

FROM THE EDITOR

There are many ways to assess a community. You can walk up and down its streets, looking for signs of growth or decay. You can study census data that monitors the movement of people and businesses in and out of the area. Or you can talk to the people who live in the place and learn from them what life in the community is like.

Of course, these are just a few examples, and any full assessment of a community—like the assessment Kenneth M. Reardon has undertaken in East St. Louis—will use all of them and then some. What are the conditions of the churches and schools? Are jobs nearby? Where do people meet to eat, talk, and enjoy one another?

As communities age, the answers to such questions change, and as the answers change, artifacts often remain to remind visitors, historians, and the curious of the old quality of life: a pigeon-filled church, a park grown over with weeds, an old drive-in theater. Such evidence offers more than the story of a single service, one family's picnic, or a particular double feature—it chronicles the passage of an entire way of life.

Much of East St. Louis's Collinsville Avenue functions this way, as Reardon demonstrates in his essay "Back from the Brink: The East St. Louis Story." The vacant Spivey Building, the old Majestic Theater, and the recently closed Seidel's department store tell complex stories of local and national change. For Mark Tabbert, Exhibition Registrar at the Missouri Historical Society, the Ainad Temple, just off Collinsville, testifies to a way of life that is gone not only in East St. Louis, but in most of urban America.

According to an East St. Louis City Directory, in 1921 the temple was home to a Masonic fraternal organization, the Ancient Arabic Order Nobles of the Mystic Shrine or, more familiarly, the Shriners. According to Tabbert, the ability to construct such an impressive structure in the early twentieth century attested to the Shriners' strength in East St. Louis and eastern Illinois.

"This temple would have served the Illinois region, not just East St. Louis," Tabbert says. "The building represents a large number of men and their families who were committed to the temple for both practical and idyllic reasons."

Inside the temple's walls, Shriners could meet, dance, talk, and eat, establishing and reinforcing the social connections that comprise a community. It was a popular form of interaction: nationally, up to 40 percent of all adult males were members of fraternal organizations in the early years of the century; Tabbert estimates that between three and four hundred Masons lived in East St. Louis.

And that's just the masons; the directory lists at least twenty other fraternal organizations operating in East St. Louis in 1921. The Eagles, the Elks, and the Knights of Columbus all had chapters; so did the Maccabees, the Loyal Order of Moose, the Tribe of Ben Hur, and the Woodmen of the World. Though their names tended toward the exotic, their functions were very down to earth.

"The lodges represented a reasonably safe leisure-time activity," says Tabbert. "They offered an important way to socialize and meet people, providing respectability, security, friendship."

None of this means that the fraternal organizations represented an integrated world. Nineteen-twenty-one, after all, was just four years after the city's notorious race riot. According to Tabbert, who has spent the past five years studying fraternal organizations, none of the organizations listed in the directory would have had African American members, "but in any African American business district, black fraternal organizations such as Prince Hall Masons or Odd Fellows lodges would have formed for the same reasons the white ones did."

Younger men, black or white, joined fraternal organizations to establish their community connections or assist their progression into adulthood. Older men saw membership as a way to solidify their standing in the business world while securing social and welfare benefits for their families. "In the lodge, and in their ladies' auxiliaries," Tabbert says, "you would find people seeking respectability, fun, and ways to maintain a healthy community and business climate."

For years, fraternal organizations prospered, but no more. In 1880, thirty Odd Fellows lodges operated in the City of St. Louis; today, one remains. While the lodges of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries clustered in urban centers, they have now moved to where the people are, the suburbs. There, the few remaining members meet in structures much more humble than the Ainad Temple.

"We lost a lot when we lost these organizations," Tabbert says. "We lost the ability to bring people together based on the ideals of fraternity. Members were more than friends—they were brothers, truly."

As Reardon explains, in East St. Louis, where the beautiful Ainad Temple still presides proudly on Martin Luther King Drive, residents are now acting on behalf of these same ideals—not to join a club, but to save a community.

—Tim Fox