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Long-time businesses reflect city's rich history Travel agency, realty company pass century mark

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The Birmingham History [Center](#) - in anticipation of next year's 140th anniversary of Birmingham's founding - has set out to compile a list of Jefferson County's oldest surviving businesses.

The quest has become an interesting enterprise in itself, revealing patterns in the evolution of the city and turning up some curious surprises.

Perhaps it's not a surprise that the oldest business on the list so far is Birmingham Realty Company, successor to the Elyton Land Company (1870). The business venture that founded the city is now part of Barber Companies, which is still a major player in downtown real estate.

However, who would have expected a travel agency that started in the age of the trans-Atlantic steamer would survive into the Internet age?

But that's the story of Brownell Travel, which traces its roots to 1887, when University of Alabama archeologist Walter T. Brownell and 10 guests set sail from New York aboard the SS Devonian bound for Europe.

"We think we are the oldest leisure travel firm in the country," said Haisley Smith, Brownell's director of marketing.

Jerry Desmond, the executive director of the History Center, said the center initially started with a list of businesses 100 years or older, working through old city directories to try to identify survivors. However, it decided to expand the list to include all businesses 75 years old and older to capture the boom years of the early 20th century and those gritty businesses born during the Great Depression.

"We wanted to have an event to celebrate these businesses," Desmond said. "Basically, what these companies have is a product that everyone wants and that stands the test of time. And they know how to sell it."

Some of the older businesses still are making headlines today. The Birmingham Barons, which are considering moving back downtown, got their start as the Birmingham Coal Barons in West End, back in 1885.

And speaking of headlines, the Birmingham News was founded in 1888.

If you're going to have a city, for better or for worse, it's going to attract lawyers. Bradley Arant Boult and Cummings law firm traces its roots back to 1871, the year of the city's founding. Cabaniss, Johnston, Gardner, Dumas & O'Neal was founded in 1887. Several other law firms also make the list.

Though they don't dominate the economy like they used to, metal makers persist: U.S. Pipe and Foundry (1900), American Cast Iron and Pipe (1905), McWane Inc. (1921), U.S. Steel (1907), and O'Neal Steel (1921).

A cluster of car dealerships also has survived from the earliest years of automobiles, despite some major potholes along the way: Drennen Motor Car Company (1908), Long Lewis Ford (1911), and Edwards Motor Company (1916).

The list includes some businesses from areas outside the central city. Golden Rule Barbecue opened in Irondale in 1891, The Bright Star has been serving diners in Bessemer since 1907, Cotton's Department Store in Ensley opened in 1922 and Huffstutler's Hardware launched in Homewood in 1935, during the Great Depression.

However, the greatest concentration of surviving businesses were either born in or survive in the city center.

Morris Avenue, the cobblestone street named for one of the city's founders, Josiah Morris, was the original wholesale district in the city, receiving shipments on the city's rail corridor.

That street was the launching pad for wholesale food and beverage businesses that not only still exist, but thrive as major regional and even national distribution companies: Alex Kontos Fruit Company (1888), Adams Produce (1903), Wood Fruitticher (1913), Royal Cup (1896) and Red Diamond (1906).

Couple that with other businesses born downtown - such as **Buffalo Rock** (1901), now one of the nation's largest Pepsi-bottlers, and Coca-Cola United (1902), one of the nation's largest Coke bottlers - and you see the legacy of Birmingham's central location on the Southeastern rail system.

"We got shipments by rail," said Bill Bowron, the fourth-generation CEO of family-owned Red Diamond Coffee & Tea. "We were still horse and buggy at that time, but the train distribution center of the entire South was Birmingham."

While all those businesses have left Morris Avenue as transportation means have shifted, The Peanut Depot (1907) survives.

The Depot's patrons still can get nuts hot from the large roasters that were original to the business. Peanuts in hand, you can amble up 20th Street and have your hat repaired and shoes shined at Bon Ton Hatters (1907) and take in a show at the Alabama Theatre (1927).

You also can visit Dixie Store Fixtures (1921) on First Avenue North, still operated by its founding family, the Cypresses.

Fred Cypress, 51, said the restaurant supply business still makes use of the original, free-standing cash register, an ornate bronze machine with multiple drawers. A coal-burning stove on display in the front window once heated the Dixie store.

The business has grown over the years, including working on some mega-projects such as fully outfitting the food service facilities for the Georgia Dome and the Atlanta Olympic stadium. But at the base of the business are long-time customers such as The Bright Star.

"Some of these businesses, their grandparents were in the business and dealt with my grandparents," Cypress said. "It's just kept flowing. People got to eat."

A few blocks away on Second Avenue North, you can eat at a spot that's been serving hot dogs since the 1920s. Despite the narrow confines, Pete's Famous Hot Dogs keeps packing them in for dogs grilled by Gus Koutroulakis, who has worked there since the 1940s.

Walking up the street, you pass Bromberg's, which opened downtown in 1900, moving from Mobile, where it was founded in 1836. While the downtown store closed in 2009, the enterprise remains very much in business with retail locations in Mountain Brook and at The Summit.

A few blocks farther on, Levy's Fine Jewelry is run by Todd Denaburg, the grandson of its founder. Levy's survival through the Depression, World Wars and the ups and downs of downtown is a testament to the adaptability of long-surviving businesses.

Founded in 1922 as a watch, clock and jewelry shop, Levy's was converted by Denaburg's grandfather into a pawn shop with the coming of the Great Depression. According to family lore, during those tough times Denaburg's grandfather once allowed a man to pawn his wooden leg.

"My grandfather knew he had to come back for it," Denaburg said.

In the 1980s, the shop began to concentrate on the antique and estate jewelry side of the business and phased out the pawn business. It has since flourished, expanding into the wholesale market and helped along by a growing residential base in downtown.

"We love it down here. We saw the urban flight in the 1970s but we never considered moving," Denaburg said. "It is called the city center for a reason."

Besides adaptability, Denaburg and representatives for other downtown businesses, including Baldone Tailoring Co. (1935) and Goodyear Shoe Hospital (1919), say the secret to long survival is enduring relationships built not on making a sale, but on a commitment to customer service.

"It hasn't got anything to do with making money," said Butch Baldone. "It's the people."

Some people still buy shoes that cost enough to care for, said Rhonda Patton at Goodyear. "We're lucky with that down here with the lawyers," she said.

One troubling finding from the History Center's quest has been the very short list of enduring black-owned businesses.

According to Desmond, the center found a black business directory published by Miles College in 1952 that listed hundreds of black-owned businesses in almost every imaginable enterprise. For example, the directory lists 61 groceries, mostly mom and pop operations that catered to the segregated black community.

Funeral homes old

But so far, the only 75-year-old or older black-owned businesses the center has been able to track down are funeral homes.

While integration was a great victory, Desmond said, it came at a cost to the black business establishment, "Once you desegregated the other stores there was no need for black-only stores," he said.

Paul G. Gardner, who with his brothers operates the family-owned Smith & Gaston Funeral Services, said it originally was started by A.G. Gaston and Gaston's father-in-law. Gardner's father entered the business in the late 1940s and managed it until the late 1980s, when he bought it from Gaston.

Other long survivors include Lumzy and Lumzy (1934) in Bessemer and Birmingham's Davenport & Harris Funeral Home (1899), which claims the title of the oldest black-owned business in Alabama.

Gardner said that industry still largely is segregated. Families tend to return to people who helped bury their mothers and fathers. "It goes down from generation to generation," he said.

But black or white, the same business practices are fundamental.

"I think because we stuck to the ideals of the people that started it: to give first class service and to take care of the client," he said.