Proprietors give Lanes Drug Store down-home feel

Just off the Old Spanish Trail, Vinton’s biggest claim to fame these days is Delta Downs. On weekends, thousands drive on Interstate 10 from East Texas to watch the horse races.

But the race crowd doesn’t hang out in Vinton. In town, life is relatively simple, and, if you want to find out how folks are coming along, stop by Lanes Drug Store.

Ira B. Fontenot, owner/operator/pharmacist, has been running the drug store for 22 years. Along with his wife Pat, he believes in keeping the store as old-fashioned and down-home as possible.

"The store goes all the way back to the Ged oil fields," said Fontenot. "Dr. Brooks married Matilda Gray from the local plantation. They lived on the Gray estates, and he established a practice and drug store on the oil field. Finally he called a pharmacist named Harry Lane in Mississippi and asked him to take over the drug business. Lane moved the business to town."

Fontenot continued, "The original store goes back to 1910. We used to be next door, but we moved into this building (built about 1918) about 15 years ago. My wife and I collect antiques, and we like to use them in the store." The coffee bar along the wall, with the old mirror, was once used at the back of the old store. It has a peephole, so the pharmacist could look out and see what was going on out front.

The coffee bar is still in use. "The Original Coffee Crew meets here every morning," said Fontenot.

"It’s really a group of men from the community — mostly retired guys — old-timers. I get here at 7:30 a.m. and I open at 8. Sometimes they’re knocking on the door at a quarter to 8. They come in, sit and drink coffee and tell stories. That’s how I learn about the community."

Pat and Ira Fontenot collect display antiques their store.

"Basically, these people are rice farmers, and we’re getting some retired people from the oil companies," said Fontenot. "In fact, the reason I don’t have carpet in the store is because the old-timers told me they liked it the way it is. They’re used to coming in here out of the fields with their boots on, and they were worried about messing up the carpet."

In addition to prescription drugs and a friendly chat, visitors to Lanes can find just about any sundry items they might need. Frances Naquin and Margie Charnois stand behind the old-fashioned display cases, ready to help customers with everything from greeting cards to jelly beans to aspirin.

"Greeting cards are one of our biggest sales in the front end of the business," said Pat Fontenot. "We used to go market to get gift items, but the buying habits of the public have changed. Now the pharmacy is about 80 percent of our business and the front end about 20 percent. People go in for Lake Charles for most bigger items."

The Fontenots have two sons — Jeff, who has just graduated in business from LSU, and Dean, a pharmacy student at Northeast Louisiana University in Monroe. "Jeff would like to find a job in this area," said his mom, "but it looks like he’ll have to leave Southwest Louisiana to find a job."

"I think things in the area are really going to pick up in the next few years, especially for our men who are in construction work. Many of them have moved to California or to the Northeast. Some families are running households in two different places. We have a lot of fathers who are off working somewhere else."

Like most pharmacists, Fontenot sees his share of minor ailments — allergies, rashes, headaches. The nature of his job gives him a pretty good idea of the health of his community. "Judging from the elderly," he said, "the people here are extremely healthy. The elderly take very little medicine. The health of the younger people seems pretty much like the rest of the state. They seem to have more cancer and a lot of bronchial trouble. But, of course, we’re not far from the Lake Charles industrial area."

Pat Fontenot said, "The population here is about 3,500. Everybody knows about everybody else. And the families who have lived here over 50 years — they’re all related."

"People here are good about donating things. When we had two young women and a little girl last year with leukemia, people were donating blood. They are always having fund-raisers. It’s one of the advantages of small-town over large-city living."

The Original Coffee Crew meets here every morning.