

Text and photos
by Aaron Levin

Not long ago, the streets north of Broadway in downtown Columbia formed a deteriorating stretch of marginal shops and lower income residences. Today that same neighborhood has been transformed by a group of energetic young entrepreneurs — many of them Mizzou alumni — into the city's colorful and increasingly popular North Village.

North Village is a place: the area north of Broadway and south of Park Street, between Eighth Street on the west and Short Street on the east. But strolling the streets there, looking into the windows of craft shops, boutiques, specialty stores, antique shops or offbeat restaurants, a shopper soon gets the feeling that North Village is an idea, a spirit as well.

It's a kind of pioneering spirit, which says, "Go where others have overlooked the possibilities. Start from scratch. Build it yourself. Learn while you do it."

North Village's specialty is the unusual. If you're looking for baskets, boxes or antique glassware, try the Bird Cage. Want to find original handmade clothing for women? Drop in at Kelly's Cloth. Forrest Echoes is the place to discover tropical birds and fish, while the d-Sport Shop is the only place in town to buy a lacrosse stick. For antique clothes and accessories, your destination is One More Time. B.W.'s Little Shop, which is so little a basketball player would cramp his toes lying down across it, specializes in gold, silver and turquoise jewelry.

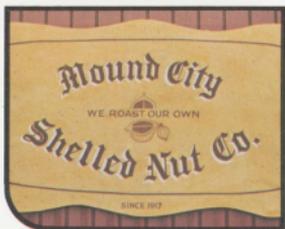
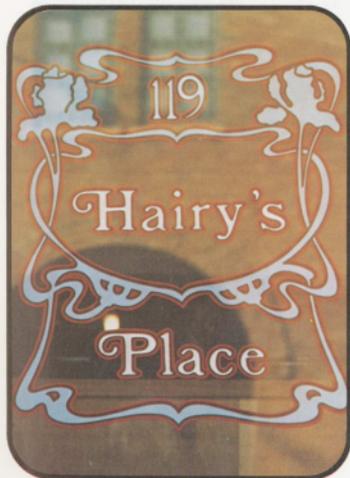
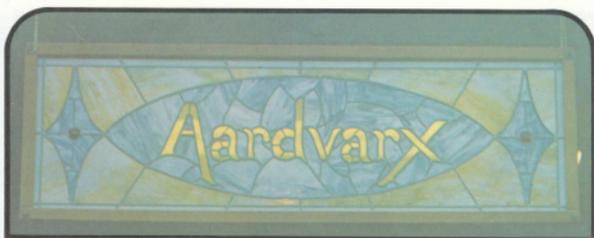
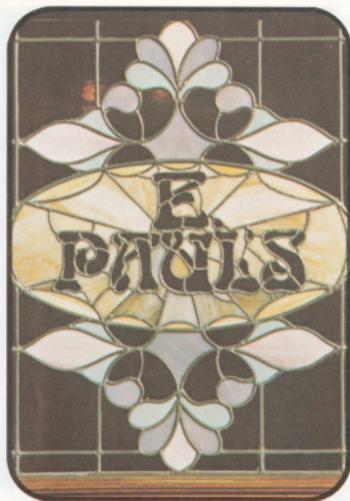
And when shoppers get tired of looking, they can pause at the Cheese Board for an avocado sandwich with homegrown sprouts, or a pastrami on rye at the Ninth Street Deli, or sample the house delights at the North Village Sub Shop. And, of course, there's still Ernie's, home of the Chopped Cow and the Dick Tracy mural. The now-



the SPECIAL SPIRIT of

NORTH VILLAGE





suspended remodeling of Ernie's has gone on for so long that knowledgeable locals insist that the upstairs Pyramid Room is named after those other ancient monuments that took so much time to complete.

Historically, the area was characterized early by the depot for the Wabash railroad, which came in 1867. Industry developed northward along the line, and nearer the station, shops and hotels sprouted to serve arriving passengers. A landmark to most alumni, the old Ben Bolt Hotel at the corner of Walnut and Ninth Streets typifies the North Village renaissance. Built in 1902 as the Athens Hotel, it was a center of social activity in Columbia until the 1930's. The old dining room used to be the place to eat in Columbia. Somehow, with the Depression and World War II (when a dormitory was rigged to put up soldiers in transit through town), the Ben Bolt slipped into poor repair and worse repete.

As recently as five years ago, says new owner Don Humphrey, "Respectable women would cross the street instead of walking in front of the building" — just to avoid the unsavory types who lurked in the lobby.

When Humphrey bought the hotel, he knew he'd have to do more than give the old place a new coat of paint.

"I had to change the image," he recalls. "We saved the walls, but everything else is new."

It took him two years, but Humphrey turned the old Ben Bolt into the new Wabash Arms apartments, with 32 units, half rented to students and half to working people. A railroad buff, he chose the new name from the nearby Wabash depot, whose train crews frequently stayed in the hotel in the railways' heyday.

He knew he had done what he set out to do when the Altrusa Club, as respectable a group of women as you're likely to find in Columbia, asked to include the renovated Wabash Arms on their annual house and garden tour.

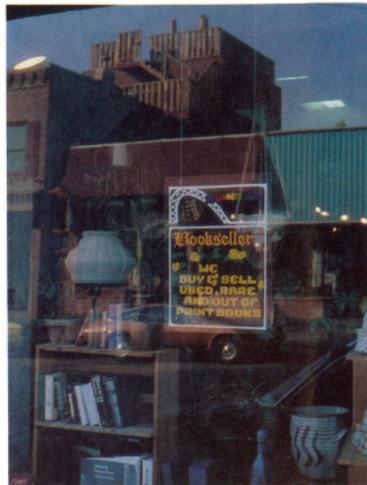
As for the new breed of shopkeepers, most of them were drawn by the low rents along North Ninth Street and Walnut Street to buildings almost as unprepossessing as the old hotel. Many of the first stores sold goods associated with what was once called the "counterculture": posters, handmade leather goods, funky clothing. The proprietors, mostly young and often without much business experience, sensed that a lot of people in town were ready for an alternative to the huge, impersonal shopping centers then mushrooming on the outskirts of Columbia.

A few pioneers led the way. Dan Neenan mortgaged his car in 1970 to finance the opening of the Poster Place (now called Aardvark) on Walnut Street. Margie and Steve Sullivan (BS Agr 73) opened the Plant Plant around the corner. Paul Mashburn (BS Agr 72) was doing well selling clothes at Ladigo's on Ninth Street when he had the opportunity to buy the building housing the shop, thus becoming the biggest single landowner in the area. Mashburn began renovating his property, both to draw customers and to show other business people that the location held the promise of success. Mashburn not only works in North Village, he lives there with his wife Barbara (BS ED 73) in an apartment constructed above the store.

Across the street, Larry Hamman fulfilled a dream of 20 years' standing when, in October 1974, he opened Rainbows, which sells leather goods, pottery, old prints and rare books. He rebuilt the interior of the store himself with boards salvaged from a 130-year-old Boone County barn. By relying on his own skills, the renovations were accomplished at one fourth the cost it would have taken to hire a carpenter. The weathered wood and gallery lighting gave Hamman what he wanted to create: a store with a unique design and ambience.

Together with Paul Mashburn and a few others, he "preached the gospel" of commerce north of Broadway. They talked to people, held meetings and finally chose a name: North Village. "North" was the direction, and "village" reflected their goal of a more personal approach to both selling and shopping. As each new store opened, it added to the variety of merchandise available. The success of one shop meant more customers window shopping — and buying — at others. The addition of restaurants, like the Ninth Street Delicatessen, the Sub Shop and the now-defunct Trilogy, drew shoppers up from Broadway each day at lunchtime. The area grew steadily until it now has spread north of Walnut and east of Tenth Street.

But it was more than a commercial success. As Larry Hamman says: "North Village was a signal that central Columbia wasn't going to die."

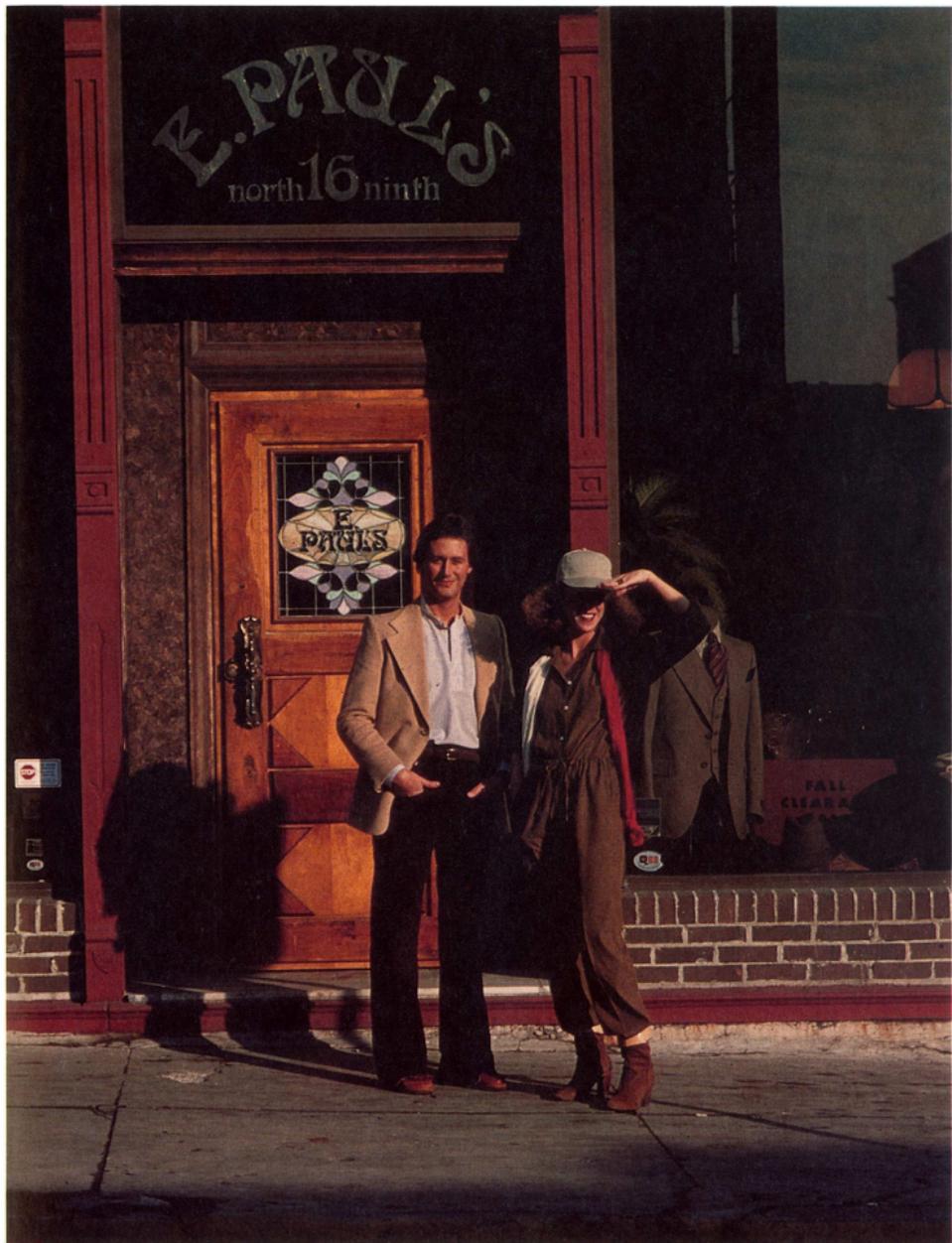


"North Village was a sign that central Columbia wasn't going to die." Rainbows, a shop for leather, pottery and rare books, reflects the far side of the street, where alumni Paul and Barb Mashburn stand before one of their four clothing stores.

Adds Ninth Street Deli manager Lisa Strutman (AB '77): "It's all part of a movement back downtown. People just like to walk around this part of town."

The Deli, which opened three years ago, has expanded into what was once Allee's Jewelers. Plants hang from the skylight; Toulouse-Lautrec ladies dance on the walls; and an old stamped metal ceiling (from Skillman's market in Fayette) decorates the ceiling. The eatery rates a hard-to-come-by "three spoons" from the *Tribune's* restaurant reviewer.

Jim Rogers (AB '67) was a grad student



in art history and his wife, Ann, was executive director of the Campfire Girls in Columbia when they decided to go into business for themselves. Neither had any previous retail experience, but they wanted to be working together. They spent months researching their idea: a shop featuring the best in designer cooking utensils and housewares. At one point, Ann looked up and said: "Are we really going to do this?" To which Jim replied, with pleasant surprise, "Yes, I think we really are."

They found an empty store on Tenth Street a half a block up from Broadway, called it the Design Center and filled it with butcher-block furniture, Swedish glassware, Marimekko fabric, silk flowers and German appliances. They're still learning how to run a business, but already have expanded into contracting out their design services.

The specialized nature of most North Village shops means their proprietors have to keep a sharp eye on their markets. As Aardvarx owner and North Village Association President Dan Viets (Arts '73) says, "Here we sell what you can't get anywhere else."

If market conditions change, shopkeepers anywhere must adapt or go out of business. Perhaps a dozen neighborhood enterprises have closed their doors over the last several years, usually to be replaced almost immediately by new entrepreneurs with undeterred hope and enthusiasm.

Viets cites several reasons why any small business — not just one in North Village — doesn't last. The owners may read the market wrong and discover there are no customers for their wares. Or frequently there's a critical lack of promotion to let the public know about the new shop. Sometimes the lack of business expertise catches up with them, although Viets says that people (himself included) can overcome this. Lastly there's the spectre of undercapitalization, when the bills come due before the money comes in.

Don Long has profited by learning to bend with changing market trends. Long and his son, Jeff, opened the Earth Shoe store in December 1975, when the natural

shoe fad was at its height. Just a year later, competition from similar-looking shoes and the bankruptcy of the Earth Shoe manufacturer might have put him out of business. Instead, he varied his inventory by adding running shoes and equipment, leather bags, socks and clothing to the original special shoe business and finds himself as busy as ever.

Viets, who sells jewelry, posters, incense, rolling papers, and smoking accessories, says he has established a good relationship with his bank, despite the unconventional nature of his business.

"There's not too much difficulty getting a loan with adequate security. Once they get to know you, things work out pretty well."

But at least some North Village merchants have had difficulty obtaining long term financing to allow them to bolster their inventory or expand their operations. They say that local bankers are less willing to take risks on North Village stores than on more conventional enterprises and don't provide the financial guidance that might make the difference between success and failure.

However, veteran photographer Gene Ringo, whose studio is in the area, thinks that too many shops have opened in North Village on shoestring and shrugs off complaints against the banks.

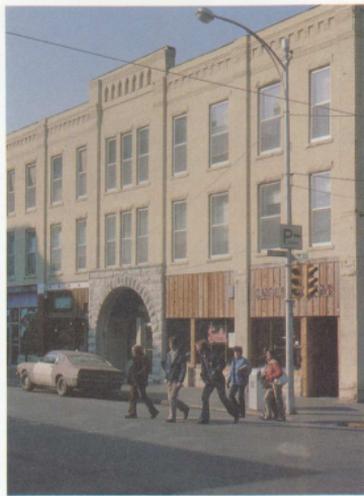
"Bankers," he says, "bet on aces, straights and flushes."

North Village is learning to cope with problems brought on by its very success. It's not always easy to find an available parking spot right in front of a favorite store and often "meter-feeders" tie up parking places all day. Columbia's little-mourned traffic loop apparently had small effect on North Village. Designed to route cars away from Broadway, it shunted them up to Walnut and Ash Streets, and perhaps even boosted vehicular traffic through the area. Like any urban center, Columbia is swamped with automobiles and a solution will have to be found soon to deal with them.

Already in action is a special task force which is using a \$50,000 grant from the city Community Development Commission to hire an architect to study the whole downtown area and suggest ways of guiding its future.

Committee member Larry Hamman says: "Columbia lacks a clearly realized view of downtown. We have to talk about the future of the whole area, about its social and human aspects. The question is how do we make the downtown work."

Implied in Hamman's words is the realization that despite its offbeat origins, North Village has to be considered an integral part of central Columbia. Once spurned by the established merchants on Broadway who perceived them as a



Don Humphrey transformed the old Ben Bolt Hotel: "We saved the walls, but everything else is new." Barbara Azar-Davis and Sharon Lay, both alumnae, send clients from their spacious North Village travel agency to anywhere in the world.

competitive threat, the North Villagers are now joining with them for coordinated promotions and advertising campaigns. And Viets would like to see a more aggressive approach by businesses in the center of town to draw customers from their real competitors: suburban shopping centers and discount stores.

North Village is still a colorful, youthful, spirited shopping community in the center of Columbia. Even as it grows and succeeds, its proprietors will deal with the hazards of growth and success. But they also remain committed to running their businesses with a personal style — and enjoying themselves while they do it.

