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# Inside Gunther's

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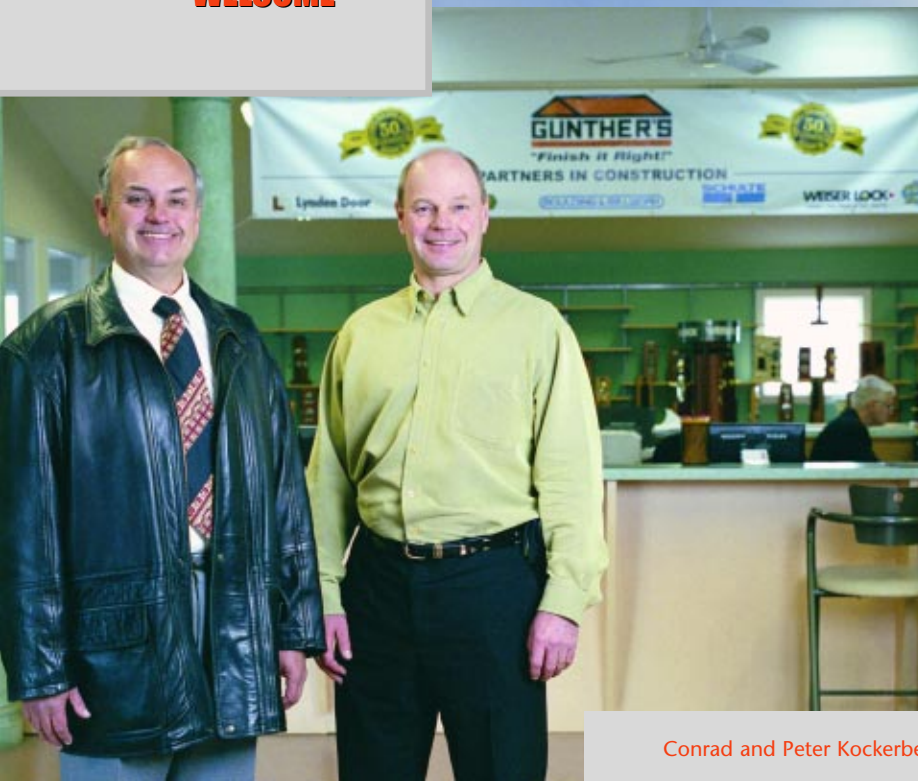
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**WELCOME**



Conrad and Peter Kockerbeck



# Welcome to Gunther's Building Center Ltd.

**G**unther Kockerbeck wasn't one to rest on his laurels. He was a man of action who pursued his business dreams with passion and tremendous dedication. Boldly striking out on his own in 1954, Gunther laid the foundation for a company that would become renowned for supplying quality interior finishing materials to Calgary's builders, renovation contractors and the do-it-yourself set.

Today, we at Gunther's do our best to live up to that legacy every time we serve a customer or inspect a shipment. We operate under a principle of providing uncompromising service and quality products at a reasonable price.

Our philosophy as a company can be summed up in one word: value. Gunther's may not always be the lowest-priced supplier in town, but when you consider service, quality and price, we offer value unmatched by our competitors. We have built an organization with the tools and resources to deliver that value to our customers. We are proud of our facilities and equipment, including our extensive warehousing, showroom and workshops. We are proud of our systems, which are state of the art in providing accurate and up-to-the-second information to our employees and customers regarding inventory, price and product availability.

This thriving family business would not be what it is today without the unflagging loyalty of our customers, our suppliers and our employees. Our customers know that we won't rest until we've met all of their expectations for products and service. Our relationships with suppliers are built on a foundation of mutual trust and a common goal of customer satisfaction.

Above all, we are proud of our employees, many of whom have been with us for over 15 years (and some for over 25 years!). As a team, we continually seek to improve how we deliver our products and services to our clientele.

We invite you to explore these pages and learn more about a truly Calgarian institution. Join us as we travel back in time for a look at the colourful history of Gunther's, find out why the company continues to thrive in a highly competitive industry and discover some of the faces and innovations behind that success. •

Conrad Kockerbeck  
Peter Kockerbeck

**"Our relationships with suppliers are built on a foundation of mutual trust and a common goal of customer satisfaction."**



# A business built on heart and hustle

It was a ride on the rails that landed Gunther Kockerbeck his first job in the land of milk and honey. The young immigrant from Germany had all the drive and enthusiasm typical of those who came from afar to build this nation. The fact that the warehouse job in Calgary offered to him by a fellow traveller was a complete departure from his work in Germany as a transportation agent didn't matter a whit; in that moment, Rothwell Sales Co. Ltd., a plywood product distributor, had gained a hard worker with keen eyes and ears.

Three years later, when Rothwell decided to close its Calgary warehouse and consolidate its operations in Edmonton, Gunther had seen and heard enough to know that opportunity was knocking.

### Building on a fresh idea

Realizing that every residential builder in and around Calgary was saddled with the time-consuming task of going from shop to shop for finishing materials to complete their interior construction,

Gunther decided to set up an operation where everything from doors and hardware to baseboards and moulding were available in one place. Gunther's Building Supplies was born. Given the continued success of Gunther's brainchild, you might say the rest is history. But it wasn't all smooth sailing for this determined young immigrant.

Gunther's first warehouse at 1339 – 9th Avenue SW proved too large and expensive for what was then a one-man operation. He found new digs on 3rd Street East near Langevin Bridge, a location he shared with a chicken factory. Building owner Ben Wilting agreed to invest Gunther's rent in the fledgling business. Wilting also gave him a carload of window glass; whatever amount Gunther sold it for could be used



Gunther in the early days.

as a loan. A deal with Calgary Sash and Door Co. solidified his early efforts into a bona fide business venture.

### Putting down roots

His first order was to provide finishing packages for homes in Art Sullivan's Meadowlark Park subdivision. When orders began to increase and Gunther got tired of dusting chicken feathers off his growing inventory, he moved to 17th Street and 10th Avenue SW. He also purchased the adjacent property at 2100 – 10th Avenue SW, and the company has operated out of this location ever since.

The original operation was much smaller, and what is now a heated storeroom for wood products was an unheated wooden structure with a dirt floor where supplies wrapped in reams of protective paper arrived at the back entrance by rail.

Through the years, the collection of people who helped grow the business was peppered with colourful characters. One such employee was a cowboy who worked local rodeos on weekends, paint-



(left to right) Eric, Gunther, Edward, Peter, and Conrad.

ed the town red on weeknights and worked full-time at Gunther's. One day, the young man sheepishly called the office for a ride. He had fallen asleep in a boxcar filled with discarded paper and hadn't noticed that the locomotive had hitched up his sleeping quarters and transported them downtown.

Other former employees who are more notable for contributing to Gunther's success include Frank Bertels, long-time sales manager; Willie Behrens, who bought Ben Wilting's interest in the company; Al Findlay, accounting and credit manager; Norbert Gross, accountant; Charles (Bud) Coutie, store manager; carpenters Otto Pfeffling and Hans Reiche; Max Reiterer, shop foreman; Paul Hermann, hardware foreman;

and bottle washer; he would sell finishing packages in the morning, help put the packages together in the afternoon, deliver them in late afternoon and spend the evening sorting out the accounting and other paperwork." Conrad credits his mother, Anna, for supporting Gunther wholeheartedly through the lean years and beyond.

## Peaks and valleys

The company founder was an entrepreneur in the truest sense—never afraid to try something new. He helped develop the market's taste for quality European products. He brought in doors from Mexico, Spain and the Philippines before anyone else in the business. Later, he expanded into floor coverings. Now the company stocks bathroom installations

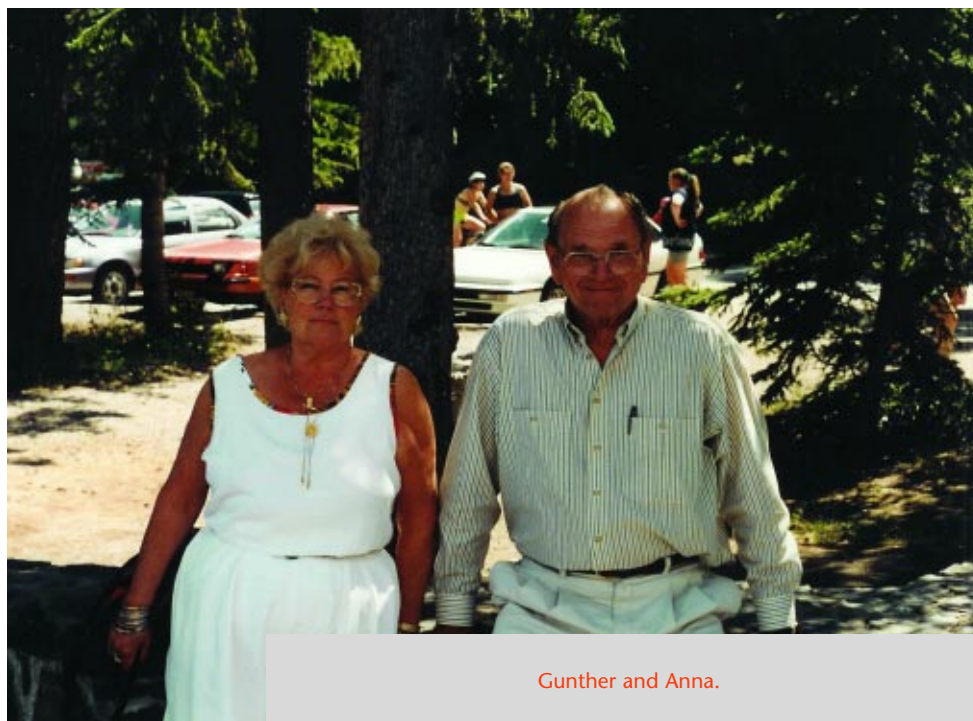
ing that time, Gunther's survived. The fact that he opted for a government-sponsored work-sharing program instead of laying people off deepened the employees' loyalty to the company and its owner. When the recession itself receded into history, Gunther's further established itself as a leader in the marketing of interior finishing materials, and sales steadily increased.

## Gunther's legacy

Gunther's four sons each served apprenticeships in all company departments—from warehousing and delivery to sales and administration—before going on to manage operations. On January 1, 1971, Gunther's Building Supplies and Gunther's Interiors Ltd. were consolidated and the owner passed on shares to the four boys.

Conrad and his brother Peter are at the helm today, proudly carrying on the Kockerbeck family business with the full support of their mother (and shareholder), Anna. Gunther himself may have pulled back a little in his later years, but he never did retire from the business. "He kept his finger on the pulse of the operation right until the end," Peter explains. "And he had a sixth sense about how things were going. You'd swear he could smell it when something wasn't quite right."

Anyone who has lived in Calgary for any length of time during the last 50 years likely knows something of Gunther's success. Some might remember the company's fleet of eye-catching apple-red International pick-up trucks that made regular forays into Calgary's newest communities.



Gunther and Anna.

Walter Kunze, shipping and receiving, Klaus Wittenberg, Horst Huber and John Herbst, flooring; brother-in-law Charles von Muehldorfer, interiors division; George Cooper, sales rep.; Gunter Lerm, hardware purchasing; Bill Bridge, and John Hamm. Other past employees enjoying their retirement include Eigon and Inge Strutz, maintenance crew, and carpenter Joe Fukumoto.

For Gunther, the early years were marked by long hours and elbow grease. As son Conrad recounts, "Dad was chief cook

including fixtures, shower doors, modular shelving and all the associated hardware. He earned the respect and loyalty of his suppliers; they were pleased because Gunther successfully brought their products to the attention of the residential market...and he always paid his bills on time.

The recession in 1981–82 was as much a blow to Gunther's operation as it was to everyone else in the building industry. But while 85 builders went bankrupt dur-

The company Gunther Kockerbeck built from the ground up has long been a local institution. Calgary lost this venerable citizen in 1999, but Gunther's legacy of honesty, integrity and fairness lives on in his sons and in the many long-term employees whose loyalty and hard work help preserve the status of Gunther's Building Centre Ltd. as the premier supplier of interior finishing packages in town. ●



# Opening doors to comfortable living for 50 years

**“We’re known for quality... Other companies may occasionally have a lower price on a product or two, but our quality and the warranty we offer save our customers money in the end.”**

**– Dan Callahan,  
Purchasing Manager**

Barry Harrison (left), Sales Manager  
Dan Callahan, Purchasing Manager.



**W**hen Calgarians walk through a door in their homes, chances are pretty good that it came from Gunther's Building Centre Ltd.

Gunther's has been Calgary's leading supplier of interior finishing materials, including doors, plywood, mouldings, millwork and builders' hardware, for 50 years. The secret to this commercial longevity lies not only in quality products and exemplary service but also in an unwavering commitment to honesty, fair play and community.

### Changing times...

Gunther's Building Centre Ltd. is half as old as Alberta itself. As we celebrate the province's centennial this year, it isn't hard to imagine that Gunther's property and its surroundings have seen some changes since the company took root and began to grow in July 1954. A few time-worn buildings flanked by dirt roads leading to a low-rise downtown skyline grace the old black and white photos that bear witness to the company's humble but promising beginnings. As the city and province flourished, the company founder gradually expanded his warehouse space, workshops and offices to accommodate the burgeoning business.

Today, the site stands in the shadows of the city's nearby skyscrapers and the large overhead bridge spans of Crowchild Trail and Bow Trail. It boasts a newly renovated showroom, a cache of offices, a busy carpentry shop where doors and other wood products are cut and assembled for delivery, a glassworks shop, a large warehouse, a heated block storehouse for wood products and an overstock warehouse. Machinery whirs at the sure hands of skilled workers while three-ton flatbed trucks and one-ton cube vans drive in and out with dizzying regularity.

### Changing expectations...

The steady cadence of this successful operation belies a

frenzied marketplace where hours, not days, often mark the interlude between orders and deliveries. Competition has increased in recent years and price is more and more of a driving force in the interior finishing business. Company President Peter Kockerbeck explains: "They used to call us up and say, 'Have you got it?' Now they ask, 'How much is it?'"

Expectations regarding unique products and speedy delivery have grown as well, which means service is still critical. As company Vice-President Conrad Kockerbeck puts it, "these days, price often gets the deal, but service keeps it."

Cookie cutter homes are a thing of the past, especially in the high-end housing market. Professional designers are bringing in custom arches, doors and floor plans, which require specialty materials and leave less room for error in interior finishing. "We haven't been stumped by a design yet," remarks Larry Ferris, manager of Gunther's carpentry shop. "If a customer wants it, we'll do our best to provide it. We also pre-hang our doors to any custom size."

This increasing demand spurred Gunther's recent showroom renovations. "A builder will send a customer over by appointment to choose his or her own custom finishing materials," explains Barry Harrison, Gunther's sales manager. "With Gunther's always looking for new and innovative products, everyone knows we offer incredible choice and selection. We even test

Dwane Ferris, Operations Manager.



## Our Business

small orders of new products to ensure they hold up to their promises."

Business is expanding. Gunther's now carries materials for "Stage 4" interior finishing, providing builders and renovators with bathroom installation packages that include mirrored doors, shelving, towel racks, tub safety rails and more. Involvement in multi-family projects—condominium and apartment complexes—is on the rise. The company also caters to builders in other areas of Alberta and even into the interior of British Columbia.

## "Finish it right"

Despite the increasing time, design and price constraints in the industry, Purchasing Manager Dan Callahan says Gunther's would never sell a substandard product for the sake of the bottom line. "We're known for quality," Dan states. "Other companies may occasionally have a lower price on a product or two, but our quality and the warranty we offer save our customers money in the end."

The company slogan, "Finish it right," is a testament to the importance of quality control at Gunther's. Suppliers know the

company's standards are as high as ever. In some cases, innovations and improved manufacturing methods are ensuring that product quality is maintained in the face of price pressures. The metal in the hardware used for interior finishing may not be as thick as it once was, but the mechanism itself often works more efficiently. And the process for constructing doors has improved, which can enhance a product's success rate.

Nonetheless, Gunther's has no qualms about rejecting inferior products in favour of higher-priced better-quality goods. By way of illustration, Dan Callahan notes that their competitors recently found themselves in a costly predicament over the poor quality of a certain type of door. Dan says, "Gunther's just doesn't have problems like that."

## Hi-tech hits home

Technology has long had a hand in tracking price, production and profits at Gunther's. In fact, his sons say the company founder was a true techno-junkie. He was the first in the business to bring in a computer system to streamline operations.

After numerous attempts in recent years to customize pre-packaged accounting and inventory tracking systems, Conrad and his son Mark have created their own software program that is proving its worth. Dan Danilowich, senior sales rep. and 26-year veteran with Gunther's, says the new Web-based system is far superior to anything else in the industry. "We have access to everything from a cus-



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customer's history with us to our own inventory to new products from around the world." Management has also successfully "trained" its computers to let them know when stock is low.

The company uses "mike phones," sophisticated two-way radios, to support lightening-fast communication between staff members. Another high-tech tool used by Gunther's delivery and installation crews is a camera phone. A visual record of quality products neatly stacked at a newly constructed building can be broadcast instantaneously and stored back at the office as proof of delivery.

### Building on character

A fair price margin, a commitment to paying bills on time and living up to promises have long earned Gunther's the respect of suppliers and customers alike. Long-time employees hail the fair treatment received from the company founder and now his sons. Several of the staff members who have been with Gunther's for decades say they stayed with the company more for the family that owned it than for the job or the industry itself.

That dedication stands Gunther's in good stead. Knowledgeable staff members who know the products, the industry players and all the ins and outs of getting finishing packages delivered on time keep long-time customers coming back.

### Community involvement

Gunther Kockerbeck's legacy of integrity in his dealings with employees, suppliers and customers is reflected in his company's ongoing contributions to the community. Gunther's supports the use of "green" products and adheres to the principles of reduce, recycle, reuse whenever possible to help curb the building industry's impact on our landfill sites.

The company supplies finishing packages for the Dream Homes awarded as prizes through the Kinsmen Children's Hospital Home Lotto every year during the Calgary Exhibition and Stampede. Habitat for Humanity, an organization that builds decent, affordable houses in partnership with those who lack adequate shelter, also receives donated finishing packages from Gunther's.

Beneficiaries of Gunther's financial support include the Cancer Research Society, Canadian Feed the Children, Canadian Paraplegic Association (Alberta), Canadian Police Association and many more. The company is also involved in a mentorship program through the Carma Centre for Excellence and has been a member in good standing with the Better Business Bureau of Calgary and Southern Alberta since 1959. As a long-time member of the Calgary Home Builder's Association, Gunther's take pride in being a solid industry leader for 50 years and counting. ●



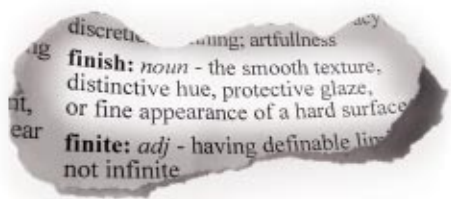
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**Congratulations**  
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**finite:** *adj* - having definable limits, not infinite

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# Staying one step ahead is a team sport at Gunther's

**T**he interior finishing business is all about the details. From plywood, doors and endless strips of moulding to doorknobs, jambs and the smallest screws, materials need to be sourced, purchased, warehoused, pieced together, correctly packaged, loaded and delivered on time.

Co-owners Peter and Conrad Kockerbeck agree that the continued success of Gunther's Building Centre Ltd., the company that bears their father's name, is due in large measure to the ability of the staff to stay on top of those details. Those at the management level alone have well over a hundred years of experience in the building industry among them.

## Honouring the legacy

While their father built the business from the ground up, Peter and Conrad can say, quite literally, that they learned it that way. The two began their apprenticeships well over 30 years ago, spending their summers sweeping floors, loading and later driving trucks, learning carpentry from a skilled European tradesman, working the hardware room and the sales desk, doing plans, installations, inside sales and much more.

"As a contributor to the family business, I knew that this company was going to be a long-term occupation," Peter states. "Dad started with some basic principles and ethics, and we are proud to have the mandate to maintain them."

Conrad concurs: "Our father believed in delivering on his promises to his customers. If he said it was going to be a certain way, he would make good on that pledge. Expectations in the building industry may have grown, but we still follow his philosophy today and we always will."

## Purchasing

The challenge of sourcing new products and making sure that stockpiles are brimming falls to Dan Callahan, purchasing manager, and Richard Fech, part-time purchaser.

According to Richard, who joined the company in 1960, staying ahead of the competition in product choice and availability has been one of the keys to Gunther's success over the years. "Trade shows and good relationships with suppliers always helped keep us on top of what was out there—and it still does," he says. "Gunther was never afraid to take a chance on a new, promising product. Plus, he never got greedy; he

plete package," Dan affirms. "We have a larger safety stock than anyone else; we stock to 99.9 per cent of our capacity. That helps us maintain dependability of delivery." Peter adds, "It's important to match the speed of the builds with our inventory. I always say I'd rather be looking at it than looking for it."

## Accounting

Delora Elliott is Gunther's accounting manager. After hearing good things about the company in 1980, Delora took a job in accounts payable. The accounting department consists of three dedicated employees including Deb Stewart, in accounts payable and Sandra Davies, accounting assistant.



Stage 4 Crew – Sri, Sheldon, Marvin Taylor (Manager) and Twyla

always decided on a fair profit margin and stuck to it."

Dan Callahan was a friend of the Kockerbeck family and, after 20 years with the company, chuckles about starting as a "temporary employee." He worked his way through the various components of the business—inventory, shipping and sales—to land and stay in the purchasing department.

"Gunther's is about fair prices for quality products, delivered on time in one com-

"A large percentage of our clients are custom home builders as well as contractors and renovators" Delora explains.

With the explosive growth in Calgary's housing market expected to continue, she is optimistic about the future of the company. The industry has become increasingly competitive, however, Gunther's has always treated their customers fairly and with integrity and this has resulted in a loyal customer base.



## Our Team



Larry Ferris, Carpentry Shop Manager.

Delora recalls Gunther Kockerbeck as an innovator who was "the heart of the company".

"Gunther liked to try new products and always managed to get everyone on board with his enthusiasm. He also looked after his staff and was a father image to many," she recalls. "We always knew his door was open."

"We all look forward to the challenges this new millennium will bring and know

"Considering how long some of them have been in the business, the vast majority of builders in town have been on a first name basis with Gunther's staff for decades."

Those kinds of relationships help retain customers and boost sales, making Barry's office a busy place. When he receives a request from a builder for a bid on interior finishing packages, he reviews the plans and forwards them to Gunther's estimating office so they can be broken down into components. After Dan Callahan sources the materials, Barry decides on the final pricing and presents Gunther's proposal to the customer. If the bid is accepted, supplies are ordered for delivery during the finishing stage of construction. "It all boils down to service," Barry asserts. "Our customers might find similarly priced items somewhere else, but no one provides personalized customer service like Gunther's does."

### Operations

Ensuring that all the various pieces of the Gunther's puzzle fit together as neatly as

possible from day to day is the job of Operations Manager Dwane Ferris. April 8, 2005, marked the start of Ferris's 31st year at Gunther's. He began as a driver, but his eagerness to learn the ropes led him to stints in every department.



25 Year Crew – Richard Fech, Dan Danilowich, Delora Elliott

the collective years of expertise at Gunthers will put us in the forefront of interior finishing suppliers."

### Sales

When Barry Harrison joined the company as sales manager a year and a half ago, he was awed by how long Gunther's had been in business and by the employees' wealth of knowledge and experience. "Employees are treated like family here," he points out.

Most days, Gunther's operates like a well-oiled machine. Everyone knows what to do and how to do it. There's literally a place for everything and everything's in its place. Or, as Peter puts it, "Every animal is in its own cage, and we don't put the snakes with the rats."

Dwane says Gunther's product line has always been second to none. "Everyone in town always knew that if you couldn't get it at Gunther's, you couldn't get

it. And if someone caught wind of something new, we'd bring it in."

"We will always be number one in Calgary," he concludes.

### Teamwork is key

The long-time employees who knew Gunther Kockerbeck well have nothing but praise for his vision and how he treated others: "He was a generous man," "He was very fair; he looked after his employees," "He was extremely honest...firm, but fair, and a leader in this industry," "His door was always open," "He was a wonderful man—a second father to his employees."

For their part, Peter and Conrad mirror their father's abiding appreciation for the Gunther's staff. "Any business is only as good as the people looking after your customers," notes Peter. "We've had good success over the years because of the good people who work here." ●

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## Thank You

New challenges in the interior finishing business and a city steadily approaching a population mark of one million means exciting times for all of us at Gunther's Building Centre Ltd. We want to extend a special thanks to all those who face those challenges with us and help us grow our business.

The dedication our employees bring to their work every day is the lifeblood of the company. We know our father would be proud of their efforts to ensure that the family business he built with his bare hands continues to thrive.

We owe a debt of gratitude to our many loyal suppliers. Over the years, their commitment to excellence has allowed us to present our customers with innovative, top-quality products at a fair price and in a timely manner, helping keep Gunther's a notch above the rest. As always, we welcome their ideas on how we can forge ahead for the next 50 years and beyond.

We'd like to thank our customers for their loyalty as well. Some of them have been with us for many decades. Rest assured, we will continue to honour those relationships with a commitment to service and quality.

The loss of a man held in as high regard by family, friends and business associates

as Gunther Kockerbeck was leaves a void in our hearts and our community. But we know his soul lives on in the airy comfort of our showroom, the steady whir of shop machinery, a warehouse filled to capacity, the tangy aroma of fresh-cut maple and oak and the quiet hum of employees' voices as they go about their daily tasks. We honour his legacy and look forward to ongoing success in all the partnerships initiated by him or in his name over the years. ●

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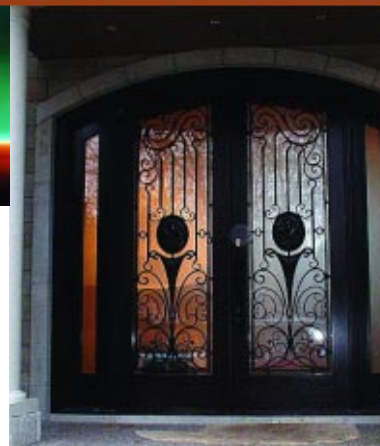
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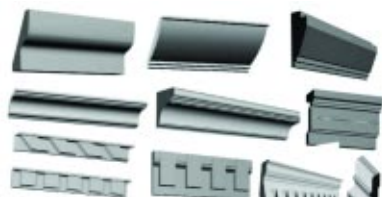
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