

Historical Ramblings

A Historical Trip Downtown

Fifty years ago, Lompoc's downtown was the bustling Central Business District, where local shoppers could find anything and everything, from men's clothing to sheep dip.

Having lived my entire life within a stone's throw of downtown, I often think back on the halcyon days of the historic heart of Lompoc, yearning to return to that simpler time. These are my childhood memories of downtown in the 1950's and 60's. Many readers will offer corrections based on their memories, but what follows is a description of the downtown I fondly remember.

H Street and Ocean Avenue boasted two banks — Bank of America and Security First National Bank, on the northwest and northeast corners, respectively. The southwest and southeast corners were anchored by Miller's Pharmacy and Brown's Drug Store.

Proceeding east on Ocean Avenue, on the south side, was Sprouse-Rietz dime store, the domain of Russ and Helen Benhart. Helen's territory was the cash register and the candy counter, where she would sell bulk candy displayed behind the glass candy counter. The peanut clusters were great.

Next, to the east, was Tommy Yager's Camera Shop. Tommy stocked everything for the camera enthusiast, and he was also a prolific local photographer. Next came Lind's Café, and the Lompoc Record, where photos published in the newspaper were displayed in the front window. If you liked any of the photos, they were yours — free! Al Godden's A & B Market anchored the southwest corner of G Street and Ocean Avenue.

On the north side of East Ocean Avenue, next to Security bank, was the bakery, where kids would always get a free sugar cookie. Our bakery visit wasn't complete without buying my grandmother's weekly supply of fresh baked potato rolls. Carl McCabe's Insurance office was next door, to the east, and then Stan and Les Johnson's J & J Drug Store and Ernie May's furniture and van and storage business.

Proceeding west on Ocean Avenue on the north side, next to the Bank of America, was Schroeder Brothers dime store, the Lucky Spot Café, the Rice Bowl, Western Auto, Stan Johnson's drug store and fountain and Negus Furniture Store. Across I Street, on the northwest corner, was Perozzi Hardware, with its oiled wood floors and an ominous moose head peering down over the rear counter.

On the southeast corner of I Street and Ocean Avenue was Moore's Department Store, consisting of a grocery store (they delivered!), men's and women's clothing and shoes, dry goods, lingerie and the hardware department, where you could find the sheep dip. To the east of Moore's was JC Penney, where the clerks loaded your payment into containers that sailed to the upstairs office via a cable system. Your change and receipt zipped back in a return trip. Karl's Shoes and American Jewelers finished the block in the Odd Fellows Building. On South H Street, on the west side next to Miller's Pharmacy, was Stalker's Men's Wear and Fitzgerald Music. Other businesses on this side of the street included Sechrest's real estate, Gil's Shoes, Lundberg Stationers, Mode O'Day, Evan's Jewelers, Barthuli's Jewelers, the Tot 'n Teen Shop, the furniture store and the bowling alley on the corner of Cypress Avenue and H Street. Across the Cypress Street was the Methodist church. The library was on the southeast corner, which is now the Lompoc Museum. On the northeast corner was the Celite lot, later to be named Centennial Square.

Heading back toward Ocean Avenue on the east side of H Street, we passed the Gas Company, Forester's Hall, Jasper's Owl Cafe and the Greyhound Bus Depot. Across the alley in the building behind Brown's Drug Store was the office of Phil Bryson, Lompoc's premier chiropractor.

Across Ocean Avenue, in back of the Security bank to the north, was a small building housing the office of local realtor, Harley Craig. Across the alley, in the corner of the theater building was one of downtown's favorite hangouts, the Snack Shop, where cherry cokes and strawberry ice cream sodas reigned supreme. Then, of course, was the theater, with the police department next door. Dr. Lawrence Heiges' office was located in an old home adjacent to the theater. Monte's Auto Parts completed the block at Walnut Avenue and H Street. On the southwest corner of H Street and Walnut Avenue was Ruffner and Schuyler Chevrolet, Stillman's Cleaners and Grossman and Cox Law Offices. The Lompoc Record later occupied the space on the alley, which was vacated by Ruffner and Ruffner, when they moved to Walnut & H to become Ruffner & Schuyler.

Businesses have migrated to the north and much of the original charm of downtown has disappeared. Some future revitalization projects hold promise for downtown, but much of its original character can never be recaptured. You can no longer buy your sheep dip downtown.