

*Main Street Blues: The Decline of Small-Town America*, Richard O. Davies. Urban Life and Urban Landscape Series. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998. xiii, 234 pp. Illustrations, map, notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95 cloth, \$20.00 paper.

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In contrast to recent journalistic efforts to understand the crisis of rural America, Richard Davies offers a more academic case study, explicated chronologically. He takes readers on a trip through time, from the birth of the small town of Camden, Ohio, to its apparent senescence in the present. His basic assumption is that the future direction of American small towns has been conditioned by regional and national forces. In addition, he claims that small towns have not always been slow-moving backwaters, but that part of their plight has been due to rapid changes and external forces beyond their control.

*Main Street Blues* is a competent, satisfying description and analysis of a small town of 1,500 people set against the backdrop of some of the major events and periods in American history. From Camden's frontier roots in the 1810s, we move to an appreciation of its role as an agricultural trade center by mid-century. Even in the 1890s, the author contends, Camden was an "island community," largely isolated from the influences of urban America. Nonetheless, this representative community of small capitalists did participate in the growing national optimism of the early twentieth century as it continued to grow and prosper throughout the "go-go" 1920s. Davies acknowledges the role played by farmers in the fabric of rural life, but this is basically a story of the small town's vital role as a keeper of values and order in American culture, with "Main Street" as the commercial focus of rural life and the "premier outpost of the nation's capitalistic system" (55).

For Camden, as well as for other small towns, the 1920s reflected the best of times. Along with advances in the standard of living, the town retained the close, family-like atmosphere of nineteenth-century village life. Social order, low taxes, and stability prevailed; few divisive issues existed because the community valued conformity, consensus building, and the cultural status quo. At the same time, the 1920s also represented the beginning of the end of a way of life built around an independent Main Street. The worst of times occurred during the Great Depression, which "overwhelmed" Camden. As bankruptcy hit various farms and businesses, the long-accepted individual explanation for failure no longer seemed to apply. Small-town residents began to let go of their stubborn independence and desire for self-sufficiency. Desperation drove Camdenites to accept the New Deal with mostly

open arms. The biggest depression-related issue was a proposed new sewer and water system and how it should be financed. The war years of the 1940s called for additional sacrifice and steadfastness in the face of another national emergency. But the hustle and bustle of small-town life during World War II, and its subsequent prosperity, tended to mask the decline of the small town.

Slow but continued growth characterized Camden until the 1960s, when stagnation set in. Ominously, few new houses were constructed there during the national housing boom. Two technological developments—the automobile and television—contributed to the demise of longstanding cultural traditions. Farmers and townspeople no longer gathered on main street every Saturday night. The disappearance of town baseball and the decrease in movie and library attendance symbolized the shrinkage of the small community's role in American life. Camden became a bedroom community, but without the accoutrements and advantages of the new suburbia. As early as 1955, Davies contends, Camden's fate was sealed.

It would be easy to claim that Camden was an unfortunate and unwitting victim of the changes wrought by mass society. The author, to his credit, resists such a simplistic explanation, noting that this town, at least, failed to adjust to the changing social and economic realities of contemporary life. Camden lacked a Chamber of Commerce, had no real plans for growth, suffered from uninspiring journalistic and political leadership, and lost its one effective organization when the Progressive Club closed in 1987. The burned-out hulk of the Town Hall, still standing since a 1988 fire, serves as a constant reminder of the decline in vision and vitality in this small town.

The author rightly observes that not all small towns have been left behind like Camden. County seats, towns with a diversified industrial base, and various bedroom communities seem to be bucking the trend of "Main Street in crisis." Yet most rural communities have lost much of their original reason for being—as service centers for surrounding farm operations. According to Davies, small towns have also had to face an oblivious and sometimes hostile federal government, whose policies result in the "trashing of its small communities" (186). This intriguing critique deserved more systematic treatment. Nonetheless, *Main Street Blues* clearly demonstrates how what once was the basic fiber of American life is now a marginal component. The book indicates that the lives of small-town residents are increasingly characterized by poverty, substance abuse, domestic violence, and poor health care. Since we all live in communities of some kind, this study of a particular small one is valuable, especially to midwesterners.

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