

Still cleaning up, 81 years on

BY STEPHEN NELLIS
Staff Writer

After 81 years in business, Santa Barbara-based Mission Linen Supply has expanded to 52 commercial laundries in five states and a fleet of more than 800 trucks. Its customer rolls include a fifth of the Fortune 500.

But it all might never have happened if not for a family dispute over some pigs.

Born in 1903, Mission Linen founder George “Ben” Page grew up in a log cabin in rural Smith County, Tenn. His father gave him some livestock, but then changed his mind.

“His daddy had told him he could go to town and sell his pigs,” said Linda Page McGaughey, daughter of Ben Page and still chairman of the board. “His father gave them to him, but then his father renegeed. So [Ben Page] sold them and took off.”

Only a teenager at the time, Ben Page left

home and worked as a miner and at retreading Goodyear tires before stopping in Texas and finally hopping a freight train to Cali-

fornia. After laboring as a farm worker and auto mechanic, he made his way to Santa Barbara, driving a laundry truck for what was then Troy Laundry. Ben Page hustled to pick up extra routes among Santa Barbara’s elite, and persuaded the owners of Troy to let him rent out the laundry at night.

“All those people had servants and butlers. There was a big old barn out in Montecito where they would have dances,” Linda Page McGaughey said. “He was a charmer. He would go and get all these accounts.”

By 1930, Ben Page had scraped together enough money to buy out the owners of Troy Laundry. Today, Mission Linen operates in California, Arizona, Texas, New

Mexico and Oregon. Its major business segments are uniform cleaning, linens for restaurants and hotels and, increasingly, health care facili-

ties such as hospitals and retirement homes. “That’s probably the newest segment for Mission Linen, but the fastest-growing,” said

Karl Willig, who took over as CEO at the firm in 2009.

Mission Linen does a lot of laundry. So much so that being parsimonious with water, electricity and chemicals isn’t just “green” posturing — it’s essential to staying in business. The laundry business is a mature industry, so Mission Linen competes on service and price, which means keeping down costs. Its largest plant, in Chino, can wash as many clothes in a week as about 400,000 households.

“That plant can do about 2 million pounds of laundry a week,” Willig said. “The average household does between 50 and 100 pounds a week.”

The third generation of the Page family now works at Mission Linen, and two of the firm’s four regional operations managers are second-generation employees. Many Mission Linen employees are decades-long veterans, and Page McGaughey said the firm keeps alive Ben Page’s traditions. He would chat with a truck driver as easily as a fellow executive.

“You’re never above anybody,” Page McGaughey said. “When somebody needs a hand, you give them a hand.”



Linda Page McGaughey, Mission Linen Supply chairman of the board, and CEO Karl Willig pause in one of the company’s cleaning facilities.

What also remains alive is Ben Page’s tough eye and drive for details. He was known to pay his plants a surprise visit and enter through the back door, inspecting his way to the main entrance.

“By the time he got to the front, he usually had a list of criticisms,” Willig said.

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Mission Linen Supply

**Santa Barbara County
 Large Family-Owned Business**

Principal: Karl Willig, CEO
Headquarters: Santa Barbara
Founded: 1930