Mary Ann Patout steered the family sugar cane business into the 20th century decades before women had the right to vote and more than half a century before Rosa the Riveter.

Patout's name is synonymous with the sugar cane industry in Iberville Parish. Patout have grown sugar cane in the area since the 1800s, and M.A. Patout & Son Ltd. is now the largest sugar cane mill in Louisiana. But few people know that “M.A.” stands for Mary Ann, and that during the company’s formative years in the late 1800s, a businesswoman oversaw operations.

Patout inherited the family business through the common transformations in technology and the economy, even as she defied conventions and assumed the position of her day.


Born on March 7, 1856, to George and Christina Schiwon, Mary Ann Schiwon grew up on her father’s sugar plantations in Bayou Cour. She learned both her father’s role and the day-to-day operations of a commercial cane farm. When the 16-year-old, Mary Ann married 25-year-old Hippolyte Patout. They lived on his plantation near Groves, Tenis until after the Civil War, when the couple moved to his mother’s enterprise plantation to help rebuild the Patout family business, destroyed during the war. Hippolyte and Mary Ann consisted 10 children; when Hippolyte died at age 20, the youngest child was 4 years old.

Hippolyte must have recognized his wife’s abilities and ambition because he sold her all of his share in the family sugar plantation and mill, which he runs with his brother Felix in Patout Brothers. Patout continued in partnership with her husband’s brother until 1886, when Felix Patout suggested a buyout to end the partnership. He acknowledged her interest and, in a partnership agreement, to buy Felix out and took over sole ownership of the family business.

In the next two decades, Patout transformed the plantation into a dominant force in the sugar cane industry. Once she gained complete control of the business, Patout immediately began a capital investment program to improve and expand the plantation and mill. With her eldest son and plantation manager, Hippolyte Jr., she kept apprised of industry developments and incorporated the latest technology into their operations.

In the late 1800s—result in the 1900s—organizational and technological changes forced mill owners to either expand or shut down and transform their operation to a central mill for processing. Patout installed new milling equipment to increase the grinding capacity of her mill in order to make the transformation to a central mill for the area. To create an efficient system for transporting cane to the mill, Patout built a narrow-gauge railroad system to haul cane from the surrounding countryside. The railroad was able to run even after heavy Louisiana rains, when roads were impassable for days. The increased efficiency more than paid for the cost of the railroad. Now, Patout had 21,000 feet of pipelines laid to convey syrup to Bawo Tache Landing for transportation to a local refinery. Eventually, Patout built her own refinery complex with modern sugar-making equipment.

By 1903, Patout’s improvements and additions ensured that M.A. Patout & Son led the transition to a central factory system without mortgage or debt. Once the company began operating as a central factory in the area, Patout continued her program of technological improvements that kept the business among industry leaders in Iberville Parish. She switched from wood fired to fuel and installed electricity to the factory. In 1911, M.A. Patout & Son led Iberville Parish in sugar manufacturing. Business continued to increase, so in 1906 Patout built a larger mill to accommodate the expansion.

Patout’s business skills and leadership among both men and women in the industry, was a sign of her success. Patout invested in sugar companies, banks, and real estate. She served on the board of the Nevada National Bank, and was perhaps the first woman in Louisiana to hold such a position. According to historian Wade’s account, Patout invested in the community of Patoutville with her time and with contributions for town events and roads, schools, and churches. And the managed to fill the role of house manager usually undertaken by the plantation owner’s wife.

When Mary Ann Patout died on July 12, 1907, her sons, Hippolyte Jr. and William, assumed control of the company and incorporated it as M.A. Patout & Son Ltd. in 1910. They and subsequent generations continued to modernize the mill through various technological changes in the industry. William V. Patout III took over from his father in the 1970s and continues to run the company.

Until this century, the sugar cane industry saw massive technological and organizational transformations that place mills in the position of either closing or expanding. M.A. Patout & Son Ltd. with estimated 2006 revenue of $55 million, once again has chosen to expand. The company now operates three mills in south Louisiana and processes 25 percent of the sugar cane in the state. The Patoutville factory is the largest mill in Louisiana, and all three factories are undergoing expansion programs to increase the amount of cane processed each year—a legacy of Mary Ann Patout’s leadership for four generations ago.