



DOWNTOWN: Catro, Ill.

Photos by MICHAEL EASTMAN

At the end of the road

A photographer captures the emptiness and essence of the countless little Main Streets we've left behind.

By DOUGLAS BRINKLEY

IN MY TIME, I have journeyed through many small towns across America. Recently, I spent some time in Jordan, Mont. — the Garfield County seat — which prides itself on being the loneliest town in the world. Blessed with no natural resources or historic tourist sites, located 175 miles from the nearest airport and 115 miles from the nearest rail depot, Jordan has very little to offer except solitude.

The county population density is 0.3 people per square mile. Perhaps because modernity has left Jordan alone, you can gaze at a forlorn bank building and tiny grain elevator and see faded storefront advertisements for Sioux City Sarsaparilla and the long-defunct Sellman's Motel. "No Loitering" signs

are posted from long ago, when the cattle drives from Texas to Montana used to let off right here at Big Dry Creek.

Appearances aside, Jordan is not really a ghost town. And there are in fact thousands of similar offbeat places that have just receded from national consciousness. Chances are that each one of us holds a place like Jordan in our distant memory. Though photographer Michael Eastman has never been to Jordan, his images evoke its spirit for me just the same. Though each of the photos in his forthcoming book, "Vanishing America," shows a specific town, all of the photos evoke that same particularly American loneliness.

Virtually in all 50 states, cobwebbed symbols of our small-town past lurk behind the shiny newness of our fast-food junctions and interstate exits. The

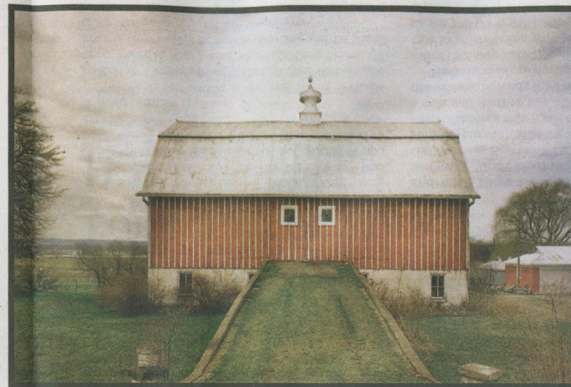
sheer thrust of American dynamism has left Main Street unloved. But if your eyes gaze at these neglected roadside monuments long enough, you can be transported back to the time when Main Street was the epicenter of most communities.

Eastman captures the hard-core essence of blue-smoked architectural loneliness better than any new artist I've encountered. I feel qualified to make this claim because loneliness has been my niche since youth. Where some might find gloom in these anti-Rockwellian photographs, I find a liberation from the glaring rat race of American life. In Eastman's images, a scent hangs in the air like that before a thunderstorm — a time when another Chapter of Life is being closed with the slam of a screen door. Darkness is falling, but a

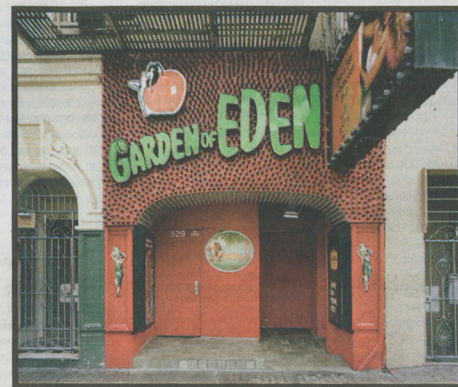
red-brick afterglow lingers in Eastman's work so you can still marvel at another crumpled calendar page being tossed away, just as Thomas Wolfe and Edward Hopper would have liked it.

Photographs like these may someday be taken in downtown Los Angeles or the Vegas Strip or Suburbia U.S.A. Nothing lasts forever. But visages don't fade away without a fight.

DOUGLAS BRINKLEY, a professor of history at Rice University, is the author of numerous books, including "The Great Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans, and the Mississippi Gulf Coast." He also wrote the introduction to Michael Eastman's book of photographs, "Vanishing America," which is being published by Rizzoli this month.



BARN: La Crosse, Wis.



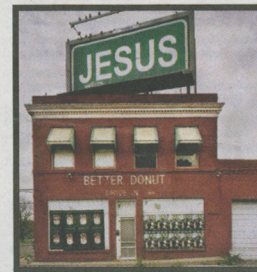
GARDEN OF EDEN: San Francisco



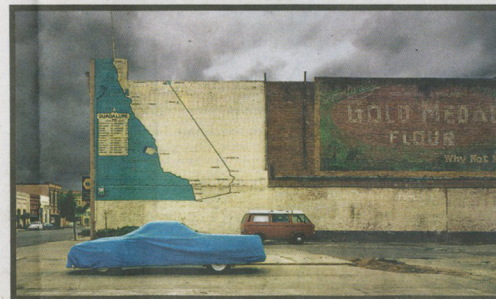
FREMONT THEATER: San Luis Obispo



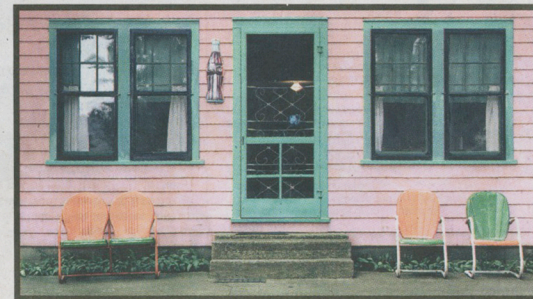
BEAR IN HAT SHOP: San Antonio



JESUS BETTER DONUT: St. Louis



ALONG HIGHWAY 1: Guadalupe, Calif.



MARCELLA'S RESORT: Benton Harbor, Mich.