Liquor lobbyist an ‘institution’ of influence, power

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When liquor industry lobbyist George Brown first flexed his muscle to influence the Louisiana Legislature, John F. Kennedy was president, Edwin Edwards was a state senator and the Beatles were conquering Britain.

More than 30 years later, Edwards is governor and Brown is arguably one of the more potent players in Louisiana government.

Legislators and others attest to Brown's continuing influence.

"He is an institution," said state Sen. Larry Bankston, D-Port Hudson.

Brown has been a force in creating legislation that would have prohibited people from under 21 from drinking.

He has been a thorn in the side of governors seeking to raise taxes on beer and alcohol.

He has opposed requiring lobbyists to report what they spend on legislators and state officials.

He has been a lobbyist for riverboat gambling.

Some lawmakers say Brown's influence is chiefly the result of years of cultivating friendships with lawmakers.

That influence came to the forefront recently when a Louisiana State Police report alleged Brown's Beer Industry League of Louisiana paid the hotel expenses of Alcoholic Beverage Control Commissioner Ray Holloway at a beer industry convention in Florida.

The report also alleged Brown treated Holloway, then the state's chief regulator, to meals and that Holloway used a state telephone on state time to try to find a debtor of Brown.

The governor fired Holloway in the wake of the state police probe of Holloway's office.

Brown has been executive director of the Beer Industry League of Louisiana since April 1967.

Brown said more than 50,000 workers in Louisiana directly benefit from the "handling and sale of beverage alcohol," and he agrees those numbers give him power.

"Like other lobbyists, Brown contributes to the campaigns of legislators, 'not so much financially, but with 'I'll get your liquor-for-your-fund-raiser' type of contribution," Donelon said.

"I guess that makes a bigger impression on folks than a lobbyist buying a $100 ticket and showing up, although ... there is not a lot of difference in the dollar value," Donelon said.

Also, Donelon said, "he runs a good-old-boy, back-slapping operation" at his office a few blocks from the Capitol, where "a cadre of my colleagues ... hang out."

"It gives him information by having folks hanging around at his place," Donelon said. "He picks up a world of gossip and inside poop that tells him where to go and not to go, and where his friends are and his enemies are and who is in the middle."

Brown said that, when lawmakers on occasion need beer for parties or fund-raisers, "if I can help them to get a price on it, or a delivery or something, I'll do that. I don't mind doing that." Occasionally that means free beer.

In assessing his relationship with legislators, Brown said that, if he has the opportunity to explain his position, he believes he can be successful.

Some legislators are "bone dry" and hate alcohol but, nevertheless, "those people I am not unfriendly to," Brown said.

Brown is known even outside the state for the loophole he guided through the Legislature that makes it illegal for those age 18-21 to buy alcoholic beverages, but not illegal for the bars to sell it.

That provision beat the U.S. Department of Transportation when it required raising the drinking age. And "he has certainly beat me and the MADD mothers" on anti-drinking legislation, Donelon said.

Brown had one serious run-in with law enforcement that sent him to prison for six months.

In February 1977, a federal grand jury indicted Brown and the Falstaff and Dixie Brewing companies. The grand jury accused Brown and the beer companies of conspiring to bribe state legislators to reduce the excise tax on Louisiana-brewed beer.

Brown, as executive director of the Beer League, was accused of requiring the two beer companies to pay him $15,000 each for passage of a Senate bill that saved the companies about $250,000 a year on excise taxes.

The government claimed Brown failed to report the additional income on his income tax returns in 1974 and 1975.

Later, the bribery counts against the two companies were dismissed. A judge ruled the government failed to prove that public bribery was involved.

A Federal jury found Brown guilty of two charges of making a false statement on income tax returns.

A Louisiana native, Brown attended elementary and high school in Shreveport, and graduated from Louisiana Tech in Ruston in 1949. He did graduate work at LSU in sociology.

Brown became associated with the beer and alcohol industry in 1960, when he joined the Louisiana division of the U.S. Brewers Foundation as field representative.

In 1956, he was appointed assistant director of the division. In 1961 he joined the staff of the Beer Industry League of Louisiana.

Underscoring the close relationship between the spirits industry and the agency that regulates it, Brown performed the 1967 marriage for Mike "Beachball" Templeton, who was heading the Office of Alcoholic Beverage Control at the time.

Russell was an appointee of Edwards.

The wedding took place at the Governor's Mansion. Brown has served as a licensed Methodist minister.

Despite battling with Brown over the years, Rep. Donelon still describes Brown "as polite and professional." He doesn't "get into name calling or threatening or that sort of thing."

State Rep. Donald Ray Kennard, R-Baton Rouge, said Brown is "a very intelligent man, he's a very articulate man, he's a very persuasive person."

"Whenever you need something, George is always there to help," Kennard said.

"I never vote with George because of the composition of my district. Most of the things that