Longtime resident remembers downtown’s heyday and two-digit phone numbers

George Jones, right, is pictured with friends Lemanuel, left, and James Evelyn ’Jimmie’ Hawsey on their bikes on the grounds of Dutroco School, January 1936.

No one in Baton Rouge has followed plans to rejuvenate downtown more closely than George Jones, a retired ophthalmologist.

As much as Jones likes to talk about old Baton Rouge and what it was like to grow up in the safe confines of a small river town, his outlook on a “new downtown” is pragmatic.

“Reality always wins out,” said Jones over coffee at Joey’s Java, corner of Third and Florida streets.

The new coffee shop and the demolition of the JC Penney building on Third Street are among the first developments. A state parking garage is to be built on the old Penney site. Among tenants mentioned for the garage is a branch of the YMCA.

The coffee shop is in a building Jones knew as a child. The building is called the “West”.

“Three men owned it,” Jones said.

The May 23, 1923, newspaper story announcing the building’s opening identifies the owners as Judge H.E. Brunet, Eugene Caupio and Alex Grucho Jr.

The men owned the Elks Theatre property, site of the Triad. The old theater burned.

“Too much is gone,” Jones said.

“But remember this: Everything is temporary. You go into buildings — it’s great some of them are still here — but the people at the tables are different. They’re talking about something different from the last time I was in there.”

A new Baton Rouge will be limited by money, Jones said.

“I want to see the execution of (Plan Baton Rouge), but there are only a few people with enough money to do things the right way. You name the big entrepreneurs, you don’t have to talk very long. Baton Rouge has lost a lot of its color and sound, Jones thinks. His boyhood was filled with the noises of men and women going about their daily lives with the windows open, the sounds of trains arriving and departing downtown and the slam-bang of trucks delivering coal and ice.

“That’s a beautiful red sign,” Jones said, nodding at the big, antique Coca-Cola sign over Richoux’s, a restaurant and bar, across the street.

The building was once home to a drugstore and a soda fountain. Today, downtown workers build their own salads in roughly the same place downtown workers once lined up to place short orders at the drugstore.

“Color, music, reading, love,” Jones said. “We haven’t lost those things, but those are the intangibles.”

Photos provided by Dr. George Jones

George Jones, standing in front of 213 E. Blvd., where he lived as a child, remembers old Baton Rouge.

George Jones, senior and junior, pose with George Jr.’s pony at the house on East Boulevard.

RIGHT: Boys go skinny-dipping in the Mississippi River near LSU in this photo dated 1942.
Jones may wax poetic about intangibles, but he can put his hands on an amazing number of things from his childhood, including hundreds of snapshots from the 1920s and 1930s, many of them annotated.

Looking through family records and photographs, Jones produced a 1932 telephone book. Jones was 10 that year.

The telephone number at Griffen’s Drug Store, corner of Government and Dufrocq, was “24.”

You needed coal, you dialed “30” for Baton Rouge Coal and Towing Co. Towing referred to tugs and barges.

Dalton’s was Baton Rouge’s leading department store, or so its ad in the 1932 telephone book said. You had to dial four numbers to reach Dalton’s — 4200 — at the corner of Third and Florida.

Woodruff’s, a funeral home at 124 St. Louis St., called itself “A Business of Tactful Service.” You dialed 860 “at any hour” for an ambulance.

In one of Jones’ photos dated 1941, Ringling Brothers Circus camels stroll down Dufrocq Street. Boys stand naked in the Mississippi River near LSU in a photo taken the following year.


“Look at this, the Roosevelt Hotel in New Orleans advertising in the Baton Rouge phone book — $250, N.O. Headquarters for Baton Rouge folks.”

When Jones was a boy, placing a call was like checking in with a friend.

“You’d call the phone operator, and she’d say, ‘Number, please.’ Then, she might say, ‘Oh, they’re not home. They left a little while ago.’”

The Joneses came to Baton Rouge in 1919. George Sr. was an auditor with the state. Mary Jones kept house. She knew half the town and talked to her friends daily on the telephone.

“That’s how many of these people, from listening to Momma talking to them on the telephone.”

In Jones’ boyhood Baton Rouge, people with telephones took up so small pages in the phone book. The Denham Springs listings, about 80 subscribers including business and residential, didn’t take up quite a page.

Ads in the back of the book told people they were missing out if they didn’t have a telephone. Shopping by telephone on a rainy day was a real bonus.

For a time, the Jones family lived at 213 East Blvd., next door to the

Jones student George Jones took this picture of Third Street, looking north, in 1941. He stood on a platform that once encircled the Confederate war memorial statue on Third Street to take the photo.

Woman’s Clubhouse. Jones remembers parties at the clubhouse.

“It had a clear view of prohibition from my bedroom window when I was 4,” Jones said.

“The men would hide their bottles in the cellars. I could see them doing ‘The Black Bottom’ and ‘The Charleston.’”

There was something on a shelf in the Joneses’ living room that rattled when the streetcar went by.

“The trolley ran right in front of the house. It was an only child. From age 1 through 5, I wasn’t allowed off the front porch. I remember the kids coming home from the Convention Street School.”

A pony came with Jones’ liberation from the front porch. Young George shared the East Boulevard median with the Baton Rouge trolley car line.

When Jones was a boy “all of the policemen were old men — they were probably in their 50s — and they were all your friend. The preachers were all wise old men.”

Jones remembers the furore over a reputed abortionist operating in the neighborhood.

“A woman abortionist. People’d get out of their cars at night with sheets over their heads, run inside. The neighbors didn’t like it, but a doctor said you had to see more than bear and monkey but scruffy trees, sat the old cage.

Nothing stays the same. “Park Boulevard used to be called Goldenrod Avenue,” said Jones.

“Claycut Road? It’s not Claycut, it’s Claycut. Look it up on the old maps. I admit Claycut, sounds better.”

Driving down Park Boulevard, Jones pointed out the corner where he caught a ride to LSU practically every day that he was a student at the university.

“We didn’t know many of the people who stopped to give us a ride,” he said. “It was a small town. I caught a ride to school there almost every morning. I never late to class and never got run down on.”

On his way to Delphine St., another childhood home, Jones swung by Dufrocq School.

“See that marker? It was there when I was a student at Dufrocq. It’s a monument to Henry Watkins Allen.”

Allen, wounded at Shiloh, wounded again in the Battle of Baton Rouge, Aug. 5, 1862, was elected mayor and inaugurated at Shreveport Jan. 25, 1864, and remained in office until June 2, 1865.

Stopped in front of the house on Delphine Street, Jones said, “We played basketball with black kids on that lot across the street. Black families lived in the next block. The city limits went right through the Remond’s house. We found that fascinating.”

Jones and his pals played in what we now know as Beauregard and Spanish towns.

“We didn’t know they called that. People didn’t call them that until things started getting fancy, when the city-parish started promoting Baton Rouge’s history.”

In George’s childhood Baton Rouge, there was a “Red Light District” on Lafayette Street, but “it wasn’t vivid.” The houses yielded to parking lots.

There were freak shows in Third Street storefronts.

“I remember one, a half-man, half-woman.”

Jones remembers the year one of the store Santas was a woman.

“It was Mrs. Justenski. She had a brown beard.”

Jones indulged his love of books at Herojan’s.

“Old man, Herojan ran a lending library out of his flower shop. Mrs. May Barrow ran the (public) library on the second floor of the old courthouse.”

If Jones misses anything about old Baton Rouge, it’s people and the things people used to do.

“There are things that have disappeared, and I wonder where they went. Where are the little girls’ jumping rope, marbles in 10-foot circles, people who raised pigeons and ate squab?”

He misses pulp fiction, too, and the things you could order from the back of those magazines. Anything in particular?

“Fishing powder.”

If a new downtown is to succeed, it will have to offer things people want, Jones said.

The last attempt to jazz up downtown was a bust because it didn’t offer anything, he said.

“Calling Third Street Riverside Mall chapped me,” Jones said. “It wasn’t a mall. It was a gimmick.”