

Autumn of Discontent for

OCT 24 1974

Sauk Centre Tired of Watergate and Upset by Inflation

NYTimes

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Special to The New York Times

SAUK CENTRE, Minn., Oct. 23—Original Main Street, they call it now. That's its official name, lettered large in white on green at the corners along its broad expanse.

Not that it's really original or a great deal different from thousands of others across the land with its J.C. Penney's, Sears catalogue store, Rexall drugs and a couple of dozens other assorted businesses.

But this is Sauk Centre, the birthplace and boyhood home of Harry Sinclair Lewis, the Gopher Prairie of his 1920 novel, "Main Street." And to Sinclair Lewis, his hometown was America writ small.

After a half-century of urbanization in the nation, that's not as true today as it

Mood of the Voters

once was. Still, in this year of Watergate, the resignation and pardon of Richard M. Nixon and deepening economic woes, it seemed fitting somehow to test again the mood of Main Street.

And Main Street is at least vaguely unhappy. It is tired of Watergate; tired, some say, of politics and politicians. It is divided, but generally upset, about the pardon. It is uneasy, if not downright worried, about the economy. A town of 3,750 people, fairly evenly split in its party loyalties, it is widely expected to vote for Democrats this year in the coming state and Congressional elections.

Republicans are viewed by a lot of people here in the well-kept frame houses along the pleasant side streets lined with elms and maples as the party of Mr. Nixon, the party of Watergate, the party somehow responsible for the runaway inflation the threatening recession.

'Lot of Mixed Emotions'

"I don't think there's any question, it's going to be a Democratic year—and I'm a Republican," said Fred Unger, the ruddy proprietor of Unger's furniture store on Sinclair Lewis Avenue, just off Original Main Street. "About a month ago I would have said there was no question it would be a Republican year, but everybody seems to resent that the first thing Ford did was pardon Nixon.

"And when he came out with his new economic program, a lot of them thought he would have taken stronger actions."

Mr. Unger, who has run his obviously thriving furniture business in this central Minnesota agricultural center for 42 years, said he thought a lot of people in the area had voted for Republicans two years ago because of the prosperity at the time.

"Now there are a lot of mixed emotions," he said, "with calves down to \$8 from \$80 a year ago and milk prices down \$2 a hundredweight and fellows with turkeys losing about \$2 a bird. They feel maybe the

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'Main Street's Voters

party that's in there is not so good."

There is some talk of voter apathy, but not as much as in many other places. In Sauk Centre, which still has heavy German and Scandinavian strains, there seems to be a sense of duty about elections.

"Politics are a little different here than they are in the big city," declared Mayor Bernard J. Robischon, a slender, graying accountant. "I'm not a Democrat and I'm not a Republican. I'm an independent and I've voted that way all my life."

Smiling wryly at the recollection, he went on:

"To tell you the truth, I was only on one winning side in a national election in my life — and the man I voted for, he's no longer in office."

With that allusion to the Nixon resignation, he paused for a moment and pondered Watergate.

"I think there's been too much publicity about that whole thing," he said. "I wish it was over so we could get back to the business at hand. As far as I'm concerned, they've wasted two years already."

Down at the Main Street

business," he said with a grin, "because we have cheap entertainment for people. We only get \$1.25 a show."

On either side of Original Main Street, there are banks, the First National Bank and the First State Bank. In Sauk Centre, they are known about as commonly as the Republican Bank and the Democratic Bank, because of their founders' predilection for politics.

"That's kind of gone by the wayside," said Dale J. Emmel, the youthful vice president of the First National Bank, the Republican Bank. "We've got some good strong Democrats here and they've got some Republicans."

Still, while he expressed concern about inflation and the cost-price problems of area farmers, he was quick to defend President Ford's efforts to turn the tide.

"Ford hasn't been in there that long," he said, "and it's not going to change overnight. And Ford isn't telling us it's going to change overnight. I don't think you can blame the party for it. The Democrats have had the Congress."



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Theatre, which he has operated for 38 years, Freeman Parsons agreed with Mr. Robischon.

"I think they'd better forget the thing and get back to the Government doing some business," he said, pausing in his preparations for two nightly showings of "The Sting." "It looks to me like all they're doing is spending a whole lot of money."

But Mr. Parsons did have a kind word for the inflation that is troubling most of his neighbors.

"It's doing O.K. for my

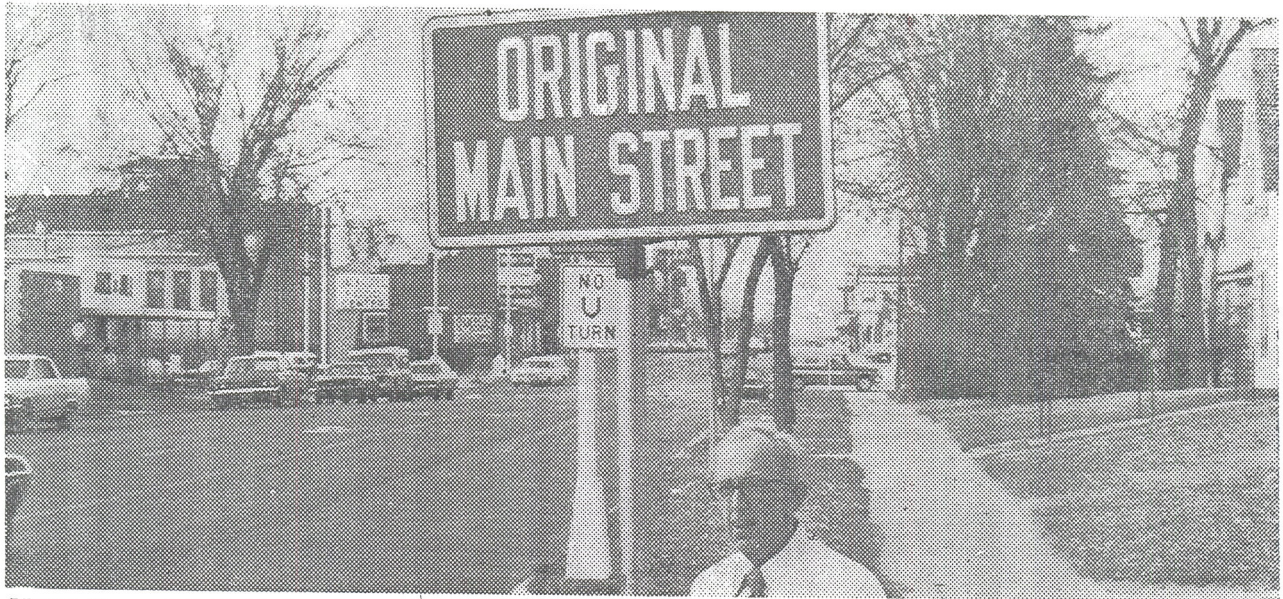
Over at the Democratic Bank, Ben Du Bois, the 89-year-old chairman of the board, who was born the same year as Sinclair Lewis and who still works every day, sat at his ancient roll-top desk, a cluttered anachronism in the modern office, and chuckled.

"Of course this inflation is the No. 1 thing," he said, "and the President's program is horrible. Ford is a nice fellow, but he's still got the mind of a Congressman. But that job is too big for any human being. Who'd want that job, anyway? You've got to be crazy to want that job and that's why we get crazy Presidents."

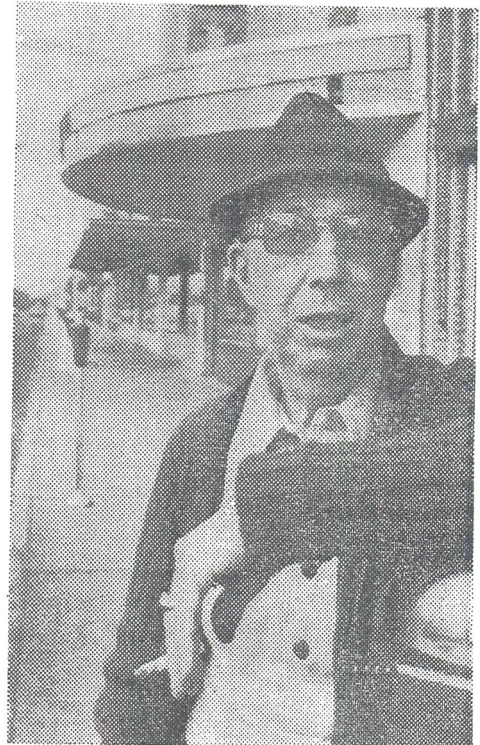
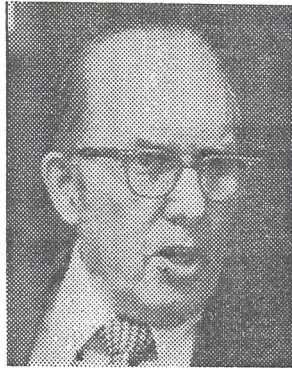
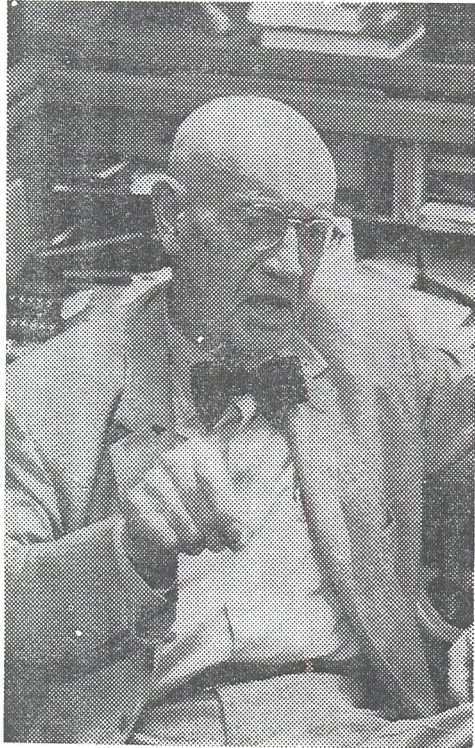
"Ford walked into that at the worst possible time. He followed a man who was horrible and left the country in a deep recession and they won't admit it."

How will the voters of Sauk Centre, the people of Main Street, react?

"This town politically is very close, it can go either way," he said. "It will go Democratic this year with these high prices. When you hit the pocketbook, you hit a sensitive nerve."



Mayor Bernard J. Robischon in Sauk Centre, Minn., the boyhood home on which Sinclair Lewis based his novel "Main Street." Of Watergate, Mr. Robischon said, "I wish it was over so we could get back to the business at hand."



Photographs for The New York Times by GARY SETTLE

Ben Du Bois, (left) banker: Sauk Centre "will go Democratic this year with these high prices." Fred Unger, upper center, furniture dealer: "Everybody seems to resent that the first thing Ford did was to pardon Nixon."

Dale J. Emmel, lower center, banker: President Ford "isn't telling us [inflation is] going to change overnight." Freeman Parsons, right, theater owner, like Mayor Robischon, wants to forget about Watergate.