

Nanticoke's Past

By Robert Kalinowski Citizens' Voice Staff Writer

Chet Zaremba is proud to have experienced the heyday of Main Street, Nanticoke. And he's saddened to have seen its demise.

Zaremba, vice president of the Nanticoke Historical Society, and others who have witnessed Main Street flourish and fall have similar opinions on how it occurred. They say it was the closing of the coal mines, as well as the accessibility of the automobile and the establishment of shopping malls.

Once a bustling commercial strip frequented by thousands each day, Main Street, Nanticoke, like others in the region, is now absent of foot traffic and full of many aging, empty storefronts. Parking lots now occupy real estate where grand buildings once stood and a popular theater once entertained. Gone are the sidewalk sales and shoeshine boys.

The Nanticoke Trolley, which traveled down Nanticoke's Main Street to Sans Souci Park, Hanover Township, and Main Street, WilkesBarre, is also a faint memory its last ride having occurred in the 1950s.

One of the few remaining restaurants The Kove, has a "for sale" sign posted on its door and the building-strip of which it's a part might be demolished to make way for a parking garage.

Zaremba isn't sure Main Street could have escaped its fate. Nanticoke's population during the 1920s hovered around 26,000. Though it began to decline, it floated above 20,000 in the 1950s - the decade when the mining industry started to free fall and family cars became more common. Today, it's barely above 10,000.

In the 50s, while Zaremba's father was at work as a coal miner at the Huber Breaker, he and his mother would walk to Main Street, where they would shop for hours.

"It just seemed everything you wanted was right there. When you were 13, it was overwhelming for a young man. Everywhere you turned there was another business, another store."

There was Nardozzo's (one of the remaining stores) for pizza and pierogies, the State Theatre, where you could catch a movie, and The Leader Store for miscellaneous items. If you needed a hammer, you'd go to Banks, Lechers or YT Hardware and, for a nice watch, there was Jimmy the Jewelers, among dozens of others.

Zaremba reminisces about the "magnificent" architecture of the buildings, many of which have been torn down or have deteriorated beyond repair. His generation might "bemoan" what has become of Main Street of the 50s, but the generation before probably did the same.

Chester Sadowski, 85, does a bit of both.

"I think Nanticoke is kaput. The foot traffic isn't here," said Sadowski, who lived in Nanticoke up until the mid-1940s and returned in 1982 after he

retired. "When I came back, it was totally different. Main Street, Nanticoke, was deserted."

He remembers checking out the newest cars off the assembly line at a Chevrolet dealership and having the opportunity to buy just about anything he wanted at Newberry's Five-and-Dime. He would occasionally scrounge up 16 cents for a trolley ride to Wilkes-Barre, or eight cents for a ride to Sans Souci Park.

Jim Bartuska, 39, is a third-generation owner of one of Main Street's surviving stores, Bartuska's Furniture.

"Having grown up in the business, I've seen a lot of changes in the downtown," he said.

The biggest and most obvious, he said, is the lack of foot traffic, even compared to the early 1970s when the Wyoming Valley Mall was just opening.

"I remember as a kid, Friday night was a big night. They (customers) would come in and walk around. Even if they didn't buy anything, they knew when they were ready to buy, they'd be back," he said.

Things have changed dramatically in the last 30-plus years, as fewer people shop and work downtown. Commercial growth, along with competing furniture stores, has popped up in the region, especially around the Wyoming Valley Mall and Wachovia Arena.

Bartuska said his store, which traces its roots back to 1934, continues to thrive "in less than an ideal location" because of his 'hometown' history and service.

Owning the building reduces the overhead of rent and leaves him in great position to compete - and usually beat - the corporate giants, said Bartuska, who thinks Main Street could revive.

Since the Kanjorski Center office building was constructed in the 1990s, Bartuska's business has seen an increase in browsers and buyers from many of the building's approximate 200 employees. Those employees also patronize several of Main Street's stores, like Nardozzo's Pizza, Antonio's Pizza, UniMart and Rite Aid.

If development plans in the works come to fruition, this trend will only grow, he said. Until then, Bartuska said, his business and several others will continue to be an "anchor" to Main Street.

Nanticoke Mayor John Toole predicts relief for these anchor stores is on the horizon. Not able to be specific because the deals are not finalized, he said, "There has been some serious offers and serious discussions with builders and businesses."

"Something should be happening soon - we hope."