Building to stay alive

By TED GRIGGS
Associate business writer

In the commercial lumber business, as in so many others, a company has two options: grow or become a memory.
Baton Rouge Lumber Co. celebrated its 116th anniversary this year because Warners bore businessman Tommy Hatfield didn't like the second option and bought the company as part of his own expansion.
"Consummation is the market is changing the way we do business," Hatfield said. "You have to do sufficient volume or you die."
In 1966, Hatfield Hardware & Lumber Co. outlets in Warners and Monroe had annual sales of about $5 million. But the stores couldn't expand any faster than their local economies.
Meanwhile, giant retail chains, such as Home Depot and Lowe's, sprang up.
The firm began life in 1985 as Burton Lumber, taking its name from the manager.
The building on Front Street was known for its red Chinese motif, and St. Clair Bienvenue, who managed the lumber company from 1963-87, the building's unique architecture made it a popular subject for art students for decades.
Witter's family gained control of Baton Rouge Lumber around 1910. That's when the building on Front Street was purchased and the current building was constructed.
The company remained a downtown fixture until February 1968, when Bienvenue wholesaled operations to the present site on Cloutiery Drive.
"The town was moving east, and I was getting further and farther from the fire," Bienvenue said.
The company was slow but steady, losing customers, Bienvenue said. The decision to move came easily, businesses had two options then, too.
Hatfield is the third generation of his family to run the business, and he may be the last.
Hatfield has three children, ages 30, 35 and 19. He said he doesn't know if any fourth generation Hatfields will join him.
"If they're interested, great. If not, I have a viable asset somebody else will be interested in," Hatfield said.

Cleaning Baton Rouge for a century

By ELLYN COUVILLION
Special to The Advocate

The dry cleaning industry has become increasingly sophisticated since its early days, when commercial laundries were mainly concerned with washing sheets and starching collars.
And in its 100-year history, Keen's Dry Cleaning has changed in a variety of ways.
"The concern recently has been the environment, causing Keen's to invest several years ago in more refrigerated, nonventilated dry cleaning machines.
"The environmentally friendly machines cost about $50,000 a pop," said Don McDaniel, president and chief executive officer.
Now, Keen's is phasing out those machines in favor of newer, "Teflon-coated" ones that work even cleaner, as well as using biodegradable solvents, he said.
"We're always up with the latest developments from state and federal environmental laws," he said.
A business today has 20 locations in Baton Rouge, Baker, Plaquemine and Gonzales, it is building a storefront on 5556 Jones Creek Road, with the run-down, two-story building, and Frank H. Keen III, owner and chairman of the company.
The facilities have "everything I can think of to put in it," including "huge wet cleaning departments" (stains come out better with water," Keen said.
"Obviously, we're continuing to revolutionize the industry," he said, citing plans to enlarge stores at Greenwell Springs and Sullivan.
Keen, a descendant of one of the founders of the business, turned over the reins of the company in 1998 to McDaniel, who's been with the dry cleaner 35 years.
"Keen's has been in the family business since 1900 by brothers Frank H. and J. Selby Keen, the Southern Steam Laundry on Government Street.
The laundry washed and ironed clothes, which detached from shirts, Keen said.
When Keen's was lost to a theft, the brothers thought they'd plant out of business, he said. Instead, they "learned to iron shirts." The business moved to Third Street and was renamed Keen Bros. laundry in 1906.
Keen's Laundry got its first noisemaker, Ward electric trucks in 1918 for running customer routes. The Ward's had no keys, but were operated by simply putting a plug in place and pressing a lever. The battery in each truck had to be recharged at the end of each day. The last of the Ward's was retired in the early 1960s, outfitting the company that manufactured them, according to a Morning Advocate story in 1950.
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The Burton Lumber Co., predecessor of Rouge Lumber Co., is shown in these photos from the "Elks Souvenir of Baton Rouge," a booklet published in the early years of this century.