

The Way We Were

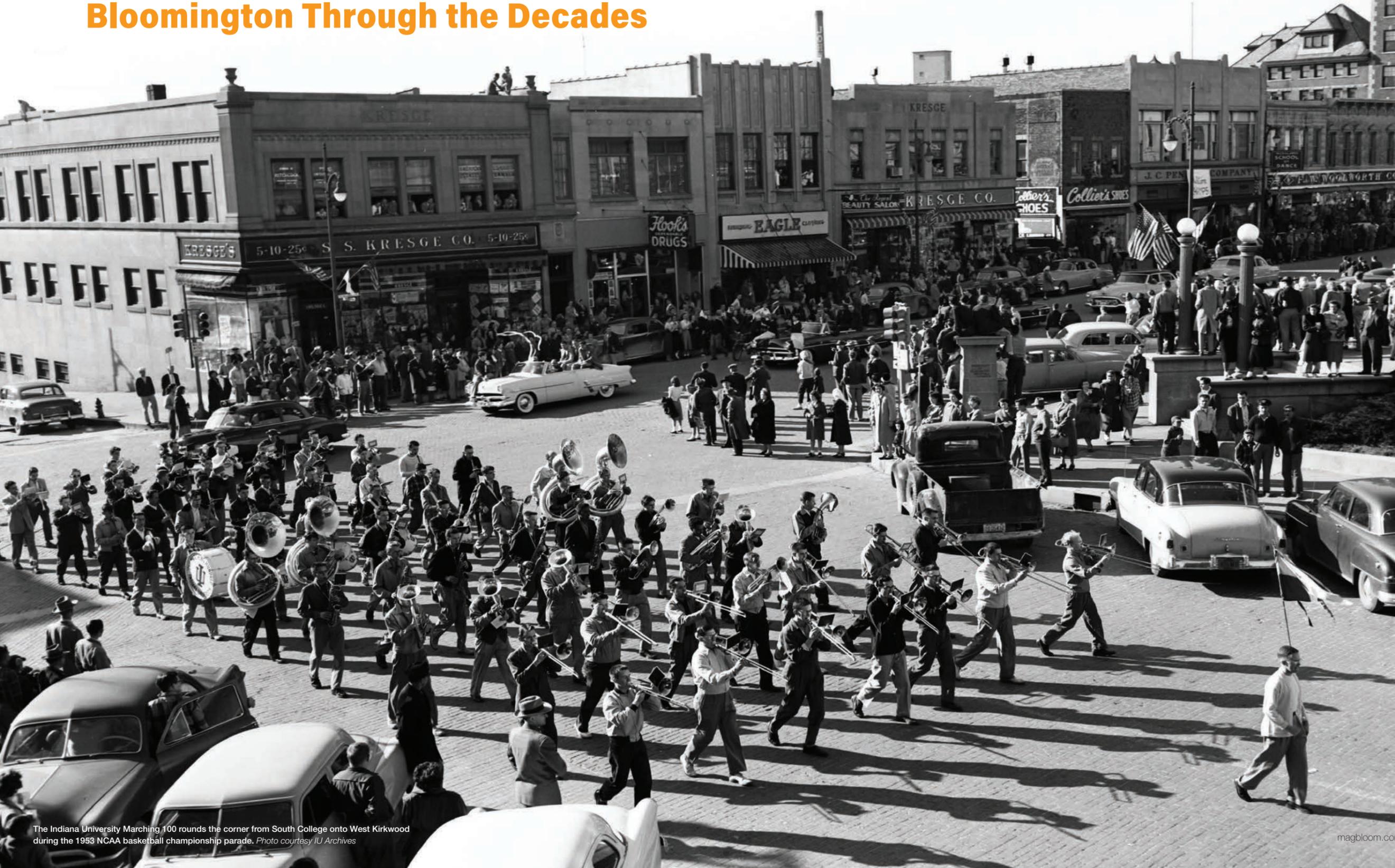
Bloomington Through the Decades

By Susan M. Brackney

It might be a bit difficult—it's not as if we have a time machine—but with the help of photographs and memories, it is possible to reconstruct the past.

While current Bloomingtonians bemoan the construction of apartment complexes and changes to the downtown, previous generations had their own favorite places that came and went. It's plain to see that, from the students who temporarily alight here to the townies who stay for good, Bloomington's inhabitants have long shaped this place—and are shaped by it, too.

Here, we take a look at the favorite haunts of decades past—the 1950s through the 1990s.



The Indiana University Marching 100 rounds the corner from South College onto West Kirkwood during the 1953 NCAA basketball championship parade. Photo courtesy IU Archives

THE '50s



Members of the Hi-Y Club host a car wash at a service station on the corner of West Kirkwood and South Rogers Street.
Photo courtesy Monroe County History Center Collection

The 1950s—Pavement and Progress

Back in the 1940s and early '50s, myriad stately residences—like the pair of homes on College Avenue which now house Planned Parenthood and United Way of Monroe County—occupied downtown Bloomington. Mixed in were hardware stores, furniture shops, dime stores, and small eateries like the Stardust Cafe and Boxman's Restaurant, which locals easily walked to. Mature trees even shaded the way. It sounds quaint—and it was soon seen as old-fashioned.

"Pretty much every major American city bought into the obsolescence concept," says Derek Richey, founder of the Bloomington Fading Project, which documents decades of change in Bloomington.

Richey moved to Bloomington in 1991 as a student at Indiana University. "My first trip walking from 11th Street on College all the way to downtown, I passed all these empty and paved lots," he says. "It really looked like maybe a bomb went off, and, at the time, I had no clue what had happened."

Finding out what had happened became something of an obsession. These days, Richey, 48, presides over the Bloomington Restorations, Inc. board of directors, and he and his wife, Jennifer Sommer-Richey, are the authors of *Bloomington Then and Now* (Pen & Publish), a book that grew out of the Bloomington Fading Facebook project.



Boxman's Restaurant on South Walnut. Photo courtesy Monroe County History Center Collection

What Richey discovered in his search was that the demolition, destruction, and dismantling of homes and businesses had created those empty lots. The obsolescence concept meant out with the old and in with the new on a massive scale.

Advanced by the national Chamber of Commerce, this scenario was playing out across the country. "What the Chamber was putting together with their consultants was based on 'science,' and it was 'progress,'" Richey says. "But it didn't really take into account that what they did to many of our towns would lead to a significant



Fergie's Drive-In at the corner of 3rd Street and Jordan Avenue, with service stations on the other three corners. Photo courtesy Monroe County History Center Collection

[economic] dip." For downtown Bloomington, the local effects from this new city-planning trend would be painful—and long-lasting.

That new car smell

"After World War II, we came back telling ourselves, we need to start rebuilding our cities, because our cities basically were built for horses and buggies, and we don't live in a horse-and-buggy era," Richey explains. As a result, Bloomington's core neighborhoods around the downtown Square were rezoned from "residential" to "commercial," and countless homes were subsequently demolished. "In the neighborhood that used to be where the old post office was downtown, before 1957, there were 16 houses on that block," Richey says.

"We lost about 50% of our major residential structures along College, Walnut, and Kirkwood," Richey reports. "It took a long time for us to get where we were by the 1950s, and then we just stomped all over it." What's more, between 1958 and the 1980s, locals debated the

worth of both the county courthouse and the entire south side of the downtown Square; many argued they should be torn down, which thankfully didn't happen.

Removing all of those houses literally paved the way for cars. New parking lots



The Gables on South Indiana Avenue in 1954.
Photo courtesy IU Archives

warranted mayoral ribbon cuttings and coverage in local papers. The sprawling Carl's Car Sales was a fixture on 11th Street, and new service stations popped up on nearly every corner.

Don Rager, 81, remembers working at his father's service station on the corner of 3rd Street and Walnut. "That was a Shell service station," Rager says. "And it was called a 'service' station because, when a car would pull in, we'd check the air in the tires, wash the windshield, check the oil and the water—and all that for 25 cents per gallon of gas."



Don Rager. Courtesy photo

"I was born here, and I've been here all my life," the retiree says. Rager worked in the purchasing department at Indiana University for 34 years.

As a young man, he and his friends used to pile into their cars and head to the movies or a diner. "For about five dollars, you could go to the drive-in [movie] and get something to eat and drink and that would take care of a couple," Rager says. "The Starlite Drive-In was there, and there was also one called the Cascade. It was out there in Cascades Park where the ball diamond is," he adds.

Besides drive-ins, they also frequented Bloomington's traditional movie houses, including the Von Lee, Indiana, and Princess theaters. "The Harris Grand Theatre was about a block beyond the Princess Theatre," Rager says. "And there was a Roxy Theatre over on College Avenue."

A movie ticket used to cost about 50 cents. "At the Harris Grand Theatre, every Saturday morning, they used to have Frankenstein



The south side of West Kirkwood in the 1950s. Photo courtesy IU Archives

movies up there," Rager says. "There were times when somebody would dress up like Frankenstein and scare everybody to death."

It wasn't just drive-in movies that supported the new car culture. You could drive in to restaurants, too. "The Circle Drive-In was on the corner of College and 17th Street, and there was one on the east side on 3rd and Jordan called Fergie's," Rager says. "As kids, we'd just cruise through there every once in a while, stop, and get a Coke or something. And there was a root beer stand on North Walnut called the A&W. A couple of my friends met their girlfriends there."

Rager and his pals weren't always crammed in their cars, though. They also spent time at Ladyman's Cafe, Coleman's Restaurant, and the Dairy Barn. "The Dairy Barn was busy-busy during the lunch hour," he recalls. "It was right across the street from the high school. We got to know the people in there. We'd walk in, and they'd already have our sandwiches ready for us."

"Bloomington was very laid-back," Rager says. "It was a college town, but nothing like it is now."



The Waldron Building on West Kirkwood in 1958.
Photo courtesy Monroe County History Center Collection

THE '60s

The 1960s—The Seeds of Change

With downtown neighborhoods all but eliminated, shops began relocating closer to suburban areas. For a time, though, anchor stores like J.C. Penney, Montgomery Ward, and Woolworth's would stay put.

"It was marvelous to go with my mother when she would drag me along on shopping trips downtown," Doug Bruce, 56, says. The owner of Tabor/Bruce Architecture & Design, Bruce is a longtime member of the City of Bloomington Historic Preservation Commission. He was born in 1963 and fondly remembers visiting several flagship stores downtown.

"The Sears catalog store was there in the late '60s," he says. "And I remember when we had the Ben Franklin store, Southern Sporting Goods, University Sporting Goods, and the J.C. Penney store on the corner that was multistory."

Dismal and desolate

Charlotte Zietlow took a dimmer view of Bloomington's downtown when she moved here with her husband, Paul, from Ann Arbor, Michigan. The retired politician and community leader served on the Bloomington City Council and became Monroe County's first female county commissioner. When the Zietlows arrived in 1964, she says, "The downtown was desolate."

An avid—and frustrated—cook, Zietlow was underwhelmed by the 1960s' Bloomington food scene. "Restaurants were dismal," she says. "There was the Dog n Suds on Kirkwood where The Village Deli is now. And Nick's was there. And The Gables."



In line for the Towne Cinema on North Walnut in the 1960s (in front of what is now The Bluebird). Down the street is Burgher's Grill, a popular Bloomington eatery from the 1940s to the 1960s. Photo courtesy Monroe County History Center Collection.



Businesses along North Walnut on the east side of the downtown Square, September 1963. Photo courtesy IU Archives

As for fine dining? “The Graham Hotel had sort of a dress-up dining room on the second floor,” Zietlow says. “That and Sully’s Oaken Bucket were the nicest restaurants in town. They had chateaubriand and snails, and they had sweetbreads under glass. They didn’t have tablecloths, but they did have wine of a sort. It was really bad wine, but the food was pretty good.”

Whipping up something tasty at home was similarly tricky. At that time, Bloomington didn’t have a farmers’ market, nor did it have much in the way of herbs and spices. “The A&P carried paprika and black pepper,” Zietlow says. “And there was Hays Market. They raised meat, and I think they must’ve gotten vegetables from some local farmer.”



Cars parked along West Kirkwood on the south side of the downtown Square in September 1963. Photo courtesy IU Archives

But, says Zietlow, downtown Bloomington did have some bright spots. “Bloomington Hardware was on the south side of the Square, and that was absolutely the best store in town,” she says. “They had wooden ladders that reached all the way up, about one-and-a-half stories. And they had drawers all along the walls. They knew their products.”

She adds, “We had Bloomington Hardware, Thrasher Hardware, and then another hardware store—all downtown.”

How could Bloomington sustain so many hardware stores? With the city’s march toward “progress” still underway, developers busied themselves working on College Mall on the east side. And, during this time, they were also continuing to raze single-family homes in order to replace them with apartment buildings.

“They just tore them down, and there was no discussion,” Zietlow says. “It really ruined whole core neighborhoods. That was all happening when we came to town, and it wasn’t pleasant.”

Re-reinventing Bloomington

Such sweeping changes caught many Bloomington locals and new transplants

like the Zietlows by surprise. “A bunch of us decided that we didn’t like the way the town was going,” she says. “We talked about zoning.



(l-r) Marilyn Schultz and Charlotte Zietlow opened Goods, Inc. in 1973. Courtesy photo

We talked about parks. We talked about taxes. We talked about mass transit. And we talked about housing code enforcement because we’d observed that people were living in really substandard housing without any adequate grievance procedure.”



(above) Opening day at Waffle House, October 10, 1967; (inset) Waffle House at the corner of 10th and College. Photos courtesy Monroe County History Center

By the end of the 1960s, Zietlow would decide to run for office. In 1971, she was elected to the Bloomington City Council. Nevertheless, Zietlow recalls, “[Critics said,] ‘You can’t understand a budget, Charlotte. You’ve never met a payroll.’ It was really annoying to be dismissed like that.”

Partly to help revive the flagging downtown and partly to bolster their own credibility, Zietlow and fellow politician Marilyn Schultz opened Goods, Inc. (now Goods for Cooks) in 1973. “When people ask, ‘Why did you do that?’ I say, ‘It was basically a political in-your-face!’” Zietlow says, laughing.

“It turned out that we had no idea what kind of impact we were having,” she concludes. “To this day, people come up and say, ‘I remember when you opened. We were so excited! You brought a different tone to the downtown.’”

In 1963, the arrival of another young couple—Gayle Cook and her husband, William “Bill” Cook—would also markedly change the city’s direction. Together, they started Cook Group, a medical device

company. Gayle was also a founder of the Monroe County Historical Society Museum.

But, early on, the young couple seldom left their Bart Villa apartment. “We had no money, we were starting a new business, and we had a young child,” Cook says. “Instead of visiting the town, we took advantage of our day off on Sunday and went for drives to explore southern Indiana.”

And when they splurged? “I recall a place called Groves Diner,” she says. “It had the best sugar cream pie!”



Gayle Cook. Photo by Shannon Zahnle



Leon Varjian's Banana Olympics at IU, April 1976. Photo courtesy IU Archives.

THE '70s



The Cochran House in downtown Bloomington, 1976. Photo courtesy Monroe County History Center Collection

The 1970s—Eats, Love & Understanding

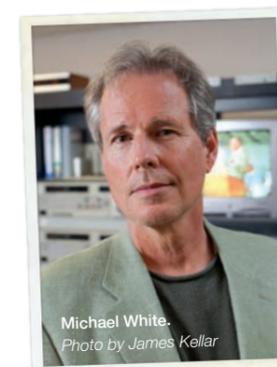
By the mid-70s, Gayle and Bill Cook would complete their first in a series of historic restorations with downtown Bloomington's Cochran House. "Bill and I took on restoration with a joined interest," Cook says. "He liked the bricks and mortar, and I liked the history and architectural style."

She concludes, "When we came to town, there were no museums, and there was no YMCA. We felt this was a void in the area and helped to bring these things to the community. This was a race between Bill and myself, to get the Monroe County History Center and [the Monroe County] YMCA completed. ... Bill beat me by opening the YMCA three months sooner."

Despite the decade's political tumult, Community Access Television Services Manager Michael White remembers 1970s' Bloomington as mostly an innocent place. "But, at the same time, there were things happening here that would never fly now," he acknowledges.

Such as? "When I was first here as an IU student, I can remember going to Wright Quad where, in the packed cafeteria, hundreds of people were watching a screening of *Deep Throat*. There's no way that would happen now," he says.

Ellettsville's Cinema West was similarly eye-popping. "That was an outdoor, drive-in movie theater that featured only pornography,"

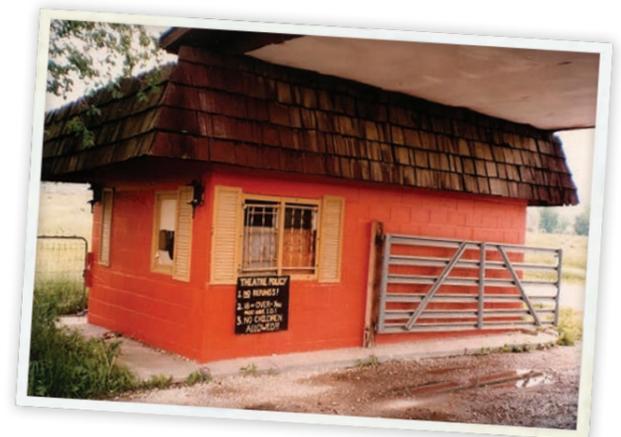


Michael White.
Photo by James Kellar

White says. "If you were driving down the road, you saw *everything*—big!" White says making a visit to "Skin-ema West" was a student rite of passage.

After graduating from IU, White chose to make Bloomington home. "There was a gentle kind of hippie thing happening," he recalls. "There were always all kinds of people in Dunn Meadow playing Frisbee. There were a lot of longhairs. There was definitely room to breathe."

Free spirits also flocked to Lake Griffy for skinny-dipping. "There was an all-naked swimming hole," White explains. "Traffic was



Cinema West, also known as "Skin-ema West," in the 1970s. Photographer unknown

jammed for almost a mile. Griffy was full of naked people swimming." Later in the decade, however, police began enforcing a no-swimming rule (a rule that is still enforced).

Staying power

Michael Cassady, owner of The Uptown Cafe, remembers a more polarized Bloomington. "There was tension between people who lived



Tovey Shoes at the corner of West Kirkwood and South Walnut, circa 1970s. Courtesy photo

THE '70s



The Tao in the 1970s. Courtesy photo

in southern Indiana and the whole hippie movement,” Cassady says. “There wasn’t a lot of violence, but people with long hair got berated and badgered. It was not peace, love, and understanding.”

Originally from Fort Wayne, Indiana, Cassady, 70, came to Bloomington in 1968 to attend IU, and, although campus life was hopping, Bloomington’s downtown—and particularly its restaurant scene—wasn’t. “The Square was pretty dilapidated at that point,” Cassady says. “Maybe from 10th Street to 2nd Street and from Indiana Avenue to Rogers, there may have been, at the most, 15 restaurants. Now, I think there’s over 150.”

If you were looking for something fancy back then, it had to be Sully’s Oaken Bucket. “That was where the Malibu Grill is now,” Cassady says. “That was really the only fine dining restaurant in Bloomington.”

Still, The Gables, a Mediterranean-style restaurant where Cassady once worked, held its own. “Food- and quality-wise, it could probably still function today very well,” he says.

And that goes double for the Tao. Easily the decade’s most iconic local eatery, the Tao began as a bakery on 10th Street. “They had fresh-baked goods made by hippies,” White says. “It did so well that there was an ashram in town just north of 7th and Washington streets, and they put a big push behind doing the Tao restaurant.”

White continues, “The Tao restaurant was fabulous. When it first opened up, it was also very tiny. You could get The Tao Dinner for

\$1.35, which was rice, beans, and a piece of cornbread, along with some tea. You could tell these people were not in it for the money. They were serving quality vegetarian food and creating community.”



Businesses along West Kirkwood on the south side of the downtown Square circa 1970s. Courtesy photo



Howard's Bookstore on the northwest corner of West Kirkwood and North College in the '70s. Photo courtesy Monroe County History Center Collection

In 1976, Cassady opened The Uptown Cafe. Located near The Bluebird on North Walnut, the spot was much smaller than its present-day incarnation. “It was just this little hole-in-the-wall restaurant that had maybe six booths,” White remembers. “It became the place for people, after they’d had their night out, to go and have breakfast. They had really good home fries, scrambled eggs, and pancakes. Saturdays and Sundays, there would be a line out the door.”



Michael Cassady. Photo by James Kellar

“I had four employees who could barely afford to make a living,” Cassady reminisces. In 1980, trouble hit The Uptown. “The [nearby] Towne Cinema burned down,” he says. “They were tearing it down and dumped bricks through the roof of The Uptown. I was closed for six months.”

The Uptown was able to reopen. By 1984, it moved to its current digs. “Now, I have 100 employees who all make pretty good money,” Cassady says. “We have a lot to be thankful for.”

A bigger playground

Long before he was an architect, Doug Bruce was a free-ranging fifth grader who moved into town in the early '70s. He lived just a few blocks south of IU. “As a kid who had been living out in the country, now, I could walk to the mall, I could walk to the university, I could ride my bicycle to Griffy Lake and fish,” he says. “I felt like my playground just got bigger.”

Bruce’s thinking got bigger, too. His imagination was captivated by the limestone gargoyles on campus, a few of the stately, old houses

still left standing, and even Leon Varjian’s bizarre 1975 mayoral candidacy. “Leon Varjian wanted to do a Monopoly board around the Square, and he wanted to put pot plants in the new planters on each corner,” Bruce says.

Bruce also recalls sneaking in to the Little 500 at the old 10th Street Stadium, where the Arboretum is now. “I was just taking it all in and thinking how lucky I was to be such a part of all of these things that were happening,” he adds.

But the number one thing that stands out in his memory? “When Space Port opened by the Sample Gates,” Bruce admits. “[The video arcade] was so different from anything else around it that it was almost cartoonish in a way. It was disco architecture.”

“It wasn’t just a room,” Cassady concurs. “You felt like you were on the inside of a spaceship.”



Businesses on North College across from the Monroe County Courthouse. Photo courtesy Monroe County History Center Collection

THE '80s

The 1980s—A Tale of Two Cities

Meg Cabot's brothers were equally drawn to Space Port—for one unexpected reason. “[Violinist] Joshua Bell had the highest score on basically every game, and it made my brothers insane,” Cabot laughs. Cabot is author of *The Princess Diaries* (HarperCollins), as well as two new releases, *No Judgments* (William Morrow Paperbacks) and a graphic novel, *Black Canary: Ignite* with illustrator Cara McGee (DC Zoom).



Meg Cabot.
Photo by Steve Raymer

Although she now resides in Key West, Florida, she grew up in Bloomington during the '70s and '80s.

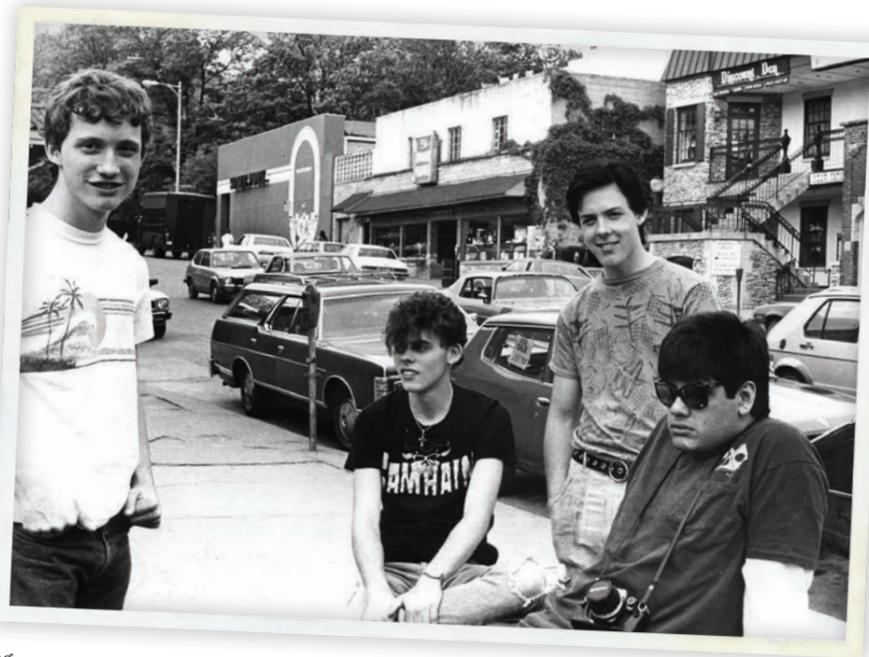
“There was another video game arcade called Rac-N-Cue that was really close to Mother Bear's Pizza, and they also hung out there a lot,” Cabot, 52, says. “Joshua Bell was around at that same time, and, although he was supposed to be practicing his violin, what he would

actually do is go to the Rac-N-Cue or Space Port. Looking at his high scores, there is no way he was actually practicing violin.”

Cabot's father was a professor at IU, and the family lived in the Elm Heights neighborhood. “Bloomington was a warm, friendly town to grow up in—very green and pretty much perfect,” she says. But in hindsight? “There was a very big prejudice,” Cabot concedes. “It was a lot like in the movie *Breaking Away* between the kids from the town and the kids who were from the country. Kids from town would call kids from the country who were bussed in ‘grits.’ And they referred to themselves as grits. I have no idea why or how that started.”



Space Port arcade at the corner of East Kirkwood and South Indiana Avenue.
Photographer unknown



Teenage boys hanging out on East Kirkwood. Photographer unknown

“I was around during the filming of *Breaking Away*,” she notes. “That movie kind of sums up exactly what Bloomington was like.”

Lotsa pizza

Due to a growing jumble of corporate businesses and mom-and-pop shops, by the 1980s, Bloomington's downtown wasn't quite as empty as it had been in the '60s. Cabot and her friends spent some of their spare time at the Monroe County Public Library and The Daily Grind coffee shop. “And we went to see movies at the Von Lee Theatre, and we ate a lot at Noble Roman's Pizza,” she adds. “That was the big place to go for pizza. We always got the breadsticks with cheese sauce. I think it was \$1.10.”

For Doug Bruce, the very best pizza came from Garcia's Pizza Pan. “That's where BuffaLouie's is now,” he says. And when he wasn't enjoying a slice or playing Pac-Man, he'd stop in at the Betty Jean Shop. “My parents bought it from Betty and Jean in 1980 or '81,” he says. “They had Fannie May Candies. They had Precious Moments [figurines] that people would collect. And they had greeting cards.”

Head inside the Betty Jean Shop and you were hit with the scent of warmed cashews and chocolate-covered raisins. “Back then, there really wasn't any kind of boutique candy store,” Bruce remembers. “In its heyday in the '80s, the line went down the street. It was just kind of an institution before the internet.”

Ah, but the internet would come. By 1991, the public could access the World Wide Web, and online shopping changed everything.



Towne Cinema shortly before the 1981 fire that destroyed it. Photographer unknown

THE '90s



Waiting for a parade in front of the Monroe County Courthouse, summer 1993. Photo courtesy Monroe County History Center Collection

The 1990s—The Road to Recovery

“The 1990s were a rebuilding era,” Bloomington Fading's Derek Richey maintains. “We were able to save our downtown and our courthouse, and more businesses and restaurants were flourishing.”

The Uptown's Michael Cassidy gives a lot of credit to Bill and Gayle Cook for the turnaround. “When the Cooks invested in the downtown and renovated the whole south side of the Square, the north side of the Square, and Graham Plaza, they brought Bloomington from disrepair to a really nice little city,” he says.

Aside from popular restaurants like The Village Deli, Positively Fourth Street, The Wild Beet, and the Bakehouse—a new venture by Cassidy and Strats Stratigios—a robust, live music scene was also thriving in Bloomington. “I was in a band—a lot of people in the '90s here were,” Richey says.

Named “Brando”—after Marlon Brando—Richey's band often played at Second Story. “After we were done playing, sometimes we would go down to Bullwinkle's and dance,” he says. “It was just a fun atmosphere.”

Frequently featuring live drag shows, Bullwinkle's was LGBTQ-friendly long before the LGBTQ-pride movement was mainstream. “Bullwinkle's closed. Then it came back. Then it closed again, and, now it's the cocktail bar, Serendipity,” Richey says.

The Bluebird and The Video Saloon were other trusty stop-offs—and, for many, they still are. “We would go there on the weekends after shows and stay until three in the morning,” Richey recalls. “And then we'd go to Rokit's to get a slice of pizza before we had to walk home.” (Rokit's, too, is still around.) Or, provided it was late—or early?—enough, Richey and his friends sometimes grabbed breakfast at Waffle House or Ladyman's Cafe.

A surprising number of downtown shops also sold records, cassettes, and the newfangled compact discs. The '90s sustained not only Tracks but also Streetside Records, CD Exchange, Roscoe's, Earwax, Karma Records, and TD's CDs and LPs. Eventually, most of these were supplanted by online music streaming and digital downloads.

Before DVDs were ubiquitous, it was also possible to catch first-run and art house movies downtown. The Indiana Theatre and the Von Lee were inexpensive, albeit well-worn, options. “I used to love to go to the theaters downtown to watch movies,” Richey says. “Of course, the Von Lee isn't even a theater anymore. Now it sells noodles.”

And the beat goes on

From the 1950s forward, change has been one of Bloomington's most reliable constants. “Things have just blossomed and bloomed and grown and died,” Cassidy observes. “Positively Fourth Street is no longer around. The Vienna Doghouse is no longer around. The Gables in that form is no longer around. The Tao and The Earth Kitchen—really, it's just kind of me and Cafe Pizzeria and Nick's.”

Even so, Cassidy remains an avowed optimist. “I'm hopeful that things will continue to grow, but wisely,” he says. “Hopefully, we can manage our growth better and just get the town really sparkling like a jewel. Hopefully, we can bring out the essence and soul of Bloomington, because there's a lot here.” ✨

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