The scene outside the Cafe Des Amis in Breaux Bridge could almost be from another era. 
Inset: Students visit after school at Frank's Drive-in in Abbeville.

**SMALL TOWNS, BIG DREAMS**

Some Small Towns in Acadiana Capitalize on Their Unique Charms.

BY AMANDA GRIFFIN

Recently an out-of-state visitor commented on the number of small towns around Lafayette and how they each seem to have their own personality. We had singled out one town for a gourmet lunch, visited a friend in another, and eyed ante-bellum homes in yet a third. Thinking back on her comment, I realized she was right.

Small towns never look so good as they do in the movies. In the movie *North* the young boy of the same name lives in an idyllic neighborhood of two-story white clapboard houses with neat lawns and sidewalks. Bicycles are left safely strewn in front yards, probably all night, and children play with abandon. Yet he's only five minutes from a major shopping mall, which he reaches by running through the neighborhood ball field and a wooded area.

Hollywood puts the most wonderful spin on small-town life. There's rarely any sign of a crumbling economic base, racial strife or school systems struggling just to remain average. There are only blue skies, beautiful trees, happy neighbors and incredible shopping just minutes from the front door.

Small towns in Acadiana reflect economic and political reality; they may never make the silver screen. But to the local residents, they rank right up there with anything Tinsel Town can fabricate.

Abbeville is like the kid who finds the cookie jar and keeps going back for more when it comes to grants.

Designated a Main Street community last July, downtown Abbeville received a $9,000 grant to be matched by downtown merchants. Another $150,000 grant is coming from the National Park Service to reconstruct a gazebo in Magdalen Square and enhance the downtown lighting. Still other grants, totaling almost another $100,000, have come from sources like the Urban and Forestry Program and the Louisiana Division of the Arts, says Rochelle Dugas, project manager for Abbeville's Main Street program.

In the early 1980s, the National Trust for Historic Preservation began funding the Main Street program, an approach to downtown revitalization aimed at towns of less than 50,000. The program operates on four points—fixing up, organizing people, promoting downtown and restructuring the local downtown economy.

"The program is very, very popular and we have many more towns that want funding than we can fund. They've found that a unique and distinctive downtown environment attracts movie..."
Small town living (clockwise from top left): Chris Bulliard (standing) and his brother Jacob fish the Bayou Teche in St. Martinville; a recently renovated building for rent in St. Martinville; a sno-cone stand in Washington; St. Martinville High School band in the homecoming parade; downtown Washington.
companies, industry, retailers, shoppers and tourists," says Jonathan Fricker, director of the Louisiana Division of Historical Preservation, the state agency designated to receive the federal Main Street funds and dispense them.

"Most of the towns in Acadiana now involved in Main Street are relatively new. We fund a town for five years, and only one in Acadiana has graduated, and that is Jennings. That statistic that supports the work done in Jennings is that when the program began in 1988 there were 25 empty buildings downtown, now there are five.

The Main Street program currently funds programs in seven communities, including Abbeville, Opelousas, St. Martinville and New Iberia. Breaux Bridge is getting started. In addition to the federal money, which pays half the salary of a Main Street manager in each community, local funds pay for mini facelifts downtown, like paint and awnings. Fricker calls those small grants "pump priming money designated to receive the federal Main Street funds and disperse them."

"Obviously the money is nice to have, but Abbeville seems to have something else. Ask Glenn Conrad, director of the Center for Louisiana Studies at USL. "If I had to move, I'd move to Abbeville. It attracts me as a town where you could live, work, play in one area, and still walk to church, walk to the post office and live in a nice neighborhood and still walk to church, walk to the post office and walk to lunch."

The town does seem to have been blessed with some of that small-town Hollywood magic.

"I think Abbeville is a small town that won because of the closeness of the people," says Mayor Brady Broussard. "I've never known anybody who moved here from out of town who either didn't stay here forever, or change jobs to stay." Broussard, a venerable politician, gets some of the credit for pulling money into his community. One local bank executive, however, believes Abbeville's good fortune has more to do with providence than politics.

"Abbeville politicians are well-connected, but the biggest thing going for Abbeville is its natural resources, the people, natural beauty and its location, which is the gateway to the Gulf of Mexico. Everybody who's going hunting or fishing has to come right through Abbeville," says the bank executive.

In the next few years when the four-lane highway from New Iberia to Abbeville is complete, Abbeville will probably enjoy a mini growth spurt. Those two communities, plus Lafayette, form a triangle of immense economic potential. One observer thinks Maurice may be the next town to enjoy a commercial boom simply because of its location.

"They have taken advantage of every federal program possible and have avoided a 'woe is me' attitude," says the banker. "Now on Friday nights people from Lafayette are driving to stand in line to eat at Black's, a little seafood place in Abbeville. There are still remnants here of the old-time flavor, of the authentic Acadian culture. Some will say all of this is here by coincidence or accident, but I believe God is governing and that it's providential that His blessings are here."

Curtis Joubert, mayor of Eunice, heard the death knell in his community in the early 1980's. The busted oil boom was leaving his community, which had benefited from the presence of numerous oilfield drilling and service companies, as a ghost town. Congress, with unfortunate timing, did away with federal revenue sharing funds at the same time.

"When the oil thing hit, we were reeling. I wish I could say what I did after that was done with great vision and that we had a vision to diversify. But we didn't. What we started doing was anything that didn't cost us much," says Joubert.

At the lower end of community morale, Joubert convinced the City Council to purchase the decaying Liberty Theater for about $55,000, with the vision that one day it could become a showcase for the talent of the numerous Cajun musicians from the prairies around Eunice.

"The theater was caving in and we purchased it. A lot of our community people figured we were losing our minds at City Hall," says Joubert. Joubert, along with musicians Mark and Ann Savoy, the Chamber of Commerce and others, began courting the National Park Service. Eventually a cooperative agreement was signed creating the Acadian Culture Center and providing money for the continued restoration of the Liberty Theater, which was already well underway with volunteer labor.

Today Eunice is a community that makes small-town mayors smile. Tour buses are pulling off the highways visiting the cultural center, going to the French radio program at the Liberty Theater and spending money.

"The magic word is 'work.' It truly takes interested people from the community, whose interest goes past the dollar and who will bond together on projects they agree on and withstand all of the second-guessing and the attempts to derail the goals and objectives they are working towards," says Joubert.

Joubert is not seeking re-election as mayor. He is leaving office knowing that not everyone is happy but not every empty building is occupied.

"Employment is not where I want to see it, the Dresser building is still empty and we need more jobs, but our retail people have done a good job, our hospitals..."
I rejuvenated, our university (LSU-E) is thriving and I feel good about the future of Eunice. My definition of tourism is that it is just as important to have people from Kaplan coming to Eunice as it is to have people from California coming. We have made South Louisiana discover Eunice."

Conrad calls Joubert's style of administration "dynamic."

"Dynamic community administrators are responsible for the revival and rejuvenation of their communities. They have taken advantage of every federal program possible and have avoided a 'woe is me' attitude. This type of administration is contrasted with the caretaker mentality of some, which lacks any type of innovation," says Conrad.

Joubert has served as a model for other small-town mayors.

"Curtis Joubert and Greg Marcantel, the mayor of Jennings, were two people I visited often. We talked a lot. and never really got any ideas from them, but more than anything I wanted to copy their drive, ambition and the vision they had for their communities," says Eric Martin, mayor of St. Martinville.

James Montelaro, executive vice president of LBA Savings Bank in Lafayette, lives in Eunice. Despite the distance of the commute, he notes that he is only four minutes away from Eunice.

"Over the years, I've been amazed at the number of people from Eunice who work in Lafayette. It's like we're in a parade, waving back and forth. Within 10 minutes somebody from Eunice will pass if you've got car problems," says Montelaro.

"I think Lafayette is a wonderful community, but I'm a very happy camper living in Eunice. We have the small-town environment for raising families, nice subdivisions, a nice country club, good schools. Yet we're only 40 minutes from Lafayette and work. We get to our jobs as quickly as people on the Southside do. There's just a bit more secure feeling living in a smaller town."

There is a doctor or two, a retired schoolteacher, a barber, a banker, an architect, a painter and so on. Of several, Pellerin will say, "He works in Lafayette, but he sleeps in Breaux Bridge," as if those were the most important 12 hours of the day.

Pellerin also talks about life in Breaux Bridge. "The Crawfish Festival, both the good and the bad, continues to draw people. What else could have gotten Breaux Bridge five minutes on CBS news?" Dan Aykroyd has friends in town and is rumored to be looking for property, which on the bayou can be had for as little as $20,000 for three-quarters of an acre. "See that lot right there? A lot like that on the Vermilion in Lafayette would cost you a quarter of a million dollars."

Pellerin is one of those native sons whose family tree is deeply rooted in Breaux Bridge. There have been Pellerins within 35 miles of the town since 1718. Ray Pellerin owns Pellerin Marble and Granite and is, of course, connected to the several other family businesses in town. Breaux Bridge is home; he never really thought of going elsewhere and he's happy his grandchildren are being raised here.

"What's neat is that people who were born here and have been working all over, are coming back to Breaux Bridge. We're like family here, but sometimes I worry that we will lose that. I met someone at a party last year I had never met before, and I found out they lived in the subdivision here. That really bothers me. How big is too big? I don't know."

The Teche Bayou is the link between a handful of towns that Eddie Cazayoux, director of the School of Architecture at USL, likens to a string of pearls. Towns such as Breaux Bridge, Franklin, New Iberia and St. Martinville all have tremendous potential for development due almost entirely to their architecture.

"Breaux Bridge is just beginning to get going on the Main Street program, but already we have been able to identify a bousillage building on the bayou as well as another old house," says Cazayoux. "Work is being done on both of them, and both of them have been sold. It's hard for local people to always see the potential in what they have. We have gone into towns where the people laughed at us and said, 'What can you do for us?' Later, they will tell us they were glad we proved them wrong. All of a sudden people see their downtowns and their architecture in a different perspective."

There are a lot of people who really like their town, but it's amazing what even a small amount of fixing up can do. Martin discovered that three years ago when he looked at downtown St. Martinville and realized it needed some work. Today the
Main Street program is kicking in, downtown is looking livelier and the area around the church and Evangeline Oak is charming, gracious and a sure stop for a tour bus.

“We feel that if you can drive down Main Street and it looks really nice, it’s like creating a positive, fresh attitude about your town,” says Martin.

Opelousas, which in the past seemed to gain more notoriety on the 10 o’clock news police report, is battling past a poor self-image to create a town where people want to live. Rod Manuel, a good citizen with a green thumb, almost single-handedly salvaged a muddy and deteriorating courthouse lawn to create beautiful grounds with flowers, benches and bird feeders. Retailers have followed suit with several new gift shops and lunch spots opening on the square.

“People say we don’t need another gift shop downtown, but the point is it gives people one more place to look if they don’t find something in the first shop,” says Roseanne Mitchell, president of the Main Street Association. “Once people get parked and out of their car, let’s give them lots of places to go.”

Opelousas architect Sam Hamilton is presently working to restore the old Dietlein jewelry store building on Landry Street just off the square. The turn-of-the-century building will be used as a board room and conference center for nearby St. Landry Bank and Trust.

“I think tourism is kind of a wake-up call to make people say ‘let’s do something downtown.’ There’s something in all of us that makes us want to hold on to those physical things we hold dear. I didn’t grow up here, but I have friends who tell me they used to play on the roof of the courthouse and skate on the sidewalks. Now we’re trying to salvage and restore these places and memories,” says Hamilton.

Although he’s at a loss to explain the sudden interest in restoring downtown, Hamilton knows it’s good. “One of our children was back in town for a visit recently and we took her downtown, walked around the courthouse and pointed out with pride the beautification efforts.”

Washington, the town where the garden club wields as much power as City Hall, is an example of a small town that attracts interesting residents. There’s no Main Street program in Washington.

Political races can get messy, and there’s not a great place to eat lunch. Some locals swear that the Steamboat Warehouse for dinner is better than anything in Lafayette. But the charm of the town is undeniable, and if antique shops and malls can spark a revival, then watch out, because Washington is on the verge of being born again.

“We have everything we need right here. The only drawback is we have to drive for some conveniences, like the cleaners, but if you live in a bigger town, you’re probably going to have to drive to the cleaners, too,” says Susan Tinney, who along with her husband, commercial artist Robert Tinney, lives in a charming renovated house in Washington.

“I’m from Beggs and went to school in Washington and always wanted to move back here. We were going to build, but found this house at a good price that we could still afford to renovate. Because Robert is self-employed we can live anywhere as long as he’s got a phone, fax and UPS. He goes upstairs to his studio every morning, then comes down around 10 to walk to the post office or the bank. If he’s hungry, he stops in the deli for some fried chicken. Every other day he goes over to Magnolia Ridge to jog on the grounds.”