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East Columbus neighborhood still recovering from manufacturing's decline



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Lisska Bar, where Beth Ann Prunte was serving burgers recently, was once a destination for blue-collar workers from the plants that used to fill the area near East Columbus.

By **Mark Ferencik**

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Drive east on E. 5th Avenue past I-670, and you can't miss the red neon sign announcing Lisska Bar, a decades-long mainstay of the East Side neighborhood.

"It catered to all the working class out here," said Mark Lisska, who took over the bar from his father, Stanley, in 1977.

The neighborhood used to be the heart of one of Columbus' prime manufacturing areas, where workers made railroad cars, potato chips and sheet metal, among other things.

On Friday afternoons, Lisska Bar would be packed with blue-collar workers who had just been paid at North American Aviation or another plant.

Today, fewer people frequent the bar, where regulars still come in for hamburgers, homemade soups and fresh-baked pie.

It's just one sign that this neighborhood has changed.

After World War II, the neighborhood was filled with people of Eastern European heritage. Today, the neighborhood is predominantly African-American, although a growing number of Latinos are calling it home.

Between 2000 and 2010, the Latino population grew from 120 to 864, according to the city's East Columbus Neighborhood Plan.

Many live in Mann's Mobile Home Park off Stelzer Road near Port Columbus.

Last week, Isidro Montoya was cutting the grass outside his modest trailer, where he lives with his wife, Maria Perez.

Montoya, who builds concrete driveways and sidewalks, has lived there since 2004. There were few Latinos when he moved in, he said. Now, there are so many that the nearby St. Thomas the Apostle Catholic Church hosts English classes.

The city works with the Dominican Sisters of Peace to help the residents of Mann's improve their lives. That includes helping create block watches and talking about ways to reduce violence, including domestic violence, said Napoleon Bell, director of the Columbus Community Relations Commission.

In the early 1900s, the East Side neighborhood was known as Rarigsville, named after the massive Rarig Engineering and Tool Co., which opened in 1897. So many people lived there that it had its own mayor and jailhouse.

Rarig Avenue, which runs through the heart of the community, also takes its name from the company.

The area became home to the Ralston Steel Car Co., which built railroad freight cars from 1905 to 1953. The company built long buildings along the tracks just south of 5th Avenue.

Several remain and now are part of the Warehouse Services complex.



	2000	2010	CHANGE
POPULATION	4,184	4,028	-4%
Black	2,493	2,177	-13%
White	1,476	958	-35%
Latino	120	864	620%
Other/ mixed race	189	866	358%
Asian	26	27	0%
HOUSEHOLDS	1,791	1,615	-10%
Renter-occupied	56%	67%	
Owner-occupied	44%	33%	

Source: East Columbus Civic Association
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"When they were manufacturing rail cars, everything around here was populated by people who worked here," said Adam Kaplin, a Warehouse Services owner whose grandfather bought the Ralston site 60 years ago.

Like Ralston, the Buckeye Potato Chips plant at 5th and Cassady avenues didn't survive. Neither did many neighborhood houses.

"There are a lot of vacancies, a lot of houses burnt out," Kaplin said.

One constant has been crime.

A 28-year-old man was fatally shot during a fight on Aug. 23 outside the Quick Stop convenience store at 2776 E. 5th Ave. The homicide is one of many that have plagued the area over the years.

But despite such problems, Michael Johnson, who leads the East Columbus Civic Association, said the neighborhood has a lot of potential.

"It's a hidden jewel," Johnson said. "People don't recognize what's there."

One positive sign is that the community is raising money to build the Mosaic Community Health Care Center near East Columbus Elementary School in the Krumm Park neighborhood.

"It's a medically underserved area," Johnson said. "There needs to be something like that."

Other positive signs:

- \$17.7 million in fixes that stopped flooding problems in Krumm Park.
- A city plan to improve Cassady Avenue.
- Design guidelines for future residential and commercial projects.
- A recreation center at Krumm Park that was renamed the William H. Adams Community Center this year, for the longtime community leader who died last year.
- A new playground in the park that members of the Columbus Blue Jackets helped build in July.

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