

Billy Bourdin

by Jessie Heitzmann

Billy Bourdin, plumber by trade, historian at heart, spent the better part of his life accumulating, cataloging and preserving those bits and pieces of Pass Christian history that others may have easily overlooked. His collection of over 4200 pictures was always a valuable resource for the media as well as the many visitors who frequented his shop over the years. Always ready, willing and anxious to share, he made sure that no one ever went away without a picture or at the very least, some interesting tidbit of information on the subject of their search.

A visit to Bourdin's Plumbing shop was always an education in itself. There was little that he didn't know about his city that he so dearly loved. Newspapers were the source of another of Billy's largest collections. He subscribed to numerous local publications that he faithfully read every single day. It was rare to enter the shop on a morning when he wasn't seated at the desk in his "office" clipping away at every possible article that concerned local people or events. He amassed an array of binders and folders that eventually filled the shelf lined room and overflowed into his living quarters upstairs. Nothing was overlooked. Every article, every brochure, every booklet, every letter, was carefully preserved. If any item pertained to various subjects, it was xeroxed and copies were distributed to every applicable binder. All told, his subjects numbered 246, plus files on 476 local families. In many cases it appeared that Billy knew more about some families than they themselves did.

In August of 2005, hurricane Katrina could very well have been the end of it all for anyone except a man like Billy. For the average person to even try to recoup those precious mementos would have been too

overwhelming under the circumstances. Imagine returning to a building that had been submerged in seven feet of seawater and contaminated with foul smelling mud. The sight was heart breaking. All of his pictures, many of which had adorned the walls of his shop, were completely destroyed. The few that survived higher up on the walls were eventually stolen by looters. Fortunately, over the preceding six and a half years, all of his photos had been scanned, captioned and preserved on disks. Originals were gone, but at least the digitized images were not lost.

Not to be discouraged by the devastation around him, Billy gathered together the remnants of his prized collections and took steps to salvage whatever he could. Binders were washed to remove the muck that had encased them and carefully wiped with Clorox to deter mold development. Finally, they were stacked in an upstairs hallway with lamps and fans trained on them to dry them out. This process went on for months on end with binders being constantly shifted and replaced until all were eventually free of any moisture. The contents of most were damaged, some more extensively than others, but all survived more or less intact due to his diligence.

After so close a call, he then realized that the only way to ensure the survival of his work was to have it digitized just as his photos were prior to Katrina. Over the preceding years, Billy resisted learning how to use a computer. As he explained to me more than once in that familiar, self deprecating way, "I'm just a plumber". At my insistence, he learned that this was a job that required more than one person to complete. He finally agreed to be taught. He learned very quickly and was soon, to his own surprise, quite accomplished at scanning.

Over the course of the following two years, everything was scanned and recorded on disks. Often during this time we had joked together that we hoped we'd live long enough to complete this seemingly monumental task. We promised that neither of us would "leave" until we were finished. Billy kept his promise. Several months after the last binder was recorded and he was in the process of fine tuning his collection, Billy suddenly passed away quietly in his sleep. In his last months he had made it known that he wanted to be sure that eventually this information would be made available to all concerned. It will be. He may have physically left us, but Billy Bourdin will always live on in the product of his labor. What he left to each of us and to all in general is beyond measure.