

Sun-Ray Drugs

The corner of Chew and Cheltenham (where a Jamaican restaurant is now located) was the center of the universe for my childhood. All energy, all activity seemed to emanate from this busy intersection. A walk down Price Street took you through a few blocks of placid, middle-class residential neighborhoods; small gardens and lawns bordered by hedges set the houses off from the parked cars lining the streets. As you approached the end of Price Street the din of traffic became audible: this was Chew Avenue, a wide boulevard full of cars, trolleys, and buses. A turn to the right would take you alongside a stone-lined hill that led under the train tracks towards Awbury Arboretum; a turn to the left led you to the center of the universe. These two photos show exactly how I remember the intersection:



On the right side of Chew Street, next to the neighborhood Acme Groceries, was a Sunoco gas station (above right) that had seen better days. To its west was the movie theater we were forbidden to walk past, let

alone look at: the Walton. I never understood the story of this building of ill-repute, which had been a glamorous movie theater in the 1930s. When asked, my parents responded tersely and said that it used to be a nice family theater that showed Disney films on their first run. Now it was a den of sin. Why it changed venue remained a mystery to



kids. Did new owners lack a sense of civic responsibility and moral decency? Had the neighborhood demographics changed that much since my mother grew up just down the street? Wasn't there still a seemingly growing population of young families with three, four, five, six kids (the area was predominately Roman Catholic) that strolled up and down the center of the universe, especially on weekends?

One day, as I walked down Chelton towards James McDonald's house—home to a devout Roman Catholic family with eight kids and a visibly stressed-out mother,—I ignored the voices of mother, father, priests, and nuns that resounded in my mind—*mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*— and walked directly past the Walton, not more than five feet from the entrance! Worse yet, I cast a furtive glance at the posters glued sloppily to the walls of the theater. The fires of hell rose up around me and singed my eyes, for I had seen a naked woman with three thick, but short black lines hiding parts of the body that should have been covered with clothing. I immediately quickened my pace and rushed towards the McDonald home, making the sign of the cross repeatedly and getting a head start on my weekly confession: “forgive me, Father for I have sinned ...”

The Walton was not the only eye-sore, or, better said, soul-sore, in this otherwise solid neighborhood. Just down the road on Chelton Avenue, to the east of the Sunoco station, was another run-down movie-house called the Orpheum. This was either out-of-business or showed off-color flicks on an irregular schedule, I because I never saw any signs of life whenever I walked past.

One lazy Saturday afternoon I was over at my grandmother's house on McMahan Avenue. My mother was off running errands, and since my grandmother was preoccupied doing the laundry she entrusted me to Helene, my teenaged aunt. I don't recall what we were doing, but I do remember Helene's excitement when Ann Hutchins, her best friend, came over for a visit. Before I knew what was happening, I was escorting both of them down to the center of the universe.

When I use the verb "escort," you have to imagine a eight-year-old boy lagging a few steps behind two perky and giggly girls, trying his best not to seem to know them in the slightest while needing to stay close to them—or else! I slowed my pace as their decibel level increased, quickened it when they exchanged confidential whispers. I tried not to eavesdrop, but every so often one of them would shriek something about "boys" or "men" or "radio" or "songs." Or "Elvis." "Elvis." "Elvis." Imagine my embarrassment when we made the left turn off of empty Locust Avenue on to Chew, walking right past Powell's!

Helene and Anne chatted with the abandon of carefree teenaged girls, laughing hysterically, waving their arms, hopping and skipping. Passers-by stared or glared, chagrined by this ostentatious display of youthful exuberance.

As we walked into Sun-Ray drugs we saw the manager standing in the center aisle, arms folded. Never had there been a man who could pass for the clone of the first Pep Boy, the one to the left, Manny: about 5'6", fifty-ish, thick-lensed glasses, hair slicked-back generously with BrylCreem, forced smile on his face. It was his business to make sure customers found what they were seeking. He also made sure that merchandise did not wander off with juvenile delinquents.

Helene and Ann darted into one of the aisles to the left, trying to escape Mr Manny's watchful eye. They oohed and aahed at all kinds of teeny-bopper goodies, making such a ruckus that Mr Manny sauntered around the corner and down the aisle to see if he could be of assistance. Helene and Ann rebuffed his offer, and began giggling as soon as he turned his back. Fortunately for them, a customer in a different aisle did need some

assistance, so Mr Manny, against his better judgment, left the girls to their own devices.

For some reason the girls decided that I needed some kind of present. That would have sounded good if we had been on the aisle with comic books and baseball cards, but here I had the sinking feeling I was going to be rewarded with some girly gift. Ann pointed at something, Helene shrieked, both looked at me. "Elvis! Elvis! He will look so cute with that!" They had found a cheap, orange-colored wallet with a picture of Elvis embossed on the side. My heart sank as their spirits soared. Ann grabbed the wallet, Helene seized me by the hand, and the three of us swooped over to the checkout. It hurt that we walked right past the aisle with all the baseball cards on the way to the cashier.

All the way back to my grandmother's house I got to hear two teenage girls swoon over the crooner with the thick black hair and the swivel hips. I was stuck with an empty wallet devoid of any sentimental value, and some other lucky kid would end up getting the card of Wes Covington or Clay Dalrymple that had been destined for me.



This is what Sun-Ray looked like in the early 1960s. I remember dropping off laundry to the cleaners on the left. I don't remember a fried chicken joint, though.