

WELCOME TO HISTORIC

Downtown

LAUREL

MISSISSIPPI

Going Home Again

Story and photography by Mary Ann DeSantis

In 1948, a young Pennsylvania woman stepped off the train in downtown Laurel to visit her roommate’s family. She didn’t suspect she would soon meet her future husband at an old-fashioned July 4th picnic. Almost 70 years later, that woman – my mother – told me she knew Laurel was a special place the moment she arrived. In fact, she was incredulous that I even questioned why this small southeastern Mississippi town was getting so much recent attention.

When I graduated from Laurel High School, I was anxious to see the world. In those days, it never occurred to me that eventually my heart would ache to return to my hometown. The trips became less frequent after my Laurel-native father died and my mother moved to Florida in 2001 to be near my sister and me.

Spurred on by the recent “HGTV Home Town” series set in Laurel, I was anxious to learn if “the City Beautiful” had really changed. I wanted to see Laurel through the eyes of a tourist, and not so much as a returning native. After all, novelist Thomas Wolfe had already figured out that “attempting to relive youthful memories is doomed to failure,” in his classic book “You Can’t Go Home Again.”

Founded in 1882 by Midwestern lumber barons, Laurel has always been known for its magnificent turn-of-the-century mansions along wide boulevards emanating from the city’s center. The larger historic homes, for the most part, weathered Laurel’s lean years better than the historic downtown district and certain outlying sections.

“Urban renewal in the 1970s almost killed us,” Judi Holifield, executive director of Laurel Main Street, said during my recent visit. “No one could park downtown because they tried to make the streets into covered pedestrian walkways.”

Indeed, I recalled the large metal roofs that hung over Central Avenue like chicken sheds. My grandfather groaned about them and eventually stopped driving downtown as did many other Laurelites. Stores closed and buildings fell into disrepair. When I visited Laurel 20 or so years ago, there weren’t many reasons to go downtown.

Today’s downtown Laurel is much different. The metal roofs are gone, and the brick-paved streets are filled with motorists once again. Replacing empty storefronts are designer facades touting a new bakery, a butcher shop, restaurants, boutiques, and home décor stores. A new brewery has opened in the former radio station. A downtown park and boulevard honor native daughter and opera singer Leontyne [EDITOR’S NOTE: Leontyne is spelled correctly] Price. Even more surprising are the high-end loft apartments above those once-boarded up stores with waiting lists to rent one.

I walked throughout Laurel exploring everything the revitalized city had to offer. At the end of the day, though, I returned to one of my high school favorites: Phillips Drive-In. Despite Wolfe’s warning, I wanted to find some nostalgia. Called PDI by locals, the eatery is known for its soft-serve ice cream and possibly the best burgers in Mississippi. Founded in 1948 – the same year that Pennsylvania girl came South – PDI looks like it always has with a walk-up window and metal outdoor tables. As I devoured my feast, I couldn’t escape the revved-up engines noisily circling through the parking lot trying to get my attention. Some things, of course, never change.

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