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Pass historian collected a legacy for the future

By KAT BERGERON

Billy Bourdin Jr.'s name is synonymous with Pass Christian history. He was the go-to man for the media, academics and locals looking for photographs, newspaper clippings, scrapbooks and documents chronicling the city's hundreds of years of history.

If a tidbit wasn't in his brain — though it likely was — Bourdin would know where to find it. He was an odd mixture, some might say, of plumber and historian.

When he finally retired from the family business, Bourdin Brothers Plumbing, he had more time to spend on his history pastime. Every shelf, wall, nook and cranny of the plumbing business was filled with photos and anything else that might tell the story of the Pass. Anyone was welcome to drop by to look or ask questions, because he did not believe history should be locked up in vaults.

The 81-year-old Pass native died in his sleep Friday morning.

"Billy's passing is a monumental loss," said Pass Mayor Chipper McDermott. "Unless it's new, there isn't a house in Pass Christian that Billy, as a plumber, hasn't been inside of, under it, over it and around it. Combine that with the knowledge and the pictures he collected and you had a living history book.

"He loved Pass Christian and talking about the old times. But modern times helped, because that brought him the computer. Every day he was inputting some new photograph or document so it could be saved for the future."

Thousands of original photographs and documents were lost in Hurricane Katrina, but Bourdin had already started putting them on computer. Eight discs survived the 2005 storm, and people brought him more images and documents after the storm.

About his vast collection, Bourdin thought it important for people to know: "This isn't about me. People have given so much in so many ways. Newspapers. Pictures. Written accounts."

Friends describe him as a content man and a talker worth listening to. His vast knowledge, storytelling and sense of humor kept people smiling. His trademark was a hearty chuckle, a punctuation to many of his sentences.

This was a man who loved his hometown so much he was never gone more than 12 days, and that momentous occasion happened when he was in Florida, helping bring a yacht to the Coast. Bad weather kept them moored in Clearwater.

Bourdin attended St. Joseph's Academy, St. Stanislaus and Pass High, eventually, as he joked, "graduating from the college of hard knocks." He joined the family plumbing business, but even in those days he was a self-described "newspaper snipper."

One of his favorite stories was of Hurricane Camille, when as a volunteer fireman he did everything before, during and after the storm to save lives. The volunteers played a huge role as the city picked up the pieces.

On the swept property of Trinity Episcopal Church, where 14 perished, they found one thing, a safe and put it in the firehouse for safekeeping, A debate surfaced between agencies as to who should do the safeguarding, and when City Hall no longer was used as a morgue, they decided to put it there.

"But as they lifted it, the safe tipped over," he would explain with his characteristic laugh. "It had no bottom. Everything was gone and they'd been arguing over who would protect it."

Bourdin once told a reporter, "People are fascinating and funny. They make the world go 'round. And Pass Christian has always been, and always will be, a great place in this world to live life."

McDermott and others who knew him would say he could easily have been describing himself. Bourdin will be buried Monday in the Pass' historic Live Oak Cemetery.

An obituary also appears in today's Sun Herald.