

# center city

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MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE

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## Conversations with Downtown People:

### "the lowdown 'bout downtown"

*Part Two:*

*An Interview with Cecil Carter  
of J. C. Carter Seed Co., 85 S. Front Street*

CENTER CITY: Mr. Carter, you've been on Front Street for quite awhile now, and you must know the people of downtown pretty well. Did many of the merchants that were downtown leave because of the events of the 1960's?

MR. CECIL CARTER: You know we got a fine City Government-- the best in the world, all the time in Memphis. But we made one little error during that era that you speak of-- I know what you're speaking of: what started the deal with the garbage men's strike.

You know that the garbage man is making much-- he need to make more. The garbage man's doing the worst work: with the wasps, the bees and the filth, picking up the garbage-- you know that I'm talkin' about. At that time he didn't have so much modern facilities for picking up the garbage. But still, it's not a job that everybody want; the job should pay the top price. I don't know how much they make, but not much more than minimum, which was about \$2 at that time.

Well, we had good City Government then-- as you know they had already gone to the City Council business. Had you had your commissioners on at that time I don't think it would have come quite as far along as it did. I bet somebody would have said: "Well they need a little more money in the first place." But we had lots of fellas then, and I'm sure the City Council's good: to have more men running the show; but they didn't exactly handle that right-- you know that, anybody know that. Of course they just held out; they weren't goin' to give the guys nothin'. They knew that union was goin' to win: the union all the time win, because usually why they used to win was because it was needed to win: it was a good cause: a humane deal. At any rate, you know they ain't goin' to beat the sanitation department: you got to have the garbage fellas. And they want a little more an hour-- just a little more.

CENTER CITY: Did that and what followed frighten some of the merchants?

MR. CECIL CARTER: No, that I doubt, 'cause you've got such a good police department. I don't think no merchants would think: "I got to go 'cause I got no protection." Course, that was bad for the town 'cause it lasted such a long time and it got worse each

day.

But that only lasted a short time. You got peoples, peoples, peoples that come to town now. That started the whole monkey business: that sanitation department.

No criticism for the City Government, because the City Government probably thought they were doing the right thing for everybody-- I can't imagine they thought they were doing the right thing for the garbage man. You follow me now?

CENTER CITY: Well, let's get back to downtown before the 1960's. Yesterday you mentioned the Cossitt Library and some tourists.

MR. CECIL CARTER: People used to come from all around to see that library-- it was better than that new showcase that they put there in front. That was a fine building; too bad they didn't leave it. But nevertheless it's gone-- we can't think about it.

CENTER CITY: When Mr. Crump first came to Memphis wasn't he in the harness business?

MR. CECIL CARTER: ...He didn't stay in the harness business too long, because he was a smart fella: could see that the town need him and he needs the town. He had a whole lot of gray matter.

The best people in the world are in Memphis. [pause]

Nobody likes to be like a machine. You go into the big shops now-- you know sometime I have to stop on the corner and laugh-- you know what I mean. Sometimes I go more like a tramp than I am now. You need something different. People come to Memphis; they hear Memphis is a good city of abode on the father of waters. Well it is, exactly as it is, but you got no place to show that good-- what you call it-- Southern hospitality, so to speak, 'cause there are no little shops where to mingle with the people. You ain't goin' to no supermarket to hang around, they'd have you arrested. I don't mean this is the kind of town you have to worry-- I don't mean that they have you arrested. They got a new clerk tomorrow anyway.

CENTER CITY: What about the trains that used to come to downtown?

MR. CECIL CARTER: Poplar Street Depot, oh man, Poplar Street Depot-- course they ain't got no more trains comin' in now-- at the foot of Poplar, right down behind the Auditorium. Course there's a little ole station there now, but there used to be a big station. ...Everybody knew the conductors on the Up and Down Train from Kentucky to maybe Como, Mississippi,... everything was good and fine in those days. But that's kind of outmoded. It's good to have the trains: it would be good for the nature of people: be good for the people's attitudes: be more better towards his fellow man, for people to mix a little more like that. But that's gone with the wind; it probably might come back.

The depot man was Frank Perkins for many years; he had a black man, the shine man--his name was Frank too. He'd tell you about the weather--anything you wanted to know. Frank and that depot man was about as talkative as the porter was.

[pause] Everybody is so helpful to people in this town.

I go to Nashville two weeks ago-- have never seen the Capitol City before. ...I go to the Governor's house to see the Governor, but don't see nobody-- maybe Sunday everybody's out. You seen it with the new fence around it? Used to have a stone fence about this high [waist-high]; now he's got an iron fence as high as these lights with sharp points on it. I went to all the high-class neighborhoods: Belle Meade this and that. You seen that big school there in Nashville, Overton School: we got as good a school in Memphis. Everything is clean in Memphis-- oh, our children might drink a little beer, but that's good for you.

People come downtown in Memphis, but they ain't got a place to buy. You know the Buntyn Cafe and the drug store out by Memphis State: that's ole time stores out there with the most modern people in the world: the Memphis State Faculty and students-- you know that. They don't have no more far out, smart and everything than

them: and those stores are doing nicely.

CENTER CITY: When CENTER CITY first asked you for an interview you said: "...Downtown is gettin' better-- been gettin' better since about, [pause] since about 1910?" Again, is downtown going or coming?

MR. CECIL CARTER: Everyday gets better-- I wouldn't tell you wrong--everyday gets better. We moved here: this is really small-- we used to have a big store half a block long.

Uptown-- now we've done mucking around tearing up the buildings-- ain't got no place to take the laundry.

I had occasion the other day to ride the "Big Mac."-- not feeling too good-- had a fine driver. Went ridin' around the downtown. The Chisca Hotel used to have a lot of shops: had two candy stores and barbershops.

... No, ain't nothin' bad in this town; everything is good.

*[Editor's Note-- After talking to Mr. Carter and his brother Nick, I too would say the downtown "everyday gets better." Still there are remnants of the memory that this community was something special and apart from everywhere else; and upon that memory follows the idea that it will again be something very special in the future. "That's the times; and you got to get with 'em."]*



Reporter Doni Donati & Mr. Cecil Carter

## Fingered to Fall

The building pictured here has stood as a cornerstone of Court Square since 1895. It became a monument to the determined Memphis leader, D. T. Porter, who fought to wrench Memphis from the clutches of bankruptcy and disease.

As the first skyscraper in the region, it has overseen the metamorphosis of Memphis. Though constructed around a steel skeleton, the Building Official at the time of its construction at first refused to issue a building permit for fear that it would topple with the first wind.

Today the Porter Building is vacant after its occupants were expelled in 1966.

It is not its age, nor is it the associated history which is most redeeming about the Porter. The building is just unusual, even singular amongst the other tall downtown structures. It lacks classical symmetry, but its very variety makes it vibrant. It glows an orangish-red in the setting sun. And

the deep shadows in the windows, which appear to have been cut from clay with a cookie cutter, draw the eye into the soul of the structure. Neither the height nor the thickness of the Porter is exaggerated; the restrained scale and straightness of its stance make it somewhat humanly noble. The D. T. Porter Building is more like a huge sculpture than an old office building.

The building, though not officially condemned for demolition, by the very neglect of its owners, and the lack of sympathetic tax laws and building codes appears set on the path of extinction. However, waste-on-waste, it would take approximately \$100,000 to destroy it.

*It wrings one's stomach to see the economic and legal machinery illogically at work in such a negative fashion. But even worse is to see men with the power of salvation helplessly and willingly sit back and wait. That is the tragedy-- or more appropriately, the pity-- of the predicament: that man's mind, afforded him to overcome the blind workings of such forces, should conspire to let him submit to such rot.*



*Around us Corinth lay in ruins  
Such details you said are rarely so accessible  
fragments of buildings stacked in rows  
the baths filled with marble rubble  
The temple you said exquisite Doric example*

*I stood in your photographs for proportion's sake  
Your back was to the sun upon the sea  
What would you have of me  
You muttered in your excitement  
the simplicity of the columns  
I stood among them*

*The Old Dog might have lain there in Alexander's  
shadow  
I would have you stand  
out of the sun*

words

p. waters

**CIVIC CENTER COMMUNITY CULINARY CLUB**

*Serving from 11:30 to 1:00*

*First Presbyterian Church, 166 Poplar Avenue*

*PRICE: \$1.25 per serving, including drink*

**MENU FOR OCTOBER 3-11**

**THURSDAY, OCTOBER 3**

*Corned Beef, scalloped cabbage, buttered potatoes, corn bread*

**FRIDAY, OCTOBER 4**

*Beef stew, tossed salad, and corn bread*

**MONDAY, OCTOBER 7**

*Chopped steak with onion gravy, whipped potatoes & green beans & rolls*

**TUESDAY, OCTOBER 8**

*Macaroni & cheese, turnip greens, corn on the cob, beets & onions & corn bread*

**WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 9**

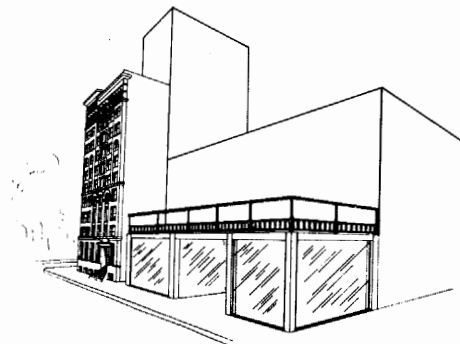
*Spaghetti, cole slaw and French Bread*

**THURSDAY, OCTOBER 10**

*Turkey & Dressing, English peas, cranberry sauce & rolls*

**FRIDAY, OCTOBER 11**

*Meat Loaf, potatoes au gratin, lima beans & rolls*



*How to salvage the Porter: Due to the thinness of the building and the need for re-wiring and new plumbing, the most feasible method of restoration is adaptation: to incorporate the building, as above, in a surrounding, stairsstepped, new construction. Thus, the visual effect of the building is preserved and the Porter can utilize the modern facilities of the new structure.*



**COURT SQUARE MARKET  
OKTOBERFEST  
OCTOBER 2, 3 & 4**

**NEXT WEEK IN CENTER CITY:  
HAPPY BIRTHDAY MR. CRUMP  
OCTOBER 2 IS HIS 100TH BIRTHDAY.**

**Center City**

**First Presbyterian Church  
166 Poplar Avenue  
Memphis, Tennessee 38103**

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postage paid at  
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