Woodley Park Community: A Sketch of Our Past
Chapter 4. Visitor Center: 1975-1990

By the mid-1970's concerned residents of Woodley Park foresaw further transformation of their "diversified city neighborhood." They predicted that the upcoming physical changes, the opening of the Metro station in 1982 and the rebuilding of the Sheraton Park Hotel, would fundamentally alter the character of the neighborhood.[1]

During this most recent period and continuing into the 1990's, the community of Woodley Park has become increasingly focused on its role as a destination for visitors. With the number of residents falling and tourist and convention populations rising, neighborhood amenities cater more and more to the transient visitor. According to the census counts of 1980 and 1990, the number of year long residents has fallen below the figure of 7,296 in 1970. The total population in 1980 was 6,233 and in 1990 was 6,590.[2]

The two Woodley Park hotels have undergone significant alterations in both structure and clientele in recent years. No longer catering to elite residents, they welcome conventions, school groups and package tours. In 1980 the Sheraton constructed a new building, considerably enlarging its convention and exhibition space and retaining only one historic structure, Wardman Tower. Residential suites had been converted to hotel rooms by 1973. The Shoreham, whose ownership had remained in the hands of the original Bralove family until 1972, was sold to Mat Associates of Chicago. Thereafter the hotel changed ownership and management many times. In 1985 the company managing the Shoreham merged with the Omni chain, changing the name of the hotel to Omni Shoreham.[3] At the same time, several guesthouses began operating in converted former family homes, offering additional accommodation to short-term visitors.

Woodley Park's two churches have also changed as the community has grown more cosmopolitan and more transient in population. St. Thomas Apostle Church introduced weekly masses in Spanish language, and in 1986 the parochial school closed its doors. The building still houses the Sisters of the Holy Cross, who had conducted the school, but today is the headquarters for the Spanish Catholic Center of the Archdiocese of Washington. In the mid-1980's the parish population included a growing number of retired people, as well as approximately one-third Hispanic households.[4] All Souls Church, with a diminished congregation, turned over a new leaf in 1988 when it hired Jim Weaver, a well known Washington musician as its music director. In the 1990's with weekend coffeehouses and dances and a new young minister, the Episcopal church is rejuvenating its parish.

Educational institutions in the neighborhood have also transformed during recent years. With the closing of St. Thomas Apostle parochial school, only one public school, Oyster Bilingual, and one private school, Maret School, remain in Woodley Park. Oyster, a public elementary school, serves more than 300 students, 60 per cent of whom are Latino. Recently two Universities have bought and converted old buildings to use for Washington study semesters. In 1988 Stanford University opened the Bass Center in a gracious apartment building of 1920 on Connecticut Avenue across the street from the Sheraton Washington Hotel. Here students meet for seminars and tutorials and reside in upstair apartments while working as interns at government institutions and private organizations. In 1990, former Syracuse University student and real estate developer Paul Greenberg purchased a 1914 townhouse at 2301 Calvert Street for his alma mater. This Edwardian four-story corner house is used for seminars and meetings, and serves as headquarters for the university's Washington programs.

The 1980's witnessed marked changes in the character of "Main Street", the business district comprising the 2600 block of Connecticut Avenue, stretching to two blocks on intersecting Calvert Street and extending behind to 24th Street. Since the Metro station, now called Woodley Park-Zoo, opened in 1982 the community has become a destination for large numbers of daytime tourists. Woodley Park restaurants serve a range of entrees from fast food to a vast array of international cuisine in all settings from formal dining to the popular sidewalk cafes. Since the 1950's, the number of restaurants has doubled.[5] The manager of Petitto's Italian restaurant, in operation since 1977 in a 1916 brownstone on Connecticut Avenue, remarked on "the massive change from the time we first came until now."[6] None of the former landmark restaurants remains. When Tucson Cantina serving Southwestern American food opened in 1976, a new era of food diversity was launched with Afghan, Irish, Indian, Thai, Vietnamese, and Lebanese cuisine.

The stores in the commercial district have changed to serve a new type of clientele. More personal services, such as cleaners, take-away food, video store, florist, hairdressers, and art gallery, cater to visitors as much as to residents. No supermarket remains, but a gourmet market, a liquor store, a convenience food store and the Peoples Drug supply shopping needs.

As the population and functions of the buildings in Woodley Park have changed, the connections between commercial and residential groups in the community have by necessity grown closer. Annual Christmas caroling takes place in front 'of Petitto's restaurant, and since 1984 All Souls Church has attracted the neighborhood to its Saturday morning farm market. The Woodley Park Business Association holds monthly meetings at Stanford's Bass Center. The Woodley Park Community Association meets at Maret School and is planting trees in the commercial district. The principal of Oyster Bilingual School belongs to the Friends of the National Zoo, and both hotels have developed programs with Oyster School.

Community identity remains strong in Woodley Park. In 1989 the Woodley Park Community Association won recognition for the area Waggaman had envisioned as Woodley Park in 1888 as the "Old Woodley Park Historic District." Another type of community-building activity occurred in the preparation of this booklet. Fifth graders at Oyster Bilingual School assisted in the research and writing. They visited and interviewed managers of six businesses: American Security Bank, Omni Shoreham Hotel, Peoples Drug, Century-21 Realtors, Debonair Cleaners and the Panama Embassy.

Notes

1. Charles Szoradi, City Options: Woodlev Park Neighborhood Planning Project. (Washington, D.C.: Woodley Park Community Association, July 4,

1976), passim.

2. Bureau of the Census, U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Tract Summaries foe the District of Columbia, Washington, D.C., 1980 and 1990.

3. Sarah Booth Conroy, "If These Hotel Rooms Could Talk," The Washington Post. March 18, 1990, F4.

4. "Adaptable Parish," Catholic Standard, Washington, D.C., October 17,1985, p. 3.

5. Haines Criss-Cross Directory 1986.

6. Personal interview with Karen Shannon, manager of Petitto's restaurant, October, 1992.