Past is present at Fuselier and Abbott

Oberlin, seat of the Allen Parish government, is a quiet town. The courthouse reigns supreme at the foot of Sixth Street, and across the street from the high school, a homemaker hangs her clothes on the edge of the cemetery. Here where Louisiana's farmlands bump head-on with the piney woods, two friends — brothers-in-law and partners — conduct their business and lifestyle with country style and Old South charm.

Fuselier and Abbott Hardware, housed in what was once the town's first national bank, should be photographed in sepia tones. It's a step back into yesterday — pre-World War II, maybe pre-World War I.

The old pine floor is giving way to concrete, walls are hung with anything and everything from dust mops to tractor belts, from sunshades to lamps. There are old clocks, brooms, knives, nuts, bolts, screws. And there's a warm greeting and friendly conversation from Walter R. Abbott, who operates the hardware business. If his co-partner Allen J. Fuselier, brother-in-law and manager of Fuselier-Abbott Pontiac in Oakdale, drops in, then you're in for a double treat.

The business, the friendship all started with a love story. Abbott, a native of South Dakota, was stationed in nearby Camp Claiborne during World War II. A local school teacher gave a "proper social" for the young officers and the young women of the area and, in the shade of a magnolia tree, he met and fell in love with Carrell Fuselier.

The couple was married, and both brothers-in-law served as officers in the South Pacific during World War II. After the war, they returned to Oberlin to go into business. Today, their relationship is sealed by a close family bonding. Fuselier has no children, and he's equally proud of Abbott's son, Dr. Walter Abbott of New Orleans.

Abbott's specialty is creating lamps from unbelievable items — pieces of farm machinery, old gears, Coke bottles, razor blades (in the lamp shade), a pair of dead man's boots. "It all started when I tried to see if something could be made out of junk. Now this is called the 'House of the World's Most Unusual Lamps'," he said.

These "good old country boys," are shrewd businessmen. They're knowledgeable about the culture and economy of their parish and the state of Louisiana. They see the problems and understand it will take a lot of perseverance to turn the economy around.

Fuselier, who attended LSU and graduated from Army School at Mississippi State, also took courses from the University of California at Berkley. "Everyone knows the economy in Louisiana has been terrible," he said. "We used to have people coming here by the droves to buy cars. But then the oil business went down.

"The only place in the state where things are pretty good is Alexandria — it's a stable economy. Things are still pretty bad in Lake Charles. The economy in our parish suffered when the Calcisieu Paper Company closed and the AC sawmill closed. Timber is the main industry here... and some farming. About 85 percent of this parish is involved in the timber business."

He added, "I think next year things will improve. They're re-building the Federal Detention Center in Oakdale, and there's going to be a new state prison between Oberlin and Kinder. These will be two permanent government agencies which will be providing jobs."

Fuselier grinned and said, "Oberlin's a good place to live. We have the Calcisieu River and the Ouiska Chitto River — one of the most scenic streams in Louisiana. It's known widely for canoeing. We also have West Bay Game Preserve that's a deer and turkey habitat, and Bundicka Lake, where a lot of people go fishing. This is a good small hometown. It's great for living a good, quiet, peaceful life."