Family portrait

Baton Rouge has several privately owned businesses whose roots go back 100 years or more. They are profiled on this and following pages.

By TED GRIGGS
Advocate business writer

How do you keep a family business in the family?

“Typically, if the new leader or manager of the company doesn’t spend three to five years with that owner, he is probably not prepared to understand all of the intricacies, all of the interrelationships involved,” Joubert said. The “key man” has to know and understand the customers, products, the market, the finance side, co-workers, suppliers, and be familiar with the technology and how it’s changing, Joubert said.

“Nobody can walk into a small mom-and-pop and just jump in,” Joubert said.

You can’t force your heirs to join the business either. “It’s not an obligation, it’s a choice,” Hatfield said.

Hatfield has three children, ages 30, 25 and 19. So far none has said they want to take over the business.

“If they’re interested, great. If not, I have a viable asset somebody else will be interested in,” he said.

This approach has worked well for the Heromans, whether they’re part of “The Original” Heroman’s Florist; Fred Heroman’s Flowers & Gifts; or Billy Heroman’s Flowerland.

“My father and grandfather were pretty laid back in the sense that no pressure was being put on us about what to do with our lives. They kind of let us live them and find out things on our own. That’s how I found out I wanted to be in the florist business,” said David Heroman, son of Harry “Rip” Heroman Jr., grandson of Harry Heroman Sr., and finance director for “The Original” Heroman’s Florist.

Harry Jr. said it came as a surprise when David, who graduated from LSU with a degree in psychology, asked to work in the business. Harry Jr.’s other son, Harry Jr. (Thur) III, worked out of town for a number of years before returning to the fold.

Harry Jr. said he thinks a big reason his children joined the business is that they grew up in it.

“It was part of their lives since they were very little,” he said.

There is another possibility; for the Heromans, it could be that all roads lead to home.

Fred W. Heroman planned to take his master’s in business administration degree to South America and specialize in international trade. He even worked a year in Peru.

But after serving in the military reserves, he decided he missed Baton Rouge. In 1965, he started his own retail florist business. He’s never regretted it.

“I certainly enjoy what I’m doing. I think that’s the main thing. People have to like what they’re doing,” he said.

Cyril Ann McBride, daughter of Billy Heroman, taught school for three years after graduating from college. After her children were born, McBride did substitute teaching, but then her mom asked for some help with bookkeeping.

The next thing she knew, McBride was back in the family business full time.

Heromans, she said, tend to stay in Baton Rouge, regardless of whether they work in the florist business. Jack E. Tucci, associate professor of management at Southeastern Louisiana University, said a family business demands a commitment seven days a week and sometimes 24 hours a day.

“You open the store in the morning. You close it at night. You’re doing inventory on the weekends when everybody else is at home,” Tucci said.

Over time, that kind of responsibility places a lot of stress on a person, Tucci said.

“You really have to have a love for the business. It’s not just a job,” Tucci said.

There are other considerations in passing along a family business, not the least of which involve taxes.

Transferring ownership can be complicated, which is why there are accountants and lawyers, Joubert said. Families can lose a lot of money if the transfer isn’t handled correctly.

Family businesses also need contingency plans, Joubert said. The family has to know what to do if the owner dies before the business changes hands.

Suppose the owner was the only one allowed to sign checks? How do you pay bills? What if the only person with the password to the computer dies?

Those things can paralyze a business, Joubert said.

Other recommendations include:

• Children should buy out their parents. This clarifies the lines of decision-making and lessens conflicts between the new management and the old.

• Many times the parents have a lot of their identity wrapped up in the business, Joubert said. This makes it hard to let go.

• They’re also used to telling everyone what to do, and they don’t want their children to fall by the wayside. The parents tend to think they know best, and this often results in conflict.

• Be flexible. Family-owned businesses often start without a business plan. The second generation family members, who have been to college, want to lay out a direction for the business and establish a plan for growth.

This is another source of friction, Tucci said. The second generation often sees business opportunities where the parents do not.

Market conditions change, and the things that made a business successful can also lead to its downfall.

• Maintain your sense of humor. David Heroman joked that the main challenge in running a family business is learning not to kill each other.

• The reason there are three different Heroman’s business entities is that four of the brothers, one of them, David’s grandfather, couldn’t get along, David said.

• Separate business activities from family time. Set aside regular times to discuss business issues. Avoid them at Thanksgiving, Christmas or other family holidays.

Blooming business

By TED GRIGGS
Advocate business writer

It’s been 121 years since “The Original” Heroman’s Florist opened here, and more than 160 years since Baton Rouge’s original Heroman, George, started a bookstore downtown that evolved into a flower shop.

These days, George’s descendants own seven retail flower shops and a landscaping service. The floral businesses are “The Original” Heroman’s Florists, Billy Heroman’s Flowerland and Fred Heroman’s Flowers and Gifts. A sixth generation is well entrenched in the business.

Why have so many Heromans stayed in the family business?

“I think it just really starts from early childhood, helping your family with what you could,” said Fred W. Heroman, owner and founder of Fred Heroman’s Flowers and Gifts.

“I know my father (Frederick I. Heroman Jr.) worked for his dad (Frederick I. Sr.) when he was a younger and I did, too,” Heroman said.

Fred Jr. expected his children to help out on the weekends, Heroman said. He made exceptions only for church and school obligations.

Harry “Rip” Heroman Jr., who runs “The Original” Heroman’s Florist operations, has two sons in the business.

“I didn’t necessarily encourage any of them to come into the business. In fact, one of them (Buck) had worked out of town for several years and wanted to come back into the business,” he said. “The other one (David) really surprised me. I thought he was going to be a psychology major, and he ended up wanting to come into the floral business.”

Cyril Ann McBride, daughter of Billy Heroman, said working in the family business is sort of “a gimme.”

“I have children that, bless their hearts, have been in the business since they were born. We don’t give them too much choice,” she said.

When the busiest days roll around, everyone pitches in, family, friends and anyone else who can lend a hand, McBride said.

But the Heroman family hasn’t always been in the flower business.

George Matthew Heroman came to Baton Rouge from Germany in 1833. By 1837, he had established a bookstore at Florida and Fourth streets and quickly expanded into general merchandise.

In the 1850s, George put up the Heroman Building. The grounds were landscaped, and the Heromans let people pick flowers for funerals. Fred W. Heroman said.

As the town grew, it became costly to maintain the landscaping so the family started charging for the flowers.

The business remained a single enterprise, later moving to Main Street, until the 1950s when separate retail branches blossomed under the fourth generation of Heromans—brothers Harry Heroman Sr., Fred Heroman Jr. and Billy Heroman.

Fourth brother, Al Heroman, entered the insurance business after having the only horticulture degree in the family.

David Heroman, chief financial officer of “The Original” Heroman’s Florist and son of Harry Heroman Jr., said the family refers to AI as “the smart one.”

Fred Heroman Jr. struck out on his own—building a nursery and garden center on Florida Boulevard—when his father refused to add greenhouses and outdoor plants.

In 1958, Billy Heroman bought a small flower shop on Perkins Road and later added locations on Harrell’s Ferry Road and Lee Drive.

Harry Heroman Sr. established sites on Government Street and Essen Lane, which eventually became “The Original” Heroman’s Florist stores.

Fred W. Heroman opened his retail shop in 1969, eschewing his father’s wholesale business, but he wasn’t trying to separate himself from the family. The Heroman Building on Main Street was being torn down, and he bought enough bricks to build his shop.