Rabenhorst, founder of Rabenhorst Funeral Homes, came to Louisiana from Prussia in the 1850s. He used his carpentry skills to establish a casket-making trade. After losing all his money in the business, he went on to establish his funeral home business in 1866. He married Caroline Focken, also of Prussia, in New Orleans in 1858.

Rabenhorst family in business more than a century 100+ years in BUSINESS

By Ellyn Couvillion Special to The Advocate

Rabenhorst Funeral Homes, one of the oldest family-owned businesses in Baton Rouge, plans to mark the millennium with an expansion.

It has two locations — 1100 Government St. and 11000 Florida Blvd. — and will build a third on Perkins close to Siegen, said Karen Rabenhorst Kerr.

"We hope to break ground by 2000," said Kerr, secretary and treasurer for Rabenhorst Funeral Homes and for Rabenhorst Life Insurance Co.

Kerr said she and her three brothers are equally involved in the two companies.

Alvin "Phil" Rabenhorst Jr. is president of the funeral home company, and Va president of the insurance company.

Conversely, David L. Rabenhorst serves as president of the insurance company and as a vice president of the funeral homes.

G. Scott Rabenhorst is a vice president with each company.

With two funeral home conglomerates present in Baton Rouge — Service Corp. International of Houston and the Loewen Group of Canada — Kerr said the locally owned Rabenhorst companies are in a unique position to serve the community.

"Every decision we make involves the fact that we are made right here with the four of us," she said. "We're very familiar with the area," as well as with the needs of families.

It was Kerr and her brothers' great-grandfather, Charles Ferdinand Rabenhorst, who established the funeral home in 1866.

The Prussian native came to America in the 1850s looking for a better life.

When the Rabenhorst Funeral Home was built at 825 Government St. in 1932, it was the first facility in Baton Rouge devoted solely to accommodating funeral services. In this 1930s picture, the Rabenhorst staff is shown on the front steps of the funeral home, with some of the 1936 Buicks that were used in the funeral processions.

Rabenhorst Funeral Homes' original location was in downtown Baton Rouge at the corner of Main and Church streets, across from St. Joseph's Cathedral. In this undated photo, Main Street is the street that runs horizontally, across the bottom of the picture. Charles Ferdinand Rabenhorst, who founded the company in 1856, started out as a cabinetmaker, then added casket making to his services, to meet a community need.

After marrying in New Orleans and serving in the Confederate Army in the Civil War, Rabenhorst settled with his family in Baton Rouge. He opened a cabinetmaking trade that grew into a casket-making business.

It operated out of several downtown locations for more than 60 years, before the Government Street location was built in 1932.

The industry had grown from one that served grieving families mainly at their homes to one providing large gathering rooms and parking.

Rabenhorst East on Florida Boulevard was built in 1978.

Rabenhorst Life Insurance Co., founded the same year as the Government Street funeral home, is located at 833 Government St.

Originally named the Mortuary Benefit Association, it offered funeral benefit policies in the form of membership certificates, which evolved into "pre-need" life insurance policies that help pay for funeral expenses.

The officers of the Rabenhorst companies today are the fourth generation to lead the business.

Founder Charles Rabenhorst and his wife Caroline had two sons, Alvin E. and Oscar F. Rabenhorst, who continued the funeral homes and started the insurance company.

Their sons — both named Alvin — took up management in the 1940s.

Alvin "Allie" E. Rabenhorst is the youngest son of Oscar and retired in the 1980s after nearly 40 years as president of the funeral home. Oscar's oldest son, Harry, served briefly as president of the funeral home, but followed his calling — sports — and was head basketball coach at LSU for 32 years.

Alvin Phillips Rabenhorst Jr., the son of Alvin E. Rabenhorst, retired as president of the funeral home in 1985. It's his four children who now head the two companies.
Industry
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2K

All that changed in the 1970s, when Etienne de Boré established the first big sugar plantation near New Orleans, Rodrigue said.

"Sugar just spreads like wildfire over the next several decades," Rodrigue said. "It coincides with the Louisiana Purchase, 1803, when the Americans start flooding into Louisiana."

The Americans, many of whom came from the Eastern Seaboard, brought their slaves and cotton to Louisiana, Rodrigue said. Cotton didn’t prove successful on the northern part of the state, including the Felicianas. Cotton became the dominant crop.

The Mississippi River connected the cotton farmers to ports in the southern portion of the state, Rodrigue said. Cane farmers also shipped their goods on the river.

"Baton Rouge becomes a commercial hub — New Orleans is the main one — for this developing cotton and sugar trade," Rodrigue said. As sugar and cotton trade grew, lawyers, merchants and other professionals supplemental to those industries made their way to Baton Rouge, Rodrigue said.

In 1830, the state capital moved to Baton Rouge, planting the seeds for what became a major branch of the local economy: state government. State government, which includes the faculties of LSU and Southern University, provided a large market for local businesses, Rodrigue said. The 19th century did, however, bring two developments that helped lay the foundation for the chemical industry.

Salt was found at Avery Island in 1860, and sulfur in Lake Charles in 1894.

In 1901, oil and gas were discovered in Jennings. By 1909, Standard Oil had begun a refinery in north Baton Rouge.

"Sulfur, water, oil and gas. Louisiana just can’t not have a chemical industry," said Edward McLaughlin, former dean of the LSU College of Engineering.

For example, the salt water in the state’s salt domes is used to make chlorine from the NaCl ion. Sulfur is used in making fertilizers and paper, among other things. Natural gas is an important feedstock for the chemical industry. By the 1960s, Baton Rouge’s economy was a man with an ego as large as its oil and gas and the chemical industry.

"It’s cheaper now, and it always has been, to ship commodities by boat or barge," Borne said.

From that single refinery, which is now the country’s largest, a synergistic industry grew, Borne said. The next major factor in the Baton Rouge economy was a man with an ego equally as large: Gov. Huey P. Long.

LSU had moved to Baton Rouge from Pineville under Long’s predecessor, Gov. John Parker, Rodrigue said. But the school changed from a small, agricultural college to a major, nationally renowned research university.

This was during the Depression. Nobody else was hiring people, and Huey Long was willing to put money into the university and build it up. You know, of course, that Huey couldn’t have second-best in anything.

— John Rodrigue, assistant professor of history at LSU

Military with a first-rate faculty under Long, Rodrigue said.

"This was during the Depression. Nobody else was hiring people, and Huey Long was willing to put money into the university and build it up," Rodrigue said. "You know, of course, that Huey couldn’t have second-best in anything."

World War II provided the next major boost to the petrochemical industry and the Baton Rouge economy. The war made the United States realize how much the country depended on the chemical and petroleum industry. Borne said.

When the Japanese cut off the natural rubber supply during World War II, the federal government and chemical companies formed what is now DSM Copolymer to produce synthetic rubber. Borne said. Synthetic rubber was the genesis of the petrochemical industry’s downstream products.

Those downstream products now include everything from the refrigerants in air conditioners and oxygen used at hospitals to plastics and fertilizer, Borne said.

Chemical plants and refineries employ 11,000 people. That’s nearly half of the workers in the area’s manufacturing sector and about 4 percent of the area’s total 303,000 nonfarm workers.

Expansions and improvements at the plants also generate a big portion of the area’s 35,200 construction jobs. Although Long became a legend, Borne said Gov. John McKeithen had the biggest impact on the area’s economy.

"He realized that the oil and gas industry was important, but he also had a sixth sense about the importance of the types of companies that could be built around the oil and gas industry," Borne said.

McKeithen pushed through a series of laws that provided incentives for manufacturers and appointed senior, blue-chip executives to the state board that oversaw the tax breaks.

McKeithen also "rolled out the red carpet" for foreign investment, and the results are readily apparent, Borne said. Royal Dutch Shell, Rhone Poulenc and BASF are just a few of the companies that McKeithen helped attract.

McKeithen also helped draw fertilizer manufacturers, who could take advantage of the state’s supply of natural gas, Borne said. Today, 40 percent of all the fertilizer produced in the United States comes from Ascension Parish.

And the Mississippi River has been key in shipping those huge amounts of fertilizer, Borne said.

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