

# STAR MAGAZINE

THE KANSAS CITY STAR

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## THE KANSAS CITY UNDERGROUND

Though 160 feet below the surface, these 1,100 acres certainly don't fit the term 'cave.' They are not dank; they have no stalagmites; they are well-lit, dry and clean.

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The U.S. Postal Service's Stamp Fulfillment Services distributes stamp orders nationwide from its SubTropolis location.

# UNDER THE METROPOLIS: SUBTROPOLIS

55 BUSINESSES AND MORE THAN 1,500 EMPLOYEES  
WORK 160 FEET BELOW GROUND - IN UNDERGROUND KC

Let's pull back the curtain to reveal an array of products:

- Gunny sacks of coffee beans
- Ronald Reagan commemorative postage stamps
- Envelopes with a return address to the Rawlins County

(Kansas) treasurer's office

- A shipping box containing a slab of ribs, beans and sauce
- Stacks of four-color postcards with a local real estate agent's face on the front
- A movie film canister with

the title: "Gone With the Wind"

- A 24-foot long portable sawmill
- A machine for vacuum-packing hotdogs
- The setup for an entire Chipotle restaurant.

What all these products have in common? They were produced and/or stored and/or assembled and/or shipped from SubTropolis – the largest underground industrial complex in the United States, perhaps the world. The underground city with 55 businesses and 1,500 employees is a Hunt Midwest venture owned by the Lamar Hunt family of Chiefs fame. Though 160 feet below surface, these 1,100 acres certainly don't fit the term "cave." They are not dank, they have no stalagmites, they are well-lighted, dry and clean.

Oh, and remember that curtain we pulled back? Allied Theatre Crafts, which calls SubTropolis home, made the curtain for the Superdome.

### Room to expand

Exit Interstate 435 east at Missouri 210, go north at the stoplight (south takes you to Ameristar casino) and you drive to the street level entryways for SubTropolis. Ameristar has 110,000 square-feet of casino space. SubTropolis could accommodate 500 Ameristars: 55 million square feet has been carved out of Bethany Falls limestone.

Ten million of that square footage has infrastructure, and approximately 5 million is inhabited, according to Tim Basler, manager of sales and leasing. Quarry operations are creating yet more space at a rate of 3.5 acres a year. Rock is blasted away, leaving 25-foot-square pillars on 65-foot centers with 16-

foot ceilings. So the floors and the ceilings are in place. Hunt Midwest then fills in between the pillars (more than 10,000 of them) with cement block, forming rooms of varying size and wide aisles for roads. Need to expand? Just move the cement blocks.

Climate in the caves – at 65 to 75 degrees with humidity easy to control – has made it a perfect site for the green coffee bean storage and redistribution part of the business. Thousands of 100- to 150-pound gunny sacks of beans from around the world are stored and shipped from 140,000 square feet of leased space recently added to its existing 200,000 square feet. If your favorite espresso shop gets its beans from a roaster in Kansas



At the U.S. Postal Service's Stamp Fulfillment Services, 12,000 to 15,000 orders per day are filled with computer-controlled conveyor belts.



**Mary Morris works on one of the manufacturing machines that help make 600,000 to 700,000 envelopes a day for KC Envelope.**

City, chances are those beans were here first. Having all those coffee beans available made obvious one business spin-off.

Paris Brothers adopted the family's original Sicilian name, Parisi, to create a coffee bean roasting business. Because Paris Brothers also handles other food items from pasta to cheese, the company also leases cold storage space at SubTropolis to store cheese and other products from U.S. Department of Agriculture programs.

Some cold storage areas offer minus-5 degree temperatures. In case of electrical failure it would take days if not weeks for the temperature of the frozen limestone to rise significantly. Items from frozen turkeys to pastry dough are stored there.

### **American made**

Temperature control was an attractive asset for Underground Vaults and Storage, too. Thousands of movie film elements, many of them famous, such as "Gone With the Wind" and "The Wizard of Oz," are kept at 48 degrees in 180,000 square feet of space.

If you worry that few products are made in the United States anymore, SubTropolis is a reassuring place to visit:

■ Rollstock, for example, manufactures vacuum pack sealing equipment for companies such as Kansas City's Boyles Meat. With 15 employees, it can turn out machines costing \$59,000 to \$190,000. A dedicated truck is used to ship each machine because, "We don't want other

goods bumping into our machine," explains Gary Filippone, plant manager.

■ Woodmaster's planers and belt sanders and sister company Timberking mobile sawmills are assembled at SubTropolis. They are doing about \$10 million in business a year with no domestic competitors. Remember good ol' American ingenuity? A potential Amish customer came to call one day wanting to buy a planer, but religious precepts forbade using one powered by electricity. The company figured out how to power it using a gasoline motor. Other Amish woodworkers learned of the accomplishment and more orders came in. Thus a foot-square box sits on a shelf labeled Amish Tapers, which are special parts for use in Amish-

ordered machines.

■ Of course there's barbecue. Fiorella's Jack Stack Barbecue uses SubTropolis to store its finished products for shipping across the country. In three days you can have ribs and beans and sauce arrive at a West Coast or East Coast door. The 6-year-old mail-order business has been growing 50 percent per year. And it's a lot of product. During the Christmas holidays, shipping can range from 5,000 to 10,000 packages a day, requiring two to three FedEx trucks, says Wiley Fisher, general manager.

### Restaurant in a box

Among SubTropolis tenants, QualServ probably spreads its business the thinnest: Eight employees work in 110,000 square feet, or 13,750 square feet per employee. All that space is used to store all of the things that create a restaurant. QualServ, unique in Kansas City because it also has a manufacturing component, can take your restaurant concept and design and supply any or all of the parts. It does the total package for Chipotle and Steak 'n Shake.

Sinks, cook stations and kitchen equipment, even

Chipotle umbrellas, are packaged and ready to ship. On average, 60 shipments will depart each month. That's one reason the daily truck traffic count at SubTropolis is 150. QualServ is a \$180 million company, according to Valinda Vandervelden, marketing director.

### Need stamps?

Perhaps the operation that brings in the most annual sales is one that is unknown to most Kansas Citians. The U.S. Postal Service's Stamp Fulfillment Services does business in 300,000 square feet of space in



Stacks of movie reels sit at a cool 48 degrees in Underground Vaults and Storage.

SubTropolis. To buyers worldwide, it sells commemorative stamps, first-day covers and even your everyday 39-cent flag stamps. Sales manager Khalid Hussain says daily inventory is from 400 million to 600 million stamps. He says most orders come from the Internet; turnaround time is 24 to 36 hours. The 180 Postal Service employees fill 12,000 to 15,000 orders a day using a maze of computer-controlled conveyor belts, stamp bins and mechanical grabbers that select the proper stamp packages and put them into a box that goes to a packing station where the order is finally touched by a human and is sealed, addressed and sent for mailing.

Hussain points with great pride to charts on the wall for workers to see. In 1997 sales were \$47.5 million and expenses were \$21.6 million. In 2006 the service is on pace to have sales of \$300 million on expenses of \$22.3 million.

### **Sticky business**

If you were going to actually use these stamps, you'd need an envelope. That takes us over to KC Envelope, where its president, Sam Santee, buys his glue by the 400-pound tote. You need a lot of glue when you manufacture 600,000 to 700,000 envelopes a day.

With 65 employees, the process starts with newsprint-size rolls of paper that are cut

into sheets, stacked, die cut into shapes, sometimes printed on, and folded into envelopes with glue applied to the edges. Originally part of Sosland Publishing, the envelope division was broken off and sold to

## **RUN THE UNDERGROUND**

Like to see SubTropolis?

You can run through it Jan. 28 during the 25th Annual Groundhog Run. As of last year the run had collected more than \$3 million for Children's TLC/Easter Seals. Call Children's TLC/Easter Seals at (816) 756-0780 for race information.

Santee and two other partners. They moved the operation from the three floors of a downtown building to SubTropolis in 1979 and have grown from 27,500 to 86,000 square feet.

At Mail Print, Gina Danner says the company she and her two brothers own and run tries to stay on the cutting edge "without being on the bleeding edge." The industry is littered with companies that bought new technology too soon at high prices that dropped six months after purchase. Mail Print is an example of what computer technology has done to the industry:

One large part of their business is printing and mailing those color, large-sized postcards featuring the face of your friendly real estate agent and

information about sales in your neighborhood.

### **Behind the curtain**

We'll end our tour where we started it. The curtain.

William McGehee, founder and CEO of Allied Theatre Crafts, thought of following in the footsteps of his father in engineering. But he didn't like that work. He did like his drama work at then University of Kansas City. He married his engineering knowledge to his stage experience and in 1969 created a company that specialized in stage curtains and lighting. He moved his 14 employees and operation from a downtown building (now loft apartments) to SubTropolis six years ago.

The smallest curtain they ever made was for a puppet stage at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. The largest was the 70-foot curtain for the Superdome. It weighed 1,000 pounds, and its rigging had more than 2,000 feet of pipe and 15,000 feet of aircraft cable.

Been to KC Music Hall? His curtains. Most of the new local high schools have his company's curtains and lighting arrays. Some projects can cost \$500,000, with half of that being for the curtain.

Paris Brothers has found the location ideal.

"Clients call and ask, 'How's the weather in Kansas City?' and I say, '70 degrees and overcast - everyday,'" says owner Joe Paris.★