

# Urban pioneers on Near West Side

Amid drunks and decay, intrepid families renovate crumbling residences and find beauty.

*This is the third in a series of six columns about the problems and potential of the Near West Side, an area bounded by Clinton, the Eisenhower Expressway, Ashland and Washington.*

Two dozen red-eyed derelicts with the morning shakes sit on the curb at Desplaines St. in front of the Legion Hotel ("world's most modern hotel for men—fireproof—free TV"). A nearby saloon selling a shot and a beer for 25 cents is doing a brisk business at 8 a.m. A young alcoholic, his hair flowing to his shoulders and belly hanging below his T-shirt, lurches along W. Madison St. Two drunks sit in old automotive bucket seats in a weed-filled lot and drinking beer and wine.

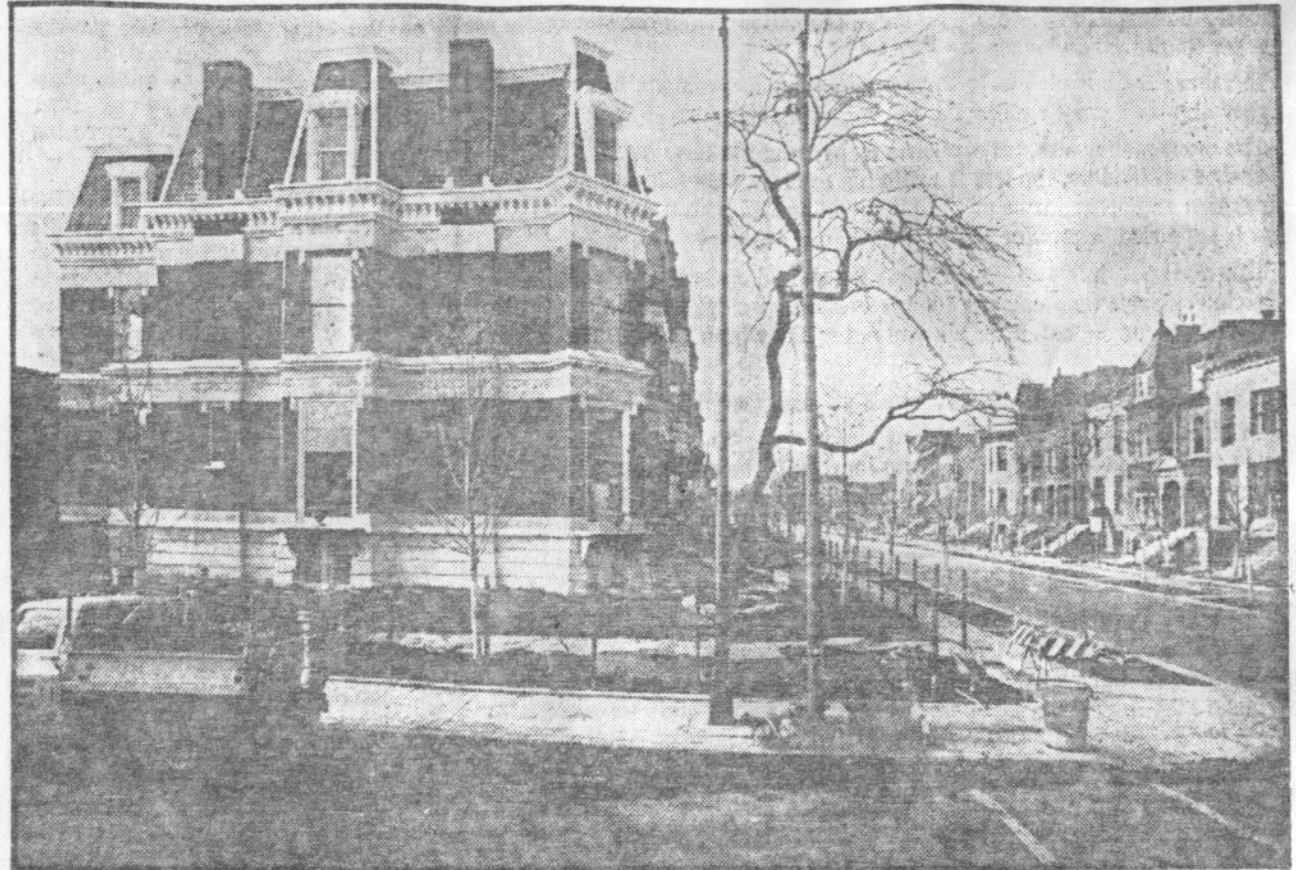
Everywhere, it seems, there are empty beer cans green pint bottles that once contained Growers or Petri white port or Richard's Wild Irish Rose.



This is what's left of Skid Row, that Dante's hell of hopeless, homeless alcoholics, their population reduced by the urban planners' bulldozers to some 1,500 men who wander aimlessly along W. Madison and W. Monroe streets, gather in front of stores and offices and panhandle passersby.

Nearby, five men sit in a circle on the sidewalk, surrounding piles of dollar bills and a pair of green dice.

Slabs of sidewalk tilt when stepped on. In places, the concrete is gone, leaving only dirt and gravel to



The Benjamin F. Ferguson Historical Preservation District in the 1500 block of W. Jackson Blvd. is on the brink of renaissance. The Ferguson mansion in the foreground, named for the wealthy 19th Century Chicago lumberman, is being rehabilitated by its young owners Stephen and Judith Peyton. Other homes have attracted young professionals as well. (Daily News Photo/Perry Riddle)

## Dick Griffin

walk on. Along one stretch of Green St., three holes big enough to hold console TV sets yawn in the sidewalk. There are no warning signs or barriers around them.

On one corner, a three-story loft building is burned out and abandoned. Several blocks to the west, the top two floors of a three-story building are charred and gutted, while a poor family continues to live

on the first floor.

And in the middle of the area, near the Skid Row pariahs and overlooking a weed-filled lot, Jo Mead is building an expensive home in the shell of an old house. Not far from her, Loren and Robert Billings are doing the same thing on the third floor of an old casket factory. Stephen and Judith Peyton bought a rundown old house that had provided

tiny apartments for dozens of poor persons and are restoring it to its 19th Century glory as a 14-room mansion with six magnificent fireplaces.

Three years ago, Guy and Pearl Pascale traded the tree-shaded tranquility of suburban Westchester for a luxurious apartment over an auto body shop in an industrial neighborhood near the Eisenhower Expressway.

These urban pioneers are among a few dozen daring men and women who are gambling that moving back

# Near West Side's urban pioneers

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into the inner city is a good idea, in terms of safety, cultural interests and money. Some are not yet out of their 20s, like the Peytons. Others, like the Pascales, are nearing 50.

They have suburban-like luxuries. The Billings have a garden and barbecue area on the roof, with an unusual view of an ugly used car lot on one side and the Loop skyscrapers on the other. The Pascales have a family room, complete with fireplace, that opens onto a rooftop barbecue area with a view of other industrial roofs. Jo Mead's house has a lovely, fenced-in backyard.

## A surprise: 'It's quiet'

"I've never slept so well in my life as I have since we moved to Van Buren St.," said Pascale, who owns and operates the auto body shop downstairs. "When the business people go home at the end of the day, there isn't a soul in the neighborhood. We love the silence and solitude. We aren't even in the O'Hare jets' flight pattern."

Mead moved to the Near West Side from Old Town, where she had lived for 25 years. Old Town was run down when she arrived there, just as the near West Side is today.

"The property here is affordable," she said simply. "It isn't in Old Town and New Town."

She owns three adjoining buildings, and is turning one into a stunning home for herself.

In the others, she manufactures and sells what she calls "decorative accessories for residential and commercial use." The words don't adequately describe the handiwork of her small staff of artists and craftsmen, who make charming and beautiful copies of old cigar store Indians, eagles, carousel ponies, wall panels and dozens of other designs.

Loren Billings, an artist, and her husband, Robert, public relations director for the Teamsters Union Central States Pension Fund, paid \$80,000 for a cavernous former casket factory near Washington and Racine, and they're investing a similar amount of money to rehabilitate it. The first two floors are for a non-profit school of holography and art gallery Loren Billings conducts. The couple lives behind a screen in a corner of the second floor while workmen turn the third floor into a vast apartment for them.

"We owned 3½ acres in Will County and we were going to build a house on it," she said. "It wasn't going to be big—just two bedrooms, a study and a studio—but bids for the work ran from \$96,000 to \$175,000. We decided to stay in the city."

## A handful of buyers

Stephen and Judith Peyton are among a dozen or more couples who have bought rundown mansions since 1974 on the Jackson Blvd. block just east of Ashland. The Victorian houses had been cut up into tiny apartments and decayed horribly as the neighborhood plunged into poverty.

The Peytons and others paid less than \$30,000 apiece for each house, and won the crucial support they needed from the Chicago Department of Urban Renewal.

They advised Lewis W. Hill, Chicago commissioner of planning and urban development, that they were interested in buying and rehabilitating several of the mansions but needed his assurance that the houses, which were in designated urban renewal areas, wouldn't be leveled. Hill told them they had to represent at least half of the homeowners on the block before he could help. Three

months later they came back with the proxies of 80 per cent of the 31 houses on both sides of the block. They won the backing of City Hall, which:

- Cancelled the demolition order for the block.
- Designated the block a conservation area—the Benjamin F. Ferguson Historical Preservation District, named for the wealthy 19th Century lumberman who built the house Peyton is rehabbing.
- Narrowed the street from five lanes to two, cutting the traffic flow sharply.
- Installed new sewer lines, sidewalks and street lights, and planted trees.
- Promised that nothing would be built nearby that would hurt the block's property value, such as a factory. Instead, the city then was deciding to build the superb Whitney M. Young Magnet High School across the street and the new Police Academy two blocks away.

Peyton estimates he'll have to spend \$280,000 to renovate the 14-room mansion and the big coachhouse behind it, but he thinks he'll have a \$500,000 piece of property when he's done. Two apartments in the coachhouse and a small one in the mansion's basement will pay many of the bills, he said.

## Retail firms set up shop

Other "urban pioneers" venturing into the Near West Side include some retail businesses that seem to be improbable residents of the area.

One is Chase Art Galleries, which opened on Washington near Halsted last winter in a one-time factory. Owner Chase Gilmore called the Near West Side "the coming-up area of Chicago." He holds monthly art

auctions at his showroom and displays art works for sale.

A year ago Frederick Baker moved his FredEric's Frame Studio, a picture-framing business that's one of the last of the handcarvers and gold-leafers, from Ontario and Wells to a former factory building at 1230 W. Jackson. He also operates an antique and fine-arts retail business at the Jackson site.

"I was worried about leaving the mainstream of the Near North art business," he said. "But for some reason it's like we turned on a faucet when we moved here. Business is very good. I think this area is fast on the rebound."

Another is Jan's Interiors, which sells \$300 toilet seats (with matching \$150 wastebaskets), \$3,000 bathroom sinks and \$5,000 bathtubs at a store on W. Madison near Carpenter St. Owner Jan Seymour, who designs bathrooms and kitchens for the wealthy and well-off, said the location near Skid Row hasn't hurt her business.

It's not unusual to see a chauffeur nervously guarding an expensive limousine parked in front of the store and half a dozen Skid Row derelicts sitting on a curb nearby, drinking wine and studying the car.

Seymour held a month-long sidewalk sale of closeout merchandise in September and nothing was stolen, she said.

"People said I was crazy to do it on Skid Row, but I didn't have any trouble," she said. "People drove up, parked right on Madison St. and browsed. You can't do something like that in the Loop. I sold \$4,000 worth of merchandise that way."

"From a business standpoint, you can make money here."