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THE COVER: Designer Karen Schmidt illustrates the differences in attitudes between Mizzou freshmen of 1970 and 1985 as revealed by results of surveys taken when they first enrolled at the Columbia Campus. The story begins on Page 10.

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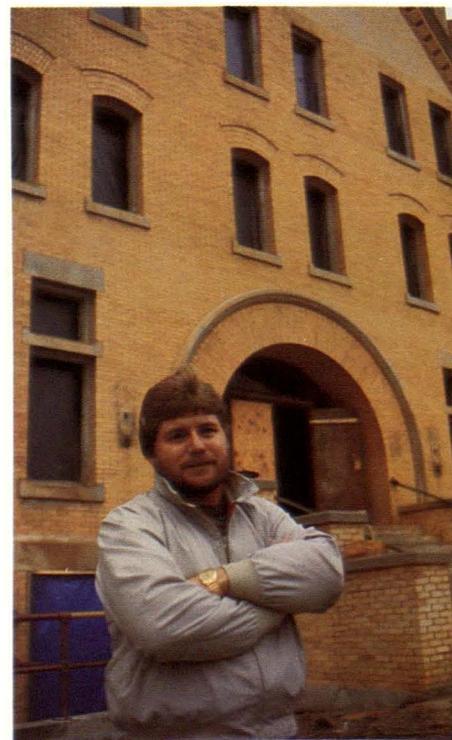


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For one semester, 14 Honors College students scrutinized a small town in northern Missouri. They would write a book about it. They debated whether a town of 5,680 was small. They discussed whether the town was surviving, stagnant, lucky or coping. They even argued over the color of the book's cover. By semester's end, the class produced . . .

MACON, MO: An Enduring Town

By KAREN WORLEY





ON LOCATION

Six Honors College students, all Missourians, visit Macon. They are, from left, Dana Rissler of Sedalia, Beth Morgan of Marcelline, Kim Duncan of Linneus, Bonnie Butler of Vichy and Karl DeMarce of Columbia. At left is Doug Owens of Ash Grove, who investigated the Blee Academy.

DOUG OWEN fell into a snakepit.

Caught between the preservation committee and city officials of Macon, Mo., Owen was attempting to write a fair article about the controversial Blee Academy, a former military school now undergoing renovation. The article, along with others written by his classmates, will compose a book.

Macon, Missouri: An Enduring Town will have limited distribution of two: One copy will go on the shelves at the Missouri State Historical Society in Columbia and the other at Macon Public Library. The class, Perspectives: Small Town Missouri, is taught by Marian Ohman, AB '68, MA '70, PhD '73, community development lecturer and author of five books.

Limited by time and resources, Owen was concerned that he'd do neither side justice in the Blee debate. Preservationists envision the building as a community center, museum or YMCA. The city is converting it into low-cost housing for senior citizens with a \$2.7 million grant from Housing and Urban Development.

"My work will be done at the end of the semester," Owen says. "I don't have to live there. They've been nice to me, brought me into their homes, given me the information they had." Wrestling with conflicting information, the broadcast journalism graduate student worries, "I won't be around to be accountable for my story. I'll have no chance to explain or defend myself."

BUILT IN 1897, Blee Academy first opened as a military academy and later served as a mental sanitarium. The brick fortress, named to the National Register of Historic Places, stands on the southern edge of town, just off Highway 63. As Owen finished his third trip to Macon and 10th hour of interviews, he zeroed in on a theme: "The committee is using preservation as a front to keep away from public housing. Small communities don't take well to low-cost public housing. They resent the fact that low-income people may be living in a nicer environment than their own.

"The federal government coming in with a big project may enhance the community physically and economically, but the animosity involved makes people stop and ask, 'Hey, who's running our town, our life?'"

As Owen tamed the slithery issues that rattled in the snakepit, his teacher was pleased. "You knew it was controversial when you chose that topic," Ohman says. "Now it's time to bite the bullet. You're going to have to do it all your life."

For the most part, her students are partial to small towns. "Most of these people will be leaders; more perceptive leaders are able to analyze situations," Ohman says.



IN THE CLASSROOM

Marian Ohman, AB '68, MA '70, PhD '73, teaches Perspectives: Small Town Missouri. Says one student, "She's opinionated, but that's neat. She hasn't lost touch with students."



TRAFFIC FLOW

"Nothing too large nor too wide can pass through the Norfolk and Western overpass," says Karl DeMarce, who studied Macon's streets and highways.

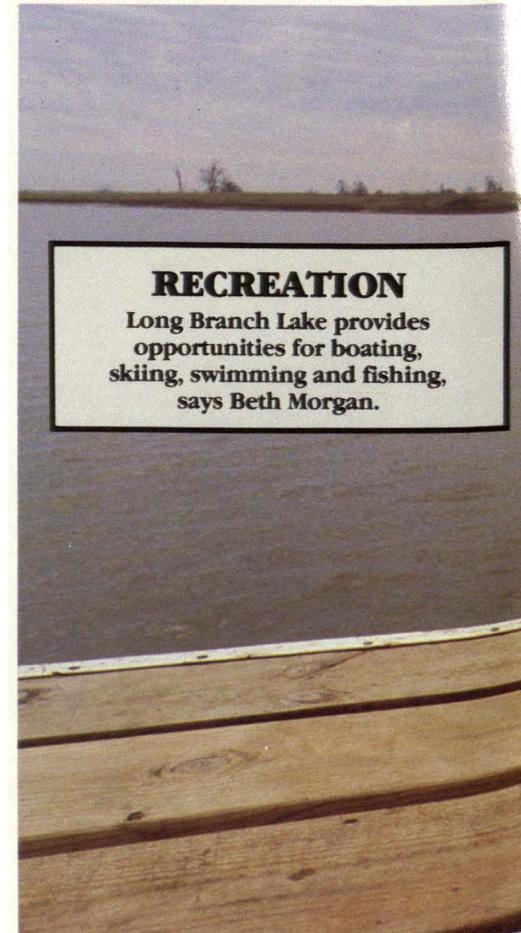
"They've got to learn to take positions. Students should learn to make judgments, weigh evidence. Check out a situation and make a decision about it. I make them talk," she continues. "I'd ask, 'What's your opinion about this?' They had to be honest."

SENSITIVE to small-town politics, Owen notes, "Both sides have their points. When you bring something like this up, it divides the town. Sometimes, controversy does more harm than good."

To find out how the issue is covered in Macon's daily newspaper, Bonnie Butler, a junior from Vichy, Mo., interviewed *Macon Chronicle-Herald* editor Mark Snow. "We print the facts that we can find out," he says. Butler also found more community support of the paper since two people who had owned the Macon weekly bought out a chain that had operated the daily for five years.

Unlike opposition to the HUD grant for the Brees Academy, Karl DeMarce found support for federal improvements to Highway 63, one of two freeways that intersects the town. "They'd welcome a new Highway 63. They see that as progress," says the freshman from Columbia. The amount of traffic on Highway 63 has doubled in 15 years. The heavy traffic, combined with direct driveway access to a major north-south freeway and 476 accidents in three years, makes it inadequate for needs of the city and state, DeMarce concludes.

In 1986, U.S. Rep. Harold Volkmer, D-Hannibal, supported legislation that would've



RECREATION

Long Branch Lake provides opportunities for boating, skiing, swimming and fishing, says Beth Morgan.

widened Highway 63 to four lanes from Columbia to the Iowa border. It passed the House, but not the Senate. "Volkmer will be pushing for it again in this next session, but we have to start completely over," says press secretary John Glover, BJ '75. State highway department plans call for widening the highway to three lanes within the city limits.

DeMarce, who also studied Macon's town plan, found examples of incompatible land use, such as industry next to residential areas. "This ought to be prevented in the future," he says. "Macon's challenge will be to grow and still maintain character of the community—to strike a balance between growth and preservation."

IN AN AREA TROUBLED by the farm crisis, Macon resident Jack Briggs, BJ '61, sides with growth. "If you're in northern Missouri, you're fighting for your life. Towns are taking anything they can get."

After a decade of decline, Macon is making a comeback. Briggs heads the Macon County Economic Development Corp., a unique public-private partnership. Since 1980, several towns, county government and the Chamber of Commerce have funded the low-budget economic development office.

"I've met with more prospects this year than ever before," Briggs says. "In the last two years we've experienced a big burst of growth. In the face of a horrible farm economy, we've gone the other way. The ball is rolling in the right direction."

BECAUSE MACON was designated by the state Department of Economic Development as an enterprise zone, it can offer financial incentives to prospective businesses.

Some class members think existing Macon businesses do not fully realize the tourism potential of Long Branch Lake. The 2,450-acre lake, located one mile west of Macon, is ideal for boating, skiing, swimming and fishing.

But other businesses are pursuing opportunities for growth, notes Michele Short, a sophomore prejournalism major from Chilhowee, Mo. The Around the Square group is working toward downtown development and preserving old buildings.

"It's an appealing little town for the most part," Short says, "I saw the kind of promise that it has. There are many businesses for such an itty-bitty town. They have more jobs. Every manufacturing plant there is operating at full capacity. Since the economic development office opened in 1980, jobs have increased by 2,000. They have more jobs in the community than they have people in the community."

Others in the class studied Macon's schools, churches, recreation, goods and services, hospital, teen-agers and elderly. And Kim Duncan, a freshman from Linneus, Mo., surveyed University students' attitudes about small towns. "I don't think city people have a true picture of a small town. They mentioned media images of the Waltons." Duncan's survey showed only 7 percent of college students plan to live in a small town. "Obviously,

not many city-raised people even consider small towns as their future homes."

Class members, however, gained deeper appreciation for their own small hometowns. "My hometown gives me a sense of place," says Jennifer Jorgensen, a freshman from Richmond, Mo. "I belong there. There's a sense of caring, a slower pace of life. The city is a nice place to visit, but I can always come back home."

"I have learned to appreciate my small town," Duncan says. "When you get away, you appreciate what you have there," adds Beth Morgan, a junior from Marceline, Mo.

AS FALL SEMESTER progressed, Ohman saw a small-town atmosphere develop within her class. "They have the same spiritual identification as people from a small town," she says. "They gained self-confidence from this peer group, and it helped some freshmen get established."

John Frazee, a junior from Knox City, Mo., recalls one guest lecturer who stressed how small-town residents work together toward a common goal. "The class took effort from everyone, too."

"It's like our own little community, sometimes with different ideas and opinions," adds Shane Bartee, a freshman from Centralia, Mo. And like many small-town residents, the students don't hesitate to express their opinions. Jennifer Meyer, a Hermann, Mo., freshman, says, "I speak up more. I feel comfortable with giving my opinion." □



STATISTICS

Kim Duncan shares student survey results with Jack Briggs, director of the Macon County Economic Development Corp.