

ORIGINAL MAIN *Sauk Centre, M*

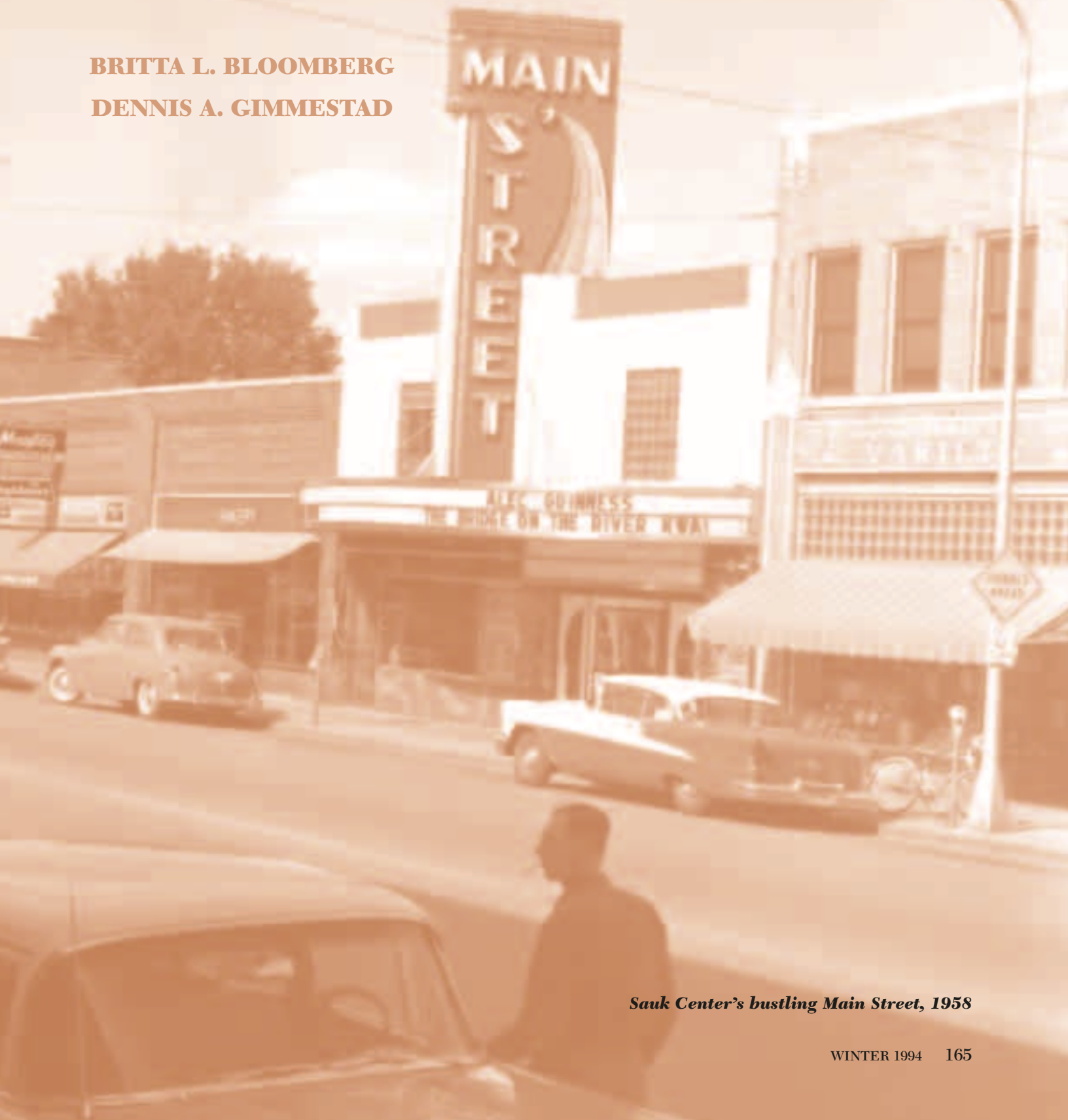
Outstanding among Minnesota's new listings on the National Register of Historic Places is the Original Main Street Historic District in Sauk Centre. Nationally significant for its association with Sinclair Lewis's 1920 novel *Main Street*, this district is a far cry from the typical National Register nomination for a midwestern Main Street. In fact, little about the street or the process that won it a place on the register could be called typical.

Sauk Centre's most recent Main Street story began in the summer of 1991, when the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDot) announced plans to reconstruct state

STREET *innesota*

BRITTA L. BLOOMBERG

DENNIS A. GIMMESTAD



Sauk Center's bustling Main Street, 1958



Postcard view of a residential portion of Main at South Fifth Street, about 1920. The houses face Main Street; Bryant Public Library is at lower left.

Highway 71 through this central Minnesota community about 100 miles northwest of the Twin Cities. The Minnesota Historical Society's State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) immediately began to receive phone calls and letters expressing concern about the fate of the famous stretch of road running through Sinclair Lewis's hometown. Although his acclaimed novel is set in the fictional community of Gopher Prairie, there has been little doubt that Lewis's own experiences in Sauk Centre were the primary source for his story's characters and settings.¹

At first, SHPO expected that its review of the highway project, required under state and federal regulations before MnDot can begin any road

reconstruction, would be straightforward. Currently, Minnesota communities are home to more than 100 National Register historic districts, and SHPO has reviewed each one of them. A historian routinely evaluates areas whenever a federal or state agency proposes a project; if a concentration of intact historic properties representing an important local story exists, the district may qualify for the National Register of Historic Places.

To review the Sauk Centre project, SHPO staff first went to Main Street. There, instead of a quaint collection of turn-of-the-century buildings, as some had expected, staff discovered only a few outstanding properties, including the Palmer House Hotel, listed on the National Register since 1982, and the Bryant Public Library. Many of the town's early buildings had been replaced or remodeled, and only a few structures displayed any distinctive architectural styling.

The central stretch of Main Street that would be affected by MnDot's road modifications includes four visually distinct areas: a southern

Britta Bloomberg, deputy state historic preservation officer, heads the Minnesota Historical Society's Historic Preservation, Field Services, and Grants Department, where Dennis Gimmetad is government programs and compliance officer. Both authors work with communities across the state to encourage historic preservation.

¹ Jeffrey A. Hess and Heather E. Maginniss, "Original Main Street Historic District," National Register of Historic Places registration form, National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, Washington, D.C., 1993, sec. 8, p. 60, copy in State Historic Preservation Office, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul.



Sinclair Lewis's boyhood home, photographed by Jet Lowe for the Historic American Buildings Survey, 1987

residential district, a three-block commercial district, a single block zoned industrial, and a northern residential area. Also included are two city parks, two bridges, and a portion of Sauk Lake. Main Street's broad roadway, 82.5 feet wide, provides continuity and focus to the corridor.²

"Modest" is the word that best fits this area. Most of the turn-of-the-century residential properties on the south end are simply designed and ornamented. The northern residences, predominantly from the 1910s and 1920s, represent popular styles of the period—bungalow, craftsman, and historic revival. The commercial buildings in the district's midsection are similarly modest structures which date to the turn of the century. Many have been altered, gaining new exteriors during the 1920s and 1930s, for example. In some cases, inappropriate changes in facades have ruined the buildings' historical integrity. Newer buildings added to the streetscape further challenge its historical unity. Three properties on Main Street's sole industrial block, on the other hand, authentically reflect Sauk Centre's working heritage: a dam over the Sauk River, a flour mill (now an

apartment complex), and the Northern Pacific Railway depot (now a feed store).

Had SHPO been reviewing a similar highway project in another community, the office might well have recognized only a few buildings for their architectural or historical importance and considered the survey job done. Yet the signs proclaiming "Original Main Street" on almost every corner in town seemed to call for a second look. SHPO recommended a historic survey to evaluate whether any part of the district would be eligible for the National Register.

Determining whether a district meets the National Register's criteria is a rigorous process. Established after the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, the criteria themselves are concise—only one printed page. They simply require that a property be associated with a significant person or event, have architectural or research importance, or comprise a notable collection of individual properties. But evaluating *why* a

² Hess and Maginniss, "Original Main Street." For a detailed description of the district, see sec. 7, p. 1-5.

property is important demands careful documentation, now guided by more than 40 volumes of National Register bulletins.³

To begin the historic survey, SHPO staff compared the buildings along Main Street with Sinclair Lewis's boyhood home. A few blocks off of Main Street at 812 Sinclair Lewis Avenue, this modest, well-preserved building housed his family shortly after his birth in 1885 until he left Sauk Centre for preparatory school after 1900. Recognized for its tie to the famous author, the home has been listed on the National Register and designated a National Historic Landmark.⁴ When SHPO staff compared late-nineteenth-century photographs of Main Street with today's streetscape, however, it was clear that the present version no longer closely resembled the Main Street of Lewis's boyhood. Lacking this historic link, it could not be placed on the register for its associations with Lewis's early life.

Next, SHPO staff intended to analyze places described in *Main Street* to see if they matched actual locations in Sauk Centre. If a sufficient number were found—and if they remained much as they were before 1920 when the novel was published—they could form a historic district. This process would be like assembling a puzzle of surviving literary locations.

Before this inquiry began, however, SHPO, working with MnDot and the historical consulting firm of Hess Roise, realized that the existing Main Street's primary importance lay not in events predating the novel but rather in what happened to the town as the book's popularity grew. In surveying the buildings, therefore, Hess Roise paid particular attention to the district's appearance during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, the period when readers across the country—and attention from the media—transformed Sauk Centre's modest Main Street into a national cultural icon.⁵

While many changes have occurred in the district since this period, Hess Roise's careful analysis showed that the essential elements and layout of Main Street remained intact and retained sufficient integrity "especially in terms of scale, massing, and rhythm of roof line."⁶ The firm's consultants, Jeffrey A. Hess and Heather E. Maginniss, suggested that the period of historic significance was from 1920 to 1947, from the publication of



Sinclair Lewis at work in a rented room in Minneapolis during the winter of 1918–19

Main Street to the year *Life Magazine* visited and proclaimed the community a symbol of small towns across the nation. Unlike most historic districts in small communities, Sauk Centre's Main Street was neither architecturally distinctive nor an outstanding example of a town center. Rather, Sauk Centre was important as America's archetypically small town.

³ See, for example, U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Interagency Resources Division, *National Register Bulletin #15: How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1991).


⁴ Inventory file, Sinclair Lewis Boyhood Home, in statewide inventory, SHPO.

⁵ For an extensive discussion of the evolution of Main Street's reputation, as well as a detailed physical description, see Hess and Maginniss, "Original Main Street," secs. 7 and 8.

⁶ Hess and Maginniss, "Original Main Street," sec. 7, p. 4.

Once SHPO determined that the district was eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places, the evaluation was complete as far as MnDot was concerned. Most evaluations end at this point; the property is entered into the SHPO database, a report is filed with the preservation office, and historical considerations are worked into the project review. But SHPO staff felt strongly that this most unusual street was *nationally* significant. Listing the district on the National Register would help validate its importance and give Main Street property owners access to certain federal tax incentives for historic rehabilitation of their buildings. In addition, the continued high level of local interest and the unusual nature of the threat that highway reconstruction posed to the district persuaded SHPO to pursue the National Register listing immediately. In Fall 1992, Hess Roise was retained to evaluate the area further and complete the necessary documentation.

In the 1993 nomination, Hess and Maginniss made a strong case for Main Street's national significance under "Criterion A," social history. Cited is the district's close association with Lewis's 1920 novel, which "introduced the profoundly influential concept of 'main street' as a way of analyzing, visualizing, and symbolizing the American small town. . . . Because of its persistent and pervasive identification with Lewis's novel, Sauk Centre's Main Street became the living embodiment—the national symbol—of the American village." Twenty-seven years later, publication of the *Life Magazine* article "Main Street, 1947" acknowledged that this symbol represented "the mind and matter of Main Street."⁷

he period of significance frames a time during which the meaning of "Main Street" shifted dramatically. When the novel was published, Lewis was bent on exposing the negative side of small-town mid-America. By 1947, the concept had taken on a nostalgic glow. A similar shift occurred in Sauk Centre; the authors of the National Register nomination discovered, in fact, that "the *Sauk Centre Herald* expressed its displeasure by waiting six months before acknowl-

edging that a native son was responsible for the nation's most talked-about novel." The ensuing feud between the writer and his hometown captured national attention and strengthened the association between Sauk Centre and its fictional counterpart. But, "although Sauk Centre's association with *Main Street* initially had engendered ridicule," the 85-page nomination concluded, "it eventually conferred a special dignity."⁸

That strong identity and special dignity persists today. It was apparent in May 1994 in the eloquent words spoken by city council members and district residents and in the impassioned letters from state legislators and the National Trust for Historic Preservation, read before the Minnesota State Review Board, a group of professional and citizen members responsible for overseeing National Register nominations. Previously, there had been considerable debate among district residents about the value of the designation, and SHPO received letters from many property owners objecting to the listing. But no one attending the meeting represented this viewpoint, none of the objections contested the significance of Original Main Street, and the objections failed to block the nomination.⁹

Finally, after more reviews by state and federal authorities, the Keeper of the National Register in Washington, D.C. officially added Sauk Centre's Main Street to the list on August 5, 1994. It stands as a rare small-town district that represents the transformation of a real historical place into a cultural symbol.

Today, review for alterations to Highway 71 continues. SHPO staff members are meeting with representatives of MnDot, the Federal Highway Administration, and Sauk Centre to discuss the proposed street reconstruction because the *street*—not just the buildings along it—is of primary importance. Careful documentation of the appearance of Main Street during the period of significance will be made to help ensure that changes to street lighting, street width, road surface, curb material, and even the center line do not alter the district's character. The challenge ahead is to determine ways to meet future traffic needs while preserving one of Minnesota's unique historic areas.

⁷ Hess and Maginniss, "Original Main Street," sec. 8, p. 55; Henry Anatole Grunwald, "Main Street, 1947," *Life Magazine*, June 23, 1947, p. 102.

⁸ Hess and Maginniss, "Original Main Street," sec. 8, p. 60, 63.

⁹ For a complete summary of the meeting's proceedings, see the minutes of May 19, 1994, on file in SHPO.

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