

# A Family Tradition

## Scarbro's National Drapery Workroom



**Virgil Ivey, seated,** pictured with wife Sissy, daughter-in-law Jennifer, son Leon, Mary Anderson, a 46-year employee and Elanda Canterbury, a 10-year employee, opened the National Drapery Workroom in Scarbro in 1971. Leon and Jennifer took control when Virgil and Sissy retired.

By Michelle James, West Virginia South Editor ❖ Photos by Jenny Harnish

**W**ith steady hands and quick, practiced precision, Mary Anderson surges together two widths of perfectly cut fabric.

Virgil Ivey looks on from a few feet away, watching as Anderson gathers the fabric and carries it over to the next station.

"I opened the place up on my birthday, May 31, 1971, and Mary has been here since September of that year," he says. "I found a home," Mary answers.



Ivey isn't around the National Drapery Workroom in Scarbro as much as he used to be. His son Leon and his daughter-in-law Jennifer took over operations a few years ago.

When he opened up shop, Mary was one of 40 employees on two shifts. Today, counting Leon and Jennifer, she's one of four.

The industry and demand have changed a bit through the years, but the business remains and Leon and Jennifer say they hope to continue what Virgil started and grow it for years to come.

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"It's a long three-day story," Virgil says, of how he got into the drapery business.

The Minden native was living in the Maryland/D.C. area studying to become a methods engineer, which he describes as learning the "easiest way to get a job done." Every Christmas, he got a part-time job, and one year, a neighbor suggested he work with him installing draperies at JC Penney.

"I said, 'What do you mean install draperies?'" he recalls laughing. "They're just a piece of plastic and curtain rod."

After a quick lesson — and nearly destroying a customer's cherry table — he learned otherwise, and eight months later, he was a full-time coordinator and later a manager.

The idea of opening his own business was

appealing though so he left to do just that, starting the International Drapery Workroom.

He admits he didn't know what he was doing when he began the custom drapery business, but he was smart in the hiring of his employees.

"I had no more idea how to make drapes than you would have," he confesses. "But you had to learn to hire people who knew what they were doing and learn from them."

His business did well, as he manufactured drapes for wholesalers in the D.C. area. But again, he had another plan.

"I had a dream and I wrote it all down," he says. "I got this big idea about how I could come down here and rent a building. My mother was still alive and she could help me. I had the dream right before Easter and at Easter I came down here and started looking for a building.

"That's how sure I was."

Within a few days of his visit, Virgil moved his business home. But he really had his eye on the old Scarbro Company Store owned by the New River Company.

"It had the full mezzanine all around," he explains of the design of the store. "I needed that for the way I wanted to make draperies."



**Each step** of the custom drapery is done by hand.



**Virgil says** the business is run the same way as it was when he set it up in 1971.

Virgil had a conveyer system in mind. The second floor of the company store would allow him to hang drapes of all lengths as it allows the fabric to relax and fall in its natural way before the final pinning and hemming.

It didn't happen right away, but a short while after Virgil moved shop to West Virginia, he received word that the company store was his.

And the newly named National Drapery Workroom has called it home ever since.

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A walk through the building is almost like stepping back in time.

"These are the same machines we used years ago," Virgil says pointing at a Singer sewing machine.

The process is the same, too.

It begins downstairs with writing up a ticket that travels with the fabric from stage to stage including cutting, surging, buckram insertion and pleating.

"Once she puts the buckram in, it gives the straight line for the pleating," Virgil says of the addition of a stiff insertion at the tops being completed by 10-year employee Elanda Canterbury. "She puts the side hems in. It's

identical to what we made 45 years ago."

The fabric has changed though. It varies through the decades — the '70s had a lot of loose fabric — and changes with the season.

"We're seeing a lot of reds and golds right now," Leon's wife, Jennifer, says.

The weight of the fabric — a lot of heavy fabric is moving through right now — can take its toll on the machines.

That's when Virgil steps in.

"He's our chief sewing machine engineer," Leon says. "Sissy, too."

Sissy is Virgil's wife, Leon's stepmother. She started with the business shortly after Virgil opened it.

But she stepped away from it full-time when Virgil decided he needed to go.

With so many years in business, Virgil admits to making a few mistakes — no really big ones though. But when he made a "4-inch mistake" on a dust ruffle a couple of years ago, he decided to evaluate life.

"We saved it (the dust ruffle)," he says. "But I was done. When I got finished, I told my wife I was done. I had been here long enough."

He told Leon of his plans to retire and sell



the building, but also told him he could have it, if he wanted.

"I said, if he doesn't, no hard feelings, but there comes a time in everybody's life that it's enough."

Leon, who has a degree in interior design and had experience working with his dad through the years, was going through his own changes at work.

"The company I worked for was having trouble and we talked about it," he says. "A guy I worked with in Charleston said, 'You real-ize what you have here, don't you?'"

He and Jennifer thought about moving closer to their kids who are in college, but they opted to stay.

"We want to give them a place to come back to," he says. "I don't know that they'll ever come back here to live, but this is their home."

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At one point, the National Drapery Workroom produced 300 widths of drapery a day. Leon says it's about 150 a week now.

But he's ready to hire more employees whenever the demand is there.

The quality is there. They aren't sure of all the locations they've shipped drapes, but

know they've hung in the governor's mansion, in the home of former United States Vice President Joe Biden and in the West Room of the White House.

But they say it doesn't matter where it goes, they handcraft the best drapes every time.

"We work with a \$200 a yard piece of fabric or a \$2 a yard piece of fabric," Virgil said. "It doesn't make a difference."

"It all has to be cut," Mary Anderson adds.

The Iveys say they're proud of the work they've done through the years. And both say they look forward to what the future holds for the National Drapery Workroom.

"I loved the drapery business," Virgil says. "I found a home. Not very many people can say their job is something they really enjoy doing. I enjoyed making draperies."

"We want to grow the business," Leon says. We want to keep a West Virginia business in West Virginia. I don't know that we'll ever get back to two shifts of 40 people, but we want to grow it and get more customers."

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Visit the National Drapery Workroom online at [www.nationaldraperyworkroom.com](http://www.nationaldraperyworkroom.com) or call 304-465-5588.