Pride patriarch Hawk Browning sits on the couch in his living room bathed by the yellow light from a table lamp as he watches the noon news.

**Pride: A town caught in the quiet of the past**

*By STEVE CULPEPPER*

Atascocita staff writer

PRIDE — The name says it all.

Well, the name says some of it, anyway.

Put it this way, if you've ever been through here you've got to admit that Pride, at least, is a more descriptive name for this unincorporated crossroads in the northeastern part of the parish than would be, say, Prosperity or Progress.

Yeah, it's quiet. And, yeah, nothing much but a little blacktopping has happened here for the past century or so. But despite its consistent quietude and even torpor, this is a special place.

For one thing, it's the only place in the universe where La. 499 intersects the Pride-Port Hudson Road.

Now let's see. What else is there?

Oh. Each in '67 or so they built a new post office at the intersection. Alverda Croft, who used to be postmistress, served refreshments the day it opened. That made the news.

What else. Oh, yeah. They've got an East Baton Rouge Library branch here. Nice little tin building. Took the place of the one that got condemned. No bathroom in it or running water, but it's air conditioned. And it's got chairs.

Come to think of it, there's actually quite a bit of stuff going on around here. There's a store and gas pumps down at the intersection. And west of the intersection a bit is a BREC park and an upholstery shop. And the biggest elementary school in the parish is right there near the intersection. To the east a ways is a fire tower. To the south is a Baptist church, founded 1846. And there's also a volunteer fire department.

There used to be a hotel there at the intersection, or what some people call a hotel, but it burned back in 1988. Nobody had lived there in years anyway. Hawk Browning, whose family owned it, said it really was "just a house and we rented rooms out to teachers or anybody else that wanted it."

Oh, there's something else. There's a new rumor — it may be more than just a rumor but nobody's seen anything in writing — that the government might build a new post office to take the place of the old one. Now that could set the place on its ear.

Postmistress Anita Reese said Pride has simply outgrown the old building.

The old post office has 229 boxes and about 320 or so are rented, "and we're renting more all the time," she said. "And we do quite a little business in post office t-shirts and pins," she said. "We have some hats, which we'm out of. They're available to people who like the mail."

The last time they got a complaint around here was when stamps went from 25 cents apiece to 29 cents. "And that was from people who wished they would've just gone ahead and made it 30 cents."

On a table in the lobby is a clipboard crammed thick with wanted posters of federal desperados, very few if any of whom seem likely to ever set foot in Pride. But there they are anyway. One wanted poster tells of Samsi Etidor, a Belgian man convicted of mail fraud, wire fraud and income tax evasion.

If Etidor ever makes the fatal mistake of walking into the Pride Post Office while it's open, all the information is right here to identify him: He smokes Kent's and carries a black leather purse "on his person" and he's had all of his teeth removed.

Over at the burgeoning elementary school, Juanita Sanford is assistant principal. She said the kids around here are some of the best, some of the smartest kids in the parish. Until a decade ago — and for 75 years before that — it was called Pride High School, even though it included all grades. Then in the early 1980s they changed it to Northeast Elementary School.

Browning — whose father donated the land for the original building — said former School Board member Donald Hunt "got mad about our boys beating them at football back when he went to Zachary so he done away with Pride High School. At least that's what I think."

Over at the tiny little library, librarian Margaret McDonald talks about the April day in 1990 when she first came to work here.

"I was extremely apprehensive when I first came up here because, I thought, they'll never accept me. I was really nervous. But they just accepted me. They really did. These are the nicest, warmest people. They really are."

—Library Margaret McDonald

Oh, there's something else...
Hawk Browning, who says he doesn't "do much anymore except sit around," finishes his lunch of beef stew and ice tea. Browning watches the noon news each day before eating lunch.

CONTINUED FROM P. 18

Back in the late 1800s, Craig established the first post-office here.

So why Pride? "God, I don't know," Browning said. "I guess it just came into my mind. You know, to establish a post office you have to have a name."

And there's something else. Some moments... A year ago this summer, cable television came to Pride, though not everybody got carried away by the innovation.

"It got all the racket I need without paying a lot of money for more," Browning said. "What need do I have studying that much?"

Donna Breeden, who teaches at the elementary school and is Browning's niece, said something which sort of explains Browning's disdain for television.

"He just got through reading Hamlet and all the Shakespeare again," she said. An interest in Shakespeare is often incompatible with an interest in, say, "Knot's Landing."

"You would be amazed at the number of people who don't even know this school is here," Northeast principal Frances Price said. "It's the largest elementary school in the parish -- 1,300 kids, give or take a few. And they don't even know we're up here."

Teachers love to teach here, she said. "It's tranquil. Quiet. Pretty. It's the only rural elementary school left in the school system. It's a beautiful place to be."

But it's days may be numbered. If a School Board bond proposal passes, plans are to build a replacement school somewhere else.

Every inch of the growing school is crowded full of kids, and the old WW II-built gymnasium, low walls have been built on the floor, dividing it into classrooms. The curved, Queen-style roof still arches vainly overhead. To the rear, a basketball/timber clock is still fixed to the wall.

They had the state championship basketball team here in the 1930's, Laetitia Louise Kent said. "Too long ago to remember," she said.

Printed in white letters on the cracked red face of the time clock are the words: "Fair Play."

And Pride has had its share of celebrities. Dot Smith, later Dot Bourgeois, and latest, Donna Douglas, came from here. You'll remember her as Elly Mae Clampett on "The Beverly Hillbillies."

"Old man Smith's daughter," Browning said. "What was his name now? Emmett. Emmett Smith. I ain't seen Donna in awhile. I don't know what she's doing. I guess Donna made some money out there."

And there's former East Baton Rouge Parish District Attorney Guss Brown. Brown, probably opting for more glamorous origins for political reasons, officially claims Baker as his home. But Browning says it's not.

"Cuss Brown wasn't from Baker. He's from right here," he said. "He just moved to Baker later."

So with a store, a post office, a school, library, upholstery shop, bowling ball stand, church, cable television, an intersection -- even celebrated -- why would anybody ever leave?

Well, Browning, for one, doesn't.

"I don't want to go to Baton Rouge any more," he said. "It has to be a real emergency for me to go down there anymore. Don't have any need. I don't need to feel no kind of excuses to go to Baton Rouge. Not anymore."

Browning lit a cigarette. Unlike federal outlaw Sam Siskel, who only smokes Kent--Brown smoking makes all kinds of cigarettes. On this day he's smoking both Winstons and Raleighs.

"I've quit cigarettes and I've stopped gambling and now I've just come around to staying with them," he said. "I don't inhale them though. I smoke and spit out if I ever did that. I just can't inhale them. Never have."

A white pickup truck with a rusted muffler speeds through the stop sign at the intersection and roars down the highway, southwest.

"I can't remember the last time anything happened around here," Browning said, puffing away.

Photography by Guy Reynolds

Above, an old DeSoto is losing ground to the vines in front of a house that used to be occupied by Hawk Browning's relatives. At right, an old scoreboard still hangs in the former gym turned into offices at Northeast Elementary School.