



Ruth Simmons, age eight, now President of Smith College.

My Fifth Ward

A recent visit to Houston's Fifth Ward after an absence of more than two decades brought back a torrent of memories of a childhood bountifully nourished by the spirit of this community. I grew up in Fifth Ward, from 1952 to 1963. I attended Atherton and Langston elementary schools, E. O. Smith Junior High School, and Phyllis Wheatley High School. In retracing the steps of my childhood, I returned to the foundation of a lifetime of expectations. Fifth Ward was a source of many proud memories during the years I spent away from Houston: of neighborliness and community, of help and hope. It saddens me to hear of Fifth Ward's present notoriety. I will always remember my neighborhood as it was for me during my childhood.

Fifth Ward was a place where my sisters and I walked to school, lingered at area convenience stores and ice cream and candy shops, and joined other children in finding shortcuts for our incessant meanderings. This was a neighborhood that offered opportunities to live fully and to learn. School activities were supplemented by community centers, such as Hester House, which introduced many children to the arts and cultural activities. Our Sundays were as full as our weekdays, spent in one of the wonderful houses of worship that were plentiful in the area.

The houses of Fifth Ward were amazingly diverse in the fifties. For some years, my family lived in a large white house that was embraced by a capacious semi-circular veranda. Beginning at the front door and wrapping around the right side of the house, this porch was gracious and welcoming; I loved to sit there and watch the world. A friend lived in a great Victorian-style house not far from Liberty Road — a ready backdrop for our childish ghost stories. There were also the endless square, one-story frame houses — two rooms on the right and two on the left — that seemed to be home to most of the families of Fifth Ward.

This was my neighborhood. While I know now that it was one of the most economically deprived areas of Houston, as a child I saw Fifth Ward as a place to belong, a place with an identity, a place that inspired loyalty. For my family, refugees from East Texas sharecropping, it was a place promising hope. Everything about it made us feel that we belonged somewhere in the world: the predictable geometry of its streets, the serendipity of its façades, the families who had found a home there over the years assured us that this was a place we could come to know and understand. To my amazement, I find I rarely ventured outside of Fifth Ward. All my needs were met there. The spirit of that place and time has remained steadfastly with me over the decades. *Ruth J. Simmons*

DAVID THEIS

FIFTH WARD

During last September's punishing heat wave, I was driving through Fifth Ward on the north side of Buffalo Bayou in search of artist Jesse Lott's handmade, pie-shaped, wire-mesh-walled workshop at the corner of Lyons and Opelousas. When I finally spied it I pulled over, already tantalized from the street by the outsized metal figures I could see through the mesh, such as one that looked like an African conjurer from the 21st century.

But the thrill was gone when I felt the right tires of my old VW van sink quickly and definitively into a mystery quagmire. I had thought I was stopping on a damp stretch of grass, but suddenly I was down to my axle in muck. I got out on that nearly abandoned stretch of Lyons, once one of the most celebrated streets of all black America, and wondered if I hadn't sunk into some metaphor for America's urban ills.

The green weeds along the deserted street were waist high, and almost every building in sight was boarded over. I walked down the street to a freestanding pay phone (it worked!) in front of the long-since-abandoned Atlas Radio and Record Shop, its old Art Deco sign hanging from the nearly collapsed building. The sign was missing a few letters but retained a shadow of its old class. As I waited for Triple A, I sought shade beneath the tree-high weeds where McCall Street had once intersected Lyons. I say "once" because a literal urban jungle has completely claimed the street. All that remains is a street sign proclaiming the 1300 block and a useless stop sign facing Lyons. Had anyone *ever* driven a car through these woods?

Much later, after the tow truck pulled my van out of the ooze, I thought that I had my story. *Fifth Ward wilts under the intense sun of neglect. Former liveliness now a distant memory.* In other words, I

would write a piece celebrating Fifth Ward's colorful past, describing how, as community activist Bob Lee puts it, "when black people got off the bus in Houston, they headed straight for Lyons Avenue. It was Houston's 125th Street [Harlem's main drag]." In the 1940s and 1950s, the Club Matinee was, Lee said, "Houston's Apollo Theater," and Lyons Avenue was so busy that "you had to walk in the street because the sidewalk was too crowded." My story would be the contrast between the Fifth's former glory and its current cheerless state.

But that's not the story. Fifth Ward is deceiving to a stranger. I'm glad I kept driving around talking to people, because I soon learned that my first impression, perhaps inevitable given the area's physical decay, was facile. The internal drive to "Keep Five Alive," as community activists exhort, is too strong to be ignored. Fifth Ward is making a serious effort to reclaim itself from the weeds.

Official neglect is nothing new here. Fifth Ward was formed by urban pioneers who began moving in after the Civil War. In 1874 residents of the "City North of Houston" petitioned to be allowed to secede, complaining that the ward was "mudbound and without public utilities."¹ Historically Fifth Ward was racially mixed, an unusually cosmopolitan neighborhood of Jews, Italians, Irish, Asians, and African Americans living together in some degree of harmony. In 1870 there were 561 whites living in Fifth Ward and 578 blacks.² Nearby rail yards and sawmills attracted working folk, while shopkeepers of various backgrounds tended to live either above or behind their stores.

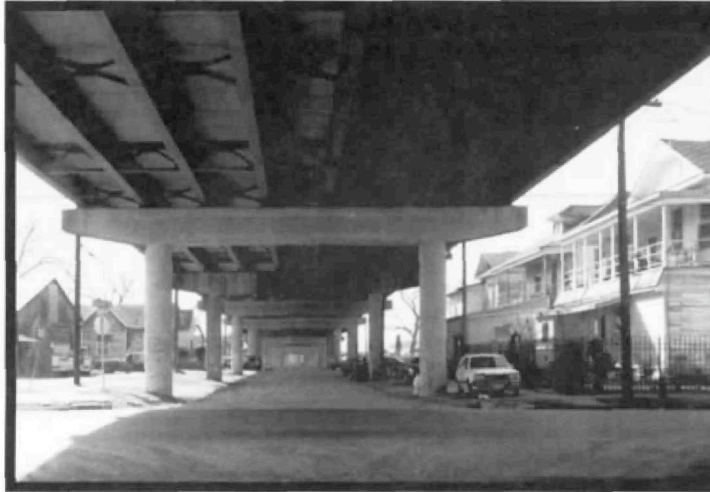
After a second secession attempt, Fifth Ward was awarded a few city buses and

Fresh Start Community Garden, on the southwestern corner of Maury and Lorraine.



Photo: David Theis

Looking south under the Elysian Street viaduct, Elysian at Lyons Avenue.



an order for construction of a bridge across Buffalo Bayou at the foot of San Jacinto.³ But the paucity of services persisted. In 1891 a fire broke out at the Phoenix Lumber Mill that “swept through twenty acres of urban property and shut out the sun with its smoke.”⁴ The Houston Water Works’ Fifth Ward pipes were too small to provide firemen with adequate pressure, evidence that the city continued to view the ward as a stepchild. The following year, Fifth Ward resident John T. Browne was elected mayor of Houston, bringing new promise to the underserved area.

Lyons Avenue was originally known as Odin Avenue, named for the first Roman Catholic bishop of Texas, Bishop Jean-Marie Odin.⁵ In 1894 the street was renamed for the Lyons family. Irishman Michael Lyons was married to Elizabeth, the daughter of Mayor

Browne. His brother, John Lyons, was a railroad engineer and proprietor of a saloon at the corner of Odin and Carr. The Lyons House was “an enormous building with rooms up above known as the House of Lords. Mrs. Lyons ran a rooming house and had boarders. In the back yard . . . was a public toilet and above it were more rooms known as the House of Commons.”⁶ The renaming apparently came about when the Lyons family donated land to the city for the lengthening of Odin Avenue. (A tiny Odin Street still runs for a crooked block or two off of Lyons.) Recently, Fifth Ward citizens have petitioned to rename this historic stretch from McKee to Aleen Barbara Jordan Avenue.⁷

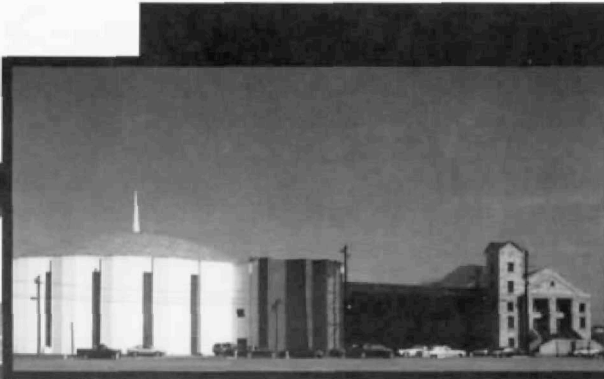
Fifth Ward remained a colorful, rough

and-ready neighborhood through the turn of the century. In 1905 the city passed a law prohibiting “any male person” from making “goo-goo eyes” at members of the opposite sex. That same year, Carry Nation paid a visit to the “Carry Nation Saloon” in Fifth Ward at Wood and Willow and chopped the place up, as she had warned Barkeep O’Brien she would if he didn’t take her name off his sign.⁸

After World War I, the great migration of Southern blacks from the countryside to the cities affected Fifth Ward’s racial makeup. As blacks moved in, whites moved out. However, African Americans prospered in Houston, at least compara-

tively so. In 1942 “more businesses [were] owned and operated by Negroes here than in any other Southern city,” and a “larger number of Negroes owned houses in Houston than in any other city in the South.” Black Houstonians had \$7 million stored in area banks.⁹

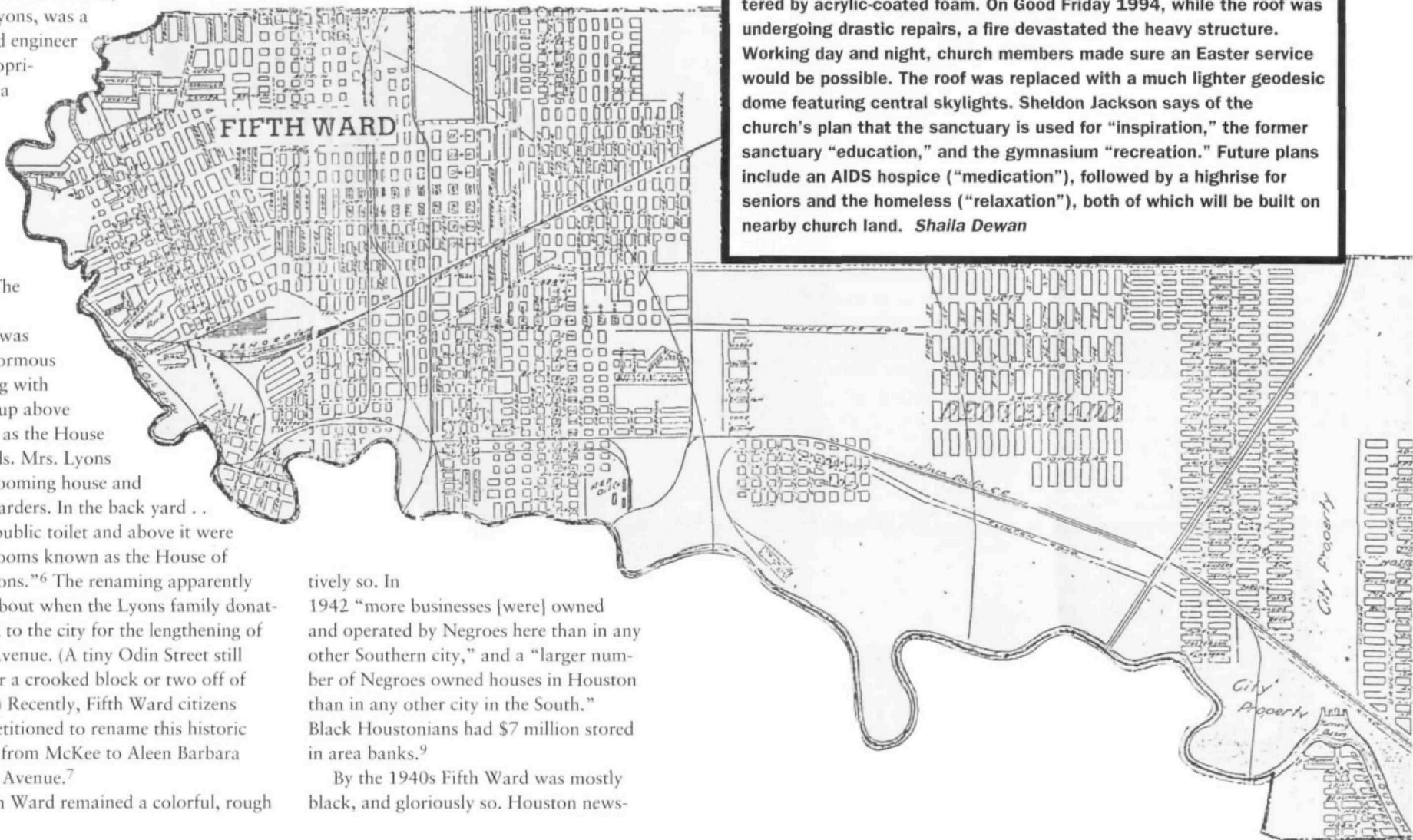
By the 1940s Fifth Ward was mostly black, and gloriously so. Houston news-



Pleasant Grove Church

With its 5,000-seat circular sanctuary topped by a geodesic roof, Pleasant Grove Missionary Baptist Church is the Astrodome of Fifth Ward churches. Located on Jensen Drive near Interstate 10, Pleasant Grove is one of the largest predominantly black churches in the South. Partially because of the church’s age — 130 years — and partially because of its nearly 20 years of televised services, Pleasant Grove claims an enrollment of 16,000 congregants from all over greater Houston. The church’s numerous programs include one that has been widely imitated: half-day GED and remedial classes for dropouts, suspended or expelled students, and juvenile offenders, offered in association with the Houston Independent School District.

The sanctuary’s stuccoed exterior is painted a crisp Islamic white and pinstriped with narrow stained-glass windows. According to assistant pastor Sheldon Jackson, the circular floor plan was a longtime dream of the head pastor — Jackson’s father. Charles L. Jackson assumed the post from his uncle, the Reverend A. A. McCardell, Sr., who in the 1950s began Pleasant Grove’s aggressive construction program with 45 new classrooms and initiated a street crusade to proselytize among the criminal element on Lyons Avenue. Completed in 1978, the dream sanctuary was originally separated from the earlier church building, a traditional limestone edifice, by a small street. Pleasant Grove purchased the street in the early nineties and built a tinted-glass gymnasium that links the two older structures, creating a motley trinity of styles. The sanctuary, designed by California architect Frederick Booker, originally had a butterfly roof of wood beams sheltered by acrylic-coated foam. On Good Friday 1994, while the roof was undergoing drastic repairs, a fire devastated the heavy structure. Working day and night, church members made sure an Easter service would be possible. The roof was replaced with a much lighter geodesic dome featuring central skylights. Sheldon Jackson says of the church’s plan that the sanctuary is used for “inspiration,” the former sanctuary “education,” and the gymnasium “recreation.” Future plans include an AIDS hospice (“medication”), followed by a highrise for seniors and the homeless (“relaxation”), both of which will be built on nearby church land. *Shaila Dewan*

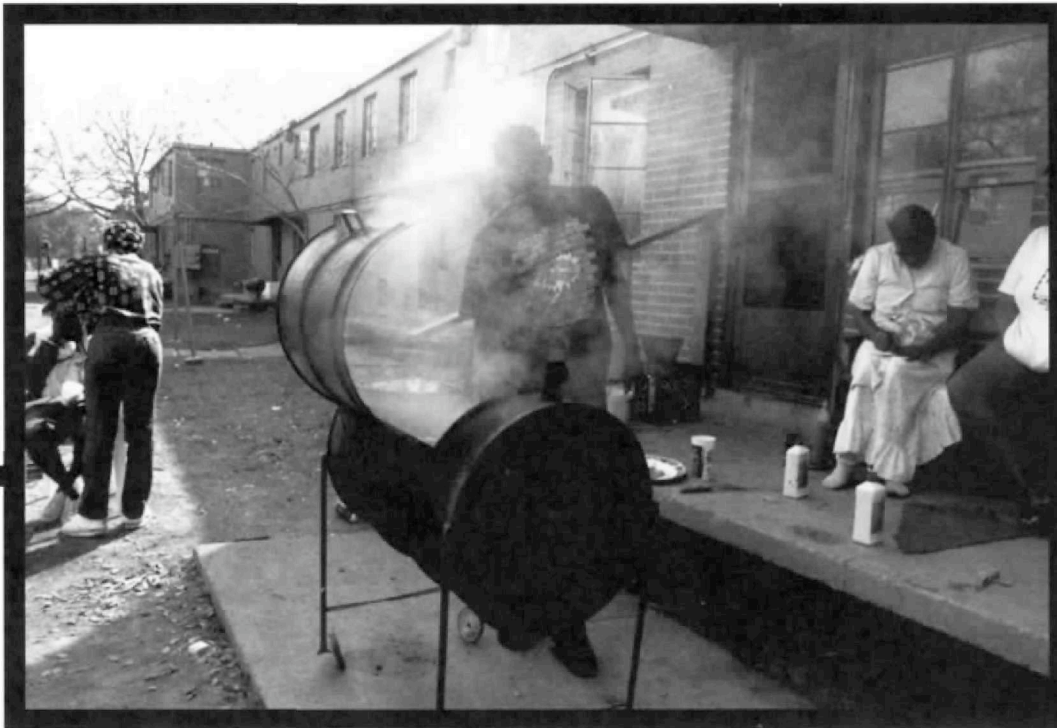


Kelly Village

Nestled up against the north side of I-10, Kelly Village is a grid of green lawns, tidy sidewalks and 44 simple masonry buildings with brick veneer. Built in 1939, many of the 333 one- to four-bedroom units have been renovated since 1988. Like the Housing Authority of the City of Houston's other 14 housing developments, Kelly Village will soon become a gated community. A controlled-access wrought-iron fence will, the housing authority hopes, deter drug dealers and other criminals who come to Kelly Village to do business. "It's not the residents who are dealing drugs and all that," says resident Mae Nell Farrow. "That's why nothing can be done about it. They [the dealers] don't live here."

Farrow, who has been at Kelly Village since 1988, is president of the development's resident leadership organization, which oversees the community center and programs activities for youth. She is also president of the new Kelly Village Resident Management Corporation, formed after the housing complex received a \$100,000 U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development grant to explore entrepreneurial opportunities. Kelly Village is funding training for a catering program, now headquartered at the nearby Kennedy Place development because Kelly's kitchen was not up to code. Residents from any housing project can participate in the training project. The corporation also plans to start a business service center to provide copy and fax machines along with résumé and notary services to customers who would otherwise have to trek downtown.

Shailla Dewan



Paul Hester & Lisa Heston © 1996

paper columnist Sig Byrd described the spot where I had forlornly called the tow truck: "The Corner of Lyons and Hill: the heavy traffic clogging Lyons Avenue, main cut of the Fifth Ward, . . . the cats lounging in front of the Atlas Radio and Record Shop, just across the avenue, Dualeh the Holy Man, with his long black beard, his swallowtail coat, and his satchel of bottles filled with dark brown liquids . . ." Another story told of a legendary disk jockey. "Perched at the cor-

No doubt acclaimed detective novelist Walter Mosley was thinking of this potent atmosphere when he decided that his hero, P. I. "Easy" Rawlins, would hail from Fifth Ward. In his novel *Black Betty*, the Los Angeles-based Rawlins recalls seeing the infamous Betty back in Houston. "I had seen her sashaying down the wooden sidewalks of Houston's Fifth Ward. I was a raggedy twelve-year old and she was more woman than I had ever seen in one place."

My on-the-street Fifth Ward education began a few days later, when Bob Lee and Patricia Prather met me at Frenchy's Chicken at the Waco exit of Interstate 10. A former student of Saul Alinsky, Lee is the brother of county commissioner El Franco Lee. Bob Lee, by profession a sociologist with the Harris County

Hospital District, is also a community activist and the self-proclaimed mayor of Fifth Ward. He and Prather, who has written a biography of Joshua Houston, former slave and manservant to Sam Houston, formed the Texas Trailblazers, an organization dedicated to unearthing the stories of Houston's prominent early African Americans.

For more than an hour the ebullient Lee and the demure Prather recounted the history of their neighborhood and famous Fifth Warders from Barbara Jordan to Mickey Leland. Constance Houston Thompson, known as Miss Houston, was the granddaughter of Joshua Houston and perhaps the leading member of the ward's black bourgeoisie. The list went on: jazz greats Illinois Jacquet and Eddy "Cleanhead" Vinson;

George Foreman; and Dr. Ruth J. Simmons, president of Smith College (see sidebar, p. 26).

Prather, Lee, and I were only scheduled for an hour's interview, but, as I had



Mickey & Rebecca/The Ward Collection

Fixer-upper: Bystanders, workers, and organizers of the De Luxe exhibition, summer 1971. Standing: second from right, Mickey Leland; fifth from right, Helen Winkler-Fosdick. Below: The De Luxe, minus marquee, empty and for sale, 1996.



Paul Hester & Lisa Heston © 1996

ner of Lyons and Hill in the early 1940s, "Stan the Man" . . . broadcast live and recorded everything happening among the 4,000 people who lived within one square mile of the Roxy."¹⁰

Basic Meal Groups: "The Diner," 1818 Jensen Drive.



Paul Hester & Lisa Hesterman © 1996

The Fan Man

When folk artist Bob Harper, a.k.a. the Fan Man, died last December, he left behind the beginnings of a wonderful new art environment on Altoona in Fifth Ward. His original "Third World" creation was in Third Ward, but after the fire that killed his mother, destroyed his house, and leveled his original environment, Harper moved to Fifth Ward to be closer to his brother Quincy and to rent a house from him. Harper commuted from Fifth Ward to Third in order to rebuild his original site, but during his spare time he began decorating his Fifth Ward home as well. After Harper (who was already diagnosed with lung cancer) was evicted from the Third Ward site last fall, the Orange Show helped him move his striking assemblages made from skis, Oscar de la Renta signs, abandoned televisions, and the other debris of our disposable society — as well as his signature fans. Harper began building in earnest on his Fifth Ward lot, and worked almost up to the end. For now, at least, his Fifth Ward environment is one of Houston's neighborhood treasures. *David Theis*

hoped, excitement led to a tour offer. So I hopped into Lee's car and we set out, Lee and Prather intent on showing off their Fifth Ward.

Lee pointed out the old hot spots: the vacant lot where the Club Matinee once stood, and, across the street, the abandoned De Luxe Theater. He remembered when John de Menil reopened the De Luxe to serve as an art exhibition hall. According to Lee, he, El Franco Lee, and Mickey Leland were supposed to be the guiding lights of the new De Luxe, "but we were too young to understand what John de Menil was doing. We couldn't carry that idea," and the project went under. Now, the 23,255-square-foot De Luxe is up for sale for \$50,000. It is rated as a number four building, one step up from the bottom of the scale.

Lee and Prather pointed out the site of Lee's mother's business, Lee's Congo Club, as well as the grocery store at Benson and Lyons, above which Barbara Jordan had her first law office. Jordan's old house is long gone. "I was in awe of Barbara Jordan," Lee said. "In those days there were no women lawyers or doctors. But there she was, carrying her briefcase."

Prather showed me the Lonnie Smith House at 4600 Noble. Smith was a local dentist who sued to open the Texas Democratic primary to black voters, and, with the help of Thurgood Marshall, took his case to the Supreme Court in 1944 and won. "I can just imagine Marshall and Mr. Smith sitting in there, mapping out their strategy," Prather said.

We passed Hester House, a community service organization that takes care of preschoolers and senior citizens alike. Prather became an award-winning swimmer in its pool, and George Foreman had his first boxing lessons there. The 50-year-old Hester House is an anchor point for the ward. Its workers typically provide some 500 people with emergency food supplies each month. They take school children on Texas history bus tours that last summer included a meeting with Governor Bush at the Governor's Mansion in Austin. The center is home to a strong senior citizens' group. The



David Theis/The Orange Show

elders are still the backbone of the community, providing the nucleus that holds Fifth Ward together in spite of its apparent problems, (see sidebar, p. 31).

I noticed that Fifth Ward was seriously short on restaurants, bars, and other public gathering places. Prather and Lee agreed, acknowledging that even the area's most integral restaurants, the Lockwood Inn and Phyllis's, bit the dust in recent years. Prather's expression was pained as she recounted how the Lockwood burned in spring 1995 — "Now I don't have any place to take my tours!" Phyllis Jarman's restaurant was the most elegant soul-food restaurant in town until the widening of Highway 59 in the late 1980s shut her down.

Even more painful memories lay ahead. St. Elizabeth Hospital, where many current residents of Fifth Ward were born, is now a drug rehabilitation center. For Prather and Lee, the tour's low point came at "Miss Houston's" old home at 1303 Bayou. A tidy Victorian house with a wraparound porch, Miss Houston's housed visiting black dignitaries such as Duke Ellington during the long years when respectable hotels were segregated. Miss Houston hoped the house would become an African-American museum upon her death. With steady vision, Lee and Prather tried to comply with her wishes. But when the

Houston Recovery Campus

After 40 years of operation, St. Elizabeth Hospital shut down in 1985, unable to fill its beds. When attempts to revive the building failed, it seemed as if the owners, the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word, would have to close the doors for good. But in 1991 a \$27 million federal grant gave St. Elizabeth a new lease on life — as a free drug abuse treatment center that will serve 4,000 to 6,000 adults and adolescents this year. Although the federal grant money ran out in 1995, the Texas Legislature has opted to fund the center for two more years, and the University of Texas has come on as administrator of the project.

The Houston Recovery Campus operates on the maxim that "what keeps clients clean and sober is their empowerment," says assistant clinical director Robert Dotson, adding that the clinic is unique in the number of services it offers under one roof. During their three- to five-week stay, clients can take advantage of literacy training, Houston Independent School District and Houston Community College classes, job training and placement, housing placement, a computer lab, a medical clinic, and a recently remodeled kitchen. One special program is housed in the nuns' small but cheery former quarters, where 16 young mothers live with their infants, learning parenting skills while they combat addiction. Anxious to become more self-sustaining, HRC is considering starting businesses that would hire clients who have completed the program.

The neighborhood was initially uneasy about hosting HRC, whose barbed-wire perimeter fence is designed to keep crime out rather than clients in. But it is fair to say that the area has benefited from the Lyons Avenue campus. Many of its clients — 30 percent of whom are homeless — come off the streets of Fifth Ward, and the campus claims its Houston Police Department security has kept crime down. Those factors probably at least contribute to the fact that since 1991, according to HPD figures, violent crime in Fifth Ward has decreased significantly more than in the rest of Houston. *Shailla Dewan*



Paul Hester & Lisa Hesterman © 1996

Stearns monument in abandoned cemetery at the northwest corner of Market Street and Lockwood Drive.



Habitat for Humanity houses, 4200-4300 Rawley Street at Waco, 1989-90.



Paul Foster & Lee Robinson © 1996

Fifth Ward CRC

Resettling a community with homeowners and businesses is a balancing act — each is difficult to attract without the other. But the nonprofit Fifth Ward Community Redevelopment Corporation seems to know how to keep more than one platter spinning. Using a combination of tax credits, public funds, and nonprofit grants, as well as the proceeds from home sales, the CRC has put many facets of its 15-year master plan into action.

Led by Stephan Fairfield, a commercial developer by trade, the corporation has restored a historic home, repaved streets and sidewalks, demolished hazardous buildings, and put in new streetlights, water lines, and playground equipment. It has restored the St. Elizabeth Clinic, donated by the Sisters of Charity, and leased it to a home health service providing neighborhood jobs. Its workers have painted or repaired 67 homes of elderly or disabled residents. The CRC has even conducted "empowerment training seminars." The Reverend Harvey Clemons, Jr., president of the board and pastor of Pleasant Hill Baptist Church, has acted as peacemaker to soothe racial discord in the area.

But the backbone of inner-city redevelopment is home ownership. And, perhaps because the 1977 Community Reinvestment Act is finally being enforced, banks are looking for loan prospects in unfamiliar territory. With the help of the United Way and numerous city organizations, the Fifth Ward CRC has built 45 homes for people with annual incomes of \$13,000 to \$55,000 and packaged mortgages for 35 existing houses. Because many people on their waiting list are suburban residents wanting to return to the ward, the CRC built a "homeowner incubator" complex of 312 low-income units in Alief, complete with a Head Start program, youth activities, and swimming pools. In order to encourage good habits, the Fifth Ward CRC is experimenting with incentives. Tenants can earn points toward their down payment by volunteering, exhibiting financial responsibility and neighborliness, or having children who get good grades. How will the CRC measure some of these characteristics? "We don't know yet," Fairfield says. "We're making everything up as we go along." *Shaila Dewan*



"Lloyd Cavells' Sports Wall of Fame," Bust Down Car Care, 4620 Lyons Avenue.

Paul Foster & Lee Robinson © 1996

grande dame died, her heirs, who do not live in Houston, "got dollar signs in their eyes," according to Lee. They did not want to donate the property, and as the haggling went on, the house was vandalized. All the historic artifacts they had hoped to preserve were stolen. As we pulled up to the house, Prather observed that the once elegant porch had caved in. "It must hurt to think about what you lost here," I remarked, and Lee answered, "You don't even know."

Mickey Leland's old house at 1614 Sam Wilson brought back more melancholy memories. "He never cut his ties with Fifth Ward," Lee said. "That's why people loved him."

From there we headed over to the old Frenchtown area along Collingsworth, where Doris McClendon still hangs on at the legendary Continental Zydeco Lounge. Frenchtown had already lost much of its flavor when the U.S. 59 widening wiped out almost a hundred homes. "Only the old folks" still speak the Creole French of their native Louisiana, Lee said.

Lee and Prather are still enthusiastic about Fifth Ward's potential, but it seemed to me that at every corner we found more loss and unreversed decline. I ask Lee how he stays optimistic. "After the Civil War, freedmen and women came and slept in tents along the bayou here," he answered. "That's all they started out with, and they built all this up."

Perhaps inspired by my question, Lee drove us to the intersection of Lockwood and Lyons, where Fifth Ward becomes Denver Harbor. In the early part of the

century, Denver Harbor was populated with working-class whites who didn't leave the neighborhood when integration came, as the leading blacks of Fifth

Ward did. So more money stayed in Denver Harbor.

"Just look at this," Lee said as we approached the traffic light at Lockwood. "You go through this light and over these railroad tracks, and you're back on the Lyons Avenue of the 1950s." He was exaggerating a bit, but in the now largely Hispanic Denver Harbor, we were suddenly surrounded by functioning, freshly

Painted retail stores. Seeing the clean white walls with business names in bold reds or blues made me realize how my eyes had ached for color, for variety, while driving through the Fifth.

Prather and Lee pointed out the Lockwood branch of Texas Commerce Bank. Although it is unusual to find a bank in an inner-city neighborhood, here the parking lot was crammed with cars in mid-afternoon. "This is one of Texas Commerce Bank's most successful branches," Lee told me. John Hernandez, the branch manager, confirmed this: "We open more accounts and make more loans per capita than any [branch] bank in the city." Hernandez also told me that the Walgreen's across the street is one of the top performers in the entire drug-store chain.

Lee, Prather, and I turned around and drove back across the tracks to old Fifth Ward. There the only sign of commerce was some furniture and other knickknacks set out for sale beside the street. "That's the kind of business we have!" Lee exclaimed, laughing bleakly at history's little joke.

As we drove, Prather and Lee also filled me in on Fifth Warders who, without achieving more widespread fame, had been instrumental in the area's development during segregation. When I asked how it was that so many people had thrived under what must have been limited circumstances, Prather cited the quality of the schools. "Our schools are all

Hester House

Julia C. Hester House, 2020 Solo, has been serving Fifth Ward for more than half a century. Built on five acres of land donated by Susan McAshan, the community center is named for Julia Hester (1881–1940), a teacher and community leader, who began inviting neighborhood children to come to her house at 1702 West Street rather than play in the streets. Once established, the community center moved into a larger building on Lyons Avenue, and in 1945 Hester House moved to its present location.

Interim director Beverly Brownlow admits that the term “community redevelopment” can seem abstract or grandiose. But sometimes it is the little things that provide the glue: hot meals, warm clothes, and school supplies that many Fifth Ward parents can ill afford. Hester House often provides the last safety net between its members and the street. It has an emergency food pantry for the many families whose funds run out before the end of the month, emergency clothing distribution, and even one-time rental assistance for those who have lost their jobs.

In many lives Hester House, funded largely by the United Way, is a daily presence — a welcoming environment that caters to children and senior citizens. The low building is located on a quiet side street off Lyons Avenue, surrounded by modest grounds and bordering park acreage. Each day, about 50 seniors play dominoes and socialize over a free lunch provided by the city; that number can double when medical professionals conduct vision, hearing, and dental screenings. Preschoolers play noisily, joined in the evenings by older children from schools such as Atherton Elementary across the street. On Saturdays, kids congregate in the gym or by the swimming pool for supervised sports. Adults use the gym, too, for the occasional zydeco supper dance. In summer, parents rest easy knowing their kids are taking their first look at NASA or Corpus Christi in Hester House summer camp. *Shailla Dewan*

named for educators,” she said. Indeed, Mabel Wesley (Wesley Elementary) and E. O. Smith (Smith Middle School) are two of the Texas Trailblazers she and Lee have written about.

Prather explained that during segregation, there was little for an educated African American to do other than teach public school, so early Wheatley High teachers were often M.A.’s and Ph.D.’s. The teachers had to maintain high standards in their classrooms. Thanks to segregation, they had to live where they taught, and if they slacked off they would hear about it from their neighbors, who were the parents of their students.

“It was said that if you graduated from Wheatley High you had the equivalent of a junior college degree,” Prather said as we drove over I-10, headed for Wheatley. The high, intimidating fence around the school, and the higher one in front of the apartment building across the street, even more like a prison, told me how times had changed at Wheatley, and in almost every other inner-city school. “After integration, HISD took our best teachers,” Prather said, “and scattered them all over town.”

Which is not to say that there are no fine teachers left at Wheatley. After Prather came to the school to talk about Texas Trailblazers, the students got so interested in studying local black history that history teacher Hise Austin began including such information in his lesson plans. Under his guidance, Wheatley students also began tending the sadly abandoned cemetery that sits only a block from the school. In fact, Lockwood cuts through the cemetery. The street-makers must have dug up or paved over graves to get through.

Austin has a funny story about how the cemetery project began. “Kids were telling me stories about ghosts they were hearing. They said something would grab at their feet while they stood at the bus stop.” So he led a class over to the cemetery to clear up these mysteries, only to step into a hole that was completely overgrown with weeds. He fell in, disappearing from sight. “The kids started screaming,” he recalls, laughing at the memory. But when he climbed out and



Photo by E. Lee Robinson © 1996



A Spin down Peacock Alley

The Bronze Peacock Dinner Club at 2809 Erastus Street, now the educational building of Charity Baptist Church, was the birthplace of Peacock Records, the legendary Fifth Ward record label formed in late 1948 or early 1949 — no one is quite sure when — by Don “Red” Robey, the proprietor of the Bronze Peacock, and Evelyn Johnson, who managed Robey’s Buffalo Booking Agency. Clarence “Gatemouth” Brown, Peter “Guitar” Lewis, Amos Milburn, Elmore Nixon, Sonny Parker, “Little Richard” Penniman, Memphis Slim, Willie Mae “Big Mama” Thornton, and Andrew Tibbs all recorded for the Peacock label.

Peacock merged with Duke Records of Memphis in 1952 and was sold to ABC/Dunhill in 1973. Before Motown, Duke/Peacock was the largest black-owned recording company in the United States. MCA, which subsequently acquired ABC/Dunhill, issued two compact disc retrospectives in 1992: *The Best of Duke/Peacock Blues* and *Duke/Peacock’s Greatest Hits*. Duke/Peacock alumni Bobby Blue Bland, Johnny Brown, Joe “Guitar” Hughes, and Milton Thomas were reunited this spring, along with Evelyn Johnson, as part of the 1996 Houston International Festival’s “Salute to Peacock Records.” *Drexel Turner*

Rappers in Fifth Ward

There aren’t many nightclubs left in Fifth Ward, but that doesn’t mean the music has died. It just turned to rap. The nationally known Geto Boys make frequent references to Fifth Ward in their songs — often under its street name, “the Nickel” — and their record label, Rap-A-Lot, began in Fifth Ward.

Today Rap-A-Lot still has an unofficial Fifth Ward presence at Jammin’ Records on Lyons. Dewey Forker owns Jammin’ Records and the Underground Records recording label and is the discoverer and manager of the two Fifth Ward rap acts that come closest to following the Geto Boys onto the national scene: the Fifth Ward Boyz and the Fifth Ward Juveniles.

After Forker opened Jammin’, the young rapper who later became the Fifth Ward Boyz’ 007 brought a demo tape he had made with another would-be rapper. Forker liked the tape well enough to sign the act, but when 007’s accomplice proved insufficiently professional, Forker fired him and hired E Rock and Low Life, and the Fifth Ward Boyz were born, largely as an opening act for the Geto Boys.

According to Forker, the Fifth Ward Boyz have reinforced Fifth Ward’s identity, bringing together young people from the various streets and ‘hoods, such as Frenchtown, Kelly Court, the Bottom, and Finnegan Park, and in so doing have reduced gang tensions. Not that Forker thinks that crime itself has much decreased. “I see these fifteen-year-olds who come into my store. They do things we would have never even thought about when I was their age [in the late seventies].”

His teen act, the Fifth Ward Juveniles, consists of Mr. Slim and Daddy Lo. According to Forker, they can only rap for him if they keep their grades up and are respectful to adults. He notes that Daddy Lo is an A student.

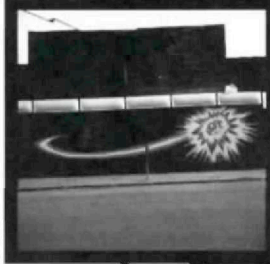
Jammin’ Records is something of a neighborhood hangout. Intensely disputed domino and card games break out almost daily, as Forker awaits the latest shipment of demo tapes, which now come from aspiring rappers all over the country. *David Theis*



In the Paint

In fall 1968, John Zemanek of the University of Houston College of Architecture conducted a fourth-year studio in a storefront in the Pearl Harbor section of Fifth Ward to help remodel a vacant building on Lyons Avenue near Jensen Drive as a youth center for the Reverend Earl E. Allen's HOPE (Human Organization for Political and Economic Development) ministries. The resourcefulness of Zemanek and his students at designing, scavenging, painting, and fixing up attracted the notice of C. Ray Smith, the Vasari of supermannerism, who featured their handiwork in the November 1970 issue of *Progressive Architecture*, under the heading "Urban Renewal With Paint."

Renovation was completed that spring with the help of a second class, marshaled by Gene Grosholtz and John Perry, that joined Zemanek and his already seasoned crew. The front of the main building was emblazoned with a supergraphic comet in Charles Coffman's best eye-pop manner. Track-lit, larger-than-life, slide-projected portraits of black luminaries and neighborhood children picked up the pace inside. The adjoining asphalt parking lot was fitted out with sports equipment and a garden-variety assortment of improvised playground accessories, from swing sets to a cable-pool obstacle course. State senator Barbara Jordan, whose law offices were still open down the street, spoke at the dedication ceremonies in May 1968, commending the volunteer efforts of Zemanek and his students and colleagues. *Drexel Turner*



De Luxe Treatment

The first adaptive reuse of a movie theater in Houston — before Bookstop invaded the body

of the Alabama, or Discovery Zone the Bellaire, or Hollywood Video the Tower — took place in Fifth Ward. During the summer of 1971, Dominique and John de Menil rented the De Luxe Theater at 3303 Lyons Avenue for three months. Crews from the contracting firm of Jones and Bynam, augmented by Fifth Ward residents, worked double shifts to convert the interior of the derelict movie house into a pristine gallery space. The exhibition, *Hard Art at the De Luxe Theater*, opened 22 August and extended its run by a week and a day through 25 September, closing with a Wheatley High School alumni celebration. The gallery was open from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday through Saturday and from 1 to 10 on Sunday. Mickey Leland, then a community organizer and teacher at Texas Southern University, served as coordinator for the project.

The show, assembled by Peter Bradley, associate director of the Perls Gallery in New York, and Helen Winkler Fosdick of the de Menil-sponsored Institute for the Arts, consisted of 40 paintings and sculptures, including works by Bradley, Anthony Caro, Richard Hunt, Daniel Johnson, Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Larry Poons, and William Williams. The catalogue was written by Steve Cannon, a novelist and poet and the editor of *Self Images: An Anthology of American Poetry*. The critic Clement Greenberg, a leading exponent of "post-painterly abstraction," attended the opening, as did Noland. Short films were shown in the walled-off upstairs balcony, where the seats remained intact. The exterior of the movie house, which first opened in April 1941 as a "family" alternative to the nearby Roxy and Lyons theaters, was left undisturbed. Efforts to find a long-term sponsor for the gallery were unsuccessful.

Drexel Turner

the kids calmed down, they began investigating the often broken and nearly illegible grave markers. To his amazement, they found markers for 11 "buffalo soldiers." This was treasure to a history teacher. For the past several years he and his senior classes have been taking care of the private cemetery, which is no longer officially claimed by anyone. Not that they keep it manicured — it is too big and too far gone for that. After four years they are still finding markers in the weeds.

Looking through this nameless cemetery, which abuts the back of an EZ Pawn shop on the I-10 feeder and has heavy traffic roaring through it, is a mournful way to spend an afternoon. Broken marker after broken marker proclaims that the person beneath is "Gone But Not Forgotten." Alas, it isn't so.

I left my conversations with Bob Lee and Pat Prather convinced of Fifth Ward's rich past, but doubtful about the viability of its future. Lee, Prather, and virtually every organization head I talked to said that the strength of the area's families and its general social glue are strong enough to hold the ward together. I wanted to see physical proof of this cohesiveness and evidence of a potential reversal of fortune. So I was thrilled to get a strong dose of optimism from the Fifth Ward Community Redevelopment Corporation (FWCRC), headed by Stephan Fairfield. Along with community leaders such as the Reverend Carl Clemons, Jr., and N. Joyce Punch, who has led the fight to keep at least two highway exits for Fifth Ward in the ongoing widening of 59, Fairfield has been patiently implementing a redevelopment plan.

They began with housing. First, Habitat for Humanity came in to build a series of attractive houses on Brewster, the first new-home construction in Fifth Ward in more than three decades, according to Habitat's executive director, Mike Shirl. Fresh paint and nicely kept gardens provide one of the area's rare splashes of color. Since Habitat for Humanity couldn't focus its efforts on the Fifth

Ward exclusively, the FWCRC began its own construction program, thinking that individual home ownership was a key to neighborhood stability. After questioning area residents as to what kind of house they would like to buy, the FWCRC began building houses with multiple gables, running perpendicular to their street rather than parallel, so as to avoid appearing like rent houses. Buyers with incomes from \$13,000 to \$55,000 have moved in near each other.

With this promising start in housing, the FWCRC turned next to making the area safer and bringing street conditions up to code in conjunction with Mayor Lanier's Neighborhoods to Standards program. The corporation is now trying, with some success, to fund small businesses and attract larger retail centers. Getting a grocery store, perhaps an HEB, to move into Fifth Ward is high on the agenda.

Fairfield's plans are still quite ambitious given the state Fifth Ward was in when he began working there in the early 1990s. But he has a cheerful exuberance that makes the FWCRC's plans all the more believable. Fairfield is white, and I could not resist asking him what part of town he lived in. He surprised me a little by saying, "Well, technically the Fifth Ward." By that he meant the warehouse district. "But I'm buying a piece of land in the poorest part of Fifth Ward, near Wheatley and the cemetery, and I'm going to build a house there." ■

¹ Workers of the Writers' Program of the Works Projects Administration in the State of Texas, *Houston: A History and Guide* (Houston: Anson Jones Press, 1942), p. 89.

² David G. McComb, *Houston: A History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1969), p. 60.

³ WPA, *Houston*, p. 93.

⁴ McComb, p. 88.

⁵ Monsignor Anton Frank, "Fifth Ward," Texas Room, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

⁶ *Houston Chronicle*, 8 May 1996, pp. 3A,4A.

⁷ *Houston Chronicle*, 18 May 1996, pp. 1A, 16A.

⁸ McComb, pp. 106-107.

⁹ WPA, *Houston*, p. 98.

¹⁰ *The [Houston] Defender*, 21 May 1971,

"Open Art-Movie Show Sunday," p. 8.