

Description of Vollintine/Evergreen

"VECA-Midtown At Its Best" is the current slogan seen on many car bumpers in this comfortable, north mid-town neighborhood. VECA, an acronym for the neighborhood organization, Vollintine-Evergreen Community Association, refers to a neighborhood bounded on the west by Watkins Street, on the north by Cypress Creek, on the east by Trezevant Street, and on the south by Overton Park Avenue. Though the organization extends that far south, it overlaps with the area of M-MIA (Mid-Memphis Improvement Association), of which a parallel history has been written. Consequently, this study will confine its southern boundary to North Parkway.

Driving through the area on a beautiful Saturday afternoon in October, one quickly agreed with the neighborhood promoters that this neighborhood offers special qualities for good living. On one of its borders is the city's only zoo and finest park where a myriad of cultural and recreational opportunities exist. On this particular sunny Saturday in Overton Park families were milling around the Dough Boy statue where Funfest, a city-wide event sponsored by the Commercial Appeal and the Memphis Park Commission, offered entertainment, arts and crafts, and a neighborhood history display. Beckoning the art minded were the Brooks Art Gallery and the Memphis Academy of Arts. Golfers, strollers and picnickers found the proper setting for their recreational desires.

Near the neighborhood's eastern boundary stands Southwestern, the neighborhood's largest property holder and the city's outstanding liberal arts college. Its tree-lined campus and handsome Gothic architecture are as aesthetically pleasing as its academic program is excellent. One could leave Funfest and within a few minutes' walk attend a fall football game at Fargason Field. At other times during the year outstanding concerts and programs such as the Renaissance Festival, Dilemma, and adult education courses invite Memphians to partake of the college atmosphere. Southwestern and its faculty are great community assets.

While some pockets of low income residents are on its northern perimeter, the Vollintine/Evergreen neighborhood is primarily middle and upper middle class. Because of its location, the neighborhood has always attracted physicians and medically oriented residents. The majority of the residents are employed in either academic, professional, clerical or government positions. In the northern section more blue collar workers will be found. The educational level is high with 12.6 the median number of school years completed. In 1970 10 percent of the area's residents were college graduates.¹

There is great difficulty in establishing an accurate current demographic picture of the neighborhood. First, the fact that neighborhood boundaries do not coincide precisely with census tracts creates a problem. Approximately 80 percent of the households are in Census Tracts 16 and 17. The remainder are in the southern half of Tract 7 and a portion of Tract 9.

Furthermore, the most current data available is the 1970 Census and the selected 1975 Polk data. Many categories of that information have changed greatly. In 1970 the black population was in the 4-5 percent range. Today it is estimated more at 30-35 percent.² In 1970 it was largely an elderly neighborhood with few children. There is visual evidence that this has changed, and today more young families live in the neighborhood. It seems likely that the total neighborhood population can be estimated at about 13,500.³ More accurate information will be available after the 1980 Census.

VECA has always taken pride in its ethnicity and old world atmosphere. In 1970, 15 percent of the neighborhood's population was of foreign extraction. The ethnic groups in the largest numbers were the Italians, Russians, Germans, and English with small groups of Polish, Irish, and Austrians. In 1974, 40 percent of the residents of the neighborhood was either Jewish or Catholic.⁴ The Baron Hirsch Synagogue magnetized a large population of Jewish families and became a center of resettlement projects.⁵

In the past the differing ethnic customs at Christmas imparted richness to the life of the VECA neighborhood. There seemed to be room for all nationalities and traditions. The Germans placed a wreath with a red candle on their door on the first day of Advent. The Greeks baked their savory pastries; Italian priests visited their parishioners to enjoy the traditional ravioli dinner with sparkling pink wine. Baron Hirsch displayed a sign offering Season's Greetings while Jews at Chanukah used this time for home worship. Russians read their fortunes by observing the way candles melted. In German families "Christ Kendle" was celebrated. Each member of the family drew names of others and secretly did good deeds for him during Advent. Their identity was revealed on Christmas day. The Greeks and Italians celebrated Epiphany on January sixth.⁶

On election day the majority of the neighborhood will be found at one of its five voting spots, for it votes in large numbers. 90 percent voter turn-out is not unusual. It is seldom less than 70 percent in this neighborhood.⁷

Party affiliation apparently has a limited effect on voting patterns. From primary voting the area would appear Democratic, but often the residents there have supported Republican candidates in the general elections.⁸ Since 1967 when the city converted to the mayor-council form of government, Bob James, a Republican, has represented District 5 in which the neighborhood south of Vollintine is located. J. O. Patterson, a Democrat, represents District 7, the section bounded by Vollintine, Evergreen, University, and Cypress Creek. There was an attempt in the spring of 1975 to combine the two into District 5, but it was unsuccessful. District 7 remains separate.

J. C. Williams won a seat on the School Board in 1979 representing District 5 when long-time member, Frances Coe, retired. George Brown, Jr., represents District 7 on the School Board; he was unopposed in the past election.

In the November 1979 runoff election Wyeth Chandler carried two of VECA's five precincts; 36-1, 921 to 214 (Snowden School), and 36-3, 515 to 170 (McLean Baptist Church).

Otis Higgs carried three: 36-2, 619 to 557 (First Lutheran Church); 41-2, 850 to 219 (Cypress Junior High); and 40-2, 801 to 95 (Vollentine School).⁹

The County Commissioners for the area are Pete Sisson, Ed Williams and Steve Cohen. The State Representatives are Pam Gaia, District 89, the portion of VECA south of Vollintine, and Harper Brewer, District 98, the area north of Vollintine.

Crime is of concern to all residents of VECA who fear it is increasing as it has throughout the city. The Memphis Police Department states that the crime in the area "consists mainly of residential, business burglaries, and armed robberies of individuals."¹⁰

Diversity in age, race, and cultural backgrounds has long been a characteristic of this "melting pot kind of neighborhood," remarks Irving Sachritz,¹¹ a long-time resident. Additionally, it offers a diversity of life styles. Its nearness to Southwestern and the Art Academy makes it a compatible place for writers, artists and musicians. The neighborhood has a large number now and had many in its past.

In 1934 Tennessee Williams produced his first play, Cairo, Shanghai, Bombay, when he was staying with his grandparents, The Reverend and Mrs. Walter Dakin, "in a pleasant little house on Snowden."¹² Peyton Rhodes was a friend of his grandparents, and Williams writes that Dr. Rhodes "got me access to the library of the University and I spent most of those summer afternoons reading there; or at the downtown library on Main Street."¹³ It was in this summer of 1934 that "then and there the theatre and I found each other for better or worse."¹⁴

Among the notable residents engaged in the arts are John Fergus Ryan, Memphis playwright and writer for Memphis magazine; Bill Womack, professor at the Memphis Academy of Arts, gifted in advertising design; Henry Easterwood, the most illustrious tapestry artist in Memphis and one of the major figures in this field in the nation; William Roberson, Jr., also a weaver and teacher at the Academy of Arts;

Brad McMillan, imaginative cartoonist who illustrated this manuscript cover; C. Edwin Shofner, a master woodworker; and Judy Thompson, commercial artist. Jack Ramey has had two novels made into movie scripts. Darrell Richardson has published numerous books under several pseudonyms and is reported to have the most complete collection of Edgar Rice Burroughs' works in the world. Granville Davis is among the many Southwestern professors who have also had works published. Etheridge Knight, "the ex-prison poet . . . reads his work in local bars and barbershops and conducts the Free People's Poetry Workshop in Merriwether's Bar B-Q at 2360 Jackson." Writers for The Commercial Appeal have found this a pleasant neighborhood in which to live. Among this group are Tom Jordan, Deborah Clubb, John Stagg, R. Craig Shuptrine, and Lewis Nolan. Shuptrine, now retired from the paper, has been a resident of the area for over thirty years.

Nell Sanders Aspero, a pioneer in Memphis music education, has lived in the area for over sixty years. Other musicians include Jimmy Griffin, rock music star; pianists Charles Mosby and Charlotte McLain; and Tony Garner, Choral Director for Opera Memphis; the latter three are on the Southwestern faculty. Talented young potter Dale Baucum and his wife Brinson live on Lyndale in the home which had belonged to her grandparents, Dr. and Mrs. Robert K. Armstrong. Radio broadcasters in the neighborhood include Fred Cook, Allen Tynes, and Charles Scruggs.¹⁵

Commenting on the fact that this diversity makes the neighborhood appealing, Irv Sachritz said, "The thing that makes it special is the fact that the people who live there have not become homogenized." Another described it as ". . . where the action is; the people there seem more interesting. In the suburbs we lived next to Barbie and Ken."¹⁶

Joe Sohm who lives on Sheridan says the neighborhood has a

value that attracts people (who) like to live a relaxed life style . . . there is a good deal of jogging in our neighborhood, a good deal of bicycle riding in our neighborhood, a good deal of interaction between neighbors. I think all these factors are good. You see many people (who) walk to church which is right unusual in this world of automobiles. I myself walk to church.¹⁷

To many, midtown is the heart of the city and will always be. There are those who have remained through the changing times and still feel very comfortable in the neighborhood. Rick Thomas who has lived in about eight different locations in the area and who now owns a home on Monticello Drive said:

There's a certain amount of continuity (in the neighborhood). It's amazing how many you can find whose parents or grandparents have lived (in VECA) and they've been away for a while and they've come back to the neighborhood.¹⁸

In appearance it is a neighborhood with quiet streets and attractive homes. There are few frills, just moderate, respectable homes which are nicely cared for. Brad McMillan calls it "an unpretentious neighborhood." The most common architectural style is the bungalow and its variations. Most are broad, low buildings with porches supported by square or tapered posts, and are constructed of either brick, weatherboard or stucco and stone.¹⁹ Sixty percent of the homes have basements, unusual for Memphis. Some streets are visually monotonous, because this bungalow style was so popular when the subdivisions were built. Landscaping relieves the sameness, and some lovely gardens of azaleas and roses flourish in the neighborhood. Jack and Mary Adamo have won many trophies for their prize roses.²⁰

The more expensive homes in the neighborhood are along North Parkway, in the Hallwood Subdivision, and in Hein Park. Some of those substantial homes sell for as much as \$210,000.²¹ There the architectural styles are often Colonial Revival or English Tudor.

The oldest remaining homes in VECA are found on Faxon, Crump, and North Parkway. Some date as early as 1907.²² Several more were built in the first quarter of the twentieth century. However, the majority were built after 1925 when the great development of the area took place. The neighborhood grew rapidly from that time through the 1940s. By 1950 the neighborhood had been developed almost as it is today except for several large apartment projects, which were yet to be constructed in the 1950s and 1960s.

Due to integration and racial tensions of the late 1960s, real estate values were at low ebb from approximately 1970-1972. "The market started to improve in 1973," said Joe Hough, a real estate appraiser.²³ Today houses are selling for maximum values. Listing periods are less than normal; financing is available. There is a good steady demand for the houses among young families, white and black.²⁴

Many residents remark that the neighborhood looks very much as it has for the last thirty years. Dr. Granville Davis, southern historian, who joined the faculty in 1954, remarked that when he arrived, "Aside from a greater influx of black families it (the neighborhood) was much the same as it is now."²⁵ Before that time he states there had been considerable change.²⁶

In order to chronicle that change and to observe the evolution of the VECA neighborhood, it is proper to return to its origins.