



## A History of Southside | in 7 1/2 minutes or less

HOME

Then

### Southside from the Beginning

Verna Gates



Spider Martin on his Harley

Stray goats posed the primary problem in old Southside. They wandered aimlessly about, eating valuable vegetation and terrorizing prized petunia beds. In 1887, the town of Highland incorporated and soon thereafter passed a “no goats” ordinance. Later, the law was amended to say “no hogs.” Tramps, strumpets, and other idlers were subject to arrest and confinement in the “jail,” then located in the mayor’s attic.

A sense of decorum must be maintained in the fresh mountain air town of Highland, located two miles above the steel furnace city of Birmingham. Advertised as “5 Degrees Cooler,” this new town began to attract prominent citizens.

The Victorian houses that first started springing up on Nabob Hill were built mostly by prominent Civil War veterans. The homes were reputed to be the finest in the country, with San Francisco’s Nob Hill neighborhood considered just a weak imitation. The story goes that “Nob” is just a shortened version of “Nabob.” These homes were later felled to build Ramsay School.

Developers moved into the area along with people of all backgrounds. Rich and working class, blacks and whites, Jews, Catholics, and gentiles. Confederate generals and newly-arrived immigrants, all came to find homes in the Southside. At one time, it was estimated that Brother Bryan ministered to people speaking over 300 languages.

Those who live in these new houses might remember the remoteness of the area. Lifetime Southside resident Margaret Selman was born in and still lives in the home that her



Little Bombers



Five Points Theatre

## Today



UAB

parents bought from the original developer. Mrs. Selman remembers that her own mother was reluctant to move to the new house because it was located too far out in the country.

At that time, 15th Avenue South was an open ditch. The mines above it were still open, and very much active. Jack Flemming, Mrs. Selman's brother, recalls "filling a coke bottle with straw and two cents worth of kerosene. We could see pretty good inside the mines with those flambeaus." Southside children played in the wooded hills, catching possums in the summer and gathering chestnuts in the fall.

Even though trolleys ran, and enterprising Model-T owners offered rides on their running board for a nickel, many people preferred to walk to the burgeoning business district of Five Points. Many older residents remember seeing Jewish families gathering on Saturdays to walk to the Synagogue. On high holidays, they shared cooked specialties with their neighbor. Mrs. Selman said dishes were returned unwashed to maintain kosher standards.

Around 1907, the first apartments started appearing, with a peak production lasting from 1910 to 1930. The Terrace Court on 20th Street bore the reputation of being the finest apartment house south of Washington, DC. It included a wide range of conveniences such as hot and cold running water, electric lights, fire-, sound- and even dust-proofing.

The building was accepted without much objection, though there were voices that warned against the then so-called "French flats," a term conjuring all manner of questionable behavior. It was still more respectable for a young couple awaiting ownership of a house of their own to live in a boarding house than an apartment.

Apparently, the neighborhood suffered no ill effects from the multi-family units and the forties were relatively quiet, as the neighborhood like others, waited out the war.

Every afternoon mothers and children dressed and took up station on the front porch. After dinner, the men went out to smoke a cigar. Porch visits were common. Mrs. Selman remembers her neighbor, Mrs. Levine, always coming by, always saying she couldn't stay but a minute, and always leaving hours later. The neighborhood reached its zenith in the late 40s and early 50s.

The age of Elvis was pretty much a period of decline for Southside. Motorcycle gangs rode in and ran many residents out. Mrs. Selman said she'd call the police on the gang across from her, they'd hear it on their police scanner, and sit outside as quiet as you please when the police cruiser drove up. A biker bar called The Little Bomber Lounge was located where the new Studio Arts Building stands. It was also the site of a double murder that seemed to set the pace for the downslide.

Then a force more devastating than hippies hit in the 60s –city government. A report predicted a future that contained over 1 million people in Birmingham and the city acted



Highland Bar & Grill



Cobb Lane



22nd Street Jazz & Blues Cafe



Storyteller Fountain  
by Frank Fleming

quickly to begin accommodating these flocking hordes. Officials began rezoning Southside to permit greater numbers of residents. The bulldozers roared.

Then, a second strike put a death grip on the charming residential character of Southside. The University of Alabama at Birmingham. Due to politics within the board of all of the universities of Alabama, it was decided that UAB would not be a residential campus, i.e., provide student dormitories. A segment of the board ruled that with campus housing, UAB would compete with UA Tuscaloosa. As a result, Southside became UAB's living quarters and the demand for apartments exceeded the supply. Developers couldn't tear down the old houses fast enough. The elegant homes with chandeliers, hardwood floors, graceful porches and grand architecture were replaced by apartment buildings that represented some of the 1960s worse design.

"When more than \$8 million is involved, people lose all honesty, integrity, and morality," said Mr. Flemming, explaining what he sees as greed over good sense. "They replaced Saks Fifth Avenue with Kmart."

In the 1970s the neighborhood had enough and a decision was made to organize and act. The first target was Cobb Lane. This successful rejuvenation sparked a hunger to tackle even bigger projects. The Five Points South Neighborhood, spearheaded by President Betty Bock, went after Five Points itself. The group was awarded a \$1 million HUD grant.

"My aim was to make such a dramatic change in such a visible area, that no one could ignore it," said Bock. The result is a popular commercial area and entertainment district, alive and vital.

Soon other sites were targeted for renovation. Unfortunately, the three-year grant was withdrawn after the first year. Birmingham ministries sued HUD to revoke the Five Points grant because the neighborhood was too good. They won. The city lost.

The Five Points Neighborhood Association set its focus on other projects. They began buying, renovating, and selling old homes back to single families. When they turned a profit, it alerted others to the potential of the older homes. The neighborhood was making a comeback.

Then, one of the area's bitterest zoning battles began. South Highland Hospital had become Healthsouth, and it wanted to build an adjoining doctor's building. The neighborhood did not object to an office building, but did request that the building be moved a couple of blocks into the commercial zone.

"We found out that Healthsouth was paying its employees overtime pay to attend council meetings." Sixty or seventy people in hospital whites make a big impact. So, they ended up tearing down six old homes with mahogany woodwork and stained glass windows.

In the 90s, Southside weaves an uneven fabric of old elegance juxtaposed with new commercialization. The area still retains its vast diversity. People of all backgrounds, cultures,



Highland Presbyterian Church



Historic antebellum mansion

races and economic levels live and work here, all of them attracted by the colorful texture of the area,

As for Southside in the 20th century, it was predicted long ago: “My Daddy (a man who saw the last century turn) always said that it would be business all the way to the foot of the mountain. I think he was right,” said Mrs. Selman.

Verna Gates began her career as one of the original team members who launched CNN. After four years as a writer/producer, she launched into business for herself, founding WordArrangement. Her work has been published in thousands of newspapers via Reuters International News Service, the world's largest news organization. Her website is: <http://www.vernagates.com/>

"Southside from the Beginning" research and interviews contirbuted by Lynn Duval. "Southside from the Beginning" by Verna Gates is from "Birmigham, Alabama 35205," a special feature in *Black & White*, August 1994. Reprinted with permission of the authors. Copyright © 1994 by Black & White, Inc.

## Historical Hangouts

### Lynn Duvall

Before there was Johnny Rocket's, before there was Joe bar, Little Bomber's Lounge occupied the place of honor on the northwest side of the Five Points Circle. Bomber's was a biker bar, and some nights the Harleys were parked 20 or more abreast outside.

Although some neighborhood residents and merchants were intimidated by Bomber's customers, longtime hog lover Julian Lackey, Jr. says he and his friends went to play pool, drink beer and hang with other bikers, not to bash bones. Lackey remembers the group as a laid-back, informal bunch, “not a club or anything, never into violent activity.”

“People had a negative stereotype of bikers back then because of the Hell's Angels –and probably the local Devil's Disciples,” Lackey says. “They were generally pretty good guys, but once in a while they would stir things up. But it wasn't just the motorcycle gang thing that



made people nervous. Riding Harleys is cool now, but back then people just assumed we were troublemakers because we rode big, loud bikes.”

### **Apple Books (Leap Day 1980-Leap Day 1984)**

*Lecture topics ran the gamut from ending world hunger to starting a local Rocky Horror Picture Show cult.*

Whenever the Grateful Dead played within a thousand miles of Birmingham, scores of Dead Heads congregated outside Apple Books (at the former Belladonna location). Apple’s co-owners Nancy Gruer and Michael Parrish wondered if lingering psychic energy from the previous owner, who had attended Dead concerts at the Pyramids in Egypt, drew the faithful.

Stranger things have happened –and quite a few happened at Apple.

Apple was the first bookstore in Five Points South where customers were encouraged to loiter in comfortable armchairs and read or talk. The store made memorable contributions to the neighborhood’s cultural life, too. That’s where you could listen to Davey Williams play his electric guitar with eggbeaters and watch fireworks explode from the f-hole of his guitar, see a Lawrence Ferlinghetti documentary about his dog or watch a motorcycle-riding writer from New Orleans gun his bike right into the store and up the steps to give a reading. Lecture topics ran the gamut from ending world hunger to starting a local Rocky Horror Picture Show cult.

But none of those avant-garde goings-on attracted the building owner’s attention, until the owners decided to paint. In an effort to improve the store’s appearance, Gruer and Parrish had tried to talk him into buying awnings or make other improvements in the store, but he wasn’t interested. So they decided to fix it up themselves.

“There was a big, old ugly wall outside, so we painted it,” Gruer says. “We used the idea of the Magritte painting of the man with an apple in front of his face. Apple –Apple Books, right? So when we’re finished, the owner comes by and kind of takes me aside and says, “You know, I really can’t allow that mural. It’s just too much of an insult to humanity to have that pig with an apple in its mouth on the wall.”

“So I said, “Oh Magritte is a famous French painter who originally painted this.” He just lowered his head, looked at his feet, shook his head and said, ‘It just goes to show what the French think of themselves.’ That’s when I realized there was no way to talk to this man.”

Gruer and Parrish are notorious for their adventurous approach to making a living. After they closed Apple in 1984, they did dental cleanings in their home and built decks for a while. Gruer has sold real estate, taught ceramics in public and private schools and earned a master’s degree in education. Parrish went back to school and earned an engineering degree and taught

engineering. More recently, they decided that with their combined teaching experience, they should teach their sons Malcolm and Ryan instead of entrusting them to public education. So the boys wouldn't miss peer interaction, Gruer and Parrish decided to operate a full-fledged home school, which starts this fall with 12 students.

**Joe Bar (1981-???)**

*I don't remember us ever doubting that we should buy it."*

Joyce Hudson, co-owner, Joe Bar



Joe Bar celebrates the Olympics

During the early 1980s Southsiders were known to complain about the lack of neighborhood hangouts where they could enjoy an imported beer and listen to jazz. Then Rowland and Joyce Scherman (now Hudson) came along and opened Joe, a bar that quickly became the most popular place in Five Points South. People still remember those years fondly as some of the best in recent history. Joe opened in January and by March, according to Hudson, the place was packed every night.

Even though neither had experience running a bar, they decided half-joking, walking around Five Points, one day that if the bar was for sale they'd buy it. So they went inside and the college student who owned what was then Poor Wille's was ready to sell. "You know," recalls Hudson, "I don't remember ever doubting that we should buy it. We just kind of went with it and it worked out."

"Rowland had lived in England for about five years before he moved to Birmingham, and

one of the things he loved about being there was the atmosphere in the pubs,” Hudson says. “There weren’t many places then where you could buy imported beer, so we knew we wanted to have imported beer. And Rowland wanted to serve really good roast beef sandwiches, and we were going to cook the roast ourselves.”

Joe also played jazz –live and recorded and served other sandwiches –on Waite’s Bakery onion rolls- chili, red beans and rice, and vegetable soup in the winter and gazpacho in the summer. Customers could play backgammon and darts, activities that weren’t available at many bars back then.

That combination brought a lot of people into the neighborhood and made most Five Points merchants happy because Joe customers were spending money in other stores, too.

After considering the Bon Ton Café and the Bozart Café, Rowland and Joyce decided to call their business Joe, in honor of Joe Simpson, a long-time Southside booster and supporter of the arts and independent publications. Simpson also owned a bookstore called Joe, which used as it’s sign his signature in red neon.

Joyce remembers, “We were driving through Five Points one night, and we stopped at the red light where Joe Simpson’s place used to be. At the time the sign was still out there. We were just sitting there at that light, just looking at that sign, and we thought, “Oh my God, you know, it would be just fabulous if we could get that sign and just call the bar Joe. So we called the Simpson estate and talked to their lawyer. He asked the family, and they agreed to lease us the sign for a dollar a year.”

Scherman and Hudson called a neon sign company, coincidentally the one where the man who had made the sign still worked. The company moved the sign for them, and the sign-maker repaired it so that the bright red “Joe” glowed above a Southside business again.

The bar has moved to Lakeview, near the Bombay Café. The owners and the menu have changed, but Joe is still one of the most popular hangouts in its new neighborhood.

### **Almost Famous (1983-1986)**

*“I was the last holdout when they started Pickwick Place. I stayed until there was only sheetrock between me and the outside world, and bulldozers were roaring up and down the sidewalk.”*

Gerry Mitchell

Almost Famous was one of Southside’s first funky, affordable art galleries. If you didn’t have enough money for a painting or sculpture that week, you might be able to afford one of

Tim Reed's exuberant, oddball whirligigs, some handmade earrings or a sleek contemporary chatchke from the Museum of Modern Art.

Owner Gerry Mitchell earned an interior design degree and designed hairstyling salons for Eric's and Hooker's in Crestline. Then he decided it was time to go to Europe. He visited Greece and Paris and Italy, where he stayed, working as a model and soaking up ancient and contemporary Italian artwork and design. Mitchell came back to Birmingham inspired and full of ideas.

Almost immediately he found a perfect Art Deco building that the owners were using for storage. The first Almost Famous show opened on May Day, 1983 and featured paintings by Jake Broadway. ("He's in New York now and doing very well," says Mitchell.) Other local artists whose work Mitchell displayed at his art gallery included Donna Adams, Lenora Berman, Charles Collins, Karen Graffeo, Donna Matthews and Art Price.

"Since I had a design degree, my plan was to be Almost Famous/Gerry Mitchell Design," says Mitchell. "What happened was that I ended up being a shopkeeper and not doing very much design work."

But he did try to save the unique vintage design of the Almost Famous façade with its burgundy glass tile and round window from Pickwick developers. "I went before the design review committee to try to talk them into protecting the art deco faced, but they wanted everything to look the same, so I lost. They tore the face right off the shop."

"I was the last holdout when they were building Pickwick Place. I stayed until there was only sheetrock between me and the outside world, and bulldozers were roaring up and down the sidewalk and a chain link fence around the area so nobody could get to the gallery.

When Mitchell closed Almost Famous, he suffered a serious depression, "because my identity was so tied up in the gallery." He stayed in touch with artist friends but stopped going to openings, because it made him feel uncomfortable. But not long ago, that changed.

"Just before I left for Atlanta in April, some friends of mine were in Marilyn Wilson's box show, so I went. That was the first opening I'd been to since I closed my shop in 1986. It was a good show –and it felt good to be there."

### **Charlemagne Record Store**

*"We have this big book in the back that we can look up songs in,  
but it's faster to ask Jimmy, because he usually knows."*

Charlemagne co-owner Gary Bourgeois





Charlemagne flies the flags of many (a few) nations

As far as many Charlemagne customers are concerned, Jimmy Griffin is the eighth wonder of the world. Whether you're looking for an 8-track original cast recording of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, a Yanni at the Acropolis cassette, a Sweet Georgia Brown Barbershop Quartet album, the new Gigolo Aunts CD or a vintage Andy Griffith comedy album, if Charlemagne has what you're looking for, Jimmy can point right to it like a dowser with a divining rod. He can probably give you a review and tell you if there's a better recording on another label, too. Don't remember the artist's full name or the exact title? No problem.

Gary Bourgeois who shares store ownership with Marian McKay and Mike McKay will tell you that Jimmy (a Charlemagne corporate officer) probably knows more about music than anybody in town. "We have this big book in back that we can look up songs in it, but it's faster to ask Jimmy, because he usually knows."

The funky, disheveled store with its Indian print bedspreads, oriental throw rugs and faded Mucha posters feels like a cross between your first apartment and a yard sale, especially the used CDs, albums, and tapes. Wish you hadn't given away Marianne Faithful's *Strange Weather*, featuring a classic husky-voiced rendition of "As Tears Go By?" You might find a used tape for \$3.00 at Charlemagne.

On the way out, don't forget to pick up a postcard of San Francisco's 1915 Panama Pacific Exposition or Andy Warhol in a rowboat in Central Park, a *Gone With the Wind* poster, the soundtrack from *Lord of the Flies*, a Martha and the Muffins CD and a Guatemalan hat.

In 1977 Bourgeois and Griffin were English majors in college, and on their way to becoming professors. Then Bourgeois and Marian McKay went to Europe. "I saved up about a thousand bucks –that's all it took in '77- and we all went to Europe," explained Bourgeois.

"We saw this little dress shop in Paris and it gave us the idea. The owner's cat lived under

the ironing board, and you could see Notre Dame Cathedral out the window –we thought that was the life. Neither one of us wanted to work in an office building. Also, I had seen Rasputin record exchange in Berkeley.”

So the three agreed to open a record exchange and named it while listening to “Kid Charlemagne” by Steely Dan. The partners rented a shop at the Garages and started trading records and selling used records. At first they were only paying themselves \$30, which then turned into \$50 a week, then \$75. Within the first year, they were clearing a \$100 each and “feeling rich.”

Seventeen years later, Bourgeois compares Charlemagne and the surrounding Five Points businesses on the sleepy North Carolina hometown of Opie Taylor. “We’re all individually owned –Five Points Market, the Golden Temple, McNolia’s, Dugan’s Mancha’s. We all know our customers. It’s like Mayberry around here with all the local characters.”

“We’ve seen Five Points go up and down, like a pendulum swinging. When Joe Bar was here was the coolest time. Having Joe and Anthony’s right outside our door was like a bohemian paradise. I’d send down a different kind of music to Anthony’s every day. He’s play it and people would come in who had just been there, saying they had to have whatever he had been playing. Everything just really clicked. The neighborhood was really vibrant.

It’s been fun being along for the ride.”

Lynn Duvall has lived on Southside for 40 years. A writer for 27 years, she’s contributed to *I Cover the War*, *Blue Note*, *Black & White*, *Birmingham Magazine*, *Southern magazine* and numerous, and other, sometimes obscure, newspapers, magazines and literary reviews. Her most recent published work is an essay in the NPR anthology *I Thought My Father Was God*, edited by novelist Paul Auster.

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Historic photographs of the Little Bomber Lounge and Five Points Theatre courtesy of The Birmingham Public Library.