



# SUPPLIER PROFILE: PICTURE WOODS

## ROOTED IN INTEGRITY: PICTURE WOODS' SUSTAINABLE SUCCESS

Even the most majestic tree was once a tiny sapling. So too did Picture Woods begin 45 years ago. From humble beginnings in a garage, Picture Woods has grown into one of the most highly regarded manufacturers of hardwood picture frames in the US. Grown from a foundation of quality, decency, and integrity, Picture Woods is healthy, thriving, and looking forward to another 45 years of excellence.

In 1980, Jack and Betty Thorpe purchased Arthur Greeno Woodworking from Arthur and Jenny Greeno.

The business was little more than a hobby for a handful of hippies who loved making things from wood in the gorgeous foothills of the Rocky Mountains. Betty was good with numbers, and Jack was a natural salesman who had learned woodworking through his family. During that time, their son, Mark, was in the woodworking business making fine Japanese shoji screens. Two months into this adventure, he brought some machinery and his woodworking skills and joined his parents at the newly named Picture Woods, LTD.

The shop didn't have running water or a bathroom, but with the right team in place, the budding enterprise had all the right conditions to grow.

Back then, each board was hand-selected and every frame was handmade. Red oak and walnut were the most popular species at the time, but Picture Woods offered everything from cherry to wenge, mahogany to padauk, and of course the slightly toxic and famously beautiful Indian rosewood. Demand for these handcrafted frames grew steadily, and soon the company was starting to outgrow the tiny shop, even though now it did have a bathroom: a porta-potty in the dirt parking lot outside.

In 1984, Picture Woods made its first move to a larger space. Along with purchasing its first moulder, the company also hired Bruce Knight and Robert Noterman, who are now its two longest-serving employees. A few years later, Picture Woods made another important decision that would dramatically affect its business. Amid rising awareness about the detrimental effects of deforestation in the rainforests around the world, the company made the decision to stop selling all exotic hardwoods: no more bubinga, rosewood, or koa. Virtually overnight, sales volumes plunged by almost half; but out of a deep commitment to the environment and a sense of duty and integrity, Picture Woods stayed the course. As with a forest after a fire, sometimes



● For the past half-century, Picture Woods has been committed to their customers and the environment.

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destruction is a necessary part of the cycle of growth.

The loss of such a significant source of revenue called for innovative thinking. There was still demand for exotic woods, but the company needed to find a way to meet that demand without causing so much harm to the environment. The solution was to find ways to stain domestic woods to look like exotics, yielding an array

of beautiful finishes, such as mahogany-stained butternut, purpleheart on walnut, and most famously, what is now still the most popular and most widely imitated offering in the Picture Woods line: ebonized walnut. While early reactions to taking a naturally rich, expensive, and beautiful wood such as walnut and staining it black were mixed, the enduring popularity of ebonized walnut throughout the picture framing industry is testament to both its beauty and the sometimes-hidden opportunities that can arise when acting in accordance with one's principles.

Another deeply held Picture Woods principle has always been minimizing waste, and while the company stopped selling exotic woods, of course there were some beautiful boards left over—one of which Jack stashed away with a note on the end that said "Save for Jack, 1995." That board would play another important part in the company's future. First, however, more transitions—some happy and some sad—were ahead.

In 1990, Picture Woods was once again blessed with good fortune, this time in the form of an extremely talented, kind, hardworking, and devoted office manager named Kathy Sniffin. The title of office manager does little to capture the depth and skill with which Kathy helped transform the company into what it is today, building a culture of customer service that was unrivaled and absolutely essential to the success of the company for the next 30 years.

Having successfully transitioned away from exotic woods and having expanded into every available warehouse bay at its location on Range Street, the company needed to find a new and bigger home. Betty, Jack and Mark set out to find it. While they were unable to find the perfect building, what they did find was the perfect land. Sadly, he would not have much time to inhabit his new second-floor office with a view of the mountains, as he



● The Picture Woods team in 1993, including Jack and Betty Thorpe (right).

passed away in the fall of 1997. A kind, loved, and well-respected man, his funeral was attended by a large gathering of former and current Picture Woods employees.

The transition away from exotic woods brought another challenge. Because warpage is the enemy of a perfect corner, the sorting criteria for lumber needed to be strict. Around 2004, Mark received a call from a lumber

supplier informing him that he had seen every board of walnut in the state of Colorado, and it was unclear when more would be available. This crisis led to the creation of the Ultra Massive mouldings, significantly reducing lumber waste from nearly 50% to less than 5%. Ultra Massive glue-up mouldings are as beautiful as they are labor-intensive, greatly decreasing warpage and defects.

In 2017, a gorgeous board of bubinga caught the eye of Mark's son, James. James had spent several years working at Picture Woods after college, starting like everyone else at the company meticulously sanding moulding by hand. He left to travel the world and earn an MBA; when he returned, he pulled that board off a dusty rack and found a note from his grandfather written on it: "Save for Jack, 1995." He spent several months turning it into a cabinet for a guitar amplifier, and in the process joined the lineage of Thorpe woodworkers.

Picture Woods is now home to 25 employees, with an average tenure of 12 years. Its team of sales reps are truly the eyes and ears of the operation. The company's commitment to sustainability doesn't stop at sourcing responsibly harvested domestic hardwoods, but extends to philanthropic endeavors such as forest restoration and wildlife protection.

A forest is a diverse arrangement of entities, and a successful company must be as well. As Picture Woods looks to the next 45 years, its continued success will depend on its roots in quality, integrity, and environmental stewardship. It will depend on the people who work every day to make beautiful products. It will depend on committed sales reps who meet their clients where they are and help take them where they want to go. Most importantly, it will depend on customers who support the company's vision and commitment to making some of the finest picture frames on the market. **PFM**