

BUSINESS ADVOCATE

Great Southern Wood Preserving was supposed to be in business for as long as it took to repair and sell its equipment. Fifty years later, it's a thriving Alabama business, respected by do-it-yourselfers and contractors alike.

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50 YEARS OF FIVE-STAR BACKYARDS

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50 YEARS' HINDSIGHT REVEALS LIFE'S UNEXPECTED TWISTS AND TURNS AS A REWARDING PATH FOR JIMMY RANE AND GREAT SOUTHERN WOOD PRESERVEING

Five decades ago, Great Southern Wood Preserving, Inc., was not part of founder Jimmy Rane's career plan; however, the Abbeville based company is celebrating its 50th anniversary by looking back at its humble beginnings.

In 1970, Rane was a senior at Samford University's Cumberland School of Law and clerking at a prestigious law firm in Birmingham where he had been offered a job following graduation. "I knew nothing about the wood-treating business. In fact, I didn't know the difference between a 2" x 4" and a 2" x 6". Needless to say, I had no intention of getting into the wood-treating business," Rane said.

Yet, in June of that year, Rane's first wife's parents were killed in an automobile accident. They were owners of a large farm in his hometown of Abbeville, which included a small wood-treating plant ran by Rane's father-in-law.

The estate taxes at the time created a difficult situation. Selling would trigger a high tax debt, causing the family to lose the farm. Thus, when an offer was made for the treating plant



equipment and that portion of the acreage, the family was faced with a difficult decision. Rane proposed they sell the equipment and lease the land, but unfortunately the

stay in Birmingham and be a lawyer. Obviously, that's not the way things worked out."

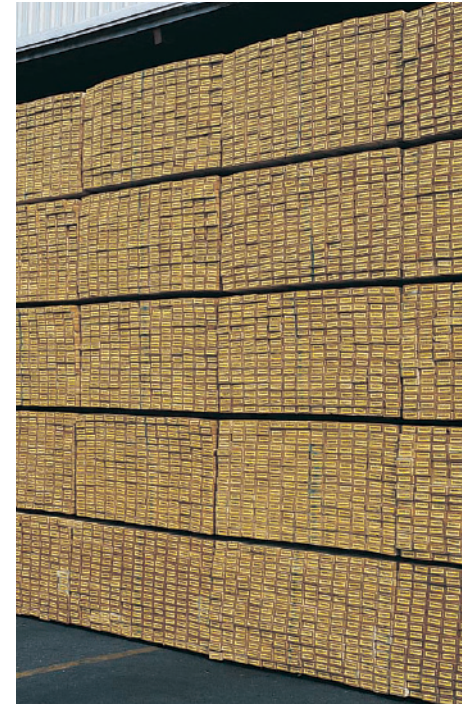
With the help of his father-in-law's one employee, Lawson Curry, friend Philip McMahan, and a bank loan to fix the equipment

"OUR COMPANY IS ABOUT FAMILY, PARTNERSHIP, AND A COMMITMENT TO PURPOSE." -JIMMY RANE

equipment didn't work. "So, I came up with another plan," Rane said. "I bought the equipment myself for \$10,000 and leased the land for \$250 a year. My plan was to get the equipment fixed, flip it, get out of the wood-treating business, and

and refurbish the plant, Great Southern was born in Abbeville, Alabama.

"We still had no intention of keeping the plant. We were just going to get it up and running, sell the equipment (ideally at a profit), and move on. It had become clear that we weren't going to be able to sell the



plant. It was decision time, and I had no choice. I had all this money that I owed, and Philip was leaving to go home to Birmingham, so I had to return to Abbeville and run the plant."

Rane set up a one-room law practice on the square in downtown Abbeville and split his time between practicing law and treating wood. "I worked at the plant from 4:30 to 7:30 a.m., then I showered and shaved and put on a coat and tie and practiced law until 5 or 6 p.m. Then I went back to the plant and worked until 9 or 10 p.m."

Great Southern was, at that time, a very small operation, but still managed to lose more than \$91,000 in the first year of operation. Rane said, "Our only chance of survival was to get an additional loan from the bank." Rane left the bank in an old 1961 truck and drove to a sawmill to buy two bundles of 2" x 6" x 12's. "Lawson and I unloaded it, treated it, put it back on the truck, and then I went out and started calling on building supply houses. I had to find someone who would pay me in cash. I finally found a buyer in Ozark, Mr. Henry King. He wrote me a check for \$292.91, and I went back to the sawmill and bought



two more bundles. I did the same thing over and over again until I could generate enough cash to buy a whole truckload and sell a whole truckload."

By 1973, the company had its first profitable year and earned \$18,796.97. Rane's brother, Greg, came in as a full partner after he graduated from Auburn University in 1974. That year, the company was also able to buy its first truck. In 1976, Great Southern opened a second plant in Mobile, Alabama. "Even though we kept growing, we never seemed to have any money," Rane said. "We always had to wait for payments to come in before we could pay our bills."

Then one day in 1983, a piece of mail arrived that changed everything. Rane received an invitation to apply for the Smaller Company Management Program at the Harvard Business School. His coursework in Boston began in January of 1984, and at the time, he had a business degree, a law degree, and had been in business for 13 years. Yet, it wasn't until those classes that he figured out Great Southern was undercapitalized. When he returned home, he went to Birmingham and got a \$1 million line of credit. "Like

COVER

The first full year Great Southern Wood was in business (1971), total sales were \$22,000. In 2019, sales exceeded \$1 billion.

LEFT PAGE

The Jesup plant was Great Southern's seventh. Today, the company has 14 treating plants covering a 28 state footprint.

THIS PAGE

Left: YellaWood® and its distinctive "little yellow tag" are well known by do-it-yourselfers and contractors alike.

Right: Jimmy Rane, Great Southern's Chairman, President and CEO. Rane is also known for his role as "Yella Fella" in the company's TV commercials.

a Saturn 5 rocket, the company just took off after that.”

Rane also learned a few things about marketing and product branding at Harvard, especially when studying Perdue Farms. “Up to that point, when I tried to make a sale, all the customer wanted to talk about was price,” Rane said. “Their mindset was ‘wood is wood.’ They couldn’t conceive that there was any difference.”

Frank Perdue had faced a similar problem, and he solved it by appealing directly to the end buyer—the grocery shoppers who wanted to provide the best quality food for their families. Perdue was one of the first CEOs to appear in commercials, and Rane took notice. “We needed to do the same thing with wood,” he said.

He soon identified a common thread that could spark emotions across the company’s service territory—college football. Then Auburn football coach Pat Dye was the first college coach to appear with Rane in a commercial, and other coaches across the Southeast soon followed. They also introduced ‘the little yellow tag’ that was placed on all of their treated lumber with the tagline, “If it doesn’t have the little yellow tag, believe me, you don’t want it.” The yellow tag trademark is now registered and still used prominently in commercials today.

Next was the introduction of Yella Fella, a character Rane played in commercials. Currently, the marketing team relies on “nature’s master builders”—beavers—to star in its commercials. “We continue to use advertising to speak directly to the folks who are going to buy lumber for backyard and other building projects,” Rane said.



In April 2006, Building Products Digest named Great Southern Wood the number one producer of pressure-treated lumber in the country. Rane received the news the same day he was announcing that the company’s Employee of the Year Award would be named for his first employee, Lawson Curry, who’d passed away in 1979.

Today, Great Southern Wood Preserving has fourteen plants and a service territory that includes 28 states, the Caribbean, Latin America, China, the European Union and the Mediterranean

states. The company also has an affiliated trucking company, Greenbush Logistics, Inc., as well as affiliated companies in the ocean freight and sawmill businesses. Annual sales top \$1 billion.

“Great Southern is more than forklifts and trucks and buildings,” Rane said. “Our company is about family, partnership, and a commitment to purpose—a common value that unites everyone. We bring ours down to three words: duty, honor, country. That’s what unites us. We are fortunate to have over 1,400 people of honor at Great Southern Wood Preserving.” **BA**

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