



The way The Hole would have looked on New Year's Eve or on another special occasion in the 1950s. There was frequently live entertainment at The Hole, especially on weekends. This painting by Wayne Manns can be seen at The Uptown Cafe, 102 E. Kirkwood, in downtown Bloomington.

Remembering The Hole

By
Douglas
Wissing

For three decades, it was the place where members of Bloomington's African American community could be themselves and have a good time. Then, it all came crashing down.

Photography by Martin Boling • Art by Wayne Manns

It's a Saturday night at The Hole, the epicenter of jumping black life in Bloomington. Down the steps to the sprawling basement club, the dance floor is flashing rainbow colors, a spinning mirrored ball sending flickers of light onto the excited crowd—town and gown, old and young, black, white, and Asian—all dancing together. There's a clack of billiard balls from the pool table where the local champions, Jimmy Ross and Fox, are holding the table. Couples flirt in the booths as latecomers work their way around the room. The mouth-watering smell of soul food wafts out of the small yellow kitchen. Singing bartenders Terry Ice and Zelma Norris are warbling to tunes

on The Hole's legendary jukebox—songs by The O'Jays, The Drifters, Atlantic Star, Luther Vandross, The Jackson 5. Over in the DJ booth, Thomas "Popcorn" Doyle is organizing his playlist.

"It was just a partying spot," Terry Ice testifies about the club's 60s, 70s, and 80s heyday when she was bartending. "Everyone wanted to party at The Hole. The music was better. Everyone got along. We had a ball."

Located at the far end of West 7th Street in Bloomington's traditionally black neighborhood, The Hole was the basement of the B.G. Pollard Elks Lodge #1242—the Black Elks, as the brothers were known. Part fraternal order, part nightclub, part counseling center,

the Elks Lodge and The Hole provided a home away from home for generations of African Americans, joined by those who appreciated a happening, happy place. It was a nationally known point of pride for Bloomington's African American community.

But a vortex of social and economic change began to spin over the B.G. Pollard Lodge. The velocity eventually became so destructive that the lodge and The Hole, for so long a rare place of shared bonds and interracial conviviality, were both forced to close. This is the story of the Black Elks and The Hole—their glory days and their poignant demise.

In the beginning

The B.G. Pollard Lodge #1242 began in 1947, when the Improved Benevolent and Protective Order of the Elks of the World (IBPOEW) initiated 23 African Americans from Bloomington. Organized by Henry W. Louron, the founding members were a who's who of Bloomington black society. The roster included familiar Bloomington family names, including Bridgwaters, Buka, Duerson, Henson, and Ramey. It was a time of optimism and promise.

The IBPOEW, one of America's largest black organizations, dates to 1898 when two black Cincinnati men who had been denied membership in the white Benevolent Protective Order of the Elks decided to form an Elks for men of color. The Daughters of the IBPOEW organized three years later.

Bloomington's West Side Elks were dynamic, and in 1949 purchased a large lot at 1107 W. 7th St., where they built their expansive new Community Basement Building, planned as the lower floor of a two-story lodge. By January 1951, the Black Elks were heading down the steps to their new lodge, with its long concrete bar overseen by an imperious stuffed elk head. The jukebox, with the best handpicked R&B, soon followed.

A few years later, Bloomington's African American women organized the New Dawn Daughter Elks. Community luminary and lifelong west-side resident Rose Duerson, 77, remembers, "When the Daughters got going, food got started—fried chicken and fish, hamburgers, chitlins, coleslaw, sweet potatoes, ham hocks, and greens." Accompanied by black-eyed peas and chow-chow, zapped with Frank's Red Hot sauce, the Daughters' home-style southern cooking added to The Hole's allure.

The Hole quickly became the locus of lively black Bloomington society. "It was the only place black people could go," Terry Ice remembers. "At one point, we couldn't go downtown. They'd say, 'You stay on the west side,' and downtown was for those other folks."

Segregated Bloomington

A pernicious racial segregation plagued Bloomington for many decades. Blacks couldn't get a barbershop haircut, swim freely in pools, sit downstairs in theaters. They couldn't patronize downtown restaurants and bars. Housing was segregated, both at the university and in the town. African Americans were sequestered in a neighborhood around 6th and Washington



streets. When IU and the business district expanded in the early 1900s, developers pressured local African Americans to move their redlined enclave west of Rogers Street, where they created a vibrant neighborhood of Victorian cottages along west 5th, 6th, 7th, and 8th streets. Centered around the segregated Banneker School and the African American Bethel AME and Second Baptist churches, it was a tight-knit, insular community, rich with social life.

That's the way it remained into the late 1940s, when the black Elks Lodge was established. And soon the Elks brothers were contributing mightily to community activities. "The Elks would sponsor so many things, especially for children," says Betty Bridgwaters of the illustrious west-side Eagleson-Bridgwaters family. The lodge hosted Christmas and Easter parties, fashion shows, and two Indiana state IBPOEW conventions that hundreds of Elks attended. "That was a big thing," Rose Duerson remembers.

A great social movement

In the years after World War II, black Americans began to clamor for social justice. As racial discrimination glacially eroded, more African Americans began attending IU, including hundreds of professionals who came from Midwestern cities and the Deep South to work on advanced degrees. The Hole became part of that great social movement, providing an African American haven in racially riven Bloomington.

The Civil Rights laws that codified voting, employment, and housing rights wrenched open doors for African Americans. In Bloomington, the red lines began



to fade, and blacks began to move into other neighborhoods, sometimes closer to good jobs in the city's burgeoning industrial plants. Throughout the 70s, African American families began relocating to Bloomington to take professional positions at the university or in government and business. They, too, could now purchase housing where blacks had previously been banned.

A place of your own

For newly mobile black people making their way in strange white Bloomington, The Hole offered a respite. "You wanted a place to be you with your people," says historian Elizabeth Mitchell, who arrived in Bloomington with her state trooper husband, Jim, in the late 70s. "I needed a place to unwind and be among my own people because the stress of white society back in the 1970s was



sometimes unbearable.” Retired professor and activist Gladys DeVane affirms, “You needed a place of comfort.”

The Hole was the warm spot where old friends could catch up after a week out in the cold world. Bloomington City Council member Jim Sims came to IU from Muncie, Indiana, in 1975, and soon found The Hole. In the 1980s, Jim moved with his wife, Doris, now City of Bloomington Housing and Neighborhood Development director, to the Near West Side. “On a good Saturday night, The Hole could be like the Apollo in New York City,” Jim Sims says. “It was a social hub, with a big community impact. Even when the African American community dispersed, it was a way—pre-text, pre-email—to dispense news.” His long-time friend and former Elks Exalted Ruler Will Thomas agrees, “We just had a good old time.”

(opposite page, left) Terry Ice, long-time bartender at The Hole.

(above) The membership of B.G. Pollard Lodge #1242, circa 1950. Photo from Monroe County: *Everyday Life in Indiana* (IU Press, 2017)

(right, top to bottom) Patrons of The Hole: Rose Duerson, Betty Bridgwaters, Elizabeth Mitchell.



The New Dawn Daughter Elks were organized in the 1950s. In 1982, that group included: (front row, l-r) Mary Black, Mary Ice, Zelma Norris, Rosie Duerson, Terry Ice, Dorothy Perine; (middle row, l-r) Cherry DuPree, Vickie Brown, Earline Belton, Bonnie Being, Catherine Norris; (back row, l-r) Lola Debro, Mercedes Edwards.

Courtesy photo

But the 70s brought another change to the old neighborhood: young white people. Attracted to the inexpensive vintage real estate at the verge of a blossoming downtown, self-styled urban homesteaders started buying up often derelict west-side cottages. And, being adventurous, they too made their way to The Hole.

Out of The Hole

By the early 1980s, things were looking up for the west side and the Black Elks. Entrepreneur-preservationists Bill and Gayle Cook, while deeply involved in reviving Bloomington's downtown Square, were also, quietly, helping both of the neighborhood's African American churches with needed repairs and construction. Aided by federal and city redevelopment efforts, white newcomers were fixing up the old cottages

in greater numbers. Some called it preservation. Others called it gentrification.

The B.G. Pollard Elks membership was up, with African American men from both established local families and the university and business communities joining in healthy numbers. The Hole was bustling.

A coalition of brothers decided it was time for the lodge to get its long-deferred main floor. And they had a plan. Dr. Joseph Russell, the Elks' secretary-treasurer who had come to Bloomington to lead the IU Department of Afro-American Affairs, spearheaded the efforts. A number of Elks, including Russell; Cook executive Gene DeVane, who had moved here from North Carolina; and Otis Elevator executive and Exalted Ruler Robert Motley, an Alabama native, decided to reach out to the larger community. It worked. The Elks raised more



(top, left) Jim Sims *Photo by Rodney Margison*; (bottom, left) Gladys and Gene DeVane; (above) Wayne Manns' painting depicts what The Hole might have looked like on a busy night.

than \$100,000 for the construction, including support from the Cooks, Rogers Group executives, and a broad range of Bloomingtonians. Pritchett Brothers Construction, long-time Cook contractors, agreed to build the upper floor and refurbish The Hole.

In late 1981, the renovated and enlarged limestone-clad lodge was completed. The new upper floor could hold 200 people for family, youth, and lodge events. The downstairs lounge was gussied up, and the renovated kitchen was readied for soul-food banquets. An Elks statement at the time proclaimed the building to be “a tribute to the labors and hopes of its grassroots people—past, present, and future.”

Good works

To enhance the building's community impact, Joe Russell secured a federal Com-

prehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) grant to establish the West Side Youth Development program. The CETA program used part of the new upstairs space for offices where counselors provided job skills to hundreds of eligible students. “We taught them how to dress and speak,” says Nancy Cross-Harris, who served as counselor and program coordinator. “We helped dropouts get GEDs, and worked with them till they were placed in jobs.” Cross-Harris recalls a CETA kid becoming an engineer, and babysitting a young mother’s infant so she could take her GED test, then helping the woman secure an internship at IU on her way to fulfilling her dream of becoming a journalist.

Also crucial for the Elks through the 80s, the CETA offices provided steady rental income to offset increased building expenses. With its proven record, Russell had little trouble getting the CETA grant renewed. Meanwhile, The Hole was hopping, as an increasingly integrated crowd packed the place, sometimes till dawn. But even in the midst of success, pressures began to build inside the B.G. Pollard Lodge.

The beginning of the end

While there was a sense of a cohesive African American community in Bloomington, there were also divisions—both social and economic. The old families whose Bloomington roots went back into the 19th and early 20th centuries saw themselves as the locals, with certain tenured prerogatives.

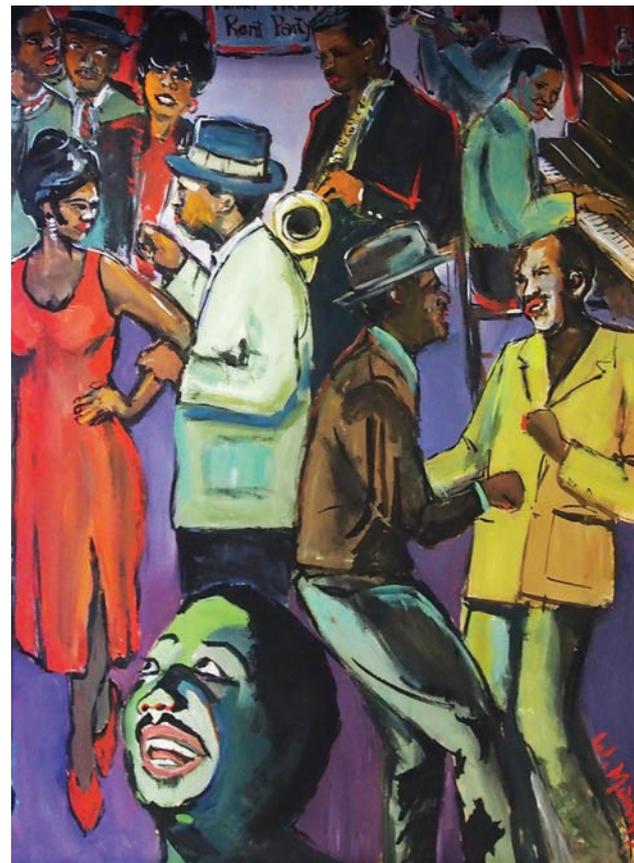
The more recent arrivals, often with university, executive, or professional positions, typically had more disposable income. And they were deemed “the outsiders.”

State trooper Jim Mitchell transferred from Indianapolis to Bloomington in 1978. “Bloomington’s pretty clannish,” he says. “You can be here forever, but you are still an outsider. If you have an IU connection, you are even more of an outsider.”

And the outsider-dominated Elks leadership had transformed what had previously been a long-sustained, bare-bones club for local black families into a larger, more complex operation with a lot more cash flow—and expenses. And the divide kept widening.

There were grumblings about the outsider leadership, about the CETA offices, questions about money, lodge trajectory, loss of control, about whites invading the old neighborhood, invading the club. Former Elks say it all climaxed when a local military veteran named Tim Tourner returned from the service in the late 1980s. He organized a large quorum of local brothers, who proceeded to vote the outsiders and their local allies out of office. As the young locals took over leadership and management, the B.G. Pollard Lodge took a decidedly different direction.

Many of the outsiders and their local allies simply stopped coming. “About that time, I disassociated myself,” says Robert Motley, who had once served as Exalted Ruler of the lodge. Terry Ice stopped warbling in Febru-



(top, left) Members of B.G. Pollard Lodge #1242, circa 1970. (l-r) James Black, Dr. Joseph Russel, Randy Norris, charter member Francis Henson, Ron Hamilton, Robert Motley, Billy Perrin, charter member Harold Duerson, Robert Manson, and Thomas "Popcorn" Doyle. *Courtesy photo*

(top, right) A painting by Wayne Manns that shows what a night at The Hole might have been like.

(above) Thomas Doyle.

ary 1987 after 19 years of bartending, saying the younger Elks all had building keys and were "drinking up the alcohol."

When Joe Russell left IU in 1990 for an Ohio State University position, the revenue-crucial CETA grant didn't get renewed. "When the youth program dissolved, we were just trying to keep the building open," says former Elks secretary Will Thomas. Talking about the split that developed, Gene DeVane ruefully says, "They were like crabs in a bucket. One'd try to get out, and the others'd pull him down."

A perfect storm

Despite the best efforts of a number of long-standing Elks, The Hole began to change—a younger, more urban crowd from Indianapolis, Chicago, and the Calumet Region (northeastern Illinois and northwestern Indiana) started coming. "They were bringing inner city, big city attitudes," Jim Sims says. More whites came for a vicarious thrill, bringing with them more tension. "White women started coming in," says Rose Duerson, echoing the sentiment of other black women. "They caused trouble—there were fights."

Neighbors, who now included many newcomers, began to phone in more calls

to the police about noise, fights, and late-night drug commerce in the parking lot. Neighbors reported gang-related graffiti on the Banneker Center. Needing money to pay the bills, the West Side Elks instituted a one-day membership, essentially a cover charge, to get into the club, further alienating the locals.

Judy Flynn and her postal worker husband, Tom, were among the whites who moved into the neighborhood in the early 90s. They witnessed the dramatic shift. "There was a lot of loud partying at all hours. It was definitely out of hand," she says. "It got worse as time went on."

Then this ... a killing

It all climaxed late on the night of September 14, 1997, when an 18-year-old Gary, Indiana, native, Dennis Michael Weldon, got in a fight at the club. Returning to his car, he came back with a shotgun and fired two rounds into the crowd outside the club. Charles Brown, an Elk and retired city police officer, was working security. Police say when Weldon turned his shotgun on Brown, the former officer shot the young man to death. A 38-year-old Bloomington woman, Debora J. Brown, was wounded, hit in the temple by a stray bullet.

The next morning, west-side residents encountered the B.G. Pollard Lodge, the former pride of the neighborhood, cordoned off by yellow crime-scene tape. “The whole climate of that neighborhood had changed by that point,” Jim Sims says. “It was the perfect storm—a changing neighborhood, declining revenues, then this.”

The Near West Side Neighborhood Association had been informally organized in the 1990s by white newcomers and a few long-established black neighbors, including Preston Bridgwaters, Betty’s brother. About a week after the shooting, the neighborhood association called a special meeting at the Banneker Center. “Some of us decided it was time for them to go,” says Bill Baus, a white attorney who’d bought west-side property in 1972. There was a hullabaloo, with members signing petitions calling for the Indiana Alcoholic Beverage Commission to revoke the lodge’s liquor license and demanding that The Hole move out of the neighborhood. “African Americans, or Africans for that matter, could go to any club in town, so they didn’t need it,” Baus says about the black-

owned lodge. An association committee was deputized to confront the Elks.

Elk Thomas Doyle remembers, “We got a notice that the west-side neighborhood association wanted to meet with us. We said, ‘Who the hell is that?’” The Elks felt the association had been exclusionary, with virtually no prior outreach to the lodge. “It was a black-white thing,” several Elks contended. Will Thomas, former Exalted Ruler, says, “They just wanted it closed. They wanted it gone.”

The final decline

The pressure never let up. Lodge membership and club attendance dropped. Finances got worse. Led by Baus, a group of association members opposed the liquor license renewal at the June 3, 1998, meeting of the Monroe County Alcoholic Beverage Board.

Faced with possibly losing the license, Will Thomas and club manager Charles Nicholson soon signed an agreement written by Baus. The agreement, which a *Herald-Times* article termed “a mea culpa,” stated that the Elks acknowledged that

the club’s operations were “unacceptable” and “a nuisance,” and “adversely impacted the safety, quality of life, and property values of the neighborhood.” They agreed to change its operations to remediate the problems. In exchange, the association agreed to withdraw its organized opposition to the license renewal.

Though a number of Black Elks, both long-time members and new ones, gave it their all, the B.G. Pollard Lodge #1242 went into its final decline. Bills piled up and attendance dwindled. The last Elks meeting was held in early 2004, the same year the club’s liquor license expired.

In 2006, the lodge property was sold for a modest amount to a white couple who planned to convert the building into apartments.

Some neighbors were relieved; most were ambivalent. But for people like Rose Duerson, who has a long perspective on African American life in Bloomington, it was a sad ending. “The lodge was the only place that black people could call their own,” she says. “They bought it. They owned it. You just felt at home.” ❄



The building today. Even though the last meeting of B.G. Pollard Lodge #1242 was held in 2004, the sign is still there. Photo by Rodney Margison