



MATT STANLEY / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Weaver Benny Ruiz operates a loom on the factory floor of Langhorne Carpet Co. in Pennel. The company is celebrating its 80th anniversary. The business now caters mostly to interior designers and decorative supply houses, and the Internet has largely replaced the trade shows.

Weaving together a family history

The Langhorne Carpet Co. has been making high-quality Wilton-style carpets in Pennel since 1930.

BY JOHN ANASTASI
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Rarely has a sprawling 56,000-square-foot building at a prominent intersection been so easy to overlook.

But not only has the Langhorne Carpet Co. been sitting at Pennel's West Lincoln Highway and Hulmeville Avenue for 80 years, it is also one of just two remaining dedicated Wilton carpet mills in the country.

"So much of the carpet production went south (to Georgia) or overseas, but that product is different," said Bill Morrow, the great-grandson of the original owner, John T. Kommer. "It's cheaper, faster and it requires fewer employees."

Wilton carpets are named for the English town that popularized the style. The woven wool carpets are produced on a specific type of loom and known for using a maximum of five colors per pattern.

Langhorne has produced high-end, custom Wilton carpets for everyone from Ronald Reagan and Hugh Grant to the Bush ranch in Crawford, Texas and Philadelphia's Congress Hall.

This month, the business and its fourth-generation ownership team will celebrate Langhorne's 80th anniversary.

In the early 1900s, Philadelphia was alive with textile mills.

"In the 1930s, almost all of the carpet in the country was made in Philadelphia," Morrow said.

One producer was the Hirst-Rogers Carpet Mill at Kensington and



To celebrate the anniversary, the Morrrows are producing a limited edition "Tree of Life" tapestry to benefit Habitat for Humanity of Bucks County. This is the first draft of New York artist Alex Papachristidis' design. It will be unveiled early next year.

Allegheny avenues in Philadelphia, where Kommer worked. He left the mill in the late 1920s and planned to retire, but news from Michigan changed his plans.

"He got word that there were looms available in Detroit that Henry Ford had," Morrow said.

Morrow explained that Ford, who founded the Ford Motor Co., had been trying to develop a business model

through which Ford could produce everything that went into its vehicles — including the carpeting.

"(Kommer) bought the looms from Henry Ford," Morrow said. "They were just sitting there."

The carpet company founder had the looms put on trains and brought to Pennel, where he set them up in the building that the Langhorne Carpet Co.

See **CARPET**, Page **A13**

Carpet

Continued from Page A12

still uses today. In the 1930s, Kommer and his son-in-law, Joseph McKay, shared the building with a tannery and a hosiery manufacturer. By the mid-1940s, Langhorne Carpet had the building to itself.

In the early days, Langhorne Carpet sold mostly to department stores like Sears and Wanamaker. Company executives would attend trade shows and market events in New York and Chicago, hoping to score enough orders to carry them through to the next show.

Kommer retired in the late 1940s. Morrow's father, William T. Morrow, started full time in 1952.

"He was here for 50-plus years and, right up until the time he was not allowed to come in anymore, he was working 40 hours per week," Morrow said of his father.

Morrow and his sister, Winifred Morrow, who came on board in 1978 and 1987, respectively, are shepherding the business into the 21st century.

"It was never discussed. It just sort of happened," Morrow said of continuing the family business.

Winifred said she worked at a few other places before joining the Langhorne Carpet team.

"I wanted to see what it was like outside as being an employee," she said. "I was able to look at things from both sides of the operation. I could bring something a little different."

The business now caters mostly to interior designers and decorative supply houses, and the Internet has largely replaced the trade shows.



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Langhorne Carpet Co. President Bill Morrow and his sister executive Vice President Winifred Morrow stand next to a loom on the factory floor of the Pennel facility.

Langhorne Carpet specializes in custom orders; clients pick from various designs or create new ones. The company uses natural fibers and yarns that are 90 percent biodegradable. Some synthetic polyester, which is not biodegradable, is also used.

The looms can produce carpeting in widths ranging from 27 inches to 12 feet. Morrow said they're not that different from the originals, which makes the company ideal for restoration work using period designs. Its carpets can be found at the Martin Van Buren House national historic site in New York, the Frederick Douglass House national historic site in Washington, D.C. and the Old Boston State House.

Often, Langhorne Carpet's 29 employees don't know who they're making carpets for or where they will end up, but Morrow said they sometimes find out after the fact.

"It's fun for the weavers to be

able to say 'I wove a carpet for ...' or 'The work I did can be seen here,'" Morrow said.

At its height in the 1990s — before much of the industry's production went to China — Langhorne churned out 80,000 yards of carpet in a single year — an average of over 6,500 yards per month. Last year, the mill was producing about 3,000 yards per month.

"Our major competition is from China," Morrow said. "It's still a labor-intensive business. They produce at half the cost. And 2008 and 2009 were not good. Things look positive now, but we're not charging along."

More homeowners are moving away from wall-to-wall carpet and instead choosing hardwood flooring, but Morrow said people will always want carpeting to anchor furniture, even in homes with finished floors.

"They'll still have carpeting in the room," he said. "It makes

it warmer. It keeps the noise down. Most dining room tables have carpet underneath to protect the floors."

The Morrows, who are now in their 50s, said the fourth generation will be the last for Langhorne Carpet because they plan to sell the business when they retire.

"We haven't determined what our retirement age is yet, though," said Winifred Morrow.

To celebrate Langhorne Carpet's anniversary, the Morrows are producing a limited edition "Tree of Life" tapestry to benefit Habitat for Humanity of Bucks County.

"We're proud that our carpet will for the first time be in local Habitat for Humanity homes," said Winifred Morrow.

The tapestry is being designed by New York artist Alex Papachristidis, who runs a residential interior design house in Manhattan. It will be unveiled early next year.

Papachristidis has worked directly with the Morrows on designs for about a year, but he said he was using their carpets long before that.

"It's been a very positive relationship," he said. "One of the things I love about it is that it's a family-run business, a small company and one of the oldest mills. They've been doing things the same way for years and years. They're doing it the way things have always been made. They have a great deal of integrity and it's an American-made product. It's important to support that."

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