

Wichelts' expanding import business started out as a hobby

By AUTUMN GROOMS
La Crosse Tribune

STODDARD, Wis. — Wichelt Imports started as a hobby for Joyce and Ray Wichelt.

The La Crosse couple saw the business as a way to subsidize their full-time incomes and hoped it would bring in enough extra funds for a family vacation with their three young children.

But after 36 years as an import distributor, Wichelt Imports has transformed from a hobby to an ever-changing career for the Wichelsts.

Wichelst Imports is a leading distributor of fine needle art fabric and supplies and offers more than 5,000 needlecraft products. Its product line includes more than 700 colors and counts of premium quality fabrics, prefinished table linens and towels, graphs and kits, threads, ribbons, stitchery accessories and hardware.

Joyce and Ray came on board full time in 1974 and 1984, respectively, leaving behind careers at Gundersen Lutheran Medical Center and Trane Co.

"It was an avocation that turned into a vocation," Joyce said.

The Wichelsts began importing German gift items to their south La Crosse home in 1970. Those items proved popular with people celebrating Oktoberfest and their German heritage.

They soon expanded to Norwegian imports that included embroidery, bell pulls, pillows and wall hangings. Other European imports quickly followed, and Wichelt Imports outgrew the Wichelsts' home.

"We were really busting at the seams at our house," Joyce said. A 4,800-square-foot warehouse was built in 1977 near Goose Island. It has since grown to more than 14,000 square feet.

After a few financial struggles, Wichelt Imports landed on its feet, becoming the exclusive United States distributor for Permin of Copenhagen.

And the business hasn't stopped growing since.

Mill Hill, a needlecraft company known for its embellishments and use of perforated paper, was acquired by Wichelt Imports nearly two years ago.

And for the first time in company history, Wichelt Imports manufactured, designed and distributed products at the Stoddard location.

"It's been a fun experience," said Aimee Wichelt, company vice president and the couple's daughter.

To accommodate the growth, an addition and more employees were required. But the company now offers a wider variety of products to appeal to different types of needlecrafters. Joyce said Mill Hill will "help to carry the company into the future."

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Business of the Week

What: Wichelt Imports, distributor of import needlework goods; and Mill Hill, a division of Wichelt Imports

Address: N162 Hwy. 35, Stoddard, Wis.

Founded: 1970 by Ray and Joyce Wichelt

On the Web: www.wichelst.com; www.millhill.com; www.millhillbeads.com



Joyce Wichelt founded the company thirty years ago.



Aimee Wichelt will take the company into the future.