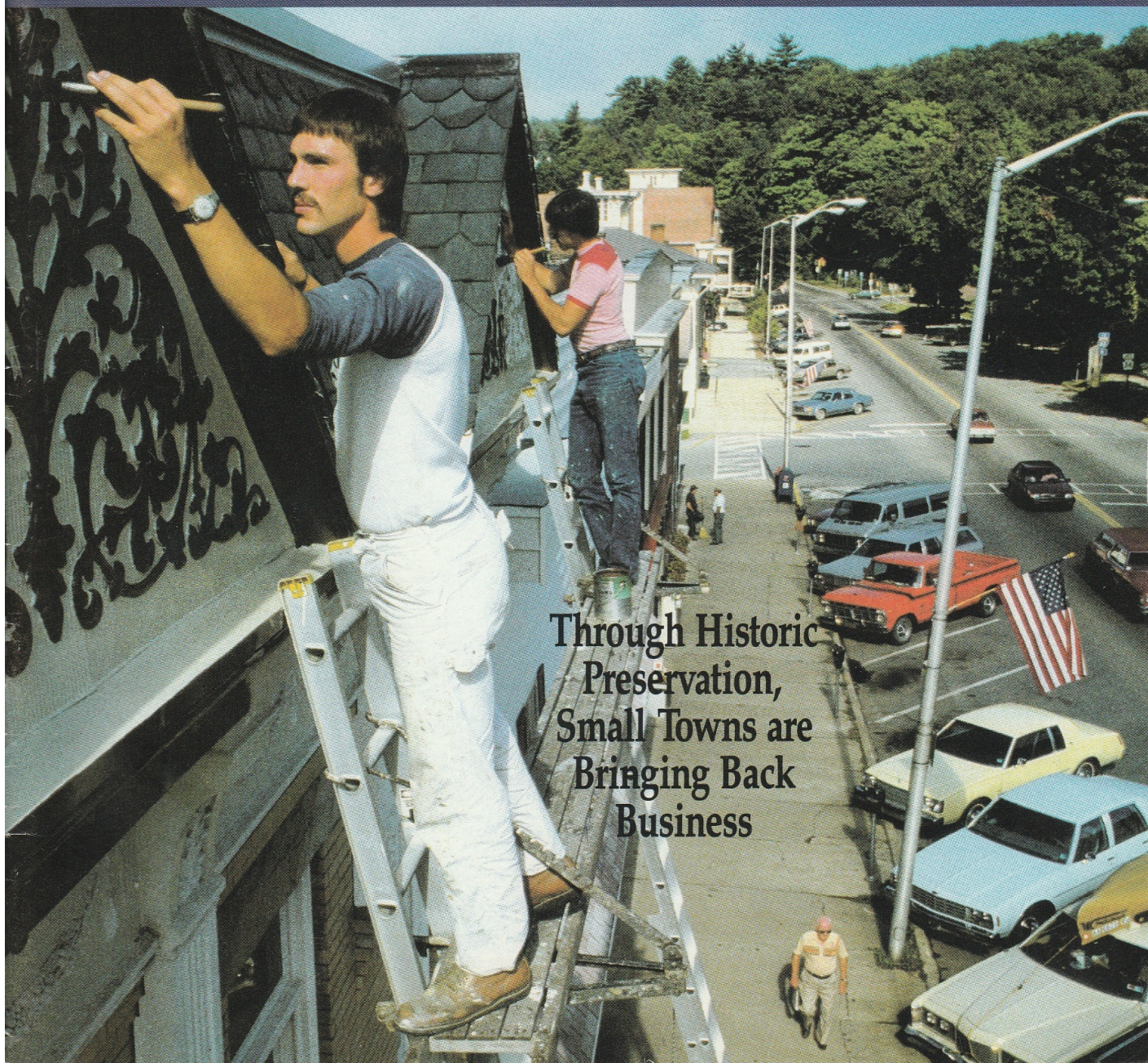




Main Street Gets a Second Chance

September 1985



Through Historic
Preservation,
Small Towns are
Bringing Back
Business

Main Street Makes A Comeback

Through historic preservation,
small towns are creating
a brighter business future

By Sharon O'Malley

JUST three years ago, many of the buildings in Brookville, Pa.—a town brimming with the history of the late 19th century—were crumbling from years of neglect. Mortar was missing around bricks, gutters sagged. Intricate architectural details, so carefully crafted a century ago, were hidden under layer upon layer of paint or sheets of aluminum siding; beautiful stained glass windows were boarded up. Fifteen of the 45 storefronts on Main Street were empty.

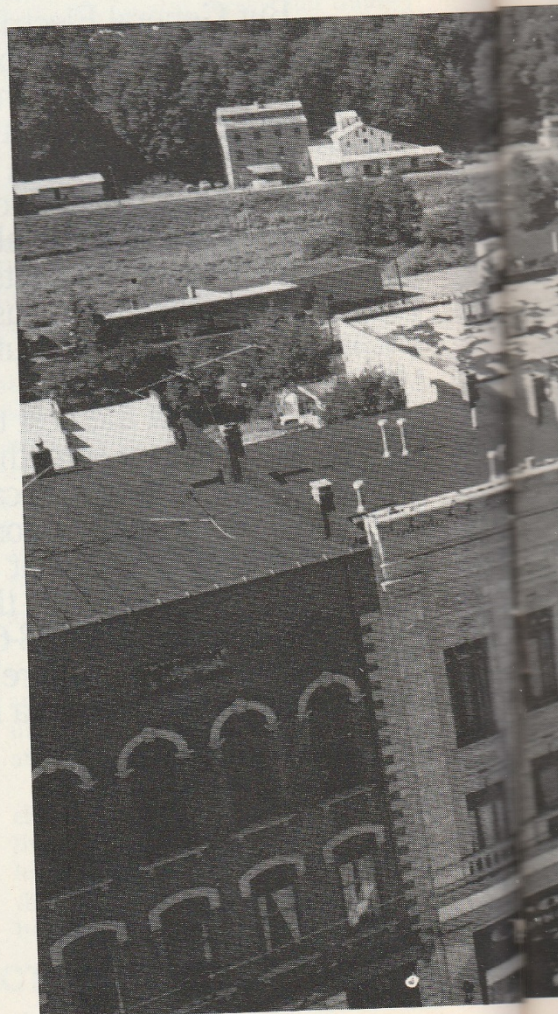
This year, when Keith Witt returned to the area after college to take a job in Brookville, he was incredulous. "What I saw were stores where there had never been stores before, and I didn't think there would ever be any because of the condition of the buildings," says Witt, executive director of the Brookville Area Chamber of Commerce. "Every day you see people walking up and down this street. Three years ago there wasn't any of that."

The change is the result of the \$1.2 million local businesses have spent on refurbishing their buildings, spurred by Brookville's selection for Pennsylvania's Main Street program, an offshoot of the National Trust for Historic Preservation's eight-year-

old "Main Street approach." With an estimated \$500 million invested in small town Main Streets across the country, the project's success is mirrored by Brookville's cleaned-up storefronts, freshly painted Victorian-Italianate and Queen Anne-style homes, new display windows and smart shop signs.

Brookville's Main Street project is one of 30 in Pennsylvania, and the town of 4,500 people is one of 75 communities in 15 states that have adopted the program of the National Trust, a Washington-based, nonprofit organization chartered by Congress to encourage public participation in historic preservation. The National Trust developed the Main Street idea in 1977 with pilot projects in Galesburg, Ill. (population 38,000), Hot Springs, S.D. (population 5,000), and Madison, Ind. (population 13,000). Within three years, seven new businesses opened in Hot Springs, six in Madison and 30 in Galesburg. And for every dollar the National Trust spent for local management of the project, \$11 was invested in rehabilitation projects by local businesses.

The National Trust's success with the three pilot projects led to the formation of the National Main Street Center in 1980 to encourage





Left: Ted McNutt paints a pressed tin floral design on the pediment of a building being restored on Brookville's Main Street. Below: The view of Main Street from the bell tower of the county court house.

revitalization of business districts in communities of less than 50,000 people. With assistance from the center, small town Main Streets are again becoming the viable centers of commerce that they once were.

In Athens, Ga., for example, retail sales increased an average of 20 percent annually over three years. In Barnesboro, Pa., one of the smallest towns (population 2,700) in the country to participate in the Main Street program, 18 new businesses have opened in a year and a half. Brookville has 25 new businesses, and two of its young entrepreneurs,



Alan King and Denny Kocher, claim that their framing gallery's business has increased tenfold since the town's project began.

Once the pulse of every community, main streets across the country slipped in importance when shopping centers began sprouting up on the outskirts of towns in the years following World War II. Many of the main street businesses followed their customers to the new shopping centers; those that stayed shared downtown business districts with an increasing number of empty, boarded-up buildings. Some towns tried modernizing their main streets with slipcovers of aluminum siding and garish, oversized signs that clashed with the architectural styles of the buildings.

The National Trust recognized the need to move downtown renovation away from superficial beautification toward a program that would encourage lasting economic growth within the context of historic preservation. After proving this could be accomplished in the three pilot communities, the Main Street Center in 1980 started six state projects (chosen from 38 states that applied): Colorado, Georgia, Massachusetts, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Texas. Each state chose five towns for the experiment, and was required to designate a full-time coordinator. Each town had to agree to hire a full-time project manager. More than half of those 30 Main Street towns still have managers.

Since 1980, \$150 million has been invested in the Main Streets in those 30 communities; 1,051 new businesses were started. Upward of 650 building facades were renovated. In each state, the government or a non-profit organization has taken over the program and expanded it to other communities.

The center chose to work with states rather than individual commu-



ROBERT GIBSON



ROBERT GIBSON

Left: A painter works on a Victorian-Italianate former home on Brookville's Main Street that has been refurbished and made into law offices. Below: David Taylor, Brookville's enthusiastic Main Street project manager.

nities because "small town Main Streets do not exist in a vacuum," says Mary Means, who started the Main Street program but now is president of the American Institute of Architects Foundation. "They are affected by the larger regional economy and by public policy," Means says. "For example, if the local priority were to encourage pedestrian activity by improving sidewalks and storefronts, the state highway department could negate this intention by deciding to widen Main Street and raise the speed limit. We hoped that by encouraging states to become more involved in local revitalization efforts they would begin to understand the needs of their communities and be in a better position to address them."

While the center does not grant money for Main Street projects, its staff provides technical assistance and training and gives advice to participating states. Administrators in each state, in turn, generally grant state funds of up to \$50,000 to Main Street towns. Main Street managers in each town can regrant the money, usually in increments of up to \$1,000, to building owners who agree to match the grants. Pennsylvania's Main Street project is administered by the state Department of Community Affairs.

BROOKVILLE'S face-lift and a new attitude among the town's residents have drawn in people like Witt. "I came here for a job," Witt says, "but I stay because of what is going on and what kind of life I'll be able to have compared with the surrounding towns."

People are staying in nearby Barnesboro, Pa., too, although the emphasis there is different. Main Street Manager Craig Rolish says his program is not so much one of historic preservation as it is one of economic development. He estimates

that 200 new jobs have been created because the town has been able, by using grant money and offering tax incentives, to attract new businesses and expand some old ones.

Both Barnesboro and Brookville are about 90 miles northeast of Pittsburgh. Founded in 1830, Brookville is the Jefferson County seat.

Brookville's renaissance is due much to the efforts of a friendly, enthusiastic man named David Taylor, who two years ago was hired by the borough council to be his hometown's Main Street manager.

The first thing Taylor did was to organize local merchants and civic leaders into a group called Historic Brookville Inc. so the Main Street project would be a joint effort. Next, he encouraged building owners to

renovate their facades to improve Main Street's image. Then Historic Brookville Inc. began promoting Main Street through advertising and special events like sidewalk sales to bring people downtown. And finally, Taylor is encouraging entrepreneurs to offer a variety of specialized shops and services on Main Street and is trying to develop downtown housing to generate more traffic for the shops.

The first renovation project was Widmann's, a health and beauty aid store owned by Taylor's family. The 103-year-old brick building that houses it was stripped of the dirt and grime that had been accumulating on it for years; two gaudy signs were removed from the front of the building and replaced with a single, more

Renewing New Concord

FOR small communities like New Concord, a college town of 2,500 in eastern Ohio, that can't afford to hire a professional, fixing up Main Street is a job for volunteers.

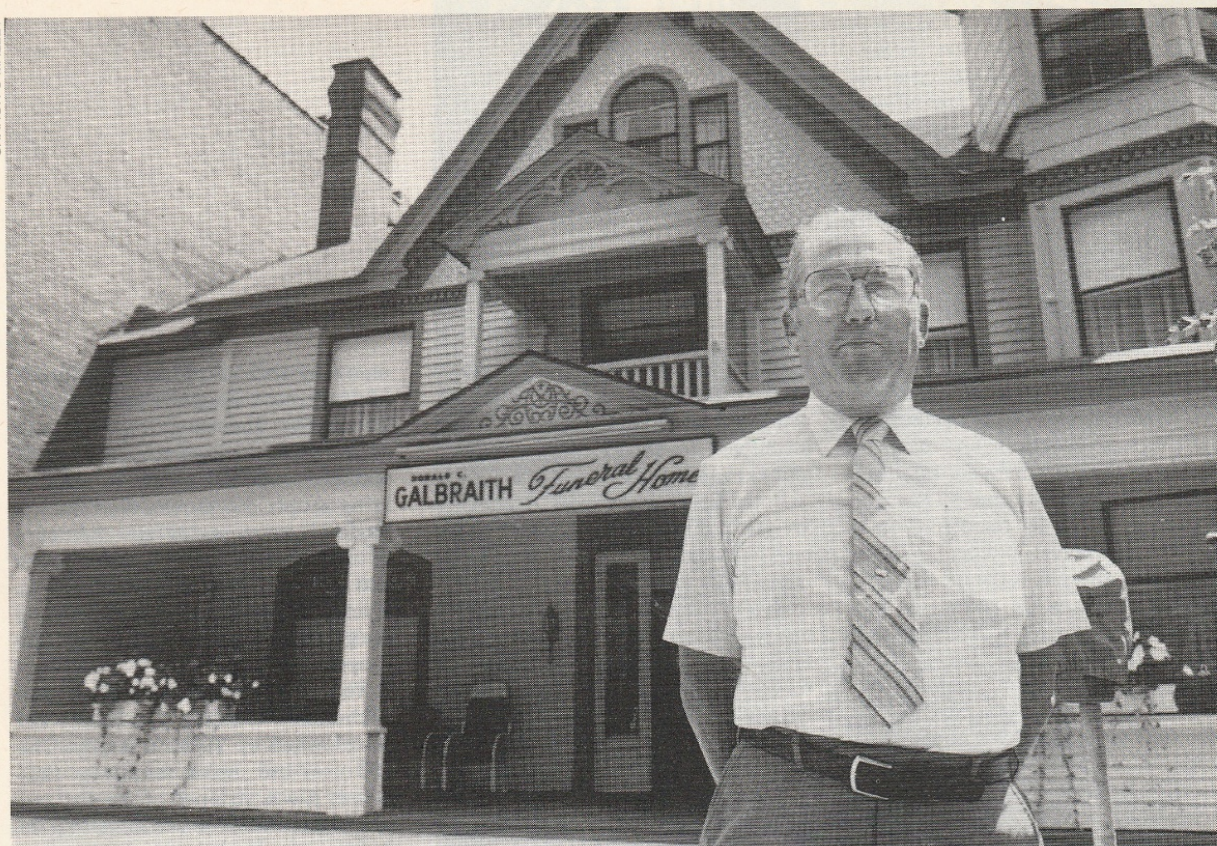
"Many cities around the country are tearing down buildings instead of fixing them up," says Darrel Cubbison, member services manager at Guernsey-Muskingum Electric Co-operative, who serves as vice president of Renew the Environment of New Concord. "We were doing that. Now we recognize how important it is to preserve what we have" for future generations, he says.

The co-op building, located on Main Street, serves as New Concord's community center. Meetings (including the monthly meeting of Renew's board of directors) are held there nearly every evening, and co-op staff members are depended upon for advice and assistance by other members of the community. Renew also

depended upon the co-op for a \$1,500 grant so it could hire an architect to show it how the buildings on Main Street could be improved.

The first thing the two-year-old group did was to take down several "old, cold signs and put up welcoming signs," Cubbison says. "The whole town is taking on a warm feeling." Another step was to create historic color scheme guidelines for homeowners and business people who want to repaint their buildings. And in May, Renew sponsored a community cleanup day.

As a Main Street business, Guernsey-Muskingum tries to be an image leader, Cubbison says. "We take a lot of pride in the way our own building looks," he says. "We were careful with the landscaping. By having the image of being a part of a town that takes pride in itself, the co-op gives pride to the entire community," Cubbison adds. □



tasteful one, and the wood trim around the building was painted soft beige with white accenting its elaborate cornices.

Soon afterward, The McMurray Company, a printing firm that publishes the local newspaper, was transformed from a decaying eyesore to a sharp-looking storefront with natural brick, new paint, a new sign and windows that look like they did when the building was new in 1895. Joe McLaughlin, editor of *The Brookville American*, said the McMurray Company could have applied for a grant of up to \$1,000 for the \$13,000 renovation work, but decided, instead, to encourage more private investment in the town through its own example.

"The amazing thing is most of the renovations up and down the street have been done by individuals," says Kocher, who with King co-owns Collector's Corner, a framing gallery on Main Street. "They have a good feeling and pride in their buildings and in the town. People like to come to a nice, clean place."

Business owners like to stay in an environment like that as well. "We can keep businesses here now," says Witt. "If they want to expand, they

can expand here."

Owners who spend money on building improvements in Brookville can take advantage of tax credits because the town is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Also, the borough has adopted a state tax abatement plan called the Local Economic Revitalization Tax Assistance Act (LERTA), which limits the increase in property taxes caused by a building improvement to 10 percent a year.

A homespun incentive for renovation is offered by Brookville's two banks, Savings and Trust Company of Pennsylvania and Deposit Bank. Both lenders contributed \$50,000 to a revolving fund for the project, from which they make loans of up to \$5,000 at 9 percent interest to business owners who want to renovate building facades and sidewalks.

And the Department of Community Affairs granted Historic Brookville Inc. \$50,000 over three years to give in increments of \$1,000 or less to business owners who will match the grant with money of their own.

In Barnesboro, Rolish sought other financial incentives. Hired to administer the Main Street project as

well as the town's Business Authority, Rolish has helped Barnesboro's business owners get funds from the Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development and other agencies with money to lend or grant for small town renovation. The Main Street project there, Rolish says, is part of a larger picture of downtown revitalization.

Such financial incentives, combined with a new interest in the revamped Main Streets by shoppers, have made young entrepreneurs seem more willing than before to invest in new businesses. "Not many small towns are thriving right now," says Debbie Kennedy, who opened a gift and flower shop in Brookville in September. "Because of Brookville's renovation, it's obvious that Brookville is picking up. If there were no joint effort, I wouldn't feel confident in doing this—starting a one-person business," she says. While much of the business at her store, Pollen and Pulp, is from tourists, she says, "a lot of people are coming here just to see what's going on with Main Street."

Kennedy rents her store from her next-door neighbors, King and Ko-

Donald Galbraith was one of the first Brookville businessmen to restore his buildings. He serves on the board of Historic Brookville Inc.

cher. Owners of a 111-year-old building that used to house the Central Hotel, the pair two years ago decided to expand their framing gallery.

At that time, the old building housed a clothing store whose owners had boarded up the windows to save energy but otherwise had "changed nothing in 40 years," says King, 28. "At that time, history meant nothing to them."

King and Kocher, by contrast, selected the building "80 percent because of history," King says. Its Main Street location was another drawing point. "Location is the key in our business and in any business," adds Kocher, 27. We attract more

browsers and impulse buyers now," King adds.

Each storefront renovation is one more piece of evidence that Main Street, the window of the rural community, is coming into its own again. The reaction expressed by Keith Witt when he returned to Brookville after being away is echoed in letters to the local newspaper and by Brookville natives who return home to visit friends and relatives.

"There's just no way you would have seen this kind of investment if there weren't some kind of program," says Bill Reitz, assistant vice president of Brookville's Deposit Bank. "The thing Brookville's been

lacking is a Collector's Corner, is a Pollen and Pulp. In the past, if you wanted to go Christmas shopping, you went out of the area because you couldn't find anything here except your everyday drug store item."

The Main Street project has changed that. "It puts us in a much better position than we would be in otherwise," says Diana Farley, president of Brookville's Chamber of Commerce. "My most optimistic goal is that we will be the alternative to the shopping mall. We have everything right here that they can get at the shopping mall. Small town shopping is going to come back," she says. "Main Street is coming back." □

Main Street Gets a New Business

In the late 1930s, hundreds of Main streets across the country got a new business—the rural electric co-op. With members to sign up, houses to wire and lines to build, the co-op got the economy stirring again. The REA symbol on those storefront

windows quickly became a symbol of hope.

The co-op that opened an office on the Main Street of Brookville, Pa., was called Jefferson Electric. Renamed United Electric Cooperative after merging with Clearfield Electric

Cooperative in 1966, its headquarters was moved 22 miles away to Dubois in 1970.

Today, the pre-Civil War era storefront is occupied by Ferringer's Flowers, a new business that is a result of Brookville's Main Street project. □

