

The

COFFEE KING

of

NEW ORLEANS

By Mark Miester

FRONTING THE WATERS OF THE GULF OF MEXICO IN PASS CHRISTIAN, MISS., THE SUMMER PLACE KNOWN AS BURKEDALE OCCUPIED A SPECIAL PLACE IN THE HEART OF WILLIAM B. BURKENROAD JR. ('23).

Each summer for the past 75 years, when temperatures in New Orleans soar to sweltering heights, the Burkenroads have packed their swimsuits, tennis racquets and golf clubs and embarked for Burkedale, where the family of Billy Burkenroad still spends most weekends—and sometimes entire months—enjoying fishing, sailing, skiing, softball, tennis, golf and eating—lots of eating.

Most of all, however, they enjoy family, because family was the most important thing in life to Burkenroad. Prior to his death in 1995 at the age of 92, Burkenroad, then chairman of J. Aron & Co., enjoyed nothing more than weekends and summer holidays spent with family at Burkedale.

"My grandfather loved Burkedale," says Robert A. Borics, president of J. Aron & Co. "He had two daughters and seven grandchildren, and he loved it when we were all there. He believed very strongly in keeping our family together.



William B. Burkenroad Jr., circa 1926

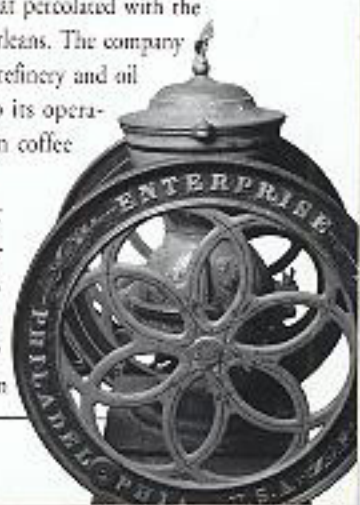
Burkedale was his way of doing that."

"Family was everything to Billy," adds W. Roarner Reily III (A&S '50), chairman of William B. Reily & Co. and a close friend of the Burkenroads.

It is no coincidence that family meant a great deal to Burkenroad. The values he lived by and passed on to his children were those same values instilled in him by his mother and father: honesty, integrity, loyalty, courtesy, perseverance and charity.

Those core values carried over into his professional life as well. As president and CEO of J. Aron & Co., the family business he joined in 1923, Burkenroad earned the reputation as one of the city's most respected businessmen in one of the city's most exotic businesses: coffee. In its heyday, J. Aron & Co. was one of the nation's top importers of green—or unroasted—coffee, a complex business that percolated with the mystique of New Orleans. The company later added a sugar refinery and oil and gas interests to its operations, but at J. Aron coffee was king.

"My grandfather loved the coffee business," recalls Borics. "It was a real gentleman's business. Every country had its own



set of rules and regulations and different banking mechanisms. He loved the romance of it, the intricacies of it."

And of course, he ensured that his family was indoctrinated with the aromatic potable at an early age. "We drank iced coffee every morning when I was growing up," says Peggy Burkenroad Selber, Burkenroad's daughter. "I probably had it in my bottle."

"He had a little book," adds Aaron Selber, Peggy's husband and a close friend of Billy's. "If you didn't drink coffee, he wrote that down."



Outside the company's original Tchoupitoulas Street offices, J. Aron employees show off a shipment of "Medabog" coffee, grown in Medellin, Colombia.

radio. On Saturday nights, I'd tell his nurses to turn the game on. I don't know if he heard everything, but he knew who won."

Burkenroad, both individually and through the family's Burkenroad Foundation, was a tireless supporter of Tulane throughout his life, with gifts going toward athletics, the medical center, Newcomb, the law school, Judeo-Christian Studies and other areas of the university. Most of all, however, Burkenroad supported the Freeman School, much like his father, who was one of the original underwriters of the

Freeman School when it was founded in 1914. In 1989, Billy and his wife founded the William B. and Evelyn Burkenroad Institute for the Study of Ethics and Leadership in Management at the school. The institute sponsors the Burkenroad Symposium on Business and Society, which each year focuses on an issue of ethics in business. Ethics was a topic that Burkenroad felt very strongly about.

"Billy lived in a world where business was done on a handshake and verbal agreement," says Reilly, one of Burkenroad's longtime business colleagues. "In the commodity business, you sometimes had to deal so quickly that if anybody ever questioned your verbal agreement, you were out of business."

If family was Billy Burkenroad's first love and coffee his second, Tulane University was probably a strong third. Burkenroad enrolled at Tulane's College of Business and Commerce after graduating from Isidore Newman High School in New Orleans in 1919. In addition to joining Zeta Beta Tau fraternity and playing saxophone in the band while at Tulane, Burkenroad also became one of the most loyal fans Green Wave football ever had.

From the time they were old enough to walk, Peggy and her sister, Jane Burkenroad Bories, spent their Saturday afternoons in the children's section at Tulane Stadium. "All I remember is my boyfriend Jitterbug Kellogg," laughs Peggy, referring to backfield star of the 1930s Bobby Kellogg. "I used to think it was the most divine

thing to see him throw the ball. I must have been 6 years old."

"He dragged me and my sister to Tulane Stadium every weekend," says Jane, not as big of a football fan as her father and sister. "From his seat, he used to use binoculars to make sure we were wearing our raincoats if it rained."

"He never missed a Tulane game," says Bories, who used to walk with his grandfather to games in Tulane Stadium. "We went through many losing seasons, but I always remember him saying, 'They played their hearts out.'"

"He called himself a freshman until the day he died," adds Peggy. "Even when he couldn't go to the ballgames anymore, he would listen on the



J. Aron coffee tasters ply their trade.

"He would not under any circumstance stretch a point to make a deal—and there were many opportunities," says Aaron Selber. "Importing coffee was a worldwide business and many of his competitors changed bags in Trieste or other free ports around the world. He would never do any of that."

Burkenroad's latest gift to the Freeman School comes two years after his death. In recognition of his love for the Freeman School, the Burkenroad family recently pledged a major gift to the school to endow its highly regarded series of student-written stock analysis reports, which have been renamed the *Burkenroad Reports*. In addition, the atrium of Goldring/Woldenberg Hall has been named the William B. Burkenroad Jr. Atrium in his honor.

Billy Burkenroad was born in New Orleans in 1902, the son of a wholesale grocer who had moved to the city from Goodman, Miss. When Billy was 7, his father abandoned wholesaling to join a cousin in the coffee importing business he had founded.

Jacob Aron, a native of Ita Benz, Miss., was also a wholesale grocer when he came to New Orleans, but he soon realized that the city's strategically located port and proximity to Latin America made New Orleans a natural hub for importing coffee beans. J. Aron & Co., the business Aron founded in 1898, purchased unroasted beans from farmers around the world and resold them to roasters, who would package and retail the coffee. Unlike a coffee broker, a firm that merely links buyer and seller, J. Aron had a physical position in the transaction. The company purchased coffee, shipped it to New Orleans or other ports of entry, and stored coffee in its own warehouses. In the context of turn-of-the-century New Orleans, it was an astonishingly complex operation, one in which traders routinely dealt with unfamiliar languages, arcane regulations, foreign currencies, unreliable transportation, and any number of problems with the beans themselves, from being sold short to being shipped the wrong beans. But for a man who knew the business like Aron did, importing coffee was a rewarding field.

When Aron brought William Burkenroad Sr. on board in 1909, he did so for a reason. Since commodity prices were set in New York, Aron believed that J. Aron would fare better if it were closer to the action. In 1911, he moved to

New York to establish a branch of J. Aron & Co. The two branches were later incorporated as separate companies.

With Aron in New York, William B. Burkenroad Sr. became the manager of the New Orleans office. Billy joined his father at J. Aron & Co. in 1923, immediately after leaving Tulane. His first job was in the sampling department, one of the lowest positions but also one of the most important. Burkenroad was charged with receiving coffee samples that growers or agents were selling, grading it by type of bean, roasting it, cupping it and cataloging it. If J. Aron were to purchase a shipment based on that sample, Burkenroad would go through the process again to ensure that the company had received the type of coffee it had ordered. In that position, Billy began to develop a palate sophisticated enough to identify not only a bean's country of origin but from which mountaintop it was plucked.

Billy's cousin, the late Jack R. Aron, eventually succeeded his father, Jacob, as manager of the New York office. Billy and Jack remained active and extremely close friends throughout their lives. They conferred each week by telephone,



sent each other gifts purchased in the exotic destinations each would visit, and over the decades rode side by side in many Mardi Gras parades.

In 1925 Burkenroad married Evelyn Levy (N '23), a Newcomb English major he had known since high school. Red, as Billy called her, was quiet, supportive and intelligent, the perfect complement to Billy's outgoing, self-confident personality. "She was a very, very smart lady," Peggy says of her mother, who died in 1991. "She had a wonderful mind. If I was going to



New York, she'd say, "Well I read the *New York Times*, and you be sure to go to this restaurant and this play. She knew what was going on all over. She wanted to write for the *Times-Picayune* after she graduated from Newcomb, but at that time ladies didn't do that sort of thing."

In 1940, after working his way up through a number of positions with the company, Burkenroad was promoted to vice president. He held that position until 1957, when he became president and CEO following the death of his father.

Through those years, Burkenroad developed a reputation as not just one of the city's business elite, but as one of New Orleans' most dedicated civic leaders as well. Burkenroad was instrumental in the New Orleans Philharmonic Symphony Society, the World Trade Center, International House, the New Orleans Museum of Art, the Metropolitan Crime Commission, the Public Affairs Research Institute, the Civil Service League, the Council for a Better Louisiana and many other organizations. He earned many awards and honors, including the 1982 Freeman School Outstanding Alumnus Award, the 1987 Outstanding Philanthropist Award of the Society of Fund Raising Executives, the 1974 Weiss Memorial Award of the National Conference of

Christians and Jews, the Most Outstanding Men of New Orleans Award of the Institute of Human Understanding, and the 1975 Times-Picayune Loving Cup.

With his cultured tastes, meticulous manners and impeccable style, Burkenroad was a quintessential business executive of his era. He drove a spotless Rolls-Royce. He was never seen without a dark suit and hat, although on weekend trips to Burkedale, he would occasionally don a sport shirt. In the era of the telephone, he preferred to write letters. "He used to write thank-you notes for thank-you notes," says Peggy.

Burkenroad also was an aficionado of the finer things in life—music, food and wine. In addition to his work on behalf of the New Orleans Symphony, he was a member of and served on the boards of gourmet organizations including the Wine and Food Society, the Confrerie des Chevaliers du Tastevin, the Confrerie de la Chaine des Rotisseurs and the Commanderie de Bonteaux. Burkenroad's wine cellar rivaled that of Antoine's, his favorite restaurant.

"He kept menus of his dinners back for 40 years," laughs Reily. "He could tell you exactly what wine was drunk in 1953. One of the great pleasures was to be able to sample his wine cellar with him, because he was an expert."

He was also friendly, talkative and enthusiastic, a master salesman with the gift of graciousness, a careful businessman whose lightning-quick decisions were rooted in a deep understanding of the market. Reily recalls the time Burkenroad excused himself for a moment while the two were having lunch one afternoon. Was there a problem, Reily asked when Billy returned. "No," he responded. "I just had to purchase a shipload of sugar."

Long before spreadsheets became common, Burkenroad charted coffee prices and compared them to inventory to gauge the impact of fluctuations. "Basically, he was doing 'what if' scenarios by hand," Bories says. "J. Aron was always state of the art. Before the era of computers, we had telex, accounting and word-processing machines. He would have loved computers."

The best was never too good for Burkenroad, who did not take the pleasures of life his business success afforded him for granted. "When he was working, he worked hard," explains Bories. "But he always stopped to smell the roses. He enjoyed himself and took great pleasure in his family and friends."

One of the most profound pleasures in

Burkenroad's life was also one in which he applied characteristic meticulousness: fishing. On most weekends, Burkenroad could be found navigating his boat through coastal marshes in search of speckled trout and redfish. Fishing was serious business to Burkenroad.

"He made a study of it and perfected it," says Reily, who accompanied Burkenroad on many of those fishing trips. "When he was at Burkedale, he had a routine. He would get up with his wife, she would get him a cup of coffee early, and off he went. About 1:30 in the afternoon he was back. They'd clean the fish and have trout muni-mer that evening."

"Fishing was his passion," says Bories. "If you didn't fish with a bait-casting reel, if you didn't use the right type of tackle, if you weren't patient enough, he would classify you as a 'Mardi Gras' fisherman. One time I wanted to bring with me a transistor radio to listen to a football game. He wouldn't hear of it—'No, you don't do that.'"

Another sport he enjoyed was horseracing. Billy spent countless afternoons in his box at the Fair Grounds. "Up until the time he died, I always went down to the track with him," says Peggy. "He'd buy a form at the track and then a couple of guys used to give him tips. He just got a kick out of it. If he won a little bit, fine. If he lost a little bit, fine. He just enjoyed the fun of it."

In fact, his love of racing was so great that when Boomer and Wendy Reily were to be married in 1957, Billy had to send his regrets. He planned to be in Louisville for the Kentucky Derby that day. Nevertheless, he managed to make up for his absence in typical fashion. "As a wedding present, he gave my wife a win ticket from the Kentucky Derby," Reily laughs. "Now I know the way he got that ticket is he bought a win ticket on every horse, so that when he got back he was bound to be able to give Wendy a winning ticket. That's exactly the sort of thing Billy would do."

In 1977, J. Aron & Co. announced its intention to liquidate coffee operations. The decision was largely that of Burkenroad, the majority stockholder of the family-owned company. Burkenroad's decision was not motivated by any downturn of fortune for the company, which remained profitable. Rather, it was a financial decision driven by the interests of the family and changes that had occurred in the coffee business. The International Coffee Agreement of the late 1950s established quotas for the importation of coffee that greatly reduced the

role of the trader in the process. Market fluctuations were also becoming more difficult to manage. To preserve the company's assets for the family shareholders, Burkenroad decided to get out of the coffee business while the getting was good.

The streamlining of operations was not unprecedented. In 1973, the company had sold its sugar refinery, Supreme Sugar. After the coffee liquidation, J. Aron & Co. became solely an oil and gas company, with Burkenroad remaining president and CEO. In 1980, his grandson, Robert Bories, joined the company as vice president and controller. Bories, who had been working as a CPA, was promoted first to treasurer and then to president. Burkenroad retained the title of CEO and added the title of chairman. He remained chairman and CEO until his death.

Judging from the accomplishments of his family, Billy and Red taught their children well. Their first daughter, Jane Burkenroad Bories, graduated from Newcomb College with a degree in sociology in 1951 and married Alan Bories, a native of Seattle, Wash. Alan Bories joined J. Aron as a coffee trader and stayed with the company until its liquidation in 1977. In 1978, he and a group of former J. Aron coffee employees founded the International Coffee Corp. to continue where J. Aron left off. Bories died in 1990.

Jane Bories, who married Sam Corensweet in 1996, has been involved with many organizations over the years, including serving on the boards of the National Council of Jewish Women, the Louisiana Nature and Science Center, the Second Harvesters Food Bank and the Tulane Associates, as well as on the Newman School Endowment Committee, the Parenting Center Advisory Board at Children's Hospital and the development committee of the Light House for the Blind. Today, she helps coordinate an art project at Andrew Jackson Elementary School in New Orleans, plays tennis and golf, and enjoys cooking, flower arranging and spending time with her eight grandchildren.

The Bories had three children, Robert, Peggy Bories Schloff and Lynn Bories Smith.

Peggy Burkenroad Selber, Billy Burkenroad's other daughter, graduated from National Cathedral School in Washington, D.C., and attended Newcomb College. Peggy has served as a member of the Louisiana Public Broadcasting Board and the Rose Society Board. In addition, she is past president of the Louisiana Women's Golf Association and sits on the New Orleans Museum of Art Advisory Board.

Aaron Selber Jr., Peggy's husband, is chairman of the board of J. Aron & Co. Aaron is a former Mr. Shreveport and in 1996 was named Business Leader of the Year by the Shreveport Chamber of Commerce. Like his father-in-law, Aaron has also remained a dedicated supporter of Tulane and the Freeman School. He is a former member of the Tulane President's Council and currently serves on the Business School Council. In 1985, he received the Freeman School's Outstanding Alumnus Award.

Peggy Selber was the tomboy of the family, Billy's enthusiastic conspirator for fishing trips or afternoons at the track. She was also a champion amateur golfer. Peggy won the top prize at many country club tournaments, won the Shreveport city championship four times, and made it as high as a state semifinalist. "My father kind of made me the sports person," Peggy says. "I play everything. I hunt, fish, sail and ski. I had to quit skiing because I tore my knee up, but I still cross-country ski. There aren't many sports I haven't tried."

The Selbers have four daughters—Patty Ann Newton of Baton Rouge; Pamela Jane Weston of Irvine, Calif.; Polly Lynn Gleichenhaus of Denver, Colo.; and Penny Dianne Autenreith of New Orleans.

Between the Bories and the Selbers, Billy Burkenroad had 14 great grandchildren.

"We're all very close," Jane says. "We're into the fourth generation, and the family is still strong."

Billy Burkenroad had been out of the coffee business for more than 15 years when he died, but in that period his life's passion staged a remarkable cultural comeback. Although per capita consumption of coffee is nowhere near its peak in the first half of the century, today younger consumers are increasingly discovering the pleasures of java at local coffee houses. In addition to offering hip, non-alcohol-oriented environments, gourmet houses also tend to serve excellent grades of coffee. Often these roasts are augmented with flavorings such as hazelnut, raspberry or chocolate. Would Billy approve of the more outrageous offerings of Starbucks and B.J.'s?

"My grandfather was a purist," Bories says. "You drank your coffee black, maybe with a little cream or sugar in it. When you start putting banana nut cream in it, he would have turned his nose up at that. Coffee was coffee; flavored coffee was a beverage."

"That's a very interesting question," Reilly says, taking a moment to collect his thoughts. "I think the first thing he would say is that a lot of the coffee shops are now selling good coffees of good quality, which is one of the things he championed for many years. As far as adding raspberry and hazelnut, Billy probably would have thought it was an abomination, but he would have been too polite to ever say anything."

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In 1950 J. Aron & Co. hosted a cocktail party in honor of writer Frances Parkinson Keyes, whose book *All This Is Louisiana* mentioned the company. Pictured around the coffee bar are from left to right, Mrs. J. C. Mackenzie, Sidney J. Besthoff, Mrs. Besthoff, Evelyn Burkenroad, Edward A. Lafaye and Billy Burkenroad.

