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Staff photo by Jim Stratford

Sadie Odom, mayor of Gibson, N.C., in front of the renovated community center

The town that wouldn't die

Institute helped Gibson improve its quality of life

By DAVID BOUL
Staff Writer

GIBSON — Five or six years ago, Gibson was on the skids.

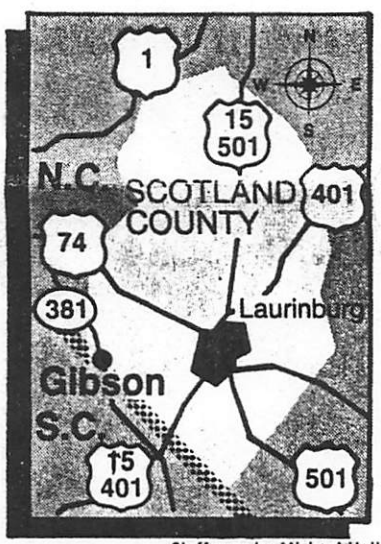
The once-thriving cotton town that hugs the South Carolina border had lost its dime store, movie house, hotel and high school. The trains no longer stopped.

"I think people had accepted we were going downhill," said Tom Whitlock, Gibson's town clerk and tax collector. "There was nothing here to bring any families in. The houses were falling down."

"We were a dying town," said Mayor Sadie Odom. "There was no place in town you could even get a sandwich."

Then, in 1978, a group from Chicago — known locally as the ICA — came to Gibson and started to change things.

The Institute for Cultural Affairs, a nonprofit group similar to the Peace Corps, had chosen Gibson to showcase its efforts in reviving blighted communities. ICA members talked to residents, conducted meetings and drafted a plan to help save the town.



Staff map by Michael Hall

The plan worked, although it created deep rifts in tradition-bound Gibson.

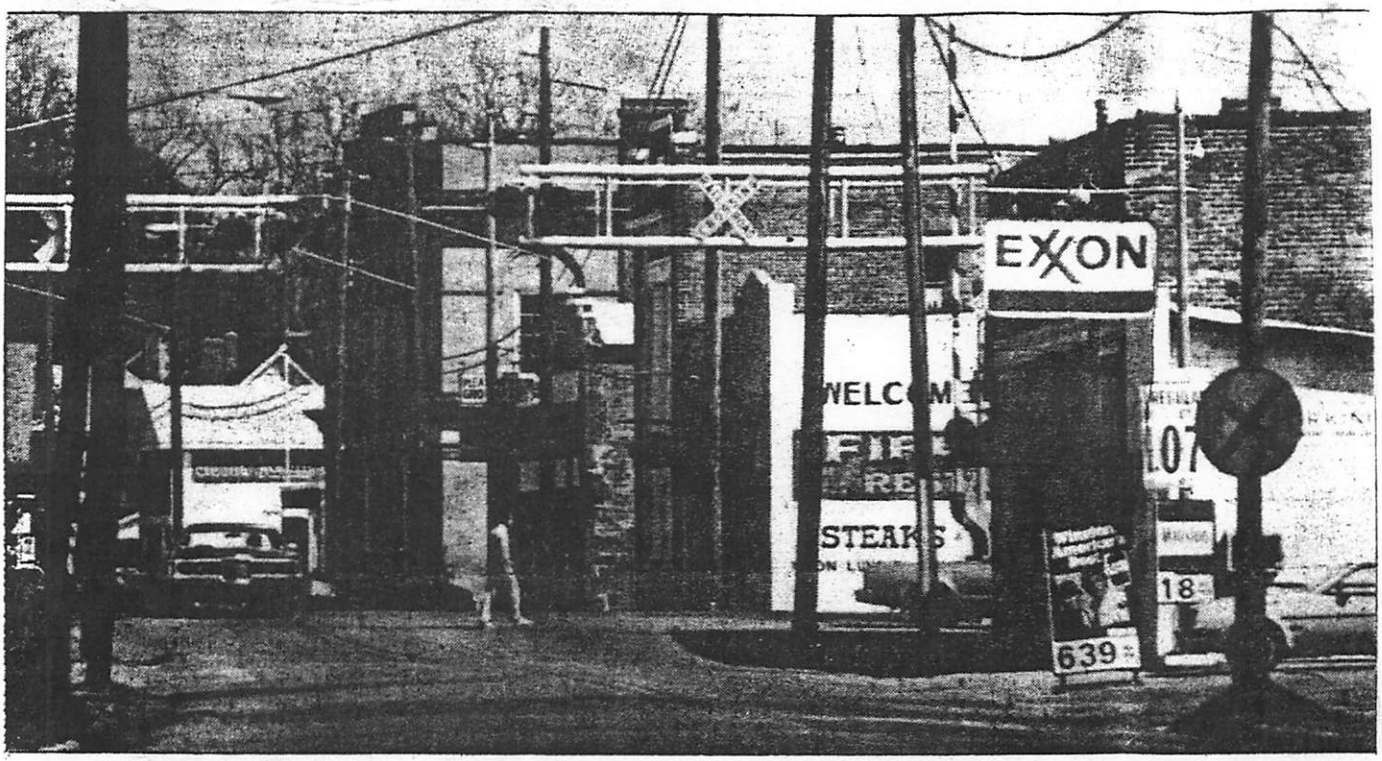
Residents transformed the vacant train station into a museum with cozy meeting rooms where dozens of elderly residents gather each weekday for lunch. Across the street, children now play and learn at a colorful day-care center.

The old firehouse became a family restaurant. A box company, Gibson's first new industry in 20 years, moved to town. Other businesses grew and the number of jobs in town nearly doubled.

"Things are happening here," said longtime resident Viola Benfield. "Most of the people have a higher image of themselves. I think Gibson has changed tremendously."

Critics complain that the Gibson renaissance increased racial integration and promoted growth too rapidly. A new housing project for the poor and elderly also upset some residents when it opened last fall.

(See Gibson, A2)



Staff photos by Jim Stratford

Above, a view of Gibson. At left, Mr. and Mrs. Burch Newton, 95 and 94 years old, stand in front of their portrait in the Gibson community center. The Newtons have been married 74 years. Citizens of Gibson can get their own or friends' or relatives' portraits hung in the community center for $50 as part of a display recognizing people who have lived in Gibson for a long time or have contributed to the community. A synopsis of their lives and Gibson's history accompanies the display. The walls are paneled with boards taken from old barns and houses in the area. Below is Alvin Stanton, one of the most vocal opponents of the town's renewal. Stanton is especially critical of the housing projects, which he says decrease the value of property nearby.

Gibson

From A1

"If that crowd is proud of what they've done in this town, well I'll be damned," said Alvin Stanton, a Gibson native. "They've caused a lot of division. Everything has two sides."

Few deny that the last six years have brought significant changes to Gibson. The effects of those changes, however, remain a matter of some dispute.

"I don't think anybody, black or white, will really ever forget the feeling they had" fixing up the town, said Whitlock. "We have achieved something we didn't realize we could."

But Stanton says, "As long as anyone lives in Gibson they'll be haunted by the ICA."

* * *

Gibson, a town of about 500 residents and no traffic lights, is located near Laurinburg in Scotland County, 100 miles southeast of Greensboro.

The town takes its name from "the widow Gibson" and her grandsons, Nathaniel and Nelson, who helped settle the area in the early 1700s. Gibson was incorporated in 1899, according to a local history book.

"Everybody is kin to everybody else," said Mayor Odom, whose mother was a Gibson.

Founded after America's urban riots of the 1960s, the ICA acts as a catalyst to help people improve the quality of life in their neighborhoods, according to Sherwood Shankland, an institute spokesman.

Although its early projects were in the ghettos of Chicago and Washington, D.C., the group has expanded over the years and now serves rural areas across the United States and 35 countries overseas.

The ICA, with a budget of $6 million, is funded almost entirely by private donations, although the group receives some government money. Major contributors include the Ford Foundation and Gulf Oil. The group's eight-story headquarters building in Chicago was a gift from the Kemper Insurance Co.

After considering hundreds of small towns across the nation, ICA members selected Gibson as one of two Southern towns for the project, Shankland said.

Soon after the ICA arrived, town residents met for a week-long talk about just what was wrong with Gibson.

Almost everyone in town came.

"It ran all day long, right into the night," Odom said. "Meals were served."

The list of problems was extensive. There was no place to wash laundry in town. There were no restaurants. Jobs were scarce; so was affordable housing.

The ICA staff, led by Ike Powell, a Georgia-born minister now on an ICA project in Egypt, proposed a plan to solve the problems.

• The ICA promised to stay in Gibson for two years. "We unanimously voted them in," Odom said.

Soon thereafter, a dozen or so ICA members — black, white and Japanese — moved into an old school building in town. Then they went to work.

"Everyone cares. Most people don't try to express it. Gibson was an opportunity to express my caring in a way that would count for something," said Bill Bingham, an ICA volunteer who also is an associate civil engineering professor at N.C. State University.

Among the first tasks was a restaurant — something everyone could use. The old Gibson firehouse, empty for years, was gutted, grant money was secured from the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation of Winston-Salem, and new equipment was brought in.

"The ICA worked day and night and Saturday, too," said Town Clerk Whitlock, who also sits on the county school board. "They got in and worked right with us."

The result, a family-style restaurant, has a fire-station motif. Giant hoses hang from the walls, as do old-fashioned helmets. A firefighter dominates the mural on the back wall.

The town sold the Firehouse Restaurant to a South Carolina minister and his wife and used the proceeds for other projects.

Next on the list was the abandoned Seaboard Coastline train depot, located smack in the middle of town. "It was just falling down," Odom said. It had not been painted in 40 years.

Volunteers, working with ICA staff, scraped, sanded and varnished the building. They ripped down the interior and turned the station into a museum and community center.

Everyone worked together. Elderly white women, not able to handle a hammer themselves, served iced tea to younger black hired hands as they labored to restore the depot.

"That was unusual," said Virginia Newton, a recently retired black educator who spent most of her career teaching at a segregated school.

"I don't think people were really aware we were making history," she said.

"It was just like, finally, the little white ladies were given an opportunity to do what they wanted to do in their hearts all along," said Bingham, the ICA volunteer.

Today, the rail station's community center hosts a federally funded nutrition program in which about 30 senior citizens meet daily for lunch in the Old Timers Room. "It brings races, rich and poor, all together," Odom said. "It's more important than the food."

On the walls of the center are neatly framed photographs of Gibson's senior citizens, past and present, with a brief history of each one's life. Other rooms are filled with railroad memorabilia.

One project led to another. A Laurinburg businessman was convinced to open a laundromat in Gibson. Scotland Wood Products, which makes crates, opened a plant that employs 50 workers. In 1980, Benfield Cams opened a Gibson plant to make go-cart parts.

The number of jobs in town grew from 75 in 1978 to 134 in 1980, according to an ICA report.

Architecture students from N.C. State University were recruited to teach residents how to renovate downtown stores. Soon, seven vacant buildings were renovated by private investors; four old structures were demolished and three vacant lots, longtime eyesores, were improved.

Residents organized a Labor Day parade so Gibson could show off. Hundreds flocked to see the improvements.

"It was like a dream," Odom said. "People could see Gibson was growing. They wanted a part of it."

"The seed had been planted," Whitlock said.

In 1980, two years after it came to Gibson, the ICA departed.

"They proved to us that we could do it," Odom said. "Most of what has been done has been done since they left town."

Indeed, four years after the ICA returned to Chicago, Gibson is preparing to launch its latest project — a new sewer system.

Before leaving, the ICA helped town residents form a development association that applied for federal and state grant money, including $800,000 to replace Gibson's antiquated sewer system and $493,000 for improvements under way in two run-down neighborhoods.

Gibson's facelift, however, was not painless.

Some residents saw the ICA as a threat to their peaceful, small-town lifestyle. Others, including former Mayor Bill Pearson, questioned the ICA's self-proclaimed altruism.

"I never could put a finger on them," Pearson said.

Stanton, who operated a garage in Gibson, said the ICA was preaching "subtle integration."

"They were wanting to mix," he said. "If I think I want to invite someone into my living room, it would be my idea.

"They're used to dealing with people in ghettos. They tried to use us the same way."

Shankland, the ICA spokesman in Chicago, said his group is used to resistance.

"This is a phenomenon you would find in any one of our programs," he said. "There are people in every community opposed to change."

In Gibson, the opposition intensified over a housing project for the poor and elderly completed in September. Stanton argued that such government-supported housing would lower property values for nearby homeowners.

Some other Gibson residents agreed.

"I can look right out of my window and see the housing development," said Pearson, the former mayor. "The housing project was a bad idea. All they've done is move the colored people from the edge of town into town."

Odom, the current mayor, takes some of the credit for the 30 apartments, privately owned but built with federal help.

She says she helped convince officials to build the housing project in four clusters, each in a different part of town. "That way it doesn't make any one part of town feel swamped by the apartments."

The units filled quickly. "There are black people and white people living side by side. They seem to get along well," said Whitlock, the town clerk.

Though the town's physical changes are obvious, Gibson's spirit also has been touched.

"I think the attitudes of some people have changed," said Newton, the retired teacher. "They all kind of see that everyone deserves a part of the good life and are willing to work toward that end.

"It was just kind of an education for most of us."