

Roanoke Traditions...Shopping at Heironimus & Leggetts...Eating at the S&W

“They Served the Best Strawberry Shortcake in Town!”

As of this writing, in late June, 2010, as workers are busy renovating the exterior/entrance to the building in downtown Roanoke known as 16 West Church, I am organizing all the data I’ve collected about the businesses and activities associated with this address. To many locals, this building is still known as the old S&W Cafeteria, though others remember it as a fitness center, a child care center, or even as a grocery store. (Only a few can remember when there was a Greyhound bus terminal at this location, and fewer still when it was a wagon yard.) This part of downtown has long been associated with the well known department store next door – Heironimus... at least in part because the **S&W Cafeteria** and **Heironimus** had grand openings within a year or two of each other in the 1950s, and because many people remember family traditions - of visiting both establishments each time they came into town for a day of shopping in the big city.

In this report, we’ll trace the history of this property (16 West Church) based on information found in maps, newspaper clippings, pictures from the archives at the Historical Society and the Virginia Room, other internet research, annual entries in the Roanoke business directories, and a number of personal accounts. I’ll try to tell a story of how this little piece of land has changed and evolved throughout a century or so, in response to changes in society and in the needs of an urban neighborhood.

A Roanoke city map, dated **1893**, indicates that in the block between Church and Luck Avenues, and between Jefferson and 1st Streets, were a furniture store (corner of Jefferson and Church), a **wagon yard** (lot #16), an agricultural implements concern (lot #20), and another wagon yard (lot #24). In another map (**1898**), we see that the wagon yard is identified as the **Stanley Wagon Yard**, and that the neighboring lot has become converted to furniture and grocery storage. Across the street is the **Roanoke Carriage Works**.

In **1903**, the **Stanley Wagon Yard** is still in place, with a livery next door. Across from this, on Church, are two carriage and wagon works, one named for J. F. Aaron and the other for John W. Witt. In **1907** everything looks much the same, except that the name Witt has been removed, with a new company called the Virginia Carriage Factory.

By **1919**, a large building has been constructed on the corner of Jefferson and Church (where now stands the Heironimus Building). It is described as being of “fireproof construction – built 1914,” and is called the Thurman Boone Furniture Store. According to this map, the next lot (16 West Church) is vacant.

Greyhound Bus Terminal... Sometime in the 1930s, the vacant lots (# 14, 16, 18, and 20) turned into a bus depot, or Greyhound Bus Terminal. This depot lasted until about **1951**, when the property was sold to the owners of the **S&W Cafeteria**. Evidence suggests that the bus depot soon moved to another prime location – on Bullitt Avenue, near Elmwood Park.

The first **S&W Cafeteria** in Roanoke was located at **401 South Jefferson Street**. The Roanoke Museum and Historical Society collection has photos taken by George Davis showing the interior, revealing an art deco motif and a multi-layered floor plan. These 1930s vintage pictures provide us with a hint at the shape and style of the subsequent facility, but no interior pictures of the building at 16 West Church have yet been found. Here is an excerpt from an article (in Wikipedia) about the S&W Cafeteria Company:

The company was organized in 1920, by Frank Odell Sherrill and Fred Weber who had served as mess sergeants together in World War I. The operations originated at Ivey's department store. Its original restaurant was located at 100 W. Trade Street in downtown Charlotte. By 1934, when the first Washington, D.C. location opened, cafeterias were located in Atlanta, Georgia; Asheville, Charlotte, and Raleigh, North Carolina; Chattanooga and Knoxville, Tennessee; and Roanoke, Virginia. By the early 1950s, locations had opened at Greensboro, North Carolina and at Pittman Plaza, in Lynchburg, Virginia. Many of these locations were designed by noted Charlotte-based architect Martin Evans Boyers.

The original cafeterias were located in busy downtown areas, often located near bustling theater and shopping areas. The early locations were quite opulent (designed in Art Deco style) and were the site of numerous local business and political gatherings. During the 1960s-1970s, as suburban shopping centers opened and downtowns declined, S&W followed the trend by closing their downtown locations...

Branch locations: Roanoke, Virginia

The original S&W operated at 412 S. Jefferson Street. In 1964 [note: should probably 1954], that location closed and has since been occupied by Davidson's Men's Store. That store recently underwent a \$2 million renovation. The downtown location moved to 16 Church Avenue, SW, in the former Greyhound Bus Terminal. The new two-story location featured art deco appointments and breakfast made-to-order for the early downtown crowd. It closed in the 1970s. This location is now the Downtown Sports Club.

Some unanswered questions remain concerning the transition between the two S&W locations. According to city maps dated June of 1955, the new S&W Building was in place (on Church Street), with a notation on the map stating... "Restaurant - Air conditioned, Non-combustible, 1954 concrete floors & metal deck, r.f. on steel joists, columns & beams, suspended ceilings." However, the Wikipedia article (quoted above) states that the old S&W (on Jefferson) closed in 1964, when it was purchased by the owners of Davidson's Men's Wear. It does not seem likely that there were two S&W cafeterias operating in downtown Roanoke (less than one block apart) during the period in question (1954-1964), so we are left wondering...

It may be helpful to consider some research done several years ago by Andrew Kantor (*Roanoke Times* – Sept. 21, 2006) concerning the Heironimus Building, prompted by the possibility Gentry Locke Rakes & Moore might move into the vacant property. Here is a timeline Kantor prepared (note especially the changes taking place downtown during the 1950s)...

1890: S.H. Heironimus opens a store in downtown Roanoke

1905: The four-story building at the corner of Church Avenue and Jefferson Street was built for Thurman and Boone Furniture Company

1915: Heironimus moves to the Jefferson and Church building, sharing the space with Thurman and Boone.

1930s: A one-story building on Jefferson Street, south of the Boone Furniture Co., is built for Woolworth.

1935: Heironimus moves to the McBain Building on the southeast corner of Campbell Avenue and First Street.

1955: Heironimus announces it had leased the entire Jefferson and Church building for an "ultra modern department store."

1956: After 1.3 million in remodeling (more than \$9.3 million in 2006 dollars), the store moves back into the Jefferson and Church building. It later purchases the building along with

Woolworth's adjacent one-story facility. It combines the two, using the smaller building for its men's store.

1993: The Dunlap Co., in Fort Worth, Texas, buys the Heironimus chain.

January 1996: Dunlap closes the downtown store.

March 1997: Calvin Powers buys the Heironimus building for \$412,400. The original asking price was \$859,500. (Today it is assessed at \$1.7 million)

December 1997: The Emporium opens, offering: Soda Jerk (Aa1950S soda style fountain, Armoires International (with antique armoire reproductions from around the world), Twist & Turns (an upscale furniture store), and Seasons (florist and gift shop).

Powers said he plans to put offices and luxury apartments on the upper floors of the former Heironimus building once the Emporium takes off.

May 1999: The Emporium boasts more than 30 retail tenants, including a 19-table restaurant, grocery store, bakery and herb store. Other companies lease offices on the second floor and storage in the basement. Powers considers making the third, fourth, and fifth floors into offices or apartments.

2002-05: Tenants begin leaving the Emporium. By early 2005, it is empty and closed.

But now let's return to our questions about the interior of the S&W on Church. Here is an excerpt from an article by Jenny Kinkaid in the Roanoke Times...September 3, 2009:

John Garland, president of Spectrum Design, and three other people who also work for the architecture and engineering firm, paid \$425,000 for the Church Avenue building that currently houses the Downtown Sports Club. When the structure was built in 1951, S&W Cafeteria was their first tenant. The Cafeteria closed sometime in the 1980s, Garland said.

He's seeking photographs from the building's cafeteria days so that he can preserve its architectural features. This historic rehab work is necessary for the owners to be eligible for tax credits to help fund the project.

The timetable for interior and exterior rehab work is unclear, Garland said. Some of it will involve pulling up carpet and vinyl tile to reveal the structure's original terrazzo floors.

More information about Spectrum Design's search for old photographs appeared that same day (posted on newsroanoke.com - *Needed Conveniences Coming to Downtown Roanoke Residents*- May 18, 2010):

The building will be restored to its original 1951 architecture, most of which is intact according to Garland. There are, however, a few important elements that need verification and the public is being asked to help identify those lost historic features.

Garland is looking for the best photography which details the building's front elevation, including the original row of lighting under the front canopy and the original S&W signage, as well as photographs that illustrate the interior entrance, including the finishes and lighting. Photos will be posted to an online gallery on Spectrum Design's *Facebook* page and a Downtown Amenity package valued at \$500 will go to the provider of the image that best reflects the building's former life....

When the city first established the downtown historic district, the S&W building was not quite 50 years old and was not listed as qualifying for historic tax credits, something that can shave tens of thousands of dollars off the restoration process.

A few years ago, in May 2005, John Anfin wrote an editorial in the *Roanoke Times*, entitled *Put Magic Back in the Magic City*, saying:

As a child growing up in Radford, I always looked forward to a visit to Roanoke, the big city of 100,000 (almost). Although there were peripheral attractions, i.e., Lakeside amusement park, the Big Boy restaurants and Archie's, it was the downtown that was exciting to me.

The downtown had so many big-city attractions, from great theaters to that incredible strawberry shortcake at the S&W cafeteria, to the Miller and Rhodes escalators, to that huge star that overlooked it all. To a 10-year-old in the 1950s, Roanoke was the Magic City.

In a blog (blogs.roanoke.com/storefront/2008/07/your_blasts_revealed) Stephen E. Fox expressed similar appreciation for the cafeteria...

The best memory of a restaurant for a kid in the 1960s, though, was the S&W Cafeteria that was between Church and Luck Avenues in downtown Roanoke, where currently a gym resides. In its heyday the S&W had four serving lines going at once (two downstairs and two upstairs) to handle all the downtown workers. As a kid my biggest fascination was the rolling high chairs that had pictures of various frogs and cats on the seat backs.

The S&W Cafeteria, as well as the large department stores (Heironimus and Miller and Rhodes), though immensely popular in the 1950s, could not compete very well with the shopping malls that began to sprout up in the 1960s. Here is a comment from Alan Edwards, writing in that same blog... about other cafeterias and the development of Crossroads Mall...

Upstairs overlooking the common area of Crossroads Mall was Bailey's Cafeteria until the mid '70s (K&W came to town and was their demise). After that (before Valley View) was Catawba Emporium – a FABULOUS restaurant like Roanoke had never seen before. Valley View's opening, the move for J.C. Penney's and other local retailers like Fink's Jewelers, Smartwear Irving Saks (merging with Berry Burk: Smartwear Barry Burk) both at Valley View and Tanglewood) killed the foot traffic at Crossroads, and eventually Catawba Emporium suffered to the new national chain restaurants scattered around Valley View. Ironically, each at their peak, Bailey's Cafeteria and Catawba Emporium had long waiting lines every day/night they were open.

And in a similar vein, Hank wrote:

My childhood was the 60s. I remember when Crossroads opened they went thru the parking lot putting Crossroads bumper stickers on cars. My father was pretty ticked when he found one on his '55 Chevy. I think on Monday evenings in the summer, Mick-or-Mack would set up tables in the parking lot under the big clock and have pancake dinners. ...Bought school supplies at Arlans. Saw movies at North-11 drive-in where 1st Team Auto Mall is now. Played golf at Brookside and hit balls at the driving range next door where the Food Lion strip mall and the Brookside apartments are now. Roses at Crossroads had a great lunch counter, egg salad sandwiches and chocolate milk shakes. Crossroads had everything, High's Ice Cream, 5 cents a scoop, Michael's Bakery, honey buns and elephant ears right in front of Globe Records where you bought 45's and got a copy of WROV's top song lists. I could do this all day, somebody stop me!! How about Diamond Chevrolet that is now Berglund? Roanoke Rambler (my first car was a Rambler)...

And here is one more rambling essay, written for the *Blue Ridge Muse* by a blogger called “Downtown” on November 16, 2005:

Roanoke, Virginia: My first home away from home. The first stop in a journey beyond what I then saw as the restrictive borders of Floyd County.

I arrived in the summer of 1965: 17 years old, fresh out of high school and ready to conquer the world. I had a plan: Attend college at the University of Virginia’s Roanoke facility on Grandin Road and work nights at *The Roanoke Times*. I moved into the YMCA on Church Street (\$30 a month).

At the *Times*, entry level for someone fresh from the mountains of Southwestern Virginia meant the copy boy’s job from 6 p.m. till midnight five nights a week at \$1.25 an hour – enough to pay the rent at the Y, junk food, gas and repairs for my 1957 Ford and college expenses.

The copy boy’s job turned into an internship by the summer of 1966 and, along with it, a chance to write about the city. I loved exploring Roanoke’s downtown - the hustle and bustle of banks and businesses along Jefferson Street, the winos and hookers of the Market area and the characters who hung out at Texas Tavern on Church Street. I learned the city and wrote about it. When the internship ended, the *Times* offered me a full time job as a reporter.

A newspaper reporter learns a city from the inside out. Like all cities, Roanoke sprawled beyond its borders and the ‘burbs grew. But for me, downtown was the city. I moved into the Jefferson Apartments, and old Victorian building just off Elmwood Park. The Jefferson rocked in those days. Fred Freelantz, the top jock at WROV, lived across the hall. The sounds of parties echoed through the halls nightly.

For residents at the Jefferson, life revolved around downtown. We ate breakfast at Texas Tavern and listened to the old-timers talk about a Roanoke changing before their eyes.

Most didn’t like the change. Lunch at the Shoney’s on Church Street or the S&W Cafeteria. We got haircuts at the barbershop in the Patrick Henry Hotel, clothes at Davidson’s and stereo equipment from Ewald-Clark. After work we drank at the bar in the basement of the Ponce de Leon Hotel....

The City Directories provide an interesting record of businesses opening and closing on Church Avenue. Throughout the 1940s and early 1950s, the listings show 16 Church as the home of the Greyhound Bus Terminal, but things began to change.

In 1954...

Corner of Church and Jefferson – Thurman and Boone Co., Inc. (side entrance)

14 Sherrill’s (display window)

16 vacant

18 vacant

Also in 1954, S&W is operating a Cafeteria at 412 Jefferson and the Greyhound Bus Terminal has opened a new location at 44 Bullitt Avenue (near Elmwood Park)

In 1955...

S&W listed in the white pages at 18 Church Avenue, SW

Heironimus is listed at 34-38 Campbell Avenue, SW

In 1956 – 1977 - S&W Cafeteria is listed at 14-18 Church; Heironimus at 401 Jefferson

Then, **in 1978**, the S&W has apparently closed. In its place on Church Avenue is an establishment called **Sixteen West** (at 14 Church Avenue) with Richard L. Hill, Manager (restaurant). That business did not exist for long, however.

In 1980, the business listings on Church include the following:

12 Heironimus
14 Vacant
16 Not Listed
22 Virginia National Bank
24 Central Fidelity Bank

In 1981...

12 Heironimus
16 vacant
24 Central Fidelity Bank
26 Bonomo's
28 Mitchell's Clothing

In 1982...

12 Heiromimus
16 Vacant
24 Central Fidelity Bank
26 Bonomo's
28 Mitchell's

Then, in 1983...

12 Heironimus
16 Downtown West – Wellness and Fitness Center

In 1984...

12 Heironimus
16 Downtown Fitness & Wellness Center
22 Bradford J.C. & Co., Investments
24 Central Fidelity Bank

In 1985...same as above, but 24 is vacant; **1986...**same as above; **1987...**more changes...

12 Heironimus
16 Lancerlot Downtown; Upper Cut (hair styling)
22 Bradford
24 vacant
26 Bonomos

To find out more about Lancerlot, I looked in the white pages (1987) and found this entry:

Lancerlot Sports Complex & Family Fitness Club

Henry J. Brabham and Gail Brabham

Ice skating, Ice Hockey, Racket Ball, Swimming, Aerobics, Nautilus, Free Weights, Tanning Beds, Indoor Track, Restaurant – 1111 Vinyard Road – Vinton, VA

In 1988... I noticed the addition of a Lancer Mart and a Lancer Oil Company (in Vinton); and... 24 Church is vacant; (Crestar Bank is under construction at 37 Church)

In 1991... Lancerlot had disappeared from Church Avenue, with # 16 vacant...

In 1995... 16 Church Ave., SW...Good Earth Deli (Brabham Enterprises, Inc.)

In 1996... 20 The Mecca – physical fitness complex; Gold’s Gym; Four Seasons Tanning Salon; Polish Me Perfect nail salon;

In 1997... 16 Downtown Fitness Club; Four Seasons Tanning Salon; 20 Top Ten Nails

In 1998... 16 Oasis Chiropractic & Massage

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In 2000... 16 Oasis Chiropractic & Massage

In 2001... Listings for the block are confusing...as if many of the buildings were vacant

In 2002... 16 Downtown Sports Club (health clubs, studios, gym); 24 Howard’s Soup Kitchen

In 2004... 16 Downtown Sports Club; Oasis Chiropractic; Top Ten Nails

To summarize, Lancerlot seems to have had a fairly brief run at the downtown location, from 1985 until 1990. The main Lancerlot Sport Complex is still a viable business in Vinton. (I believe that they are still well known around the region for their promotion of ice hockey.) Although I have not found very many articles in the *Roanoke Times* concerning the comings and goings of businesses at 16 Church, the headlines concerning Heironimus tell the story of a downtown retail environment in decline. Here is a sampling of the headlines...

A Downtown Store is History – Nov 14, 1995

A Passing Era – White Gloves – Jan 14, 1996

Shopping Eras End, Begin – Jan. 28, 1996

Empty Building Poses an Opportunity – Feb. 2, 1996

Sales Sign Goes Up – Mar 23, 1996

New President Takes Helm at Heironimus – Oct. 4, 1996

Looking for Tenants – Jan 12, 1997

Old Heironimus Building Sold to Calvin Powers – Mar 8, 1997

Out With the New – Façade of Heironimus – Mar 28, 1998

Heironimus Store May be Torn Down – April 11, 1997

Developer Buys Lazarus Buildings – Calvin Powers – April 16, 1998

Heironimus to Close Sundays... Cut its Evening Hours...Jan 6, 1999

Heironimus Goes Way Back – Sep 12. 2003

Our Past One Hundred Years Part One – Sep 26, 1999

Meet one of Roanoke’s Major Property Owners – Oct. 19, 2003

Heironimus to Close Three Stores – Dec. 31, 2003

A Store’s Closeout Days – Jan 2, 2004

David Dearing, an engineer for the City of Roanoke, helped me track down information about the deeds and the chain of ownership, allowing me to better understand the sequence of events. There were

several lots that were listed on one tax map, #1012307. On the land book from 1929, Lot 7 was redrawn to create new Lots 7-A-C...

Land Map... Official Survey Section **SW1** Block **16** Lots 7 (new Lot 7-A-1)
Tax Map 1012307 1929 Land Book Line 5625
Owner – Gibson, R.D. et al (16 – 18 – 20 – 22- 24 – 24A)
Location – **SW House Number 24 Church Avenue**
Front Feet by Deed 135.82 Acreage 1.146
Remarks: SS Church Ave W Jeff St 135' thru to Luck
Dec. 12, 1888...Roanoke Trust, Loan and Safe Dep. Cp. (Grantor) Jno T. Gibson (Grantee)
Aug 289, 1905...John T. Gibson (Grantor) B.D. Gibson et al [Susan, Annie] (Grantee)
Aug 20, 1946...Braxton D. Gibson (Grantor) Susan G. Gibson and Annie G. Packette (Grantee)
Apr. 24, 1943...Annie Gibson Packette (Grantor) Frances D. Packette Todd (Grantee)
Mar 10, 1987... Todd, Frances Packette (Grantor) United Virginia Bank – Admin (Grantee)
Aug 19, 1988...Jefferson Memorial Hospital Inc. et als (Grantor) Brabham Enterprises (Grantee)
Nov. 26, 1991...Brabham Enterprises (Grantor)...Howard, Jerry James (Grantee)
Oct. 10, 1997... Howard, Jerry James (Grantor)...Bonomo, Vittoria & Jane (Grantee) 28.50 sq. ft.

In 1992, when lots were redrawn, the Property now known as 16 West Church became New Lot 7-C., with the new tax map #1012318.

Land Map - Official Survey Sec. SWI Block 16 Lot(s) New Lot 7-C
Tax Map 1012318
Owner Brabham Enterprises
Location S.W. House Number 16 Church Avenue
Acreage 0.339
Remarks – MBI – 997 from 1012307 9-27-90
D. B. 1672 p. 1196 Dec. 2, 1992 Grantor Brabham Enterprises
Grantee Varelos, Michael N. & Karolyn K.
D. B. 1720 p. 274 Aug 18, 1994 Grantor Varelos, Michael N.
Grantee Huffman, Dean S.
D. B. 0000 p. 2926 Mar 1, 2000 Grantor Huffman, Dean S.
Grantee Huffman, Dean S. & Blackburn, Suzanne
June 17, 2003 Grantor Huffman, Dean S.
Grantee Blackburn, Suzanne

To summarize, these records hint at the story of four lots on Church Avenue (numbers 16 – 24) that were acquired by Brabham Enterprises in the mid- 1980s. The original tax map (#1012307) was converted to a new tax map (New lots 7 A-C) about when Brabham Enterprises (Henry and Gail Brabham) became owners. They were also owners of the Lancerlot Sports Facilities in Vinton. Lot # 24 was eventually sold to the Howard family, and lot # 16 was sold to Michael N. Varelos, then Dean Huffman, Susan Blackburn, and finally, in 2009, John Garland and Spectrum Design.

It is interesting to note that other S&W buildings, in cities such as Asheville, North Carolina, and Knoxville, Tennessee, are also getting revived under new ownership. In Asheville, according to an article in the *Citizen-Times* of April 16, 2010,

...the commercial portion of the Cafeteria building (Haywood and Patton) is back on the market. The S&W Cafeteria was a community gathering place for decades, operating 1929-

1974. The building, designed by Douglas Ellington, had sat empty for several years before current owner Steve Moberg bought it in 2007.

According to *Knoxvillenews.com*, in an article that appeared on April 4, 2009, Hayes Hickman wrote:

Five months ahead of its expected opening, the S&W Grand Café hosted its first packed house Friday night. The crown of nearly 400 people looked past its unfinished bare walls toward what is promised to become a faithful restoration of downtown Knoxville's famed S&W Cafeteria. And despite the sparse setting, it was a fitting venue for the night's event – the 35th anniversary celebration of the historic preservation nonprofit Knox Heritage.

Incorporated on April 1, 1974, the group initially was formed in an effort to purchase and save the then-neglected Bijou Theatre. Since then, the agency has become a driving force behind similar successes, including two George Barber-designed homes in East Knoxville's Parkridge community and, more recently, the S&W itself.

The restaurant, which had sat dormant since the 1980s, was threatened by plans for the publicly- and privately- financed Regal Riviera Stadium 8 on Gay Street's 500 block until city of Knoxville officials were convinced to incur the extra time and costly redesign necessary to preserve the adjacent S&W, as well as the Athletic House and WROL buildings.

"This was all going to be a movie theater," said Knox Heritage Executive Director Kim Trent, who counts it as one of the group's greatest successes in recent years.

Developer John Craig now is in the midst of renovating the trio of buildings, with tenants already secured for more than half the space....

Original ornamental ceiling medallions, the wings of the revolving front door and shaved shell fixtures that once glimmered along the walls of the mezzanine – all are providing a template for the recreation of key details that still stand out in the memories of many former patrons.

"This is part of the growing up of Knoxville," said Knox County Commissioner and Knox Heritage Board member Finbarr Saunders, who reminisced about the movie reel cartoons he watched as a child in the lower floor in the 1950s, and the lunch hours he later took there as a young banker in the 1970s.

Knox County Criminal Court Judge Richard Baumgartner remembered similar lunches there in the 1970s, too, when he was fresh from law school and the S&W fed power brokers such as federal Judge Robert Taylor, entourage and all.

"I can see him walking down the street now," said Baumgartner, standing at the windows of an unfinished office space on the second floor and chatting with the project manager Jim Buhl of Hickman Construction.

"The decisions that were probably made in here," Buhl added. "If these walls could talk..."

To return to the comments offered by a Roanoke blogger (*Downtown*, in 2005), when he revisited his hometown that year...

Too many empty store fronts line Jefferson and Church Streets and Campbell Avenue. Finks Jewelers closed its flagship store on Jefferson and moved out to fancy new digs on Electric Avenue in the county. Davidson's hangs on, surrounded by empty storefronts. A homeless woman who says her name is Wilma pushed a grocery cart packed with her belongings down the sidewalk of Jefferson Street. Wilma says she's lived on the streets of Roanoke for "oh, about 20 years, I guess." Roanoke, she says, "is my home. I wouldn't live anywhere else. "

At the De Espresso coffee shop on Jefferson, the only customer is a man in a business suit who talks on his cell phone while typing on his laptop. A kid on the couch puts his

magazine down long enough to fix me a medium sized cup of the house blend. It tastes like crap.

But Texas Tavern still has the same strong, greasy coffee in standard white mugs. As I sip some real coffee, the old man on an adjoining stool tells me Roanoke just *ain't* Roanoke any more. Others nod agreement. Most the places I used to frequent on Church Avenue are gone. You find lawyer's and architect's offices occupying spaces that use to house retail shops and restaurants. You get the feeling that this is a place where people come to work during the day and then head home on nights and weekends.

Today, when you pick up a copy of *The Roanoke Times*, the stories you read about downtown... talk of revitalization, building and economic conditions. But I don't get a feel for downtown because I don't see stories about the people. Maybe somebody there is still writing about the men and women who make up a downtown but I haven't seen them like I'd like to. Maybe downtown Roanoke is no longer the pulse of the city. Maybe it doesn't have a pulse. Perhaps life in the city centers around the plastic and neon of Valley View or the laid back lifestyle on Grandin Road. Maybe sprawl has robbed Roanoke of a center. The Market provides some focus but that image seems manufactured or maybe I'm missing the point... Or maybe I just need to spend some more time walking the streets of the city I once called home.

Maybe Roanoke seemed to be losing its center in 2005 (when the above article was posted), but many of the more recent blogs and newspaper articles seem to be telling a different, more hopeful story. In the summer of 2010, one can see big posters on buildings scattered throughout the city, announcing renovations and new businesses to be opening soon. As one who has his finger on the pulse of all these business developments, Dan Smith has written many times about the latest in business news. Here is an excerpt of his report from June 8, 2010...about 16 West Church (16 West Church could house vendors when it is finished...Stories and Photos by Dan Smith)...

The two major renovations Spectrum Design's John Garland and his partners are pushing forward in downtown Roanoke are lining up tenants at an impressive rate and one of them could provide alternative space for vendors in the soon-to-close Roanoke City Market Building. The properties are at 108 Campbell Avenue (a former part of the Leggett Department Store) and 16 West Church Avenue (a former S&W Cafeteria and more recently a gym) and construction work is intense at both sites.

...At 16 West Church, there has been considerable interest from food vendors, says Garland. "The City helped us line up a pitch" to City Market vendors who will be looking for a home in September when it close for extensive repairs. A small irony here is that Spectrum Design's very good proposal for the renovation was rejected in favor of an out-of-town bid.

Garland held a meeting with vendors recently and says that since then New York Sub, Tokyo Express and Burger in the Square have expressed an interest in the upgraded facility, but none has signed a contract. Garland says that Tokyo Express would not only bring its sushi bar, but has talked of opening a salad and vegetable bar and a take-out deli. Garland says a candy shop and a pizza shop have shown interest, as had a bead vendor.

...Two other major projects – one in the Woolworth's building and the other at the Patrick Henry Hotel – would contribute to that quality of life when opened in the next year.

By examining the history of one small chunk of property in the middle of a city, one gets a good lesson in social and economic history. This one little lot was once a place to park wagons, then a bus depot, and, in its prime, a stylish cafeteria. When the big department stores began to move away to the suburbs,

the customers at the cafeteria also began to disappear. In recent years, as efforts have been made to revitalize downtown, and as gymnasiums, emporiums, restaurants, law offices, and beauty salons have tried to make a success of their businesses on Church Avenue, they have not yet found the magic formula. However, the tax laws favoring the renovation of old historic buildings may be a significant factor, allowing many ambitious business concerns to bring life back into old structures, and into the heart of downtown.