What Baton Rougians look for

How we choose our neighborhoods

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There were — two grown women who had similar experiences in the same neighborhoods and always met.

We discussed oak trees, ball games on empty lots, memories of giant, empty fields once consumed by apartment complexes or tall commercial buildings. Thoughts went back to how growing up in South Baton Rouge seemed so much like living in a small town. And we laughed about how we eventually made small neighborhoods with older houses, wood flooring and tall, shading oak trees. And then, "Oh, let me get you your phone number. It's EL...

"We looked at each other for a split second and then burst out laughing.

"I remember," I said, "You were Elgin, I was Dickens." Not like a Charles Dickens novel, these were telephone numbers and in the "old" days, when Baton Rouge telephone extensions began with letters, EL or WA or FA for Elgin, Dickens or Walnut. There were others, but these were the ones most people in Baton Rouge had stumped onto the little circle of paper covered with plastic in the middle of their rotary dial phones. Oh, yes. All the phones were black.

It's not for the sake of nostalgia, but to find out why people move into the neighborhoods they now live in that Magazine talked to several Baton Rouge residents. Growing up in a particular area of town will etch definite feelings for lifestyles, depending upon your memories. Some people hate the places of their childhood and run to a different city, while others find their roots extend far beyond the oak trees that fill Baton Rouge neighborhoods.

Susan Turner, who teaches landscape architecture at LSU, lives in a downtown residential neighborhood. Turner, married to independent film maker Scott Purnell, received a bachelor's degree in art history, then began turning her sights more and more to historical preservation, urban history and architecture. Working for the Chamber of Commerce in Atlanta also gave Turner experience in city planning and an awareness of differences between urban areas.

She returned to Baton Rouge for master's thesis work after living in Georgia for eight years and ended up renovating seven houses in Beauregard Town owned by her parents, the Bert Turners. She remembers the area as a child from visiting her grandmother in a house down the street.

"We would visit, and when she'd take us, we'd walk down to Third Street (Riverside Mall), go to Morgan and Lindsey's... always loved this neighborhood," said Turner, "and my whole professional life is tied to the past.

In graduate school, studying historic preservation, one of her last projects involved creating a development plan to make the family property a viable residential area. The seven units are for rent to people who have moved into Baton Rouge from other areas, people who grew up in older, established neighborhoods in other cities.

According to local realtor Pat Craig, this track with what she's seen in her work. Craig, who owns her own agency and recently gave a seminar at LSU on trends of where people are moving in Baton Rouge, said in an interview this week that the word neighborhood is being used much more frequently than in the past.

"It's a word people are using a lot more than house. We want a neighborhood, not where people party," it's a caring concept. A lot of times it's where they grew up. If they grew up in an old community kind of neighborhood, the trend is to go back to the neighborhood."

Craig also said many people moving in who know they're only going to stay two or three years tend to seek out neighborhoods with other transfers.

"They move into the same kind of neighborhood where others have the same kind of problems. If families don't have family here, they have each other for a support system," said Craig. She added that in the Southeastern part of the parish, many of the families have transferred from another city with many of the same problems inherent in moving without extended family to share the burdens.

In contrast, Craig said university professors want neighborhoods with diverse mixtures so they have the opportunity to learn more about people who aren't just like themselves.

Dr. Robert A. Multer, professor of climatology and Louisiana state climatologist, often gets the task of taking prospective professors throughout Baton Rouge. Although most of his tours are in residential neighborhoods in the Highroad Road and Perkins Road area, one visitor insisted on being toured through all of Baton Rouge's neighborhoods, from the poorer sections to the more affluent areas. One difference Multer notes is that in the south, especially in Baton Rouge, people aren't bunched together as much as they are in larger cities.

"People are just impressed by Baton Rouge," said Muller. "It's a better-looking city than we've been around a while will admit. The landscaping is very attractive. Just caring for it (vegetation) makes a place look good in just a few years." Muller said this is very impressive to visitors from colder climates where getting yard work in can take years of coaxing. In Baton Rouge, a few months of care can accomplish what takes others a lifetime.

However, Muller added that the roads and zoning are a problem.

"What hurts us is the lack of really careful and preventative zoning. With just a little more enforcement, places could really look better."

Since Muller's vocation is climatology, he is keenly aware of flooding problems in East Baton Rouge Parish and focuses on the high ground. He also thinks people need to pay more attention to the possibility of flooding, no matter what part of the parish they're in.

"People have just become too complacent," said Muller.

Everett Powers, executive director of the Arts Council of Greater Baton Rouge, grew up in North Baton Rouge — a block away from Smiley (Andrews) and was drawn to the downtown area, where he works. After living in Beauregard Town, he bought a house in the Garden District. Even though Powers moved away from Baton Rouge for several years, upon returning he moved back into the house because of the quality of the neighborhood and the convenience of getting to work.

"I live in the one-mile area around my house. And I can run downtown fast. Some people spend half of their lives in the car commuting," said Powers. "It's a good, friendly neighborhood," said Powers. "People have put their hearts and souls into their houses. And the neighborhood has a good mixture of people, a good civic association — it feels like a neighborhood.

After growing up in Goodwood, Paula McGrew moved away to Georgia and Tennessee and for a time lived in Franklin. Now a research associate in dairy science at LSU, she lives in a neighborhood outside the south gate of the university.

Her memories of living in Goodwood are "wonderful, warm memories." Some of her childhood neighbors are still there, and McGrew laughed when she recalled some of the adventures kids have that always cause trouble with parents.

"After Woody (Dumas) had the canal concreted, we used to slide turtles down the canal. Then we'd follow it to Lobdell," said McGrew. "The image that sticks in McGrew's mind is the big, white plantation house that still stands on Goodwood Boulevard. She and her brother and sisters would take the children, just to get a look. The neighborhood's other fixture in the '60s was the general aviation airport that is now Independence Park. "I was a common sight then to watch low-flying private planes in the evenings.

"The neighborhood where I live now is great. It's close to my work. When I go, I can park my car, the cows, etc. in the river. I was cognizant of all these things before leaving Baton Rouge. I just move in tune with it now," said McGrew.