HIDDEN HOUSTON

The city you see on the surface is not all the city there is

Houston is too big, too much, to be taken in by a single glance or a single idea, and its parts are hidden from us in many ways. They are obviously hidden by space and time, by the city's sheer size and complex history. But they are also hidden by the space and time that each of us defines in the routes and routines of our daily lives.

The city most of us know best lines the paths we take to and from work, the carpool circuit, the weekend errands, the shortcuts to our favorite places for fast food and slow, and whatever it is we follow over the river and through the woods to grandmother's house. These versions of the city are utilitarian, intimate, and fragmentary. They have boundaries we maintain and boundaries we are unaware of. And bounded by our routines, we don't know what we are missing — in the same way we don't know the inside of someone else's history, in an old neighborhood that's disappeared, until they map it for us in conversation.

Other parts of Houston are hidden in plain sight, their surfaces clear to view but the values and the contexts they create invisible. The unexceptional looking Thai Xuan apartments near Hobby Airport enclose a Vietnamese village, one defined not by its physical spaces but by its relationships, practices, and historical attitudes. This apartment complex is a community, as are the Walden Internet Villages, though the communal values that inform these two places are radically different from each other.

And yet those communities are more like each other than any name we might have for the patrons of the Guatemalan bakery in southwest Houston or for the seekers who come to the Villa de Martel convent in the city's southeast. "Community" is probably too strong a word, but what else is there to name their aggregate? The bakery's customers are not really a neighborhood, and the Villa's customers are not really a congregation. According to Sister Olive Bordelon, those who are drawn to the Villa don't even all share the same faith. But what they all value is the same sequestered peace, and what they expose is both the hope and the emptiness in the builder's phrase "planned community."

When we speak of the city that is Houston, we mean, of course, several different things. In audible caps, The City is an idea to which we often attribute order and intention: It has an architectural culture and a visual style; it has made progress or failed to. Or The City, at this late date in its long history, is part of nature, an organism with its own intelligence and ecological law. Nothing in The City is hidden, because The City is an ideal entity rather than a series of disparate places, a totality without actual parts. But the city that exists without audible caps, the city that is experienced on the streets rather than as a pristine ideal, does have parts. They come into view in social, political, and personal terms — neighborhoods and districts, tax zones and facilities, my block and yours — and these places are set in opposition to each other by the rules of function, class, and color. Using these rules, we can hide the poor from the rich and work from play, and the city we are taking its texture from the ways in which these rules play out.

It is not enough; however, to simply see this real city. You have to hear its voices telling their own stories, and that's what we have sought out in this issue of Cite. What we call "hidden" here is not a secret anyone is keeping from anyone else. It is only that the stories tend to not move far from their source. Some of the stories come from the pen of the person talking; others come via interviews. But they all come with their own sound, and reveal their part of the hidden whole.

In presenting the hidden Houstonians that follow, we are not addressing issues of urban order or disorder. The River Oaks that Robin McCorquodale remembers has not been wiped out by change in the way that the old neighborhood Jack Lapin remembers has. And the planned neighborhoods of Fondren Southwest weren't planned to accommodate the Orthodox Jewish families who now mark the boundaries of their Shabbat "city" by an eruv, a wall, that the rest of us can hardly see because we do not know what we are looking at. Money, beliefs, and development have all played a role in defining the nature of these different places, but not the kind of role that provides a single explanation for their differences.

Neighborhoods are not necessarily communities; the social orders defined by the Guatemalan bakery or the Indian cinema aren't even neighborhoods. Hiddenness seems to bring with it a difficulty in language, too. But these place-related relationships have analogues. On the one hand, they are like money found in the pocket of a jacket we haven't worn in a while — not so much a secret as a surprise. But they are also like the kind of conversation we sometimes have with a stranger who informs us of something we didn't know and, therefore, tells us something about ourselves. Strangers are the city's natural citizens, and perhaps one of our strangers here is talking directly to you. — TERRENCE DOODY

Photographs by Michael Stravato
Bob Lee is a social worker and labor organizer who lives in the Fifth Ward. He is a brother of county commissioner El Franco Lee.

Desegregation all but ruined the Fifth Ward. Now, you can't really say anything good about segregation, and nobody with any sense would want to go back to that, but the simple truth is that in a lot of ways Fifth Ward was better off before desegregation than after. Houston is the fourth largest city in America, yet the Fifth Ward seems like it's in a Third or Fourth World country, and a lot of that is because of desegregation.

Segregation forced us to build our own businesses, because we weren't allowed to go to downtown Houston and shop. The first institutions we had after slavery were the church, and then the barbershop, because many of the barbers were blacks who had worked for their masters. From that point you had bakeries, restaurants, funeral homes, then what people negatively called the Red Light District. The black gangsters, many of them were people who said they'd never work for a white man again. They opened up enterprises — nightclubs, gambling, prostitution, bootlegging — that provided an economic base for the black community.

In the Fifth Ward during segregation you couldn't get loans from white bankers, so community development was based on the black gangster. The black middle class won't admit it, but things like the numbers racket played a very important role in building the neighborhoods. The black middle class, they didn't make any money during segregation, I don't care how many degrees they had. The black middle class was middle class mostly in name. The gangsters had the income. In the 1930s, Lyons Avenue was filled with nightclubs, and the nightclub owners would loan people money.

During segregation, our money went in a circle. Now it goes in a straight line, from us to other areas. My wife and I go shopping in Montrose. If we want good coffee, we have to go there. If we want clothes, we have to go elsewhere. I don't like that one bit.

From World War I, when a lot of money started flowing, up until the 1960s, we were self-sufficient. All the things that organizers are talking about now — self-determination of the community and all that — in the Fifth Ward we already had it. Doctors lived here, teachers lived here. The black middle class during segregation lived with the black working class. That was the thing about segregation: We all had to sit together.

They're reviving Lyons Avenue right now, and that's a good thing. Fifth Ward is getting ready to go through the same sort of renaissance that Harlem went through at the turn of the last century. We have so much room for redevelopment. But before desegregation it didn't need to be redeveloped. It was cooking. One of the newer projects is Lyons Village, a mixed-use development with business and housing. But that's really nothing new. Where Lyons Village is now there used to be the Club Matinee, which was like the Cotton Club of Houston. If we went back into the 1960s, you would see an all-black cab line right in front of it. Crystal Cab was the company's name. Men would be washing cabs right next to the beautiful Club Matinee, where Count Basie and Duke Ellington and all of them came. It filled the whole block. It was more than a club. It was a restaurant, and it was also a hotel, because when the big bands came to town, they may have played for the white folks, but they couldn't stay in their hotels.

During segregation, when you had a nightclub, people could build other businesses around it. Barbershops, grocery stores — across the street from the Club Matinee was the Deluxe Theater. We had four movie theaters in Fifth Ward then: the Lyons, the Deluxe, the Jensen, and the Roxy. Now we don't have any.

My mother and father had a nightclub, Lee's Congo Bar, that was at the corner of Lyons and Featherstone. We had eight, nine people working for us. My father's from Henderson, Texas, my mother's from Jasper. My father was real slick; he stayed in the background and let my mother be the public face of the club. He said, nobody's going to come to the club to look at me, but they'll sure come to look at your mother. I started working in the club when I was eight years old, and worked there up until I was 18. I met all the lawyers, teachers, working class, poor, sex merchants, and hustlers. They all came through our club.

Dr. King wasn't a sociologist. He was altruistic, a minister, but he wasn't a sociologist. He didn't realize that an action would have a reaction. I remember many arguments here between the black middle class and the black hustlers when desegregation was about to happen. The black hustlers were against it. They predicted what the results would be. Because when integration came, the black middle class packed up and left.

I knew something was changing when this girl came up to me and said, Bob, let's go to the Loewes and see a movie. We had four movie theaters right here in the Fifth Ward, but because integration made it possible, she wanted to go over to Main Street to the Loews. That's the first time I realized that people really thought the grass was greener on the other side, when I knew the truth my uncle had told me: Grass is grass. I wouldn't take her. — Interview by Mitchell J. Shields
THE GARDENS OF VIETNAM

Tran Thi Dao is from My Tho, a city in the former South Vietnam. In 1981, she and her husband took their seven children, boarded a boat they had built, and left their homeland for America. They arrived in Texas in 1981. Today, they live in Thai Xuan Village at 8200 Broadway, not far from Hobby Airport. The apartment complex is occupied almost solely by Vietnamese immigrants, and although it is in disrepair, many residents cherish it for the sense of community created by their shared origins, customs, and the tiny gardens of Vietnamese vegetables they grow.

My whole life takes place in Thai Xuan Village. To me it feels like a real village. I've got people from Vietnam all around me; I've got my husband and my daughters nearby. I'm going to live here forever, and I'm going to die here.

Every morning, at the same time, the first thing I do is check my plants. The lettuce is for the old man and me, the old lady, to eat. When it's windy, I pick up the plants that are tipped over, prop them up with a stick, and tie them. Next I check for bugs. I kneel down to get a good look at each leaf, and if I see one I'll get a scissors and snip the whole leaf off.

My garden makes me feel at home. It's a little different here: the weather is different than in Vietnam, where you can plant anything anytime. And we don't have much space. But I plant what I can. For winter, I grow lettuce, cilantro, onions, and elephant ears — a kind of green that you use with pho and soups. That's a papaya tree out front, left over from the previous resident. For the summer I put in basil, lettuce, and water chestnuts. And I go around to talk about the garden with other people in the village. We ask, "How do you get this to grow?" Or, "How did you do that?"

Every day I also visit other old people. When I'm sick, they come and visit me. If we still lived in Vietnam, we'd do it the exactly the same way. Each morning we call each other on the phone, to see how everyone's doing.

In mid-autumn, we have a traditional festival for the children. There are lantern shows, lantern contests. At New Year's we give cake or candy to the children. And we have a little Catholic chapel, where you meet people. There are about 60 Catholic families in the village. Altogether, about 360 families live here. The residents are all different ages — many times, children who can't take care of their parents like them to live here. It's like they've brought them to Vietnam.

We've lived here for a year, but some of our kids have lived here for over six years. For years, we lived in Port Arthur with our son, but he died of cancer. So we came to Thai Xuan to be with our other children. They like having us in the village — it's safer.

Living here feels like Vietnam. You can visit and play and yak with the neighbors. You can leave your house for a whole month, and people will watch it for you. I can't leave the village because I can't drive or go out very easily. Outside, I'm scared. But here I can walk around anytime.

Once a week one of my children takes me to a Vietnamese market downtown, to buy things like meat and eggs. We have a little store here, but it's only for things you need at the last minute — noodles and fish sauce. There's also a little hair salon here, where my husband gets his hair cut.

We usually don't talk much about the past. Only when someone comes back from a trip to Vietnam, we ask questions: What's it like? Also, you know, even old people here are still very busy. They babysit. You see someone, you say, "How are you?" Then they rush home to baby-sit their grandchildren. — Interview by Claudia Kolker
LIFE IN THE WEB

Colorado native James Birney is the owner of Walden Internet Villages, three Houston apartment complexes he bought in 1989 and transformed into a gathering spot for the technologically adept. The Walden Villages offer residents a T-3 Internet connection, high-speed access usually found only at major corporations or large universities. They have been designed to appeal to those for whom the Internet is not the future, but a crucial part of life today.

The Walden idea came about mostly because my son and I were in love with the idea of the Internet. Early on, people used to call it the "World Wide Wait." The question was, how to afford a faster connection? So we came up with the idea of distributing it throughout an apartment complex, and building a community — a challenging, creative, entrepreneurial environment and a learning environment. Until we came up with the Walden Internet Villages thesis, these apartments had been conventional rental complexes.

At Walden, we offer something that's unprecedented, both in speed of connection and the nature of the environment. People really get incredibly attached to the community aspect. The thing about young, technologically oriented, aggressive people is that they're mobile. They tend to come, learn a lot, gain a lot, and move on.

There's been a bit of fallout from the tech crash. There is still an extreme demand for technologically oriented people, but before it was a frothy bidding market. People were changing jobs nonstop. Now certain residents who rely on grants and consulting sometimes have trouble paying the rent. Some have to get jobs. So they're starting to dress differently: get haircuts, wear suits, be polite for interviews.

The Rodgersdale complex was where we got everything started. There are 200 units here. Maybe six or seven of them are unoccupied. For about three years, we've struggled with defining this community, with summarizing what it is we offer. We look at ourselves as an advanced lifestyle of the future. We've tried to evolve the community, carefully. That probably chases some people away. But we end up getting a fairly interesting group.

When we first started out, it was a geek-oriented community. Up to a couple of years ago, it was 95 percent plus males. Now we're getting much broader. I think it's now about 70 percent men, 30 percent women. Not that there was any resistance to women from the residents — they were looking for them! And we're getting more families. Major progress, actually.

There are a lot of gamers here. They pursue that with a totally incredible passion. Actually, it's worse than being on drugs. At a LAN party, six or seven people play at night, until 5 o'clock the next morning. There have been cases where — in Everquest — they stay at it for two or three days steady.

Over time, we learned it was necessary to develop rules. One was be a good neighbor. You can't do something with broadband that impedes others' work. The average person here has about four computers; some have 16 plus. They have the capacity, if unleashed, to absorb our bandwidth in the blink of an eye. Online, it's 100 megabits per second. So you can't go around stealing other people's IP addresses; you have to peacefully coexist.

Two, you have to have reasonable ethics and moral standards. You have to be reasonable to your neighbor. What that has meant, especially during the geekiest of our stages, is well, put it this way. Geeks are not social. They actually have been more or less social rejects over time. In college they were hermits. And afterward, they actually had a lot of challenges. You get a tech job, you get shuffled around continuously. So not only are you not socially adept, but you're being moved around the country. When they came here they found like minds. In fact, they formed a kind of elite guard, running around town, doing things together. They really felt they were part of something. The Internet trains people to have an outlook of instant gratification, total freedom. In the beginning at Walden, they loved it and lived it with a passion — drugs, drinking, flaming (sending aggressive e-mail messages). Being extremely assertive.

One of the most interesting things is when you see the residents face to face. They're very pleasant. But then you get them on e-mail... In any case, we've moved to a much rounder and fuller community than existed at that stage. Very intentionally, we stepped in and laid down some rules. It didn't all happen at once. We get an idea, we work on it, nothing happens, and eventually, sooner or later, it seems to click. At first, that bothered me. Then I realized that cultures develop slowly. — Interview by Claudia Kolker.
It's an adventure when you come. You don't know where you'll wind up. Five of us came together, children, cousins, nephews. I was 32.

We went to work for Randall’s. Randall’s was a very good company for us. First we had to work in the floor crew, doing clean up. Then after three or four years I went to work in the bakery. We didn’t make any Hispanic bread. We did make sweet bread, cinnamon rolls. If you can make Guatemalan sweet bread, you can make donuts.

I worked in lots of stores, especially Number 19, at Fondren and Bissonnet. We were the first Guatemalans to work there, and that store opened the door for lots of other Guatemalans. Nearly all my family has worked for Randall’s.

And the Guatemalans helped Randall’s. Then, Randall’s had 15 stores. Now it has 70, in part because of the Guatemalan help.

Three years ago I opened this bakery. At first I was a little afraid, but my kids were grown, and they helped. All the family helped.

We were successful almost right away. I had a lot of friends. I don’t know exactly how many Guatemalans are here, but there’s a lot. The majority of our customers are Guatemalans. We help people remember their homes. We make Guatemalan breakfasts. Tostadas guatemaltecas.

Now I’ve opened more locations. Number Two and Number Three. Number Two, on Long Point, is a taqueria, too, because there are more Mexicans on Long Point. Here we mostly serve Central Americans: Hondurans, Salvadorans, Nicaraguans. In terms of bread, the different nationalities mix well. Now I see the Central Americans as more or less the same. That’s what I learned in Houston, from getting to know people from different countries. But it’s rare for a South American to come here. Their bread is different. The cultures are different. The food is very different.

We’ve kind of lost our customs. Here, business is hard. We only rest like an American. Only on Thanksgiving, Christmas. In Guatemala you have fiestas for everything. Holy Week, you take the whole week off.

Actually, we still observe customs that have to do with food or bread. For Holy Week we make pan grande, also called pan dormido, because it takes so long for it to rise. The Virgen del Rosario is the patroness of Guatemala. But we don’t observe her feast day. I’ve even forgotten when it is. But for Christmas we do make the tamal de la navidad. It’s with rice, tuna, cherries, pork.

I go to Guatemala more often now. The economy there is really bad. In 1980, the quetzal was one to one with the dollar. Now it’s 7.80 per dollar.

My mother is almost 92, so I need to see her more. And she’s the one with the recipes. People come here to ask for bread that we’re not making, so I have to learn to make it. For example, las milolás, which is like a cheese pocket. And she gave me a recipe for xacas negras, a wheat bread.

I miss my country, and I think about going back. I want to spend my mother’s last years with her. I’d probably open a bakery. — Interview by David Thies

BAKING MEMORIES

Esteban Benito Chanas runs a southwest Houston bakery that serves as one center of a community that, according to Néstor Rodríguez of the University of Houston Center for Immigration Research, continues traditions that stretch back to the Mayans of Central America, predating the discovery of the New World. Chanas makes no such claims. He sees himself as simply a baker from the highlands of Guatemala.

I have a wife, three sons, and a daughter. We came to Houston in 1980. We had a bakery in Guatemala, in San Cristóbal Totonicanapan, a very small town. My parents were bakers, and they taught me how to make bread.

That was the time of the guerrilla. San Cristóbal was near a war zone. We worked and sold products in the town fairs. The guerrillas always approached us, and they scared people. Life was dangerous. We were in between the two sides. Lots of people died. That’s when we decided to come to the U.S.
When I wakened to the beginning of memory, I was living in River Oaks, 2920 San Felipe Road, in a time when, without exception, the accent on "Felipe" fell on the first syllable. From my nursery, I heard cars, not yet the fathers driving to work downtown in one of the city's two skyscrapers, but trash men, milkmen, or the newspaper boy, who arrived at the corner of Kirby and San Felipe in an open-bed truck. Saturdays, that boy came to our front door to collect for the Houston Post. Evenings, we received the Chronicle and the Press. The front page of the Press was pink, the Chronicle green, the Post without color.

To get the breeze from the south side of Westheimer, we opened our windows. We shut them only against the severest cold and rain. Electric fans buzzed on their stalks and the attic fan drew air from the prairie into our bedrooms. Fridays, after breakfast, the green grocer came in a wagon. When he blew his whistle, we stopped whatever we were doing and ran outside. He owned a farm beyond the railroad tracks and past the Gun Club. It was on the other side of Post Oak Road, in what is now the south edge of the Galleria. What interested me were not his vegetables but his fat, gray mare, Clemmie, who wore blinders so she would never shy and bolt. Mondays, a knife and scissors sharpener crossed Kirby Drive on a big tricycle with a bell on the handlebars. He let us take turns ringing it.

My sister went to school across the street at River Oaks Elementary. The building was long, but it had only one story. Houses in River Oaks were required to have two stories and be set back at least 30 feet from the sidewalk. Residents could not build a wall around the front of their places. They could not be Jewish.

Our house had three bedrooms, a garage with a servant's quarters, and two bathrooms. In the back yard we had a playhouse, two swings, a sand pile, and a sliding board. In the summer, we played in aluminum tubs filled with water from the garden hose and invited Stuart and Maria Phelps from 3020 San Felipe to play in the tubs with us. Sometimes we walked to the Phelps' house and tried to catch butterflies with their net. Our friends Mary Anne and Carol Settagast lived on Mimosa. To get there from our house we had to cross Kirby and then an open field. We had to walk down a tunnel of Queen Anne's lace, nut grass, and milkweed. If we forgot to hold our arms close to our sides, red ants stung us and made us swell.

To the west of 2920 San Felipe was a path that led north from our house to Chevry Chase, to friends there, whom we could reach without crossing a street. Mrs. Langham lived immediately behind. Clark Gable had married her. She was older than he, his drama teacher. When they divorced, she married Mr. Langham. She owned a black tomcat, and to see him we knocked at the back door. In River Oaks, servants and children used the back doors. No one lived in the front of the houses. Next door to us on the east side lived the Sealy's. From the top of our sliding board, we could see when Mrs. Sealy returned home, and when we went there, she listened to our stories about the men who came to our back porch looking for work and a hot meal. We had no work, so we gave them part of our lunch and a dime. When I left River Oaks I was seven.

Since then, I have lived in other parts of Houston, as well as in Austin, Oakland, New York, Versailles, and Paris. In 1974, home from an overseas assignment, my husband and I returned to River Oaks, to a house at 3470 Locke Lane. While we were living in New York, the membership of the River Oaks Country Club had remodeled their original building, designed by John Staub. The first time I met my three sons saw it, fresh from spending four years among the monuments of France, they asked, "Is that the Hotel de Ville?" The only horses I have seen in River Oaks are Shetland ponies in the front yard that abuts the country club. If you want your knives and scissors sharpened, you go to Buffalo Hardware. Indigent men no longer come to the back door or eat a hot meal on the back porch. We have no back porch; when my childhood house was remodeled in 1970, the porch was sacrificed for a garden room. Sometimes when I attend an event at St. John the Divine, I remember that I am praying on the site of the drug store where Patsy Leach and I drank ice cream sodas.

Children do not cross Kirby now with their dogs loping freely beside them. I am not sure children walk anywhere in summer. Perhaps, acclimated to air conditioning, they can no longer tolerate heat.

Each morning I take a walk with Angelika Stillman, who lives on the corner of Locke and Clairmont. As we do Piping Rock, Meadowlake Lane, Wickersham, Overbrook — all of which are open fields when I was born — we watch as the mid-1930s houses are blasted and carried away. New ones, twice the size of the old, replace them. The cottage at 3459 Locke Lane was displaced by 6,000-square-feet of design, sans landscaping. A stucco house dominating the entire lot, save for a circular parking pad in front, replaced the '50s bungalow at 3440. Cars remain there all night. Even in River Oaks, people now park in their front yards.

The Settagast house is gone. The River Oaks Bank and the Huntington Condominiums now fill a field where native plants once thrived. The Hamill's Natechin plantation house on the Boulevard has been expanded, and it is landscaped. Last year, Connie Marmaduke sold her Mediterranean house on Olympia. She feared the buyers would raze her treasure, and they did. Angelika and I dread the time when, at the passing of its present owner, who is more than 90, the house at 3376 Inwood, with its gently classic Mount Vernon façade, the first John Staub house in River Oaks, gets the wrecking ball. What would it be like, we ask, to be a child today in a house on San Felipe Road? The weather here hasn't changed, but everything else has. — Robin McQuarquodale
A FAMILY AFFAIR

Joe CT Chow works for the city of Houston's planning department and is treasurer of the Gee Tuck Sam Tuck Association.

The Gee Tuck Sam Tuck Association is what we call a family association. It's members all share a family name, or a family tie, that goes back to China. Gee Tuck Sam Tuck actually has five family names — Chow, which can also be spelled in English Chou or Jesus or Joe; Wu or Woo; Tsai or Choy or Toy; Yung or Weng; and another Chow, which is spelled the same in Chinese but is different in English but is different Chinese characters, which can also be Tsao or Cho. There are about 12 family associations in Houston, all of them connected by their names. The biggest are the Lee, Chang, Wong, and Po family associations.

The whole idea of the family association was for people who were away from China, and who felt isolated. When I first came to Houston in 1965 as a student, I was that way. I think in 1965 there were about 3,000 Chinese in Houston. I happened to work for a gentleman who is a part of this association, and he sort of took me under his wing. He said, you're Chow, right? I said yes, but I'm from Hong Kong, and most of the organization members were from Canton. But he said they wouldn't know anyway, because I speak very good Cantonese. So I started hanging around with him. If you're a Chow, and you meet another Chow, because you have the same name, even though it's a national name, you go, "Oh, you're from the village next door to me." So you feel a little bit closer to them than to, maybe, the Wong who is from two villages away.

At that time they had the On Leong Association building downtown, right off McKinney and Chartres. Every family association would lease a little room in it and make that the association office. There would be the Gee Association, and then two doors down in the same building would be the Wong Association. On Leong means "trying to settle the people," and when new Chinese would come here, if they didn't know where to go, they'd go to On Leong. If they had language problems, somebody from there would help them out, that kind of thing. And then On Leong would direct them to their own family association, which would take much better care of them.

The Gee Tuck Sam Tuck Association had an area with a kitchen and a dining room, and on Sundays the ladies would cook while the men would play mahjong. That's how they would socialize, because on the other days everybody would be working.

At the On Leong Association on the third floor was a big meeting room, and the meeting room could hold about 400 people. So the family associations decided they wanted to do something to meet other Chinese in other family associations, and they said, well, Chinese New Year is the best time. We can cook a big dinner and invite people. So each family association would take one Sunday after the New Year and say, okay, this Sunday we're going to have a banquet in the meeting room and invite everybody. One week might be Wong, the next week might be Chan, the next week might be Gee Tuck Sam Tuck. For about two and half months, every Sunday you would have a banquet.

On Leong still exists, but they don't have their building anymore. About three years ago they decided to sell it, and the family associations had to move, because the new owner didn't want to rent out the rooms. Some associations got other offices, some just use the home address of one of their officers, like Gee Tuck Sam Tuck uses my home address.

One problem with the family associations today is language. A lot of the second and third and fourth generation don't speak Chinese. The Gee Family has completely turned over to the second generation, who speak only English. Chinese is a very limited second language. But in other associations the elders are in charge, and they want to hold on to the Chinese. A second problem is finances. A lot of the second and third generation don't feel they need to get together with this group of people so much. They're part of the American culture, they have friends who are American. So the only time they really get together is New Year's, when the father says, hey, we're having a family association dinner, you guys got to go. There are still first generation Chinese coming in, but they are more likely to be professionals, well educated, who can speak the language. These are not the sort of people who need much assistance, not the sort of people who would have to search out a family association.

We've been lucky that the tradition of spring banquets has continued. In the 1970s, when the Chinese restaurants got better, a lot of the family associations started moving out to them. At one time we would have 500 members attend, and we'd have to seat people in two shifts to get them all in. This year we had 200.

But we had more at the family dinner this year than last year. There seems to be a little resurgence, because of younger people going back to their roots. It's like with Bobby Moon, who works for Metro. He came over to Mississippi when he was two years old. His father's name was Chow something Moon, and the American immigration official thought, your last name is Moon, when his real last name was Chow, because in China the last name comes first. So Bobby became Bobby Moon instead of Bobby Chow. And I didn't even know he was a Chow, until he came to me and said, "I'm a Chow." And I felt like, we're family. — Interview by Mitchell J. Shields
The Villa de Matel was built for the congregation's move to Houston in 1925. This location was so far out of town, they wouldn't deliver the mail. It was rather swampy here. The young sisters sat at the gate and counted the number of trucks that came in to deliver dirt, to make sure we got all the soil we'd paid for. One of the sisters who did that counting just died.

The Villa, the building itself, is our center point. It reminds us of the women we're in communion with, and of our commitment to serve God's people. The whole building and environment is incarnational. They remind us of God's living presence. The chapel absolutely speaks of beauty, the way light comes through the stained glass windows. It calls us to prayer.

The porches are very important as well. I'm from the South, where you'd sit on the porch to say important things. When I told my father I was becoming a nun, we sat on the front porch to talk. Night is beautiful here too, when you can see the moon and stars. It's wonderful to have this much space, this many trees. What better way to see God's presence on earth than in nature?

This is a beautiful place, a holy space, an oasis in the middle of Houston. Anyone who treasures and values the holiness of God's presence is welcome. I see very spiritual people come in, including non-Christians. I see the reawakened need for silence, which we're learning so much about from the Eastern religions.

Our congregation was founded in Galveston. Texas was missionary territory then. I suppose it still is. The first women who came were from France. They came with the constitution and rules from another congregation. They were told to take that spirit, but to start a new congregation.

Those were courageous missionaries. In the first year, the first Mother Superior, Mother Blondine, contracted yellow fever and died. And in those days, when the sisters said goodbye to their parents, they knew they would never see their family again. That was policy. That's changed now. But they made that sacrifice to serve God.

We survived the 1900 Galveston storm. Every year we remember the ten sisters and 90 orphans we lost. The 1900 storm symbolizes the commitment of the sisters, not only the ones who died, but the sisters who survived. They didn't sit there and do nothing. They were part of the rebuilding of the city. Every year on September 8, all the sisters in the worldwide congregation stop what they're doing to sing "Mary, Queen of the Waves."

Mother Placidus Mulcahy, who was Mother Superior when the Villa was built, had a big say in its design. The architect, Maurice Sullivan, and she had a very good relationship. He was a wonderful architect, but Mother Placidus would have had her view heard. She insisted they drill through each column and fill it with concrete, to make sure the chapel would never fall. That wasn't in the original plan, but she had her mind set.

You didn't say "no" to Mother Superior.

The Villa is the focal point of our congregation worldwide. Last December, we had...
sisters from Kenya, El Salvador, Guatemala, Ireland, and the U.S. come for a meeting. About 176 came. Worldwide we’re a small congregation, only 217 in total, so that was a great gathering.

About 70 people live here. Approximately 50 are in retirement. And the people who work in the various ministries, the hospitals and so on that we run, live here too. We have our archives, our heritage center. We have legislative advocacy programs for the poor. We’re aggressive in pursuing the abolishment of the death penalty, Third World debt reduction, a number of advocacy programs. The sisters who direct these programs live here as well. I live in a little house down the street, so that at the end of the day I can get away from my work.

We’re particularly interested in women’s issues. We help women in every country get as much education as they can. So we’re very involved with the world, but also very contemplative. That’s the balance that we need: to both turn in and look out.

People are terrified of making lifetime commitments now, but I live my own vows one day at a time. It’s very helpful to live in a community. It’s more than just sharing a house with others. You become part of each other’s lives. That’s the goal.

In 1967, when I joined the congregation, my sister was living in Houston. She drove me here on that first day, but she was really afraid for me. “You can turn around. You don’t have to do this,” she kept saying. We saw the big lions by the front steps, and when we rang the bell, we heard a big key unlocking the door. The big door pulled back, and here was this very sedate sister all in black. I’m from a Cajun family, so you can imagine that this place with no noise seemed very strange to me.

They took me upstairs to put on my black uniform, with a little net on my head. Then we went back down to see my sister. She looked stunned. She was sitting right here in this parlor. That was the only room open to the general public at that time.

But my sister actually died here. She developed cancer at 46, and the congregation allowed me to have her at our retirement center. So the congregation became her family too. It was a beautiful experience of community. — Interview by David Theis

Monica Fontenot-Poindexter is president of the Houston chapter of Jack and Jill of America, a members-only social service and cultural club for African-American children ages two through 19. Founded 62 years ago by a small group of Philadelphia mothers, Jack and Jill today has chapters across the United States. Fontenot-Poindexter grew up in Jack and Jill, and today her two sons participate in it.

GROWING INTO SOCIETY

Jack and Jill was one of the reasons why I had a great childhood. It instilled the importance of volunteerism, and of giving back. And for a child, it was also about camaraderie — being around children whose parents all shared the same philosophy, about being successful, giving back, trying to be the best at whatever your vocation was. It gave you a sense of your individual importance to society.

Jack and Jill is a children’s organization, but the membership goes to the mother, not the child. There is no major underwriter for the monthly activities. If we want to do some quality programming, we have to do it ourselves. That’s just how it is.

I started when I was about four. The mothers prepared activities for us. A lot of times we got dressed up. I probably have a picture of myself in a cute velvet outfit with a lace collar, standing in front of Jones Hall sometime in the 1970s. We’d go to the opera, the ballet, then afterwards we’d go to the Green Room. You had a sense of, “I’m special, I’m part of a special group of people who do fun things.” That’s why they stressed volunteerism so much. We learned at an early age that “to whom much is given, much is expected.”

As a teen in Jack and Jill, you’re responsible for raising money for our charitable foundation. Our favorite method was to have a teen dance instead of, say, a car wash. So everyone knew about us, because our parties were great. There might also have been some animosity, unfortunately. Some children might have wanted to be members, but it isn’t simply a matter of saying, “Hi, I’m interested in Jack and Jill, I want to join.” If the mother wasn’t interested, or didn’t have the resources, or whatever, then it wouldn’t happen. There are some who are devastated, saying, “They’re elitist,” and don’t want any part of it. But others become part of Jack and Jill as adults.

In June the teens will have their annual conference. All the kids in the region will get together and elect officers. It’s like a miniature political convention. In 1978 I was at a national convention in Florida and met Jesse Jackson for the first time. The mayor of Dallas, Ron Kirk, grew up in Jack and Jill and was a regional teen president. Dr. Cornel West, a professor at Harvard, also grew up in Jack and Jill. So did Debbie Allen.

In 1980 the National Convention was in Houston at the old Shamrock Hotel. There were at least 300 teenagers there. They always had teen speaking contests. It was one of those things your mother forced you to do. You picked your theme, you wrote your whole speech. It usually included references to African-Americans who had made contributions to society. Someone taught you about delivery and presentation, how to make your entrance.

The first time I did it, I remember thinking, “I’ve created something I’m proud of. However, if I could get a proxy I would definitely get out of this!” But after you finished, even if you messed up, you weren’t jeered. And then there were those children who would get up and mesmerize the crowd. You’d say, wow, she’s going to be the next Barbara Jordan. And often those kids would go on to be prominent.

In the Houston chapter, we have our debutante ball every two years. It is a culminating event. There are lots of teas, luncheons, and parties honoring the debutantes. One of mine was at the Brownstone. At the ball, each girl makes a bow as the master of ceremonies reads about her high school accomplishments, travels, the name of her college, her major. It was a major moment.

Now that my sons are in Jack and Jill, a lot of the values are still the same. It’s a traditionalist organization. Teens still have parties and picnics. You still know there are these high standards that are not ideals, but something you have to achieve or surpass.

With the advances in technology, though, some of our activities changed. For example, we’re all given the task to find activities connected to computers so the children can get more exposure to them. And when I look back at Up The Hill, which is the Jack and Jill yearbook, a lot of those pictures had us in little suits, all dressed up. If there was an Easter Egg hunt, the little girls would be in frilly dresses, Maryjanes, and bonnets. The boys would be in knickers. Now that my sons are in Jack and Jill, they understand if they’re going to a reception, they get their suit out. But if it’s a picnic, they’re going to be wearing jeans. — Interview by Claudia Kolker
I remember when they laid the first stone for the new building of the Our Lady of Guadalupe Church in 1923. We had a big fiesta. People were working to get money to build the church. The people would make tamales and sell them to make money. Our Lady of Guadalupe has been the center of my life. Nobody better touch Guadalupe.

I can’t imagine the neighborhood without the church. It’s why I’m here. When I got married, I told my husband, “You have to promise to never take me away from my mother or from Guadalupe.” Living with my mother, we had four kids. Our family was growing, and my husband wanted to buy a home. He wanted a better house, a better neighborhood. When my mother died, my husband said, “Now it’s time to move.” I said, “If you can move Guadalupe brick by brick, let’s go.”

My grandmother and mother were very devout. My grandmother would say, “Get up and get ready, let’s go to Mass.” We’d go to 6:30 Mass. Then we’d come back and get breakfast, then go to Guadalupe school. My husband went to Guadalupe school too, and so did my 13 children. Now five generations of my family has graduated from Guadalupe.

I was born October 19, 1919, in Matuhaul, San Luis Potosi, Mexico. My mother brought me and my sister and my grandmother here when I was a year and ten months old. We came first to be with my uncle, my mother’s brother. He had come in 1918. At the end of World War I they were bringing people to work at the Humble refinery. They cut the trees and cleared the land to build the refinery. We went to Baytown to live with him, but it was so far to go from Baytown to Houston to go to church that we decided to move to Houston. This was in 1921. There was no church in Baytown. We were already going every Sunday to Guadalupe, in the old building.

We had a nice neighborhood around here then. There were a lot of houses. Across from Commerce, they had a factory to make burlap sacks and sack potatoes in. My mother used to work there. We used to have the A&P on Canal, but we called it “El Colorado” for the red fringe on the building. There was a drugstore, Canal Pharmacy. But there was nothing for kids to do. Mexican kids couldn’t go farther than Delano Street, at Settegast Park. Our kids weren’t allowed to go there.

There were a lot of whites living here then. I’ve lived in this house 54 years; I bought it from Jews named Sigfield. Whites lived next door too. First it was a white neighborhood. But by the 1920s and 1930s there were a lot of Mexicans living here. By the 1940s you could say that it was a Mexican neighborhood.

The Sociedad Mutualista started on this block. My uncle belonged. They’d have dances and meetings. But my mother wouldn’t let me go. I didn’t go to movies. I didn’t even have a radio. We only had a Victrola. We’d play Mexican music and comedy records. When I was 16 or 17, my uncle took me to the movies, but he’d get the third degree from my mother. She was very protective. She wouldn’t let me work. You could say she was very strict, but that’s how things were.

We played outside in the yard with friends. My uncle did take me to the Azteca theater on Congress. And there were nightclubs. Mexico Bello was here the longest. It was on the north side. My uncle bought me a beautiful dress to take me to a dance.

Grandma said, “You better ask her mom.” Mom said, “You’d better return that dress.”

They didn’t let me have a boyfriend. When I got married in 1940, we went to live with my mother. The priest had to come and ask for my hand. They used to do that. I remember the priest coming to ask for my sister’s hand when she got married. I got married in Guadalupe. After church there was food in my mother-in-law’s house. It was very private.

After I got married, my husband and I used to walk to the Azteca and go to the movies. But my husband wouldn’t let me work. He said, “There’s a lot of discrimination out there, I don’t want you to experience it.” He said he was run out of a restaurant once. They told him, “We don’t serve Mexicans here.”

We used to have big, beautiful pastorelas in church. This was back in 1926, 1927. We’d have devils, angels, everything. A parishioner did this, Mr. Gonzalo Lopez. He also made plays about Our Lady, and about the good thief who died with Jesus. But after he got up in age, nobody did it anymore. We didn’t do a posada this year. We’re getting old, and the younger people are very busy.

My grandmother kept the traditions. But my mother was working, so we let some traditions go. They used to give candies to people when they came to church on Candelaria (February 2), but Father Steffes doesn’t know that. He doesn’t know all the traditions, and nobody reminded him to bring the candies. But it’s still a very Mexican church.

People come from Tomball, Conroe, Pearland, Pasadena to attend our church. I think they come because of the fact that it honors Our Lady of Guadalupe, the patroness of Mexico. It was the first church in Houston to honor her. I stayed in church all night the last December 12 [Guadalupe’s feast day]. I told my husband not to look for me. I wanted to stay all through the night, to see what happens. — Interview by David Theis
**A Visit to Bollywood**

Abdul Bhagani manages the West Bellfort Cinema 5, one of two Houston theaters that feature Hindi and Urdu language movies from India and Pakistan.

In California, you have Bollywood. In India, you have Bollywood. And in Pakistan you have Lollywood.

Bollywood is what they call the movie industry in Bombay; Lollywood is near Karachi. Movies are important in South Asia. They make more of them there than anywhere else in the world except America, and maybe Hong Kong, though I think we have more than Hong Kong. Indian and Pakistani movies are popular not just in their own countries. Countries like Nepal and Sri Lanka depend on Indian movies, too. They're also big in Arab countries. The culture there finds a lot of the American movies too racy. The Indian movies are more family oriented. There are a lot of musicals, with singing and dancing.

Houston is a very big market for South Asian movies. New York is very big, and California is too. Generally, those are considered the one and two markets. But in some cases, when we call the movie distributors to give them our week's attendance, we rank right behind New York. In the U.S., when it comes to attendance at Indian and Pakistani movies, it's generally either New York, Houston, California, or New York, California, Houston.

There are two movie theaters in town that show South Asian movies exclusively. The other one is the oldest, it's been around for 20 years or more, but we're the biggest. When my brother came to this theater about three years ago, it was part English, part Hindi. He saw that there were hardly any people at the Hindi movies, and thought that was an opportunity. He knew that there are around 200,000 to 250,000 South Asians in Houston. My brother basically looked at the location and saw five big screens, and thought he could make something of it. So he talked to the owner, who was looking to make some changes, and offered to take over; and he did. We made it all Hindi. In the first two or three months there were maybe seven or ten cars parked outside every night. Recently, we had a movie that was sold out for two weeks straight. Every single show was full, the parking lot was full, and the side streets were full. So it has come a long way in three years.

We don't say we're an Indian theater or a Pakistani theater. We say we're South Asian, because it's Pakistanis, Indians, people from Bangladesh, people from Nepal and Sri Lanka. They all come, because there's a common bond in the language and the culture. Even though somebody may not be from India, they love to see Indian and Pakistani movies.

We're like a hub for the South Asian community. We provide them entertainment, which is a number one priority in their lifestyles. The reason for that is that it's the only way they can keep in touch with the culture, and keep in touch with each other. They go to their schools, work, jobs, and all that, and they get spread out. The American life is so fast, that if someone lives on the west side of town, and somebody else lives on the north side of town, they don't have a chance to get together. So they'll say, why don't we get together at the movies? So it's a meeting point in that sense.

It can be hard to know just how big the South Asian community is. In the late 1800s, people from India and Pakistan migrated; they went to Africa, to Arabia, to South America, to places like Trinidad. Then a lot of those migrated to America. So what happens is that when people give you numbers, when they say that the figure for South Asians is 175,000 or so, they're just looking at those who came directly from India or Pakistan, not at another 60,000 to 80,000 who stopped in another country along the way, but kept their Indian identity. We try to cater to that population as well. I'm part of that population. I have never been to India or Pakistan. My parents migrated to East Africa before I was born, then we left Africa in the 1970s to come to the United States.

On average we have a new movie once a week. Sometimes we get two a week. There's no way we could show them all, because there are so many that are made. Recently, though, because of the earthquake in India, production has slowed down; all the stars are out raising money for charities. So they actually stopped making movies in certain sections of the country.

We get very few people from non-Indian backgrounds who want to see Indian movies. There are some; I recall one case where a man was planning to travel to India, so he came to see the movies to get an idea of what the country was like. He was jumping from movie to movie. When you look around Houston, you see people who are in a Western mode of thinking. They send their kids to Western schools, their kids take up Western culture. They want their children to be part of the Western world. But when it really comes down to it, they want the best of both East and West. Mom and pop remain attached to their roots. And they'd like a way to let their kids know about them. The movies play a big part in that. — Interview by Mitchell J. Shields
I arrived in Houston from Poland in October of 1938 with my parents and my brother. I was seven, and the Houston in which I found myself was still essentially a small town, having a population of approximately 375,000. We immediately moved into what was then the city's equivalent of the Lower East Side of New York, an area now south of I-45 bounded by McGowen, Holman, Austin, and Hutchins streets. It was a part of town inhabited primarily by immigrants, lower middle-class Jews, and blue-collar workers.

We originally lived in the upper story of a small duplex on Chenevert across from Elizabeth Baldwin Park, and every Monday night during the summer there was a free movie shown in the park. I still remember how thrilled I was with the movies, which were essentially serials, and which left us hanging at the end of each episode, breathless for the next Monday night to see how the characters would get out of their predicaments. In addition to the movies, the park was equipped with Ping-Pong tables—I became quite a good player—and a basketball court.

After living on Chenevert for several years we moved to a bungalow at 1710 Dennis, which was across the street from a tiny delicatessen that my father bought and which he operated during World War II. A substantial number of Jews lived in this area, and my life was bounded by what was essentially a Jewish neighborhood. I attended Allen Elementary, located at the corner of Chenevert and Cleburne, and then Johnson Junior High. At Johnson, after my regular classes were done I attended Hebrew classes in the same building; I also attended Sunday school at Congregation Beth Israel, which was at the corner of Holman and Crawford. My parents did not own a car, nor was there a need for a car, as I was able to walk to all of these places.

The tiny store in which, except for the Jewish holidays, our entire family worked seven days a week, and where in the back we ate all of our meals, was not just a place I worked every day after school, on weekends, and during school vacations. Rather, as I think about it now, it was an additional classroom. During World War II, we had the only delicatessen in the city. Grocery stores in those days did not have deli sections, and our store was truly a miniature Jewish community center, a meeting ground for Houston Jews from all walks of life. I can still vividly remember the crowds on Saturday and Sunday mornings. You could hardly get into the store. In its own way, our store was as much a Jewish institution and fixture in Houston as Lindy's was in New York.

It was in that store that I listened daily as Jews gathered together and talked of plans to help other Jews—this one to escape to America, that one to overcome an unexpected financial crisis, and a third one to recover from some other of life's bitter experiences. My entire life was bound up in this neighborhood: public school, religious school, Sunday school, work, and all my friends. Everything was done in the neighborhood, and there was no thought of any need to go outside it for anything. The area in which I lived had its own motion picture theater, the Sunset Theater, drugstore, and barbershop. Even our family physician had his office in the neighborhood.

The only time I can recall leaving the neighborhood was to get on the bus and go to the Public Library downtown. From my earliest years I was fascinated by books, and I remember vividly how proud I was to have a library card and to come home on the bus from the main branch of the library with a stack of books. Other than this one adventure, I don't recall going downtown for any reason until I became at least 13. The idea of going to a restaurant outside the neighborhood was unheard of.

As I reflect now upon the lives my children have lived, I realize that the Houston I remember has disappeared completely. All of the grocery stores now have deli sections, and the Jewish community itself is spread through the city and beyond. The idea today of a young person walking to school, Hebrew School, or Sunday school, is beyond belief. The neighborhoods in this city are few and far between, and the close-knit community life that I led as a youngster has disappeared. In almost every respect, it was truly a different life. — Jack Lapin
LEARNING TO BE BRITISH

Grainne O'Reilly-Askew is headmistress of the British School of Houston, which opened last September at 4211 Watonga Boulevard.

The British School of Houston is part of a private, for-profit organization that has two other schools in the United States. The first was in Washington, and the second was in Boston. Houston was not expected to be the third, but when people learned what we were doing, there was a considerable clamor to have us open here. There has been a problem, primarily in the oil companies, in getting British senior executives to relocate here, because the executives didn't want to live in an area where there wasn't a British school.

Almost anywhere in the world you move you can find schools that operate using the British system. The only exception has been the United States. The chap who came up with the idea of opening British schools in America, Bob Findley, owned an education relocation company in England. He had been the head of two British schools abroad, and he began to realize there were considerable problems trying to place senior executives in America because of the lack of British system schooling. He approached the British department for education about this, and they were very supportive of the idea morally, but there was no money. The French fund education abroad, but the British don't. So he realized if he came to America, he would have to do so as a private venture.

The British school system is not really terribly easy to dip in and out of. There are certain building blocks that one has to have. If a child has been outside the system for a while, it can be difficult for him or her to slot back in, and that's what concerns a lot of parents. They want to know that if after a few years in Houston they return to the United Kingdom, their child can slot right in at a U.K. school.

According to the local consulate, at any one time there are about 40,000 British living in Houston. These are citizens of the United Kingdom who will be staying here for a period of time and will then most likely either go back to the U.K. or move on to another country and continue to be part of the international community. Those are the people we serve. Our students are about 70 percent British, and the other 30 percent is international and American. I think about 12 percent of our students are American citizens, which is much less than in our other two schools. The Washington School is about 33 percent American, 33 percent international, and 33 percent U.K. And Boston is nearly all American. So in that way, Houston is unusual.

We have just over 100 students at the moment. We opened with 75, and we have over 150 registered for September. So we're growing incredibly quickly. I've already had to make two trips back to the U.K. this year to recruit staff. The class teachers are pretty much all British, because they have to know the system. My French specialist is a native speaker, so obviously she couldn't be either British or American. My music teacher is American, and a couple of my assistants are American. But that's about it.

Everyone else on the staff is British.

All of our resources and supplies are ordered from the U.K. and shipped over. The classrooms look like British classrooms. When we bought this school, that wasn't the case. Its environment was not typically British. It had been a high school, and it was painted battleship gray. There wasn't much natural light, and there were corridors and corridors of lockers. Well, we don't have any of that at home. We tend to have light, airy classrooms. Even our older buildings, our Victorian buildings, were built with a lot of natural light. They have very long, multiple windows in each class. So we had to do a lot of work to really make the building appropriate for teaching young children, to give it that sort of welcoming feel that a British primary school in particular would have. We repainted the walls with lots of bright colors, added windows to classrooms, took out the lockers and put in open storage cubicles at the child's level. As much as we could, we tried to make it look like a school you would walk into in the U.K. The only thing we don't do here that we would do at a similar school in England is RE, religious education. There, we have to do it by law. Here, we can't do it by law.

We really do have delightful children here. And it's interesting, because they've all shared the same experience. They have all come from either the U.K. or somewhere in Europe, somewhere in the world, and they all know what it's like to be uprooted. All the children have to wear a school uniform— it's shorts or trousers for boys and girls, and polo shirts and a cap. The girls may wear a little summer dress instead if they choose. And there's a red cardigan. So it's red, white, and blue. It's a nice uniform, very practical.

We feel that we are beginning to be a focal point for the British community. There hasn't really been a focal point before, because we're an assimilated group, generally speaking. What we tended to find was that one would have a large group of parents who knew each other socially, but only because they all happened to be with the same oil company. But now people are making links through the school rather than just through their professional groups. Also, the Daughters of the British Empire are discussing making us a focus of their activities, you know, using our site. Obviously, we are still very new, but we're hoping that we will become more and more a center of the community, a little island of something British in Texas. —Interview by Mitchell J. Shields
The Manila Symphony

Shirley Virey, a native of the Philippines, is assistant nurse manager of labor and delivery at LBJ Hospital. Some 28,000 Filipino nurses came to the U.S. in the late 1980s and early 1990s under a visa program meant to ease a nationwide nursing shortage. Those who came to Houston joined other Filipino nurses who had already made themselves an integral part of the city's medical community. The profusion of Filipinos working in area hospitals led one medical student to term the sound of their voices Houston's Manila symphony.

There are maybe 50,000 Filipinos in Houston. We're all scattered. There's a few Filipinos in every subdivision. There are quite a few in my neighborhood. They work in different fields.

I was one of the first Filipino nurses in Houston. I came to Jeff Davis Hospital in the early '80s with four other nurses. There were not many Filipinos living here then. We all four lived together, but we were so lonely, so homesick. After eight months my husband came too.

Every year after that they recruited more and more, and the groups got bigger. The groups would have maybe 20 nurses. Most of them went to Jeff Davis and Ben Taub. The groups kept coming until maybe the late 1980s. Then they stopped hiring unless you already had a visa. They didn't want to go to the trouble of getting you a visa.

There was a shortage of nurses here then, and there are a lot of nurses back home, lots of nursing schools. Maybe they say we're good nurses. We work in labor and delivery a lot, and mostly on the night shift. There are only three Filipinos on day shift with me.

We speak Tagalog at work only if the group is all Filipino. Sometimes Tagalog is useful when we speak to a Spanish patient. Tagalog is almost like broken Spanish. We say "kumusta," which is "como estás." I am from the north of the Philippines; the dialect of the south is more like Spanish. Still, people tell me I speak good Spanish because we also say "cabeza" in Tagalog. I just say "What?"

We have associations to help us stay connected to Filipino life. They started to form in the mid-'80s. My husband and I belong to the Filipino-American Association. There's also a Tagalog Association. During big holidays we have picnics in the park. We have a Christmas party. It's nice to be away from work and to socialize. Most of my friends are Filipino. They are my extended family.

We have two or three Filipino newspapers printed here in Houston, and now the papers from back home are on the Internet, so it's much easier to stay in touch. My parents live here now, so I only go back every five years or so. If I go back in summer it's really bad. It's much hotter and more humid than here, and now I'm used to air conditioning. Only the people with money have air conditioning in the Philippines.

We still keep some traditions. We go to church and parade our saint patron saints. During Christmas season we go from one church to another until Christmas day. That's called Simbang Gabi, and it starts on December 15. We're Catholics, but there are no churches in Houston that cater mostly to Filipinos.

Some businesses do, though. There are Filipino restaurants near the Medical Center, because of the nurses. On the north side, where I live, there are two Filipino restaurants, and three stores owned by Filipino businessmen who sell all kinds of things. I mostly cook Filipino foods, like adobo, which is chicken or pork and soy sauce with some garlic. The one Americans like is pancit, noodles with vegetables and shrimp. And they love our egg rolls. It's easy to find the ingredients.

And there are a lot of videos. You can watch Tagalog movies all day if you want to. One restaurant even has karaoke in Tagalog. But Houston is home now. We became American citizens. It was an easy choice. — Interview by David Theis
A WORLD CONTAINED

Etan Minvis, a native of Brooklyn, owns a property management company. He and his wife Valerie, together with their five children, (seen on the cover) live in Houston’s South Braeswood Orthodox Jewish community.

On all the other days of the week, I’m a typical American. Then my whole life changes on the Sabbath, which starts at sundown Friday. The exact hour changes each week; I have it in my Palm Pilot. I plan each Friday in advance so I leave work with plenty of time to get out of my car before sundown. On a typical Friday, you’ll get home and see other Orthodox people walking throughout the neighborhood — walking, because they can’t drive, work, or create anything new on the Sabbath.

People will be hurrying to drop off cakes or presents at each other’s houses. In summer, everyone has been baking challah (bread for the Sabbath) and the air smells delicious. Then it becomes like a Broadway show: you’ll see one person on the sidewalk, then a couple, then more and more join them shoulder to shoulder on the way to synagogue. They had to make the sidewalk extra wide on this street because of all the people who walk together.

You don’t see kids out playing or biking anywhere. They’re all bathing and getting ready to go to synagogue. The adults are also bathing, and shaving. The lights in everyone’s houses are set to go on automatically. The water goes into an urn because you can’t boil water on the Sabbath. A warming pan goes on the stove to heat food, because you can’t turn on the burner on the Sabbath.

Back in the early 1980s, Fondren Southwest was loaded with Jews. There were Jews in the oil and gas industry, South African Jews, Reform and Conservative Jews. But there was no Orthodox enclave. Then at one point, about ten young Orthodox families from another part of Houston got together, and with a local outreach rabbi, said, “There’s a new, trendy area, with gorgeous houses, why don’t we start an Orthodox Jewish synagogue?” That’s when they began moving here, to the Northfield subdivision.

Today the South Braeswood area has three Orthodox synagogues within walking distance of each other. There are probably 175 Orthodox Jewish families in this community altogether. I work in the Memorial area, but it doesn’t matter where I work, the point is that I have to live within walking distance of my synagogue. I even know a guy who works in San Antonio but commutes here because he has to be here for the Sabbath.

The reason is that in order to have a functional Orthodox Jewish community, you need certain amenities. At the absolute minimum, you need at least ten Jewish men — a minyan, which is a quorum according to Jewish law. You don’t even need a rabbi; you can get together and pray in somebody’s house.

For community longevity, though, you want a rabbi. And you need good Jewish day schools, access to Kosher foods, Orthodox synagogues. And you need something called an eruv. To understand what that is, you have to know the difference between Orthodox and other forms of Judaism. We believe that Moses didn’t spend 40 days and 40 nights on Mount Sinai only receiving the Ten Commandments. When he came down from Mount Sinai there was written law, but there was also an oral law, given directly from God, because Moses had a million questions.

These laws are like addendums or oral traditions. These traditions were handed down over the centuries until they were finally codified in year 200 of the Common Era.

Part of the oral law concerns keeping the Sabbath: you weren’t allowed to leave the city limits. Within the limits, you could do certain things like carrying, as long as you didn’t work. The details are intricate, but basically within the city limits some of the strictest Sabbath rules could be relaxed. In ancient times those limits were set by a wall. Today, we don’t have walled cities. So instead an eruv is constructed to permit people to carry on the Sabbath outside their homes. The eruv functions as a symbolic modern-day wall.

In our community, the eruv is defined by a closed circuit of wires, telephone poles, gates, and other off-ground barriers. This resolves the number one issue on the Sabbath: women who want to push baby carriages. Outside an eruv, you may not carry or transport anything. Without an eruv, Orthodox women with kids are essentially stuck at home for 25 hours a week.

When I start home from work, I cross the eruv right near my house. You can see the string at the top of a pole — it’s a fishing line. That’s part of the eruv. I put it up the week I moved into the neighborhood, about five years ago. Normally, there will be a sign or flag to say that the eruv is up. In Brooklyn, there’s an eruv hotline you’re supposed to call if you see it’s down anywhere. But here, because it mostly follows telephone lines and other natural boundaries, it’s hardly ever down. The rabbi has an e-mail list, and on Thursdays he sends out an e-mail to let the community know if the eruv is up or down.

We’ve got about an hour before Sabbath starts tonight. Just now, a friend called me. He needs a computer-generated prescription. They wanted to find out if my non-Jewish housekeeper could come over later to push the “enter” button on their computer. How did they know this was permissible? They called the rabbi first.

I see my neighbors seven days a week in some capacity. You’ll see them at the five or six Kosher restaurants in town; especially the King David Deli or Saba’s pizzeria. You see the people the next day at synagogue — it’s not just a religious center, it’s a community center. And because the Orthodox Jews who live in Houston are often far away from their families, we are always eating at each other’s houses. At Sabbath dinner we sit here at the table, which faces the street, and see neighbors walking by constantly.

Even if it’s 100 degrees out, they’re always walking, and I’m waving, waving, motioning them to come in: “Come join us. Have some tea.” — Interview by Claudia Kaiker