

Memphis preserves culture of 'white gold' with Cotton Museum

By BRIAN GOFF

AS a third-generation cotton broker operating in the heart of Memphis' famous "Cotton Row," Calvin Turley recognized the changes time and technology were bringing to the industry that his family and much of Memphis had considered their livelihood for more than a century.

After all, "King Cotton" was the single-greatest influence in Memphis' culture, shaping the city's economic and political landscape, and influencing everything from the region's music and cuisine to visual arts and literature.

So, in 2004 Turley set out on a mission to ensure that one of the most prominent chapters in his city's colorful history was not forsaken.

"Cotton was a very integral part of the

Memphis social and economic culture," says Turley, owner of Turley Cotton Co., which boasts an address on the mezzanine of the Memphis Cotton Exchange. "It became quite clear to me that this culture wouldn't be here forever, and we needed something to capture it so we could tell this story."

In 2006, Turley's vision came to fruition when the Cotton Museum at the Memphis Cotton Exchange opened its doors on the main floor of the Exchange. "It seemed like something that had to be done," notes Turley, who spearheaded the museum project and currently serves as chairman of the museum's board of directors. "What would Memphis be doing without a cotton museum? It seemed kind of ridiculous to me not to have a museum in this city dedicated to the story of cotton."

With a long list of contributing sponsors, the nearly 3,000-square-foot museum was developed to provide detailed histories on the main aspects of the Memphis-based cotton industry — Front Street and the Cotton Exchange, cotton from field to fabric, and the global impact of cotton on culture and technology.

A step back in history

Inside, the museum's motif is a snapshot of the Cotton Exchange trading floor, circa 1939. Its dominant features include actual telegraph booths used by cotton traders to sell their "white gold" and a life-sized mannequin atop a ladder, posed as if scribbling then-current market prices on a massive, black trading board that runs the length of the museum's east wall.

Throughout the museum, neatly arranged, glass-encased exhibits tell stories centered around this mystical white fiber. They feature everything from guitars of famous Bluesmen, whose art form evolved from the field hollers of slaves, to costumes worn by Cotton Carnival royalty.

Other multimedia exhibits showcase technological advances that changed the industry forever, including International Harvester's production of the mechanized cotton picker and Monsanto's development of genetically enhanced seed varieties.

Aside from these exhibits, there are two recent developments — a self-guided MP3 walking tour along Front Street and an expansion project that increased the museum's size by more than 50%.

"These are two projects that we are very excited about, and it's going to be great to have them both online," Turley says. "We're off to a good start already, and I believe these projects will help us to be a truly great small museum."

Rick Rice, a marketing executive with Plant Health Care Inc., and fellow member of the Cotton Museum's board



VISIONARY: The Cotton Museum "had to be done," says Calvin Turley.

of directors, praised Turley for his efforts to establish the Cotton Museum and for his outstanding leadership. He also cited the contributions of several key partnerships in making the museum possible, and noted the significance of cotton on the lives of not only Mid-Southerners, but also humanity.

A lifetime wrapped in cotton

"Every day of your life, from the day you are born and you're wrapped in a blanket at the hospital to the day they lay you in the ground, you are touched by some form of cotton," Rice explains. "It's one of the few things in the world — like maybe water, for example — that nearly every living person in the world

touches every day of their life."

Rice adds, "That's a pretty profound statement, and it illustrates how important the story of cotton is to us as a society."

The Memphis Cotton Museum is located at 65 Union Avenue, at the corner of Union and Front Street. The museum is open Tuesday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., and Sunday from noon to 5 p.m., year-round. Admission ranges from \$4 to \$6 per person, with children under age 6 admitted free of charge.

For more information, contact the Memphis Cotton Museum at 901-531-7826 or visit www.memphiscottonmuseum.org.

Goff writes from Mississippi.

Museum shows innovations in cotton industry

FIELD trips are nothing new to the Memphis Cotton Museum. But thanks to a recent expansion, school children of all ages will be able to learn firsthand about cotton's impact on society.

The expansion, which increased the overall footprint of the museum by 1,650 square feet, or an additional 50%, includes permanent exhibit space as well as a classroom for age-appropriate education programs.

The expansion was made possible by the contributions of local benefactors and three major players in the cotton industry — Monsanto, Case-IH and Cotton Incorporated.

"I'm delighted for the museum to have this space and to have the involvement of these three companies. They have each made significant contributions to the cotton industry as a whole," explains Cotton Museum Board President Calvin Turley.

"They came together to work as one cohesive team in creating the exhibit," says Carol Perel, acting director. "It is a continuation of the time line, beginning with mechanization and running through innovations that impact environmental sustainability and genetically engineered seed varieties in use today."

Rick Rice, a member of the Cotton Museum Board of Directors, says the expansion re-emphasizes Memphis' place as the global hub for cotton.

"What I hope happens here as a consequence of the expansion is that the Cotton Museum of Memphis gains recognition as the official museum for cotton in the United States," says Rice. "Memphis holds a unique position in the cotton industry in that it was the hub of cotton trading for the world."

Front Street Walking Tour provides a look at cotton's heyday in Memphis

AFTER completing a tour of the Memphis Cotton Museum's exhibits, a unique experience awaits you on the outside.

Your journey begins on Union Avenue with an MP3 player and a set of headphones. You step onto Front Street and a narrator takes you on a journey, complete with nine stops, along one of the most storied streets in Memphis, better known as "Cotton Row."

This self-guided Front Street Walking Tour is the latest attraction at the Cotton Museum at the Memphis Cotton Exchange. Made possible through a \$10,000 "Save Our History" grant from the History Channel, this 30-minute tour provides an overview of notable businesses along Front Street and the personalities that helped transform Memphis into the center of the cotton universe.

"It consists of about nine stops and was designed to simulate the daily activities of a Front Street cotton buyer," explains Calvin Turley, president of the Cotton Museum's board of directors.

"Front Street was built on cotton. It was a wholesale area full of cotton wholesalers, commissaries, liquor stores and other retail businesses that sprang up from — and were supported by — the cotton trade," he adds. "This was one of the first incarnations of Front Street."

During the heyday of cotton, from the 1880s to the mid-1900s, as many as 300 buyers and traders would line Front Street each day trading this valuable commodity for use in mills throughout the world. In fact, about 40% of all cotton supplied to England's textile factories during the Industrial Revolution made its way along Front Street and was sold through the Memphis Cotton Exchange.

Over time, changes such as government grading programs for cotton and, ultimately, the advent of technological advances such as the computer, made trading as it once was obsolete. Consequently, a part of the great culture associated with the cotton industry died as well.

"We're hoping that by interspersing some facts about Front Street, the architecture of its buildings and information about the development of businesses along the street that we can provide a glimpse into what life on Front Street used to be like," says Turley.

"Cotton was for all practical purposes the greatest commodity produced in our part of the world," he adds. "And Front Street was where Memphis cotton made its way from the field to fabric."