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Bring the Wood

Robinson Lumber Builds on History

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For five generations spanning almost 120 years, the Robinson family and Robinson Lumber Company have called the Crescent City home. Founded in 1880 by Charles Wesley Robinson in Meridian, Mississippi, the company relocated to New Orleans in 1893 to seize opportunities in the growing pine lumber market, and soon began exporting products around the world. Over a century later, Robinson continues to benefit from intergenerational trading relationships formed over decades of importing and exporting domestic and exotic hardwood and pine lumber, flooring, decking, and related wood products through the Port of New Orleans and other ports.

"Basically everything we do is an import or an export," said W. Garner Robinson, the first member of the fifth generation to join the Robinson team. "About a third of our business is bringing product into the U.S., from South and Central America, Southeast Asia, and West Africa. Another third is U.S. exports to Europe and Asia, and the rest of our business is purely international."

With over 1,200 customers in 60 countries, Robinson has foreign operations in Belgium, Brazil, Honduras, and Nicaragua as well as multiple offices and warehouses in the U.S., including its corporate headquarters in New Orleans.

"We source from primary manufacturers around the world," Robinson said. "Rather than owning the forest or the sawmill, we focus on commercializing wood products by concentrating raw material at the source, adding value where it makes sense, and handling logistics through to the customer's door."

In an average year, Robinson Lumber Company and its 46 employees sell 50 million board feet of wood products and ship 5,000 Twenty-foot Equivalent Units (TEUs), with two thirds of that product going through the United States. Many of these products pass through The Port of New Orleans, which in 2010 handled approximately 671,000 short tons of forest products, making it one of the leading ports in the country.

The company maintains its commitment to the forest as a renewable resource and is certified by the Forest Stewardship Council to sell FSC Pure products. Two generations of the Robinson family have served as officers in industry associations including the International Wood Products Association, the National Hardwood Lumber Association, and Southern Lumber Export Association. These associations have many members using the Port of New Orleans in their businesses.

"Many people don't realize it, but there's nothing greener than wood," Robinson pointed out. "When sustainably harvested and replanted as part of a forest management plan, wood products are much better for the environment than plastic or steel."

Compiled By Shelley Davenport

Photos by Tracie Morris Schaefer

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1. From left to right: Sam, Toto, Garner, Courtney, and Ivens Robinson at their corporate headquarters in New Orleans, Louisiana.

2. Denise Dalferes, traffic manager, takes a call.

3. U.S. Sales Representatives Steve Stoufflet and Dan Lennon describe the quality of Robinson's flooring products.

4. Robinson's first mill in Nicaragua, opened by the second generation, operated by the third generation, and birthplace of two members of the fourth generation.

5. Robinson Lumber Company products destined for New Orleans are loaded at the Port of Breves, Brazil.

6. Robinson lumber, packaged and ready to be shipped via container.