

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

July 19, 2007

Company's pool tables satisfy

By Gail Appleson

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

There really is a place where the Rolling Stones can get satisfaction. At least when they want to play snooker.

It's A.E. Schmidt Billiard Co., which designs, builds and restores pool tables.

Indeed, the 157-year-old St. Louis business restored a snooker table built in 1820 that's used these days only by Keith Richards and Ron Wood of the Stones. The 6-foot-by-12-foot table is stored in a local warehouse and pulled out when the band is in the area.

"Twelve feet is the length of my dining room," said Kurt Schmidt, owner of the company and the snooker table. "It is too big to let sit on any of our showroom floors. I can set up three in the space that this table takes up."

The Stones last used the table a decade ago after the billiard company installed it in the Rams dressing room at the Edward Jones Dome.

"We got a note back from Keith Richards that said the table was excellent, it was superb. He gave us 35 Rolling Stones tickets," Schmidt said.

157 YEARS OLD

St. Louis company is one of only about ten in the U.S. that still makes its own tables.

FAMOUS FRIENDS

Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones likes a table built in 1920 that the company restored

And while it might seem strange that the Stones would seek out a local billiard maker for their table, A.E. Schmidt is a rare breed. It's one of only about 10 companies in the United States that still makes its own tables.

Schmidt sells about 1,000 tables a year, and it's the official supplier to the Dave & Buster's restaurant and entertainment chain.

The snooker table is an example of A.E. Schmidt's work. It was built by the Thurston Co. of England at its original location, which burned in 1826, Schmidt said. The timbers used to build the table were taken from the Royal George, a warship that sank 40 years earlier.

The company restored the table in 1989 at a cost of about \$6,000. "The last sale price on it was \$40,000. I have not tried to sell it in the last 10 years. ... I'll never find another one like it," said Schmidt.

And while it would be hard to find another table like that, it's also kind of hard to find another company like A.E. Schmidt, which was founded in 1850 by German immigrant Ernst Schmidt.

The company found its niche selling pool tables to saloons, but had to survive Prohibition and the death of many bars. It also survived the Depression and wars. Kurt Schmidt and his wife, Karen, are fifth-generation owners with about 25 employees.

Schmidt, 48, said he never had thoughts of doing anything else.

"I started part time when I was 13, and I fell in love with it right off the bat," he said. "As soon as I got out of high school it was pretty clear what I wanted to do."

Reprinted with permission of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, Copyright 2007

"Company's pool tables satisfy" July 19, 2007, Gail Appleson

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

July 19, 2007

At the time the factory was producing "very unattractive" tables made of Formica, he said. The styles didn't match the décor in many houses, so the company began producing wood tables and found there was demand.

"In the 35 years I've been in the business it's grown from six or seven choices to literally millions of choices," he said. "If you can dream it, we can pretty much build it."

Today Schmidt offers about 40 standard styles with a myriad of variations. For example, there are more than 30 different kinds of woods, both domestic and exotic, and almost 30 different colors of cloth.

The company even makes a pool table that can be converted to a dining table. The model was inspired by a family that didn't have space for both.

The biggest change in recent years, he said, is the growing popularity of contemporary styles, particularly in the high-end market.

"A lot of the tables we've built, St. Louis never sees," he said. "They end up in New York or Los Angeles where there's more of an appetite for contemporary stuff. The more costly kinds of tables do go out of St. Louis, but our meat and potatoes is still heavy St. Louis traditional style pool tables, which are kind of unique to us."

Although Schmidt sells tables made by other companies, he said, it doesn't cost that much more to order a customized product, and most take only about three weeks to construct. Prices usually start at about \$2,000 and can go up to about \$15,000.

While \$15,000 for a pool table might sound like a lot, some companies sell tables that cost upward of \$50,000. At that price, Schmidt said, the status, not quality, is the appeal.

"We don't typically go after that market," he said. "But that's probably a byproduct of being born and raised in St. Louis.

You can get just about anything you want in a pool table for \$15,000. You don't need to go higher than that."

It's not just the construction that adds to the price of the table; delivery matters, too. Sometimes delivery costs more than the tables.

"We've installed tables in virtual haylofts. We've taken them up spiral staircases. We've even installed tables in mobile homes that shift," he said. "We don't typically get stopped."

Schmidt, who often drives one of the company's four trucks to make deliveries, said he never gets tired of the work.

"I like the pride factor that's involved in building your own product," he said. "These pool tables are family heirlooms. For the average guy or gal, they have something they can hand down. That's priceless. I build things to last."