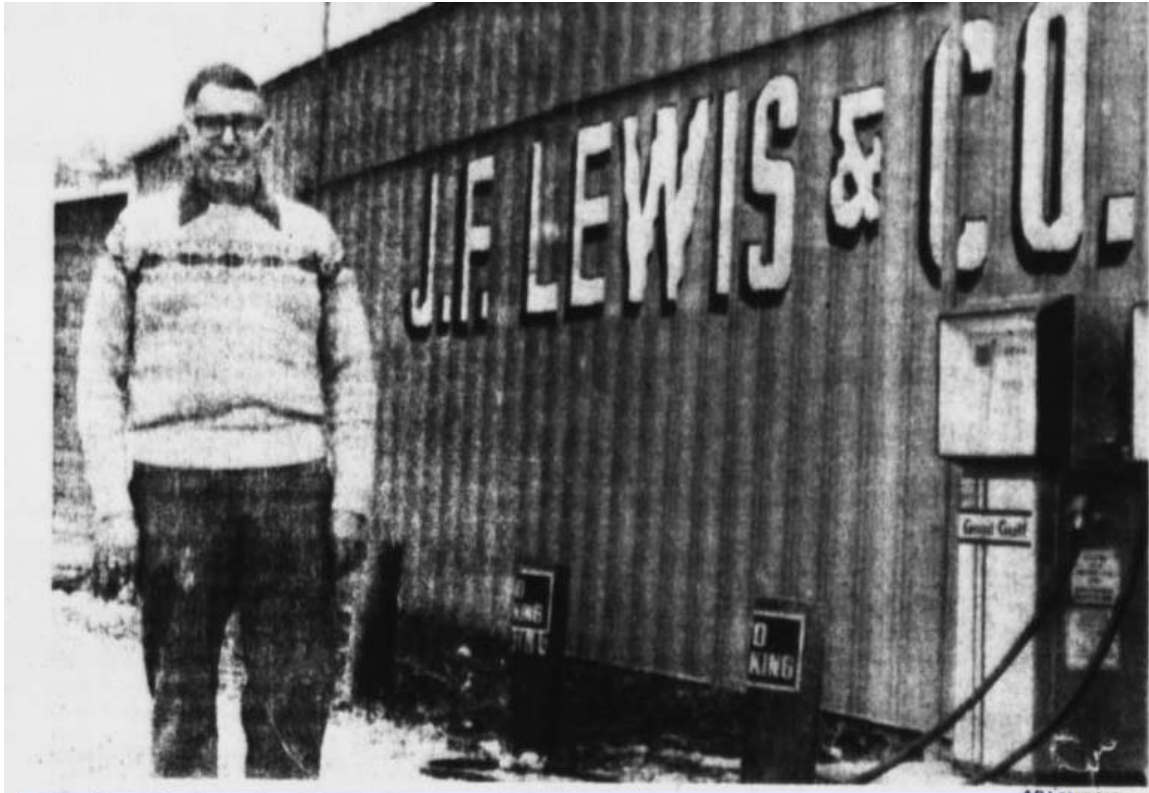


Submitted by Glen Haney - bud at ncweb.com



John F. Lewis II in front of his warehouse

AP Laserphoto

... "People will travel a hundred miles to save a nickel," he says.

He's Kentucky's furniture king

CARTER, Ky. (AP) — John F. Lewis II is a firm believer that "people will travel a hundred miles to save a nickel." To that end, he has built a multimillion-dollar discount furniture business from the country store his grandfather founded 91 years ago.

"We're living in a different age," said the 65-year-old owner of J.F. Lewis & Co.

The business once was a rural commissary where rock-quarry workers bought groceries, clothing, sundries and gasoline. "But when the discount stores got in the cities, the country stores dried up," Lewis said. "There was no way you'd get enough volume in the rural areas.

"We had to get into something that would make people come out into the country, and that was furniture. You can't do it on groceries."

There is little in this **Carter County** hamlet besides Lewis' four

warehouses, grocery store and gas pumps. But hundreds of customers trek along Kentucky Route 474 each week to wander through a vast stock of furniture that includes the biggest names in the industry.

Lewis bustles among them, seeming to enjoy the conversations as much as the sales — and he makes plenty of both.

The company grossed almost \$3 million last year, Lewis said, and furniture sales accounted for 75 percent of it. "Most of the furniture world is amazed at the business we do," he said proudly.

On an average Saturday, Lewis' gravel parking lot is clogged with cars and trucks from several Kentucky counties, as well as from Ohio and West Virginia.

The attraction is major — said would cost twice as much in an average retail store. And there is no

haggling over the price: cost plus 10 percent and sales tax. Take it or leave it.

The key, Lewis says, is maximum volume and minimum overhead. That means no delivery, financing or advertising beyond a single line in the Grayson area yellow pages.

He has four employees, and the rural location means low property taxes.

"Everything adds to your cost," he said. "The advertising for these big stores runs thousands of dollars a week. You just think about how much stuff you have to sell to make back the advertising.

"We've got it down to where we don't figure we've got any competition."

There is no showroom here, just 20,000 square feet of warehouse space with furniture stacked to the ceiling. Most customers guide themselves through the maze, peering into cardboard cartons to see

see what you want, they ask. Lewis will order it.

"We custom-order

thousands and thousands of dollars worth of merchandise without a down payment," he said. "We normally find that, at the price you're buying it for, there's always somebody else who'll take it if you don't."

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