Kettles sweet business for foundry

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Pierre Larroque

By Bernard Chaillot
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JEANERETTE — Anyone who has tried to find an old sugar kettle to dress up a front yard knows the black, cast iron treasures are hard to come by.

A Moresi Foundry Inc. sales manager Jim Farmer tried to scare one up as a gift for a client several years ago and almost gave up before finding one he considered too expensive to purchase, he said.

“They were asking $1,400 for it and when I went back later to check on it, it had been sold for a lot more than that,” he said. “I didn’t know they were making me a deal.”

From that experience came the idea to cast reproductions, using old kettles for authentic molds, for people who wanted the real thing, rather than the fiberglass models sometimes available at roadside flea markets.

Farmer pitched the idea to foundry president Pierre Larroque, who said he thought it was a good way to expand the foundry’s marketing base, which consists of making the rollers used by sugar mills to crush cane stalks during grinding season.

Passersby now may notice several reproduction kettles sitting in the foundry’s yard, the first of many to be manufactured and stamped with the Moresi name and the year the legendary business was established — 1852.

“There’s a big demand for these kettles out there, but a very limited supply,” Larroque said.

“The demand is mainly regional right now, but we think it could go beyond the Acadiana area once it becomes known that cast iron reproductions are available.”

A walk through the old foundry building is like stepping back in time more than a century, to 1890, when Antoine Moresi from France and built the Main Street landmark whose aged red brick exudes an architectural character modern structures can’t match.

Rusting engine blocks from scrap yards sit in piles near the cupola — a giant oven two stories high that heats to 2,800 degrees Fahrenheit and can produce up to 40,000 pounds of molten iron at a time.

Farmer said as late as the 1970s, in the manufacture of sugar mill rollers, “engine blocks were passed hand to hand like in a bucket brigade up the stairs to the cupola,” Farmer said.

“You had to be a healthy man to do that,” he laughed. “You had to be physically fit and alert. And it was extremely hot working around the oven, especially in the summertime. When I hear somebody complain about hard work, I tell them about that.”

A heavy duty elevator now carries the engine blocks to the cupola, Farmer said.

In the making of kettles, a steel flask shaped like a kettle is used to reinforce a sand mold, he said. The mold pattern is put into the flask and sand with a hardening agent packed in around it to make a mold.

The mixture hardens in about 20 minutes, allowing the pattern to be removed and molten iron to be poured into the mold, Farmer said.

Foundry foreman Rinzer Bouie Sr., who has worked at Moresi for 40 years, said that in the old days, flour from Lejeune’s Bakery and molasses were used as binding agents for the sand used in making rollers.

The mixture had to be baked to harden it, causing the foundry to smell like something good was in the oven, he said.

Bouie pointed out the old oven that sits on one side of the foundry, resembles a large fireplace, its bricks glazed and blackened from decades of red hot fires.

“Mr. Rinzer has been working here longer than I’ve been alive,” Farmer grinned. “What he doesn’t know about the workings of a foundry isn’t worth knowing.”

The foundry is making two sizes of kettles, the No. 4 models that are about four feet across and the No. 7 models that are a little less than seven feet across, Farmer said.

No decision on price has been made for the reproductions yet, or even whether they will be sold retail or wholesale, but if you could find an old kettle at an antique store, you would pay in the neighborhood of $3,000 for a big one and from $800 to $1,200 for a smaller one, he said.

The ones in the foundry’s yard have an aged look to them. That’s how they’re supposed to look, Farmer said.

“We could have had a perfectly smooth pattern made, but we use actual old kettles from the Beau Pre plantation to make our molds, so that’s what they look like,” he said. “We’ve been tied to the sugar industry for more than 100 years, so this is a special project for all of us here. It’s like preserving pieces of our past.”