Bank of Sunset: 101 years of memories

by Natasha Dupuy & Amanda L. Guidry

What's so special about a bank? Well, usually not much in a world of Wal-Mart banking, but Sunset's hometown bank, which was founded in 1906 by a group of landowners, has carved out a niche for itself by catering to small business and residential construction lending while keeping its autonomy. It also has weathered many storms during its 101 years, including surviving the Great Depression.

But how did it all begin? What catalyst set in motion the beginnings of this much-beloved and respected bank?

"Two guys had some silver coinage, and they were carrying it by buggy to a bank in Opelousas," explained current CEO Brent Vidrine. "The coins were so heavy, they fell through the floor of the buggy, so they were stuck. They said then, 'We need to have a bank in Sunset!' And that was Willie's (Barry) grandfather, Mr. Hugo Sabille."

Soon, local merchants and landowners sold shares of stock in the proposed bank, and on April 16, 1906, the Bank of Sunset opened for business, with $10,000 in capital and Frank Dimmick as president.

Bank officials quickly approached a banker from Rayne about running the daily activities, and Lloyd Franques became the Bank of Sunset's first employee. He handled all of the banking until a second employee, Frank "F.S." Barry, was hired for the sum of $20 a month to help with the bank's rapidly increasing business. Barry quickly was elected cashier.

"My daddy (F.S. Barry) was the youngest cashier in the United States at 16 years old," said current bank board member William "Willie" Barry proudly. "He had to be emancipated to do legal work because you couldn't until you were 21 back then."

In 1921, 16-year-old Robert J. Castille joined the Bank of Sunset's team for $10 per month. By this time, the ever-increasing sweet potato farming industry was bolstering the bank's finances, and the busy bank needed more workers.

Eight years later, however, the United States went into a dark period of financial crisis known simply as The Great Depression. Although the exact cause of the Depression is debated among scholars to this day, the fact remains that thousands of banks went under because of financial fear. The Bank of Sunset, however, survived, along with other local bank Washington State Bank.

When other, larger banks were closing their doors, Barry and Castille spent many hours assuring depositors that their money was safe. In order to illustrate this, stacks of cash were taken from the vault and piled in conspicuous view behind the counters so that depositors could readily see the bank had an ample supply of money available.

"When people would come in and ask my daddy if they should take their money out of the bank, he would say, 'Look at all that cash. Your money is safe. Leave it.'" said Willie. "It was the faith they had in Mr. Barry," agreed Woody Sabille, another board member and Willie's cousin. "When they would ask him if they should take their money back, he said, 'No, leave it.' And they did."

In 1933, U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt declared March 6-10 a national Bank Holiday so that depositors would not bankrupt the system by withdrawing all of their money. Banks could open when they proved that the money in their reserves was greater than or equal to the money that had been deposited.

Barry, however, knew that