

## **NOTHING BUT THE BEST FELINE FURNITURE**

Written by June Grayson

When Linda and Dave Brinkman were married eight years ago, they started a sideline business. The business was to be one that Linda could operate from her dining room table while staying home to raise their family.

Their plan failed: their sideline business has now succeeded beyond their wildest dreams, and they are both full time operators of the business. For Dave and Linda Brinkman, cat furniture is big business. It DIDN'T start out that way. They meant it to be a sideline business, one that Linda could operate from her dining room table while she stayed home to raise their children.

With over a 50% growth rate each year for the past eight years, their gross yearly sales now will soon approached one million dollars and the company commands both of their fulltime attention.

Dave started work in a pet store while a high school student, and moved on to managerial jobs throughout the pet industry.

Linda has her masters' degree in Home Economics, and worked as a quality control specialist in a multinational pet food company in Chicago when they met. Dave knew that there was an unfulfilled niche in the market.

The pet furniture being manufactured eight years ago was of cheap quality and the companies gave poor service.

Their plan was to start a small company to supply that market niche, and Linda could manage the company while she stayed home to raise their children. Dave would keep his full time job salaried position with a pet supply company.

They started with a small factory staffed with four workers in McHenry, Illinois. Within one year, that facility was too small, and the next year they moved to Elburn, Illinois to a large 20,000 square foot barn where they eventually employed fifteen people.

Within two years, they their grossed 100,000 and Dave had to quit it job to manage the factory full time.

If you work and your cats have to stay home alone all day, you need to know about the American Cat Emporium their products range from a \$1.00 toy made out of cardboard with a bell inside, to a complicated climbing post four foot wide and six feet tall. The wood is all natural bark branches and their are shelves,

tunnels, and nests made out of wood and carpeted. With the same kind of carpeting you have in your home. In fact, you can even ask for something to match your color schemes.

One of these climbing posts may last your lifetime if you have only one or two cats. For a cattery, where many cats play

They buy mill ends and samples from a Georgia carpet factory, the same carpeting you have in your home, ranging in price from \$15.00 to \$80.00 a yard. Scratching posts, cradles, chairs, swings, and even a Ferris wheel are some of their other models. Davie is the designer, and it is up to Linda to work out the design and teach the employees how to make them and climb all day, you can ask to have it reupholstered

They buy cherry, oak, maple and other hardwood tree limbs. They use only natural woods, and inspect it well to rule out bugs and rot. They are the only cat furniture company to use real natural branches. The wood is in good supply because the size branches they use are smaller than firewood.

If you ever examine the furniture or have to rip something out, you will be able to appreciate how well it is put together. It is. They use staples, all deeply entrenched, and with pneumatic air driven stapling guns that can deliver 120 pounds of pressure.

They feel that one factor of their success is that they did it the shoestring way: they didn't buy any equipment still they could afford to pay cash in full. Others go the other way and get head over heels in debt with interest payments, and loans through the Small Business Administration. In fact, they bought out another manufacturer who started the opposite way, with \$100,000 right of loans from TBA got discouraged.

So they took over his business of making wood animal houses and toys. He also had a couch and trailer which they bought.

They do not sell directly to customers but sell to distributors who sell to pet stores. Their rustic branch furniture does not ship too well in common carriers. So they now have two full time trucks and trailers and deliver as many of their own products as possible. Their routes go as far east as the coast and as far south as Florida and as far west as the Rockies. Imported from Taiwan. That is why they feel their pet products do well. They are well made and wear well. We constantly have to keep on top of quality and shipment and meeting deadlines. Almost all other people's products are so seem to be able to manage several facilities. But when we acquired two facilities, we had to make a decision. We are evidently the kind of managers who have to manage by keeping our hands on the system. So they consolidated their two businesses now in Camp Douglas, Wisconsin factory over 20,000 square feet with 20 employees. Their business has grown by over 50% each year for each of the eight years they have been in business. And their business is recession proof: we started the business in 1980 when the economy started to turn down. But people will always take care of their pets. When the economy is poor they can't afford to go on luxurious vacations, or have expensive hobbies, but they can always afford a cat.

Ten years ago, the pet distribution in the United states was 2/3 dogs and 1/3 cats.

Now it is estimated to be 55% cats and 45% dogs. And the pet industry is still switching. AS more and more women work, the percentages can only keep switching to cats. Cats are easier to keep. you can't leave a dog home alone for a long time. But you could even leave your cats alone for three days if you had to. Each piece of furniture is different and custom made. The personal making the furniture takes advantage of the natural curve of each piece of branch and fashions the perches and housings accordingly.