

VII

Growth of Commercial Areas

In the 1890s dairy farms furnished the majority of the rural population in the area with their livelihood. By 1893 Thomas J. Briggs had a dairy at the northeast corner of May (now University) and Vollintine, present site of the University Cabanas. That same year four other dairies were listed in the vicinity; they belonged to R. A. Terry, N. B. Williamson, J. W. Winston and R. H. Carter. By 1900 many more dairies had opened.¹

As Terrytown grew, it provided the scene for various small businesses: a blacksmith shop, harness shop, and Crump Brothers, a successful general store which had opened ca. 1898. Following the Crump Brothers move to a further east location in 1910, the store was operated as Terry Brothers until 1915.² To the northeast W. P. Spencer operated a grocery store on Vollintine Avenue just east of Watkins as early as 1910.³

The Jackson/Watkins commercial area had its beginnings in the early twentieth century. W. S. Davis was in the grocery business at 1344 Jackson as early as 1907. He later moved to 1387 Jackson; a grocery continued at the former location through 1924.⁴

The four major commercial areas as they exist today are in part a continuation of these early places of business. They are Jackson/Evergreen intersection, just to the west of the former Terrytown commercial area; the Jackson/Watkins corner; the west side of McLean between Faxon and Snowden; and the Watkins/Brown intersection. All the above are zoned C-1, i.e. generally neighborhood shopping center and retail shops, with the exception of Jackson/Watkins intersection which is zoned C-2, i.e. general retailing and service facilities of more intensive use. (See zoning map IV) A study on downzoning has been done by VECA, but at the present no further action is contemplated.

A 1977 survey by The EvergreenNews noted that the Jackson/Evergreen intersection and Jackson/Watkins areas are the most stable.⁵ While that appears still true, there are signs of fresh activity at the McLean shopping area.

The vitality of the Jackson/Evergreen corner is reinforced by durable businesses such as Bosi and Son Grocery, Borg's Rexall Drug Store, and Carl's Bakery, which are landmarks in the neighborhood. Carl's Bakery was designated the city's "best old fashioned bakery" by Memphis magazine, December 1979.

The Jackson/Evergreen corner has had a drug store, a grocery and a bakery since 1928. There was a Bowers Grocery #67 at 1693 Jackson, Grosmann's Bakery at 1699 Jackson, Carter's Drug Store at 1703 Jackson Avenue, and another grocery, Morrison Market at 1701 Jackson. By 1930 there was Lincoln Cleaner and Dryers Branch at 1692 Jackson, Alexander's Coffee Shop at 1695 Jackson, R. G. Beale, Barber, at 1697 Jackson, and Shelby-Roth Tire Company at 1698 Jackson. Robert Bonner, M.D. and Malcolm Prewitt, D.D.S. had their offices at 1679 Jackson by 1939. The Evergreen Cafe opened at 1699 Jackson, and there was Freeman-Lindsay Service Station at 1717 along with the Goodyear Service Store at 1712 Jackson.⁶ Today often the uses are the same, but the operators have changed. For more detailed information see the 1979 City Directory.

We interviewed owners of certain businesses of long standing importance in the neighborhood. Unfortunately time did not allow us to interview all of those people who have contributed to the stability of these commercial areas.

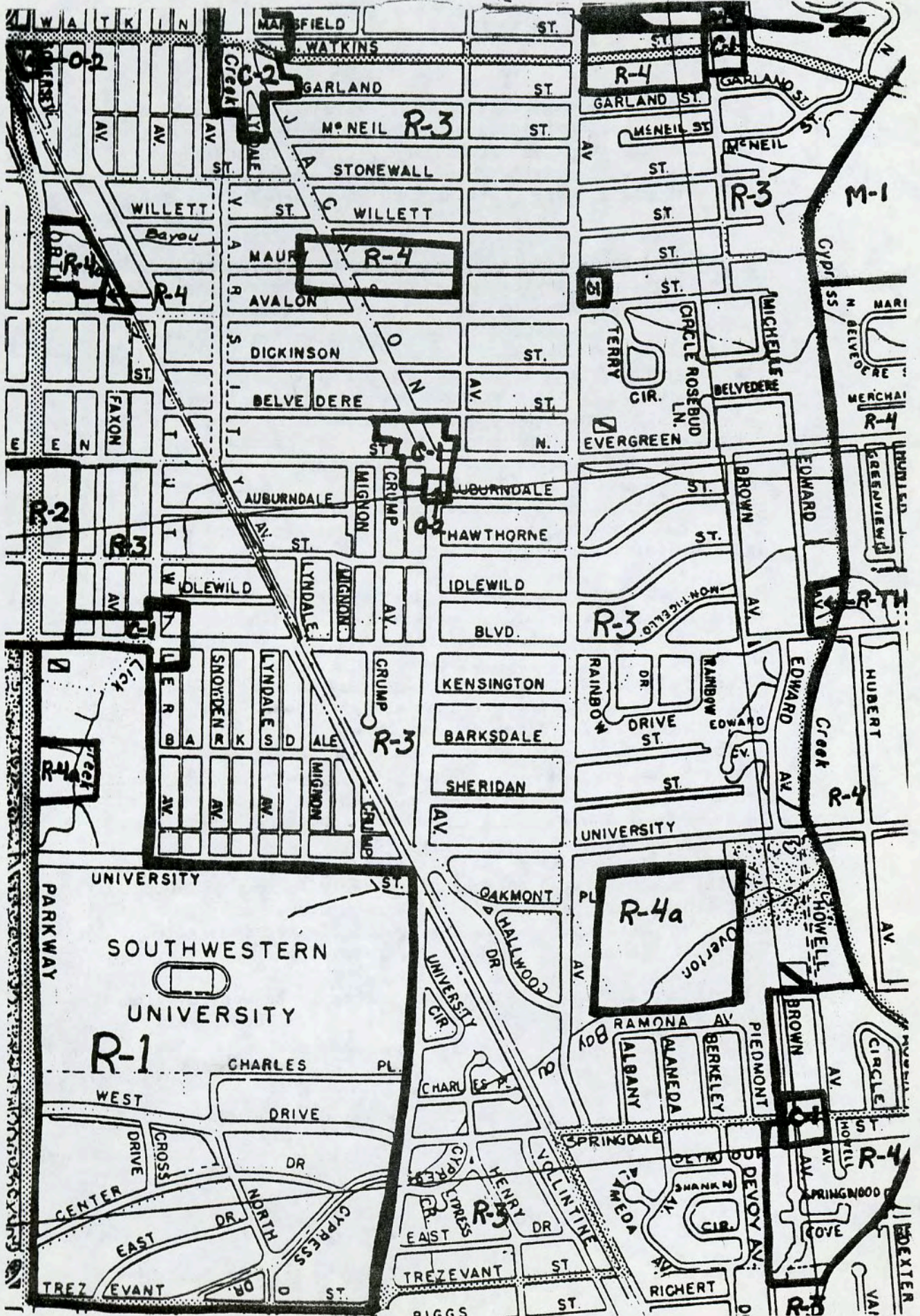
First, Bosi and Son's Weona #17, a neighborhood grocery, which according to Joe Hough "is the mainstream of the neighborhood."⁷ The grocery is tiny with shelves well stocked with merchandise, not organized but homey. The clientele is diverse. They come for the meat which they say is still the best in town and to joke or chat with the affable Silvio Bosi and his son and partner, Gene, who at times is the butcher. There are many regular customers

who are good friends of the Bosis. They tell tall tales of hunting and fishing and what is happening in the neighborhood. "All in all, the regulars have a great deal to do with making Bosi's the place it is; they fit right in. Many of them fit so well that Mr. Bosi puts them to work!"⁸ Others like retiree Tom McCarthy and Joe Cuccia, former owner of the liquor store at Brown and Watkins, pass the time of day with homespun philosophy in this friendly atmosphere.

Silvio Bosi is a man of small frame and expressive eyes which filled with tears as he talked about his mother and their struggles; he will tell you that his parents came to the United States from Italy in the late 1890s. They went into the grocery business first at Lewis and Vollintine, and then from 1902 until 1928 they had a store at Olympia and Vollintine. Silvio was born in 1914 and when old enough worked in his mother's store. He later worked for Clarence Saunders. In 1931, he went to work at Weona #21, a small grocery in the newly opened shopping center at the corner of Vollintine and Avalon. Silvio Bosi started his own store in partnership with Jimmie Lott; in 1950 he had an opportunity to buy him out. Since that time, Bosi has given personal care to his business. In 1973 his son, Eugene or Gene, came back to go into business with him. Bosi's business is good. Even when people move away from the neighborhood, they come back to buy his baked ham and meat.⁹ His father admonished him while he was alive: "Don't never stop handling good meat. Can't nobody break your backbone on good meat."¹⁰ Bosi agrees. "That's what I've done. I've had the best meat in the City of Memphis. We bake the best hams in the City of Memphis."¹¹

Many will agree with that. The Bosis feel very protective of their longtime customers. They deliver to shut-ins, will hold tickets, cash personal checks, and take a great interest in the neighbors' needs. He says, "I've got a steady business . . . my customers stay with me."¹²

MAP IV: ZONING MAP (Prepared by Memphis and Shelby County Planning Commission)



Gene Bosi definitely believes that there will always be a place for a neighborhood grocery, especially now when "everybody is thinking of gasoline . . ."13 He thinks more people will start walking to neighborhood stores, and the Bosis will be there as they have been for the last

Next door is Borg's Rexall Pharmacy, 1703 Jackson, which also seemed typical of a small town store. Pharmacists have time to talk with the customers. There is a sign saying blood pressures will be taken on certain days. They have charge accounts and delivery service; Mr. Borg will fill half a prescription if the customer is low on money. It has a personal, accommodating atmosphere.¹⁴ Jack Borg, present owner, purchased this drug store in 1965 from Lee Holcomb. Mrs. Borg's family, the Gattis, have been in the neighborhood since its development. Her grandparents, Mr. and Mrs. Harry Thomas, lived at 919 Evergreen for many of their seventy married years. Mr. Thomas was chief electrical inspector for the city and was active in the Jackson Boulevard Improvement Club.¹⁵

Across Jackson at 1688 is Carl's Bakery. This was originally John's Bakery and was opened in 1948 by Mr. and Mrs. J. E. Johns. The Johns started out in a building which had formerly been a hardware store. They were so successful and baked such tasty pastries that in 1962 they bought the laundrette next door and expanded. They sold in the early 1970s to the present owner, Carl Koppeis, whose father came from Germany and taught him to be a baker.¹⁶

The Gulf station at 1712 Jackson, corner of Evergreen, "is very good," says resident Joe Sohm. ". . . the attentiveness that is given is like it used to be." This and the Exxon station on McLean are real fixtures to people in the neighborhood.¹⁷ The Firestone Store at the same corner has been there since the 1940s. It received a "facelift" in 1972 and looks more up to date.¹⁸

It appears that the tenants at this intersection which have established businesses are doing well. They supply

that desirable atmosphere of personal care and attention so often missing in today's discount shopping.¹⁹

A similar shopping area is located along North McLean, between Faxon and Snowden. It too has been a popular one for the neighborhood. Eason Pharmacy and Mr. Bowers' Store #45 were an early part of the community. North of Tutwiler there was Kuhn's Pharmacy, Piggly Wiggly #54, and University Barber Shop. Kuhn's Pharmacy was replaced by Southern Pharmacy which later became Southwestern Pharmacy. Nell Aspero remembers the drug store as an ideal place for dates and family excursions; they would go there for ice cream sodas. She still misses this drug store.²⁰

Some residents think that this commercial area is less vital than it was in the past. However, there is still a variety of shops and services available at this center. Three widely patronized and highly regarded are Delicious Foods Bakery, Ed's Exxon Station, and Dino's Southwestern Grill.

The name of Delicious Bakery at 607 North McLean is certainly descriptive of the quality of its cakes, cookies, breads, and pastries. It is the successor to Harris Bakery which opened there prior to 1930.²¹

Ed's Exxon at 585 North McLean was purchased by Ed Cissom in 1973 from V. D. McCullough, who had been at that site for thirty-six years. In 1975 it was selected best station in the Memphis district, and the Memphis district was the best in the United States based on appearance and service. Ed Cissom was honored in 1976 by Snowden Junior High School and given a plaque in appreciation of his patience with and consideration for the school's students.²²

Standing room only is the rule for Dino's Southwestern Grill at 645 North McLean. It opened in 1933 when Nick Papageorge closed his downtown cafe and opened the Southwestern Grill "out east." Mostly Greek was spoken in the kitchen as Greek immigrants operated this eating spot. It was a popular gathering place after the ball games. Pictures of

the Southwestern football players adorned the walls; a sadder reminder, in the 1940s, were pictures of Southwestern students who had been killed in World War II.²³ Dino Grisanti bought it in late 1972, renamed it, and added Italian dishes, including homemade ravioli to the menu. A sign in the front window proclaims, "Pure Food," and customers flock in to enjoy homecooking at reasonable prices. One meat and three vegetables cost \$2.50. It is no wonder that the ten tables and nine booths are filled, and people of all ages and professions are waiting to eat.²⁴

The intersection at Jackson and Watkins had its beginnings in the early 1900s. The rural nature of the earlier neighborhood was evidenced by the existence as late as 1923 of a blacksmith shop at 1389 Jackson. A sign of the changing times was the opening of the Standard Oil Company 'filling station' on the southeast corner in 1926. Contiguous to it was the site of Phillips' Market and Mr. Bowers' Store #66. From these origins, the location expanded into a fairly complete shopping area.²⁵

This intersection was for years one of the most popular corners because of the Rosemary Theatre, which was opened in 1929 by Michael Cianciolo. It was named for his daughter who is now Rosemary Nickas.²⁶ It was described as "Memphis' Largest and Finest Suburban Theatre."²⁷ (See picture)

Located at 1396 Jackson the theatre's importance is attested by the fact that for years old timers referred to that corner as Rosemary.²⁸ Going to the Rosemary was a tradition. In 1940 double features with Carole Lombard, Gary Grant, Randolph Scott, and Nancy Kelly could be seen for 10¢ and 21¢. There were many attractions at this neighborhood theatre. Regular "Bank-Nite" jackpots made winners happy. Popular Colie Stoltz played his trumpet there. This was a place to be entertained. "A neighborhood retarded boy who came to the theatre every night for years, was affectionately called 'Ronnie Rosemary'," said Augustine Cionciolo, the manager. In its day the Rosemary Theatre occupied the position the management claimed for it as "the hub of this community . . . around it revolves all the substantial citizens of the place we call home."²⁹

The Rosemary Theatre, like many other neighborhood movies, did not survive in the television era. The theatre closed in February 1965. The First National Bank (now First Tennessee) bought the property, tore down the building and built its Jackson/Watkins Branch of the bank which opened May 2, 1966. In 1975 the bank moved to another location and leased the building to MARC Activity Center, an adult mental health institution.³⁰

On the northwest corner of the VECA neighborhood is the commercial area at Watkins and Brown. In 1977 The EvergreenNews rated this area as the section's least stable.³¹ Nothing has happened since to improve that assessment. With the deterioration of the apartments at Vollintine and Watkins, this shopping center has fallen victim to the changing neighborhood surrounding it. It was built by Walker Hall ca. 1948-49 on land his father, J. M. Hall, a major developer in this section, purchased in the 1920s. The Halls also built and still own twenty-eight apartments and forty duplexes on Brown. At the time they were built, the neighborhood was white. Many of the shoppers lived in Vollintine Courts. The Hall office was located at 1063 N. Watkins until 1963. Later in the sixties the area integrated. At first the change was not alarming; in time, Hall states, pimps and prostitutes moved into Vollintine Courts (now Saints Courts). After a few years the apartments became vacant. This helped complete the deterioration of his property. He rents his commercial property now for \$1.25 to \$1.50 per foot, "less than warehouse space" he asserts.³² He is trying to hold on to the property in anticipation that the apartments will be rehabilitated. If that happens, the corner at Watkins and Brown could be a fair investment again. Mr. Hall has several good, long-term tenants. The Southern Souvenir Shop owned by Albert Steiner and the L & G Grocery have been there since the center opened. Otherwise the tenants have been short-term.

Worthy of mention are two businesses which took root in the neighborhood in the 1920s and which are somewhat unique to the neighborhood. One, The Smith Lumber Company, located at Avalon and the L & N Railroad, was started in 1919. Neighborhood children liked to climb on the stacked boards. When it was sold in 1962 to Morris Fogelman, whose sons, Robert and Avron, have carried on the family business, Smith Lumber Company was probably the oldest general lumber yard in town, according to T. Herbert Smith, the son of the founder.³³

The other was the Doctors' Exchange, which started in 1922 in a small house on Tutwiler across from the Memphis Light, Gas and Water pumps and moved to 765 N. McNeil in the late 1920s. The name of the founder has been forgotten, but the idea has proven most successful and necessary. The Doctor's Exchange was purchased by Mrs. Lena Powell, who with her husband, lived at 883 Dickinson for a number of years. The Doctor's Exchange has subsequently moved to 774-A Adams Avenue.³⁴

The shopping center on Vollintine between Avalon and Maury was constructed in 1930 as a "suburban center" with eight stores.³⁵ The first occupant was Avalon Grocery at the eastern end of the center. Dlugach Real Estate Company and the Owl Sandwich Shop #2 were located there by 1931. Terrell's Drug Store was there for over thirty-five years.³⁶

The Weona #21, 1590 Vollintine, was established in the early 1930s by Pete Coda, who subsequently sold it to Ralph Robilio. Later in the decade Joseph Evangelisti, father of Tony Evangelisti, bought the store. Today it is operated by Tony Evangelisti and his partners, Louis & Dolly Bosi Pierantoni.

The store, that once catered to a large Italian and Jewish ethnic trade, serves a clientele that is evenly

divided between whites and blacks. The owners still have some credit business and deliver groceries to customers in the area near the store. Dolly Pierantoni says that business is better than it was ten years ago; many of the purchases are paid for with food stamps. The fresh produce and good meat that are carried in the store make them competitive with their relatives, the Bosis.³⁷

Next door to the Weona at 1580-82 Vollintine is a popular restaurant appropriately named Little Italy. It is a small, cozy dining spot where one can order lasagna, manicotti and veal parmesian at prices which range from \$1.50 to \$4.50. The owner, Eula Murray, opened the restaurant around 1971 and says she enjoys good business. Her customers come from as far away as Collierville and Germantown.³⁸

Davis Laundry and Cleaners at 1570 Vollintine was formerly a branch of Hurlburt Laundry-Cleaners, Inc.; it was bought by Knowledge Davis in 1972. Moseley's Enterprises at 1572 Vollintine was opened by James M. Moseley in 1974. He works in electronics.³⁹ In addition to these Hattie's Beauty Shop is next door at 1576 Vollintine. There is a miscellaneous group of other stores, some of which are not clearly defined as to their business.

Some residents recall shopping at the center at Jackson and Trezevant on the northeast boundary of the VECA neighborhood. This center suffered during the neighborhood racial change. By 1970 each business had changed owners with the exception of the dry cleaners. Krogers went out of business, and a bar and lounge replaced the drug store.⁴⁰

The changes in the neighborhood have not benefitted the shopping centers on the northwest and northeast corners of VECA. The record for the neighborhood shopping centers within VECA is stronger than in most comparable situations.

Without the attraction of any large stores, small, family-operated businesses have survived and succeeded in days when the trend runs in the opposite direction. This is, in part, indicative of the neighborhood's appreciation for continuity and personal service. It also denotes the quality service and product that these businesses provide.