On a Saturday afternoon, the Fullerton picture show was a good place to escape the heat.

Small Louisiana towns dying as economy and society change

First in a series

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It's not coastline, but other little pieces of Louisiana are disappearing just as surely.
The little towns where your parents and grandparents grew up are going away.
They're being cut off by interstate highways and poor economies, isolated from jobs, healthcare, adequate housing and good roads — packed away with what was.

According to the census, 220 of the state's 301 cities, towns and villages lost people during the 1980s.

More than 46 percent of Louisiana's municipalities began the 1980s with less than 1,000 people and nearly 75 percent of those had by 1990 lost an average 10 percent population — many losing 20, 30, 40 or 50 percent of their people.

A few grew by that much. A few lost even more.

Bonita, in Morehouse Parish, lost almost half of its population between 1980 and 1990, according to the census.

Mayor Richard Polk said he believes some people in Bonita were missed by the census, which reports the town went from 503 to 265.

"But I do not doubt that we have lost some. We can tell just by looking around," Polk said.

People left Bonita for the usual reasons, he said. "Better job opportunities, recession, lack of housing. This is a major farming area here and with more modern machinery you need less labor. Schooling has a lot to do with it. Our schools only go through the sixth grade. Older kids are having to be bused."

Many of the people who live in Bonita don't work there. Polk himself doesn't work in Bonita, though his wife teaches there. And his parents are there. "This is my home, where I want to raise my children. Small towns like us, we can see"