Mill town died with the trees

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FULLERTON — Not that it mattered much at the time, but Fullerton was probably the only town in the United States to get shelled during World War II.

In 1941, the U.S. Army used the abandoned mill town for artillery practice in preparation for turning its guns on the Axis. But for 20 immensely productive years before and after World War I — from 1907 until 1927 — Fullerton was the site of the largest pine sawmill west of the Mississippi River and a busy boomtown of 5,000 people.

Then in 1927, after 20 years of clearcutting by the Gulf Lumber Co., the vast virgin pine forests of Vernon Parish —

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...and a post office.

"Unemployment is bad here," Sandidge said. "We just don't have any industry to keep the people here. I have two daughters and my youngest daughter had to leave because..."
“Unless something drastic happens,” James said. “There won’t be no more small towns in the next five years if something don’t really happen.”

Calvin Beale, a demographer with the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service, said America’s small towns underwent a wrenching population decline during the 1980s and that Louisiana’s small towns fared worse than most.

“If you take the United States as a whole and look at the non-metropolitan towns of less than 2,500 people, 72 percent of the places that size declined in the 1980s,” he said.

In Louisiana, 78 percent of the towns under 2,500 declined in population as compared to a 72 percent drop in Arkansas, 65 percent in Texas and 68 percent in Mississippi.

“Clearly, something is happening,” he said.

As mayors of small towns know too well, the problem with population decline is mainly a problem with a lack of jobs brought on by a lack of “economic meaning,” Beale said.

“It’s associated partly with decline in agricultural employment,” he said. “These places were founded, almost all of them, in the horse-and-buggy era. If the country were settled anew today, you wouldn’t need that many places. Farm employment has declined with farm productivity. In Louisiana, there’s that and the decline in oil and gas.”

Large discount stores like Wal-Mart have opened in the larger towns and are drawing people from the smaller towns, Beale said. That can eventually drive stores in the smaller towns out of business, eliminating even more jobs and sending more people away in search of employment.

“People in the countryside may have a certain liking for these small towns, but their loyalty has its limits. After all, folks don’t have that much money and if they can get more variety or something cheaper at a distance down the road, they’re going to do it,” he said.

Also, “If manufacturing companies used to go to rural areas partly because of cheap labor, they’ll go overseas in many instances,” Beale said. “In a state like Louisiana which has a lot of timber, the employment is down and it’s not just some sort of cyclical decline. There’s been so much of an increase in productivity you just don’t need as many people.”

The nation has seen a growth in the service industry, though the best of the service jobs — in such fields as computers, banking, finance, engineering and law — tend to locate heavily in the metropolitan areas where there is a good, steady supply of labor, he said. So again, small towns get left out.

As far as the towns in Louisiana being undercounted by the census, Beale said many probably were.

“Their undercounts would probably be in the 3-4 percent range,” he said. “But the declines tend to be often 20 percent or 30 percent. I would accept their view that they got some undercount, but it doesn’t explain the sort of visible declines you see. It affects the prospects of prosperity, when the town gets to the point where so many of its people have gone and many of those who are left are poor.”

James became mayor of Athens in 1981. “And it’s been drying up ever since I went into office,” he said. “We tried everything. We finally did get a grant last month for $600,000 to put in a fire district. We don’t have but one old ’71 model Ford F-100 truck.”

Currently, Athens has a fire rating of 10. On a scale of 1 to 10, 1 is the best.

“Some people can’t even get insurance,” he said. “The day’s coming soon” when Athens will vanish, she couldn’t find a job. She looked for months and months trying to find a job in her field. She went to college and graduated in insurance. She’s working in Monroe now. I would have preferred it if she could have stayed home. She really wanted to stay home. It’s bad. We just need something here to keep our people here.”

Sandidge said the census also failed to count some people in Pioneer, though she said many did leave. “They must have left because they’re not here to count.”