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THE FURNITURE AND JOINERY INDUSTRY IN WESTERN SAMOA*

by

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Introduction

Western Samoa, with area of 1,100 sq. miles, lies in Central Polynesia and consists of two main islands, Savaii with area of 6,600 sq miles and Upolu with an area of 430 sq. miles.

Apia, the capital of Western Samoa situated on the north coast of the main island of Upolu, and it is where the seat of Government and Centre of Conference is located. Western Samoa is an independent state with a population of 155,000 in total, 35,000 living in the city of Apia, ninety per cent are full blooded Polynesians and ten per cent partly Samoans, Europeans, Chinese and other Pacific Islanders.

Climate

The climate is pleasantly tropical (72° - 86° F) with more than 2,500 hrs of sunshine per year. The annual variations in temperature is very little, throughout the year. The annual relative humidity is 86 per cent but there is a fluctuation within 80 per cent to 100 per cent figures.

Air conditioning is mostly used in hotels, while a few offices use it too. Air-dried timber is not a problem unless used in air-conditioned places. Insects, termites and fungus thrive in our tropical climate, consequently timber have to be well treated before using.

Situation of furniture and joinery

Samoa is a newly independent developing country, therefore a lot of new buildings such as schools, Government residences, Government offices, private houses and even a national new hospital is half way through. Thus furniture and joinery plays a very important role in our development. The Government runs a workshop (10,000 sq ft.) for both furniture and joinery. A staff of 80, 6 leading hands - four foreman, two overseers and one superintendent who is manager and is responsible to the Director of Works. There are also two similar private firms of similar sizes. Ten per cent of the yearly production (Government furniture and joinery workshop) is exported to American Samoa and New Zealand through Government arrangements.

Our major problem in this field is the lack of machinery. Most of the machines we are using are 20 to 30 years old. We are trying our best to maintain them in use because we cannot get any more spare parts from overseas supplies. Skilled labour is still a problem but soon be overcome as the apprentice scheme has been introduced three years ago.

Timbers

Four-fifths of our land is still uncultivated and is covered with thick bush, which is mainly tropical hard-wood. We have fourteen species of local timbers, all of which can be used for furniture and for buildings. The common species used are Ifilele (Palisander), Gasu, Mamala, Kua, Mamalava (Mahogany Group), Manli, Afa and Teak which is also locally grown.

Pine and red-cedar are still imported and mainly used for building construction.

Both air and kiln drying methods are used for seasoning timbers, but not to a satisfactory condition. The main problem with our local timbers is the treatment given. I hope in the near future this problem can be overcome, as furniture or building could last for only a short period.

Other materials, use and availability

Apart from timber, all the other materials needed for furniture and joinery have to be imported, such as particle board, plywood, fibreboard, etc. and all metal and brass fittings. Plastic, chrome and leather furnitures are also introduced in the local markets but all imported from overseas. The problem regarding this is shipment. If the materials needed are in short supply, a delay in shipping means a delay in manufacturing and selling.

Labour

Labour cost compared to developing countries are far too low. Eighty per cent of the so called carpenters, joiners and furniture makers can read and write (Samoan language) from pastors school (village school) but never received any technical education in English, as most of these 80 per cent have limited experience as all the drawings, technical terms and books are in English. The remaining twenty per cent are almost all of

the younger generation, some have had a general education or been through the technical school.

In our only Home Technical Institute Furniture and Joinery is all incorporated under carpentry and there is no specialised teaching for furniture and joinery. Thus the knowledge the students receive is very general. A student attends the T.T.I. for two years after spending two or three years at a high school. The five year apprentice scheme also provides a general training for this field, thus the specialised training needed for it is still lacking.

Furniture and joinery factories

We cater for almost all kinds of furnitures and joinery, as we supply office furnitures, residential furnitures, hospital, schools, churches and all different joinery fittings.

I am solely responsible in designing all what is manufactured in the workshop. The designs vary depending on what the product is needed for. The finance available, whether it can be produced from the existing machines, and what material is available. I am so far trying to standardize some of our products such as school desks, chairs, book-shelves, cupboards, dining chairs, dining tables, lounge sets, toilet sets, doors, windows, etc. so that the flow in production could be speeded up.

Machinery used in the Government workshop are in a very poor condition and ought to be replaced, as no spare parts are available anymore.

Trends

During this year the Government was proposing to build and set up a factory for furniture and joinery, and because of the very limited aids we are getting from New Zealand, Australia and other countries, this project is set aside for next year.



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