by Darby Baham, New York Time Student Institute: 5/20/03

You know you’re in New Orleans if you get your king cakes from McKenzie’s, get your hair done on the mezzanine of Krauss’ Department Store on Canal Street, and you describe a color as K&B purple.

No, you don’t, because these places, along with Schwegmann’s Giant Supermarket, Maison Blanche, and D.H. Holmes are no longer around. “These places were a major part of the culture and allure of the city,” said Jeanene Gabriel, a junior at Clark-Atlanta University, who was born and raised in New Orleans. “When they closed down or were bought out, the whole city felt it.”

In recent years, especially between 1997 and 2000, local businesses in New Orleans have been closing down or were bought out by larger corporations. However, these establishments that have sometimes been around since the 1800s still have not necessarily taken their marks off of the city.

Landmark signs still stand at most McKenzie’s Bakery Shops, even thought they are no longer around. There is a K&B sign that hovers on the top of a building downtown, and the Maison Blanche building still stands on Canal Street. It was renovated to become the Ritz-Carlton Hotel.

Locals have not forgotten the businesses, either. “I remember my mom and I used to go to Krauss at least one Saturday of every month,” said Gabriel, with a hint of a little girl’s grin on her face. “We parked across the street in the parking lot that had one entrance and the only person that guarded the cars was this man named Smokey.”

“Then once you went inside the double doors that you had to push, couldn’t pull, there were these big pictures on the walls as advertisements for the photo department,” Gabriel said. “The photographs were actually graduation pictures and I just couldn’t wait until I was old enough to graduate so that i could have my picture up there, but I never got the chance. It closed down.”

Krauss was first opened in 1903 at 1201 Canal Street, by Leon Fellman and his nephews, the Krauss brothers – Max Alfred, Leopold, and Fritz. It eventually became one of the major local attractions on Canal Street, a place to not only shop but also multitask. It contained a beauty parlor, a fabric department, a photo department and a place where children could get some ice cream and candy.

“My mom used to go to Krauss for the hats, but I always love the ice cream and candy,” Gabriel said. “It actually got me in trouble one time. I was eating some candy and not paying attention to where I was going and ran into one of those fabric things. It was not pretty, but we still went back all the time.”

Another place with cultural significance was Maison Blanche. This local business had its beginnings in the 1800s and was sold in 1998 to Dilliard’s department store. “Maison Blanche gave me my first job,” said Leah Taylor, a New Orleans native. “And I always thought that the Maison Blanche on Canal Street would be a permanent fixture. When it closed down, it took some of my past with it.”

There was one thing in particular that stood out in her mind, she said. “The cutest thing was the little Christmas mascot, Mr. Bingle,” she said. “I actually still remember the jingle. ‘Jingle, jingle, jingle, here comes Mr. Bingle with another message from Kris Kringle. Time to launch the Christmas season; Maison Blanche makes Christmas pleasin’. Gifts galore for you to see, each a gem… from MB.’”

Natives born before 1989 also tend to remember D.H. Holmes Department Store, which stood next to Maison Blanche on Canal Street. D. H. Holmes, which was names after Daniel Henry Holmes, opened in 1849 at a time when Canal Street was primarily residential. It is best known as a place where people would meet “under the clock.” “My grandmother, who is almost 80 years old, is always telling us stories about when she used to shop at D.H. Holmes,” Taylor said. “Now, it’s a hotel on Canal Street, but before she said it was the main place to go shopping. her mom would get her dressed up in her Sunday best to go there.”

Schwegmann’s Giant Supermarket also represented the one-stop shop appeal that the department stores had. In fact, according to 20th Century Business Firms, it was the fifth-largest private-sector employer in the city until it was sold in 1999. It originally opened in 1869 and became a giant supermarket in 1945. “Schwegmann’s was like the old version of a super Wal-Mart,” said Fay Arbuthnot, a hairdresser whose salon was located in the Algiers Schwegmann’s Supermarket for sever years. “It offered a good experience with better security, but it also was a place you could get your groceries, pay your bills, get your hair done, get your clothes dry-cleaned,a nd get a little something to eat. You couldn’t beat that.”

Yet, one of the most influential stores was not a department store at all, but a drugstore. K&B Drugs, which is short for Katz and Bestoff, opened in 1905 at 732 Canal Street. K&B, however, did not just stay in New Orleans. It expanded to 195 stores in Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, and Tennessee. Therefore, when Rite Aid bought out the chain of drugstores in 1998, there was a little bit of discontent in the city. Rite Aid tried to appease the customers by auctioning K&B memorabilia, but only served to remind the people of New Orleans just how important K&B was to them, Taylor said.

“Around that time, a lot of our local stores were closing, but K&B just took it to another level,” Taylor said. “It was such a surprise, the way it happened. One day it was K&B, the next day they were changing all the signs to Rite Aid signs,, and it just hasn’t been the same since.” In fact, there is a K&B Drugs memorial Web page where memorabilia is pictured and former customers share fond memories.

The fond memories are not limited to just stores. McKenzie’s Bakery Shop had a chain of about 50 stores and shipped up to 30,000 king cakes a week during the Carnival season, according to www.mardigrascoconuts.com, a Website that gives a history of Mardi Gras and facts about New Orleans.

King cake is served during Carnival season and contains a figure representing the Christ child inside. Whoever receives the piece of cake with the baby inside of it must provide the next king cake. It is usually covered with colorful powdered sugar, but sometimes contains fillings and icing.

McKenzie’s opened its doors in 1936 when Daniel Entringer bought a small bakery shop from Henry C. “Mack” McKenzie. According to the Website, he turned it into the largest chain of bakeries in New Orleans and the largest maker of Carnival king cakes. It originally closed in 2000, when the Louisiana health department’s issuance of sanitation citations was made public. Schwegmann’s closing a year earlier also hurt the business, because they were both local chains in the city. McKenzie’s tried to come back under new management, but closed again in 2001.

“McKenzie’s had the best king cakes,” Gabriel said. “No one else made king cakes kike they did. Everybody misses that. I wanted them to at least open up seasonally from Christmas to March, so we could get some of the best king cakes in the world again.”

Taylor said she was heart broken when McKenzie’s closed. “The fact that they brought it back is what hurt me,” she said. “When they did that, I think we all thought it was coming back to stay, but then it was gone again.”

But these businesses and others like it in the city that have folded or were bought out have a couple things in common, said Bob Folse, director of research at the New Orleans Chamber of Commerce. “All of them were owned and started by local families, which makes them appealing to the locals of New Orleans, but they reached a point in their growth where they weren’t going to go any further,” he said. “In order to continue, they would have had to go public, which would mean to sell stock and raise capital.”

Some of them tried, but to no avail, he said. “Schwegmann’s tried to do this when they sold to a company, but they went bankrupt a couple years later,” Folse said. “McKenzie’s market moves away from them. Supermarkets were competing for their major clientele with their deli bakeries.”

“Maison Blanche and D. H. Holmes both went public,” he said. “They were stock-held businesses, and Dilliard’s gave them a very handsome offer. They came in at a time when Holmes had peaked out and had some internal problems with management and labor. Maison Blanche closed down because it was just overrun by the competition.”

However, Folse said the common denominator in these businesses was that the market they catered to became the actual problem. They had to compete with larger companies for the same business. “It was a matter of how they were going to deal with that, and it became a pivotal point; whether or not they would hold onto the market share or grow with it and bring in new management,” he said.

But to Arbuthnot, the only thing that mattered was the fact that she could not go to these places anymore. “Well, at least I have my memories,” she said. “I just can’t believe what happened to all those places I grew up on.”