Profile

By ELEANOR YOUNT

Huval Baking: an Acadiana tradition

If it's close to meal time and your resistance is beginning to ebb, you'd best steer clear of the revolving loaf with the Evangeline Maid at the corner of St. John and W. Simcoe streets. It's the home of Huval Baking Co. Inc., and the aroma of fresh-baked bread that fills the air may prove your undoing.

Generations of South Louisianians have grown up with the Acadian lass known as Evangeline Maid, trademark of Huval Baking Co. For almost half a century, her familiar blue dress, white bonnet and apron have been seen on bakery products in homes throughout Acadiana.

Dudley Hebert, president of Huval Baking, has been with the company for 39 years but his association with Evangeline Maid goes back much further. An unsliced loaf is something of a luxury today, but in Hebert's formative years, it was the only type available.

"I remember my mother slicing the loaf every morning for our sandwiches. Sometimes we had big sandwiches, sometimes small. It all depended on how much bread was left," he recalls.

When Hebert became associated with Huval Baking, softness was not an important consideration in bakery products. Loaves were so hard they were stacked one on top of the other with no danger of crushing the bottom layer.

In today's market, freshness and softness are essential. And although 95 percent automated, Huval Baking continues to hand twist the dough, giving Evangeline Maid a finer texture than found in bread made in completely automated establishments.

Huval Baking had its beginning almost 64 years ago when a young man by the name of Joseph Huval was mustered out of the Army on Aug. 19, 1919, with $50 in bonus money. With the $50, he opened a one-man bakery in nearby Youngsville. Today, the firm has grown from a one-man operation to a multi-million dollar business with 350 employees and an annual payroll in excess of $4 million.

Huval would begin baking bread at 11 each evening. Then early the next day, he would set out on foot, selling his fresh-baked French bread door-to-door. As his business grew, he advanced to a horse-drawn vehicle and then a Model T. In later years he would deliver bread in all steel bakery trucks and even airplanes.

The World War I veteran first expanded by establishing a route in the neighboring town of Milton. It wasn't long, however, before he realized he had reached the limit in Youngsville and Milton. So he closed his shop and moved his operation to Lafayette.

The first Lafayette location of Huval's Bakery was in a remodeled residence at 311 Sampson St. From that base of operation, he began house-to-house deliveries in his now paid-for Model T truck.

It wasn't long before the enterprising young businessman knew he'd also outgrown that facility. In 1926 he bought Lalonde Bros. Bakery at the corner of Simcoe and St. Antoine streets. Business continued to grow and, within a year, he had to expand his bakery from one oven to two.

The great Mississippi flood of 1927 followed on the heels of the expansion and Huval and his staff were taxed to the limit to provide the staff of life for the more than 15,000 refugees who sought shelter in Lafayette, one of the few dry spots in ravaged South Louisiana. The ovens baked 24 hours a day just to keep up with the demand.

Busy years followed and in 1937, Huval knew it was time to make the big move. He now had four delivery trucks and 18 employees. Once again, he'd outgrown his facility. A new location was needed and he chose the corner of St. John and Simcoe streets, site of the present plant. He built a 5,400 square-foot plant and expanded his delivery fleet to make deliveries as far away as Jeanette and Franklin. This was also the year Huval Baking was incorporated.

The Evangeline Maid trademark came into existence as the symbol of Huval Baking Co. about this time. Huval's daughter, Mary Helen, was the model for the first Evangeline Maid. The likeness was patented in 1941. Since that time, it has become one of the most familiar trademarks of any Acadiana industry. In 1964, Evangeline Maid was modernized slightly by giving her a smaller cap and shorter skirt and apron.

In 1947, Frem F. Boustany Sr., bought into the business. Boustany, proprietor of Frem's Grocery just down the street, sold his grocery business to a nephew and bought half interest in Huval Baking, becoming executive vice president and general manager.

Together, Huval and Boustany implemented a number of new ideas. One of these was the use of the first resealable wrapper ends in South Louisiana. Another was the switch from waxed wrappers to cellophane in 1959. Plastic bags replaced the cellophane overwrap in 1963.

The innovative and imaginative ideas extended to the field of public relations. Who can forget Evangeline Maid standing guard at innumerable school crosswalks urging motorists to drive slowly? The company had to abandon the project in recent years because of the liability involved. Thousands were distributed in their hey-day and a few still remain, but they are no longer the property of Huval Baking Co.

And then there were the sound trucks. These were available for some 30 years to any organization, free of charge, to publicize its function.

The Huval calliope, seen in hundreds of parades, was purchased from Hadacol, the medicinal elixer manufacturer, in the mid-'50s when that...
business closed its doors. Huval Baking put it on a circus truck and its familiar tunes remain favorites in parades throughout the area.

But the most talked-about promotion is the revolving loaf atop the bakery. It has become a Lafayette landmark, even being incorporated in commercials for other businesses and institutions.

Boustany became sole owner and president of the company in 1961. Under his leadership, the company continued to expand. The Bunny brand franchise in the Alexandria area was purchased in 1960 and, in 1965, General Baking Co. of New Orleans was purchased. Its "Bond" bread was changed to Bunny bread, establishing a second Bunny market. The latest expansion was a merger with Flowers Industries in 1976. Astute observers may have noticed the addition of the name "Flowers" on the wrappers.

Over the years, Huval Baking has phased out the preparation of cakes but continues to market white pan bread and a variety of buns and rolls. It has maintained a steady market during times of economic fluctuation. Its present facility has some 100,000 square feet, including a 20,500 square foot loading dock added in 1972. The company has 108 routes and operates 11 recovery outlets and eight distribution points outside Lafayette.

More than half-a-million pounds of flour are used each week since the Lafayette-based bakery serves an area from Texas east to Grand Isle and the Gulf of Mexico north to Campti. A second plant is located in New Orleans, serving the popular product remains the 24-ounce loaf, available in thin and sandwich slices.

Through the years, Huval Baking has built a reputation for fair play among its employees and civic support in the community. Employee turnover is low. Many employees have been with the company for more than 30 years. Hebert attributes this excellent employer-employee relationship to good benefits, good pay and consideration of others.

Executives at Huval Baking are civic-minded and encourage their employees to be also. The company has long been a supporter of the United Givers Fund and Greater Lafayette Chamber of Commerce. In the past, it has sponsored a number of Junior Achievement companies.

Its community involvement extends beyond civic organizations and projects. Each year thousands of school children and Scout troops pass through the bakery doors on special tours. None leaves empty-handed: each child receives an array of gadgets and a free loaf of bread. The day CITIBUSINESS visited Huval Bakery more than 365 visitors toured the facility. Many booster clubs have been able to increase their profits by purchasing bakery products at greatly reduced prices for their fund-raising projects.

Boustany serves as chairman of the board of Huval Baking Co., Inc. of Louisiana and Dr. Frem F. Boustany Jr. is chief executive officer.

Huval Baking plans no major changes in the near future, according to Hebert. It will just continue to do what it does best — provide an outstanding product, support community projects and lure passersby to the revolving loaf with an aroma of fresh-baked bread.