Lizzy Dupre has run a store in Chataignier since the '30s, although there is no sign to indicate the store is there.

### Jobs the key to small-town growth

**Small Town, La.**

By STEVE CULPEPPER
Advocate staff writer

Driving through the Avoyelles Parish towns of Cottonport and Mansura, it's hard to tell much has changed over the past 10 years.

In 1980, both had about 2,000 people. Neither had much to offer in the way of employment opportunity. Both were equally remote and rural.

Today there still aren't many jobs in either town. And both are still well off the beaten path.

But when the 1990 census figures were released, the numbers showed Cottonport had grown by 36 percent and Mansura had diminished by 23 percent — now Cottonport has about 2,600 people and Mansura has a thousand fewer.

The only apparent reason for the increase in Cottonport's population is that the Avoyelles Parish Sheriff's Department built a women's prison there and the 143 prisoners now count as part of the population.

However, on the surface, there's still little to distinguish Cottonport and the few small towns in Louisiana that actually registered significant growth over the past decade from Mansura and the rest of the majority that declined:

- Jobs are scarce all over small-town Louisiana.
- Young people often have to leave home to find work.
- The prospect of future growth in these towns doesn't appear to be particularly bright, according to many small-town mayors.

However, it doesn't have to stay that way, according to an expert with the Louisiana Municipal Association. By working together, Louisiana's small towns can reverse their decline, create new jobs and keep more of their young people at home, said Gordon King, deputy director of the LMA.

It will take lots of cooperation, however, if these towns hope to reverse the trend, King said.

Towns will need to work together. Towns will need to work with parishes. Parishes will need to work together to attract industry on a regional level, he said.

"Jobs is what it all boils down to. It's all economy-driven and you have to have jobs," King said.

The type of jobs a town or area attracts depends on the natural resources in its part of the state.

"If you're up in the northeast part of the state, then it seems the local government officials, parishes and municipalities, and the state economic development folks should work together to coordinate the natural resources that the area has to offer."
from the outside; most are created by existing businesses, she said. A big goal of the REDAs should be to retain the businesses they have and help build on them, according to Nyrop.

"People in small communities say they don't have anything to retain, but that's not quite true," she said. "They do have businesses to retain. They need to help those companies survive and grow. And we need to encourage local enterprise and local talent."

Calvin Beale, an expert on small towns with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, said growth in small towns depends strictly on jobs.

"Clearly, jobs are the key. You've got to have employment," Beale said. "Whether it is local employment or whether it is employment in some conveniently commutable place that's 15, 20 or so miles down the road."

Few of the population increases in Louisiana's small towns over the past decade seem to have been brought about by any real economic growth. In fact, most of the towns that grew did so by annexing land and people or by having populations of people who commuted to work in nearby cities.

Folsom in St. Tammany Parish is getting a population spillover from New Orleans, Mandeville and Covington—people who have chosen a more rural locale in which to build their homes and raise their families.

"We have many, many people commute between here and New Orleans, Baton Rouge, Mandeville, Slidell," Folsom Mayor Bernie Willie said.

Folsom went from 319 people in 1980 to 550 people in 1990, an increase of nearly 50 percent. "We built some new apartments, low-income but really nice low-income apartments. We had a new subdivision open up. Mostly we got people from New Orleans and the surrounding area," Willie said.

Other towns increased their population by increasing their physical size.

New Roads grew by 35 percent over the past 10 years, from 3,932 in 1980 to 5,303 in 1990. Mayor Sylvester Mulkeroysaid most of those people were brought into New Roads through annexation.

Woodworth, near Alexandria in Rapides Parish, annexed a large tract during the 1980s. Its population went from 412 to 754, an increase of 83 percent.

Greenwood, which shares a border with Shreveport, showed the most dramatic population increase—100.6 percent, from 1,043 to 2,092.

Economic growth in the Shreveport area has been almost nil in the last decade and Greenwood has suffered along with the rest of the northwestern part of the state. But like Woodworth, New Roads and many other small towns that grew, Greenwood got bigger by annexing the land and people around it.

"I would say that we did increase, but probably 10-15 percent, not 100 percent except through annexation," Greenwood Mayor Owen Adams said.

Just north of Alexandria, Boyce grew by nearly 14 percent, according to the census. Annexation accounted for most of that, Mayor Julius Patrick Jr. said.

Now Boyce is considering annexing a portion of Interstate 49, which just opened to the west of the town. That way, Boyce at least will have a better commercial foothold built on the new highway, the mayor said.

But not all small towns are close enough to a city that their people can commute and many won't gain much by annexing the land around their borders.

Sustained growth and any real hope for a meaningful future will depend on jobs, King said.

"There may have to be two or three towns or two or three parishes working together to get economic development," he said. "And you've got to remember that if there's something in your area, it will benefit your people even if it's not in your town."