**LOUISIANA SPECIAL**

**Goudchaux's memories on Main Street**

Hans Sternberg stands next to a piano in Maison Blanche, formerly Goudchaux's. Sternberg's family owned Goudchaux's from 1907 through 1992.

Former, longtime employees schedule Aug. 29 reunion

By CHANTE DIONNE WARREN
Advocate staff writer

Shoppers enjoyed interest-free charge accounts. Children earned nickels for making "As" on their report cards. Petting zoos were set up in the parking lot.

Store managers did office work in the center of the department store on rolling desktops so they could quickly reach customers.

These are a few of the memories former employees recall about the old Goudchaux's department store at 1500 Main Street.

Former employees will hold a reunion Aug. 29, said Don Bell, co-chairman of the event and a former manager.

Hans Sternberg, whose family owned the store for years, said the Sternbergs believed in running a personalized, customer-friendly business.

"We tried to always be on the sales floor," he said. "Buyers would have offices next to their department. That was important to us to have the company that way so we could give good service."

Bell, who was in charge of the store operations, worked from a rolling office while traveling from store to store.

"I had a podium with a desktop and a mobile phone. I did my work in the middle of the floor as a store manager. I stood there and did paperwork and telephone calls," he said.

"If anybody had anything they needed, I was there," Bell said.

There was little the employees would not do to help a customer, said Bernard Blanchard, 72, who worked

---

**GOUDEXHAUX'S REUNION**

The reunion will be held on Aug. 29 at Crockett's, 10555 Florida Blvd. Tickets cost $15 in advance and $25 at the door.

All employees who worked at Goudchaux's from 1907 through 1987 are invited to attend.

For more information, call Don Bell at 293-8133.
Goudchaux's employees in 1936 from left, Fritz Fitzgerald, Joann Whitehead, St. George Hines, Myrtie Cox, Herman Whitehead, Eva Wald, William Hoover and Harry J. Hoover.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1B

at Goudchaux's for 35 years.
He recalled a late night call from a customer who needed clothes for a family burial.
Blanchard made a trip to the Main Street store just before midnight and picked up the clothes for his customer.
There were also the fun customer services such as Easter egg hunts in the store, baby races, Santa visits and the parking lot petting zoo.
Sternberg said he modeled the report card program that awarded students nickels for making "A" after a similar program in another state.
"We brought it here and liked it so much we kept it for years. The community liked that sort of thing," he said.
Creativity was encouraged, said Pam Pettit, an employee for 17 years.
"They allowed everybody to be creative within the constraints of right and wrong," said Pettit.
There was not an off-the-wall idea the Sternbergs didn't say 'let's try.'

The family actively sought suggestions from its employees.
Each Friday, the Sternbergs and 10 different employees met for breakfast to talk about the business and generate ideas for the store, Sternberg said.
In one instance, an employee started a real-estate business for the company.
Although the business failed, Bell said it was just one example of the Sternbergs' willingness to test new ideas.
Bell also recalled a menswear buyer who suggested selling electronics. The idea turned into a thriving business until specialty electronics stores came along.

Goudchaux's presence in Baton Rouge goes back to the early years of this century. Goudchaux's opened in 1907 by brothers Bernard and Jake Goudchaux as a 6,000-square-foot store with three employees in the 1700 block of Main Street.
In 1925, the store moved to 1500 Main Street.
In 1936, Erich Sternberg joined Goudchaux's, and was followed a year later by his wife, Lee. The family purchased the store in 1945. The Sternberg family opened another Goudchaux's store locally and one in Lafayette. The company expanded in 1962 when it acquired the Maison Blanche stores in New Orleans. It expanded again in 1969 by buying the Robinson's of Florida stores.
In 1983, the family officially dropped the Goudchaux's name and brought all of its stores under the Maison Blanche identity.
In 1992, the Sternberg family sold the chain to Ohio-based Mercantile Stores Co. Inc.
Earlier this month, Arkansas-based Dillard's Inc. purchased all of the Mercantile stores. Birmingham-Ala. retailer Proffitt's Inc. has announced plans to buy from Dillard's the Maison Blanche stores in the Mall at Cortana and the Mall of Louisiana.
It remains unclear what will happen to the 1500 Main Street store, now owned by Dillard's, but which some Baton Rougeans still call Goudchaux's.
While the store has roots in the past, it was among the first retailers to embrace the new, recalled Bill Hamblin, 52, former personnel manager and a 25-year employee.
It installed automated cash registers in the early 1970s, Hamblin said.
Before automated cash registers, department store cashiers added stacks of price tags by hand, Hamblin said.
"In a busy period, it wasn't unusual to have a stack of tickets that were six to eight inches high," he said.
Meanwhile, despite technological changes, the store continued to offer at least one old-fashioned service: interest-free charge accounts.
"That went on until well after we bought Maison Blanche," Sternberg said. "That's unheard of. We did it because we had traditionally always done it. We were probably the last major department store that didn't charge interest."
While the employees pride themselves on the stores customer focus, Goudchaux's was also a family, Pettit said.
"Everyone watched out for each other," Pettit said.
The store offered a continuing education program for all of its employees by paying for classes.
We had lots of kids who worked through college and the store paid an awful lot of their way through school for kids who otherwise wouldn't be able to go through college," Hamblin said.
Mae McCoy, 68, who began working for the company in 1952 and still works at the Main Street store, said she sometimes worked until 4 a.m. adding up time cards so employees could get their wages on time.
In the 50s, employees were paid in cash, she said.
Employees also recalled everyone was treated the same — from store owner to stock clerk.
"The Sternbergs always stressed no specific parking places for executives or sales people. And everyone was offered the same discounts. So everyone was not allowed to get bigger than their britches," Pettit said.
But employees had to follow one main dictum, she said.
"You were to always joke and always assist. You were not to pass anything on the floor that needed to be picked up," she said.