

Thomas R. Durkan

Thomas R. Durkan, the founder of Durkan Patterned Carpets who was credited with creating a lucrative niche market for upscale printed carpet in the commercial carpet industry, died at his Dalton, GA home on November 25, 2003. He was 78 and suffering from leukemia, a family spokesperson said.

A self-made millionaire who entered the carpet business as a trainee for Mohawk Carpet Mills in 1951, Durkan retired in 1996 after selling his \$100 million company – ironically to his alma mater, now known as Mohawk Industries, Inc., a publicly traded \$4 billion industry giant.

The rags to riches story Durkan was fond of relaying as an inspiration to the entrepreneurial independent sales agents he cultivated, many of whom also became millionaires selling his product, was one of true grit and determination. Durkan, who also maintained a residence in Manhattan, was born in October, 1925 above the New York City carriage house of business tycoon Jay Gould, for whom his father Thomas was chauffeur.

His parents were Irish immigrants (his mother a practical nurse), and they provided him with a Catholic school education for 12 years, 1931 to 1943. A veteran of World War II, Durkan was a Waist Gunner for the Air Force, and flew 30 missions over Germany for two years, 1944 to 1945. After the war, he attended Fordham University in New York, and graduated with an accounting degree in June 1949. In addition to holding various positions at Mohawk, he was national commercial manager for Stephen Leedon, a carpet company in New York City, and national commercial manager for Stark Carpet Corporation between 1960 and 1961.

Durkan's carpet empire began as Durkan Carpet Corporation in June 1964, a small contract carpet operation in New York City catering to the architects and commercial interior designers he served throughout his career. When that company filed bankruptcy in 1971, the scrappy fighter came out for round two, forming Durkan Enterprises with no money, no equipment and no factory. The business was a one-man show, with Durkan selling carpet produced by way of commission manufacturing.

The era from 1971 through 1980 was marked by a constant struggle to remain liquid. By 1980, the company had a 10,000 square foot rented warehouse, 12 employees and no real net worth.

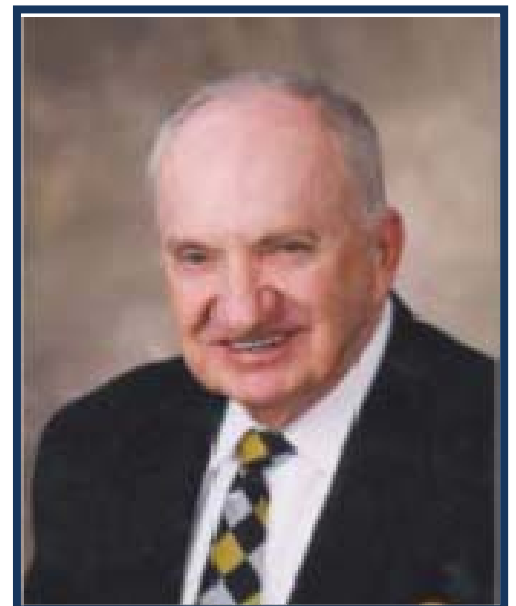
He did have a vision, however, and he clung to it steadfastly despite all obstacles. Durkan wanted to change the poor image of printed carpet via high quality manufacturing, and market his improved product to hotels and restaurants where printed carpet would make the same visual statement as woven Axminster carpet from Europe, but would be more durable, and far less expensive than the imports, the standard for hospitality installations at the time.

The company, now called Durkan Patterned Carpet, began limited printing of carpet on commission basis in late 1977. Gradually Durkan overcame challenges in the manufacturing and marketing areas, so that commercial interior designers would specify his product – indeed, continued product improvement became the company's hallmark.

Durkan was 54 when he made the decision to pinpoint the hospitality trade as a prime target, and gave up his previous market as a supplier of carpet to department stores for their own store use. In 1982, his children joined him in the business, learning all aspects from sales and marketing to production. The family soon expanded Durkan's markets to health care, the gaming industry, contract commercial, theaters, shopping malls and other areas, including international sales.

As their empire continued to expand, generating millions of dollars, the family, unencumbered by outside stockholders, continued to invest in plant and equipment. With limited credit from banks and commercial factors, Durkan soon became totally vertical through a series of shrewd acquisitions.

First a small, rented tufting plant was purchased in 1981. In 1984, Durkan built its own print plant. In 1989, the company bought a small yarn spinning mill and also purchased a finishing plant for back coating. Between 1989 and 1997 the company invested over \$40 million in plant and equipment, including a \$7 million state of the art



flat bed printer and a new computer jet printer.

Known to family, friends and employees as Tom, Sr., Durkan was a patriarch to everyone who worked for him, not just his children. He molded a company personality of familial organization, and was quick to praise his sales agent network of 80 in the field, and a staff which grew to 550, for their accomplishments. Of his own accomplishments he said, "Looking at the situation in retrospect, the formidable task seems impossible. However, through good fortune, tenacity, the assistance of many talented people, perseverance, and sacrifice, the job got done and Durkan Patterned Carpet became the world leader in printed patterned carpet."

As chairman of the board, chief executive officer, Tom Durkan led the fastest growing, most successful niche company in the commercial carpet industry in the U.S., one that was sought after by Shaw Industries as well as Mohawk for its high margin business and loyal customer base.

Durkan received a Platinum Circle award for contributions to the Hospitality industry in 1995.