North Baton Rouge still set off from rest of city

By ED CULLIN
Advocate staff writer

There’s a good turnout for the meeting of the Plank Road Business and Civic Association. The turnout pleases A.J. Spodel, the association’s president. Anything that reflects well on the association pleases Spodel.

As an outsider, the men and women seated at tables in a back room of the Mirage Steak House seem a small town’s women represent a variety of interests. A man has a commercial building, a savings and loan, furniture store, a auto and lock company, a pawn shop, an accounting firm, an insurance company, a new car dealer. Taken together, the businesses could serve a small town — a small town such as North Baton Rouge.

All of the people at the meeting of our businesses or work for businesses or Plank Road. Members of the association’s attachment to North Baton Rouge goes deeper than that. Most of the association’s members grew up in North Baton Rouge. Some of them still live within a few blocks of where they grew up.

Spodel, who lives on Byrons Street in a house just a block off Plank, never left.

The Spodel family settled in North Baton Rouge about 1951 — to farm.

Other families — English-descended or French — joined Italian families that had migrated up the Mississippi River.

The Standard Oil refinery was powerful magnet. Through World War II, families continued to arrive in North Baton Rouge, fathers and sons working at Standard Oil and later at other plants that grew up during the war and in the post-war years. North Baton Rouge — and its neighborhoods — gathered a sense of community about itself, feeling that set it off from the rest of the city.

They were few income, industrial workers, Spodel said. “Blue collar. Small businessmen. Very few professionals. I was the first homegrown high school graduate to become a lawyer. I think I can safely say that.”

There are other items graduates at the business meeting. The business owners speak of “Old Ironsides,” the Intramural High School football teams that have had better football clubs with Baton Rouge High and Catholic High. Intramural — the school and the neighborhood — prides itself on being tough, on being the best. “Old Ironsides” is Barrow Street.

The tracks were the railroad tracks along Chocowinity Drive, the traditional boundary line between north and south Baton Rouge. The tracks were the railroad tracks along Chocowinity Drive, the traditional boundary line between north and south Baton Rouge. Plant workers lived north of the tracks, professionals and the like lived south of the tracks.

The tracks bordered the city.

On the one hand, there is the pride attached to growing up in a part of Baton Rouge that stands apart from the rest of the city. On the other hand, there are practical reasons why North Baton Rougeans insist the rest of Baton Rouge — newspaper, radio and television reporters in particular — not monkey around with what God and Standard Oil created.

North Baton Rouge is a state of mind, but most people who live north of the tracks always that the boundaries of North Baton Rouge were and Chocowinity Drive, the school and the neighborhood — prides itself on being tough, on being the best. “Old Ironsides” was Barrow Street.

North Baton Rouge was a state of mind.

Adams, the member of the Plank Road association and president of Adams Toyota, sees candy apple red when he hears or reads about a “North Baton Rouge waste dump.”

“Show me a waste dump in North Baton Rouge,” Adams said. “There aren’t any. Scares the hell out of people who’ve never been in North Baton Rouge. People in South Baton Rouge think they’re gonna come up here and fall in a waste dump.

‘The waste dumps aren’t in North Baton Rouge, northerners part of the parish, maybe, but that’s not North Baton Rouge.”

That’s civic and business pride talking. The Adams car dealership is old North Baton Rouge.


Glenn Adams and his father began selling Toyas in 1955. Largely on word-of-mouth advertising, father and son built up one of the most successful Toyota dealerships in the country.

Glenn Adams grew up on Charles Street, about eight blocks north of his automobile business. About 15 years ago, he moved away from North Baton Rouge and now lives in Kenilworth. The family business stayed, however. In 1981 it became Adams Toyota.

North Baton Rouge had changed a lot by that time. The interstate had served through the old community. Black families had began moving up from South Baton Rouge and down from the northern part of the parish. The parish was growing, but not in the locale of Adams’ car business.

Some long-time residents say the interstate was a blow to North Baton Rouge. Glenn Adams and other Plank Road businessmen disagree. They say...
North Baton Rouge

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Roy Carter of Roy Carter Realty has both black and white clients these days. In the early '70s, Roy's clients were black. Government loans financing made it possible for blacks to start buying houses in North Baton Rouge neighborhoods where only whites had lived for generations.

"There was no black housing," Carter said, "and there was no black housing, period. People were just coming in to get homes. Carter said, "People wanted to improve their living conditions. Quite a few white clients moved. We just got out and sold houses, and kind of interesting. It seemed to work out real good in some areas. They really could live together."

North Baton Rouge is coming back, Carter said. "Especially on Plank Road. People are buying homes up here. The real estate market is good."

"The neighborhood's been held in the same block. A tough row, but we're playing the same street." Plank Road is a residential area with old, abandoned buildings on Plank Road to make way for new businesses and the explosion of new homes.

"We need a few of those landlords who are buying some of these abandoned buildings down on Plank Road, so do some of them.

"None of the old buildings is a traffic count.

"Plank Road has a heavy traffic count. There's a lot of business being done on Plank Road now. We've got a lot of old, abandoned buildings on Plank Road to make way for new businesses and the explosion of new homes."

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