For sale

Baton Rouge retail shifts

By TOM GUARISCO
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The retail business in Baton Rouge has undergone revolutionary changes this century, and Sydney Argue has seen just about all of them.

Argue, 85, can remember when dirt streets crisscrossed downtown, then the city's shopping hub. Thousands of people flocked downtown to buy furniture at Krommeyer's, a tuxedo at Welsh and Levy, a dress shirt at Rosenfield's or tie at Raymond's.

Mom-and-pop grocery stores dotted the city every few blocks. In the 1950s, national retailers like J.C. Penney, Sears & Roebuck and Montgomery Ward joined the family department stores downtown.

All that has changed.

Today downtown is home mostly to office buildings, lunch-time restaurants, some small specialty stores, the occasional festival and an abundance of parking lots. Today's shopping hubs are suburban malls and strip shopping centers.

"I remember my mother's neighbor dying of cancer, and they asked her what she wanted. She said she wished she could walk down Third Street one more time," Argue said.

"The shopping hub Argue remembers grew up where it did because of the Mississippi River, said Robert Gibbs, a Michigan retail consultant who conducted a market study last year for the city's downtown master plan.

Baton Rouge first prospered as a port, so its original retail activity sprung up around its first wharf at the foot of Main Street, Gibbs said.

More stores sprung up parallel to the river along Third Street and south to Florida Street, where the city later moved the wharf, Gibbs said.

"Florida Street became the retail focus, making any Florida Street address most desirable," Gibbs said.

"Stores crowded downtown during the first several decades of this century, Stroube's, Sears, Rider's, the Paramount Theater, Grant's, Woolworth's, Kress and many others drew shoppers downtown.

"Goudchaux's Department Store got its store built on Main Street near downtown. Erich Sternberg, an employee and immigrant from war-torn Germany, bought the store in 1945. The family modernized the store and eventually expanded it to 130,000 square feet.

"After Erich's death in 1965, his widow, Lea, and sons Josef and Hans turned the store into the second-largest family-owned chain of department stores in America. They opened stores in Cortana Mall and Lafayette and acquired three Maison Blanche stores in New Orleans in 1982.

In 1992, the Sternbergs sold their stores, which had been renamed Maison Blanche, to Mercantile Stores Inc. for $47 million. In 1998 Dillard's bought the remaining Maison Blanche stores, changing their names and ending the Maison Blanche name in Baton Rouge.

In August, Dillard's announced it would close the Main Street location by the fall of 1999, possibly ending the store's 74-year reign as a retail landmark in Baton Rouge.

"Back in the days when Goudchaux's was just getting started, many downtown stores delivered their goods," William Meyerer told The Advocate in 1995 about his family's grocery store at Main and Sixth streets.

"In summer I helped deliver groceries, which was done by panel truck or by bike with a large basket," Meyerer wrote. "Groceries would be put into the kitchen and milk and meat into the customers' refrigerators. No doors were locked, and you just went in and put up the groceries, even if the folks weren't home.

"Argue said that system worked well because most people walked to the store, so carrying a load of groceries was impractical.

But as the number of cars grew dramatically in the 1940s and 1950s, people started driving to shops, choking downtown with traffic, Argue said.

"It was so damned difficult to park," Argue recalled. "They were a hassle just to find a parking place.

And businesses started phasing out deliveries. That set up the perfect environment for suburban shopping centers to thrive, Argue said. With most everyone driving, shoppers could quickly reach the spacious shopping centers and their massive concrete parking lots.

Gibbs said retail followed Florida Street out of downtown, a trend that made Baton Rouge different from most American cities.

"After World War II, most cities fanned out in all directions from downtown centers, but Baton Rouge retail activity took a linear course. Compounding matters was the construction of Interstate 110 with its "screwy exit ramps," Gibbs said, making it even more difficult for motorists to get to Florida Street downtown.

Shopping centers began popping up along Florida, luring more and more customers away from downtown.

"From 1958 to 1960 downtown retail sales slipped by 0.4 percent, while Florida Boulevard businesses reported a 66.9 percent increase in sales. A city-parish survey of that time reported. The heyday of downtown retail was coming to a close.

See RETAIL, Page 19K
Retail

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 19K

However, downtown did not give up without a fight, and stores stayed open until 9 p.m. to challenge the new shopping centers. But the tide had turned.

Developers saw the shifting retail tides and built Bon Marche in the early 1960s. It included J.C. Penney, D.H. Holmes and many smaller stores.

Sears, which opened downtown in 1934, moved to a green field near Bon Marche at Florida and Ardenwood in 1963. In the mid-1970s, Cortana Mall opened and lured many stores even farther from downtown.

During the 1960s and 1970s many downtown buildings became vacant, and many were demolished to make way for parking lots for the government offices left behind.

In 1979, S.H. Kress & Co. closed its 70-year-old downtown landmark store.

As the city continued its expansion outward, more suburban shopping centers popped up. Hammond Aire, Village Square and dozens of others sprouted at busy intersections into the 1980s.

Giants like Wal-Mart and Kmart flourished in the 1980s, pricing many mom-and-pop stores out of business.

In 1989, the venerable D.H. Holmes department store was bought out by Dillard's.

The Bon Marche location was closed, and the remaining two stores were trimmed back from department stores to apparel-only stores, according to newspaper reports at the time.

The advent of so-called category killers swept through Baton Rouge in the early and mid-1990s. The stand-alone super stores, specializing in electronics, toys, computers, furniture or sporting goods, opened along busy highways in the suburbs.

In 1997, the Mall of Louisiana opened on Bluebonnet Boulevard, even farther from downtown and further pulling retail into what were once rural suburbs.

However, once long forgotten as a retail hub, consultants and local officials are trying to spark another wave of retail development downtown, Gibbs said.

All the attention on suburban development left a vacuum downtown. Millions of dollars of office construction is under way downtown, and it will push demand for shops and restaurants far beyond today's supply, Gibbs said.

Part of the reason more retail stores have not opened downtown, Gibbs said, is many local real estate brokers his firm has interviewed said they believe downtown is dead.

"It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy," Gibbs said.

But Gibbs' firm conducted a detailed study of the city's retail economy. Gibbs said downtown could support 25 to 35 new shops, half a dozen new restaurants and even a multi-screen movie theater.

"We are forecasting downtown will return as a prime shopping district," Gibbs said. "It would be one of the region's primary shopping destinations."

Third Street once bustled with shops and shoppers. City officials tried various strategies to lure them back. At one point they added a median, and put planters on it for decoration, as seen in this November 1961 photograph.