



45. A Southside couple, Mr. & Mrs. Solomon Chapman, in front of their home at 520 West Clinton Street, ca. 1910.

winter we poured water on it and made a slide. We made skis out of barrel staves, and we had a bobsled run down Columbia Street that went right across the bridge to the hospital." In the summer, the children could go swimming in Six Mile Creek "once the boys ran the snakes out. My brothers would go out snake hunting and bring back snakes six to eight feet long, on poles. When we had a cook-out, we'd take corn and potatoes from the fields, and the boys would fish. I don't remember ever buying meat from a market. We raised rabbits and chickens and got our eggs from our own hens."

Descriptions of a bucolic yesteryear make it easy to romanticize the past. The truth is that life was often a struggle for poor families at the turn of the century. Mrs. Mann's father earned \$6 a week. Her mother took in washing from the well-to-do in East Hill, charging \$2 "for an enormous basket of clothes." Sometimes she made \$6 a week, which, added to what the father earned, "was a good wage. Rent was \$6 to \$10 a month."

The family cut its own firewood and picked coal off the railroad tracks. They carried water from the well and never wasted a drop. The toilet was an outdoor shack that had to be moved periodically, and carefully at that, to avoid the dreaded typhoid that swept through the town every few years. "Shoes were a problem," remembers Mrs. Mann, "but we were always clean. You had two dresses; one for school and one for Sunday."

The family moved downtown while Mrs. Mann was still a child. At one time they lived on Morris Avenue, which Mrs. Mann recalls as "poverty row; the

neighbors were mostly immigrants from Hungary and Italy," living in row houses that amounted to slums. Eventually the family moved to the Southside. The children were assigned to attend Central School, which at that time accommodated kindergarten through twelfth grade. It also ran a "fresh air" school on the roof for children with tuberculosis. Both of Mrs. Mann's older brothers suffered from TB.

Turn-of-the-century mothers anxiously watched their children for symptoms of any number of devastating illnesses. One of the most feared was infantile paralysis, also known as poliomyelitis, or polio. The disease is caused by a virus that attacks the nervous system. Although some victims recovered completely within two weeks, others suffered a loss of motor control and, in severe cases, permanent deformity and disability. A highly infectious disease, it was epidemic in 1916. A year later, the New York State Health Department assigned a young nurse, Anna Quackenbush, to head rehabilitation efforts in a six-county area around Ithaca.

Miss Quackenbush lodged in a house owned by Mary Hibbard, who became interested in her boarder's work. In 1919 Miss Hibbard took four young patients into her own home. She then began raising money to open a larger facility for the after-care of polio victims.

Miss Hibbard recruited her friends to help with the fund-raising. Her group hosted a series of luncheons, dinners, card parties, and bazaars. But she was apparently willing to do anything to raise a few dollars and brought in hundreds by collecting old newspapers, tinfoil, and other junk. Within four months, she had raised \$1,800. The money enabled her to lease the Bostwick house on South Albany Street. On June 11, 1920, the Reconstruction Home opened. It was the first facility in the country, and possibly in the world, devoted to the after-care of polio patients. At least thirty patients spent time in the home during its first year, as many as fifteen staying there at one time.

Although city residents were at first concerned with the possibility of contagion from home residents, these fears gradually diminished, and over the years the home received strong support from the Ithaca community. An Infantile Paralysis Home Association was formed to oversee incorporation of the home in 1926 and to hold title to the Bostwick home when it became possible to buy it. Private donations provided for an elevator. The Elks contributed to the purchase of a specially equipped truck. Cornell University farms regularly donated fruits and vegetables. The university also provided special seats at football games, and private cars were put at the disposal of the home for picnics and other outings.

Inside the Reconstruction Home, every effort was made to avoid an "institutional" atmosphere. Staff members were encouraged to consider the patients as individuals rather than cases. The medical supervisors kept abreast of the latest treatments, which for the most part involved manipulation of stricken limbs in hopes of stimulating them back into usefulness. It was assumed that one day the patients, who ranged in age from five months to eighteen years, would return to regular classrooms, and tutoring was provided by teachers from the Ithaca school system.

Recreation was considered an important part of therapy. The children were encouraged to take on activities as they recovered, and in 1928 Boy Scout Troop 20 was formed, pioneering a new program for handicapped scouts. A Girl Scout troop was also organized.

As the home's reputation spread, the number of patients grew until it was clear that the Bostwick house could no longer accommodate them all. In 1929 Morse Chain offered to donate \$150,000 for the construction of a new building, on the condition that the new home would be built on South Hill. But the board of trustees voted to stay downtown, where the home could be more accessible to volunteers, patients, and visitors. The company trimmed its donation to \$120,000, but another \$30,000 was obtained from other sources, and the Morse addition was built.

The Reconstruction Home attracted the attention of a number of famous and influential persons during its early years. Starting in 1919, it was visited by a series of New York State governors. One of them was Franklin Delano Roosevelt, himself a victim of polio. FDR was a frequent visitor, and in 1931 declared the home "the finest institution, both in planning and equipment, for the treatment of infantile paralysis that I have ever seen."<sup>6</sup> Other visitors



46. Patients and volunteers on the grounds of the Reconstruction Home in the 1950s, when the home still served polio patients. It now provides comprehensive nursing and rehabilitative care for adults.

included pugilist Jack Dempsey, humorist Max Baer, aviator Amelia Earhart, and actress Helen Hayes, who stretched a scheduled half-hour visit into three and a half hours.

With a patient load that at times ran as high as 125, the home found it necessary to build another addition in 1939. The Bostwick house was razed in 1962 and a new section built in its place.

The Salk vaccine was developed in the 1950s, and thereafter the number of polio cases at the home declined. At the same time, there was a growing need for comprehensive nursing and rehabilitative care for adults, particularly the elderly. The transition from polio after-care to nursing home was made gradually. The home still cared for polio patients as late as 1972, but they were in the minority. Today, the clientele is for the most part elderly but also includes some younger patients who are recovering from illnesses or accidents.

By the 1980s, the Reconstruction Home was again considering a building program. The patient population had declined to seventy-two, so the problem was not so much a space shortage as obsolescence; most of the facilities were geared toward children, and the buildings did not meet new state hospital regulations. Through fund-raising and financing, the home pulled together the \$4 million needed to build a modern, three-story facility on the same South Albany lot where it began its mission.

The Great Depression hit at about the time the Reconstruction Home was celebrating its tenth anniversary. Although Ithaca weathered the economic storm better than urban areas did, it was not an easy time to be raising a family.

People such as Ruth Mann and her husband took the Depression in stride; they were used to hard times and approached them as a challenge to their ingenuity and determination. She and her husband bought their present house on West Green Street in 1932. The street is now a state highway, but she remembers when it was "a narrow street with lots of shade trees. It was very beautiful. A nice place for kids to grow up; family-oriented, and everyone owned their own house." Although the neighborhood around Green Street was "redlined" at the banks, which meant that loans for home improvements were impossible to obtain, residents did what they could to maintain the exterior appearance of their property. The do-it-yourself spirit was carried on inside the homes as well, as women made their own upholstery, curtains, and clothing for the whole family. Mrs. Mann recalls "I did whatever came up to make a dollar. I washed white folks' floors and cooked for them, took in students as roomers."

"It sounds like a perfectly awful ordeal, but it wasn't" she laughs. "We got together and sang and danced, and we were never short of food because we knew how to make do with what we had. My aunt was famous for a one-egg sheet cake that could feed dozens. Fruit came in wooden boxes back then, and I would take the boxes, pad them and cover them with cretonne to make furniture. It was pretty, too."

At Christmas, Mrs. Mann and her friends gathered to make toys for their children. A crate with a hood and rockers became a cradle. A stick and a stuffed sock turned into a hobby horse. A pair of old roller skates was converted into a

skateboard. "We sewed for months," says Mrs. Mann. "And Easter was the same thing. Our kids went to church dressed to kill."

Mrs. Mann's memories of the Depression are echoed in a book, *Remembering Ithaca 1930–1970*, by Jessamine K. Johnson. She too remembers scrimping and saving to get by: "If a salary was cut to ten dollars a week . . . it meant some hardships and devious ways of scraping up living expenses. People drove to the farm and carried their milk (unpasteurized) and eggs home, . . . lived on twenty dollars a week unemployment insurance plus odd jobs, and rented a room or two. Supper sometimes consisted of a thirteen-cent can of pink salmon made into a casserole with bread crumbs and an egg. The children and mother, too, wore 'hand-me-downs' sent by some cousin in better circumstances. Families who lived on the edges of town raised their own produce, and many 'weekend farmers' sprung up."

But, she continues, there were plenty of diversions: "People living on 'the Flats' south of the Six Mile Creek could watch a circus set up its 'Big Top' on the old Fair Grounds on Meadow Street. The elephants were paraded along Meadow to Wood Street where a hydrant was opened for watering them, much to the delight of assembled children." Each August brought the County Fair with its rides and exhibits. Johnson recalls that one year the fair was washed out by a flash flood: "People fled home in their cars, but the animals . . . had to be released if no truck was on hand to take them away. . . . It was said that the carnival man had lost two alligators and a large blacksnake. The alligators were later recovered far over in the marsh, but no one heard about the snake, and the women in the neighborhood were fearful for many days afterward about setting foot in their backyards."<sup>7</sup>

Whether runaway reptiles actually roamed the swamps of Ithaca is a matter of opinion, according to John Dougherty, superintendent of the city's department of public works. Dougherty, born in 1927, lived in various houses on South Plain Street, Hyers Street, and the corner of Plain and Wood throughout his childhood. He had heard the stories about escaped alligators, but, he says, "I never found them to be true or not. Practically every time the circus came to town we'd get a flood, and the talk would start. It was exciting."

Dougherty's end of the neighborhood was still very rural in the thirties. Plain Street was "a dirt road with tar sprinkled on it once a year to keep down the dust. There were some houses on Titus, but the area to the west was undeveloped. I remember when they built Wood Street." Much of Titus Flats was pasture land, which the neighborhood children used as an all-purpose playing field. Dougherty remembers pick-up softball and football games on Saturdays that started at 8 A.M. and ended long after dark.

Six Mile Creek proved another irresistible attraction for youngsters. "We did anything our parents told us not to do," Dougherty remembers with a chuckle. "Built dams, swam in holes, fished. We would walk or bike to Buttermilk Falls to go swimming, using Old Spencer Road because the Elmira Road hadn't been built yet."

As Dougherty and Johnson's memories of the thirties demonstrate, the problem of periodic flooding in the Southside had not been entirely solved by



Charles Titus and his engineers. In 1935 a summer cloudburst turned the neighborhood into a miniature Venice.

"The rains began on an early July evening, increasing continually until by midnight all the creeks were full and roaring madly," writes Johnson. "Soon the creeks were overflowing their dikes, and the water from the Inlet began to stretch across the meadows until practically all of the flat section of the city was covered and filling up cellars. Yet it poured on and on."<sup>8</sup>

Dougherty remembers his father coming home late at night from his job at City Hall to tell the family that flood warnings had been issued. Although most of the family was in bed at the time, they arose and prepared to hurry to higher ground—in their case, Barton Hall on the Cornell campus. Meanwhile, Dougherty's father went out to alert the neighbors.

"There were only four houses from the Wood Street corner, but by the time my father came back, the water had already risen so fast that our car stalled," he says. "We left it and went to Barton Hall. The next morning, all you could see of the car was its roof."

A pumping station at the corner of Wood and Meadow bears a watermark as a visual record of the '35 flood. The water rose as high as four feet in some parts of the city. Fortunately, the storm had abated by the next morning, and residents returned to their homes to assess the damage. The water level was still so high that Dougherty remembers sailing a toy boat in the street and seeing people coming down Plain Street in a canoe. But, as Johnson writes, "Excepting for houses set low on the ground, most damage was to cellars and in gardens newly grown with peas." The flood had liberally coated the city with mud, and the result, says Johnson, was "a plague of mosquitos . . . [that] pestered throughout the night."<sup>9</sup>

The Flood of '35 was caused by excessive rainwater that could not get from the south end of the valley to the lake quickly enough. Instead, it collected in the flat areas, affecting much of downtown Ithaca. As a result, the city began to examine possible solutions to the flooding problem (see Overview and Chapter 7). Eventually, the flood control channel was constructed, but it was difficult to get that project started. As Johnson writes, the problem was "how to influence legislators who had not been here and seen the real thing! It took thirty years to do it."

"So now we have our meadows safe and useable," she adds, "but for what? Used carlots, supermarkets, motels and eating places. What price progress? At least the mosquitos are gone!"<sup>10</sup>

Floods, pestilence, disease, and economic hardship present a grim portrait of life in the late twenties and early thirties. But there were good times as well as bad. The Southside's black community enjoyed a lively social life: Ruth Mann recalls dances, balls, and coming-out parties. They were planned and conducted in much the same way as the affairs put on by the rich, but "we sewed our own clothes, catered by ourselves, and the musicians were friends." The Big Band Era was in full swing back then, and orchestras would appear at Cornell or in the pavilion at Johnson City. If there was a big dance somewhere everyone went. It often meant traveling long distances in ancient, unreliable

"Tin Lizzies," but everyone knew how to fix the old cars, and if they wound up in a snowbank "we'd all get out, pick it up and put it back on the road. They didn't weigh much," Mrs. Mann shrugs.

"We had a tremendous social life because everyone knew everybody in central New York," Mrs. Mann continues. "The Masons, the Elks, the Eagles would sponsor a dance, and whole families went." This was an era when no distinctions were made between social occasions for the young and old. "In fact, young people weren't allowed to go nowheres without an older person; an aunt, a mother. Young men customarily danced first with their mothers, then their grandmothers, then their aunts, then they could pay attention to their girlfriends." Dances usually lasted until 3 A.M. If it was summer and the dance was in Ithaca, everyone went to Stewart Park for a swim and breakfast on the beach. Then the revelers went home—to get ready to go to work. "You just didn't skip work because you were out all night," says Mrs. Mann. "My husband says 'where we got the energy from, I don't know.'"

One Southside organization was established specifically for young people. It was, and still is, called the Southside Community Center. In 1927 the Francis Harper Woman's Club determined that black youngsters needed a central place for their activities, and it began raising money for a community center. The Servus League was established the next year, in hopes of building "a social-health-educational-cultural and recreational center for all Negroes of Ithaca . . . nonsectarian and nonpolitical, with all efforts directed toward uniting the community for the betterment of each and every individual."<sup>11</sup> The Servus League president was Jessie Cooper.

The first "center" was a rented house at 221 South Plain Street. In 1930 the league changed its name and became the Southside Community Center. Membership grew, and by 1932 the center was able to buy a house at 305 South Plain. In its early days the center ran on much ambition and little money. "Jessie Cooper had no training, but she had a dream," says Mrs. Mann. "She kept the young people in line. If a young girl got pregnant, she got help for her. She got the Tremans interested in funding to build a new center."

The center purchased a lot adjacent to the house in 1936 and razed the old house. With the help of Common Council and the WPA, the present structure was erected on the two lots. A two-story, brick-faced building, it included a kitchen, a gymnasium with boys' and girls' locker rooms and showers, meeting room, game room, and children's room. The new Southside Community Center was dedicated by Eleanor Roosevelt on February 17, 1938, a "dream come true" for the black community.

Since then, the center has experienced ups and downs. During the late seventies and eighties, it looked as if the drive to survive had been lost, but through the efforts of the community and city officials, the center is making a comeback. Its doors open early in the morning and close late at night. With programs ranging from day care to martial arts to black counseling services, the center remains a vital part of the black community in the Southside.

Another big event in the Southside during the thirties was the construction of Route 13. As Dougherty observed, the main route out of town until then was

Spencer Road, which ran all the way to Newfield. Charles W. Barber, who worked for the city of Ithaca as assistant engineer for twenty-one years, remembers when the New York State Department of Transportation began laying out the new highway. "Meadow Street from Six Mile Creek to Wood Street was nothing but swamp, with maybe ten houses on the east side, plus some old shacks and shanties," he says. "We watched them construct Route 13, and everyone said it would wash away because it was in the swamp."

Fortunately, the new highway (two lanes, back then) stayed high and dry, and it soon became the focal point of new commercial development. "A lot of stores and houses were built right after the road went in," says Barber. One of the biggest projects was the Ithaca Plaza, built by real-estate developer and engineer Robert Reed Colbert. "It was the original plaza in Ithaca," Barber remembers. "Loblaws was the big store there, and the others came afterward." It does not sound impressive in the age of the shopping mall, but the supermarket was an exciting new concept in the thirties, when most people did their shopping daily in small, cramped "Mom and Pop" grocery stores.

The Depression was just beginning to abate when World War II began. Mrs. Mann remembers that both her older brothers ran straight to the recruiting office, and were crushed at being turned down because their lungs were scarred by tuberculosis. "Everyone wanted to go," she says. "They all wanted to see Europe!"

Those who could not fight abroad contributed to the war effort at home. In part out of patriotism, but also because of rationing, they continued the thrifty habits they had acquired during the Depression. As Jessamine Johnson remembers, "Victory gardens were planted on all available land. People spent their evenings planting and hoeing instead of driving around since gasoline was rationed." Employment opportunities were plentiful, and women entered the work force in unprecedented numbers, leaving their children in the care of neighbors or relatives.

"When the war was finally over, there was no frenzied jubilation, but more interest was taken in Memorial Day and Armistice Day," writes Johnson. "No one seemed to enjoy the march of the military and guns through the streets. It was now time to forget."<sup>12</sup>

By the end of the war, the Southside was fairly well established as a residential area. Most of the available building space had been taken before the war for housing or commercial purposes. The fifties were a relatively tranquil period for this neighborhood, as it was for most of the nation. But beneath the surface stirred the embryonic civil rights movement. The Southside felt the winds of change, as blacks throughout the country began to demand the dignity and respect guaranteed them by the Constitution.

Although Ithaca has cherished a reputation for racial tolerance that predates the Civil War, the experiences of its black community did not differ greatly from those of blacks almost anywhere in the nation. The St. James church was organized in response to segregation in local churches. Mrs. Mann recalls that when black celebrities such as Marian Anderson and Paul Robeson visited Ithaca in the 1950s, they were refused rooms at the Ithaca Hotel. Blacks were



denied service in local restaurants, "even the diner on State Street," until, as Mrs. Mann remembers it, "a black man who couldn't get served there went home and came back with a shotgun. He just sat there until they decided to give him something to eat. Lionel Martin, a black policeman, brought suit against the Villa Restaurant for refusing to serve him, and won."

The experiences of local black leaders such as Corrine Galvin were not heartening. Mrs. Galvin earned her Ph.D. at Cornell, only to be rejected for a teaching position at her alma mater. She eventually taught at Ithaca College and wrote articles for scientific and black-oriented magazines. She also taught a course in black American history at the Southside Community Center. "She taught black history as she knew it," remembers lifelong resident Frances Eastman. "She told of her own experiences. Being black and not meeting her goals could not have made her hopeful about the future of young blacks." Still, "her home was always open. She would help people write resumes and find jobs." Corrine Galvin's contributions did not go unnoticed: the Tompkins County Human Rights Commission named its annual award in her honor.

Another black community leader of that era was James Gibbs, one of the first directors of the Southside Community Center. Anita Reed, who worked with Gibbs as an office worker, attributes much of the activity at the center



47. Fashion Show at Southside Community Center, ca. 1950. Photograph by Curt Foerster, courtesy of Southside Community Center.

during the late thirties and early forties to Gibbs's leadership. "His focus was very broad, from youth to adults," says Reed.

Gibbs's dedication to the community went beyond his duties as director at Southside. "No one could ask for help that he didn't help in some way," says Eastman. "He had a way with young people," agrees Reed. "He could relate to them, helped them find jobs, encouraged them to stay in school." Gibbs was a member of Kiwanis, the Servus League, the Episcopal church, and served as president of the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). "He knew everybody in town," says Eastman. "His forte was public relations; he was a 'greeter.'" There are a number of local posthumous tributes to Gibbs, one of which was the dedication of the street to the new city Youth Bureau as James Gibbs Way in 1987.

People who lived in the Southside during the fifties and sixties remember it as a quiet, friendly neighborhood. The racial tensions that turned Cornell University into a battleground apparently did not affect the black community downtown. This may have been a matter of demographics. "There were a lot of children and elderly people in the neighborhood," recalls Frances Eastman. "The men and women in their twenties went to California or New York City, because there were no good jobs for young blacks in Ithaca."

The assassination of civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968 stunned the nation, and the loss was deeply felt among Ithaca's black community. It also marked a turning point in local employment opportunities. "As destructive as it was, people who were prepared found entry into jobs," explains Eastman. She was working in the medical records department at Tompkins County Hospital when her white supervisor died. "Before, they would have hired a new white and I would have trained her to be my supervisor," says Eastman. "Instead, I got the job. A lot of scholarships became available around that time, and employers like plumbers started taking young black men as apprentices. I think Martin Luther King's death shocked a lot of people into doing the 'right thing.'"

By the mid-sixties, it became clear that another basic right, shelter, was becoming more difficult for Ithaca's low-income residents to obtain, particularly for those over sixty-five. A 1965 study by the city planning department indicated that there was a potential demand for at least one hundred units of housing that would rent for no more than \$75-\$95 a month.<sup>13</sup>

In response, Hunna Johns, who was mayor at the time, ordered the reactivation of the Ithaca Housing Authority (IHA). The agency was created in the 1940s, but had apparently been dormant for over twenty years when Mayor Johns called it back into action, appointing Jack Kiely as chairman. The group began planning a public housing project in the Northside, with an initial goal of 100 units. By April of 1966, the IHA was recommending that the figure be increased to 250 units of new construction plus another 50 units of existing housing space. IHA also broadened the eligibility standards, deciding that the projects should be open to anyone of any age who needed low-cost housing. It was also decided to divide the project; half would be built in the Northside and the other half on a twelve-acre tract in Titus Flats.

The original plan for the Southside project was to build one hundred garden apartments for the elderly, and another fifty-two units for people of all ages. The mayor balked at the latter proposal, insisting that the needs of the elderly come first. Johns warned that "if we don't watch it, we'll be getting all the poor people to come to the city."

Southside residents were also worried about the project and its potential for devaluing surrounding properties. The Southwest Civic Association was somewhat mollified after touring two similar projects in Binghamton, noting that public housing would not necessarily harm neighborhood property values if it were well managed; but they expressed some mistrust of the management.

By July 1967, the Southside plan was to build 108 units for the elderly and forty-four "any-age" units. Schematic drawings featured a number of low-level buildings with private gardens. The mayor was still not satisfied, and, the following December, vetoed the project, arguing that it would draw low-income families from rural areas into the city. That is, it would benefit the county more than the city, solving a problem that should be addressed by the Board of Supervisors. Johns declared that the housing problems of the non-elderly population were best left to private enterprise, aided by tax relief or rent subsidies. (Johns was himself a real estate agent.)

In February 1968, by a vote of 11 to 2, Common Council overrode the mayoral veto. But the override was not a defeat for Johns; in a compromise solution, it was decided that all 152 units of housing in the Titus Flats project would be reserved for the elderly.

Progress was slow, for the project was beset by a series of problems. In 1969 the federal government ordered plans for one- and two-story buildings scrapped in favor of a high-rise building. In the meantime, a so-called turn-key project was successfully built and opened at Plain and Center streets. The twenty-four unit complex, built by developer Arthur Golder and turned over to the IHA in June of 1969, was the second housing project completed in Ithaca. (The first was Overlook Terrace on Hector Street.)

Finally, on August 22, 1970, the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development approved plans for the Titus Flats high rise. A ground-breaking ceremony for the \$2.9 million project was held a month later. In April 1972, the IHA board chose the name Titus Towers for the new building, which stood fourteen stories tall and contained 165 apartments. The first tenants assumed occupancy in September, and the formal dedication ceremony took place in October.

The opening of Titus Towers did not satisfy the need for affordable housing for the elderly, and in 1979, the IHA embarked on a second project in the flats. The result was Titus Towers Two, a \$4.1 million, six-story building behind Titus Towers One, with access from Wood Street. Of the seventy apartments in Titus Towers Two, ten are specially designed for the handicapped and are available to occupants without restriction as to age. The rest are set aside for those who are sixty-two or older. Although Titus Towers Two encountered its own obstacles along the road to completion, it was built somewhat more expeditiously than its predecessor; it was finished and occupied by October 1984.

Public housing was one means by which the city increased its low-cost housing stock. Titus Towers represented the obvious approach, which was new construction. By the mid-seventies, city leaders began to look for other, less expensive, options and found the solution in their own backyard: the restoration of decayed residential buildings. Under the leadership of Mayor Ed Conley, the city embarked on a kind of house recycling program. The effort led, in 1977, to the creation of a private, nonprofit corporation called Ithaca Neighborhood Housing Services (INHS).

The new organization had its work cut out for it. According to a city planning department study from the early seventies, about 85 percent of the residential buildings in the North- and Southside neighborhoods were considered "deteriorated" or "delapidated." "Deteriorated means there are maintenance problems, and maybe it's not too attractive, but it's not a safety hazard," explains the first executive director for INHS, Arthur Pearce. "Delapidated could mean unsafe wiring, unsanitary plumbing, really unsafe conditions. And there was a fair amount of delapidated housing in [the Southside]."

How did so many Southside homes become so run-down? Pearce suspects that many homeowners did not have the resources for regular maintenance or thought they could not get the necessary financing. Past INHS board president



48. Newly renovated house at 136 Cleveland Avenue, one of the first projects of Ithaca Neighborhood Housing Services. Photograph courtesy of Ithaca Neighborhood Housing Services.

Shirley Mann-Smith says the problem was especially pressing in the Southside because "the area was redlined by the banks. They didn't want to lend money to people they thought couldn't repay it; all they could see was money going to pot. We had fifty or sixty abandoned houses here because even if the owners could repay a loan, the bank wouldn't finance them." To remedy the situation, INHS engaged the participation of local banks, both as lending institutions and in an advisory capacity.

Another reason for the deterioration of Southside buildings was the prevalence of absentee ownership. "Some of the most difficult buildings were rental," says Pearce. Lucy Brown, an INHS board member since its formation, agrees. Brown watched her own Northside neighborhood deteriorate during the 1960s. "At one time, everybody knew everybody and everybody owned their own house," Brown recalls. "Then the family sells the house, and the buyer isn't interested in living there or the quality of life there, but how much money he can make renting it."

The first INHS project was to create office space for the fledgling organization. A run-down house at 520 West Green Street was purchased, and the newly elected board members rolled up their sleeves and did the gritty rehabilitation work themselves.

The next task was to drum up enthusiasm for a low-interest home improvements loan program. Mann-Smith says that was easier said than done. "We thought we could waltz in and everyone would think what we were trying to do was just great," she laughs. "They could only see themselves going thirty to forty thousand dollars in debt!" Nevertheless, board members persisted, going door to door surveying residents and bringing in city building department inspectors to assess housing conditions in the neighborhood. "Some people slammed their doors in our faces," Mann-Smith says mildly.

Then the group sat down to determine which owner-occupied houses should be attended to first. "We wanted to pick an area that would provide visual impact as soon as possible, so when people from the funding sources came around they would have an impression of progress," says Brown. "We didn't want to pick a neighborhood that was too run-down; it would take too much time and money to fix it up."

"A lot of us wanted to start with Cleveland Avenue, because it was such a mess," Mann-Smith says, "but they told us it would be too expensive; it would deplete our funds right from the start! So we chose Plain Street because it had a good combination of housing that was deteriorated and in good shape."

"The house on the corner of West Green and Plain streets was our first official job," continues Pearce. "We rebuilt parts of the house, did extensive repairs, fixed some of the plumbing."

As the founders of INHS had hoped, the rehabilitation of one house had a ripple effect on its surroundings, as other homeowners were encouraged to spruce up their own properties. Interest in the organization grew, and the target area was expanded throughout the Southside, then to the Northside, and finally to West Hill.

INHS has made a difference in the Southside, not only in the physical ap-

pearance of the neighborhood but psychologically as well. "People realize they can live in decent housing, instead of a slum," affirms Mann-Smith. "Overall, we have had a positive impact on people's lives, by providing decent housing in a way I don't think a public program could," agrees Brown. "[INHS] is not a panacea for all problems, but it has made a contribution."

The Southside does not readily come to mind when phrases such as "historically significant" or "architecturally important" are used; with a few exceptions, the buildings are rather modest in size and design. It does not have the clear identity of neighborhoods such as Fall Creek or Bryant Park: Southside residents tend to resist formalized organization, although they have demonstrated a willingness to pull together and fight when they feel the need. A Titus Avenue group, for example, petitioned successfully for better maintenance of the banks of Six Mile Creek. The Southside Community Center sponsors an annual festival each summer. But for the most part the residents, black and white, eschew neighborhood slogans and bumper stickers. If there is such a thing as Southside pride, it is a private, individual matter. "It's a nice place to live," they say, and maybe that is all it really needs to be.



## 6 North Central

### Margaret Hobbie

The region called North Central on the 1970 Neighborhoods Map is a large, diverse area made up of several neighborhoods. Bordered by commercial districts, highways, and waterways, it has been the site of splendid mansions, public housing, churches, factories, parks, settlement houses, schools, businesses, cultural agencies, and dozens and dozens of houses. In this chapter the area south of Cascadilla Street and east of Washington Park will be referred to as Central, while the area west of Washington Park will be called West End. The area north of Cascadilla Street will be described as Northside. All of this region was once owned first by Abraham Bloodgood and then by Simeon DeWitt (see Chapter 1).

### Central

The easternmost blocks of the Central neighborhood—those closest to the present downtown commercial district—made up one of Ithaca's wealthiest neighborhoods in the nineteenth century, years before Cornell Heights, Cascadilla Park Road, or Cayuga Heights were developed. In her novel *The Cliff Hangers*, Janet O'Daniel described this neighborhood as "the old, dignified downtown section, where there was still [in 1914] considerable elegance. Inside there was a great deal of dark woodwork, along with high ceilings, long windows and heavy furniture."<sup>1</sup>

Today, the neighborhood is still blessed with rows of large, gracious homes, many occupied by just one or two families. Others have been converted to professional offices but are beautifully maintained so that the residential character of the region has been preserved. Neighbors enjoy the amenities of downtown, and count proximity to the library, churches, the Women's Community Building, and the Commons among the pleasures of living in the Central neighborhood. In some respects, however, the neighborhood has paid a price for its closeness to the commercial district.

The "Gray Ladies" of North Geneva Street made up the most impressive grouping of residences in the neighborhood—indeed perhaps in all of Ithaca—for over one hundred years. Each of these Greek Revival mansions was associ-



49. The Gray Ladies of North Geneva Street. The Porter house on the left was torn down in 1956.

ated with a prominent nineteenth-century business family. Number 202 was built about 1830 by Edward L. Porter, a merchant and sheriff. Its neighbor at 204 was built by Chauncey Grant, captain of a Cayuga Lake steamer, trustee of the Tompkins County Bank, and owner (with his father, Jesse) of Grant's Coffee House (see Chapter 1). The next house, number 210, has been inhabited by members of the Treman family and their descendants since 1849. In that year, hardware merchant Lafayette L. Treman and his bride moved in to the home of Mrs. Treman's parents, Ebenezer and Eleanor Dey Mack. Lafayette Treman lived there until his death in 1900.

The houses have served as residences, professional offices, and a tourist home. The symmetry of the block was destroyed in 1956 when the Porter house was demolished to make way for a gasoline station. The site is currently occupied by Bottle Bert's.

As Ithaca grew, the Central region expanded to the west. Wooden and brick houses reflecting the fashions of different decades—Greek Revival, Italianate, and Queen Anne—filled out new residential blocks. The establishment of the Ithaca Gas Works at the corner of Plain and Mill (Court) streets in 1853 provided impetus for the construction of simple workers' homes on adjacent streets. The Jacobs family lived in one of these, at 120 Esty Street, in the 1910s. Lawrence H. Jacobs described growing up in this house in *Early Boyhood Days in Ithaca*:

In the early days coal-oil or kerosene lamps were used for illumination throughout the homes. The kitchen lamp had a bull's-eye reflector that could be adjusted to focus anywhere in the room. Electricity was installed on the first floor about 1911.

Having no central heating system, coal-burning heaters were set up in each room downstairs. Stovepipes extending through to upstairs rooms into brick chimneys, furnished what heat they could, which in winter months seemed insufficient. To offset this the children had heavy, warm blankets on their beds. . . .

The front room off the living room of the home was set aside as a special room, used only on special occasions, a custom not unusual in many homes at that time. A baby-grand piano in the front room was a treasure, used only when the girls practiced lessons or the family sang together, or "had company." The tinsel-covered Christmas tree was set up in the front room. But there was no fireplace on which to hang stockings on Christmas Eve. Nevertheless, Santa, in some mysterious way, never missed leaving presents for all the family.

In front of the home were two large horsechestnut trees. Every spring they were covered with blossoms that later matured into large, shiny brown nuts, which the children gathered. They had fun carving faces on them and stuck in toothpicks to resemble arms and legs. . . .

The iceman went by the house about twice a week, delivering orders. His wagon had chips of ice covered with sawdust in it. Children followed the wagon, hoping to get a piece of ice. When they did, they washed off the sawdust and popped the ice into their mouths.

Father had a small flock of hens that supplied the family with eggs. One was a tame bantam. One day the little lady seized an opportunity to get into the living room and flew upon a small bureau. There she made a nest in some towels and laid her eggs. From then on it was a daily habit, of which she seemed very proud.<sup>2</sup>

The blocks around Washington Park, laid out in 1832 by Simeon DeWitt and his son Richard Varick DeWitt, were built up with homes by the end of the century. The park has been under municipal authority since 1847 and is still an important open green space enjoyed by all Ithacans, especially those in the immediate neighborhood.

A list of businesses located in the Central region over the years would fill several pages. One of the most notable was the Ithaca Bottling Works, which produced soft drinks (nine different flavors of Sigler's Beverages) in a handsome frame building at 407 West Seneca Street from 1923 to 1974.

Small groceries and other services have enhanced life in the Central neighborhood. Among the small stores and services in the area have been Zorn's confectionary (also a newsstand and post office) at 526 West State Street and Jake's (Lucarelli's) Red & White at 402 West Court. From 1899 to 1955 the house at 414 West Buffalo Street (The Frame Shop since 1965) hosted a succession of meat markets and grocery stores.

#### Central Landmarks: Schools, Churches, and the Gas Works

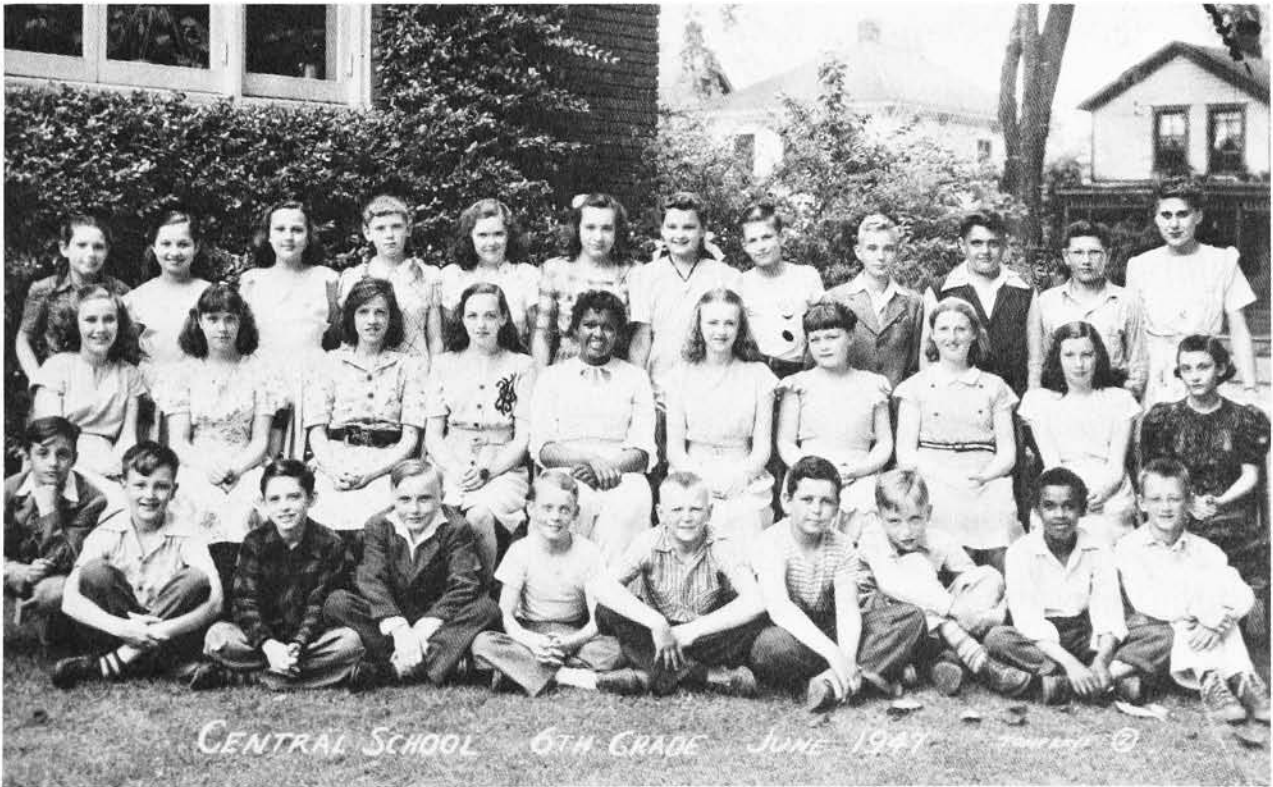
An early public school based on the Lancasterian system was built at the northwest corner of Geneva and Mill (Court) streets in 1827. By 1854 it was hopelessly overcrowded and so was replaced by Central School at the south-

west corner of Albany and Court streets. The block bounded by Court, Albany, Buffalo, and Plain streets has been dominated by school buildings ever since.

Central School was the city's only public elementary school until the Fall Creek School opened in the 1860s. In 1874, when New York State's union school district law was enacted, Central became part of the village of Ithaca's school district. The school building was remodeled and enlarged in 1880 but burned to the ground April 29, 1912. It was not replaced until the present building on North Albany Street was opened in 1923. Several generations of Ithaca schoolchildren attended elementary school here until the school moved next door into the former Boynton Junior High School building in 1972. The original Central School building now houses the Greater Ithaca Activities Center, serving the residents of the North Central region and many other Ithacans by providing meeting rooms, recreational facilities, classrooms, a day care center, and a roster of outstanding programs for children and adults.

Ithaca's first junior high school, named for long-time district supervisor Frank David Boynton, was built adjacent to Central School on Buffalo Street in 1931. It was designed by Ithacan Arthur N. Gibb, who also designed the Henry St. John, Fall Creek, and West Hill elementary schools. In 1972 Boynton Junior High School moved to a new building on Lake Street north of Ithaca High School.

A school to serve Ithaca's growing Roman Catholic population was opened in 1884 on Buffalo Street near Central School and called Immaculate Concep-



50. Central School sixth grade, 1947. Beverly Martin, fifth from left in the second row, grew up to become principal of the school. Photograph by Tompkins, courtesy of Southside Community Center.

tion School. Seven Sisters of St. Joseph sent out from Rochester were the first teachers. Four girls and four boys were graduated from the school in 1885, and it has held a firm place in Ithaca's educational system ever since. Over the years, the number of students has grown to about 250, and lay teachers have joined the Sisters of St. Joseph on the faculty. Children from the successive waves of immigrant families—Irish, Italian, and Hungarian—attended Immaculate Conception in its early decades. Today the student body includes children of different races and many faiths; in fact approximately one-third of the pupils are non-Catholic.

A fire destroyed the original school building in April 1946 and the current school replaced it in 1949. A convent for the Sisters of St. Joseph was erected immediately to the west of the original school building about 1899. The convent was built over in 1927 and still serves as the home of the Sisters who teach at the school.

Calvary Baptist Church, at 507 North Albany Street, branched off from the older African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church on Wheat Street (now Cleveland Avenue) in 1857, to serve a small black community in the North Albany Street area. Known first as the Wesleyan Methodist Episcopal Society (Colored), it assumed the name Calvary Baptist in 1903. Its present building was constructed in 1917 and rededicated in 1954.

Lawrence Jacobs poignantly recalls this institution in an almost-integrated neighborhood in 1912:

During the summertime the church doors were open, especially when evening services were held. The voices of the Negro congregation could be clearly heard outside the church as they sang their hymns. It was pleasant to listen to them, for they sang with a sincerity a listener could feel.

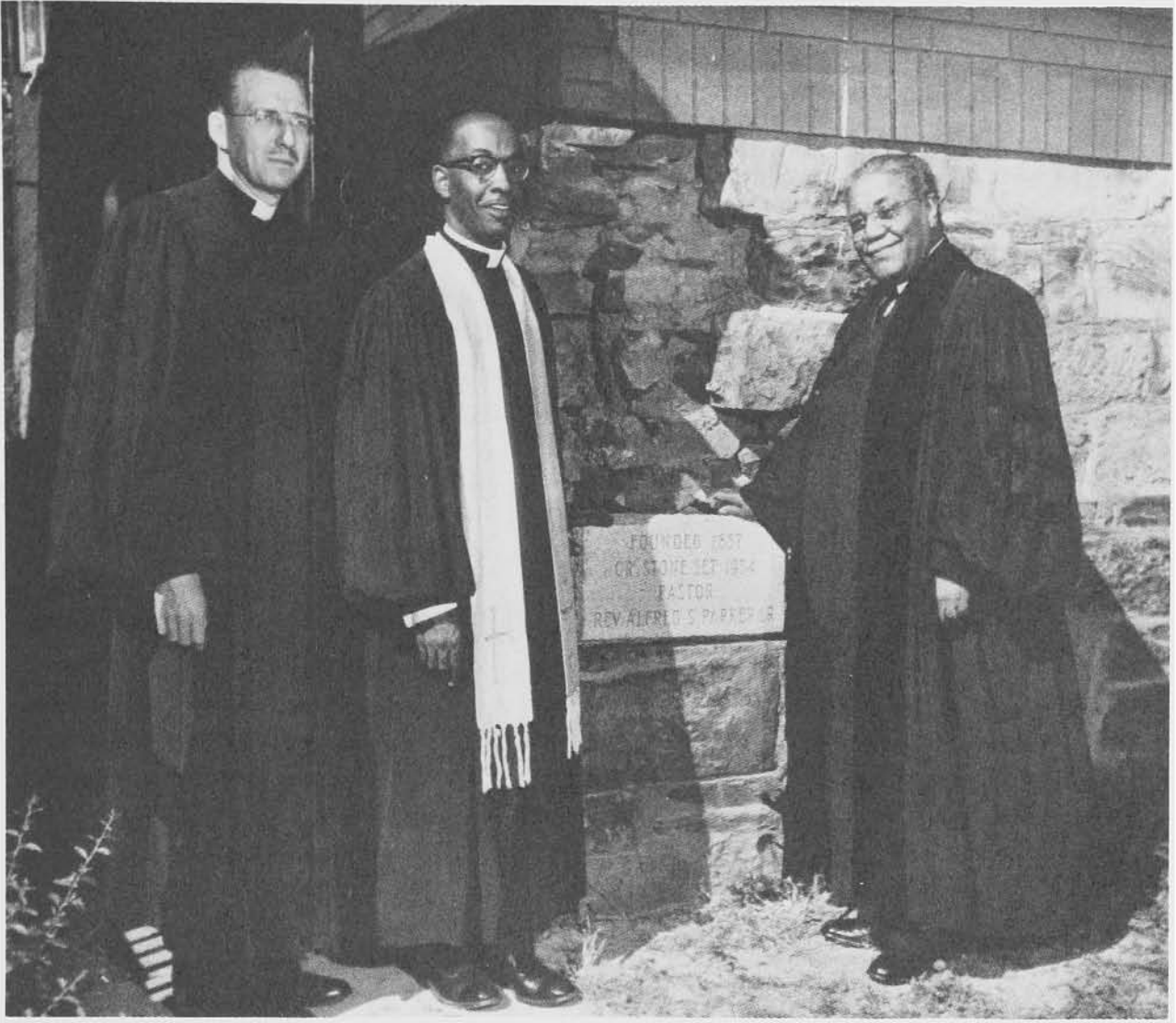
A neighborhood white City Boy often was attracted by their singing, and knew many of the hymns they sang. Frequently, during summer evenings, he would step to the open doorway and peer in. He was always tempted to enter as he saw the congregation standing while they sang, but he never quite got enough courage to do so. At the farther end of the church aisle he could see the gentle-mannered pastor, singing with his congregation. He never heard one of the pastor's sermons but he always had the feeling they were worth listening to.

When the lad was older and singing in his own church choir, he often thought of the old-time religion sung by the good folks of the Negro church on Albany Street.<sup>3</sup>

Calvary Baptist is still known for its fine music and outstanding church choir.

Author Alex Haley spent the first few weeks of his life in the North Albany Street neighborhood. He was born while his graduate student father, Simon, and mother, Bertha, were living at 516 North Albany. Haley is arguably the most famous living American born in Ithaca. The house at 421 North Albany is also associated with the history of American blacks. The first informal meeting of the black fraternity Alpha Phi Alpha took place there in 1905. Alpha Phi Alpha now has about 700 chapters.





51. The rededication of Calvary Baptist Church, 1954. Photograph by Curt Foerster.

A church at the northwest corner of Seneca and Plain streets housed a Methodist congregation from 1851 to 1878. It was replaced in 1878 by an elegant building, commonly called the State Street Methodist Church, at the northwest corner of State and Geneva streets. This church served Methodists in the neighborhood for many decades, but by 1960 the area had become very commercial and there was no longer a large enough congregation to support the church. It was torn down in 1961, and the congregation merged with the church on Aurora Street to form St. Paul's Methodist Church.

The Christian & Missionary Alliance Church was established in Ithaca in 1894. In 1919, the group purchased an old plank building from the Baptist Association and moved it to a site near the northwest corner of Plain and Esty streets. The church remodeled the building extensively in 1934, raising the ceiling and adding a basement.

By the mid-1960s the congregation had outgrown its building and the Sunday School annex next door; it built the Hillside Alliance Church on Slaterville Road. In 1968 the Ballet Center of Ithaca purchased the former church building



and has been located there ever since. In 1977–78 the corner house was demolished to make way for the addition of a second studio, designed by Nancy Reid. The Ballet Center has carefully preserved many elements of the original church building, including the stained glass windows.

The Ithaca Gas Light Company was formed in December 1852 by several local investors. In 1853 the company began to acquire land at Mill (Court) and Plain streets and constructed a retort house and three other buildings for the manufacture of gas from coal. This gas was used to light residences and businesses and, later, city streets. Treman Brothers bought the firm in the 1860s and in 1898 sold it to William T. Morris of Penn Yan. Morris built the present brick building in 1899.

Like many other youngsters in the neighborhood, Lawrence Jacobs was fascinated by the process of manufacturing gas:

During the summer months a door on Plain Street, opening upon the furnace room and coal bins, stood open. Boys would gather just inside, where they could watch the men stoke the ever-hungry furnaces. It was hot in the big room and the men's arms and faces were covered with coal dust and were heavy with perspiration from scooping up the coal with short-handled shovels. They were adept at their work and never missed their mark as they fed coal through the open furnace door, then quickly closed it again to shut out sight of the roaring flames within.

Between stokings, the men would talk with the boys, sometimes about their own work, sometimes about how the boys were progressing with their studies in school.

The "gas tank" was on Esty Street, close to the coal building. The boys were always curious as they watched the "inside" tank rise and fall so slowly they would not see it move. Someone told them there was pressure within that caused the action.<sup>4</sup>

By 1918 Morris had merged the Ithaca Gas Light Company with other local light and power interests, and the New York State Electric & Gas Company (NYSEG) was formed. By 1932 NYSEG was manufacturing gas at the foot of First Street and the old buildings at Court and Plain were used for storage. Later, NYSEG sold the complex to the Ithaca City School District, which used the brick building for many years as an alternative junior high school called Markles Flats. The building is currently leased by Ithaca Soy Works, Offender Aid and Restoration, and artists' studios.

## West End

Many Ithacans claim to be natives of the West End, but few can agree on its boundaries. The West End lies somewhere west of Washington Park and east of West Hill and has at times overlapped and merged with areas referred to as the Rhine (see Chapter 7) or the First Ward. Now badly fragmented, it was at times home to hundreds of middle-class and working-class families as well as the desperately poor Inlet squatters.

The homes of the West End have shared space with businesses, warehouses, hotels, and railroad tracks. Many small factories were located here at various times in the nineteenth century: a silk factory, a tobacco factory, the Williams Brothers foundry, the Treman Brothers warehouse, the Bostwick & Williams barrel factory, and a lumberyard. Travelers' hotels, among them the Grand Central, St. John's, Globe, and Commercial, were located on State Street near the train station.

The area did not see much residential development before it was drained and filled, toward the end of the nineteenth century. Its early occupants were laborers, small businessmen, and railroad workers, many of them recent immigrants. In *A Boy's Will . . . A Man's Way*, Louis Fendrick describes life in this neighborhood. The Fendricks (the parents were natives of Hungary) lived at 305 North Fulton Street in the 1920s.

I believe my earliest recollection was of sound—an almost constant ringing of bells, a shrieking whistle followed by an increasing hiss of steam and the awaited crash of metal against metal. . . .

The house was of fairly good size with a high porch fronting the dirt, muddy road which passed for a street. A lattice-like affair was fastened to the underside of the porch. Abutted to this was a big gatepost, the gate, and a picket-type fence, which spanned the front and enclosed the property. . . .

The lattice-like covering on the front porch provided an excellent sidevantage to my hideaway under the porch. I could look out onto the street and the tracks, but no one could see in. It was from here that at this early age I often ventured forth in my search for adventure. It was here that I kept my little red cart that I used for so many things. I would walk the track loading spilled coal into the cart to bring home. When coal was scarce on the tracks, I would join the other kids and make faces at the fireman and engineer on a passing train. They'd throw coal at us. It was a game really; they knew that we needed coal and they would pretend to be really angry and hurl huge hunks of coal at us as the train passed by. We would then fill our carts and hurry for home. . . .

It would be fun to hike to the round house down by the Treman-King warehouse. We'd watch the big locomotives enter on a siding track that led into the round house. A blast on the whistle by the engineer would alert railroad workers who grabbed wooden spokes on the turntable and manually walked the big engine around the house, making a complete turn-around to face the opposite direction from which it had entered. This was always good for an hour or two in a day of play.

We would wander over to the dump in back of the warehouse and search for discarded goodies or come up with a wooden packing crate worthy of conversion into a tree house. Somehow there were always immense possibilities for the treasures we would find. I had a big collection of used typewriter ribbons that one day I found useable. The empty ribbon reels were ideal for storing valuable fishing line which I had cadged from my Uncle George.<sup>5</sup>

Many Italian immigrant families moved into the West End in the early part of the twentieth century. Augusto and Ignazia Baldini, immigrants from Carpineto Romano, lived with their family and ran a grocery store in a large house at 301 North Washington Street. Mrs. Baldini was a wonderful cook, and many

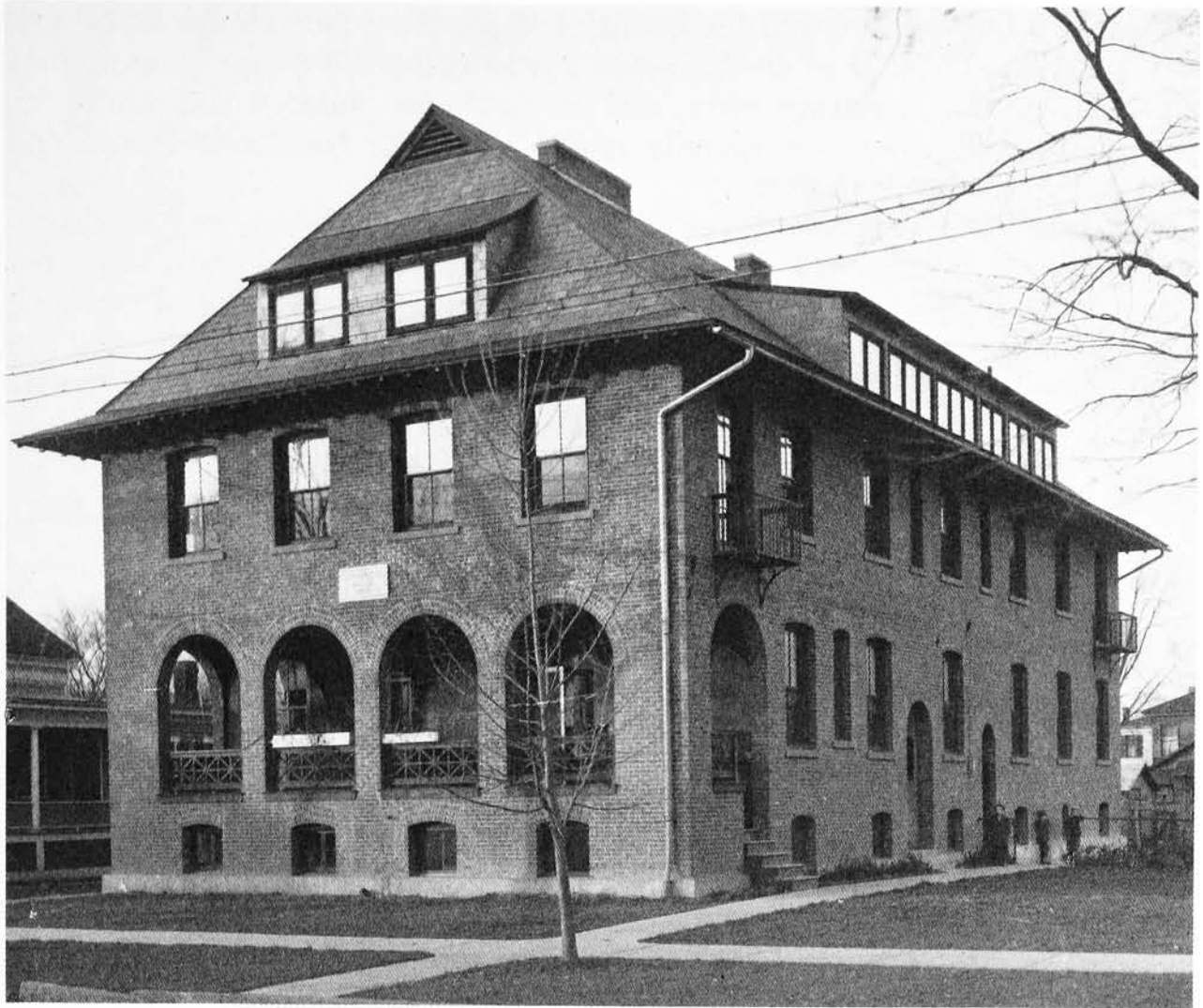
Ithacans who grew up in the neighborhood remember her famous dinners. Other Italian businesses in the area were Natalis' grocery at Court and Meadow and Joe's Restaurant at State and Meadow. Joe's did a booming business for over fifty years, and reopened in 1988 after a hiatus of a few years. The Daino family purchased Ithaca's first commercial pizza oven for Joe's in 1938.

Bruno Mazza ran a bakery near the corner of Buffalo and Meadow streets from about 1910 to 1947. A trip to Bruno's each morning for a loaf of fresh bread was a ritual for many West End and Northside families. Neighbors also remember his sons, Bruno and Ralph, delivering fresh bread from a truck when they were little boys. Bruno Jr. became an attorney, Ralph a surgeon. The business, later known as the Ithaca Bakery, has been owned by the Zazzara family since 1947.

One of the best-loved Italians of the West End was Luigi Massucci—blacksmith, artist, generous host, and practical joker—who lived at 313 North Meadow. Anthony DiGiacomo remembers Massucci's parties: "He would string colored lights up in his yard, buy whole stalks of bananas and invite hundreds of people. . . . On my fourth birthday, Massucci gave me a box about six feet by three feet, and as I unwrapped it, little gifts fell out of the wrapping paper. Finally I got to the gift, which was an enormous carrot. He had hollowed it out, and inside was a \$20 bill."<sup>6</sup>



52. Luigi Massucci in his grape arbor at 313 North Meadow Street. Photograph courtesy of Luisa Massucci Scalia.



53. Children's Home, ca. 1910.

In 1885 industrialist Edward S. Esty presented two lots in the 500 block of West Seneca Street to the Ladies' Union Benevolent Society for use as an orphanage. The Children's Home was incorporated separately on January 20, 1889, and the original two houses were replaced by a handsome brick building, designed by William Henry Miller, in 1909.

The Children's Home could accommodate twenty-four girls and boys—orphans and poor children whose parents could not care for them. The home admitted no "mental defectives." The children attended the Ithaca public schools and tended to do well in their studies. The Children's Home ceased operation in 1952 with the growth of publicly supported social services and the foster home system.

Since then the building at 520 West Seneca Street has served as the home of the Assembly of God Church of Ithaca, which began as an independent pentecostal congregation in 1915 under the leadership of Reverend A. Clinton Ayers. The church was eventually known as the Calvary Full Gospel Church and was located at 521 1/2 South Meadow Street. Around 1953 the congregation affiliated with the Assembly of God and moved into the old Children's Home, where it serves a citywide congregation.

West End families enjoyed the facilities of the West Side House for almost fifty years (see Chapter 7). In the 1960s it was still a full-fledged community center, with staff, meeting space, and programs for children and adults. Its basketball team enjoyed a friendly rivalry with the Northside House and Southside Community Center.

The demolition of the West Side House, the Beebe Mission, and over sixty homes and businesses was devastating to the West End—not just to the area between the Inlet and West Hill, but to the eastern part of the neighborhood, which had already endured the widening of Meadow Street in 1960 and the commercialization and traffic that followed. The West End today exists mostly in people's memories, and they look back fondly on the old days. "I would like to see it go back the way it was," said Al Curry in a 1988 interview. "It was a very close-knit, friendly little community. The people knew each other, most of them liked each other, and they helped each other."<sup>7</sup>

## Northside

In about 1790, when Ithaca was populated by only a few families, a man named Lightfoot sailed up the Cayuga Inlet with a boatload of trade goods: a chest of tea, a sack of coffee, some crockery and dry goods, hardware, knives, gunpowder and lead, and some barrels of whiskey. Lightfoot landed near what is now the new sewage treatment plant, built a shack, and set up a store. Then, and for several years following, he traded his goods for furs brought to him by the families who had settled around the head of Cayuga Lake.

Lightfoot was the first person to live near the area now known as the Northside. His presence indicated the course of the neighborhood's future development: its strong ties to commerce and transportation and its dominant characteristic as a neighborhood of newcomers.

The Northside was a swampy, unhealthy place during the first half of the nineteenth century. Cascadilla Creek meandered through it from southeast to northwest, meeting the Cayuga Inlet at a point that acquired the name Steamboat Landing, because lake steamers docked there after 1827. In the 1830s Cascadilla Creek was set on its present course into a channel extending from Cayuga and Cascadilla streets northwest to the Inlet. A grid of streets was laid out at right angles to this creek bed, with wide promenades on either side of the creek itself. This route, Willow Avenue, became the principal thoroughfare carrying traffic from Steamboat Landing into town. The journey is described in *The Scenery of Ithaca and the Head Waters of the Cayuga Lake*, edited and published by Spence Spencer in 1866:

For more than half a mile this avenue, consisting of two broad and handsome roads, with the swift and sparkling Cascadilla between, bordered by its parallel rows of willow trees, extends to the Lake. On a pleasant summer evening, when the setting sun is throwing his slant beams across it with a transfiguring glory, and when the roads are alive with citizens on foot, on horseback and in carriages, it presents a





54. Cascadilla Creek in winter, ca. 1920, from Cayuga Street.

highly picturesque and attractive scene to the stranger landing from the steam boat.<sup>8</sup>

Because of its swampy nature, the Northside was relatively slow to develop. The oldest houses for the most part lie along Cascadilla Street and the first three blocks of Lake and First streets. As land was drained then filled, more houses were built on the grid of streets extending to the northwest. The Northside today is a mixture of charming old nineteenth-century houses, simple workers' cottages from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and attractive modern housing.

The people who have lived in the Northside have been as diverse as any group in Ithaca. Business owners and professionals were the first to inhabit the larger homes on Lake and Cascadilla, while "mechanics" and laborers lived just a short distance away to the northwest. By the time of World War I, the neighborhood had become the first stop for many immigrant families.

Louis Fendrick's family moved from Fulton Street to a house on Second





55. Morris Avenue, ca. 1908, looking toward East Hill. Entrepreneur Morris Moscovitch built sixteen almost identical houses and rented them to workers' families. Only two of the houses remain.

Street in the 1920s. That end of the town at that time was, according to Fendrick,

what one might call well-integrated. There was a good representation of Hungarians, Italians, and Poles, liberally mixed with some Jewish and so-called American families. Our landlord, Mr. Appolinary Rawa, was Polish, and our neighbor in the apartment across from us was Mrs. Blostein. The nearest Negro family was the Martins. Beans Martins was a school chum of ours, and they lived on Second Street, about two blocks from where we lived. The Sweedlers lived down the block on Hancock Street.<sup>9</sup>

In 1983 Anthony DiGiacomo remembered the Northside in the 1930s: "The streets were a mix of Hungarian, Italian, Jewish and black people, but as far as I can remember there was very little racial tension or even an awareness of race. We all played together and got along fine."<sup>10</sup>

Some Northside families lived in the neighborhood's first planned developments. Morris Avenue was one of these new developments—sixteen almost identical houses built in 1908–10 by clothier Morris Moscovitch and Jacob Louis. Several of the first residents were Russian Jewish immigrants like Moscovitch himself. In the 1910s many occupants were Italian-born, and in

the twenties the residents tended to be black. Of the original sixteen houses only Numbers 109 and 111 remain.

An earlier, similar development took place in 1895 on Second Street, when Charles Ingersoll built five, six-room tenant houses at Numbers 103 through 111. All five have survived as residences.

### Life in the 1930s

For over one hundred years, the families of the Northside have lived close to its businesses and industries, a boon to Northside children who love to explore; many have become amateur archaeologists in the process.

Louis Fendrick describes some of his Northside adventures in *A Boy's Will*. (By the early 1930s the Fendricks had moved from Second Street to 406 Hancock.)

In the backyard, between two full-grown plum trees, Dad rigged up a pipe across the span and having bought us a gymnastic set, positioned a trapeze bar, a set of rings, and a swing. It wasn't long before kids gathered, and we all took turns performing our gymnastic feats.

Since Rosie's [Vilano] field was next to our house we took over the lot for our playground. As a result, the rings and the trapeze bar were available to anyone. The lot was our football field, our baseball field, and a general meeting place for all the kids. . . .

We would make our own kites, walking stilts, and other objects made from scrap lumber we would scrounge at Potter and Allen's Lumber Yard, at the end of Third Street. Wooden cigar boxes were a valuable item for a kid of that day. They served us well as tackle boxes for our fishing gear, chests for burying treasure, and boxes for storage of Indian artifacts, such as arrowheads, Indian beads and pipes. We would dismantle some of the boxes for the lumber to build a rubber band-propelled boat, and there [were] so many other uses a kid could come up with. . . .

On our scrounging trips down to the lumber yard we would always manage to explore the glass slag heap in back of the bag factory. This building was located on the site of a former glass factory. The slag heap, which was a mountain to us, was a huge pile of molten glass of many colors, and for some reason we would also find pieces of flintrock there. When we weren't looking for flint, we would be playing king of the mountain. Shoving and brawling, we would fight to get to the top of the heap to declare in a loud yell, "I'm king of the mountain."

This was follow the leader ground. It took in the mountain, quicksand, the island, the barges, the gas plant and Cascadilla Creek. Of course, there was always walking the tracks. We would see who could walk the longest distance balancing on the railroad track. Another feat would be walking up the load bucket on the endless belt sand loader.<sup>11</sup>

### Businesses

Many immigrants went into the food business, and the Northside's groceries figure in the recollections of long-time residents. In addition to Mr. Rawa's grocery at Hancock and Second there was Mr. Labar's grocery in the former

Oakhurst Hotel at Madison and Third, Gus's Italian Grocery at 320 Hancock, and Todis' at 501 North Meadow.

Today we do not associate the Northside with farming, but the alluvial soil left by the old courses of Cascadilla Creek and the relatively open spaces made for wonderful, large gardens. Carl Petito lived for many years near his aunt, Rose Vilano, at 422 Second Street and they grew vegetables on the block bounded by Adams, Second, Hancock, and Third. Petito sold the site in 1960; it is now called Hancock Plaza and is home to several businesses, Abby's Restaurant, and the Tompkins County Department of Motor Vehicles.

Down Third Street from Hancock Plaza is Ithaca Scrap Processors, the Northside's oldest business. Founded around 1903 as the Ithaca Junk Company by Henry Blostein and Abraham Alpert, it moved to its present site in 1907. The firm was purchased in 1949 by Gilbert Webber, and since his death in 1965 has been run by his widow, Ida. A spur of the Lehigh Valley Railroad once bisected the firm's property, and Ithaca Scrap and Shulman's furniture warehouse used rail transport until the line's demise around 1960.



56. Hungarian party at the old Northside House, ca. 1930.



57. A meeting of the Semprevisa Society, made up of families from Carpineto Romano, Italy, on St. Augustine's feast day, at the Northside House in the 1930s. Photograph courtesy of Nancy Bordoni.

Now over eighty years old, Ithaca Scrap plays an increasingly important part in the life of the city and county as concerns about solid waste disposal grow and mandatory recycling takes effect. Its presence along with other businesses on the Northside, however, now poses problems as the area becomes increasingly residential, and some neighbors press for stricter zoning laws.

### Northside House

The Social Service League of Ithaca, founded in 1904 (see Chapter 7), established the Northside House in response to the needs of the neighborhood's burgeoning immigrant population. The league first established a settlement house in a frame house at 206 Third Street in 1925. The building was used until about 1931 and is now a residence.

A second Northside House, designed by Arthur N. Gibb in 1926, was a large Tudoresque frame building housing a gymnasium/auditorium, meeting rooms, library, and staff living quarters. Full-time and part-time staff members administered a full roster of programs for adults and children. A typical week in 1939 included sessions of nursery school for children ages two to five, gym sessions, Boys' and Girls' Clubs, Mothers' Club, Bachelors' Club, boys' and girls' cooking classes, Home Bureau classes, the Hungarian Lodge and Hungarian Social



Club, art and handiwork classes for children, the Syrian Men's Club, and dances for adults.

The lives of Northside youth revolved around Northside House well through the 1960s. John Wells, born in 1952, remembers going to athletic and social events at the community center almost daily after school. The house at that time was funded primarily by the United Way, with a small contribution from the Social Service League.

In 1972 the league sold the Gibbs building to private interests. The West Side House, which was demolished in 1967 (see Chapter 7), and the Northside House were consolidated into the Greater Ithaca Activities Center at the old Central School building. The building at Third and Madison now houses the Ithaca Fitness Center.

### Other Northside Landmarks

The Baptized Church of Jesus Christ has been located on the 400 block of First Street since around 1950, when it was led by Pastor Ella Brown. Until recently the congregation met in a tiny building at 412 First Street, but in 1986 it began to build a much larger structure at the same site. The new building was designed by Jaqad Sharma and much of the construction was done by members of the congregation.

Across Third Street from the Ithaca Fitness Center is a building that has seen varied use as a hotel, grocery store, and restaurant. In the 1894–95 Ithaca city directory it was billed as the Oakhurst Hotel. It housed Frank Labar's grocery in the twenties and thirties; from 1940 to 1956 it was again called the Oakhurst Hotel; in following years it was known successively as the Villa, Cattleman's Restaurant, and Ozzie's. It is now home to Portable Feast Caterers.

An often overlooked treasure of the Northside is the small bridge over Cascadilla Creek at Monroe Street. Built by the Groton Bridge Company in 1907, the three-panel plate girder bridge features a Baltimore Railing and Eureka posts. Its design and attention to detail are typical of the Groton firm, which was a major manufacturer of bridges and machinery from 1877 to 1920.

The triangle formed by Madison, Fourth, and Cascadilla streets appears as public land on city maps as early as 1835. Known for decades as Lafayette Park, it was renamed Conway Park in 1920 in honor of former Alderman Michael Conway, who had died in action in France with the American Expeditionary Forces. The current playground and other facilities were built by the city about 1975 according to plans by engineer Charles W. Barber.

### Public Housing

Ithaca experienced a severe housing shortage after World War II with the return of students and faculty to the city. Throughout the postwar period, much of the existing rental housing stock suffered a decline. Housing for low-income families and the elderly was in especially short supply. A 1957 state

law established the Ithaca Housing Authority (IHA) to evaluate the city's housing problems, acquire and demolish existing unsanitary and unsafe housing, and construct new housing for persons of low income.

In 1965 the IHA hired its first professional director and began the acquisition and demolition of property to make way for three hundred units of housing for low-income families and senior citizens. Among the areas targeted for renewal were the blocks bounded by Hancock, Third, Madison, and Fifth streets.

The site was selected in part because of its low population density. The area was not completely unoccupied, however. The Ithaca Sea Food Company, a day nursery, and eighteen homes—some of which had been occupied by the same families for a half-century and more—were all located on these blocks. Joseph F. Pirko of 210 Fourth Street was reluctant to leave his home. "Why tear down one house to put up another house in its place?" he asked an *Ithaca Journal* reporter. Another resident, Mrs. Antoinette Sellers of 510 Madison Street, also objected: "Most of these houses are not shacks like they're trying to tell us. We're proud of our homes—maybe some were shacks back years ago when our families moved in, but most . . . have been fixed up over the years, especially the interiors."<sup>12</sup>

The Ithaca Housing Authority prevailed, however, and by the end of summer in 1972, seventy public housing units were occupied by low-income families. Fifty-four modular duplexes had been erected by Stirling Homex of Avon, New York, along with a community building, office space, and laundry. The open space in front of the community building was named Pirko Square. Another sixteen units were built at Hancock and Third streets by Thomas Parker of Marathon, New York.

The early years of the Hancock housing project were troubled by crime and administrative upheavals at the IHA. But now, in the late 1980s, the project has become a neighborhood of which all Ithacans can be proud. The area is beautifully maintained, and mature trees and plantings contribute to the tranquil atmosphere. The Ithaca Housing Authority, under the direction of Mary Louise Battisti since 1976, has done an excellent job of maintaining and administering the project, but credit for its success as a neighborhood ultimately lies with the residents themselves.

Since the late 1970s the Hancock housing project has been home to many refugee families from Southeast Asia. The Asians' strong family orientation and meticulous gardens have made life more enjoyable for all residents of the neighborhood. True to the Northside tradition, the neighborhood has once again welcomed newcomers, and once again the newcomers have responded with hard work and enthusiasm.



## 7 The Inlet

Carol U. Sisler

By most accounts, life on the Inlet in the nineteenth century was not a pleasant experience. While the townspeople blamed the squatters who lived along the banks for the squalor of the area, the real villain was Cayuga Lake, which ebbed and flowed uncontrollably, flooding houses, privies, and boardwalks. During the nineteenth century, Ithaca's economy was mainly water-based. Coal brought from Pennsylvania by rail was floated northward by barge, while timber, gypsum, wheat, and salt were transported southward. All this commerce was conducted on the Inlet.

Furthermore, the Inlet was used as a dump. The Humboldt and Esty tanneries disposed of their bloody wastes in the Inlet. Human wastes from privies emptied into the Inlet, and when the city constructed the sewer system, the effluent poured into the Inlet. Nevertheless, children swam in the putrid water; fish were caught and eaten; in the evening the squatter people walked over a network of boardwalks to their kerosene-lit shacks. They had faith in the cleansing power of the water that flowed into the Inlet from Six Mile and Inlet creeks.

As was true in most of the United States in the nineteenth century, Ithaca was developing into a class society. Those who prospered during the industrial expansion became the upper class; they lived near the commercial area of the village or on East Hill, their lives centered around the church and theater, their children enrolled at Cornell University, their wives had servants to help run their households. While the growing middle class of clerks and managers built their houses on the north, east, or south sides of the village, the Inlet area collected the lowest class: those who were poor and uneducated and often the victims of industrial expansion, hired or fired seasonally, perhaps injured by factory work, unable to work, or too sick to work.

This section of Ithaca was often called the Silent City, because when the police arrived to make an arrest or quell a fight, no one would speak about the law-breaking incident. Another name for the area was "the Rhine," because of the Inlet's distant similarity to the Rhine River in Germany. The Inlet snaked through the west end of Ithaca to the lake, the squatters living to the north, where today the Hangar Theatre is located. They built simple shanties of scrap lumber on land they did not own.