

Wooden nickels ring true

By Laura Lambeth
Express-News Business Writer

Louis Berkie doesn't take wooden nickels. He makes them.

The owner of the Elbee Co., Fun 'n Magic, at 520 Broadway, also sells magic tricks, gags and novelties in his shop, where 4 million wooden coins are stamped and sold annually.

The wooden-nickel tycoon formerly operated in a musty old shop on the sixth floor of the Calcasieu Building at 214 Broadway, but 18 months ago moved into the free-standing, pink-painted building at the corner of Broadway and 6th Street.

Love of building

"I wanted to stay downtown and I fell in love with this building," the talkative 80-year-old said. "All I want is a few customers stopping in to see me every day."

When a customer visits the Fun 'n Magic store, a laugh is almost guaranteed. That's because Berkie, a magician, takes pleasure in pulling out his bag of tricks and playing one.

"This is my most famous trick," he said, shifting his magic cups so that the ball under one of them disappeared. "I love this trick and I've shown it a million times."

His scratched and worn wooden countertop is his stage, and his customers are his audience.

Berkie, who bears a resemblance to the late Groucho Marx, has been in business in San Antonio for 40 years. Magic is his hobby, he said, and making wooden nickels is his livelihood.

"It's a wonderful way to do advertising," he said. "Wooden nickels are never



PHOTO BY CHARLES BARKSDALE

Louis Berkie, longtime tycoon of the wooden nickel, has been fascinated with magical tricks and novelties most of his life.

thrown away, and they make people smile when you give them one."

He said six businesses in the United States still make wooden nickels.

"I'm the only one who makes them for a living," he said.

Anything can be printed on a wooden nickel, and Berkie makes them for anyone. He's sold them to politicians, companies, associations, restaurants and clubs. He takes special orders for birthdays, anniversaries, weddings and family reunions. Orders come in from around the world.

On a recent weekday, Charlie Bruton of the Wild Bunch Chili Team stopped in

to order hundreds of wooden nickels stamped with a green rhino and a motto, "It Just Doesn't Matter." His team will give them away at the next chili cook-off.

"I like to come here because he's been here forever," Bruton said. "It's great."

Berkie, a member of the International Brotherhood of Magicians, said he shows his customers how to do a trick before selling them the gag. He also has books teaching certain magic skills.

Still, there are the old, classical standby gags he keeps handy on the racks: birthday candles that can't blow out,

plastic snakes, "whoopie" cushions and the standard rubber chicken.

And he's well-stocked with other kinds of circa 1950s novelty items he's picked up through the years by buying the inventory of stores that have closed.

"If anyone comes in the shop and says they've read this story, I'll give them a wonderful old sign and a wooden nickel," he said.

Berkie said he's not certain how the saying "Don't take any wooden nickels" originated, but he does know the meaning.

"It means watch what you're doing, or don't be a sucker," he said.