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 seemed to have their own personalities. We have stumbled onto some of these towns on our own, and other avenues have been taken. This is one of the few times we have stumbled onto another, and upon returning home with a third. Thinking back on her comment, I realized she was right.

Small towns never look too good in the movies. In the movie, the boy who went home to find the same small town as before, was a hipster, holding a surfboard, and living in a hipster neighborhood. In real life, however, the same small town may be a quaint village with charming homes and a downtown square. Children play with abandon. Yet it's only a few minutes from a major shopping mall, which has stores by most of the neighborhood businesses.

Hollywood puts the most wonderful spin on small-town life. There's never any sign of a crumbling economic base, and the crime rate or school systems are 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 realities; they may never make the silver screen. But to the local residents, they rank right up there with anything Hollywood can fabricate.

Acadiana is like the kid who finds the cookie jar and keeps going back for more. You can see the smiles on the faces of the people. This small town is being revitalized by grants from the National Park Service to reconstruct a gazebo in Magnolia Square and enhance the downtown square. Stilted grants, totaling almost another $100,000, have come from sources like the Urban and Forestry Program and the Louisiana Division of the Arts, says Rusty Dugas, project manager for Acadiana's Main Street program.

In the early 1990s, 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 a grant—self-funding, organizing, and promoting downtown and restructuring the local downtown economy.

"The program is very, very popular and we have many more towns that want funding that we can fund. They've found that a unique and distinctive downtown environment attracts movie-goers, families, and others."
"They have taken advantage of every federal program possible and have avoided a "we're me" attitude."

Curtis Joubert, mayor of Eunice, headed the death knell in his community in the early 1980s. The tortured oil boom began hurting his community, which had benefited from the presence of numerous oil-field drilling and service companies, like a ghost town: Congress, with unauthorized spending, 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 we 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 lowest ebb of community morale, Joubert convinced the City Council to purchase the derelict Liberty Theater for about $5,000, with the vision that one day it could become a showcase for the talent of the numerous Cajun musicians from the parishes around Eunice.

"The theater was caving in and we purchased it. A lot of our community people figured we were using our minds at City Hall," says Joubert.

Joubert, along with musicians Mark and Ann Savoy, the Chamber of Commerce and others, began touring the National Park Service, eventually a cooperative agreement was signed initiating the Acadiana Cultural Center and providing money for the continued renovation of the Liberty Theater, which was already well underway with volunteer labor. The local Courte de Mandeville was crowned (which intruded 300 income last year) and Joubert created the cultural operation of the community. It was a relatively new idea in Louisiana.

Today Eunice is a community that makes small-town mayors smile. Your basins are pulled off the highway, replacing the cultural center, going to the French radio program at the Liberty Theater and spending money.

"The magic word in "work. It truly takes recruited people from the community, whose interest you put the dollar and who will bond together on projects they agree on and work with all of the seco..." Joubert

Joubert is not seeking re-election at present. He is heading off knowing that not everyone in Eunice has a job, and not every empty building is occupied.

"Employment is not where I want to see it; the Depression building is still empty and we need more jobs, but our retail people have done a good job, our hospital..."
There is a doctor or two, a retired schoolteacher, a barber, a banker, an architect, a painter and so on. Of course, Pelletier will say, "He works in Lafayette, but he sleeps in Breun Bridge," as if those were the most important 12 hours of the day. Pelletier also talks about life in Breun Bridge. "The Crawfish Festival, both the good and the bad, continues to draw people. What else could have gotten Breun Bridge more minutes on CNN News?" Dan Aykroyd has friends in town and is rumored to be looking for property, which on the bayou can be had for less than $30,000 for three-quarters of an acre. "He says he wants a quarter of a million dollars." Pelletier is one of those natives whose family tree is deeply rooted in the bayou. (Left) and Calvina Alphine pass time in Albeville.

Breun Bridge. There have been Pelletiers within 50 miles of the town since 1718. Ray Pelletier meets Pelletier Mistletoe and Granite and G, of course, connected in the several other family businesses in town. Breun Bridge is home; he never really thought of going elsewhere and he's happy his grandchildren are being raised here.

"That's not that people who were born here and have been working all over, are coming back to Breun 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 there. That really bothers me. How big is too big? I don't know."

The Tchoup Bayou is the link between a handful of men that Eddie Gaureaux, director of the School of Architecture at LSU, is trying to solve. The subdivision, or whats left of it, is a string of houses, Trouts, Bayou in the party house, which he keeps locked only steps from his back door. It's like a neighborhood and the fall sunlight creates patterns of brilliant light and dark shade on the murky water. A water monitor is called in a big in the pack of rats. Pelletier spices the snake and nudges the beast slowly against the big to watch it slide into the water. Almost every afternoon we paddle down the bayou, Susan enjoys her margarita and we see snakes, beavers and nuts.

As he grows this familiar waterway, Pelletier talks about his neighbors along the Tchoup. First the left bank, then the right, Pelletier gives a brief familiarity of each house.

MAYOR BEAUROUD OUTSIDE ST. MARY MARYPELICAN CHURCH: "I Think Albeville is a small town that works because of the closeness of the people."

Continued on page 62.
Main Street program is kicking it, downtown is looking better and the area around the church and Evangelical Oak is charming. It could be a nice stop for a tour bus.

"We feel that if you are driving down Main Street and it looks really nice, it’s like creating a positive first impression about your town," says Mori.

Opelousas, which in the past seemed to gain more notoriety in the 10 o'clock news police report, is bustling past a poor self-image to create a town where people want to live. Red Mantle, a local group with a green thumb, almost single-handedly salvaged a muddy and deteriorated park bench area 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 didn’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 Koscenski Mitterer, president of the Main Street Association. "Once people get excited and out of their car, it’s easy for them to see a lot of places to go."

Opelousas architect Ken Hamilton is presently working to restore the old DeJarnet jewelry store building on Landry Street just off the square. The tarp of the canopy building will be used as a base for a fountain and maintenance center for nearby St. Landry Bank and Trust.

Axadam small towns are a reservoir of architectural treasures.

"I think tourism is kind of a wake-up call to make people see that’s a good thing 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 skated 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 born in town and we took her downtown, walked around the courthouse and pointed out with pride the revitalization efforts."

Washington, the town where the garden club minute at City Hall is an example of a small town that attracts interesting residents. There’s no Main Street program in Washington. Politically, the city can get away, and there’s not a great place to eat lunch. Some locals swear that the Board of Warehouse is better than anything in Lafayette, but the charm of the town is undeniable, and if antique shops and malls can speak a few, 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 some for some competition, like the cleaners, but if you live in a big town, you’re probably going to have to drive in the cleaners, too," says Sarah Tenery, who lives with her husband, commercial artist Robert Tenery, from a charming restored home in Washington.

"I’m from Bossier 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 afford to renovate. Because Robert is self-employed, we can live anywhere as long as he’s got a phone, his work is done. He goes upstate to his farm every morning, then comes down around 11 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."

That’s it? Just that? Very.