

My Town

Written by Lee Smith
Monday, 26 January 2009 17:40 -

I live in an old house on the main street of Hillsborough, North Carolina, population 6,162, a rural village and county seat now undergoing major change ever since the Old South turned into the “Sunbelt,” and *Money* magazine wrote up our area as one of the best places in America to live. What’s it like to be “discovered” after 250 years?

A quick walk down King Street tells the tale.

Whatever you need, the Dual Supply hardware store has got it—though proprietor Wesley Woods may be the only one who can find it on the crowded shelves, which have looked “pretty much the same” ever since he started working here at “eight or nine years old, putting up stock, sweeping, and changing tires.” He’s not worried about the big box stores going in down by the interstate: “Your people are your business, and my people aren’t going away.” There’s a steady stream in and out as contractor John Shoneman picks up a couple pounds of nails and “just writes it down”; other customers “pay so much per month.” There’s no computer.

Across the street we find Evelyn Lloyd’s venerable little family drugstore, which she opened in 1987 after working alongside her daddy, Allen Alexander Lloyd, in the James Pharmacy for years and years. They had a soda fountain then, Evelyn says, and sold “gift sets of Evening in Paris at Christmas. Daddy knew everybody—anybody who needed help. If they couldn’t pay, that was okay.” Evelyn’s father was on the town council for thirty years; she has served for sixteen. Evelyn worries about the problems that have come with development. “It’s a lot to think about,” she says. “We’re forcing people to move out—where are they going to go?” There’s not enough water, and traffic is an increasing problem, too: “You can’t get across the street now.”

Nestled in between her pharmacy and the Carolina Game and Fish (now featuring a sign for its current Turkey Contest, Entry Fee \$15, in the window, along with hunting bows, fishing tackle, camo clothing, and bright orange hats), we find Cup A Joe with its latte, cappuccino, chai, and multiply pierced baristas, doing a thriving business. Even more sophisticated is the authentic patisserie two doors down, owned and run by French-speaking Eric Valour, recently of Lyon. We ain’t quaint no more.

I join Mayor Tom Stevens for coffee in Cup A Joe, his “morning office.” The Wooden Nickel bar is his afternoon office. Everybody seems to like Tom, a longtime resident and organizational development consultant who ran for office because he “had a sense that this town was on the

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verge,” and he wants Hillsborough to “be successful in a way that is good for human beings.” Mayor Stevens sees a “huge agreement in town right now, given the diversity.” He touts Hillsborough’s “authenticity,” which he sees as deriving from its small-town character and sense of place; its strong heritage, from Occaneechi Native American roots to Revolutionary and Civil War history, to jazz singers, millworkers, and farmers; its current prosperity (“We’re in good shape, with a 40 percent business base and 3.3 percent unemployment rate”); and its vitality, with a newly vibrant street life epitomized by the downtown “Last Friday” festival every month featuring the arts, barbecue, bluegrass, and blues.

But the Mayor wonders how to “create a sense of belongingness for everybody”—especially everybody in those big new suburbs outside of town, like Waterstone. And bulldozers are rumbling in every direction. “We are under huge development pressure. Now we have to choose our future, and we have to do it right.”

Up Churton Street at Tony’s Barbecue, the Price brothers, Donny and Lee, aren’t so sure about all this. Like the Dual Supply, Tony’s has stayed the same ever since anybody can remember, serving the best sausage biscuits in town—arguably in the entire South—for \$1.09 apiece, or two for \$1.79, made from scratch every day by owner Tony Swanger. I like to get mine with mustard on it.

“They’re going to mess up Hillsborough,” is Donny’s opinion about all the new and planned development in town. “They’re tearing down woods and running off the deer. It’s driving the country out.”

Lee Price agrees. “You can kill somebody and get away with it if you’ve got enough money,” he says. “It ain’t nothing to build something.”

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Postscript: And by the way, Tony’s Barbecue, which I mention in the piece, has gone out of business now—destroyed by “progress,” I guess. Progress may destroy us all!

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