

Cumberland

Beautiful Objects That Work

by Lauren Weinberg

Many senior designers have fond memories of **Cumberland Furniture**, a company that – in its New York heyday – produced some of the contract market's finest casegoods and other designs.

Though the Cumberland brand lost some of its luster over the past couple of decades, **Scott Gilmore** is reviving it, with a help from designers including **Gary Lee, Timothy deFiebre, and Jordan Goldstein**.

Mr. Gilmore is the founder of Grand Rapids-based **Gilmore, Inc.**, which has made components and finished products for the office furniture industry for more than 20 years. As a vendor to Cumberland, he recognized the company's potential for greatness and purchased it in 1998, moving its headquarters to his facility in Grand Rapids. After a bumpy start, the resurrected Cumberland is expanding rapidly, having tripled its growth during the past three years.

I recently traveled to Grand Rapids to meet with Mr. Gilmore and Cumberland's sales manager **Bill Greeley**. They told me about the history of the company

and their plans for the future, including a bold new program called **Designers Speak**.

OI: What can you tell me about the history of Cumberland Furniture?

SG: Not a lot of younger people know about Cumberland, but in the 60s and 70s, it was one of the contract furniture industry's most respected brands, acclaimed for an array of contemporary casegoods and seating. It was founded around 1957 in New York and originally served the East Coast market. In its heyday, Cumberland was a well-known and respected resource, but it eventually lost recognition in the minds of contract designers and moved in and out of a lot of different styles.

OI: Why did this happen?

SG: Cumberland has been through many hands. At one time, I believe it was owned by the **Epstein** family in New York, and then by **Ozzie Krug. Irving Rosen** bought it in 1984 and decided to turn it into a more upscale company. He put together really well-designed packets of literature, for the time, and photographed

everything in color. But he started to import a lot of European furniture – trendy things from Italy and Spain – and some of them were nice pieces, but Cumberland lost its uniqueness.

OI: How did you become associated with Cumberland?

SG: About 23 years ago, I founded a company called **Gilmore Furniture**. We manufacture products for other furniture manufacturers and have a very good reputation in the industry for [making] a variety of things from component parts to completely finished goods. We became familiar with Cumberland in the 80s because we were making some of their tables. Originally, Cumberland did their own manufacturing, but as it changed hands, the different owners began to focus more on design and distribution. [Cumberland now manufactures the majority of its furniture.]

OI: During this time, was Cumberland still based in New York?

SG: Yes, and they had very nice showrooms in major cities like New York, Chicago, Houston, and Dallas. Irving Rosen put a lot of money and attention into creating and marketing the products, and trying to grow the company. As a vendor, we got to see how that worked. We didn't agree with their total business model, but we respected and admired their designs and the image of quality they projected. I thought, "I would like to acquire that company and really make it into something."

When Irving Rosen passed away, the company became available and I purchased it in 1998. It was a diamond in the rough, and I have to stress the "rough" part of it! We really didn't know what we were in for when we purchased it. Sales had decreased dramatically over the years: since the 80s, they had gone down tenfold, and the company was pretty much a shadow of what it had been

OI: What were some of the reasons for that?

SG: I think it was a lack of funding, mismanagement, and the wrong approach to customer service. Nevertheless, when I bought the company, people still thought well of them. Very little of the company was still functioning: all we were able to buy were the rights to the name, the existing lines, and some of



Bill Greeley (r) & Scott Gilmore

Cont'd on page 4, Cumberland

... Cumberland, *Cont'd from page 3*

the marketing literature. There was nothing in terms of hard assets; there was no inventory. But we inherited all of their problems. There were vendors who were waiting for money so that they could ship products, and customers who had already given them money, who were waiting for products to ship. There was a backlog of complaints. We weren't obligated to take care of these things, but we did; we did a lot of damage control in order to satisfy customers and build the company's reputation.

Ol: Did you have to vie with other companies to acquire the rights to the name?

SG: No. I don't think it was seen as a real asset. But having made products for other people for 20 years, we wanted to get into this business with our own product line and our own brand. We saw this as a perfect opportunity to build on something that had a great reputation and a core of classic designs. We thought that would be easier than starting completely fresh.

Ol: Did any of your customers feel threatened by your decision to start your own brand?

SG: No, several of them were very supportive of it. The market was considered to be big enough for everybody.

Ol: What happened when you first acquired the company?

SG: During the first four years, part of what we did was to evaluate the potential of what we'd gotten, to get an idea of what the product line was and what the market potential was. There was also a lot of deferred maintenance in terms of the functioning of the company.

We made somewhat weak attempts at creating new products and cleaning up some of the old ones. We had very good insight, as a manufacturer of other people's products, into what sells, but we still weren't quite sure what to do about marketing.

Ol: Did you have to take on new staff?

SG: We did. We had to expand the engineering department and the sales department, and we had to develop relationships with independent sales reps around the country, which was a difficult job. But over the years, I think **Bill Gree-**

ley, our sales manager, has showed that we're very committed and he has attracted a high-quality group of reps.

Ol: I think we left off in 2002. What happened next?

SG: Well, our initial introductions had a mediocre reception. Since we lacked a real handle on what Cumberland should be, we had a scattershot approach to design. We had designers working on products for us, but we didn't know enough to give them good direction. (We actually still sell some of those products, but I'm not sure they complement our line any more.) We lacked a coherent strategy for the company, and I'm a person who likes a plan and needs to understand exactly what we're doing so we can execute it!

2002 was the turning point. Bill Greeley and I decided that the company wasn't gaining momentum, and if we didn't do something, we would lose what we had. We decided to show at NeoCon to gauge interest in the company and see where we could take it. The response we got was very positive. The key indicator, to me, was that many of the senior designers we talked to fondly remembered the old Cumberland. There was a real sense of nostalgia and romance connected with the company, and we heard that over and over. It affirmed that there was something special about Cumberland that we could leverage.

But we realized we didn't have the resources or experience to plot a strategy for where we should go; we would need an outside partner to provide that for us. We started looking for a designer who would not just look at an individual product, but at the whole company. We interviewed three or four – people with an architectural background who also did furniture – and we chose **Gary Lee** in Chicago. Gary was intensely interested in helping us rebuild the company because he had a strong personal association with it; it wasn't just a job to him. He said that, as a young designer, whenever he got to specify Cumberland, he thought, "Great! I get to play with the nice stuff!" because Cumberland was known for really nice design and materials: stone, exotic woods, and fine finishes.

Gary Lee Partners spent a lot of time putting together a "visioning report" for us, which they completed in January 2003. It went into the company's history and its products. They interviewed our representatives to find out what was hap-

pening in the industry, and its perception of Cumberland. They looked at what our competitors were doing and summed up what they thought our mission statement and core values should be.

From there, they detailed an action plan. They blew us away with what they proposed; I have never seen anything so complete and so right-on as this report. And everyone we've worked with so far – all the professionals involved in this – have had a personal interest in the company. It's almost like a historic preservation effort, and that's what has made it fun and interesting. When Gary's team was working on the proposal, one designer was in a local vintage furniture shop and saw a piece he really liked.

When he turned it over, it said "Cumberland" on the back, so he bought it, and brought it to the presentation meeting that we had! Gary Lee Partners provided us with the platform for all the dramatic changes that have taken place in the last three years.

Ol: What were some of their suggestions?

SG: One statement was that success, for a furniture company, depends not just on beautiful products, but on a succinct vision defining the essence of those products. That's what had always escaped me: What are we, stylistically? What are we trying to represent? We don't want to be a mishmash of styles. They said the company should define a market niche and excel within that niche. One of the things they had found was that the best-selling products in the US contract marketplace are neither too contemporary nor too traditional; they're transitional pieces that appeal to a wide range of tastes. They also said they believed Cumberland had the opportunity to be the only manufacturer representing the executive level of classic contract office furniture and could, in effect, create its own market niche. So, we decided that we would work on our products from the ground up. We've pared down the product line, but we've also added to it quite a bit, and we will continue to add to it.

One of the things that also developed out of the visioning program was the tag line, "**Beautiful objects that work.**" What we're trying to do is create beauti-

Cont'd next page, Cumberland. . . .

... Cumberland, *Cont'd from page 4*

ful objects that everybody can appreciate, and that function in today's environment. We have a passion for design excellence and quality execution, and the desire to create something special. We also pride ourselves on the experience of dealing with us; we're trying to make that as high-quality as our products.

Ol: Whom do you envision as your clients?

SG: I think it was the same base that Cumberland had once had, but lost over the years. Our main focus is the office. There is some residential work, but it's not as big as it once was. At one time, Cumberland's goal had been to be at least 40-50% residential. They even coined a word for this, "contra-dential," which was very innovative!

Ol: Did "contra-dential" refer to their mix of products, or is it that their products could cross between markets?

SG: I think the latter. Nowadays, we're primarily in the office market, but we do a lot in education and healthcare as well.

Ol: When did Gary Lee Partners start designing products for Cumberland?

SG: Immediately after they finished the visioning report. We got drawings in February 2003 and had nine new products to show at that year's NeoCon, so it was an amazing amount of activity in a short period of time. That was really the first step, introducing the **Modo** collection. Some of the pieces were resurrected designs from the archives. It got a great reception and I think Gary Lee Partners did a fabulous job.

They also studied our finish palette and gave serious thought to the colors we offered. We had inherited the same colors that Cumberland had been selling for a long time, but Gary Lee Partners designed a light and a medium and a dark palette and suggested that we have coordinating wood and stone finishes, which they updated according to today's trends.

There's finally some rhyme and reason. One of the things I appreciated was that there was substance behind everything Gary Lee Partners did, even in naming the products. All of the pieces in

Modo have Latin names with meanings that are tied to something significant in their design.

Ol: What types of clients were interested in Modo, at first?

SG: We had a lot of interest from law firms and financial services firms.

Ol: It seems like even the offices in those industries are shrinking. In terms of scale, were your new pieces like what Cumberland had always done?

SG: They were actually a little bit smaller, because Gary Lee Partners had seen that people were trying to maximize the use of their space.

Ol: What happened after NeoCon 2003?

SG: In 2004, we analyzed all of our existing products – some were 30 years old – and decided which ones we were going to dump. We went through each one that we decided to keep, and restyled it, updated it, and added new options. Cumberland used to be very strong in the casegoods market, but by the time we inherited it, there weren't a

Cont'd next page, Cumberland. . .



Gary Lee

Cumberland: Modo Collection:

(clockwise from top left):

Lara Chair, Terra Bench, Gala Table & Tantus Table



... Cumberland, *Cont'd from page 5*

lot of viable products in that category. So we focused our attention on occasional tables, benches, and lounge seating, and we're working on building up our conference tables, executive casegoods and desking systems.

Gary Lee Partners told us to redo our website and literature. So we had **Hedrich Blessing** in Chicago take new photography and **Michael Barile**, an artist and former senior designer with Herman Miller, designed our new graphics program and product sheets. I think we reintroduced 18 older [pieces], almost as new products. We also introduced another five MODO pieces that Gary Lee added to his original collection. So, by last year, we had all new photography and a new catalog with all new graphics. That was a huge job; it's kind of unheard of to do all this from scratch. It really took us up a step.

OI: This must have gone over very well with the A&D community.

SG: It was very well received. They said, "Wow, this stuff is really nice!" They loved the photography and the care that was taken in presenting it, the clean lines. We went through and restyled the last section of the binder last year; we condensed five or six lines of conference tables down to three and took new photography of them.

OI: Why hasn't Cumberland been showing at NeoCon since?

SG: After reviewing the visioning report, we asked our reps, "Would you rather we spend all this money going to NeoCon, or should we do new products, new photography, new literature, new binders, etc.?" Every one of them said, "Invest in the business, in marketing and new products, and forget NeoCon." Even our Chicago rep told us to do that. We followed their advice and put the money where we thought it would be most effective. But we'll show at NeoCon again, after all gauging the market at NeoCon 2002 is how we started this revival.

Once we rebuilt the product line, the next question was, how do we market it? We started working with a local firm, **BBK**, which does a lot of work for people in the furniture industry. In January of this year, we launched our new website and started a two-year national advertising campaign. And so far, it's been effective:



Cumberland: Capri Table

we've seen a huge increase of interest in Cumberland through the website; we're constantly getting calls for samples and literature.

In less than three years, we've defined who we are and where we're going; and completely remade the company's products and marketing materials. All this has tripled our business since 2003. Last year, we put an addition on the factory, and we're already breaking ground on another one as part of a million-dollar expansion. So we're really seeing the fruits of our efforts.

OI: As Cumberland has grown, has it affected the rest of Gilmore's business in any way?

SG: Producing more finished products, knowing they're going directly to the customer, and being more keenly aware of how perfect they have to look – I think these things have made us a better, more well-rounded vendor.

OI: What's the next step for the company?

SG: Product development is going to be our focus for the next few years, through a program called **Designers Speak**. We have been working with **Travis Clifton**, a former associate at Gary Lee Partners who was closely involved in the visioning report and the development of the MODO collection. (She has since left to start her own firm in Chicago.)

We thought we had done a great job in remodeling the old products and add-



Cumberland Factory

Cont'd next page, Cumberland. . .

... Cumberland, *Cont'd from page 6*

ing new ones, but we still had a fairly limited selection, without the depth in many categories that we need to be a recognized leader in the contract marketplace. We want to offer one-stop shopping to our customers. Travis, with her experience from Gary Lee, knew us intimately. She helped us craft a program for design development. She analyzed each of our product categories, determined how broad the offerings should be in each of those areas, and then determined what pieces we needed to add, and when we need to introduce them.

As we talked, we decided that we didn't want to work with just one designer. Gary Lee has obviously contributed a lot to what we've done, but part of his vision was to introduce other designers to the line, while working within a cohesive framework. And we know there are regional differences, in terms of what's in vogue on the East Coast versus the West Coast and the middle of the country, so we didn't want to have just one flavor of design. We decided to use this as an opportunity to let designers from all over the country "speak" about what's happening in their regions through product groups. The regions we've selected so far are the East Coast, which will be the first phase; the South (second phase); the West Coast (third phase);

and the Southwest (the fourth phase). Over two years, we're going to be working with nine designers throughout the country, and we'll introduce a new group of products every six months.

Ol: How have you chosen which designers to work with?

SG: We've talked to a lot of people in the industry about who the influential, strong designers in various areas are, who has experience in furniture design and could bring something fresh to Cumberland. We've interviewed a lot of people. For the first phase, the East Coast, we determined the three that we wanted to work with were **Gary Lee**, **Jordan Goldstein** from **Gensler**, and **Tim DeFiebre**. (Gary Lee has a New York office, so we figured we could classify him as a New York designer!) Jordan Goldstein is supposed to do a lounge chair, a side chair, and an occasional table. Tim DeFiebre is doing three side chairs and Gary Lee is doing a conference table collection.

Ol: Are you still trying to identify the designers you want to work with in other regions?

SG: Yes, we're talking about that right now.

Ol: Most manufacturers are designing things to look the same across

the country so that they can be used by national clients. Why are you emphasizing regional identities?

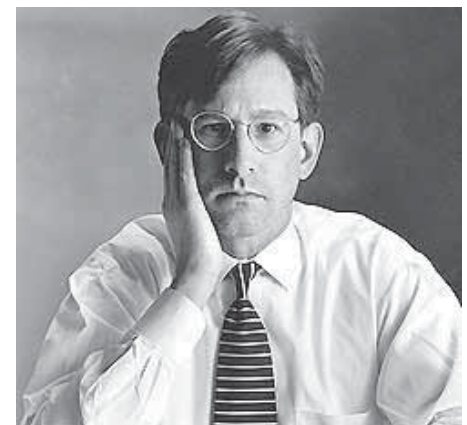
SG: We've defined our stylistic imperative and communicated it to our designers. You should now be able to use our catalog for any job: contemporary, transitional, East Coast, West Coast, bright colors, neutral colors. But there is still room for individual and regional influences. There's unity, but there's individuality as well. ▲



Jordan Goldstein



Cumberland Factory



Tim DeFiebre