

# Memphis Center City<sup>®</sup>

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## UP IN THE SHRINE BUILDING

by  
DAVID BOWMAN

I've been going to Dr. Jacob Plesofsky's office in the Shrine Building for over thirty years. He's a great dentist, but the real reason I go is for the million-dollar view out his window. When I'm not slouched down in the chair, dreading the drill, I can see the river barges on the Mississippi. Dr. Plesofsky moved into the Shrine Building before it was even finished, when the terrazzo floors hadn't even been poured.

The Shrine Building was built in 1923 as the first of the postwar building boom of the new Memphis. During an incredible three-year period, Memphis saw new quarters for Lowenstein's, Brodnax, and the Peabody Hotel; the appearance of the Ford plant on Riverside, the Parkview Hotel, Southwestern College, and the Columbian Mutual Tower; about twenty-thousand bungalows in the new suburbs; and about five-thousand larger houses for the well-to-do. The Shrine itself attracted the best of business and professional Memphis into its tower on the Mississippi.

To do so, its builders (Kaucher & Hodges) and its two architectural firms (Hanker & Cairns and Jones & Furbringer) spared no expense. The building cost \$1,000,000 and featured the first high-speed multi-voltage elevators in the South. In the basement was a \$90,000 tiled swimming pool. On its top floor was a restaurant managed by the Peabody, featuring a distinguished menu and music by groups like the Washington Syncopators. A direct line was run between the Shrine Roof and the studios of WMC so the midday concerts could be broadcast live all over the country.

At the corner of Front and Monroe, in the middle of the cotton and financial districts, the Shrine was **THE LOCATION**—one block from the Post Office, across the street from the Chamber of Commerce and the Cossitt Library, one block from Madison (known as the Wall Street of Memphis), close to leading hotels and stores, and two blocks from the steamboat wharfs. On the ground floor were the ticket offices for all the railroads serving Memphis.

Five floors were designed for the Al Chymia Temple; the other eight floors were rented to commercial tenants. This meant a tax-exempt status for the Shrine floors and lower assessment on the building.

For a decade the building prospered, producing a gross income of about \$85,000 annually. In 1932, a bad year for buildings everywhere, the mortgage came due, but an extension was granted for five years. On February 6, 1938, the New York Life Insurance Company, the first mortgage holders, took over the building for \$300,000 in a foreclosure sale on the Courthouse steps. Efforts to form a protective association for holders of second mortgage bonds were unsuccessful.

The Shrine's fortunes again rose with the 1940's, shortly after New York Life sold the building to a Tiptonville farming and cotton businessman, George Wynn Smith, for just over \$300,000. But today the building's occupancy level reflects the depressed level of the downtown as a whole.

Memphis attorney Wynn Smith, Jr., the present owner, knows the building can be renovated. The

upper floors could be converted to an interesting mix of living and working space. Work could go on without disturbing the existing tenants on the lower floors. With the great need for downtown housing, Wynn Smith should have little trouble finding tenants. But he would be the first to plunge into something Memphis hasn't tried before.

One other alternative has already been presented. Under the Marcou, O'Leary Plan (1974), the Shrine Building would be torn down for a 500-space parking garage, costing \$1,600,000, or \$3600 per parking space!

What is remarkable about the Shrine Building is how little it has changed. The parquet-marble of the top-floor ballroom, and its fourteen-foot windows, the vaulted ceilings of the smaller ballroom underneath, the black-and-white terrazzo of the halls and offices, the ball-globed lighting fixtures, the etched glass of the office partitions, the tiled swimming pool are all still there. C. R. Dozier, the

building superintendent, says that the only real changes made in the last twenty years were to install safety doors on the elevators and to replace the brass cuspidors with smoking stands.

On the roof of the building, the night superintendent, Toye Russell, showed me that the Shrine seals are still outlined in lightbulbs. On the ground floor, the Rogers Coffee Shop still serves the same good lunches it always has, and Mr. Stavrianos, the present owner, still gives all the patrons a mint with their change. And the elevators are still manned, day and night, offering the security of the old-fashioned concierge, knowing who goes into the building and who must come out.

The Shrine's longtime tenants have fought the flight from downtown. They share Dr. Plesofsky's love of the historic Memphis and its river presence. They have decided to stay. When downtown Memphis crowds to life again, the Shrine Building will be ready.

# PEDALING FOR PLEASURE?

Since the '60's the ranks of bicyclers have been swelling. Whether a revolt from the noxious automobile, an outgrowth of the fitness campaign, or just a by-product of economic difficulties, with little hesitation, the popularity of this activity cannot be blamed on the pursuit of pleasure.

Oh, on occasion--while riding at twilight down peaceful Midtown streets, looking at the different neighborhoods and houses--biking is quite relaxing and even refreshing. But very seldom will one witness a dedicated bicyclist riding for any reason other than necessity or health.

And even that fitness angle has its throwbacks: say when some delinquent animal lover allows his depraved mutt to waylay each and every passerby; or, when some equally rabid automobile lover gets careless or indignant because you have the impudence to ride your bike on his street; or, when your thin racing tires get caught in the grill of the gutter (because there's no other place for you to be) and you flip over landing on your elbow, or worse, and can't function for a week.

~~And then again, the economic explanation won't hold up very well either: say, for example, when those gangs of punks riding super-10's (they couldn't tell you of a single instance when they needed more than four gears) shove or shame your 19?? hand-me-down or your 1965 J. C. Higgins off the road. Then what do you have to do with a shiny new 10-speed, even if you can afford one: why you have to park it in the living-room of your third-story, two-bedroom apartment to keep it from being stolen.~~

No, bicycling is not a fun sport. The bike may be a counter-culture symbol, or an outdoor exercise machine, or simply the "second car"; but at that, the bike is discouraged and scorned at every turn by the vast majority who think it nothing more than a defenseless toy incapable of holding its own against offensive weapons like the automobile.

The Medieval ascetics would not have practiced flagellation in this culture of ours; instead, they would have come to Memphis, bought a bicycle, and tried to make it their only mode of transportation.

# From where I stand...

## That's How It Got Its Name!

by  
STEVE SIMS

I am pleased that David Bowman not only explored Mud Island, but also wrote about it.

CENTER CITY readers are now the city's most informed citizens as far as Mud Island is concerned.

My wife and I spent a most enjoyable Sunday afternoon roaming the island early this summer after the high waters had receded. Indeed, the area, which then turned out to be surprisingly large in size, is very attracting and contains a number of points of interest for photography buffs.

David's description of the island, its sights and its inhabitants is quite fitting. But, where do the swallows and doves go, and how do you admire the downtown river bluff during that three-to-five months of the year when the southern third of the island is under water?

Admittedly, the model for Volunteer Park looks much like a heavily armoured fortress, and leaves much to be desired aesthetically.

However, should Mud Island be left completely alone; how many Memphians have the inclination to mount their Jeeps or Hondas and explore its natural attractions? How many visitors would seize the opportunity to view the bluffs from the old landing strip?

Be realistic man! Get off your Jeep of total preservation. For — or from whom — are you preserving it?

Let's make Mud Island and its sights available to a much wider range of interests.

To leave Mud Island alone would produce the same results as leaving downtown alone. Emptiness and non-recognition.

*Photograph: Mud Island during the high water of 1975 — Contributed by James Roper.*



# earthly delights

## DOWNTOWN EXHIBITS

### First National Bank (Lobby)

August—Paintings by Valerie M. Berlin\*

### National Bank of Commerce (Lobby)

August—"The Magnificent West: An American Heritage"—Smithsonian Institute Traveling Exhibit\*

### Sterick Building (Lobby)

August—Paintings by Harold L. Peek\*

## FILM

### Center Film Society

August 15—"Last Year at Marienbad"—UT Student Alumni Auditorium-7:30 p.m.

### Lyceum Film Theatre

August 19—"The Umbrellas of Cherbourg"—First National Bank Auditorium—7:30 p.m.

### Peabody Library

August 22—"One Eyed Men Are Kings," "The Frank Film," "Grand Canyon," & "The Critic"—7:15\*

## DOWNTOWN ACTIVITIES

### Confederate Park

August 15—Magpie—Noon Concert\*

August 22—Crawdad—Noon Concert\*

August 29—J. S. Buzz—Noon Concert\*

\*Free

## Announcements

*The members of First Presbyterian Church  
invite you to a reception  
honoring  
Reverend and Mrs. David R. Freeman  
Wednesday, August 20, 1975, 5 until 8 p.m.  
at First Presbyterian Church  
166 Poplar Avenue*

## CIVIC CENTER COMMUNITY CULINARY CLUB

*Serving from 11:30 to 1:00  
First Presbyterian Church, 166 Poplar Avenue  
PRICE: \$1.50 per serving, including drink*

### MENU FOR AUGUST 14 - AUGUST 25

#### THURSDAY, AUGUST 14

*Barbecued Chicken, Lima Beans, Apple Sauce, Rolls*

#### FRIDAY, AUGUST 15

*Ham, Macaroni-cheese, Turnip Greens, Corn Bread*

#### MONDAY, AUGUST 18

*Steak w/onion gravy, Green Beans, Buttered carrots, Rolls*

#### TUESDAY, AUGUST 19

*Turkey-dressing, English Peas, Cranberry sauce, Rolls*

#### WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 20

*Spaghetti, Cole Slaw, French Bread*

#### THURSDAY, AUGUST 21

*Fried Chicken, Cream Corn, Squash, Rolls*

#### FRIDAY, AUGUST 22

*Hamburger, Cole Slaw, Potato Chips, Sherbet*

#### MONDAY, AUGUST 25

*Roast Beef, Whipped Potatoes, Green Beans, Rolls*



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