in the U.S. and Europe.

Thirty-three percent of Bolivia is covered by the Amazon jungle, said Guillermo Amonzabel, one of UTD's top managers. The jungle contains countless trees and millions of board feet of lumber. UTD bought the concessions on 25 parcels to harvest 21 species of trees in a vast area of the jungle.

Before doing so, the company complies with so-called “green” regulations as developed by the Forest Stewardship Council, headquartered in Bonn, Germany.

According to the Forest Stewardship Council’s web site, certified companies promote responsible management of the world’s forests. Only companies that comply with strict conditions can use the FSC logo on their products.

In UTD’s case, it can harvest trees from just one of its 25 parcels each year. Every tree on each parcel is identified and numbered. Then, UTD must develop a 25-year plan on how it intends to harvest the trees, by sector. Once the trees on one parcel are harvested and replanted, the company cannot return for another 25 years.

Before logging, UTD must win approval of detailed plans on how it intends to open roads to reach the trees. Logging can only be done when the rainy season is over, which limits harvests to half a year. Each tree is brought down with minimal damage to other trees and the surrounding foliage. A chest high stump is left behind, cutting in such a manner leaves the roots alive, and the tree will regenerate.

The tree is then taken to a nearby sawmill, and cut into pieces. Each board is individually numbered and can be tracked throughout the entire manufacturing process. The pieces are then shipped by truck to the UTD factory in Cochabamba, from as far as 1,000 kilometers away.

“It takes four or five days for the wood to get here,” said Amonzabel.

Once it arrives, every piece is graded individually by size and quality, then dried in one of the company’s kilns. When cut in the jungle, the wood registers a moisture content of around 95-98 percent. By the time it is kiln dried, that drops to 8-10 percent. The wood is also treated to kill any insects living in it, as required by the U.S. before it can be imported, said Amonzabel.

The UTD factory in Cochabamba can now handle 300,000 feet of lumber per month, said Amonzabel. Yet demand for its finished product is so great UTD cannot keep up.

The rough cut wood is cleaned and smoothed, and every single piece – including scraps and sawdust – are used or sold.

“Nothing is wasted,” said Amonzabel.

The high tech equipment within the factory’s huge buildings ensures that the most modern techniques are used for finishing wood. As we walk through the plant, workers operate machinery that produces exquisite finished products.

Ninety-two percent of what UTD produces – high quality doors, flooring and molding – are sold in the United States, primarily in Texas. Eight percent goes to Italy.

UTD can fit 400-600 sets of doors per standard shipping container . It ships seven containers a month to its wholesalers, via road to Chile and then by ship to the U.S.

“If we had the capacity, we could go to 15 containers per month,” said Amonzabel. “We’re already looking to expand here.”

UTD must present documentation each year to show what it has done, and what it intends to do for the coming year. The Forestry Commission of Bolivia must approve the allocation of diesel fuel, which keeps UTD’s trucks going. But diesel fuel is also used in the manufacturing of cocaine, something the Bolivian government is fighting hard to stamp out.

At the end of our tour, we meet Ernesto and Janet Martinez, two of Felix Martinez’s children. Ernesto handles marketing for UTD, while Janet serves as department manager. They show us some of the 10 different styles of door designs made by UTD.

Their sister, who is now a business graduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, will one day come back to help run the company.

In a city where many people live below the poverty line, UTD has no problem attracting and keeping good workers. Most are proud to hold a job with a company that produces such high quality doors, said Amonzabel. And because the company adheres to the international forest management standards, it is required to pay salaries higher than companies that are not certified.

“That’s why we have such low turnover,” he said.