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Milton Street: A Self-Portrait of Urban Change

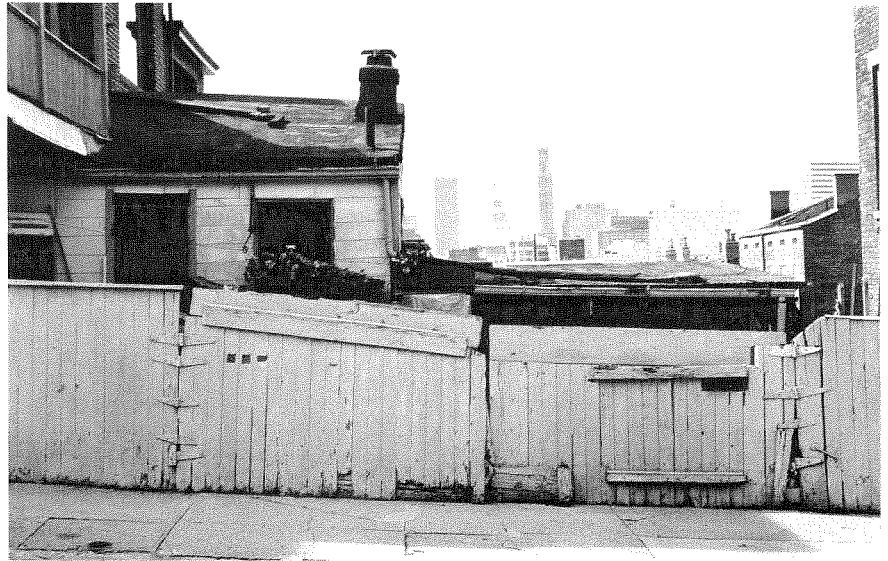
William Carney, interviews
Sally Moore, photographs

We moved to Milton Street one hot summer morning, still surprised by our sudden realization that this “slum” was in fact a vital, closely scaled and textured neighborhood of brick Victorians overlooking downtown Cincinnati.

By first appearances, Milton Street is a neighborhood of blacks displaced by downtown urban renewal in the early 1960s. But there are also Appalachian families that the city’s industry attracted from nearby Kentucky during the 1950s. A few Irish and Italians remain from an earlier immigration. The buildings themselves were built by late nineteenth-century German immigrants who later “moved to the country.” Even the hillside’s original natural community is still represented by a few established maples and the hundreds of sumacs pioneering vacant lots and neglected backyards.

Now immigrants from the suburbs—mostly young, white, middle-class professionals—are again making changes on the street. They are attracted by the views of the city, the patina of the past, the challenge of urban homesteading, and the considerable money to be made in real estate.

We talked about this newest change on the front stoops and in the living rooms of neighbors who, we felt, represented the diversity of the street. Our work with tape recorder and camera was gentle, unstructured, and subjective. As



1 A New Downtown

2 Milton Street

3 Summer Sumac

4 Ronnie Hatcher

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much as possible we wanted these to be self-portraits, registering the deeply personal connection of people to a place.

Like many American places, Milton Street is characterized by change. It is a place where human responses to change—pride, fear, greed, nostalgia, hope, resentment, denial—are as tangible a part of the environment as sandblasted brick, boarded windows, or raggedly lush sumac trees.

To understand and perhaps even to enhance such a place, it is first necessary to understand such attitudes. In doing so, we began to see how people make psychological use of a place, either projecting their emotions onto the environment or perceiving the environment as a metaphor for human concerns.

The interviews and photographs reproduced here are condensed from *What's Happening on Milton Street?*, a publication that we and the neighborhood children laid on every doorstep on the street as a way of stimulating more discussion. For a week, *Milton Street* was the homemade *Time-Life-Ebony* of the neighborhood. Using this material and a follow-up study as a basis, we now hope to publish a book-length account of the street.

Eating charcoal-broiled steaks on the fire escape (the only escape sometimes from Cincinnati heat), we spent many evenings discussing the social, economic, and

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psychological injustices involved in the gentrification of which we had become a part. We hope to widen this discussion by presenting these portraits in their present form.

Ronnie Hatcher
528 Milton Street

White people are moving in and buying buildings. And I don't think that's exactly right. People that are in the neighborhood, they can't stay. They ain't got the bread to fix the houses up.

I hear they got a bunch of long-range plans for the street. Build a park, you know, and make a pretty center. There'll be a gate up here and a gate down there that will be closed off, you know. It'll be a whole new thing. If it happens, what can I say, what can I do?

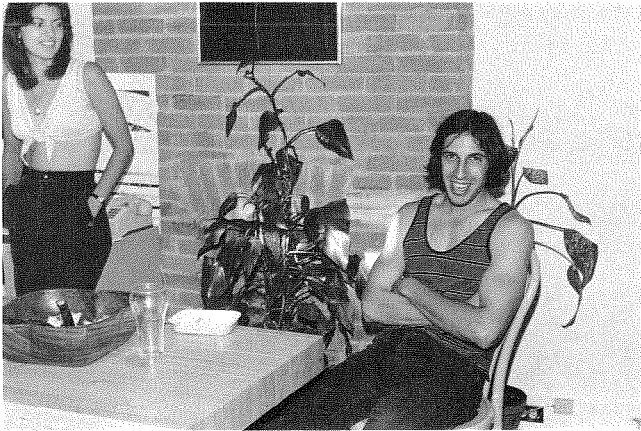
It's a drastic change. Like once last summer they were forming a block club. I listened to them rap. It was a whole lot of just blah-blah talk. Some of them maybe went to college two or three years, four, five or six years. I mean there are

certain people who can talk all day about nothing.

They were voting on a couple of things. And since they had the majority, it was, you know, "This is what we're going to do here." No regard for the people that stayed here, what they thought.

But you can't really stop the change. If I was in the majority, ok, the majority's cool. But you all know that green talks. It's going to be easier for them to get a loan or pick up some bread. Whereas the people that stay here, mostly black people, they just couldn't do it.

You make a home wherever you stay at. That's where you want to be. I wouldn't say the people up here are not interested. But you know, it's a white movement. I don't know these people. What are they saying? What's going on? Maybe I better get on out of here too while the getting's good.



Phil Adelman
512 Milton Street

Every day I'd go out and look for a loan. It was rough, the first loan. The reason we got it wasn't that I convinced somebody that this was such a great area, or would be. But they're starting to get government pressure to equalize their loans from the suburbs to the city. I just happened to walk into a bank when they wanted to put an inner-city loan on their books.

You know, risky things are for people trying to make money. If we can do it here, we'll make a real name for ourselves and we can do it anywhere.

I think both blacks and whites should start realizing that if this neighborhood was 50 or 60 percent white, and if that happened all over the city and all over the suburbs, you know, this is the best thing. Because basically you want integration.

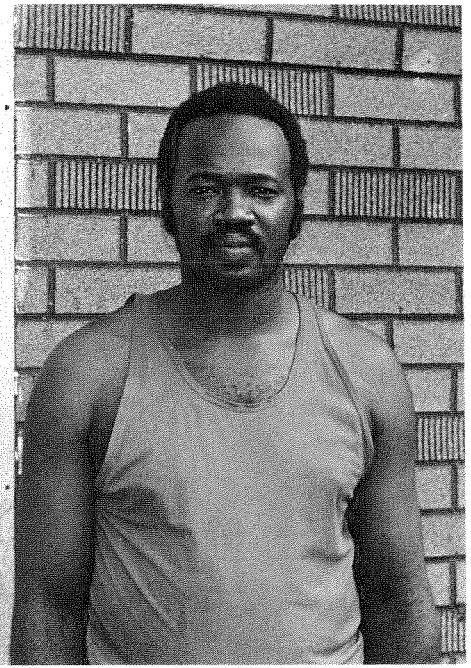
And one thing that's definitely happened, they've done a lot of work on their houses since we've

been here. And I don't care who owns the house as long as it looks good. I try to sell buildings to couples who are going to live in them. Owner-occupied is what gives stability to the neighborhood. You don't have all these tenants running around.

I'd get rid of all these sumac trees. I don't like those, maybe because they're everywhere. I think they're just like weeds. I'll get rid of a lot of the stuff here and put new ones in. The American way.

Feltus Dunn
449 Milton Street

There's so much I've seen changed. I seen the time when black people weren't allowed up here on this street after dark. Now you can go anywhere in the city you want to, and nobody says nothing to you. I think things are going to keep on changing for the better. I think as the world progresses, the prejudice is going to leave more than it was back in the olden time. I think people are going to learn to get along better.



We bought this place in 1974. This is the fourth place we've lived on Milton Street. It's hard to find someplace to rent with the children. We figured if we were going to live here, we should have a place of our own so we could do as we liked with nobody telling us when to move. And Milton Street was the best choice. You know, we talked to people. And they said the street was going to be improved. So we found a place and we bought here.

We're going to remodel the inside, fix it like we want it to be. We're going to tear all the walls out, knock the ceilings out. We're going to put aluminum siding on the outside. We're going to try to make it look nice. I do all the work myself. It's something I want, and I enjoy working on it.

I would say 10 years from now, you wouldn't hardly be able to afford to rent a place on this street. Course, if you want it bad enough, you'll pay the rent. If you don't, you can go somewhere else. You can go back down to the slums or whatever. But you've got a lot of blacks here and they'll stay here, unless someone would buy up all

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the houses and force them out. And you can't do that because it's against the law. You can live anywhere you want to now.

If somebody came up and wanted to buy the house and gave me a reasonable price for it, I'd sell it. I likes to live here, but I also likes money. If the price was right, I'd sell the house and move up.

Lois Adams
543 Milton Street

When I was very young, I was aware that this was a dirty neighborhood, trashy. Slum. I used to sort of wonder why people at church were always inviting me to their houses, but nobody ever came here. Of course, their houses were all out in the suburbs. People were afraid of this place.

I decided that I wanted to travel. I don't remember what I expected to find. I do remember that I had to find a home. I swore to myself that I was never coming back to Cincinnati willingly. Seems like everything I'd gotten from it

was negative. I grew to love the highway. Once after I'd run away, I came back here and my aunt took me in. And she let me know I had a place to take off my shoes and fill my stomach.

I took one little corner of the attic and fixed it up and wrote a lot about that. And I started to become aware of the changes here. At first I couldn't figure out why people were interested in this place. Then I started noticing the structures of the buildings, and I acquired my own love for it.

Knowing that other people were interested in it and doing something with it made me feel like I fit in. Man, did I ever have a sense of belonging. I started going to the meetings. And in the middle of one of the meetings I raised my hand and said I was available to do some renovation work.

I felt good about it because I was helping to preserve the structures I had come to love. Just the fact that something was being done was a good feeling. Because otherwise the neighborhood would just fall apart completely.

5 Phil Adelman and Cathy

6 Feltus Dunn

7 A Vacant Lot

8 Lois Adams



George A. Gover, Jr.
524 Milton Street

Anytime you're different you're going to be observed, especially in the black community. Most whites don't care that I live here. I pose no direct threat. I think the threat would be the difference between other blacks and myself. You know, is this better than what I am doing? If so, do I have to change?

And most people are afraid of change, because change means from something known to something unknown. What is the unknown? That is the threat, I feel.

Some blacks feel like they're being invaded. Because in fact they have made this street a part of their living room. Now you have moved directly into their living room. But if you get it together, it's going to be a beautiful neighborhood. People sharing ideas.

I've had people knock on my door and say, "Can I see your apartment?" Most of them say it's nice. Strange but nice, you know. They have a hard time dealing with

a dude who grows plants. This is not the thing for a black male to do. But then when they see you on the street, they speak. They say, "There's that guy who lives down the street. With the plants."

It could be very dangerous at the same time. If they view my plants as being of a certain gender, and also classify me that way, then I might be walking up the street one day and woof, you know. This is one of the chances that I take.

I love this fireplace. I guess it's the materialistic view of things. It's nice just having it. Opposed to somebody else who doesn't have a fireplace. I like looking at it. It's a beauty to me. I like it too much to burn wood in it. Then you have to clean it up, you know.

Al Ferrara
312 Milton Street

Beautiful. Beautiful. It was beautiful. Every morning people were out squirting the streets, sweeping their sidewalks, watering their plants. Oh, I mean it's so

different. Painting. I mean you just wouldn't believe it. Everyday there was a hose down there washing.

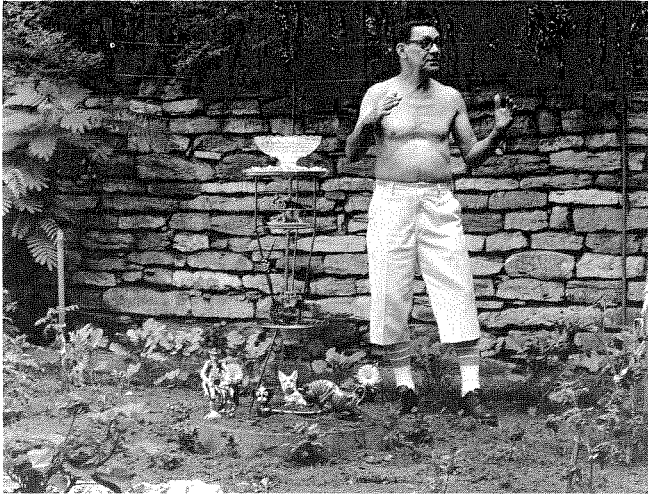
Then things got a little different, and the city used to come up and wash the street once in a while. And everyone would just throw their trash out and well, you just had to live with it.

My neighbor was ready to give up when he heard we were moving. He said, "Al, if you move from there, I don't know what I'll do." I said, "Art, I'm not going to move. I'll stay." He said, "Shall I do anything to my yard?" I said, "Fix it up." So he went on, and he's got a beautiful yard.

Why run? Why run? You live, let live. Enjoy life. There's nothing to worry about. I wouldn't feel at home anywhere else. After all, I was a youngster here.

Look at these. These are doing good. These are the eggplants. You see these little fellows, I put them out there the day before Good Friday. So I don't think it looks too bad. I work on it every day.

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Years ago there was nothing here. Then my Dad built this wall. I was a painter and worked at these construction places, and every day I would bring in about four or five bushels of topsoil and keep filling in. I think anybody who lives in the city, if they have any ground at all, I don't care if it's only two feet, put something in it you can eat. Instead of putting garbage on it. And you can't eat grass.

I abstract that wall every year. Paint one brick red, and one white, and one gray, and one green. And, oh, it just stands out so beautiful. And these geraniums I've just got to have all the time. My mother loved them. My mother said, "You got to have geraniums." I buy them at one particular stand the day before Good Friday. And I always have good luck.

Hurley Bonner
441 Milton Street

I just keep my mouth shut. I don't have nothing to do with nobody's business. I mind my own, cause I

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know the police is not going to protect you. I don't have no protection. I'm an old man. I'm 71 years old. I can't get around here on this hill, can't walk up and down that hill. So I come out here and sit. The conditions which we're living under now is gone beyond man's control.

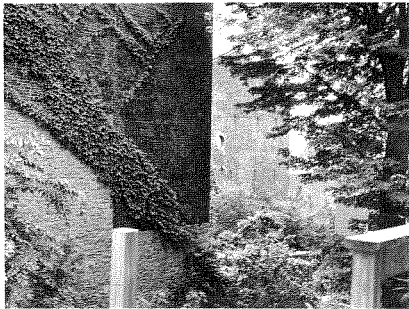
I've been here now for 15 years. It's changed here, changed everywhere. And it's going to get worse. It seems like Milton Street is the world, it's just like any other street. It's something you have to live with. I can't move. I don't know where I'd look for a better place. There ain't nothing to be found. Thieves, liars, murderers, they got enough transportation they can go anywhere they want.

I don't want to be no part of it, this confusion and hatred and malice and the race prejudice. I want what Christ said he was going to give us. Go home and look in your Bible and read Revelations, "I saw a new heaven and a new earth. I saw the holy city of Jerusalem coming down from God."

9 George A. Gover, Jr.

10 Al Ferrara

11 Hurley Bonner



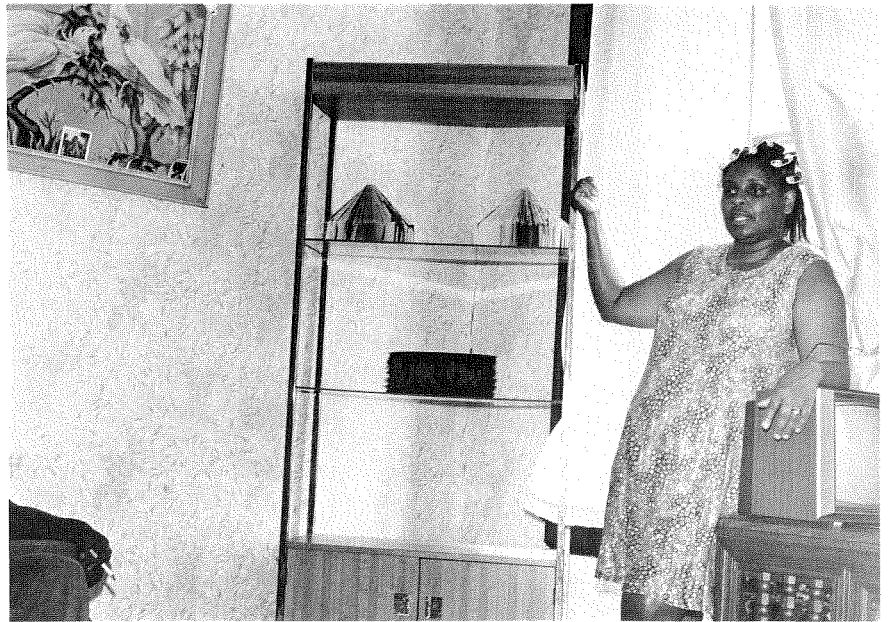
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Essie Owensby
334 Milton Street

Lord, I'll stay here till everybody in the house is grown. I was moving so much because I was having kids. One place had four rooms. Then I had a kid. So I moved up to 508. It had six rooms. Then I moved out of there because the rats got in. Then we moved across to 501, and the man didn't want no kids in there. After we moved out, they tore the building down.

Then I moved in there at 417. And I don't know why we moved out of there. Oh, the front steps to the door were all broke. We almost had to jump out of the door. And it's torn down now. At 433, the landlord wouldn't do nothing for the house. The toilet got stopped up. So we called the board of health on him. And the board of health said we'd have to move out of there.

We were out at Winton Terrace for a year. But it was too far out. Four kids and myself all had to catch the bus every morning.



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I would like very much for this to be my last move. This is a beautiful building from the outside, you know.

The view is pretty overlooking the city. But I don't want them to come in and take my house, where I'm living at now, just for a view. I would like to live here the rest of my life.

I love that tree. Don't bother my tree. That's the best thing here. They say, "Where you living?" I say, "I live up there on Milton Street with the tree hanging out of the yard." Come round here invading us out of our house and we'll take our tree with us.

12 Trees in a Vacant Lot

13 Essie Owensby

14 Milton Street