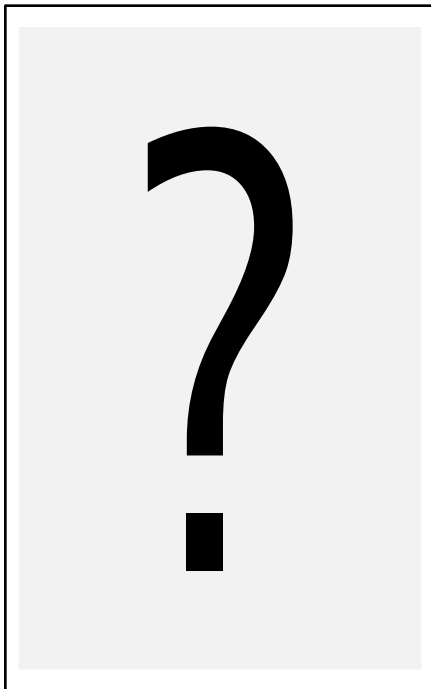




Sunday, June 17, 2001

Broken Detroit: Death of a City Block

From Detroit News, Part 1 of 5



David Coates / The Detroit

News

Harry Shiovitz visits his old house at 1956 Elmhurst. He moved his family out in the 1950s as pressure from realtors mounted.

Life of one street mirrors city's fall

Racial fears trigger white flight in '50s

*Here I come! Been saving all my life
To get a nice home For me and my wife.*

—**Langston Hughes**, “*Little Song on Housing*,” 1955

By Cameron McWhirter

DETROIT

As the *moyel* finished the ceremonial circumcision, family and friends who had gathered in the living room of the modest home at 1956 Elmhurst chanted in unison, in accordance with the ancient Jewish rites:

“Let this boy be happy in this world, in the goodness of this home, in the holiness of this place.”

Harry Shiovitz had invited everyone over to celebrate the *bris* of his first son, Nathan, on the morning of Sunday, July 8, 1951.

The dining room table was stacked with traditional Jewish dishes: blintzes, kugels, cheeses, pastries, and smoked fish.

Shiovitz, a 32-year-old salesman of used restaurant equipment, was struggling to make ends meet, but he decided after careful calculations that he could afford the ceremony.

But even as the family was chatting and eating amid shouts of *Mazel Tov*, Shiovitz and his wife knew that this story-and-a-half house, for which he had borrowed the \$500 down payment only a year earlier, would not long be home for Nathan.

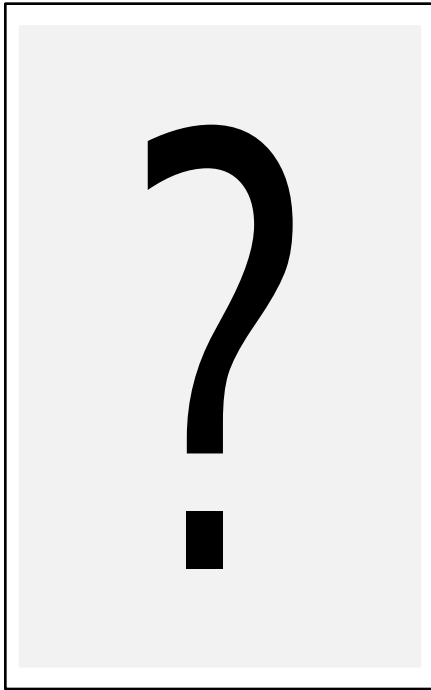
This world, the northern frontier of Detroit’s Jewish neighborhood, was coming to an end.

“We were already planning to leave,” he said. “Everyone was getting out.... Even while she was pregnant we knew we had to go.”

Detroit, the world’s “Arsenal of Democracy,” had emerged from World War II to resume its role as the world capital of the booming auto industry. The 1950 census recorded the city’s zenith in population — 1,849,568, more than six times the total only a half-century earlier. More than 83 percent — 1,545,847 — were white. In the 1950s, Detroit had the highest home ownership rate of any major city in America, and median household income exceeded that of all other major cities.

Though no one knew it, Detroit’s course for the next half-century was about to go terribly wrong.

The life of one city block, Elmhurst between 12th and 14th on the city’s west side, tells the story in microcosm. White flight, abandonment, confusing tax and property laws, absentee landlords, profit-hungry real-estate agents, criminals, drug addicts, lax bureaucracy and ineffective federal and local policies caused a city block to die.



Detroit News

Photo by David Coates / The

Michael H. Traison, attorney for Miller Canfield, grew up at 2019 Elmhurst in the 1940s and 50s.

2: Life on Elmhurst in 1951 would never be better

That summer of 1951, the 1900 block of Elmhurst was lined with tall elm trees that shaded the street and sidewalks with a canopy of broad branches and leaves. The 17 houses, four four-family flats, four apartment buildings and two storefront/apartment buildings were full to capacity. The shops fronting 12th — Nino's pizzeria, Olympia Candy Shop (known to the kids as Gussy's), Black & White Cleaners, the Kosher butcher and others — were busy and thriving.

The assessed value of the block's 28 parcels — about \$200,000 — would never be higher. Its nearby schools would never be better. Central High School students regularly went off to prominent colleges out east, or to Wayne State, or to the University of Michigan. Roosevelt was considered one of the best public elementary schools in the country.

By modern standards, crime was nonexistent. Police walking the beat in the area coped with minor infractions: an occasional drunk outside the bar and juvenile monkeyshines. That year, 129 homicides occurred in the city of more than 1.8 million.

Phyllis Shiovitz Weeks, Harry's daughter who was four in 1951, remembers the biggest problem on Elmhurst was a little girl who liked to bite other kids. Police came and talked to her parents, and things were ironed out.

Ed Gold, 60, now an attorney with Butzel Long, lived with his family at 1981 Elmhurst. He remembers his mother always left the back door, and occasionally the front door, unlocked.

Elmhurst was a perfect street for families with children, within walking distance of Central High,

Durfee Middle School and Roosevelt Elementary only two blocks away. Beth Yehuda, the Jewish parochial school, was also a few blocks away. Jewish kids walked to school or to the playground or the butcher's on 12th to pick up orders for their mothers.

And just down the street, B'nai David had been the cultural center of this part of Elmhurst since it opened in 1928. "On the High Holy Days, it was packed wall-to-wall," said former state Judge Schlomo Sperka, whose father was the Rabbi of B'nai David in the early 1950s.

In 1951, Elmhurst was a typical post-war Detroit street. It was primarily white, like the city at the time. It was working class. It was crowded. And everyone wanted to get out, move up, make it. Part of the American Dream was a new, modern, suburban house.

"My impression was that it was a very bland Jewish neighborhood, not very rich at all, and it was a pleasant neighborhood," Sperka said.

The Jews on Elmhurst, like most other Jews in the city, did not actively work to keep blacks out of their neighborhood. In other parts of the city, whites had attacked black homes with bricks or Molotov cocktails. White homeowners' associations were filing lawsuits and petitioning city government to stop blacks from moving to their blocks in other areas of Detroit.

3: Real estate agents push: 'Now is the time to sell'

real-estate agent had been talking to Shiovitz. The agents called homeowners all the time in those days.

"The real-estate man called and told me, 'I can get you a good price....' He said, 'Well now is the time to sell. If you wait a few years you're not going to get the price you want,'" Shiovitz recalled.

Shiovitz could get a larger house on Westmoreland, past Evergreen. Other Jews were moving that way. A bigger yard. Three bedrooms. A garage that would fit his car. The house would be affordable with the \$3,500 down payment he would raise by selling now.

Shiovitz knew that the family moving into his old house would be black, though he never met them. The real-estate agent handled everything.

Blacks were moving up 12th Street, having crossed over from the lower east side, where the Jews used to live. Whites had better sell before their property values went down, real estate agents were warning. Remember the 1943 riots? Blacks meant trouble, the real-estate people said. Read The News, the Free Press or the Times: Blacks meant crime.

Shiovitz didn't buy all of that. He had no problem with black people. He had worked with them all his life. During the Depression he grew up alongside them on Alger near Hastings Street. Jews in Detroit always had gotten along with blacks, not like other ethnic groups, such as the Poles, who always seemed to be fighting with blacks. But that did not mean Jews wanted to live next to black people.

Black children were enrolling at Roosevelt Elementary a few blocks away. His daughter walked home one day from school and announced her new "boyfriend," a little black kid. B'nai David, with its 1,600-seat temple on the corner of 14th, was looking into buying land in Southfield, a burgeoning suburb where lots of Jews were moving.

Shiovitz's white *Goyim* neighbors on either side seemed fearful that blacks would bring crime, and they were looking to sell. Petty crime had been increasing. Smart-aleck kids — he didn't know whether

white or black —would occasionally steal children’s bikes off porches to joyride. That kind of thing didn’t happen before.

“Sometimes (the bicycles) would be missing altogether. Sometimes they would find them down on the corner,” he said. “This was the start of things going down.”

Why not move to a bigger house away from all these problems?

"Genug iz genug," as the Yiddish saying goes: "enough is enough."

4: House by house, the faces of Elmhurst changed

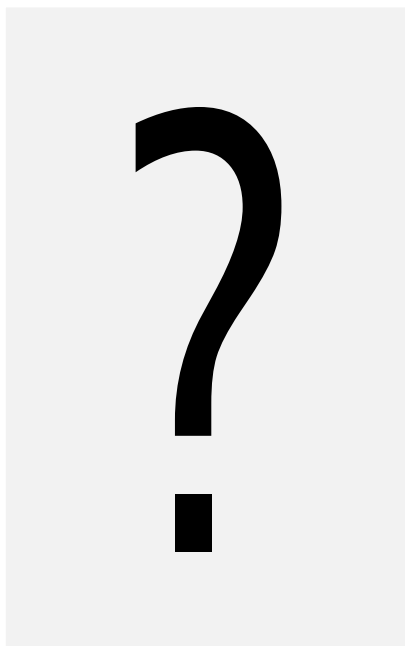
In the early 1950s, some blacks started to move to Elmhurst. At first they moved to apartments on 12th: Mrs. Lottie Mills and others. The home of Ed Gold’s parents was one of the first on Elmhurst to go to a black family. They sold in 1951 to move near McNichols and Wyoming.

Gold, then only 10, said he didn’t want to move, but his parents, Ukrainian Jewish immigrants with little money, were afraid that blacks would bring down property values. Their modest home — purchased with a down payment from a settlement after Ed had been hit by a car — was the only investment they had.

“The sense was that you’d better not be the last one off the block,” Gold said. “The real-estate agents were out there fanning the flames.”

“Real-estate agents learned to use a variety of tactics to drive sales,” said Cliff Schrupp, executive director of the Fair Housing Center of Metropolitan Detroit. “Money was a factor. But it obviously wasn’t the driving factor. Racial fears were.”

Neighborhood snapshot: The high school senior class



A page in Central High School’s class of 1951 yearbook that shows mostly white students attended the school.

Jim Bush, now 66, worked from 1962 to 1992 for the Detroit Commission on Community Relations, a city agency that tried to monitor and alleviate racial tensions in neighborhoods. Bush lays much of the blame for white flight on short-sighted real-estate agents and the State of Michigan, which allowed the real-estate agents to use racist fears to boost sales.

“Segregation was enforced by the state until 1948,” Bush said, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled unconstitutional covenants in real-estate titles blocking sales based on race or ethnicity. Bush added that segregation “was allowed by the state until 1968” when Michigan passed a fair housing bill. “It was egregiously unstrategic,” Bush said.

The commission found evidence that real-estate agents had regularly “flipped” blocks, bringing in a black family to look at a house, then scaring whites into selling their homes and raking in the commissions from outgoing whites and incoming blacks. The practice was known as “block busting.” Now block busting is illegal.

“There was a joke going around at the time,” Bush recalled. “What is racial integration? It’s the time elapsed between when the first black family moves in and the last white family moves out.” Bush found that about 4,500 houses transferred from white to black families annually in the 1950s.

The pattern was often confusing and quick. Bush said white community groups would hold meetings where a white real-estate agent would stand up and announce that the block must not sell to blacks. Blacks brought crime. Blacks brought down property values.

Throughout the early 1950s, no one remembers anything violent or awkward that happened as blacks started to show up on the block, but tensions were in the air. Any local crime was perceived through the prism of race. Jews today still remember an incident in 1954 when a white basketball player from Mackenzie was stabbed with an ice pick after a game at Central. The player was white. His attackers were black, according to newspaper accounts of the arrest and trial.

And so the Jews prepared for an exodus, led by mostly Jewish real-estate agents. On Elmhurst the transition was quiet, but sweeping.

“By ’53, the pressure was on,” said Sperka, who grew up in the neighborhood. “It all happened in those few years.”

The Detroit City Directory for 1953 — the year Shiovitz moved — lists 191 people and businesses with phone numbers on the Elmhurst block. Only three apartments were listed as vacant. The 1958 City Directory lists 159 people with phone numbers and 28 vacancies. Only 10 of the names are the same. Names like Rolvitzsky, Sheffel, Katzenstein, Faigenbaum, Abramson and Goldberg were gone, never to return.

These vacancies, a result of the flight of Jews and other whites, caused rents in the area to drop for the first time in years. The lower rents attracted low-income blacks, who had been crammed into substandard housing. Home prices remained stable through much of the 1950s, but many of the houses on the street became rentals.

The buyer of Shiovitz’s house at 1956 Elmhurst promptly defaulted. This became increasingly common in the 1950s as real estate agents eagerly provided financing for blacks looking for homes.

5: Block by block, pattern repeats throughout city

Thomas Sugrue, a University of Pennsylvania professor, documents this in his award-winning book, “The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit.” He shows that real-estate agents had the most to gain financially from whites deserting a city block.

Agents often bought the houses for less than market value, then sold them to blacks at a profit. Sometimes, they also provided financing, making more money on the mortgage. If the new black family couldn’t meet the mortgage payments, the real-estate agent would simply call in the loan, have the sheriff seize the house, and then sell it again, earning even more profits.

In 1954, Shiovitz’s former house at 1956 Elmhurst was sold at the Sheriff’s sale for \$849.32 to a Joel W. Josephson, who turned the house into a rental. Starting in 1954, through at least eight owners following Josephson, Tim Lewis, a black carpenter, lived in the house with his family. Lewis bought the house in 1970. Lewis had moved up from Arkansas after the war, like hundreds of thousands of other blacks looking for work.

His son, Curtis Lewis, lives in the house today. He said he remembers the lush trees and the quiet street. “Most of the Jews had moved off the block,” he recalls.

Why did they move? Lewis shrugged.

“Maybe they wanted to be bettering themselves,” he said. “Maybe too many blacks was moving in.”

The blacks who moved onto Elmhurst in the 1950s were generally poorer than the Jews who had left, but not by much. They were mostly working-class: factory workers, tradesmen, shop workers. They brought large families. On Sundays, they went to church and had cookouts. On weekdays, they went to work.

Those who were children on the block at the time remain baffled by the complex interplay of racial fear and economic incentive that led whites to leave Elmhurst.

Rita Vanerian Jury, who now lives in Birmingham, was only four in 1954 when her Armenian immigrant father decided to move the family off the street. She still doesn’t know exactly why they moved. The new house was actually smaller.

She has only good memories of Elmhurst: walks with her father down to the corner store for ice cream; games with kids of all races in the open lots; and the beautiful flowing elms standing watch above the street and its inhabitants. She simply isn’t sure why they moved. “We were just kind of going in the same direction as the others,” she said.

Phyllis Shiovitz Weeks, now a school librarian living in Southfield, said she never heard

her parents utter any racist words, nor as a girl did she ever consider race as a reason they moved away. But now that she looks back on it, she said the predominant mood of older Jews on Elmhurst was worry and anxiety.

“It’s so complex,” she said, thinking about the move 50 years later. “Racial differences were never mentioned in my house . . . but I think people find it hard to not be influenced by a natural fear of the unknown.”

What happened on Elmhurst was repeated thousands of times, block by block, across the city and into the suburbs: whites “moving up” and away from blacks.

Most of the whites leaving Elmhurst didn’t move to the suburbs. They moved first to northwest Detroit. Later, they would leave the city altogether.

“A lot of black people were moving in. ... At that point there was this turmoil beginning,” Shiovitz, now 82, said sitting in his Southfield home. “If I look back ... I didn’t have the sense at that point, you could see all of this was brewing. Eventually something had to come about. The biggest thing was you would see all these people moving out.”

All these years later, Shiovitz still remembers the work that he did on his house. He built an archway from the kitchen to the dining room. He fixed the porch. He put in a new sink cabinet. He replaced rotting wood under the house. He put new tiling in the kitchen.

“When I left that house, it was all in good shape,” he said. “There was nothing more I could do.”

Migration



Freeways bring change

Roadways carved up city and facilitated white flight

By Cameron McWhirter / *The Detroit News*

DETROIT — The construction of Detroit's freeways starting in the 1950s had a huge impact on population migrations in Detroit.

In the early 1950s, the Lodge Freeway cut Elmhurst in half to the east of the 1900 block.

Interstate 75 led to the destruction of the main black neighborhood, Black Bottom, increasing the housing pressures from the burgeoning black population.

Moreover, the expressways made suburban housing developments and suburban shopping malls economically viable.

Northland Mall in Southfield opened in 1954, drawing shoppers away from the city. Tract after tract of former farmland was developed for new modern homes with large garages.

The suburbs offered white homebuyers modern amenities, huge lawns — and no integration.

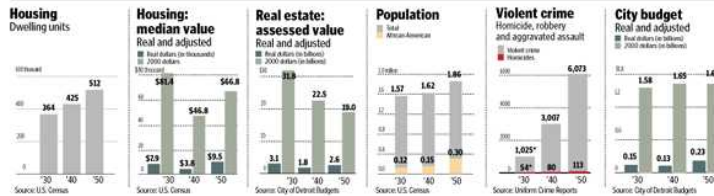
1953 A snapshot of Elmhurst

In 1953, the 1900 block of Elmhurst on Detroit's west side was at its apex. The city directory at the time listed 191 phone numbers on the block, which was primarily Jewish and working class. But whites were already moving out to the north and west of the city, and some to the suburbs. Blacks began to move in quickly and by 1958, the Synagogue on the corner held its last services and the majority of the street was occupied by blacks.



A snapshot of Detroit Mayors 1950-1959: Albert E. Cobo, 1950-1957; Louis C. Mirani, 1958-1962

- Throughout his time in office, Mayor Albert Cobo (1950 to 1957) severely limited the construction of public housing, a position supported by most of the city's white neighborhood associations. To this day, Detroit has one of the smallest public housing authorities of any major city in the country.
- In 1954, the Northland Mall in Southfield — the first shopping mall in the United States — opened. The mall transformed consumer spending habits in metro Detroit, drawing many from traditional mom-and-pop neighborhood stores and from downtown stores.
- In the 1950s, the Tigers were the city's baseball team — if you were white. The team was one of the last major league teams to break the color barrier, bringing on its first black player, Ozzie Virgil, in 1958.
- By 1960, Detroit's overall unemployment rate was 10.2 percent, but 18.2 percent for blacks, according to federal statistics.



Who lived where in 1953:

1910 Gus Karikolis	1981 Stern Morgan	A2 Fred Emmert
1920 United Dairies Inc.	1981 Clarence O'Neill	101 Herman Hollenberg
1922 Jack Knott	1987 Frank DeFranco	102 Sadie Eisenberg
1926 W. Barr Vessey	1988 Apartments	103 Pearl Demery
1926 A. Conrad Fregin	Albert Bosman	104 Lewis Richmond
1929 Hazelle Apts.	Abr Nessel	105 Richd Chartiers
1 Frank Wright	Morris Klein	106 Marie Francis
2 Goldie Rukhtzky	Harry Gernansky	107 Dora Tilson
3 John Cossins	1995 Elmer Hamner	108 Alex Dunham
4 Rudy Olson	2000 Apartments	109 John Polow
5 Jack Hayles	El Rukhtzky	110 Harry Uchenik
6 Jennie Salmi	100 Wayne Haganan	111 Morris Berlin
7 Madeline Terry	101 Ralph Greenberg	203 Celia Auerd
21 L. McClatchie	102 Kenneth Doyle	202 Robt Burke
22 Edw Sheffield	103 Donald Ainsbinder	203 Dora Wasseman
23 Marc N Fox	104 Marc Reagh	204 Morris Blair
24 Robt Reiner	200 Louis Freedman	205 David Milner
25 Arth Mickelson	202 Ezra McConnell	206 Jacob Lwazer
26 Norbert Boring	202 Harold Glen	208 Fannie Panter
31 Fred LaVie	203 Benj Addison	209 Jas Cox
32 Gust Scandary	204 L Laine	210 Notman Potter
33 Eva Abramson	300 Mary Rannev	211 Harry Bliznick
34 Harry Padberg	301 Ruben Nayback	301 Morris Kane
35 Margt O'Neil	302 Vacant	302 Stella Dorf
36 Morton Stockler	303 Peter Simonen	303 Lewis Dandorf
1932 Jack Knott	304 Resben Sarkissian	304 Roy Clich
1938 Hagop Vanerian	2001 Jos Kaffan	305 Frank Halperin
1939 Wm Brundie	2005 Jos Bell	306 Eug Waldman
1944 Martin Londer	2019 Elmfour Court Apts.	308 Wm Lampela
1945 Lester Yolkick	El Geo Hadak	309 Paul Walker
1950 Michl Daratony	El Geo Morgas	H Sterling
1951 John Richard	El Frank McInerney	310 Edw Bellola
1951 Milton Scott	El Kelly Nesswender	311 Boone
1955 Robt Dean	El Kenneth Hall	
1955 Geo Hanley	El Dexter Combs	
1956 Harry Shiovitz	101 Ernest Dempsey	
1959 Wilbur Gentry	102 Richd Crawford	
1959 Arne Lehto	103 Louis Eckhouse	
1960 Edison Wildwood	104 Jos Willis	
1961 Frank Snyder	105 Benj Purple	
1961 Albert Carter	106 Lydia McDonald	
1965 David Darrah	107 Roy Randy	
1968 Francis Hageman	108 Saml Traison	
1974 Gerald Bell	109 Morris Parker	
1974 J. Namach	110 Jas Cantabrough	
1977 Shirley Apts.	111 Hobart Jenkins	
El Ethel Kennedy	201 Dillon Morin	
El Wm Schlein	202 Benj Gobin	
101 Leo Mehler	203 Gerald Sigman	
102 Raymond Lude	204 Chas Hart	
103 Geo Schnell	205 Sherridan Holzman	
104 Ray Lambert	206 Arth Washkugler	
105 Peter Verbanic	207 Nathan Wallace	
106 Mary Wesley	208 Sylvia Goldberg	
201 Jessie Sinda	209 Marvin Weckstein	
202 Saml Storchan	210 Nathan Chodnow	
203 Ernest Ramsnyder	211 D Sapac	
	301 Gerald Frye	

Along 12th Street

1825 Francis Jaques
1827 Nino's Pizzeria
1829 Whiskey Bar
1831 Arth Cumming
1835 Fred Gilbert
Marcus Frost
Dentist
1837 Tuxedo Tailors and Cleaners
1839 Roland White
Mrs. Lottie Mills
LaVeada Beauty Shoppe
Andrew Ios
barber
1847 Mac's Market
12001 Olympia Candy Shop
12003 Black & White Cleaners
12005 Vacant
12007 Thos Michalis

Motives

Why did whites leave so quickly?

By Cameron McWhirter / *The Detroit News*

DETROIT — Why did the Jews leave Elmhurst in the 1950s?

Fifty years on, the participants in the block's rapid transformation, both black and white, see Jewish motives at the time as confused, murky.

Some say the whites simply wanted a bigger home, or they were afraid of crime. Others say that Jews simply wanted to live near Jews. No one recalls any animosity on the block — but the Jews and other whites suddenly just left.

Many Jewish leaders actively supported a proposed Fair Employment ordinance then being debated in the City Council. The Jewish Community Council issued public statements against housing discrimination. Most Jews had voted against conservative Republican Albert Cobo, who had stopped expansion of the city's public housing program and was strongly supported by white homeowners groups.

Jewish families knew blacks chiefly as domestics and laborers, as the women who cleaned their kitchens or the men who swept their shop floors. The Orthodox would hire black children in their homes on Friday nights, the Sabbath, to turn on electric lights and the stove, since their religion forbade them from doing so themselves.

Many Jews had a perception that blacks, who were generally poorer and less educated, were more likely to commit crimes. They lived in slums. They caused problems. Elderly Jewish apartment-dwellers often would not allow black paperboys in their building vestibules.

Larry James, now 54, grew up one block from Elmhurst and used to deliver newspapers on the street and do other odd jobs for the Jewish merchants and homeowners. While Jewish children liked to play with black kids, he said, the older Jews seemed fearful. He remembers many older Jews immigrating from war-torn Europe. He remembers noticing numbers tattooed on their forearms as he handed them their paper or delivered their vegetables.

One white resident of German descent used to complain to her black neighbor Curtis Lewis about the Jews, claiming they were conspiratorial financiers. The young Lewis used to question the woman. "How do you hate someone you don't even know?" he would ask.

Larry James, who is black, recalls playing with the Jewish kids in the street. "We played stickball, we played other games," he said. "There was no problem because we were friends, until they moved away."

Michael H. Traison, a downtown corporate attorney who is white, was a little boy in 1951 living with his brothers and immigrant Russian parents in a two-bedroom apartment in the Elmfour Court apartments at 2019 Elmhurst, across 14th from B'nai David, where they attended services.

Traison doesn't remember noticing much when blacks started moving in. He doesn't remember any concerns about crime. But by 1954, his father decided the family should move farther out, to the edges of Detroit.

Their synagogue, B'nai David, held its last service on Elmhurst in 1958. The temple leaders held a

special ceremony to carry the Torah out of the building. They drove it up to the brand new Temple in Southfield.

Traison believes he was one of the last Jewish boys to live on the block, if not the last. Asked whether he was sad to leave his friends, Traison said, “By the time I moved, I didn’t have any friends.”

Housing

Realtors’ tactics shaped exodus

By Cameron McWhirter / *The Detroit News*

DETROIT — Detroit in the 1950s, crowded and cramped as never before or since, became a disordered chess game fueled by racial anxiety, controlled by a small group of white real estate agents and unchecked by government.

Block by block, the city turned quickly from white to black — whenever white real-estate agents decided that it was time — and the suburbs began to develop homes by the thousands for whites moving up and out for good.

Blacks often found the least resistance to purchasing housing or renting from Jews. The victims of prejudice themselves, many Jews were more open to dealing with blacks than other whites. So as the Jewish population moved through the city, out from Hasting Street to the North End, then west through the city and out into the suburbs, blacks followed.

Since the dawn of the 20th century, when blacks from the South began coming to Detroit to work, racial tensions had developed over where they would live. Since the 1920s, whites on some blocks had organized community associations geared toward keeping blacks out.

In 1925, a black doctor named Ossian Sweet and his family moved onto a white street on the east side and were promptly harassed and the house pelted with rocks. After one such assault, Sweet and his family had opened fire on a crowd, killing one man.

In the high-profile murder trial that followed, Sweet and his relatives were found not guilty. But the trial’s publicity exacerbated racial tensions.

In the 1940s, hundreds of thousands more blacks came to Detroit to fill armament-industry jobs. In 1943, riots caused to a great extent by housing tensions led to the deaths of 34 people.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People issued a postmortem report on the riot, blaming unfair housing practices by whites against blacks. But little was done in the years following to resolve the housing crisis.

Blacks continued to pour into Detroit after the war. Pay was good in manufacturing jobs. And the automobile industry, thanks in part to black activists working to integrate the United Auto Workers, treated blacks more equitably than many other industries.

Black activists such as the youthful pastor C.L. Franklin raised issues about segregation of schools, hospitals and housing.

But few white leaders paid attention. Albert Cobo, the conservative Republican mayor of the city from 1950-57, believed in an unrestrained real-estate market.

Monday, June 18, 2001

Broken Detroit: Death of a City Block

From Detroit News, Part 2 of 5 Parts



David Coates / The Detroit News

First the looters came, says the Rev. Edith Johnson, who has lived on Elmhurst for four decades. “They came down the street here singing, ‘Hey, hey, it’s Christmas day,’ and their carts were full of everything they could get.”

1967 riot sent street into wrenching spiral

Once-stable block withers as property owners desert

“...We must come to see that de facto segregation in the North is just as injurious as the actual segregation in the South.”

— **Martin Luther King Jr.**, in a speech at the Great March on Detroit, June 23, 1963

By Cameron McWhirter

DETROIT

The Rev. Edith Johnson was struck by how few worshipers came to hear her preach that summer morning at her storefront church, the Universal Meditation Center, a few blocks from her home at 1965 Elmhurst.

Where was everyone? Why was it so quiet? Riding home with her husband through deserted streets,

she suddenly heard gunshots and reflexively pushed her granddaughter Paris, who was wearing her Sunday best, down on the floor in the back seat.

By the time the Johnsons got home, the worst American riot since the Civil War was well under way. It was Sunday, July 23, 1967.

In the middle of the next day, Rev. Johnson watched from her porch in amazement as young men wheeled grocery carts down Elmhurst. The carts were full of booty from the stores on 12th — dry cleaning, food, hardware supplies, liquor.

The 1967 riot spilled into a neighborhood that, after the upheaval of white flight in the 1950s, had turned into a stable, well-maintained, working-class community for African-Americans. The 1900 block of Elmhurst had a front-row seat to the drama of civil unrest that would forever alter it and the city's landscape.

Paris Freeman, now 38, grew up with her grandmother, Rev. Johnson, on 1965 Elmhurst.

David Coates / The Detroit News

Paris Freeman tries to get her 1-year-old son Isiah to fall asleep at the home of her grandmother, Rev. Edith Johnson, who has lived at 1965 Elmhurst for the past four decades.

2: Detroit a synonym for industrial greatness

In 1951, during Detroit's 250th anniversary celebrations at the apex of the city's population and industrial strength, standing before throngs at city hall, President Harry Truman declared: "Today, the word Detroit is a synonym throughout the world for the industrial greatness of America."

By 1967, a demoralized Mayor Jerome Cavanaugh compared his burning city to Berlin in 1945.

On Elmhurst between 12th and 14th streets, on Detroit's west side, the rapid movements of entire ethnic populations during the 1950s had helped set the stage for the social upheavals of the 1960s. The life of this block was a microcosm of life in Detroit.

Moreover, the history of this working-class neighborhood shows how white flight, abandonment, confused tax and property laws, absentee landlords, profit-hungry real-estate agents, criminals, drug addicts, lax bureaucracy and ineffective federal and local policies over several decades caused the death of a city block.

Detroit News Photo

It was July 23, 1967, the first day of the Detroit riot. Hundreds of protesters charged down 12th Street near Clairmount. They threw stones and bottles at store windows and looted the shops.

3: Jewish exodus brings instability to Elmhurst

The exodus of Jewish families and apartment dwellers from Elmhurst in the mid-1950s had brought instability to the block. By 1958, the street's five apartment buildings had a total of 27 vacant apartments — the highest vacancy rate in decades.

To fill apartments, landlords lowered rents. Owners of houses, when unable to sell them quickly, rented them out for the first time. Poorer blacks, desperate for housing in the rigidly segregated city, moved in from streets to the south. As long as the houses were occupied and property taxes were being paid, this development of absentee landlords holding single-family houses didn't initially pose a problem.

More disturbing was the increased use of land contracts, under which real-estate agents could sell houses with very low down payments but with high interest rates. Black families could live in the houses and buy the property over time. But if they missed payments, they were quickly evicted. Rapid property turnover became common.

Choice Cooper, a factory worker at the nearby Cadillac factory, bought the house at 1926 Elmhurst in February 1962. He had grown up in Oklahoma but moved to Detroit after military service to find work.

At the time, Detroit was a magnet for black workers across America. Manufacturing jobs were plentiful, and Cavanaugh, the city's youthful new mayor, had promised to eliminate racial problems in the police department and other branches of city government. He also pledged to deal with unemployment among black youth, improve the schools and help end segregation in the city's housing.

Cooper thought Detroit was becoming more receptive to black people, and his job paid well, so he decided to buy a house. The black real-estate agent showed him the story-and-a-half home next to Red Front Collision. Elmhurst was pretty, quiet, close to work and safe. The house had a small yard and easy access to the alley garage for his car. It seemed like a good place for his wife and son.

"At that time they had police walking the beat," he said. "Crime was nothing." Cooper remembers fixing up the yard when he moved in and planting juniper bushes in front of his porch.

Tim Lewis, a carpenter, was renting the house at 1956 Elmhurst where Harry Shiovitz had once lived. Lewis rehabbed the small garage and fixed up the kitchen, putting in new tiles, according to his son Curtis. Lewis also scrimped to buy the place one day.

Close to Roosevelt Elementary, Durfee Middle School and Central High School, the area had lots of children. It was a good place to raise a family.

"It was quiet here," Curtis Lewis said. "When you looked down the street, all you saw was trees."

Wing Chow and his wife Irene, who went by "Renie," bought the white clapboard one-story between the 20-unit Hazelfern apartment building and another house on the southeast side of the block. Chow, part owner of a Chinese restaurant, took out a \$4,900 mortgage.

The Chows were the only mixed-race couple around, and Wing was the only Asian for blocks. But Renie Chow, who is black, said no one bothered them about racial issues. City services — street lights, garbage pickup, police patrols — all remained good, she remembers. Renie Chow, who worked as a waitress and later in a factory, remembers walking her dogs at night and leaving the door open when she went to work.

Even the principal vacant building in the area was soon filled. The 1,600-seat B'nai David Temple, which had been closed in 1958 when the congregation followed most of its members to Southfield, was

sold to the 1,700-member New Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church.

Racists had thrown firebombs at the church's doors in two separate locations on the city's east side, where at the time both blacks and whites lived. The church wanted to move to a solid, black residential neighborhood. It bought the building for \$140,000 and placed its black and white nameplate over a chiseled Star of David.

Another church, the Bible Community Baptist Church, founded by the Rev. George Gooden Jr., opened in a storefront on 12th in the 1950s. The two churches anchored both sides of the street with religion. In the middle of the block lived the Rev. Johnson, pastor of the Universal Meditation Center storefront church.

"Trees were everywhere, and there were children. The apartments were all occupied, said Mary Thomas, a deaconess at the Mt. Zion church. "It was up and coming. The stores were all busy. The majority of the people living here were black, but the shops were mostly owned by whites."

Said Renie Chow: "Everyone around was homeowners, and they kept up their properties, and they looked out for each other."

About this time the residents set up a community block club and started having street parties in the summer.

Although Jewish homeowners had left, several Jewish families kept or bought commercial real estate — the shops and apartment buildings — on Elmhurst in the early 1960s.

Richard Coskey, now 68, of Bentley-Lawrence Securities, in the 1950s and early 1960s co-owned and managed the building on the southwest corner of Elmhurst and 12th, which had both storefronts and apartments. He was attending Wayne State University at the time and used to hold fraternity hazing rituals in the basement to scare the pledges. Coskey said the block was "not a place where I would like to walk my 20-year-old sweetheart, but it was OK."

The family had reduced rents as low as \$45 a month by the early 1960s to keep the buildings full. There was a high turnover of black tenants and white renters who came from the South to find work.



4: Racial tensions simmer with unemployment

Trouble was brewing only a few blocks south of Elmhurst, in the heart of what had become the city's black ghetto. In the 1960s, the black neighborhood around 12th Street had a population density that was twice the city average.

And while the city's total population was dropping (and so was the property tax base), city schools like Central High, Durfee Middle School and Roosevelt Elementary were more crowded than ever. Unemployment among black men was more than double that of white men in the city. Blacks were less educated than whites, and when they did have the same education, they were generally paid less than white counterparts.

Black leaders had been complaining about these issues for years. Martin Luther King Jr. had even come to Detroit in 1963 for a great march to protest segregation and racism.

Nowhere were these problems more manifest than on 12th Street, around Clairmount on the west side, 13 blocks south of the Elmhurst neighborhood.

A decade earlier, the area around Clairmount had been a solid center for Jewish businesses.

By the time of the riot in 1967, it had turned into a strip of pool halls, liquor stores, small party stores and illegal drinking establishments called "Sin Street." The neighborhood on Elmhurst had few social ills, but the residents noticed the changes on 12th, the main thoroughfare.

Vagrants started to panhandle more in front of the shops. The bars along the street, Skid's and LaVert's Lounge up the way, were filling with men, even during the day.

Sharon Jackson, now 44 and living in Lansing, was a young girl living with her mom in an apartment in the four-family flat at 1957 Elmhurst in the late 1960s and early 1970s. She remembers a strange white man who would walk the street with a tomahawk, claiming he was an Indian. A short, thin black man, who had returned from Vietnam, would stand at the corner of 12th and Elm, flinching and jerking.

"I don't know if anyone ever knew his name," she said. "I can still see him standing there in his trenchcoat, dodging bullets in his mind."

Rev. Gooden had started to stand on the corner of Elmhurst on Saturday nights, preaching against the evils of drink.

5: July 23, 1967: The riot spills over to Elmhurst

The block was ill-prepared for the havoc unleashed when police raided an illegal after-hours liquor joint, a "blind pig," 13 blocks south of Elmhurst on 12th in the early morning hours of July 23, 1967.

The next day, looters, mostly young men and teen-age boys, had hit the businesses at the end of the block on Elmhurst — Mac's grocery, Diggs TV Shop, Skid's Bar, the candy shop — and even the small garage on Elmhurst behind the 12th Street shops, Red Front Collision.

"They came down the street here singing, 'Hey, hey, it's Christmas day,' and their carts were full of everything they could get," Rev. Johnson recalled.

Then the soldiers came. National Guard and U.S. Army troops drove down the streets and alleys in

armored trucks. Tanks drove down 12th. Army marksmen stood on the roof of a nearby warehouse. Shots rang out each night. No fires were started on Elmhurst, but all the stores fronting 12th had been ransacked. The curfew kept everyone inside.

Wanda Cowans, then living in the flat at 1910 Elmhurst above the Summerville Party Store, remembers cowering in her apartment with her daughter and two sons. She looked out to see teens smashing windows and running away with food and clothes. People fought over dry-cleaning in the street.

After three days, Cowans and her children tried to sneak to her sister's house down the block, away from the looting. They were met by soldiers, guns drawn.

"I never been so scared," she said. The soldiers yelled at them but let them go.

On July 27, 1967, the day the riot ended, a grim-faced President Lyndon Johnson addressed the nation on television, as disheartened shopkeepers swept glass from their shop floors on the corner of Elmhurst and 12th.

"The only genuine, long-range solution for what has happened lies in an attack, mounted at every level, upon the conditions that breed despair and violence," Johnson declared. "All of us know what those conditions are: ignorance, discrimination, slums, poverty, disease, not enough jobs.... We should attack them because there is simply no other way to achieve a decent and orderly society in America."

But the shopowners, property owners and residents on the 1900 block of Elmhurst got little help from the federal or the local government after the riot.

Federal "Great Society" programs focused on jobs and centered in the worst-hit neighborhoods. Conflicts about fair housing were still being fought in the city, but they were irrelevant to Elmhurst: The whites had all left in the 1950s. For quiet, modest streets like Elmhurst, the "Great Society" meant little.

After the riot, "Sin Street" was demolished. The area of 12th and Clairmount, the heart of the riot, was turned into modern, well-kept urban renewal housing. Today, those houses have a higher property value than the ones on Elmhurst.

"Places like Elmhurst were just left behind by community development policy," said Thomas Sugrue, a University of Pennsylvania history professor and an expert on Detroit's race relations.

David Coates / The Detroit News

Mary Thomas, who was a deaconess at Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church on Elmhurst and 14th, says she remembers trees and children were everywhere on the street.



6: Commercial district dies as vacancies gut street

The stores were the first to go. In 1964, eight stores operated on the end of the block on 12th. By 1970, only five remained: the Elmhurst Barber Shop, the Summerville Party Store, Billy's Cleaners, The Four Season's Bar-B-Q and Skid's Bar.

"Investors, most of them white, were wary of putting their money in poor, urban minority areas anyway," Sugrue said. "The riot just killed the 12th Street commercial district."

The residential section of the street also suffered. By 1970, three years after the riot, the city directory listed 128 phone numbers on the Elmhurst block and listed 41 vacancies, more than double the number of vacancies in 1964.

Most of the vacancies were in the apartments. Landlords had little choice but to lower rents again, bringing in even poorer people. Evictions went up. The apartments became less desirable to working people, and the neighboring homes less desirable to home buyers.

Landlords also started using these properties for tax writeoffs. They wrote off the depreciation of these old buildings while not investing in their upkeep. The financial incentive wasn't there, Sugrue said.

The physical deterioration started at the Elmfour, 2019 Elmhurst. On July 31, 1967, only four days after the riot ended, the Brant family, which had owned the building for decades, filed with the Wayne County Register of Deeds that the property had been sold to Forbes-Cohen Corp.

In 1968, Forbes-Cohen took out a \$65,000 loan against the property with Chicago Mortgage Co. The same day, Harry and Mary D. Walton bought the property from Forbes-Cohen. Wayne County records then show a flurry of owners and claimants to the building. By 1971, the building was mostly vacant, and building inspectors had declared it uninhabitable.

On Feb. 10, 1972, the city filed suit for the Elmfour “to be demolished and the cost assessed against the property.” By then, the last owners, Edward and Jessie Armstrong and Evelyn J. Woods, had defaulted on their mortgage and were nowhere to be found. Because of bureaucratic and legal delays, the building would not be torn down for years.

The police still came to the street, but now they drove by in squad cars. Crime citywide was on the rise, even as the overall population continued to drop. In 1960, 150 homicides were reported in a city of 1,670,144 people. In 1970, 495 people were murdered in a city of 1,514,063.

The rioting only accelerated white flight to the suburbs. White people who had left neighborhoods like Elmhurst for the outer sections of Detroit fled the city altogether. And black people from neighborhoods like Elmhurst began moving into the outer sections that white people were leaving.

After the riot, the modest working-class community that the Elmhurst block had always been lurched into a frightening downward spiral. Drugs, crime and abandonment came quickly. Despite the efforts of those on the block and the stated intentions and investments of local and national governments, Elmhurst was doomed to become a lost block.

“We didn’t have any problems until ’67, when they started breaking in them stores — that was the turn of it,” said Renie Chow.

Paris Freeman, now 38, grew up with her grandmother, Rev. Johnson, on Elmhurst. She traces the block’s downfall to those momentous days in July 1967. “That just devastated the land values here, the shops and everybody living here,” she said.

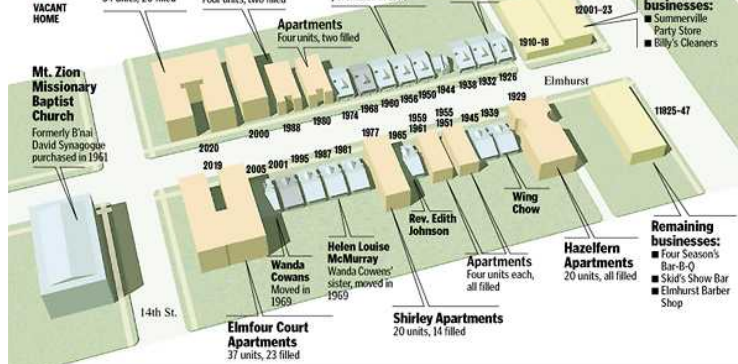
Curtis Lewis now lives in the house at 1956 Elmhurst, where he grew up, but he didn’t live there during the riot. As for most older Detroiters and former Detroiters, the riot was a bitter, pivotal moment in his life. He doesn’t condone the riot, but he understands why it happened.

“People just got tired of being victimized by the police,” he said.

Harry Shiovitz, the Jewish salesman who had owned and lived in Lewis’ house in the early 1950s, by 1967 had moved his family to far northwest Detroit. He recalls driving home through the city from a wedding with his wife on July 23, when he noticed a young black couple stopped at a light next to them. Both cars had the windows down. The woman in the other car caught Shiovitz’s eye and nervously told him she was frightened.

“I’m as scared as you are,” he told her.

The Shiovitz family moved to Southfield in 1972.



A snapshot of Detroit Mayors 1960-1980 Louis C. Mirani, 1958-1962; Jerome Cavanaugh, 1962-1970; Roman Gribbs, 1970-1974

Jerome Cavanaugh, heralded by the national media as a progressive urban leader, was elected at the age of 33 in 1961, with the overwhelming support of the city's black voters.

On June 23, 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. marched in Detroit with the Rev. C.F. Franklin, Detroit Mayor Cavanaugh, Michigan Gov. George Romney and 125,000 others. At the time, the march was the

largest civil rights demonstration in U.S. history. Two months later, on Aug. 28, King delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech in Washington, D.C., to 250,000 people.

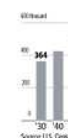
During five days of rioting in July 1967, 43 people were killed. 7,231 people were arrested. More than 88 percent of those arrested were black. President Lyndon Johnson ordered in more than 4,700 members of the

82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions to restore order. They supplemented more than 7,000 Michigan National Guard who were already stationed in the city.

Despite losing population, Detroit's homicides jumped after the riots. In 1964, the city reported 125 homicides. In 1970, the city reported 495.

Housing

Dwelling units



Source: U.S. Census

Housing: median value

Real and adjusted



Source: U.S. Census

Real estate: assessed value

Real and adjusted



Source: City of Detroit Budgets

Population

Real and adjusted



Source: U.S. Census

Violent crime

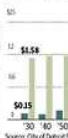
Homicide, robbery and aggravated assault



Source: Uniform Crime Reports

City budget

Real and adjusted



Source: City of Detroit Budgets



Who lived where in 1970:

1910 Wanda J. Cowans	1W C Phillips	At Robt Thomas
1920 Vacant	2W No Return	B Stephanie
1925 No Return	1981 Frank Gordon	Michigan
1929 Hazelfern Apts.	1987 Norma Taylor	101 Calvin Outlaw
Bl Wattie Patterson	1988 Apartments	102 Margt Washington
Al Nannon Gardner	1E James Lately	103 Vacant
2 Sallie Dickerson	2E Betty Teasler	104 Vacant
3 Henry Clark	1W Vacant	105 Fred Bryan
4 James Welch	2W Miller Jones	106 Vacant
5 Edith Wright	1995 Fred T Johnson	107 Vacant
6 Georgetta Baker	2000 Apartments	108 Charles Taylor
7 Mary Bonange	Bl Charles T Johnson	109 Gary Cheeks
21 John W Wilson	100 Vacant	110 Vacant
22 Beaula E Schultz	101 Mrs V Brice	111 Vacant
23 Mary Alston	102 Howard Williams	201 Wm Bice
24 Cynthia Smith	103 Hable	202 James Rhodes
25 Oscar J Nash	104 Vacant	203 Lucius Crawford
26 Julia M Scott	200 No Return	204 Vacant
31 Rev John Kerr	201 Donna Dickerson	205 Joyce Guise
32 David Piggie	202 Walter Brown	206-209 Vacant
33 Philip Foster	203 Alice Johnson	210 Charles Burns
34 Earl Knox Jr	204 Arth White	211 Vacant
35 Toney Smith	300 Isaiah Lowe	301 Randolph Combs
36 McKinley Dillard	301 Wm L Kennedy	302 Robt Gathrite
1932 Robt B Rucker	302 Vacant	303 Vacant
1938 Clyde Carrington	303 Vacant	304 Vacant
1939 Wing J Chow	304 Harriett Walker	305 Earl Hardy
1944 Maggie Patton	2001 No Return	306 Jimmie Spruad
1945 Lehman Harris	2005 Helen McMurray	307 Robt A Matthews
1950 John Montgomery	2019 Elmfour Court	308 Robt Burns
1951 Sheila Birse	Apts.	309 Vacant
Betty Preston	Bl Annie Gless	310 Priscilla Treat
1956 Tim Lewis	82 Vacant	311 Betty J Bailey
1959 Bernice McCarver	83 Azalee Kapor	
Anthony Gwynn	84 Margie Robinson	
Geneva Howshaw	85 Vacant	
E Holman	101 Robt L McGraw	
1960 Leon Wiggins	102 Odella Smith	
1961 Phyllis Bost	103 Carolyn Echols	
Reginald Smith	104 Jay Coleman	
1965 Jeff Johnson	105 Robt Green	
1968 Vacant	106 Vacant	
1971 Thos Walker	107 Hurschel Boykins	
1977 Shirley Apts.	108 Harold Meccison	
Bl Vacant	109 Vacant	
82 Wm Bedsoe	110 Dekens Carter	
101 Jessie Davis	111 Wm Grubbs	
102 Joseph Hudson	201 Mornie Calkin	
103 Alvin Parker	202-206 Vacant	
104 Reginald Payton	207 Wm Gray	
105 Johnny Taylor	208 Keith Terry	
106 No Return	209 Hazel Gray	
201 Oscar Stargus	210 Arth Young	
202 Juanita Byrd	211 Vacant	
203 Clo Connor	301 Vacant	
204 Ghafur Hasum	302 Aureo Ulmer	
205 Wilbern Haynes	303 Vacant	
206 James Ivey	304 Barbara Lewis	
301 Leonard Brantly	305 Maydian Grey	
302 Vacant	306 Melissa Fann	
303 Melvin Lanus	307 Vacant	
304 Vacant	308 Vacant	
305 Vacant	309 Pat Pettway	
306 Vacant	310 John Ellis	
1980 Apartments	311 Vacant	
1E Vacant	2020 Elmhurst Manor	
2E Robt Willis	Apts.	

*No return - No response to Directory inquiry, possibly vacant
*Based on 1969 address
Source: City Directory

