THE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

In the late 1980s, Glenn Conrad and Carl Brasseaux, director and assistant director, respectively, of the Center for Louisiana Studies at USL, began a review of small town life in Louisiana called "Return to Main Street." What they found as they traveled the state was that main streets were a dying entity. Strip malls were where the cash registers were jingling, and unemployment, particularly in the northern half of the state, was rampant.

"In North Louisiana the small town is just a place of refuge. In fact, we started calling these towns 'welfare refuges' because government aid was the biggest economic support in the town," says Conrad. "Hospitals had closed— I think we found 12 closed hospitals—professional people had moved away, and generally speaking, hard times had come to these towns. We actually found that the best place of living in the state was south of Highway190."

Most small towns have gone through an evolution from being steamboat towns, if located near a river or bayou, to railroad towns, to, by the 1890s, towns with proper brick and mortar buildings, with the brick-and-mortar era came civic pride, says Conrad, along with widened streets, sidewalks, trash collection, and eventually electric lighting and streetcars. But the automobile was the harbinger of the decline of the prospering brick-and-mortar downtowns, which reached their peak of prosperity in the 1920s.

Surviving the Depression and World War II, towns and Americans grew more prosperous. Now almost everyone owned a car, and the compactly built downtowns offered little or no parking. Car dealerships, gas stations, and eventually motels, drive-in theaters and drive-in food businesses moved to the outskirts of town.

Conrad, who lives in New Iberia, remembers well the arrival in town of the first supermarket chain store. The Winn-Dixie opened in Torrido Village in 1957.

"The automobile wasn't the sole factor in the end of downtown as a viable commercial district," says Conrad. "After World War II, the rapidly growing American economy brought big changes in the field of merchandising."

The decay of small town downtowns is well-known. Vacant brick buildings, not considered of any value at the time, were torn down for parking lots. Some main streets were converted to one-way, broadband, or narrow streets, with few or no success, while other downtowns attempted a haphazard approach to brightening the downtown gloom with well-meaning but tacky renovations.

But many small towns in Acadiana have revived, usually because of visionary community leaders. The deterioration of their downtowns has been reversed, and people are coming to see.