

'Our business is fun:' Baxter Distribution place to go for party supplies

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By FRED POLLARD

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ALTON - Baxter Distribution has been chosen as the River Bend Growth Association Business of the Month for June.

"We appreciate what (the RBGA) has done, not only for us but for the entire region," co-owner Bob Baxter said.

Since 1945, Baxter has provided various services for the region and is the area's largest distributor of party supplies. Janet Hansen, who owns and operates the business along with her brother Bob Baxter; husband, Roland Hansen; and Bob's wife, Janet, said the company's ability to adapt and meet the community's needs is one reason for its long-term success.

"You always have to have an eye on the future and be ready to change," Hansen said. "We try to stay unique and innovative. My mom and dad had good business sense instinctively, and we try to follow that idea."

After World War II, Clifford Baxter found himself at a crossroads. He was laid off from his job at Shell Oil and was wondering what to do next. His wife, Lorraine, had grown up in the grocery business and had a few ideas.

"My grandpa (Adolph Schnell) was a salesman for the Red and White grocery stores," Janet Hansen said. "He then owned a grocery store in Alton. Mom had to work in the store. She would ask her dad if they could sell other items in their store, and he always told her absolutely not, that they were a grocery store and that is all they would sell.

"You can see now how innovative she was by looking at the variety of things sold in grocery stores today."

Bob Baxter said his father and his grandfather began selling drug sundries such as aspirin, saccharine, handkerchiefs and hand-bottled lotion to grocery stores, filling stations and bars.

"The first day my dad got home my mom asked him if he sold anything," Janet Hansen said. "He told her no, but he was going back out tomorrow. My parents were not quitters."

As the business grew, it expanded to include picnic supplies and small toys.

"It started with the toys," Hansen said. "When I was in kindergarten, the schools would have socials at the end of the year, where they played games and gave out small prizes. My teacher

knew what my dad did for a living, and she asked if he knew anyone who could supply some small, cheap toys for the events. He started selling them himself, and we still sell them today.

"Area businesses also had company picnics in the summertime back then. We supplied picnic supplies and attendance prizes, which got bigger over the years. As those businesses left the area, we just evolved into more of a party supply."

Originally working out of the basement of a house on State Street, the business soon moved to a storefront near the current police station before ending up at 554 East Broadway in the mid- to late 1950s. In 1976, it moved again to its current location at 912 East Broadway and became incorporated in 1979. In 1997, the facade of the main building was renovated, including signage, awnings, painting and tuck-pointing.

Clifford Baxter died in 1977, and his wife, Lorraine, ran the company until her death in 1992. Today, their children carry on the family business.

"We grew up here," Bob Baxter said. "It's what we know."

Baxter Distribution offers a seemingly endless supply of party and event items, including balloons, champagne fountains, candelabras, costumes, games, lighting, plant stands, plastic flowers, raffle drums, tables and chairs, and wedding supplies. Napkins and paper plates are available in literally dozens of colors and styles.

Snow cone machines, helium tanks, cotton candy tubs, popcorn poppers and hot dog machines also are available for rental.

For themed events, prop rentals are available including supplies for Halloween, Mardi Gras, pirate, western and beach parties. Large props such as a full-size fiberglass horse, wooden barrels, 8-foot-tall palm trees, skeletons and treasure chests quickly bring a theme party to life.

While Halloween, Christmas and the graduation season are the busiest times for the shop, other events also can keep the family on its toes.

"When 9/11 hit, we had people lined up to buy American flags," Bob Baxter said. "In no time at all, everything we had was sold out."

"It was the same thing when the Rams were in the Super Bowl. We could not keep Rams colored stuff in stock. Wigs, spray paint - it all flew out the door."

In addition to being a longtime member of the RBGA, Baxter Distribution also is a member of the Alton Marketplace Association, the East End Growth Association and Pride Inc.

For information call (618) 465-9347.