Aubrey Henderson has been in so many different businesses, he can't remember them all.

Aubrey Henderson may be Acadiana's most well-rounded businessman.
He's 81 years old—and sharp as anyone—yet, even he can't recall all of the businesses with which he's been involved. But he is prepared. He's written up a list of them for an interview, and as the day goes on he remembers more. And make no mistake—he's entrepreneurial spirit is alive and well.

Even the most astute businessman would have some trouble remembering decades of business ventures that have brought him from the hills of a North Louisiana town through years in the nursery business all the way to ownership in hotels, a subdivision development, etc.

If he can imagine it, Aubrey Henderson can do it. He thinks long and hard about whether there's something he's always wanted to do but hasn't. "If something comes along..." he adds. "If something comes along..."

He then immediately begins to explain that he's just poured the foundation for "nice," sort of portable restrooms, so that the mini-tourism business his home and adjacent property on the Coteau Ridge have turned into will be adequately accommodated.

"We've got a lot of people who come out here. They drive up here in a bus and a bunch of women (he adds, "and men"), they need to use the bathroom. We had a busload from California just a while back."

At this point in his life, Henderson can do just about anything he puts his mind to, but life hasn't always been so kind to him. Actually, it's all the more grateful.

"I think if someone hasn't had some hardship on the way up—well, that's just a good lesson for you," Henderson says.

Henderson grew up in Forest Hill, in Rapides Parish, and is one of five children. His dad made his living as a "flathead," and his family was quite poor, he says.

"Most people don't know what a flathead is," Henderson says. He recalls vividly how he came to know his dad, a logeater, was indeed a flathead.

When a friend in grammar school told him, "I know you. You're dad's a flathead," Henderson became quite upset.

"Oh, man, I want to jump on him," he says. "I know my dad wasn't a flathead. I knew he was a round-head."

When Henderson got home, worried that a schoolmate had insulted his father, he wanted to resolve the issue. "I told Dad, you're not a flathead." Laughing rather loudly, Henderson recalls, his father said: "Well, let me tell you why I'm a flathead."

BY LESLIE TURK

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Henderson's involvement with the local business community, names like the late Maurice Heymann, Jimmy Bean and Pete Rush, is evidence that he knows the ins and outs of the business world. But don't go to his 105-acre spread on Coteau Ridge expecting a suburb-type house. In his blue coveralls and baseball hat—the temperatures on this day are in the 90-degree range—Henderson looks and feels right at home. This has been his home for years.

Most recently, he has hired help to construct covers for recreational vehicles, which, with Keep on its proper's lot, will keep to RV owners. "I've got several doctors who want to lease them," he says. "These RV covers will join a number of other businesses/hobbies already underway on Henderson's property. Only two years ago, some rather unique-looking birds began making their home here, too. Indigenous to Australia, Henderson's emu can bring some healthy export money—he recently sold a pair for $10,000. But they are much more than a commodity for this couple. "As soon as they hatch, we bring them in," Henderson says. And he means the home to the hens.

"Bonnie puts them up on her lap, pets them. That's the way to keep pets out of trouble. We've spoiled those babies to death. I taught them how to eat and everything," he says.

It's obvious that Henderson is rather fond of his emus, but he also knows they are going to put money in his pocket. He's heard that a pair in Texas recently brought $200,000. It only costs about 50 cents a day to feed them, he says, and the market for them is blossoming. "It's a breeders market now. Everybody's trying to get into it," he says.

While Henderson typically won't get into a business if he doesn't see the likelihood of making a buck or two, he will jump into some ventures just for the fun of it. "A lot of it, you don't make money. I just get into it, I like it." Among the countless interesting aspects of his property is an alligator farm, a project he undertook a number of years before Bonnie isn't as fond of these creatures as she is of the emus, however. The task of keeping the alligators has to be cleaned daily, and Bonnie doesn't want her husband taking any chances by cleaning them out himself. "I don't like him going in there," she says. "I really don't." "I've been trying to get her to go in there," Henderson says. But she won't. She has no interest in visiting the gators. "I've been in there a time or two when they were babies. I'm not going in there now," she says.

The alligator farm also serves as a nice complement to Henderson's restaurant of more than 10 years, Gator Cove, which serves up a number of alligator dishes. The restaurant is now under a five-year lease agreement to another party, and Henderson says that later it will be taken over by his grandson, Jay Voorhies. Another of his restaurant businesses is also being leased by the same party. Henderson's grandson is training to run that business, too, when the lease is up in three years.

"He'll take over," Henderson says. "Of course, I hope I'm still here to help him.

Unlike most of what he's had his hands in, some of Henderson's investments haven't paid off. One of the largest investments he made was in a blacktop plant in Houston, Henderson says. "It didn't do too good. I couldn't control it. It was too far away. I eventually sold it." Henderson says he had put about $30,000 into the business but managed to escape somewhat unsathed. "I got my money back," he says.

Another investment with three other partners, in the drilling of three oil wells, also didn't pay off. "We broke even," he says.

A good sense of timing saved Henderson from losing too much in hotel ventures more than 10 years ago. Along with several other investors, he at one time shared ownership of two Holiday Inns in Lafayette. Some of the partners, including Henderson, got out of the business before the economy crashed. "We sold out before that bust," he says.

Not only has his business life been varied, Henderson's hobbies have also produced some quite unusual constructions. He built his grandson a two-story house out of landscape timbers, an accomplishment he thinks is unique. "That's the first I ever heard of it," he says. "And then I got a barn that's made of it.

Henderson gets a lot of satisfaction out of undertaking projects no one else has thought of. "If I wake up tomorrow morning I might want to do something else. I don't know what's going to come up."

And if nothing else does strike him, and he slows down like Bonnie wants him to, he'll say to himself, "OK, too, he says.

Aubrey Henderson is at peace with himself. It's the kind of peace few people ever come to know. "I don't drink. I don't smoke. I don't run around. I've lived a good life."