Montrose Lives!

by Thorne Dreyer and Al Reinert

There's something for everyone in Houston's Montrose, the strangest neighborhood east of the Pecos.

In the living room of the old house on the corner, the one with the odd turrets and built-in birdhouses, Clark Gable took acting lessons from old Dr. Webster, who used to teach English at Rice Institute.

Around the corner is the First Pagan Church, with papier mache statues, and signs proclaiming the virtues of Paganism, love and nudity. It's become a tourist attraction, and people drive in from all over the state to look at it. Above the door it says: "Our religion doesn't teach sin, shame or hypocrisy. So don't blame us for your dirty mind. With love all things are possible."

Over in the vacant lot next door to the old Jubilee Hall is a strange, incongruous boat-like structure. Gail Wilson, who lived down the street, remembered: "There was this old man who lived there, and he was building a lifeboat. He would come out at night to work on it and I would talk to him. He said Houston was sinking and would be covered by tidal waves. He said maybe he'd take me along. I think they've had him committed now . . ."

Pretty weird? Commonplace in Houston's Montrose, the strangest neighborhood in Texas . . .

Thorne Dreyer and Al Reinert both live in Houston, in or near the Montrose.

Photographed by Richard Pipes

"A haven for Prohibition honky-tonks, antique stores, wealthy socialites, motorcycle gangs, gays, harmless eccentrics, exiles, writers, artists and musicians."

You need to know about Prufrock's if you're going to understand this article. Prufrock's is a bar, sort of. It's not your ordinary bar, of course, with its battered old chairs that you lounge around in, a fireplace you have to stoke up yourself, and T. S. Eliot's "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" lettered along the top of three walls. You can win a free beer if you find the three errors that are supposed to be in it, but we don't know anyone who's ever done it.

"We don't get much street traffic in here," says Dorothy Schwartz, who owns Prufrock's. "We've let the bushes grow up over the sign out front, and the only people who really know we're here are our regular customers. We held out for a year and a half to get the kind of crowd we wanted."

It's not the kind of crowd most bar owners go out of their way to attract: lots of scruffy looking college and graduate student types (one University of Houston professor holds his finals in Prufrock's), artists, photographers, youngish journalists, that sort of crew. Some of them sit around playing chess and bridge a lot, which is not the kind of activity you're used to finding in bars, and there's a semi-permanent chess hustler named Steve who hangs out there trying to make his rent off unwary newcomers. That's probably what Prufrock's really is, a hangout, but since the Alcoholic Beverage Commission doesn't license hangouts, we'll have to settle for calling it a bar.

Prufrock's, not your standard bar, is comfortably hidden away in a part of Houston called the Montrose, which is decidedly not your standard city neighborhood. Located just off the southwest corner of downtown Houston, the area is composed mostly of old buildings ranging all the way from Victorian Epic to Ramshackle Plywood, and its history has wound a tortuous course from Silk Stocking to Low Rent and back again. It's been known at various times as a haven for Prohibition honky-tonks, antique stores, wealthy socialites, motorcycle gangs, gays, harmless eccentrics and a broad array of exiles, writers, artists and musicians. From the days when O. Henry worked for *The Houston Post* and peddled short stories on the side, Montrose has nourished Houston's creativity.

It's hard to say just exactly where the Montrose starts and stops because residents are always arguing, with equal vehemence, whether they should or should not be considered part of "that place." It's that kind of neighborhood: people either want in or out of it. Generally speaking, though, one can define the borders as West Gray to the north, Shepherd Drive on the west, the Southwest Freeway to the south, and Smith Street on the east (about 7.5 square miles with some 30,000 inhabitants.) The spatial boundaries are relatively easy to determine — Exxon makes maps that help with those—it's the spiritual borders that are hard to fix.

Though it is certainly much more, the Montrose has become identified with a conspicuous string of European-style restaurants and sidewalk cafes which are earning it, not altogether deservedly, the title of Houston's Left Bank. Scattered along five blocks of what's now called the Westheimer Strip, and housed in renovated pre-World War One homes, the restaurants offer up foreign cuisines, wines, music, accents and ambience. Together with an electric assortment of boutiques, antique stores, specialty shops and the like, the restaurants help the Strip provide a little cosmopolitan flash to an otherwise languid Boomtown.

Chess and cards at Prufrock's

As must seem both appropriate and inevitable, the sidewalk cafe craze was sparked not by Houstonians, or even Texans, but by foreigners. Ari Varoutsos wandered down from Montreal to run a restaurant at San Antonio's Hemisfair in 1968, dropped by Houston, saw the Montrose and decided to stay.

"When I come to Houston I was passing by—I was a visitor—and I see that you have great big restaurants here, big dining rooms, very formal, you had to be dressed to go in and you had to spend 7, 8, 10 dollars a person to have a good dinner. So I saw that there was need for a good restaurant, with good food, and not very expensive.

"So what I did, I happened to pass by Westheimer and I see this little building here, which I liked. And I built it myself, the whole restaurant is handmade, the tables are made out of sewing machines. I was by myself, I was my own cook."

Opened in 1969, Ari's Grenouille sported antique clocks, paintings, a handbuilt Spanish hurdy-gurdy, a pseudo-French accordionist and all the French onion soup you could eat for $1.25. An immediate hit with students and Montrose hangers-on, Ari's did not at first really catch on in Houston at large but, rather, just simmered for a bit like a good spaghetti sauce, while another European got ready to slip the Westheimer Strip into high gear.

Soon after the end of the Second World War, Willie Rometsch had been apprenticed out as a cook in his native Bavaria at the age of 13. He became a journeyman cook in Munich, then was *chef de banquet* for Sweden's King Gustaf until the Sheraton Corporation lured him to Houston in 1962. He later struck out on his own and found the backing to open the Bismarck in downtown Houston, one of those "big dining room, very formal" places Varoutsos saw in 1968, and recently named by *Southern Living* as one of the ten best restaurants in the south. But Rometsch had his eye on the Montrose.

"I saw a potential for a unique atmosphere, I could visualize a very picturesque background. It's something Europeans are very accustomed to, where you can sit down and read the newspaper with a glass of wine, no rush.

"I talked to my backers and they said 'But there's nothing but homosexuals and strip joints there.' But I thought that was what was needed, that it was all good, gives the area some character, like Greenwich Village."

Together with a new partner, Mirko Predesoin, Rometsch opened Michelangelo's sidewalk cafe in October of 1970, delivering Southern Italian cookery into a good vibes environment of awnings, ferns, flowers, guitars and fine wines. River Oaks ladies had never seen the like, Houston's social superstars breezed in to soak up a little Continental *élégance*, the place did a land office business and the Great Res-

"I'd been looking all over for a place to open a gay bar and this just seemed like the natural place for it."

taurant Hustle was on. Rometsch had had the good sense to move about ten blocks closer to downtown than Ari had.

There was no stopping after that. Restaurants sprouted like wildflowers, all in rebuilt Victorian homes seeing their second incarnation as Left Bank bistros with an international barrage of foods and wines. Ari opened a Greek place, the Bacchanal, which does its best to live up to its name (and offers belly-dancing lessons during the day); and Rometsch had a hand in four more, including Boccaccio 2000, a disco-restaurant furnished in Modern Kubrick that's become a Jet Set pit-stop for movie stars lost in Houston. Everybody wanted a restaurant, and they're still going up, apparently with room for all of them so long as they don't run out of countries with distinctive foods, wines, or at least tablecloths.

The early arrivals are getting just a little bit wary of all the new competition. Ari says, "It doesn't matter how many restaurants there are, they just need to be good. Houston was ready for something like this," but adds, "I'm afraid we get some unprofessional people in here."

Rometsch is a little more blunt, saying that "a lot of people are getting greedy" and admitting that some of the restaurants, including those he has an interest in, wouldn't rate too many stars if the Michelin Guide bothered with Houston. "Michelangelo's was very poor for a while until we brought some new people in. A restaurant can never stand still, it needs constant promotion and it can't be phony."

One of the unfortunate consequences of the Westheimer Strip scene is that a lot of genuinely good Montrose restaurants are lost in the glare. Cardet's Cafe, for instance, hidden behind a drug store over on Fairview, functions as headquarters for Houston's tightly-knit Cuban exile community and offers a menu of bona fide Cuban dishes. Las Brisas, a working-class Mexican restaurant and hangout, a couple of creole cafes, places like Phil's plying downhome plate lunches at downhome prices, were part of the Montrose scene before the suburbs discovered the Strip.

The Montrose has also been the focus for organic/health food/vegetarian restaurants and stores ever since the Natural Child proved you could sell food even without the chemicals. The area now supports close to a dozen such places, including one where you can pay whatever you figure a meal happens to be worth. Wonder how that would go over on Westheimer Strip . . .

Another Montrose restaurant that is way, way off the Strip, in more ways than one, is Zorba's, long held dear by Houston's restaurant aficionados. Frequented by Greek sailors whenever a ship's in port, Zorba's proffers a raucous Mediterranean comaraderie that is, perhaps, less *élégant* than that offered on the Strip, but more fun.

Ever since 20 immigrants built Houston's first Greek Orthodox Church in 1917, the Montrose has served as the center of Creek community activities. Two of Houston's three Eastern Orthodox churches are there. The Annunciation Greek Orthodox Cathedral on Yoakum is, in addition, the seat of the Eighth Archdiocesan District of the Greek Orthodox faith, encompassing 11 states from Mississippi to Wyoming, as well as Panama, Venezuela and Columbia.

Another reason they call Westheimer "the Strip."

Which brings us back to Prufrock's. We mean, if you were writing an article about a place that was the favorite hangout of River Oaks bridge clubs, Cuban exiles, Greeks, junkies, runaways, drug store cowboys and God knows who else, wouldn't you run for cover? It's not like all we had to do was knock out a piece about Highland Park or someplace simple.

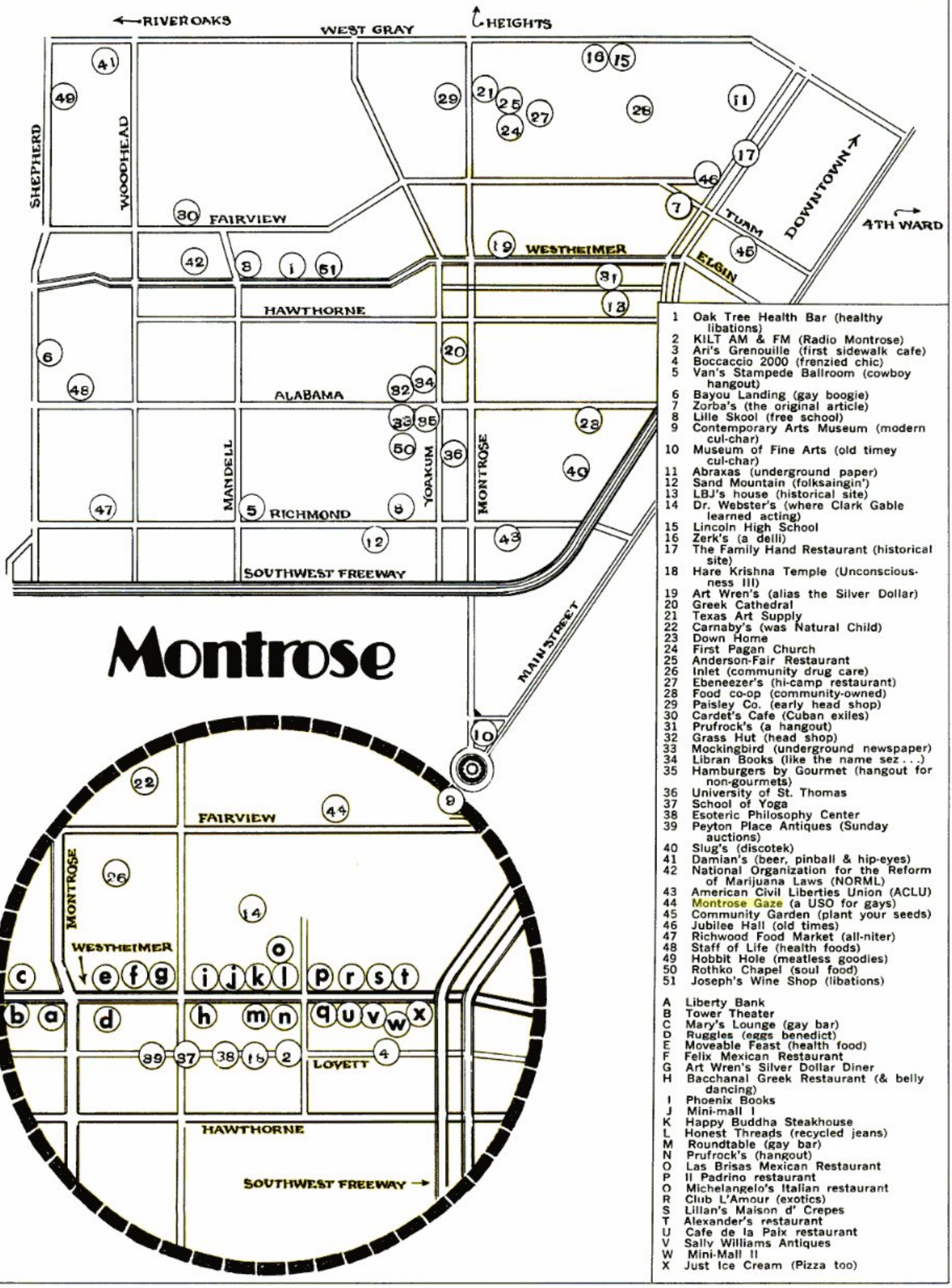
That's why we said you needed to know about Prufrock's to understand this article. We sure needed Prufrock's to survive writing it, and to help writing it: sooner or later, someone is gonna turn up there who knows the history of the trolley car lines or where Tab Hunter used to live, or has a good rap about the lady who lives with 500 cats. Montrose is full of weirdness like that, and Prufrock's is one of the places where it all kind of comes together and you can sit back with a beer and soak it all in.

It's like interviewing Dorothy (she owns the place, remember?); you don't really interview people in the Montrose, you just sorta sit around and talk with 'em and scribble notes like mad hoping that something in there will be of some use. Dorothy owns another bar a couple of blocks down from Prufrock's called the Round Table, which has been open for seven years now and was one of Houston's first gay bars. "I'd been looking all over Houston for a place to open a gay bar and this just seemed the natural place for it," she says.

The Montrose, then as now, was the center of Houston's homosexual community, which many people say is one of the largest in the nation. "We don't live or work here (the Montrose) necessarily, but we play here," is the way a man we'll call, say, Ralph, puts it. Ralph is one of the four directors of a gay organization called Integrity, which was formed by a local church as "a forum to air our difficulties," He characterized it as "the more moderate" of the two existing gay organizations, the other being the Montrose Gaze, a community center founded by "younger, more militant" gays who split away from Integrity. The Houston chapter of the Gay Liberation Front, which would be a third group, is, Ralph says, "dead," expired from terminal publicity.

Ralph estimates that close to two-thirds of the "30 or 40" gay bars in Houston are located in the Montrose, including the Bayou Landing, reputed to be the biggest gay dance hall between the East and West Coasts.

Many gays feel that they have had a significant impact on the development of the Montrose. "The intrigue helps the area, I think," says Ralph, "like Bourbon Street." Joe Anthony, owner of Mary's Lounge and active with Montrose Gaze, is more outspoken, contending that "the area is going to grow around the gay community and businessmen have to accept us because if they didn't, they'd be out of business," a statement with which Willie Rometsch



1 Oak Tree Health Bar (healthy libations)
2 KILT AM & FM (Radio Montrose)
3 Ari's Grenouille (first sidewalk cafe)
4 Boccaccio 2000 (frenzied chic)
5 Van's Stampede Ballroom (cowboy hangout)
6 Bayou Landing (gay boogie)
7 Zorba's (the original article)
8 Lille Skool (free school)
9 Contemporary Arts Museum (modern cul-char)
10 Museum of Fine Arts (old timey cul-char)
11 Abraxas (underground paper)
12 Sand Mountain (folksaingin')
13 LBJ's house (historical site)
14 Dr. Webster's (where Clark Gable learned acting)
15 Lincoln High School
16 Zerk's (a delli)
17 The Family Hand Restaurant (historical site)
18 Hare Krishna Temple (Unconsciousness III)
19 Art Wren's (alias the Silver Dollar)
20 Greek Cathedral
21 Texas Art Supply
22 Carnaby's (was Natural Child)
23 Down Home
24 First Pagan Church
25 Anderson-Fair Restaurant
26 Inlet (community drug care)
27 Ebeneezer's (hi-camp restaurant)
28 Food co-op (community-owned)
29 Paisley Co. (early head shop)
30 Cardet's Cafe (Cuban exiles)
31 Prufrock's (a hangout)
32 Grass Hut (head shop)
33 Mockingbird (underground newspaper)
34 Libran Books (like the name sez . . .)
35 Hamburgers by Gourmet (hangout for non-gourmets)
36 University of St. Thomas
37 School of Yoga
38 Esoteric Philosophy Center
39 Peyton Place Antiques (Sunday auctions)
40 Slug's (discotek)
41 Damian's (beer, pinball & hip-eyes)
42 National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws (NORML)
43 American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)
44 Montrose Gaze (a USO for gays)
45 Community Garden (plant your seeds)
46 Jubilee Hall (old times)
47 Richwood Food Market (all-niter)
48 Staff of Life (health foods)
49 Hobbit Hole (meatless goodies)
50 Rothko Chapel (soul food)
51 Joseph's Wine Shop (libations)

A Liberty Bank
B Tower Theater
C Mary's Lounge (gay bar)
D Ruggles (eggs benedict)
E Moveable Feast (health food)
F Felix Mexican Restaurant
G Art Wren's Silver Dollar Diner
H Bacchanal Greek Restaurant (& belly dancing)
I Phoenix Books
J Mini-mall I
K Happy Buddha Steakhouse
L Honest Threads (recycled jeans)
M Roundtable (gay bar)
N Prufrock's (hangout)
O Las Brisas Mexican Restaurant
P Il Padrino restaurant
O Michelangelo's Italian restaurant
R Club L'Amour (exotics)
S Lillan's Maison d' Crepes
T Alexander's restaurant
U Cafe de la Paix restaurant
V Sally Williams Antiques
W Mini-Mall II
X Just Ice Cream (Pizza too)

Map by Bill Narum

is "very much" in agreement.

Although both Ralph and Anthony agree that the gay community is "not particularly well organized," they both see an amorphous cohesiveness that "is beginning to come together" enough to exercise a little leverage in their own behalf. "Most gays are pretty conservative voters," Ralph says. But if you give them a candidate who will speak to their issues, and support their interests, then they'll support him."

He gives as an example State Representative Ron Waters, a 23-year-old law clerk who defeated a former House member last year to win his seat from newly-drawn District 79, the population center of which is the Montrose. Waters ran on a typically liberal platform of legislative and tax reforms, but included strongly libertarian positions on the decriminalization of marijuana and the repeal of laws regulating abortions and sexual conduct between consenting adults, all hot issues in the Montrose.

"There are lots of gays who are conservative, who voted for me, who worked for me," Waters says. "Because I'm committed to the gay cause, I can be open and public about it—to say in an official capacity that there's nothing wrong with gay love. To admit that I have gay friends, gay people on my staff, and to introduce them as such, should have a radicalizing influence."

Waters, who sees the Montrose as "an identifiable political subdivision with its own particular interests," admits that he may be less than successful in satisfying those interests in Austin. "I'm practical enough to know that everything I introduce isn't going to pass, but I think in many ways the forum is probably more important then the actual legislation. After all, I'm only in Austin about six months every two years, and I can devote the rest of my time inside the district working on local problems."

One constituent who will likely pass up the chance of seeking his legislator's assistance is another Montrose politician, former GOP State Senator Henry (Hank) Grover, who last year narrowly missed becoming Texas' first Republican Governor since the Federal troops pulled out of Austin. (Another Waters constituent, who misses being a full-blooded Montrosite by a scant half-dozen blocks, is Lieutenant Governor Bill Hobby.) "Hank is probably a hangover from the old Montrose; he's part of the transition," is the way Waters sees his arch-conservative constituent.

Which, needless to say, is not the way Grover sees it: "The hippie image of the Montrose is changing because the land values are going up, and the low rent areas are disappearing." Grover has lived in the Montrose for 25 years, went to college there, worked at his brother's gas station down on Westheimer, taught at nearby Lamar High School and was one of the first people to dabble in Montrose real estate.

"I've been trying to sell people on this area for a long time. I was the first person to start blocking up property around here. It's financed me in politics." Grover started buying up dilapidated frame houses in the 'fifties, restoring them and renting them out. "I had my own urban renewal project," he says. In time, he accumulated almost an entire square block on which he intended to build high rise apartments—"this area should have high rises built here, it's perfect for it, convenient to downtown"—but he was forced to sell it during his gubernatorial race.

During the days Grover was teaching in Houston high schools, he was following close in the footsteps of another one-time Montrose resident who taught in them and went on to considerably more success in politics: Lyndon Johnson. Johnson's cousin, Mrs. Dorothy Askew, who still lives in the house where "Lyndon shared the corner bedroom with my uncle," says "I guess he thought it was pretty swell; he was a poor boy who didn't make much then, and it was back in the Depression when any place with a roof was a good place to be."

Montrose area schools, in the days when Lyndon Johnson was teaching (1931–32) were widely acclaimed to be the finest in Houston. "All the schools around here were the best in town then," remembers Mrs. Askew, who went to Montrose Elementary and San Jacinto High. "Mayor Holcomb's niece went there, and Lynn (Mrs. Glenn) McCarthy. Roy Hofheinz was a classmate of mine. We had the cream of the crop—high society. Most of my close friends and I went right into Rice University."

If Montrose area schools are no longer "high society," they are still, by contemporary urban standards, among the best in town. Zoned together with the poverty-struck black Fourth Ward in a court-ordered integration plan, Montrose area schools seemed ripe for the kind of private school exodus that plagued other parts of the Houston Independent School District. Typically untypical, the upper middle-class parents of the lower Montrose, urbane and liberally inclined, rallied in support of their public schools to infuse them with community spirit and educational excitement.

Four-year-old Lincoln Jr-Sr. High School, which services part of the area, has been termed by school district officials "the most successfully integrated school in the city." Parents teamed with black school principal Elwood Piper to help win a $40,000 Emergency Assistance Program grant that has sent students to the ballet, opera, Alley Theatre, the Manned Spacecraft Center and the Contemporary Arts Museum. One-time Montrose author David Westheimer (*Von Ryan's Express, My Sweet Charley*), after whose family the street is named, spent a week with the high school English classes.

"We've had excellent community cooperation," says Piper, "far better than most other places in the city.

"The community projects have brought people together who would have never met by chance. We've had fiestas, ethnic celebrations, parent-teacher basketball games, invitations to the staff to visit in the homes and churches of the neighborhood."

The educational focal point of the Montrose, however, is Hank Grover's alma mater, the University of St. Thomas. UST was begun in 1947 when the Basilian Fathers of Toronto dispatched Fr. Vincent Guinan to Houston to start a university. In the 25 years since it began classes with 40 students and a faculty of eight, UST has secured a comfortable niche within both Houston's educational community and the Montrose.

No longer church supported, the University has recruited a lay board of Houston's most powerful laity and has built a subdued but impressive campus of soft bricks, covered walks and live oaks that retains and blends with the earlier residential architecture. In some cases, old buildings have been restored and put to new uses, like the boyhood home of Howard Hughes, which is now the Modern Language Building. (Fine mesh of history and irony that one, eh? Told you the Montrose was pretty weird.)

UST has probably been, as its spokesmen like to think, "a major factor in the preservation of the Montrose." A prime example of preservation is the building that first attracted Father Guinan to the Montrose, the former Link-Lee mansion, now the St. Thomas Administration Building, and one of the key reference points in the history of the Montrose.

Way back around the turn of the century, in what future archeologists will unavoidably call the Pre-Astrodome Period, there was, sadly, no Montrose. While it's true that Houston must have been a dreadful dull place without a Montrose, there were few people who had to suffer it: just about 40,000, all working to finish off the ship channel and not yet fully realiz-

Prufrock's: not your ordinary neighborhood bar

ing what a good deal oil was. There wasn't anything to the west of "downtown" but a few dairy farms and a jerky old country road angling out to where some folks called the Westheimers lived.

Houstonians, though, were just beginning to get it into their heads that they were going to be a Big City, and they were pushing in that direction. The Westmoreland and Courtland "additions" (what we call "subdivisions" nowadays) were right next door and included some of the finest homes in the city, colossal constructions with galleries, gables and gazebos, towers and balconies fastened on everywhere in pretentious Victorian grandeur. Fine Homes, they were called. Burlington Railroad vice-president W. W. Baldwin had organized the South End Land Company in 1902 to build the posh little neighborhood, and it was just about filled up. The time seemed ripe for what we know now as a "real estate killing."

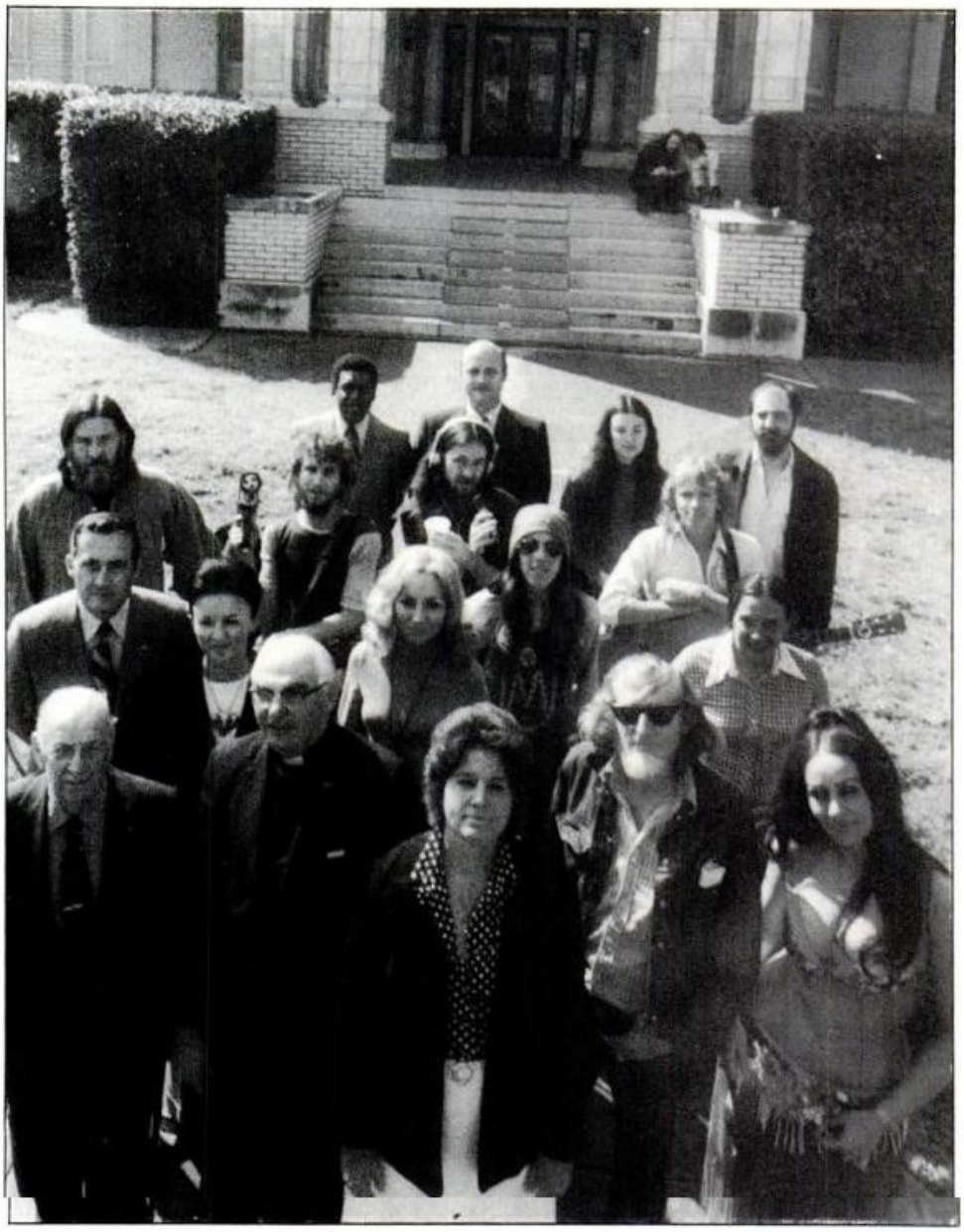
In 1910, a group of investors headed by J.W. Link formed The Houston Land Corporation and "conceived the idea of laying out and improving a great residential addition." The plot was to be called the Montrose Addition and built around Montrose boulevard, an enormously wide street for those days, with its esplanade planted in palm trees. At the corner of Montrose and Alabama, Link built his own home, an immense Doric edifice of imported limestone and nitrified brick that cost $60,000 even then. When the Galveston Hurricane ravished the Gulf Coast, neighbors from blocks around took safety within its fortified parlors. In 1916, the Links sold the mansion to oilman T.P. Lee, whose family would later deliver it to the newly-born University of St. Thomas. The family had other things to worry over than the upkeep of the mansion, what with Howard Lee running off to marry, consecutively, Hedy Lamarr and Gene Tierney.

The Montrose Addition, meanwhile, was busily becoming just what its corporate progenitors had envisioned: "the most superbly developed residential area—not only in the City of Houston, but the entire South." The great and wealthy of the city all found homes nearby: the Hogg family, the Joneses and Garwoods, Edna Saunders, Lamar Fleming, Ross Sterling, the Cullens and Cullinans, Neuhauses, Kirbys, Espersons, Rices, all of the names that would make up Houston's history for three decades.

In the 'twenties the Hogg brothers and Hugh Roy Cullen had conceived their own great residential addition, River Oaks, followed in later years by Memorial and Tanglewood. The social elite, always on the lookout for new plateaus, began emigrating west. The middle-class, developing tastes for two-car garages and central air conditioning, was moving into the carefully homogeneous split-level suburbs that kept rolling out to the southwest.

The original residents of the Montrose, meanwhile, were proving less able to withstand the passage of decades than the sturdily-built, carefully crafted homes they had erected. As they moved on, their Montrose homes fell into estates, or were deeded over to suburbanite descendants who either sold them cheaply or were content to rent them out for just enough to pay the taxes. The obvious tenants were those who could neither afford nor particularly desired swimming pools and microwave ovens but preferred the leaded-glass windows, ten-foot ceilings and cheap rent in the Montrose. These were a diverse lot: students and professors from St. Thomas and nearby Rice University, artists and architects desiring proximity to the museums and galleries that cluster around the Montrose, journalists, writers, photographers and musicians seeking an atmosphere of creative excitement and Bohemian figures of every sort.

"There are always groups in society who choose autonomy, who wish to live apart from society at large. In Houston, the Montrose was the logical place for people like that," explains urban planner Clovis Heimsath. "Groups that want to live by themselves, like homosexuals, divorcees,



A Montrose Selection

1) Marge Crumbaker, columnist, **Houston Post**
2) Rev. A. P. Caird, chairman, Dept. of Theology, University of St. Thomas
3) Gen. Victor A. Barraco, U.S.M.C., Ret., landlord; oldtimer
4) Don Snell, artist; Bohemian Renaissance man
5) Helena, bellydancer at Bacchanal restaurant
6) Rickie Shevack, advertising executive
7) Kay (Mrs. Henry) Grover
8) Sen. Henry Grover, former state senator, GOP gubernatorial candidate
9) Gail Wilson, Houston coordinator, National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws (NORML)
10) Ann Waldron, book editor, **Houston Chronicle**; founder, Lincoln Jr.-Sr. High School PTA
11) Don Sanders, folksinger
12) Dan Earhart (Cap'n Macho), newscaster, KILT radio
13) Bill Narum, Space City Video
14) Gray Fair, Anderson-Fair Restaurant; commercial artist; "Mayor of Montrose"
15) Bob Edmiston, attorney and real estate agent; president, Near Town Association
16) Elwood Piper, principal, Lincoln Jr.-Sr. High School
17) Eileen Hatcher, community activist; organizer of collective garden
18) Mike Condray, owner, Liberty Hall
19) Texas Monthly's Dreyer and Reinert, checking it all out

young rebels, always head for neighborhoods where they can be left alone."

Heimsath lives and offices in a beautifully restored, immense old home in the Montrose, and has been a close student of the development of his neighborhood. "The Montrose flies in the face of national urban dynamics trends. The typical pattern of areas surrounding the central business district of a major city is that of decay. Even where attempts have been made to rejuvenate them—the Gaslight district in St. Louis, New Town in Chicago—it's been a failure. Montrose has reversed this trend, and the glory of it is that it was done without any government assistance, support or programs.

"Houston needs an urban residential neighborhood like the Montrose. Urban residential areas are common in Europe and the older cities of this country: Georgetown in Washington, Back Bay in Boston, the Garden District in New Orleans. Urban areas require high density living, and it's justified by the higher land costs. And they're always heterogenous, a mix of people and land uses, while the suburbs are homogenous."

Paralleling the rise of Westheimer, the last few years have seen the return of many promient, wealthy Houstonians to the neighborhood. As *Houston Post* columnist and Montrose resident Marge Crumbaker puts it, "Some of the folks who moved out to Tanglewood are moving back, and all from a more technical perspective: "These old restored homes are an enormously important visual symbol. They give a sense of history and place to an area. That's something you'll never get in the suburbs."

Area real estate agent Bob Edmiston, president of the Near Town Association, the Montrose area civic/booster group, says people are moving back because of "the interesting old architectural charm. You can redo and redecorate these old homes, come up with all sorts of ideas. It's just not the same as living in those fishbowl houses in the suburbs. Here we've got a hodge-podge of ages, types, groups. We're certainly not stereotyped like some of my friends out in Westbury."

Redoing and redecorating homes, though, is getting to be an expensive proposition. In an unzoned city like Houston, residential land values keep pace with commercial values, and the Westheimer boom, compounded by the "Return of the Prosperous," has sent prices through even Victorian roofs. To buy and refurbish a home in the lower Montrose runs on the order of

"You can redo and redecorate these older homes, come up with all sorts of ideas. It's just not the same as living in those fishbowl houses in the suburbs."

$60,000. Townhouses, many of them designed to blend into the neighborhood, are multiplying rapidly, and bringing equal prices.

New single family dwellings are rare, but do exist. University of Houston architecture professor John Zemanek bought an old house, tore it down, and replaced it with an austere, Zen-inspired home that has won him architectural kudos. He admits that it would have been cheaper to build it elsewhere, but says "I wouldn't live anywhere else in Houston. I like the quality of life here, the shops, restaurants, crafts. At this time, that's what's stimulating the Montrose, pumping new life into it. People are moving in like myself, who wouldn't live in the suburbs."

Zemanek calls Montrose "essential to the City of Houston. It provides a humanistic element at its core, like the Left Bank in Paris. If the Montrose as it is now was wiped out by high rises and commercialization, the city would become sterile and materialistic to the point where culturally stimulating people would move out, and everyone would lose in the long run."

Be they "culturally stimulating" or not, a lot of people are beginning to move out. Increased rents and property values, spurred by what City Hall called "a long overdue" tax valuation increase, are forcing many to move elsewhere; if the wealthy are indeed "rediscovering the Montrose," as Bob Edmiston cheerfully phrases it, one reason is that only they can afford it. Many of those less fortunate are looking north for places to live, towards the Heights, a near-North Side corner of town possessed of a comparable architectural heritage but of middle class, rather than upper class, origins.

"The Heights is now very attractive to young people," says Ann Lower. "They're moving up there because the rents are so much cheaper, and there are trees up there. You can start to see the movement in the voting patterns."

Folksinger Don Sanders agrees that "there's increasing interest in the Heights. I know some people have already moved up there. You can find better deals on houses there, $60 to $70 a month. Around here it's getting hard to find an apartment for under $100.

Some people foresee the development of an East Village–West Village relationship between the Heights and the Montrose, with one area providing cheap housing for those who can't afford the other, and considerable cultural interplay between the two.

Those with a Bohemian bent are not the only ones with an eye to the north: Willie Rometsch, in a move that's either far-sighted or precipitous, has optioned an entire block of Taft Street, north of West Gray and into the middle of the black Fourth Ward. He has already opened Zerk's, a delicatessen similar to the poor-boy-famous Antone's that is just down the street, and he has plans to open a bakery, spaghetti house and high-kitsch hamburger joint (to be called the Great American Disaster, perhaps prophetically) in the near future. "The city is going to have to move in that direction," predicts Rometsch. "In four, maybe seven years, I see much development up there."

He is not, however, anxious to see the northward movement become an exodus of "the artists and young people who made the area as charming as it is. I sincerely hope they don't move out. If you lose them, you lose the whole idea. Fortunately, many of them own their own homes, and they don't give a hoot how much they're offered

continued on page 77

One of Chief Short's finest passes Michelangelo's, first sidewalk cafe on the Westheimer strip.

continued from page 63

for them—I think this is great."

Artist Don Snell is one of those: "I've bought my house and I'm staying." Clovis Heimsath, who agrees that a mass emigration of the counter-culture "would probably hurt the area as a whole," isn't worried: "High density residential areas are always going to have room for people like that, they'll always have diversity. There aren't enough wealthy people in all of Houston to fill up the Montrose."

Heimsath is one of several people who have their own notions of how the Montrose should develop. Working through the American Institute of Architects, he devised a "Blueprint for the Future" which envisions pedestrian malls, townhouses and high-rises, and massive investment.

Fellow architect John Zemanek has a more imaginative proposal: "The ideal thing would be if the Mayor and City Council would declare this part of Houston an historic area for conservation of the city's and Texas' early days and in sense subsidize it—give it a chance to survive. It would make Houston internationally attractive culturally. Artists, musicians, galleries, schools for art, design, crafts would move here in droves. They're being forced out of other cities."

Speculation would have it that a majority of Houston's crop of practicing artists already live in the area—at least the younger ones. Hundreds of young journalists, rock musicians, architecture students, college professors call the Montrose home. Plus consumers of macrobiotic foods, crazy anarchists, Jesus freaks, and devotees of mind-enhancing or destroying chemicals ranging from peyote to quaaludes to smack.

It is a confusing time now, as many of the external trappings of the counter culture have spread into the mainstream—from oil workers to advertising executives. Long hair and grass—which were, for the oldtimers, merely symbols for a deeper ethic—have become, for many, ends in themselves. Lots of young kids come into the Montrose now, strung out on exotic drugs and with no semblance of vision—just looking for a way to survive. On the other hand, swingers move in from the suburbs, toying with group sex and psychedelics while tipping big at Boccaccio's.

Liberal organizer Ann Lower sums up how the Montrose counter culture bridges the gap: "The older bohemian types provide the basic leadership for the young kids—lots of whom don't have any skills. The bohemians want to live simply and are artistically inclined. They feel they can contribute something to the community at the same time as dropping out. They are generally the street philosophers."

Don Snell is a greying hippie elder statesman. His paintings are whimsical cartoons: bright, two-dimensional, skillful giggles. His eyes twinkle over a glass of brandy as he sinks back into the comfy-but-certainly-not-chic sofa. The room is saturated with sculpture (candle in crotch/tongue in cheek), his moody photographic studies and sprightly canvasses.

"I've got a strange feeling that the dope thing has started to take its toll in terms of productivity. It's easier to stay stoned than to produce."

Snell communicates a kind of wise cynicism, nourished by a half century of coping with the contradictions. Snell is a Montrose prototype, though there certainly isn't another like him. Right now he's discouraged about the direction of things in the neighborhood he's occupied some 15 years.

"It's harder to rent a house now. There are more freaks, but not necessarily more artists. A lot of people have left town. There doesn't seem to be any excitement about art now. I have a feeling this place is never going to make it as a Village, art-wise. Artists here are independent. They don't traffic much with each other, except at parties. They don't need each other."

Don Snell may be the Pearl Mesta of the Montrose. His parties draw hundreds of folks into his two-story frame house on Welch Street and are truly community events. Last Halloween his house was filled with weirdos disguised as weirdos: elaborately costumed local artists rubbing rears with denim-jacketed radical politicos and moddish uptown dilettantes. Pacifica radio considered it of sufficient interest to broadcast it live.

Pacifica also covered the block party held outside Anderson-Fair Restaurant on Grant Street last October. That event drew several hundred people who listened to rock bands and local liberal politicians touting the candidacy of George McGovern. This was the latest in a series of outdoor fiestas over the last several years: they've featured tap beer, street dancing and flea market booths hawking crafts, cakes and underground comics.

Anderson-Fair Proprietor Marvin Anderson is a former Texas Art Supply executive who dropped out, let his hair and beard grow and began running the marginal operation restaurant that features spaghetti and beer and down-home vibes. We peeked over our bottle of Shiner's as Marvin reinforced Snell's perceptions.

"I guess I measure the Montrose by the block parties," he said. "And this last one, I hardly saw anyone I knew. So I guess people must be leaving, or else they're in hiding."

Marvin's former partner, Gray Fair, was perhaps the most cynical of all. Gray, a man with massive physique and thick greying beard, was tagged the Mayor of Montrose for a time. He has now dug up his roots, bid his constituency adieu and packed off to Austin where he is doing promotional art work for Representative Ron Waters.

"This area is becoming less and less comfortable to live in," bemoaned the Hon. Mr. Fair. "There's paranoia about the police, the smog is so bad, housing is getting more expensive. There are too many crazies around here—real flipped out. They have no sense of direction. I can see no unity in the community. People are too tired to get something going.

"I watched the Flower Child era when I was first here. In the last year lots of serious people have moved on, moved up. *Space City!* (then Houston's underground paper) was going—it was damn radical. You felt the spirit of change, of revolution. It's gone from a mood of heavy social change to a directionless thing at this point."

Community activist Eileen Hatcher has a philosophical attitude about those changes. She feels that a lot of the older folks have just gotten burnt out, especially those who worked hard in community organizations such as Inlet Drug Crisis Center, the food cooperative and the Montrose Community Council, of which she was chairperson. And, according to Eileen, new people just haven't moved in to take their place.

"I just kinda ride with it," she told us. "I figure it goes through phases. People seem to be quietly more into their own thing: trying to live together, to cope with existence. More families are developing relationships, learning crafts, raising kids. People are saving energy, wanting to get themselves strong. Maybe it's just kind of a time to go inward."

But Eileen Hatcher is involved in an imaginative project that could tap some of that energy; she and a handful of others are organizing a community garden. The Houston Independent School District has leased them—at no charge—a city block bounded by Louisiana and Smith and Anita and Tuam. The block is being broken down into nearly 100 plots, 400 square feet each.

According to Eileen, "There are two stipulations for getting a plot: you must live within walking distance of the garden, and you cannot use chemical fertilizers or pesticides. So it will be ecologically sound and community-

oriented." University of Houston architecture students have helped design the garden. It will include a playground area and a covered meeting place, perhaps a gazebo.

Perhaps the most exciting media venture is Space City Video. The group is spearheaded by Bill Narum, whose experience has ranged from commercial art to the underground press to radio work. Bill and crew have pulled together $15,000 worth of half-inch video equipment which they have used to tape Italian filmmaker Roberto Rossellini, rock concerts and community events. Space City Video has taped cable TV hearings in Houston and plans to make a serious bid for public access when Houston gets wired.

Pacifica Radio and the "underground" radio stations have always related heavily to the Montrose area and, in fact K-101 and its sister AM station, KTRH, are currently in the process of moving their studios into the neighborhood. They'll soon be neighbors on Lovett Blvd. with KILT's AM and FM stations. Among the four, they'll reach well over a million listeners a week, says KILT's Cap'n Macho, still known to many as Dan Earhart.

Earhart, former general manager of KXYZ-FM (now KAUM-FM) has a long history in Houston radio. Now he can be seen most any time, riding around the Montrose on his bicycle, his blue jeans rolled up to his knees, his face haloed by a massive bushy beard. And at night Cap'n Macho's rambling, iconoclastic newscasts—sometimes didactic, often tongue-in-cheek—pierce the hairwaves on both KILT stations. (KILT's top-40 AM station has led the city's ratings for years, but the newer FM outlet—which has a free-wheeling format and calls itself "Radio Montrose"—has a weak signal and can't be picked up outside the area. Its transmitter is on Westheimer at Whitney.)

Cap'n Macho leaned back in the old cane rocker, its battered cushion spitting out stuffings. It was a gorgeous, spring-like afternoon on this Willard Street front porch, just around the corner from the Pagan Church. "Montrose is the only small town I've ever lived in," said the Cap'n. "It has the small town attributes of everybody knowing everybody else. But it's a *big city* small town, so everybody doesn't get in your way.

"It's a lot closer to the earth. Why, it's still got squirrels," said Dan, pointing out a nose-twitching rodent that had taken the middle of the street and was calmly sizing up the scene. "I rarely go out of a 10 to 12 block radius. I find everything I need. I don't

continued on page 82

continued from page 78

relate to living in Houston, Texas. I live in the Montrose."

Cap'n Macho traded smiles with the afternoon sun. Jamie and Peggy, who live up the street, walked by and waved baseball mitts; they were headed for a nearby field to play catch. Gail Wilson—she's working to legalize marijuana—ambled around the corner from Anderson Fair, retracing the squirrel's steps, and joined us on the porch. Former ecology activist and aspiring politico Mike Noblet pedaled by on his two-wheeler: "Hey, is this a party? How about a beer?"

Our interview with Cap'n Macho had indeed become a party and, perhaps as well, the proof of the pudding —Earhart's unspoken "I told you so." Where else in sprawling Houston would such an impromptu scene occur?

After we interviewed the Captain, we moved up to the General. 'You're looking for an oldtimer?" they asked at Anderson-Fair. "Just go upstairs. The General—he owns this place. But watch out; once you get him started he won't stop."

The old building on the corner of Grant and Welch houses Anderson-Fair on its ground floor; some of the restaurant's employees reside on the two upper levels. The owner, General Victor A. Barraco, is 79, and his stripes are legit, via the U.S. Marines. (The Houston Marine Corps Reserve Chapter is named after him.) We found the side door and climbed the two flights of stairs.

"Hey, there. Are you the General?" He was standing on a chair, applying first aid to some faulty wiring. "Talk 'bout the Montrose? Well, I'd wanted to get this finished this evening, but I guess . . ."

". . . Yeah, I bought this place from Congressman Emmett Moss—he was speaker of the Texas House of Representatives back in 1925. There was a drugstore then and an A&P. I was in show biz then, owned five theaters and The Key vaudeville house on West Dallas where Bessie Smith used to play."

What about this building, General? What's its history?

"Well my wife and I sponsored an artist, Miss Carlson. And then my wife gave the Playhouse Theatre $1,000, too. You know, arty-farty and all. Anyway, Miss Carlson was a teacher over to the Feather and Feather School of Art on Montrose. When we moved out of here, she moved in and had her studio here. Every one of her students made more money than she ever dreamed of.

"Then Jim Love moved in. [Jim Love is a Houston sculptor who had hair down over his shoulders back when long hair was the exclusive property of women and the Three Musketeers. A retrospective of his work, featuring weird variations on teddy bears, was recently shown at the Houston Contemporary Art Museum.] He came to me one time and complained about the roaches. I came up here and there was empty beer bottles all over the place, and they all had dead roaches in 'em, all right . . .

"Then another artist moved in. He put more paint on the floor than on anything else. Then this antique guy moved in over there [pointing]. King of the homos, they called him. And a sculptor had that place—he was going to kill himself one time. A girl tried to kill herself downstairs. First she killed her parrot and then tried to kill herself. Anyway, there was a barber shop and a boutique and a cycle shop. And two architects. Then Gray Fair came along, and he started the restaurant. . . ."

Area resident Noelle Kanady says there are three main problems in the Montrose: "the pack of dogs that attack you, the police who harass you, and if you're female, the dirty old men who are all over the place."

For some, the police might not pose that much of a problem. But artist Shell views it this way: "People are uptight about overprotection. The police really do harass people. On this corner here (Welch at Stanford) I can remember four different times they've stopped someone and in two minutes there'd be six patrol cars."

In vino veritas; dinner at Anderson Fair

We talked with patrolman B. J. Ferguson, a boyish-faced cop who had been on the Montrose beat "about eight months." Ferguson told us that the shooting at Art Wren's was considered an isolated incident and that the Montrose is not a particularly high crime area. "It's probably safer to live than most any place in town."

Ferguson went on: "I've never made a mugging, and I don't guess I've ever heard of more than one or two purse snatchings . . . I've never known about a rape or that kind of violence on anybody who lived there. There used to be a problem with girls who were hitchhikking being raped, but that doesn't happen much any more.

Though crimes of violence may be scarce, burglary and vandalism apparently are not. Officer Ferguson said, "You get burglary calls all the time, can't hardly find the time to go from one to the next. It's mostly stereos and TV sets, that kind of thing. It's not the upper-income people that are hit, it's those kids living in the apartments. And a lot of those older homes that have been made into duplexes." Why so many burglaries in this area? "Well, a lot of people say it's because of people trying to keep up on a dope habit, but you can't tell that for sure until you catch them."

B. J. Ferguson says he likes the Montrose beat and that he faces little hassle. "I enjoy working out there—it's always different. I think both sides have changed some in the last couple of years. They (freaks) have begun to realize that we're trying to do a job out there, and we've changed our techniques a little. The kids don't bother me and we don't bother them."

So the Montrose community has seen its ups and downs in the last few years. But even those who've voiced a pessimistic view see light at the tunnel's end. Like Don Snell: "It's fallow ground and there could be a turning. Something could happen; there may just be one element you need to pull it all together . . . For all its faults, I'd rather be here than any other place I can think of."

* * *

We've tried to describe the Montrose —to give you a taste of its history, its ambience, its future. But it might be that the only way to comprehend "The Montrose," to come to any kind of terms with the diversity, the stark contrasts between tradition and iconoclasm, is to navigate the area—via foot, bike or motor car.

You'll travel the busy arteries like Montrose, Westheimer, Alabama, Richmond, Shepherd, with their grocery stores, sidewalk cafes, boutiques, strip joints, art galleries, all in bizarre juxtaposition.

There are other spots you may—or may not—notice, that reveal best the nature of the Montrose:

The ramshackle frame house at the corner of Welch and Hopkins, the one that looks like a heavy gust might level it. Ernie and Noelle pay $55 a month (including utilities) for the downstairs. An equally dog-eared shack adjoins the house; Bald Charlie lives there. An old lady across the street called the cops, complaining about junk in the yard and the shabby condition of Charlie's pad. Charlie responded by cleaning up and painting the front—all that is visible from her window—a lively green with fancy trim; he left the sides and rear untouched, like a movie set. Charlie and the old lady who called the cops on him are now the best of friends.

The Rothko Chapel, at 1409 Sul Ross, adjacent to the University of St. Thomas, built by John and Dominique de Menil to house 14 massive dark canvasses by Mark Rothko, who killed himself soon after completing these paintings. Widely acclaimed for its beauty and atmosphere, the octagonal chapel is a sanctuary for any and all who wish to partake of it. Barnett Newman's sculpture, "The Broken Obelisk," dedicated to Dr. Martin Luther King, stands in a reflection pool outside.

Old man Tannenbaum, who owns a half million dollars worth of property in the 100 block of Westheimer, yet works as night manager in the Baby Giant drive-in grocery across the street.

The strange tower of a building on Mt. Vernon at West Main, on the St. Thomas campus, that houses the Institute for Storm Research, the only one of its kind in the world. Photos of the entire sky are shot from inside a plastic bubble on top.

Of course, it may be easier to predict the weather than to figure out what this place called the Montrose is all about. One thing that is certain: if you go to Prufrock's, don't play chess with a guy named Steve . . . □

April 1973