

## **LEE FAMILY CELEBRATES 70 YEARS IN WOOD BUSINESS**

Putnam Co., TN

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Richard Lee, an employee of Winell Lee Mouldings and Hardwoods, was recently outside near the business' mill in Baxter and noticed something caught in the trees. When he went over to investigate it, he found a popped balloon with a note inside, frozen in the chill of winter weather. He took it home and thawed the piece of paper and found it was a note in Spanish that looked like it had been written by a child.



Once translated, it revealed that it was a prayer for family and everyone in the world, and especially those suffering from cancer.

"I just felt like that was an echoing of what I think we all feel," Jeanie Lee, marketing, sales and design manager, said. "It's important to make a living, but I have found out that at the end of the day, or days, or years, you realize that what was in that prayer was what was key for us — that your family is doing well, your community is doing well, and your world is focusing and doing well."

Winell Lee Mouldings and Hardwoods celebrated 70 years of service this year by making a donation to the American Cancer Society in honor of the letter they found and in honor of the family members who have battled the disease.

"It seems like (this letter) came at the right time," Jeanie said. "It was like an affirmation of how we feel after 70 years. There's a bigger picture to life that involves your work, but it involves a lot more."

The business began with Isaac and Isabell Lee, who opened a sawmill in Baxter in the 1940s. Later, their son, Winell Lee, for whom the company is named, and his wife, Mary, developed a larger niche in the wood industry. The business continued to the next generations, developing and adding new dimensions to the wood business: son Winell Anthony (Tony) Lee and his wife, Jeanie, and daughter Connie and her husband, Phil. They work alongside Tony and Jeanie's sons, Shea and Jason, and grandson Jay Lee, as well as other family members Howard Harris and Sean Harley, along with other non-related employees.

"Each generation that has come on has brought us a new reach," Jeanie said. "We've retained our love for wood, but we've just found more options, more things you can do with it."

The business is one of very few in Tennessee that takes wood from full trees to the finished product. It all starts on the business' tree farm in Baxter. Once the trees are cut down, new ones are planted in their place, and those doing the cutting make sure to only take down trees that are a certain size.

"You don't just go in there and start cutting down the whole countryside," Jeanie said. "And it's good to selectively cut because it allows other trees to grow."

From there, it can take anywhere from 10-12 steps, depending on its intended use, before a piece of wood is ready to be sold. The wood has to be stripped of bark, cut into pieces and let air dry anywhere from a few months up to two years. Then it goes into a dry kiln and is heated for weeks before going through the processes to get it into the proper shapes for its intended purpose — anything from mouldings to flooring to special projects like cribs, picture frames and guitars.

“Some people come in here and they’re just so troubled about ‘How can I finish this?’ or ‘Here’s a problem with this wall or with this mantle.’ When you get done and they’re happy, it wasn’t a big job, but it was something that really made it for them. ... It’s nice to be able to see that come to pass,” Jeanie said.

Work done by Winell Lee Mouldings and Hardwoods can be seen not only in Putnam County, but also all over Tennessee and other parts of the United States. They created Billy Graham’s stage in Nashville, much of the stage and storefront for a Christmas TV program for Kenny Rogers, as well as helped restore many historical buildings in the area. They’ve also worked with many community organizations such as Habitat for Humanity, Teen Challenge, Baxter Beautification Committee and various trade schools.

“We’ve been a part, I think, of our community growing, and helping restore and maintain our history of our buildings,” Jeanie said.

Now they are looking forward to seeing the business head into the next 70 years and excited to see where the future will take them.

“We’ve had success because we play and pray together,” Jeanie said. “That’s, what I think, has held us together during the difficult times.”

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\*Read more about the history of Putnam Co., TN and surrounding areas at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>.



### **WINELL LEE MOULDINGS AND HARDWOODS**

Winell Lee Mouldings and Hardwoods is a family-owned business. Pictured, from left, are Phil Gentry, Winell A. “Tony” Lee, Jason Lee, Jeanie Lee, Shea Lee and Connie Gentry.