



FOREIGN-MADE CASKETS

Greenville businessman embraces opportunities of Chinese imports

By WILLOW DUTTGE
Washington Correspondent

WASHINGTON — While many South Carolinians are concerned with the importation of Chinese textiles, for one Greenville man, manufacturing and importing caskets has opened up a world of opportunity.

Troy Shockley happened on his casket business venture, Greenville Funeral Supply, while visiting China in the interests of another of his businesses, Excalibur Tool & Equipment Co.

"Through the contacts that I made there and the incredible amount of opportunity that I saw in China, I just decided to find some other product that was still being manufactured in the U.S., and one day I just hit on caskets," he said.

Then he purchased a sample casket from a retailer in Greenville, shipped it to China, found a partner and shipped it back to the U.S. for resale, he said.

Now he and his partners manufacture and ship Chinese-made coffins directly to wholesalers, domestic manufactur-

◆
"... My husband, if he was buried in something that was not USA-made, ... he would simply hate it."

BETTY BROWN,
Vice chair,
National Casket Retailer Association

ers and funeral homes in the United States and Puerto Rico.

Shockley said he can sell his caskets at a lower price than U.S. manufacturers and lower than other companies who import caskets from China via a middleman. On low-end caskets he estimates a 5-percent price difference; on upper-end models, a 25-percent savings.

"(Customers) seem to not really be concerned with who made the product as much as the savings and the lower funeral prices," said Linda Gaskins, owner of two funeral homes in North Carolina and a customer of Shockley's.

But Betty Brown, vice chair of the National Casket Retailer Association, has a personal

problem with the imported caskets and doesn't sell them at her store, A Team Masters Casket & Vault of Ohio.

"For instance, my husband, if he was buried in something that was not USA-made ... he would simply hate it," she said.

How the Chinese imports affect the American casket industry isn't easy to define.

"There is a possibility that the American casket manufacturers would look at this like a challenge," said Jack Jensen of the California Funeral Directors Association.

"Presumably a competitor that does not have some of the manufacturing challenges that an American manufacturer has with regards to cost of labor

and so on."

While some funeral directors say they are keeping an eye on Chinese imports, the executive director of the Casket and Funeral Supply Association of America said imports are not on the rise.

Citing statistics from PIERS, the Port Import Export Reporting Service, Lemke said only 324 caskets were imported from China in the first quarter of this year, compared to more than 10 times that many in the first quarter of 2004.

And in the first quarter of 2005, Lemke estimates 437,000 caskets have been sold nationwide, including all imports and domestically manufactured products.

Shockley disputed Lemke's figures.

"He's not doing a full extensive search," Shockley said, but would not explain how to find more appropriate numbers.

Shockley said he imports between 2,000 and 15,000 caskets a year and wouldn't supply a smaller range.

Shockley foresees growth for his casket company. It's a huge market, he said.