

THE OLD SIXTH WARD HISTORIC DISTRICT

(Or as We Used to Call It, Del Sesto)

ALL OF US KNEW ABOUT THE ALLEN BROTHERS, WHO WE BELIEVED CREATED the wards, Houston's first six districts. My father, my aunt, and my grandmother talked about them as if the Allen Brothers were people we'd known, or people in the Bible maybe.

My teacher, however, didn't know about them. Isn't that strange? When I asked her, she said that as far as she knew, it was Sam Houston who'd made our city. There was no mention of any Allen Brothers in the teacher's edition of our textbook. "What were their first names?" she asked me. I didn't know. They were the Allen Brothers. They didn't need first names.

My family wasn't from the same kind of people as my teacher. Therefore, the Allen Brothers were added to the list of subjects we assumed were known only to those like us. For instance, we knew that the proper name for flip-flops was chanclas, no matter what my teacher called them. Our grocery store sold cow heads, and my teacher's did not. We knew people who lived in jail, and no one in school ever talked about jail.

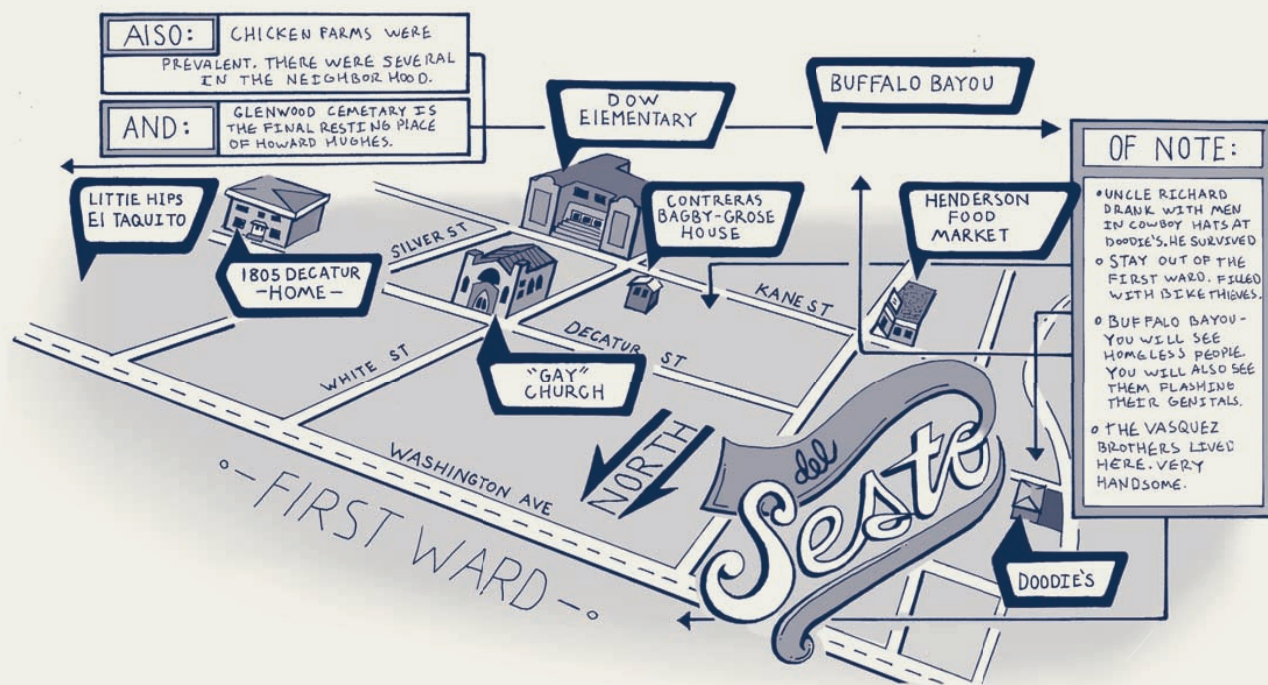
And we knew the Allen Brothers had existed. There was proof: when we

walked downtown, we came to that place called Allen's Landing. That was where they'd landed, my grandmother said, and I guess she meant on their boats.

Then there was the street called Allen Parkway, where I guess they used to park their boats or horses. After landing and parking, they must've built One Allen Center and Two Allen Center, the giant skyscrapers made of blue glass that hid underground sandwich shops. It made sense that my teacher didn't know any of this. Whenever I went to the Underground, the only people there were businessmen and businessladies, and the other kids like us who walked downtown.

The Allen Brothers, in their wisdom, had created six separate but equal wards—six worlds, actually, that were very close in distance, but light years away as far as I was concerned.

Across our northern border was the First Ward, a maze of rice factories and train tracks and children who liked to steal our bikes. On the other side of Downtown was the Second Ward, where ghosts and prostitutes gathered



on Polk Street, according to my cousin, who'd been forced to move there after marriage. Sometimes we visited her and roller-skated among the pit bulls at Eastwood Park, but we always came home before nightfall.

The Third Ward, Fourth Ward, and Fifth Ward were places we could never go. They had their own people, the Black People, who would be well within their rights to kick our asses if we ever crossed into their neighborhoods. And we were expected to patrol our own borders in the same way. It was understood, like the treaties we heard about at school that were drawn up between the White People and everybody else.

Lastly, the Allen Brothers made the Sixth Ward, which was my ward and which those in the know referred to as Del Sesto. The day after that, I suppose, the Allen Brothers rested.

Let's get our bearings now. Establish our boundaries. Own up to the truth.

The Old Sixth Ward is west of Downtown. It is defined, clockwise from the north, by Washington Avenue, Houston Avenue, Memorial Drive, and Glenwood Cemetery. It wasn't actually built by the brothers Augustus Chapman and John Kirby Allen. They were the founders of Houston, yes, but according to the Texas State Historical Association, the Sixth Ward wasn't named until 1876, 37 years after Wards First through Fourth. About 1858, it was platted by Mr. W. R. Baker as cheap homesteads for his railroad employees and for German farmers who needed places to live in town.

Did any of that matter, though? Not to me. Not then. Why would I research the Germans who built the Victorians on my street if they weren't in my teachers' textbooks and their houses were now peeling and sagging after a century of use? I didn't wonder who'd built the brick building I lived in; I only knew that our house was built in 1930 because the newspapers they'd used for insulation were printed with that date and peeking through parts of the ceiling.

I was living in modern times—the practically Space Age 1980s—and struggling through lower-classdom. The Allen Brothers were a good enough local mythology for me back then—someone in the sky to thank when the view of Downtown was particularly fine.

I used to sit in my room on the second story of our red brick house at 1805 Decatur, looking at the sliver of Washington Avenue visible between my green flowered curtains. Every evening, the nightclub called El Foco Rojo flashed its namesake red light and played loud music, alternating between ranchera favorites and Rick James' "Superfreak." Next to El Foco Rojo was the old fire station where I waited for the bus to take me to Reagan High School. Across from the fire station was the free clinic where I'd waited three hours to have my broken nose fixed before giving up and settling for permanent crookedness.

Throughout those air conditioning-less nights of 1989, I fantasized about a new Washington Avenue. I imagined the long stretch of car dealerships and taquerias replaced with coffee shops, fancy boutiques, and nightclubs with more than one English song on their jukeboxes. I wished it would be transformed into a place just as exciting and exotic as Houston's other long "W" street: Westheimer Road. I literally used to dream about it, so often I was sure my dreams were prophetic.

The year is 2011. El Foco Rojo is now a Pilates studio. The old fire station is an office where you go to inquire about the townhomes on that block. The

free clinic is an art gallery. And I can still see it all from the upper northeast window of my father's house when I drive in from the suburbs to visit him. Afterwards, I might meet friends at the nearby wine bars that used to be nothing at all.

As Mimi Swartz put it in *Texas Monthly*, "The once forgotten corridor emerges as an eclectic enclave." But I always remembered the corridor, so must excuse myself from her collective.

My wish for Washington Avenue came true. I didn't understand what I was wishing for.

There's a Belgian restaurant on Washington Avenue called The Broken Spoke. Local folklore says it's owned by half of the former husband-wife team who owned Café Montrose until Hurricane Ike. They divorced and sold that café. Then the wife opened Jeannine's Bistro and the husband

opened The Broken Spoke, and the two restaurants now compete for the discretionary income of Houston's crepe connoisseurs. Interesting. Both of them are on the "restaurants to try" list I keep on my iPhone.

But that's not why I'm Googling The Broken Spoke today. No, I'm trying to figure out what it used to be when I was a kid. I remember it so clearly: the deer heads on the wall and the waitresses serving tostadas under neon Tecate signs. The family who owned it was really into jigsaw puzzles. They'd work on big one-thousand-piece puzzles at the table by the register, putting in pieces here and there when business was slow. Their completed puzzles—Big Ben, the Eiffel Tower, a cottage garden—were rubber-cemented to poster boards and hung above the glass case

that held Chiclets gum and leche quemada.

I remember every single thing about that place except its name. Did it start with a T? We used to eat there every week. I went there with my first serious boyfriend on our first serious date, only 22 years ago. Luckily, I have a computer and a connection to the Internet. I do an online search for "Broken Spoke," then search for the physical address.

I find a few dispatches from disappointed strangers posted two years ago. They're sad that Little Hip's Diner no longer exists. Little Hip's Diner was what existed after my restaurant closed, but before The Broken Spoke opened. I used to drive by it eight or ten years ago, on the way to visit my dad's house. But I never went in. I wonder, when the people who ate at Little Hip's get older and forget its name, will they feel as faithless as I do now?

Closer to the Sixth Ward's core, on the corner of Henderson and Kane, there's a neighborhood grocery-slash-convenience store. When I was in kindergarten, it was called Garcia's and featured a butcher shop in back. Mr. Garcia himself cut the meat. I used to walk there—three blocks—and purchase sliced ham and cheddar cheese, sometimes a quarter pound of headcheese, on behalf of my aunt. I'd buy her a pack of "Benson & Hedges Menthol Lights 100s," too, chanting the syllables every step of the way in order to get it right. If I came home with the right cigarettes, I'd earn the reward of being allowed to keep the change. I'd use that change to purchase a Snickers or a Moon Pie on my subsequent trip to Garcia's.

When I was 10 or 12, Garcia's was purchased by Uncle Buddy, the first black man I'd ever seen in the confines of our neighborhood. He was nice—generous with the candy. He rechristened the store in his own name, just like

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the used car dealership he owned on Washington Avenue. The butcher shop became more of a grill with burgers and sandwiches. But Uncle Buddy didn't keep the store for more than a few years.

He sold it to a Vietnamese family whose name I never learned because they called the store, generically, Henderson Market. The grill became known for its "fried rice with pork," which seemed like such a delicacy to us at the time. We ordered it for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. We were addicted to the marinated pork, which I now know is *thit nuong* because I can now order it anywhere in Houston.

But back then, that first year of fried rice with pork, I knew nothing. That was the year that we learned not all Asian people were the same, even though we called them all "Chinese" or "Oriental." Henderson's was owned by the Vietnamese family, and Payless Market, the new grocery on Union Street, was owned by Koreans. And neither family would tolerate being confused with the other. So I learned the difference, just as I'd learned from my classmates at Dow Elementary the difference between Mexicans born in Mexico and Mexicans born here. I understood what it meant to be proud of one's country of origin right there in our neighborhood of houses built by Germans.

I believe that Henderson's Market passed through a few more hands between 1990 and 2000, the decade when I lived in not-Houston. For the moment it's still called Henderson's, and a Vietnamese family uses the back of the shop to make *banh mi*.

I know for certain that right at this very moment, just as when I was a kindergartener buying cigarettes in 1976, a Mister Carmen Frias is standing outside that store, having a beer and a chat with his friends. Some forces resist changes such as the cycling of gentrification. I imagine these men will be there drinking after the sun goes nova.

If you know the cycle of gentrification, you won't be surprised to hear that the gays had almost as much claim to the Sixth Ward as the Hispanics back in the 70s, 80s, and 90s. They even had their own church, which I used to call "the fag church," just like the rest of the Hispanic kids and just like an ignorant brat.

The gay church was shaped the normal way, but had strange windows. Instead of mosaic-like stained-glass saints or doves, its windows were a greenish blur. I wondered if that was meant to signify the congregation's homosexuality, but my grandmother said it was because they weren't Catholic.

Two or three Sunday mornings in a row, I walked very slowly down Decatur at Mass time, watching from the corner of my second grader's eye. What did I see? Two white men exiting a car and walking into the gay church together, almost close enough to hold hands. Then two white women doing the same. Then more: male couples, female couples, but also men and women walking alone.

After three Sundays of seeing this, I became bored by these gay people and their churchgoing. So I stopped worrying about them, along with all my friends.

I googled that church in 2011. It used to be the First Baptist Tabernacle, built in what one website tells me is the Gothic Revival Style. The building I remember is still there at 1919 Decatur. It's now an architect's office, but it remains church-shaped, greenish windows and all.

There's absolutely nothing online that describes it as a church for gays. Maybe I was wrong about that. Maybe we imagined it, all my friends and I. But the memory of exotic mystery and then blasé acceptance remains.

What else doesn't change? Dow School doesn't change, really, even though it has done quite a bit of shape-shifting and isn't technically a school anymore.

Dow Elementary was built in 1912 for the railroad workers' kids. Between its inception and 1991, Dow was attended by the children of German, Italian, Polish, Swedish, Irish, French, Swiss, Mexican, and Vietnamese immigrants. My parents were born here, so I wasn't technically an immigrants' kid, but Dow let me hang around for kindergarten and first grade in 1976 and 1977.

While I was learning from my *We Go Together* reader in Ms. Williams' class, a woman named Alice Valdez was starting an organization called MECA—Multicultural Education and Counseling through the Arts—four blocks away on the grounds of St. Joseph Church. In a small peach-colored building called Guadalupe House, she oversaw music and art lessons, tutoring sessions, summer musicals, and a sliding-fee-scale summer program for the neighborhood children. I went to MECA, too, after school and

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on weekends, from 1986 to 1990, when Ms. Valdez personally drove me to the University of Texas for my freshman year.

In 1993, a much more expansive MECA moved to the historic Dow School building. With the help of the Sixth Ward Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone board (TIRZ #13), the organization began the process of restoring it.

If you go to MECA today in 2011, and climb its 40-odd cement steps past the soda-can sculpture of the Virgin de Guadalupe, you can see what they've been working on in their programs at the new building and throughout HISD schools. Sign up to volunteer. Take in a performance or register your child for violin lessons.

The inside of the Dow School now looks like a fabulous watercolor that's been laid to dry over Christmas lights and Aztec sundials. It smells like turpentine and tamales, and it echoes with children's voices and musical scales, countdowns to ONE-two-three, ONE-two-*plié*. I barely recognize my old alma mater.

But it feels as if a buzzing or humming underlies everything. I guess that comes from art and its creation. There's also a slight vibration that comes from the beating of parents' hearts as they watch their children on the stage. A small variance in air pressure from the sighs of parents and grandparents who mop MECA's floors to pay for lessons. All of these parents and grandparents want better lives for their offspring. You can feel it.

That's the same way it felt in that building in 1976. And I bet that's the same way it felt in 1912, too.

What's changed for the unequivocal better? The houses. I look at old photographs of my barrio and see my neighbors' homes, squatting there on Decatur, Kane, Lubbock, State, Union, Sabine, Silver, White, Henderson, Hemphill, and that strange little piece of Memorial Drive's feeder road where Gus's grandma lived.

The houses crouch next to bail bond companies, located close to the municipal court. The houses crowd against each other, front to back, over where the permanent renters used to live. The buildings stand wearily in

these photos, achy and gray, but distinguishable by their shapes. I'd recognize those houses anywhere.

Someone else recognized those houses and knew the names for their shapes: Folk Victorian, Classical Revival, Queen Anne, Bungalow, Shotgun. Several people then took a handful of those houses and developed them like photographs, making them emerge more colorful and sharper around the edges. Those people formed the Old Sixth Ward Neighborhood Association, a coalition sworn to protect the houses from the plague known as developers, who'd already ravaged the land from Glenwood to Sawyer Street and were sneaking townhomes onto vacant lots on a weekly basis.

Thanks to these heroic efforts, houses from my childhood now stand proud. My chest swells with satisfaction when I see them today, even though the process had nothing to do with me.

The most successful restorations have their own names. The William A. Diehl House. The Harry A. Thomson House. The Mary Kay Wagner Ash House (she of cosmetic and pink sedan fame). I wonder if, back when the Diehls and Thomsons and Wagner Ashes lived in the Sixth Ward, they ever envisioned the decay and then the public adulation that would eventually overtake their homes.

Maybe some day there'll be houses named after people who lived in my time. I imagine the Martha Diaz House, painted a tasteful pale violet, complete with wrought iron plaque celebrating the longtime activist and Precinct 2 chairwoman.

The Vasquez House would be done over in bright coral and would commemorate the handsomest set of brothers that the 1980s Sixth Ward had to offer.

The Margaret Suarez Zepeda House is what I'd modestly call the two-story brick apartment building my father bought for my grandmother. She served her community and her tenants there for years before making it into our family home. My brother is painstakingly remodeling it as we speak.

Maybe the naming will come about if I become more successful. I'll write a few more books and keep hoping. Surely someone will christen our house before I die.

The neighborhood I'm describing—Del Sesto, aka the Old Sixth Ward Historic District—only spans 25 or 30 blocks between Houston Avenue and Sawyer Street. (I can't vouch for anything

between Sawyer and Glenwood.) And yet it would take me months to tell you everything that tiny slice of Houston encompasses.

Like everyone else who grows old, I look at my neighborhood and see stories. At that building behind the gas station, I see my Uncle Richard shocking us by walking his brown-skinned self into Doodie's, the neighborhood's first honky-tonk icehouse, and living to tell the tale. Simultaneously, I can see my (second) fiancé and myself, sipping Monica Pope's rosemary-scented cocktails on the patio, discussing which Asian traditions his parents will expect at the wedding.

I look at an empty spot behind St. Joseph Church and see the boardinghouse where my sons' paternal grandfather lived, back when he was a tall, blond 18 year old working for Clark Motors on Washington. I see him walking down Houston Avenue for lunch and meeting the beautiful Chicana who would become my sons' paternal grandmother.

I look at the architects' office that's sprung up next to my dad's house, and I see the field of chickens that our neighbors weren't supposed to have, and the day the boy we called Pelon taught us how to hold them.

I see all the buildings that have burned down and sprung up again. A phoenix on every block, almost.

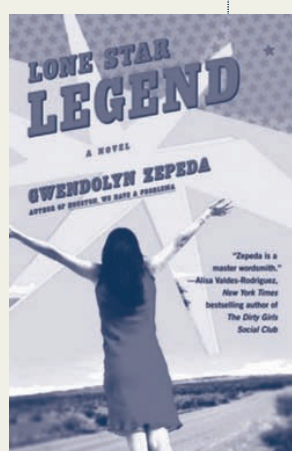
What will you see if you go to the Sixth Ward? Parking for the nightclubs on Washington? The fireworks from Downtown on the Fourth of July? Location, location, location?

Will you see gingerbread trim and leaded-glass windows? Oak trees? A relative lack of flooding? Or the art car in that yard? Or the cow on that roof?

Will you see the decay? Remnants of the Germans, the Polish, the Mexicans, the crackheads, and "those people"? If so, can you see the melancholy that decay causes, which sometimes leads to determination? The kind of determination that builds railroads, writes novels, changes society for the better?

Or will you see all the various kinds of people living there relatively peacefully together? I invite you to go there and find out. Administer the Rorschach test that is the Sixth Ward.

Then ask yourself if the Sixth Ward is a permanent landmark, with its hard-won government-sanctioned designation. Did its newest neighbors succeed in creating a haven for so many time capsules? Or am I only fooling myself, pretending not to understand that everything in Houston eventually is temporary? c



EAST SIDE SILOS

A sapling struggles to grow in the groove made by two of four silos on the lower banks of Buffalo Bayou. Shot by Jack Thompson.





MIRACLES OFF HILLCROFT

The drop ceiling and industrial-grade carpet of the Sri Sirdi Sai Jalaram Mandir befit the simple life of the saint Sirdi Sai Baba, who eschewed organized religion, caste, and material wealth. Shot by Rose Kuo.



A BAYOU TABLEAU

The unscripted spaces along the banks of the lower Buffalo Bayou provide a mysterious but humanizing escape from the city. Shot by Jack Thompson.





AN UNZONED SOUNDTRACK

The magnetic tapes in the archives at SugarHill Studios stretch across an enormous back room.
Shot by Jack Thompson.

FACE THE MUSIC

Learn your Houston music history, the wall-mounted speaker seems to shout. In contrast to the angry face, the interior of SugarHill Studio is warm and textured with various sound baffling materials. Shot by Jack Thompson.





THE SIMORGH

Many of Farnoosh Moshiri's compatriots were tortured and killed by the Iranian government.

In her essay about exile, she draws strength from Houston's oaks, comparing their roots to the talons of the Simorgh, a giant mythical bird.

Shot by Rose Kuo.



FIFTH WARD JAM

Dan Havel and Dean Ruck exploded what was the front of a house and transformed the side (not shown) into a stage.

Shot by Jack Thompson.



SIXTH WARD, OR DEL SESTO

Writer Gwendolyn Zepeda stands on Decatur Street. She recalls the neighborhood before it received protection as a historic district. Shot by Lawrence Landers.