

# *The Shelby Report of the Southeast*

salutes

# ROUSES MARKETS

for 65 years  
of success



## Third-generation CEO: ‘We’re the No.1 grocer’ along the Gulf Coast

For Donny Rouse, president and CEO of Rouses Markets, the story of the company’s past and its vision for the future always come back to family, community and the Gulf Coast culture that shaped them both.

“It first starts with my grandfather and his passion and energy for the business and willing to do anything that the business needed to succeed,” Rouse said. “And then, back in 2007 when we had that A&P acquisition in the New Orleans market ... that really made us ready for our future growth.”

The deal doubled the company’s size at the time, giving Rouses both the momentum and the clarity to lean into its strengths.

“We really stepped back and thought about it and planned it,” he said. “Really understood who we were, how we were successful, being local and with our pricing structure, and that kind of set the roadmap for helping us be successful years later.”



Anthony Rouse

Donny Rouse

Donald Rouse

“Seeing how my grandfather, my father, worked with the farmers to make sure they were successful ... Over the years, we went to the fishermen and had the same confidence in the fishermen to give us that quality seafood.”

The goal, he said, is simple: “We want those fishermen to be successful.”

That spirit extends to emerging local brands, too.

“Many people have the dreams and the concepts and ideas of what they want to do, but they don’t know how to scale it,” he said. Rouses helps guide them into packaging, licensing and distribution so “they can get their items on our shelves.”



### Remaining true to its roots

As the grocery industry adopts more technology and more chains chase efficiency through sameness, Rouses leans into a simpler formula.

“We just do our own thing,” Rouse said. “We sell groceries. We fight for the best cost and give our customers the best price ... we’re still old school with us just putting groceries on the shelves, having clean stores, great customer service and low prices.”

Being family owned, he said, allows the company to move quickly and stay grounded in its values.

“Family knows each other. Family trusts each other,” he said. “We don’t have a big board of directors we have to go in front of to make decisions and such. I can make any decision that I want, and I know I’ll have the family’s support behind it.”

That responsibility, he added, is deeply personal. “It’s our business. It’s not Wall Street’s business ... My name’s on the front of the buildings. It’s all I’ve ever known.”

### Deep local ties

Local sourcing remains one of the company’s strongest identities – particularly its commitment to Gulf seafood and regional products.

“It’s important to the culture of the communities that we’re in,” Rouse said.

His family’s roots in farming shaped this focus.

### Scaling up while staying grounded

From a handful of stores to becoming the Gulf Coast’s No. 1 grocer with 76 locations, Rouse said lessons have been learned along the way.

“Don’t mess up,” he said with a laugh. “The bigger you grow, the more customers you have, the more team members you have, more product you’re selling – there’s a lot more moving pieces in the business ... It’s a big deal, and a lot of people count on us.”

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# Chairman: ‘We’ll keep trying to get better forever’

As Rouses Markets celebrates its 65th anniversary, Chairman Donald Rouse Sr. reflects on the roots of the family-owned company and looks to the future with the third generation leading the way. Rouse said his father, Anthony J. Rouse Sr., set the standard for the company with his humility and strong work ethic.



Donald Rouse

“He would never ask anybody to do something that he wasn’t doing himself, and he would always work alongside everyone. I think everybody respected that,” said Rouse, adding that his father was a very hands-on leader.

He noted that some employees still talk about his dad being in the store in his coveralls, “doing anything and everything that everybody else was doing. I think he began teaching the work ethic in the company.

“He would go from working in the office to getting on a bulldozer when we were doing a project.”

## Family leadership continues

Rouse said while there have been many changes in the grocery industry over six decades, technology has been one of the most remarkable. He said the third-generation family members are well versed in today’s technology and “their capability has really helped the company.”

But while much has changed, one thing hasn’t. “Family or not, everyone is treated the same and held to the same standards,” Rouse said. “We make decisions based on what’s best for everyone – not one group or one person.”

## Buying local

Another thing that hasn’t changed is the company’s commitment to supporting local farmers and fishermen.

Rouse recalled working with his dad in their first grocery store when he was in his early teens. He said his dad was a farmer before he became a grocer, and farmers were

always important to him. “He always told me when a farmer comes in with a bushel of okra and they want to sell it to us, you buy it even if you don’t need it ... Keep buying from local farmers. And we did that with fishermen and shrimpers as well. The memories of buying locally are not new; they go all the way back to my childhood.” That commitment to supporting locals helped the company when it bought the southern division of A&P, Rouse said.

“We went into New Orleans and that was our theme – we’re local. We buy local. We pushed that very hard.”

People remember and talk about that support of local suppliers, Rouse said. That focus also has helped with Rouses Markets’ recent acquisition of 10 Winn-Dixie stores. Rouse said some of the comments he has read about the transaction “is a lot about local – us being local and buying local. They love that. It’s very important.”

He also pointed out that Rouses has been a supporter of cottage industries over the years. Owners of these fledgling businesses would come to Rouses for help in getting their products on store shelves.

“We would teach them exactly what the process is ... and everything that went into it. A lot of these small manufacturers we helped start, they would start with us and then expand into other stores.”

## Lessons learned and passed along

When he was growing up, Rouse said he learned much about the business from his father. He continued that tradition with current CEO Donny Rouse and his cousins.

“Donny, in particular, used to sit with me and listen to conversations between my father and myself in the office ... I would include him in meetings, whether it be with suppliers or bankers or whatever. I think he learned a lot from those meetings. [It was] like going to school, basically,” Rouse said. “I think that’s about the best thing that we could have done for Donny.”

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Rouse added that he likes to make decisions quickly. “If it’s the wrong decision, well, I’ll change course, and we’ll fix it real quick.”

Variety, especially local variety, is another non-negotiable. “We don’t want to be like the next big supermarket chain out there and have limited assortment,” Rouse said. “We want variety for our customers.”

## Transformational acquisition

The company’s latest chapter – the acquisition of 10 Winn-Dixie locations – marks what Rouse calls a pivotal moment.

“This Winn-Dixie acquisition, I think, is extremely important to our company,” he said. “They have some great locations where we could not have [gone] and built in those same locations ... we’re in two new markets with these stores, and it’s strong for our company.”

He is energized by the transition ahead. “I really can’t wait ‘til January comes and we start transitioning these stores over to Rouses and welcoming new team members into our company,” he said. “It’s going to be great.”

Rouse said longtime Winn-Dixie employees can expect stability and support. “They come into a family-owned company,” he said. “They’re going to enjoy the job, just like they are today.”

## Customers, community at center

As Rouses grows, customer enthusiasm has been evident. “We see that through social media. We see that through emails that they’re sending in,” he said. “They love to see us continue expanding ... We’re the No. 1 grocer on the Gulf Coast, and it’s because our customers enjoy shopping with us.”

Rouse believes his grandfather would be proud of how far the company has come. “I don’t know that he would believe it,” he said. “We’re so far past what I believe his dreams were for the company.

“He would just be so proud of how the family stuck together and how the family was able to continue growing this business.”

## Strong partnership for growth

Rouse also credits longtime partner Associated Wholesale Grocers for standing

alongside the company through multiple phases of expansion. “AWG is always there for us,” he said. “They’ve been a great partner through our growth ... they’ve always showed up.”

As he looks toward the next phase, Rouse said one thing gives him immense confidence: the people behind the operation – “the strength of our team.”

“We have a phenomenal team in place ... we have the right team in place to continue growing, continue being successful,” he said.

And for Rouses Markets, that team – and the communities they serve – remain the heart of every decision.

“It’s just the same thing as always – support local, take care of your team members, have great customer service, have the right prices and sell the groceries,” Rouse said. “It’s what we’ve always done, and that’s what we keep doing.

“We have no cards, no gimmicks; we’re not playing any games. We’re just keeping great customer service, great product, great price.”



Donny Rouse



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# First jobs – growing up in family grocery business

by Ali Rouse Royster

I don't remember exactly when my dad started bringing me to his office, but I know I was younger than the law would have technically allowed. (Don't come at him! I'm fine. We still talk 10 times a day.)

I'm fairly certain I was at least in double digits. I would tag along during my school breaks and a few days a week during the summer – maybe just to get me out of my mom's hair.

When I was 15, I begged to work in the store with people my own age. My dad warned me that this meant more responsibility – and wearing a uniform (back then, black jeans and a teal shirt with pink writing ... so stylish), committing to being on time, working my shifts and learning the ropes like everyone else. So many people's first jobs are at Rouses, and I was proud to finally be one of them.

I worked at Store No. 5 on Audubon as a cashier; my manager, Mr. Bert Knight, was tough. I was once given a warning for trading a nickel for five pennies to make change – I was flabbergasted until he explained that my back was to my open till, with all the money just right there.

Over 25 years later, that moment is still etched in my brain. Bert rejoined our team a few years ago, and I doubt he remembers any of this – but I know his cashiers down the bayou in Golden Meadow are some of the best around.

I worked the front end for many summers and school breaks during high school and eventually trained as a customer service specialist and an office cashier.



When I went off to LSU, I thought I'd finally get a break from work. But when my dad saw I'd scheduled all my classes on Tuesdays and Thursdays, he pointed out that with all that free time, I could come home to work (before there was a Rouses in Baton Rouge). Eventually, we compromised: I stayed in Baton Rouge, had my fun and found a job at a Hibernia Bank branch.

For the rest of college, I had to keep taking classes on Tuesdays and Thursdays so I could work Monday, Wednesday and Friday. But working at the bank gave me experience I didn't even realize I'd use later. It all worked out; I'm still on the financial side of the business.

Like me, my siblings and cousins worked in the stores and at the office when we were younger. My cousins Nick and Chris Acosta and Blake Richard used to tag along with my grandfather, who'd make them bring in the buggies while he made his rounds.

When they were old enough, they started working in the stores – Nick in the butcher shop (where Donny also did a stint), Chris in the service and cashier area, and Blake in seafood.

At one point, so many cousins were working in seafood at Store No. 16 in Thibodaux, the whole department was practically third generation – it felt like a family reunion behind the counter. Sometimes, when we are all in the office, it can still feel like a family reunion!



Donny Rouse Donald Rouse and Ali Rouse Royster

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Donny Rouse and Donald Rouse

Young Donny absorbed that knowledge, taking advantage of an opportunity not many would have.

"I thought my father was one of the greats in the industry," Rouse said. "And for [Donny] to have the opportunity to sit and listen to us talk about the business, strategic points and where we were going, what we were planning, I think helped shape him a lot."

## Looking ahead

Watching the third generation of Rouses "be excited about the growth and about trying to be the best in the industry and striving for nothing but greatness" is very encouraging, Rouse said. He added it was time for "new energy" to come in, especially with advances in technology.

"I wasn't the technology guy," he said. "I was the operator. So now we have the third generation who is very familiar with technology, very familiar with operations and they have the drive. I think that puts them in a better position than I was in."

That knowledge was key in the recent acquisition of the 10 Winn-Dixie stores. Rouse said the third generation of leadership has a good plan and will be successful in bringing these stores under the Rouses banner.

Plans include opening the 10 stores as Rouses Markets within five weeks.

"We won't keep them closed long enough to do a major remodel with the first go 'round, but we're going to come back and do those later," Rouse said.

First on the list for major remodels are the stores in the city of Central, Louisiana – near Baton Rouge, and in Hattiesburg, Mississippi.

"We will rock and roll with those as soon as we can," he said.

For the Winn-Dixie team members who will join the Rouses family, Rouse said, "We welcome them ... we'll make the transition as smooth as possible."

He noted that employees are the heart of the stores, and he already has seen comments on social media such as, "I sure hope they keep the team members."

He also pointed out that at Rouses, it's family and team members running the company. "It's not corporate people running everything."

Rouse added that the company will continue to build stores, with a "ground-up store" in the works for 2026.

## Heart of Rouses Markets

Rouses Markets takes an active part in supporting each community it serves.

"Customers realize and can see that Rouses is a part of the community," Rouse said. "We love our customers. We try to treat each and every one of our customers as if we have to earn their business every day. I hope they see us being partners with the communities. That's very important to us."

He added that the company gives back to its communities. This year, Rouse said it gave \$500,000 to local food banks. It also sponsors sports teams, from professional organizations such as the New Orleans Saints and New Orleans Pelicans to high school and Little League teams, "from Lake Charles to Orange Beach, being in the community and being a part of the community," he said.

And when disaster strikes, those communities can count on Rouses to be there.

"We're the last one to close and the first to open," Rouse said. "Been doing that since my father ran the business in the '60s. If a hurricane comes, they can count on Rouses to be open as fast as we can after the storm passes and stay open as long as we safely can before the storm approaches."

"Nobody does it better than Rouses. We have a disaster plan like no other, I would say. Other stores will be closed, and we'll be operating on generators. People recognize that, and they remember that."

Reflecting on how far Rouses has come in 65 years, Rouse said he thinks his father would be amazed at the progress.

"But he wouldn't be satisfied," Rouse said. "He would say, 'What's next?'"

Rouse answered that question by confirming that the company will continue to grow and get better.

"I want to be mentioned in the same sentence with Publix and Wegmans and H-E-B as far as quality of operation," he said. "And we're not going to stop until we are. And we'll never be there, in my mind, so I guess we'll keep trying to get better forever."





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# Delivering a great experience – ‘that’s really what it’s all about’

When Donald Rouse was a boy, every weekend and every day after school, he worked at the grocery store owned by his father. “I basically grew up there,” he said. His father, Anthony, and uncle, Ciro DiMarco, opened the very first Rouses location in Houma in 1960 – 65 years ago this year. “It was our first store, a little small one, 7,000 square feet, and I just remember being with my dad, listening to him, serving customers.” (For comparison, today a newly built Rouses might be 50,000 or 60,000 square feet.)

It made for an interesting and, in some ways, exciting childhood. He bagged groceries. He carried bags to customers’ cars. He mopped floors at the end of the day, and bagged chicken that came in on ice and potatoes that came by the sack. “I was kind of like the neighborhood kid, but in a grocery store,” Donald recalled. “Just being able to be on the floor at the store all the time, and mingling with the customers, really getting to know them and our team members. They all knew me, and I knew all of them. I enjoyed that very much.”

His father used to take him to other grocery stores near and far, to see how Rouses could somehow improve. “Any time we traveled along the Gulf Coast, we would visit Bruno’s, Schwegmann’s, Winn-Dixie – all of them,” Donald said. He and his father would walk up and down the aisles and talk about what they were seeing. “Look, some places like Bruno’s in Alabama were really good at what they did,” he said. “I was young, walking around the store, looking around with my dad, thinking to myself, ‘This is the kind of store I want to operate one day.’”

Those experiences shaped Donald and gave him a vision for what he wanted Rouses to be if he ever had a chance to run it – which he did, beginning in the 1980s. “I wanted Rouses to be known as one of the best grocery stores in the country, and to be mentioned with the likes of H-E-B and Publix and Wegmans,” he said. “To me, if you’re known like that



– known for being a great operator – that means you’re really delivering a great experience to your customers, and that’s really what it’s all about.”

He devoted his career to that goal and, today, feels proud of where Rouses stands in the grocery industry and in local communities. Donald was the second-generation CEO of the company. He retired from that role in 2016 but remains chairman. Today, his son, Donny, is the head of Rouses Markets.

“I’m so fortunate that I have an opportunity to see Donny, my niece Ali Rouse Royster and the entire third generation working so

hard, and to see them accomplish more than me – to actually do better than what my brother Tommy and I did.”

Things in the grocery business have changed dramatically over the years, and Rouses now has 76 stores in three states along the Gulf Coast. “To see them operating at a higher level and accomplishing more than what I did – it’s just so overwhelming, and something I’m very proud of,” he said.

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# ROUSES MARKETS

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Donald speaks with his son at least once a day. He remains interested in operations and is happy to offer advice when it's needed.

"My dad did that for me and my brother, but just like my father was with us, I try to stay out of day-to-day operations. That's for Donny to handle, and he's very capable. He's been running things for quite a few years now."

Donald feels the same way about the other members of the Rouse family keeping the stores going and their teammates.

"I'm fully interested in results, and in the big projects that they want to pursue. They'll get my opinion," he said with a laugh.

As chairman, however, Donald is concerned chiefly with customer service.

"I enjoy doing this and have since I started as a boy. I love the business and I love serving people. I get very disappointed when I disappoint someone, and my team knows



that, my family knows that," he said.

Similarly, it bothers him when he learns that a store has let down a customer. "Customers don't realize, I think, how much their business means to me and how much it disappoints me if or when we disappoint them."

When there are a million customers a week coming through your stores, you're bound to disappoint somebody, he admitted, but he'll still obsess over that one.

"When someone is disappointed in Rouses, it becomes my top priority. I want to know what happened, why and what we did to rectify it. I guess that's part of enjoying the business – having that deep interest in each and every customer and each and every team member."

While he's not in the stores every day like he used to be, he still reads every email sent by customers.

"I expect the good things; that's what we're supposed to do. I don't ever want an unhappy customer," he said. So if a customer ever has a question or concern, he's quick to let the team know.

Though many people visit grocery stores a couple of times a week, the stores still remain somewhat mysterious. Every Rouses location is a complex logistical operation with many moving parts. Stores face constant new challenges that come about as technologies and communities evolve.

The changes since Donald worked at that lone Rouses location in Houma have been astounding. In the old days, everything was done by hand, from labeling prices on products to tracking store inventory.

The only way to know the prices of competitors – to make sure Rouses was more competitive than anyone else in the market – was to physically go to all the other stores in the area and compare pricing.

Today, however, Rouses Markets is able to process complex analytics to keep tabs on what customers want and when or where on shelves they want them. All the data now available means better prices and better service for Rouses customers.

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CELEBRATING

65 YEARS

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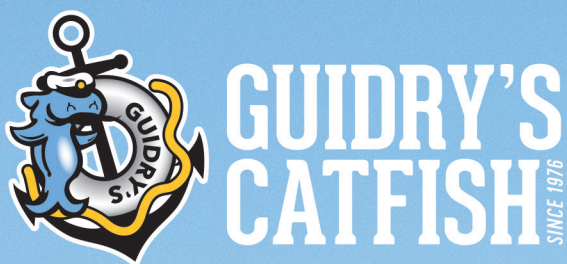
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“The way that we go to market is not by making what I used to call a ‘gut decision,’” Donald said. “We don’t make gut decisions anymore. We make our decisions based on facts, and it’s made all the difference for our customers.”

From the beginning, he said the Rouses mission has been “to operate clean stores at competitive prices, taking care of our communities we’re serving, taking care of our team members that help us get where we are, and never forgetting where we came from.”

Being local, he explained, is everything, and “community” is the company’s north star. “Back in my time running a store, I remember that local farmers would come to me with produce,” he said. “I remember getting to know them so well. They would come in and make their deal, okra or green beans or corn, maybe local meats or seafood – and we’d buy and sell for them.

“And I just remember that for some of them, that was probably their income. Knowing that we’re contributing to better the community is big to me. Very big.”

Contributing to the community hasn’t changed, but the way it looks has, in some ways. It’s not just buying local seafood and other products. Donald has watched Donny pioneer new ways to help local startups get on their feet and build their brands to get them ready for Rouses store shelves. It’s a lot harder than one might think.

“You can have a great product – and a lot of people do – and they deserve to be on the shelf. But having a great product is just the beginning,” he said. “There are so many steps along the way, from design to production and branding, that you have to go through. Rouses works really hard to help walk young, local companies through each step. Seeing these local startups thrive is pretty amazing. I mean, it’s really cool.”

Being part of the local community means big things and small, and Rouses is always looking for new ways to give back.

“I’m always interested in being part of the communities that we serve,” Donald said. “We always have been. It’s just such an important part of what we stand for as a company.”

He was recently at a ballgame with his grandson and, while watching from the stands, he realized that all the players were wearing shirts with “Rouses Markets” printed on

them. “Rouses supplied their shirts,” he said. “Those little things, they’re everywhere.

“I was looking at the TV the other day, and I saw on the news a story about local food banks. And I see Rouses products on the shelves at the food bank. I was so proud.”

In the bad times, he said, Rouses contributes to the community in other ways. “We are last to close before hurricanes hit, and first to open when they leave. We are always there for the community with trucks of ice and trucks of water and giving it all away – that’s a good feeling.”

More than a few big national chains have noticed the success of Rouses Markets and what it means to the communities it serves.

“There have been numerous times in the past that companies have come along and wanted to buy Rouses,” Donald said. “Of course, I always reject their offers. We’re not interested in selling – we’re interested in growing.”

One time, someone from a particularly large national chain approached him and asked him point-blank if he wanted to sell Rouses. “I said, ‘No , but how about you? Do you want to sell?’ I guess I was feeling cocky, but they weren’t happy about that.”

Being a local company is the competitive edge that Rouses has over such big corporations.

“We can be quick to respond to our national competition. We can turn on a dime, where it takes them months to get a decision from some corporate office,” Donald said. “We can



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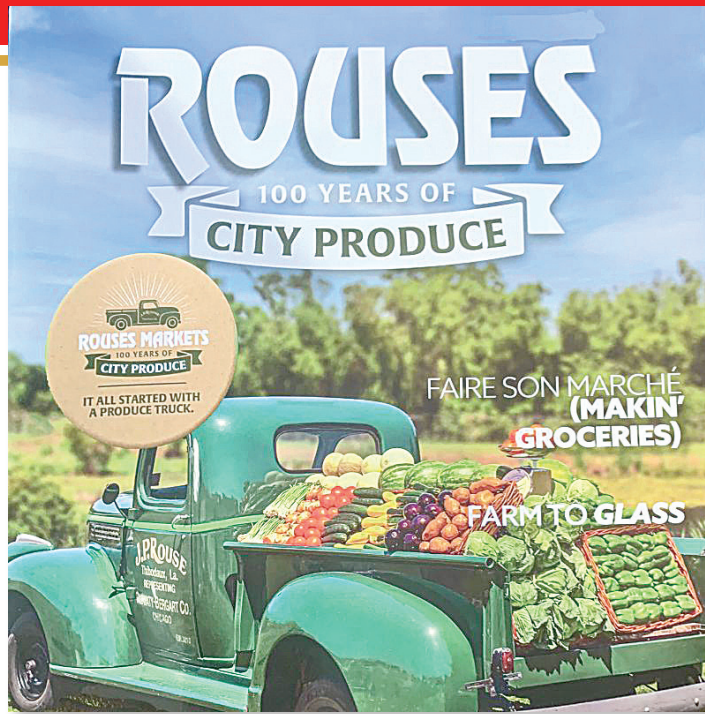
"We don't have to ask anyone. We don't have to ask the bank. We just make a decision ourselves. And that is a big, big opportunity that [larger] chains don't have. And we never want to lose that."

He's watched as chains have come along and grown, what they did and how they responded to changes. Giant companies have tried their hardest to take over local markets, but Rouses is stronger than it's ever been, even after 65 years.

"And look," Donald said, "I've seen them come and go. We competed with A&P, with National, with Delchamps, with Piggly Wiggly, with numerous ones that are no longer here today."

Donald sees a future where his grandsons and granddaughters will be running the business, along with other family members. He envisions Rouses having a hundred stores in the not-too-distant future, and he hopes that his descendants running the business are never satisfied.

"I mean, never," he said. "Not everyone understands that. Every day, we should operate like we've just opened our very first store for the very first time, and we have no customers," he said. "You have to work every day – hard – to gain customers. You can't depend that they'll come tomorrow, so you have to work hard to earn their trust and loyalty."



"And you do the same thing the next day, and the next day: work hard to gain those customers, gain their business and, most importantly, you must appreciate their business."

Rouses Markets will always be successful, Donald said, as long as it does what's best for the customers. "When you do what's best for the customers, that means you're doing what's best for the business as well."

The same goes for Rouses team members: Do what's best for them, because the family can't do it alone. He's also very proud that Rouses hasn't forgotten about the older stores it runs, nor the customers who've been there from the beginning.

"We're building stores across the Gulf Coast now, but we're also replacing and remodeling our older stores. We can't forget our mission, and we can't forget our roots: where we started, and who we are."

Back when Rouses was a single store, maybe two, his father, Anthony, would marvel at their success. "Boy, if my dad could see what we've got going on now, the operation that we have," he said.

Donald's grandfather, J.P. Rouse, was an Italian immigrant who scraped together enough money to start a little business in Thibodaux called City Produce Company. They bought things like shallots and cabbages and potatoes from local farmers, and packed them in his old truck. He sold some products at the French Market and eventually got large enough to get into the shipping business, packing produce on railcars and shipping goods to other parts of the country. It's where Anthony and Ciro learned the trade before founding Rouses.

"If only my dad could see the work Donny and his cousins are doing, and how far we've come as a company," Donald said. "He would be so proud to see the business doing so well and continuing our mission."

"It's my greatest joy to be able to be here and see the third generation be more successful than Tommy and I were in our time in the day-to-day operations. To watch them find these amazing opportunities to get better and to watch them perform. It just makes me very proud."



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Fax: 281-339-3412

Email: [info@prestigeoysters.com](mailto:info@prestigeoysters.com)







# ‘Mr. Anthony’ remembered for drive, work ethic

A good entrepreneur can build a business from the ground up. A great entrepreneur can build a business from the ground up, literally. That was Anthony Rouse, the founder of Rouses Markets.

Those who remember him recall the family man in coveralls who was always the hardest-working man in the room – or on the back of a bulldozer. He was a businessman’s businessman who pioneered an industry, brought innovation to the Gulf Coast grocery business and founded a company that has grown for three generations and counting.

But such successes don’t just happen; they are made to happen and require sacrifice, dedication and the kind of commitment to quality and service that few possess – and fewer still can keep going across a lifetime.

Anthony Rouse was one such man, and here is his story.



Mr. Anthony Rouse

## Locals supporting locals

Joseph “J.P.” Rouse immigrated with his parents and brother to the United States from Sardinia, Italy, in 1900. As a young man, he got into the produce business, eventually founding in 1923 a packing and shipping company named City Produce.

The company bought from local farmers, then loaded fruits and vegetables on railcars and shipped the goods as far as Alaska. If you were a farmer in Thibodaux, Louisiana, it was a pretty exciting deal, and local families benefited mightily from the company’s national reach. City Produce also sold locally, including from stalls at the French Market.

In 1929, J.P.’s wife gave birth to a son, Anthony; 14 years later, the younger Rouse joined his father in the family business. No two ways about it: To do the job, you needed a strong back and a strong will because this was hard work in a fiercely competitive industry. And Anthony came along during the back half of the Great Depression. For the Rouse family, success was the only option – it was the only way to keep food on the table. Success, however, was by no means guaranteed.

City Produce weathered the storm, and 11 years later, Anthony and his cousin, Ciro, took over the company when J.P. passed away. There they remained until 1960, when Anthony spotted trouble ahead for the produce business. The oil industry in Louisiana was reaching critical mass, and Anthony realized that workers would soon be in short supply, which meant produce would be in short supply, which meant business would soon go flat, if it could survive at all. So he and Ciro decided to make the leap to the grocery store business.

“They named it Ciro’s, because when you hung the letters on the outside of the store, Ciro’s had fewer letters than Rouse’s,” said Donald Rouse with a laugh. He is Anthony’s son, and chairman of Rouses Markets today. “That’s a true story.”

Anthony put every dime he had into the new business, borrowing from the bank what he didn’t have. He and Ciro eventually opened a small, 7,000-square-foot store in Houma, hiring two workers to help them. Donald eventually joined the team, pulling carts from the parking lot, bagging groceries, learning the business even as a boy. (This would become a family tradition that endures today; age 16 is a rite of passage for young Rouse family members interested in learning a trade that has served the community for three generations.)

In 1975, Ciro retired and Donald bought his interest in the business. They renamed the store Rouse’s, though that apostrophe didn’t last long. The bulb always burned out on the lighted sign, and Anthony, ever the pragmatist, did away with it completely. The following year, Anthony and Donald began work on a new grocery store on St. Mary Street in Thibodaux. And from the start, when Anthony saw the contractors at work, he knew right away that this wouldn’t do at all. He knew he could do it better.

“He did everything himself,” said Jeaneen Rouse, his daughter. “He didn’t like the way some contractors were building his store, so he got his contractor’s license. He taught himself everything. He wasn’t young when he did that, but he came from that generation where men did things for themselves. If he didn’t know how to do it, he was going to figure it out.”



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She added with a smile, “We wanted a pool, and we got a store.”

Donald remembers the construction of that store well. “It was exciting. You know, it seemed like a big store at the time, but it wasn’t when we look back at it now. I remember business just picking up and growing slowly in volume. Same thing at Ciro’s in Houma. And I remember telling my dad one day, ‘Wow, we did this much business today – we used to do three times less.’”

Donald’s favorite times were always when he was in the store, on the floor, working at Ciro’s or at that first Rouses.

“Those are the most fun memories for me – it’s something my dad instilled in me – taking care of customers and serving customers and bagging groceries if I needed to do that, or bagging potatoes if I needed to, mopping the floors after we closed, anything. Being at that level – I like serving people. My dad was the same way.”

**Building the business**

Ask anyone who knew him and they’ll tell you the same thing: Anthony Rouse loved to work – and work hard. It wasn’t enough to work tirelessly in the stores. After he got his

contractor’s license, he liked to build them, too – particularly the work involving heavy equipment.

“I wanted to talk to him a lot of times,” Donald said. “I don’t know how many hundreds of times, and I would have to go out there and catch him on a bulldozer, or working outside moving trees or lumber, and I’d have to stop him so I could ask him some question or perhaps tell him what’s going on, or just see if he needed help with anything. So many times I had to walk out through the mud to go talk to them that I started carrying boots in my truck.”

Said Cindy Acosta, Anthony’s daughter: “He loved to work. He lived to work. His attitude was: ‘If somebody else could do it, I could do it.’”

Donny Rouse, the third-generation (and current) CEO of Rouses Markets, agrees with that recollection of his grandfather.

“He loved everything he did,” he said. “When we had construction going on, he wanted to be on that bulldozer. When he had family over to the house, he wanted to do the cooking. Walking in the stores, if the stocker was putting [groceries] on the shelf, he wanted to put groceries on the shelf. He loved being around people, and he loved having his hands on everything.”

But Anthony Rouse was not one for putting on airs, which could sometimes have humorous results. “My dad always wore these overalls, so nobody ever knew who he was. He blended in,” Cindy said. “One day I was at the store in the back, and he walked in and told this young stock boy to do something. And the boy said, ‘Who are you, old man?’ He found out!”

Henry Eschiette, who handled the Rouses Markets accounts for Bunny Bread and Evangeline Maid – a major task in the grocery business, bread being perhaps the ultimate staple – remembers Anthony fondly.

“We talked at least once a week. He was always in the store, in those coveralls, and he was always looking at everything – what’s going on, you know, and seeing that it was done right. And nobody knew who he was.”

He said that Anthony would stand around, or sit down somewhere, and just watch.

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**MANDA**  
FLAVOR SAYS IT ALL





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“You’re going to laugh at this one,” he said. “Here I was, just talking to him in a store. And he noticed a bag boy sitting on the floor putting groceries on the shelf, and he was only using one hand. And Mr. Anthony told me, he said, ‘Henry, I think I paid for two hands.’”

Anthony went over to the young stocker and patiently demonstrated the best way of stocking a shelf.

This was hard-won knowledge. When Anthony first decided to open Ciro’s, there was no instruction manual for how to run a grocery store. He had to learn it all. Ordering product. The best way to shelve items. How to handle refrigeration and keep those coolers running. How to handle drains and plumbing. Inventory. Sales numbers. Figuring out what needed ordering when. How to keep the parking lots clean and the buggies in order. How to price items and keep those prices competitive. Payroll. How to handle ads and marketing. He had to figure it all out.

Every time the family traveled, they would visit grocery stores across the country to see what they were doing and how Rouses might innovate back home. Anthony and Donald were the first in the area to bring a deli to their stores. The first to boil fresh crawfish on-site. The first to bring in a florist. A bakery. Electronic barcode scanning at the checkout. That young stock clerk may not have realized it, but he was getting a master class in shelf stocking from a pioneer in the field.

And the business lessons from Anthony’s City Produce days applied neatly to the grocery store business.

“One time my dad and I were talking about competition,” said Donald, “and I was telling him about a big national chain that had a certain price on a specific item. And he said to me, ‘Well, let me tell you about that ... back in the City Produce days, I would ship one packing car of shallots to, say, Chicago, and maybe my competitor next door would be shipping 10.’ So one day my dad and that business rival got into a little, I guess, competitive thing over pricing, and my dad said: ‘No problem,’ and Dad dropped his price below what it was costing him to ship the item. My dad said: ‘I’m shipping one car, you’re shipping 10. Now let’s see who’s going to last the longest.’”

Donald continues, “And when I was talking to him about that, we only had, maybe, a couple of stores at the time, and this national chain had a lot of stores. And my dad said, ‘I’ll tell you what to do. Sell the item at cost.’

“They’ll get the message. They’ll back off of you. Put it at cost. You’re going to sell one truck and they’ve got to sell a hundred trucks.’ And it worked.”

Family first, then business

“He and my mom liked to go out,” said Cindy. “They went out every Saturday night dancing. They always told us they’ll babysit any night besides Saturdays. The thing is, they were going dancing and we weren’t! Boy, he liked to dance.”

Donald added: “My dad always preached to us that there is a price to success. And he wasn’t talking about money. He was talking about your time, your devotion and what comes first – family. Then the business and stuff like that. But he told us that and tried to make sure that we always put the first thing first.”

Anthony never retired. A man like that was a force of nature; he loved his job too much. But Donald gradually took over increasing responsibility from his father. He had prepared for the job his whole life.

“I remember one time hearing in the next room one of my dad’s good friends,” he recalled. “I was pretty young, and my dad’s friend and him were speaking, and for some reason his friend said, ‘Why are you so hard on Donald?’ And his answer was: ‘Because he’s going to be the one.’

“It stuck with me, yeah,” Donald said.

Donald’s son, Donny, would likewise one day take over the business and, like his father, he started out in the parking lots snagging buggies, working his way up over the decades. But the lessons from his grandfather started much earlier than that.

“I rode around with him a lot as a kid, and he talked to me a lot,” Donny said. “I remember he just talked and talked and talked about everything. He wasn’t rambling – this was about the business or about life, and this is when I was young, 8, maybe 10. I still think about those talks pretty much every day. And I think I learned a good bit from them,



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Anthony and Joyce Rouse

remember one time pulling up to the job site, and I see six guys standing around a big hole. They're looking down there. I hear a chain saw going so I walk up there and ask, 'Where's my dad?' They say: 'He's in the hole down there cutting something in the way.' I say, 'What is he doing down there? Why aren't y'all down there?' They told me: 'You tell him that!' I said, 'You're right,' and I walked away."

That work ethic, and Anthony's honesty and integrity, are at the heart of the Rouses business philosophy. And the third generation running the stores and main office today learned from him firsthand. The lessons never stopped.

"I was 17 or 18 years old, and I was running the seafood department at one of the stores," said Blake Richard, who today is Rouses' director of marine supply/commercial sales. "It was about a week after Katrina, and Granny and Pa, they were back at home – they were by themselves because everyone was busy running the store. And I remember he came to the store and said, 'I need you, boy.'"

Blake arranged to have his shifts covered and spent the next few days helping his grandfather clean up after the storm.

"I woke at five o'clock every morning with Pa, and he would get on his tractor and I was helping with branches." A tree had been uprooted in the back of the house, and when Anthony tried to pull the rest of it free, a root broke a water line.

"It's shooting out everywhere. And I remember he said, calmly, 'Come see, boy.' And it's

because I am here today in this role.  
"There's a lot of pressure being in a family business. My grandfather and my father – they were the best, and just to follow in their footsteps – to keep the business going for 7,000 employees – is a lot of pressure. And I enjoy it."  
But that man Anthony could work.  
"We were building a store in Houma," recalled Donald, "and I

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hot as can be – I’m out there, it’s just me, Pa and Granny – and Pa gave me a shovel and said, ‘I need you to keep going down until you hit metal.’ And it’s a long way down.” Anthony had Blake searching for a water valve. “I had no idea what I was doing. So finally, I hit metal. And he said, ‘OK, boy, I need you to dig three feet down and five feet across.’ And I’m like – all right!” he laughed. “He would even comment on it the whole time – I was digging the hole wrong, according to him.

“And finally, I dug this enormous hole, shut the valve off myself, and we grab this big Bobcat tractor; we go out there and I have to wrap chains around the trunk covered in fire ants, and Pa takes off and this thing is popping wheelies dragging this big old tree.” The tree’s remains finally removed, Anthony looks at Blake and said, “Now don’t do what I did and break the water line, but that’s how you fix everything else.”

“I’ll never forget that. He wanted to make sure we knew how to dig a ditch right. He would do everything in his power to teach us.”

Legacy of service

Anthony Rouse died in 2009 at the age of 79. Today, Rouses Markets has grown to 76 locations along the Gulf Coast. “Toward the end of his life,” Cindy said, “he still went into the office every day, but he never had his own office. He never wanted one.” Donald added, “He was a shrewd businessman but a good-hearted businessman. He raised us, showed us how to live and showed us how to live in the business world. And then in his final days, he showed us how to die. He died with integrity.” But he worked until the last. “I remember the day before he died, he was in his room, and he was on oxygen. And he asked me, he said, ‘What were the sales yesterday?’ So I gave him a rough number. And he said, ‘No, no. Per store.’ So I said, ‘All right.’ I went to get my computer, opened it up, and he sat there and listened, and would question me on specific stores.

“And the old man was dying, but he still had it in him – that amazed me. What he was going to do with that information, I don’t know, but he wanted to know, you know, how we were doing. And we were doing well, and that pleased him.” His legacy lives on, both in the Rouse family and in the thriving business he built. “I am proud to say we have 7,000 team members,” Donald said. “We are not only responsible for the company but for them as part of the company.” The Rouses experience applies not only to the men and women who work there today, but those who have worked at one store or another for decades. “I’ve had so many people come up to me and say their first job was at Rouses. You can’t imagine. If I didn’t hear that 5,000 times I didn’t hear it once. And that’s a good feeling, to know they still remember it and to hear how it helped them. That’s one of my proudest achievements,” he said.



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