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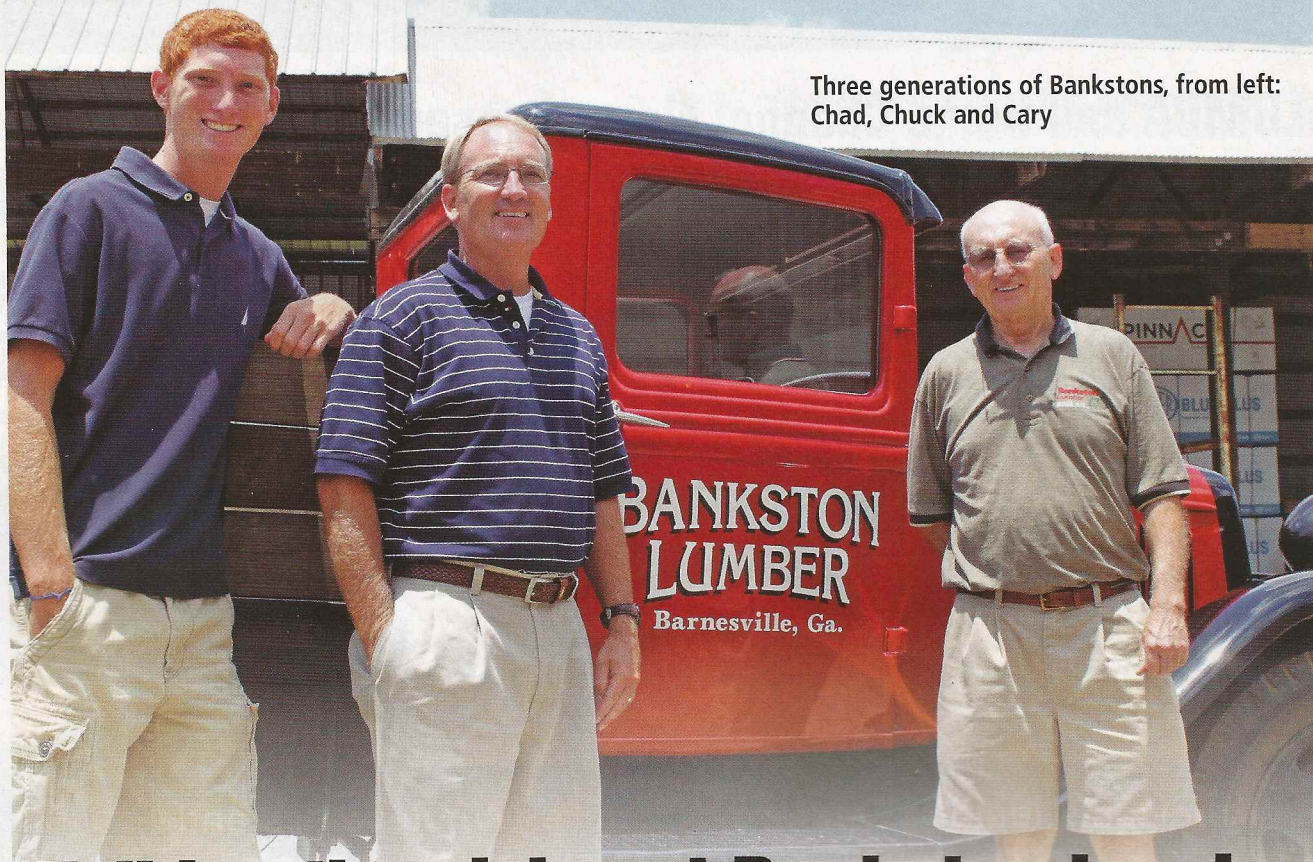
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Country Classic

Incoming NLBMDA Chair Chuck Bankston maintains a profitable tradition in rural Georgia

ALSO INSIDE:

The Top 100 Distributors: Who's doing well



Three generations of Bankstons, from left: Chad, Chuck and Cary

Walking the aisles at Bankston Lumber

Chuck Bankston, the NLBMDA's incoming chairman, runs a classic family business with unconventional style

BY KEN CLARK

Chuck Bankston, the fourth-generation owner of Bankston Lumber and the incoming chairman of the National Lumber and Building Material Dealers Association (NLBMDA) stands beneath a sign in the yard's main warehouse in Barnesville, Ga.

The sign reads: "If you're not having fun, you're fired."

It's a far cry from Six Sigma management principles, but the sentiment on the sign fits Bankston's personality, and it's one of a handful of unconventional yet rock-solid-successful approaches to the business for his single-unit, central Georgia lumberyard.

"I'm not a micro-manager," Bankston said. "It's more important to me to empower people in their jobs. And I'm more focused on balancing family and business."

Case in point: The yard is closed on Sundays. And Saturdays, too.

Whatever he's doing, the style seems to be working. The debt-free building products company has never had an unprofitable year since its founding in 1929, even through a lingering construction downturn has challenged the business. The January-through-June building permit numbers in the four surrounding counties combined falls short of 100. (Bankston Lumber's home county of Lamar had a meager eight permits issued during that period.)

That's why remodeling projects play a big role in the company's revenue stream. And the Bankston's two outside salespeople have drummed up business where they can — pool houses, for instance — while staying close to the county administrators for tips on new construction.

And the yard is willing to travel for business. The yard supplies materials to contractors engaged in the booming

(story continued on page 22)



Just because the business is profitable, doesn't mean it can't be fun, according to Bankston's management theory.

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Robins Air Force Base, some 50 miles away. Bankston Lumber also supplies materials to the student housing at Barnesville's own Gordon College.

One of the biggest recent transformations is next door at the new truss division; Bankston Lumber entered the truss business in 2007 and had a strong rookie year. But the lack of new construction took its toll, pushing the division to a low point in 2009. "We were wondering if we made the right decision," Bankston said.

But the truss business rebounded with a 26% increase in 2011. And during a recent visit, the covered but open-air facility was humming with activity.

Eric Evans leads the Bankston Truss division, which came into being when Bankston purchased



Evans' former company, Custom Truss. An Alpine computerized saw is at the heart of the operation, cutting sticks to exact lengths, which are assembled on two massive wooden slabs. Finishing the job is a giant press that rolls along rails elevated a few feet above the ground. (The elevated rails are an idea drawn up by Evans, and imitated elsewhere, Bankston said.)

The company was founded in 1929 by Chuck's great grandfather Ed Bankston, who ran a portable sawmill operation, buying land, clearing it, in some cases selling it and

ON THE NLBMDA: "MEMBERS CARE DEEPLY"

During the 2012 ProDealer Industry Summit in Savannah, Ga., Oct. 25 to 27, Chuck Bankston of Bankston Lumber will be inaugurated as chairman of the National Lumber and Building Material Dealers Association (NLBMDA) during the annual Officers Installation Dinner.

Here are some of the fourth-generation pro dealer's thoughts on the importance of the national group:

On the priorities of the NLBMDA:

"As of right now, I think the most important way we can represent our members is by encouraging our government to lift unnecessary regulatory burdens on our industry. From overreaching environmental regulations to taxes, these costly burdens continue to stifle growth in the building supply industry."

On the people of the NLBMDA:

"I've really enjoyed meeting other dealers and suppliers from across the country. Our members care deeply about our industry, and I get a lot of personal satisfaction out of working with them to benefit our industry."

On reasons to join and participate:

"This industry has been very good to my family for decades. I think most of us owe it to our industry to give something back, whether it's time or money. Speaking of money, most people don't realize that the yearly NLBMDA membership dues cost less than sponsoring a Little League baseball team in their hometown. NLBMDA members get a lot of bang for their buck. However, it also takes involvement to make sure our voice is heard in Washington."

some cases keeping it. The business transformed into a full production mill in the 1940s, then a lumberyard. During the 1970s, the lumberyard was decidedly DIY-focused, as an Ace Home Center, but refocused on the pro in the 1980s.

But a family business is more than a collection of business decisions and earnings statements. And the Bankston family has collected some classic stories over the generations from Ed to Pete to Cary to Chuck to 17-year-old Chad, the fifth generation of Bankstons to work at the yard.

Cary Bankston, Chuck's father, remembers decades ago when a supplier tried to sell a new window concept



Old school: A photo behind the counter shows Pete Bankston, right, son of the founder, and sawmill manager Elmo Mauldin.

to one Bankston Lumber's buyer named Elmo. The pitch went on for 20 minutes within earshot of founder Ed. When the pitch finally concluded, Ed lifted his hat above his eyes and drawled: "Elmo, don't put anything in stock that takes that long to sell."

"It's good advice — I wish I had heeded it more," Cary said.

Chuck Bankston's own history is part of the family lore. As a small boy, he played in the yard and climbed the wooden racks. At 11, he was already sweeping floors. And at 15, he was delivering lumber, even though 16 was the minimum age to drive a car.

"We knew the sheriff," Bankston explained.

After a brief stint with State Farm Insurance, he returned to the family business in 1992, becoming the yard's first outside salesman, with pockets full of quarters to call in orders — more than a million dollars' worth in his first year.

On the merchandise front, the business has embraced more energy-saving home products, some of which Bankston tests in his own home, including the Ecosmart electric water heater and Enerflex Radiant Barrier insulation.

Bankston Lumber has held lunch-and-learns with property managers and contractors and plumbers to promote products, and he's sold about one tankless heater per week for the past three years.

Marvin windows and Masonite doors have a strong

presence in a small showroom near the counter.

Bankston is a big believer in the power of networking through both the NLBMDA (*see sidebar*) and the Tyrone, Ga.-based Construction Suppliers Association (CSA), the trade association for independent dealers in Georgia and Alabama. Bankston calls the CSA roundtable events extremely rewarding.

"The meetings help sharpen the sword," he said. "We can ask the guy who is leading the pack how he does it, and I get a lot out of it."

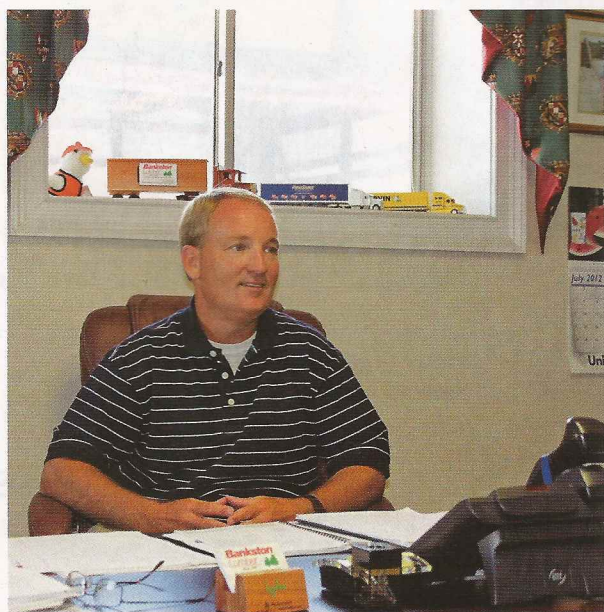
Sometimes it's more than he expected.

When Bankston hosted a CSA roundtable group in Barnesville, the group toured the yard and then met in a conference room to discuss the topic of security.

"They asked me how secure we were, and I told them that the fencing around the perimeter was adequate and that the merchandise in the store was pretty well protected because it was so close to the registers and all the people near the front desk. And then one of the dealers threw a big Bostitch nail gun on the desk and said: "So you're saying we couldn't steal this?"

"One of them had taken it in broad daylight," Bankston said. "That was an eye opener."

It also shows the power of a new pair of eyes on operations. "They are going to tell you how it is, which is what you want." ■



Clockwise from top: Bankston is a big believer in the power of professional networking and the importance of giving back to the industry. The company's truss division showed a 26% increase in 2011. In the company's small show room, Marvin Windows and Masonite doors get prominent floor space.

