

Shapiro firm celebrating 100 years as Baltimore customs broker leader

By Paul Scott Abbott, AJOT

When an ambitious 20-year-old Baltimorean named Sam Shapiro earned his customs broker's license and opened the door of his own one-room office in 1915, he likely couldn't have imagined that the family business he founded would now be celebrating a century of industry leadership.

Sam Shapiro died in 1987, just shy of his 92nd birthday, still holding the position of chairman of the board he assumed in 1968, but son Sig Shapiro and granddaughter Margie Shapiro are still around to enjoy the gala centennial of Baltimore-based Samuel Shapiro & Co. Inc.

The company's Aug. 12-13 "celebration of 100 years of innovation, heart, results and fun" is to include tours of the firm's new headquarters, an evening event at the Baltimore Museum of Industry and a logistics and supply chain panel discussion featuring more than a dozen industry experts, concluding with the Propeller Club of Baltimore's annual crab feast.

Those celebratory functions come nearly 100 years to the day after Sam Shapiro, on Aug. 15, 1915, began his own business after working three years for a local customs broker.

Back then, at a time when Woodrow Wilson was U.S. president and World War I was still nearly a decade away, Sam Shapiro operated from a \$5 roll-top desk and had just two employees in that room at 29 S. Gay St. They enjoyed the across-the-street proximity to the U.S. Custom House at 40 S. Gay St., two blocks north of where Baltimore ship docks were then located.

Today, Samuel Shapiro & Co. Inc. – known throughout the industry simply as Shapiro – has more than 130 employees in six offices along the U.S. East Coast, including a 13,087-square-foot Baltimore headquarters, opened two months ago, where 67 full-time employees plus seven interns are based.

Plans call for 110 Shapiro employees to be part of the centennial celebration, with more than 30 of them being flown in from offices as far away as Atlanta. In addition, agents and carriers from throughout the world are to be hosted, including quite a few from China, South America



Sam Shapiro's granddaughter, Margie Shapiro, carries on family values as president and chief executive officer of Samuel Shapiro & Co. Inc.

and Europe, according to Olga Lyakhovetskaya, the company's marketing manager.

While the firm has expanded not only in geography but also service offerings, Margie Shapiro, who has been president and chief executive officer since 2002, is quick to point out that the company has not strayed from its founding pillars of integrity, honor, respect for clients and staff, and ability to implement change.

"Shapiro was built on a foundation of integrity," said Margie Shapiro, who began helping out in the family business at age 7 and, after studying psychology at the University of Pennsylvania and a stint at an advertising firm, returned to the family business in 1991 as Philadelphia branch manager.

"In earlier times, Shapiro became famous as the broker/forwarder whom foreign companies could trust in Baltimore to collect freight monies due and to operate with full transparency," she said, noting that her father was integral in the efforts to establish the Maryland Port Administration and grow what in 2006 would be renamed the Helen Delich Bentley Port of Baltimore.

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In the early days of his customs brokerage business, Sam Shapiro (right) personally handles a filing at the U.S. Custom House in Baltimore.

“In the 1950s and ’60s, Shapiro’s solid business ethics and process integrity allowed us to develop tremendously valuable and collaborative relationships with government agencies, services, and departments,” she continued.

“In recent times, as physical port presence became much less essential, Shapiro has showcased our integrity by designing cargo technology products and tools that consider the importers’ and exporters’ needs before our own,” Margie Shapiro went on to say.

“At the same time,” she said, “we have earned a reputation for honest pricing. We adjust our transportation rates for our diverse client base promptly in a declining market and only after tough negotiation in an inclining market. Integrity lives at the heart of all we do and will do.”

Margie Shapiro pointed out that philanthropy also has been an important part of Shapiro from the start, with her grandfather having given 20 percent of the company’s whopping \$50 in first-year profits to the American Jewish Relief Fund.

“Both the Shapiro family and the company are well-known and respected for their support with causes that fur-

ther build the Baltimore community,” Margie Shapiro said. “Today, we sponsor a class in logistics at the University of Baltimore business school; provide college scholarship aid to deserving children of our employees; and advise not-for-profits on a pro bono basis on the best way to manage international freight.

“We also have a policy of matching charitable gifts our employees contribute to not-for-profits of their choice,” she added. “To date, most of our humanitarian logistics work has focused on building materials and relief goods for children in Kenya and Honduras.”

Margie Shapiro – whose words of wisdom include “just have fun” – learned the family business philosophy well, not just from her grandfather but from her father as well.

Her dad, Sig Shapiro, began working fulltime with his father at age 20, in 1947, and he became chief executive officer in 1968, at age 40. Like his father, Sig doesn’t believe in retirement and, now as company chairman and approaching 90, continues to come to work on a regular basis.

Sig Shapiro’s view of the business is embodied in a catchphrase for which he is known: “We’re travel agents for cargo.”

With the crowd coming in for the centennial celebration, they this week also are travel agents for people.

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