

*Precision Bedrail Manufacturing hopes to employ about 100 people*

# Entrepreneurs build new business from idle factory

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By **RON BROWN**

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APPOMATTOX — At the once-bustling hub of the Courtland Manufacturing garment-making operations, row after row of sewing machines sit silent.

About 192,000 pieces of unsold clothing are packed away in boxes.

It is an eerie monument to the demise of an industry.

American textile plants are dying at the hands of the North American Free Trade Agreement, former Courtland employees say.

"It's rather sad," said Pat Wallace, who has worked in the plant since the 1970s, even before it was Courtland Manufacturing. "I was here when things were booming."

About five years ago, the company's orders and jobs started to dwindle in the wake of competition from Mexico's cheaper labor.

"I felt the American people needed those jobs," Wallace said.

But her spirits have been renewed as a portion of the former Courtland plant hums once again with activity.

There's a new manufacturer in town.

Bolstered by a \$1 million investment, Precision Bedrail Manufacturing hopes to employ about 100 people by the end of its first year of operation.

Within the next two weeks, much of its manufacturing

equipment will be in place.

The company already has 163 applications for employment to fill its 30 or so start-up jobs. The company plans to open in early October.

"I'm very excited about the prospect of having another business," said Judy Smith, a former Courtland personnel manager who is a partner in Precision as well as the company's chief financial officer. "It's a chance for Courtland's employees to come back to work."

Smith has seen a lot of familiar names among the applications.

"Many are from Courtland," she said. "They're very anxious."

Smith, 52, remembers all too well the doldrums that followed Courtland's shutdown on Sept. 18, 1998.

Courtland once boasted 1,100 employees at seven sewing plants, a cutting facility, a distribution center and screen-printing operation.

"The last year, we laid off 700 people," Smith said. "Most of the people I have known all my life. To lay people off and shut plants down, it was one of the hardest things I've had to do. It was a sad time with many sleepless nights."

She credits the creation of Precision to the perseverance of Fred Lawson Sr., the longtime owner of Courtland.

"If it hadn't been for Fred, the doors would have shut a lot sooner," she said. "He's always been concerned about his people."

Late last year, that concern led Lawson to Gareth Bosiger, the chairman of Appomattox County's Board of Supervisors who runs a plant in Keysville that produces

component parts for the furniture industry.

"My people could do this," Lawson told Bosiger. "If you see anything my people can do, let me know."

As chance would have it, some companies Bosiger deals with began clamoring for someone to supply wooden bedrails.

"The furniture business is becoming specialized," Bosiger said. "Furniture companies have found they can buy furniture parts cheaper than they can manufacture them."

After 28 years in the business, Bosiger felt he had the expertise to give them what they need.

Appomattox River Manufacturing, the company he runs with his wife, Martha, is producing about 600,000 drawer parts each month.

A business marriage between the Bosigers and relatives of Lawson seemed like a natural.

The Bosigers had expertise in the manufacturing of furniture parts. The Lawson family had available space and experience in administering a business.

"Garet has an excellent reputation in the furniture business," said Smith, Lawson's sister-in-law.

Bosiger began outlining some goals for the business early this year.

"I had to survey the market to see if we had sales," he said. "I analyzed the cost to see if we could make a profit."

After determining that a profit could be made, he turned his mind toward finding financing for the venture.

Some of that financing came from Lawson's children and their spouses, including Sue and Mitch Eggleston, Fred Lawson Jr. and Rindy Reeves. The company got other money from the bank and low-interest economic development loans from the state.

Bosiger, Precision's president and chief executive officer, is depending on a group of experienced furniture manufacturing managers to make operations run

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PRECISION'S PRESIDENT AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

smoothly.

David Scruggs, the plant manager, has 25 years of experience. Mike Miller, a department manager, has 14 and Scott Osbeck has five.

Smith will be called on to add expertise in the money management and personnel side.

"We've got smart people," Bosiger said. "I'm kind of like a coach."

Beyond the plant's walls, the community is watching and hoping for the plant's success.

"There were people who worked for Courtland all their lives," Bosiger said. "That's all they know. They're happy to have something coming back into the building."