New Maison Blanche president gets bearings

By MUKUL VERMA
Adrian correspondent

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windowless office, John W. Irvin, the
new president of Maison Blanche-bred
retail giant Blanche, felt the new
responsibilities with a mixed sense
of exhilaration and stress.

From his current vantage point, he
had taken it as far as the Penguin
must, on a walk along Texas and now in
Blanche's new office, the former
headquarters of Maison Blanche who is
now the leading retailer.

Irvin and Hans Biersberg will
continue in their capacities as co-
owners of Blanche, with Irvin
taking over the store chain's real
characteristic, personnel and
general operations, and in his role of
Maison Blanche's general
merchandising and advertising.

"It comes from a larger organization
and has been through many of the things
that we are going through," Hans
Biersberg said. "It comes from an
expansion retail organization. He has
had experience in the kind of situations
that we are in, and he has been in
blood.

In the past three years, Maison
Blanche has gone from seven stores, all
under expansion, to 20 or more stores
in 10 markets. It is the kind of situation
that Irvin will have to work through.

When Irvin's appointment was
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"We've been working 12 hours a day,5
seven days a week," he said. "Now, we'll work 12 hours a day, six days a week."

Irvin, 45, has a business degree from Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, the Sears executive training program and senior vice president and general merchandise manager for Foley's Department Stores in Houston.

Prior to joining Maison Blanche, Irvin was head of the Dallas Market Center, which brings together retailers and wholesalers.

"I was sort of out of the retail business, per se," Irvin said. "Quite frankly, I missed the retail business. I started looking around for opportunities and a place to make a contribution. A place to add value."

In his first month back in retailing, Irvin has been getting his bearings, focusing on the central organization, marketing efforts, employees and customers.

"I think Maison Blanche is already well-positioned towards value, fashion and customer service," Irvin said. "I believe we are committed to providing a wide range of products. We focus our business on moderate, upper-moderate and in the bridge-price lines. We want customers to perceive us as a headquarters store. We would like our customers to look at us first."

Ranked 19th in the National Retail Merchants Association list of top-100 department store group, Maison Blanche is adding stores in the Jacksonville, Fla., and St. Louis markets and moving to a larger location in Orlando, Fla., by the end of 1990, Irvin said.

But further expansion and future plans should not convert the family business to a publicly-owned corporation.

"As to the issue of going public, I couldn't answer that," Irvin said. "That would be Mr. Sternberg family's decision. I just want to make sure we are doing the day-to-day things."

Being a closely held, private company allows greater flexibility in operations, he said.

"Right now, we have our own business to run, without worrying about someone else's," Hans Sternberg said. "I'm not going to say never, never to quick expansion. We have an aggressive growth plan. We have a very full agenda.

A public corporation must also defend itself against hostile takeovers, which recently have hampered the retail industry, Irvin said.

"I am very disappointed in what has happened in retailing," Irvin said. "The takeovers don't bring any added value to customers. Takeovers made us take our eyes off customers. It was damaging to the retail industry."

Even though consolidation in the industry has reduced competition from major department stores, Irvin said the competition remains fierce.

"A few years ago, I would have said a traditional department store was our competition," he said. "Our competition now comes from retailers who have comparable assortments, such as specialty stores, chain stores and discounters. The marketplace is more fragmented. Different stores have moved into the niche."

Irvin said that the Louisiana market has leveled off and Maison Blanche is continuing to grow. Maison Blanche also will continue to locate in major regional malls, but will locate outside pretentious mall anchor positions if the site is profitable.

Irvin's wife, Cathy, and their two children live in Dallas, but are planning a move to Baton Rouge in the beginning of the summer.

"It's fine," Cathy Irvin said of the move during a telephone interview. "It seems like Baton Rouge has a kind of small-town atmosphere. It's a nice atmosphere to raise a family."