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THE GAZETTE WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 11, 1993



PETER HADEKEL

Good wood

Beauce's white spruce steers entrepreneur to grand-piano parts

ST. JOSEPH DE BEAUCE — This region just north of the Quebec-Maine border is already renowned for spawning small and medium-size businesses that export to the United States.

Now it boasts what is described as the only company in Canada that manufactures components for grand pianos.

Nestled in the rolling farmland above the Chaudière River is Les Pianos André Bolduc Inc., the latest example of the entrepreneurial miracle in the Beauce.

You've got to drive far up into farm country to find André Bolduc's small factory and showroom. It's easy to miss after you've taken that left turn up the steeply winding Route des Fermes.

At first glance, it seems like an odd place for a manufacturer of piano sound boards and tuning-pin blocks that are sold to great international piano-makers such as Mason & Hamlin of the U.S. and Fazioli of Italy.

Odd, perhaps, but perfectly logical once you understand that Bolduc's livelihood comes from the plentiful stands of 250-year-old white spruce in the region.

"We've got the best wood in the world for the piano sound board," he says, because of the right moisture content. The close-grained spruce makes the best resonator for the sound board, which Bolduc describes as the heart of any piano.

It's a large, thin piece of wood that fits the contour of the piano and is tucked under the strings and tuning pins. It's what makes the instrument sing.

Company expanding

And there may not be anybody better at making them than Bolduc, a 45-year-old ex-policeman who has turned a hobby into a fast-growing small business with \$1 million in revenue and customers around the globe.

Mason & Hamlin, a 100-year-old Massachusetts piano manufacturer with a top-quality reputation, recently commissioned Bolduc to provide sound boards and pin-blocks for 20 grand pianos it will make in the next 12 months.

Last month, Fazioli of Italy ordered 10 maple pin-blocks from Bolduc, and deals with other companies are on the way, he says.

The sudden spurt in business has prompted Bolduc to invest \$100,000 in expanding his factory and purchasing new equipment. He'll also be increasing his work force to 10 from seven by the end of the year.

Bolduc grew up in Montreal, where he was trained as a cabinet-maker and developed an interest in tuning and repairing pianos. He later joined the Sûreté du Québec, where he was an officer for 19 years while continuing to work on pianos as a sideline.

"I used to spend my vacations going to school in Germany to learn about piano-building and repairing," he says.

Four years ago, Bolduc took early retirement from the Sûreté to devote himself full-time to his passion. By then, he had already established a good business in tuning and repairing pianos in concert halls across Quebec and he also became a distributor for several lines of pianos.

'Step by step'

"My dream has always been to build my own pianos, but I realized how complicated it is. It's like building a car. There are so many details and everything has to fit together to make the right sound.

"So what we're doing is going step-by-step, starting with what we do best."

Bolduc is as much a craftsman as a businessman. He goes into the woods to supervise the cutting of "just the right kind of spruce. It's got to be big and old." He also carefully oversees the milling at local sawmills and pays special attention to drying the wood properly.

"He's an extraordinarily gifted technician," says Lloyd Meyer, president of Mason & Hamlin in Haverhill, Mass. "And he has very fine wood available to him in that area."

Training his employees is another top priority. "It's almost impossible to find qualified people for this kind of work," Bolduc says. "The only training school in Canada with a course on piano tuning and repairing is George Brown college in Toronto, and even they don't teach piano construction."

It's a family business for Bolduc. His wife helps to manage the company while both his son and daughter have summer jobs there while pursuing studies in wood-working and piano repair.

"With my children interested in the business, the future is good," he says. "We've been careful not to grow too quickly and our best years are still ahead."

And one of these days, André Bolduc promises to build that piano he's been dreaming about.