



# The nostalgic murals of Takoma Junction

The most prominent landmarks at Takoma Junction these days are the large murals that adorn the three buildings facing the intersection.

Other landmarks are long gone: General Carroll's manor house, which dominated the corner for nearly a 100 years, was demolished in 1960 after years of neglect. The trolley line stopped running years before that.

And the fire station at the outside edge of the Junction awaits a long-delayed knockdown-and-replacement, which will erase its familiar stone facade from the streetscape.

The storefronts remain much as they have always been since the early 1930s - small businesses modestly providing local residents with groceries, haircuts, electrical repairs, drycleaning, even picture framing. But thanks to these murals the corner has a distinctive character.

That was the intent. In 1984, the neighborhood was struggling with the departure of Barcelona Nuts, the largest industrial establishment in the city.

Ed McMahon served on the committee that launched the revitalization effort. One tactic was christening the intersection as Takoma Junction.

McMahon was also chair of the Public Arts Committee, and he suggested a second tactic: creating what he called a



PHOTO: JULIE WIATT

Sandra Philpott's Victorian image of Takoma Park has graced Takoma Junction since 1985. The accompanying portraits (below) have since been painted over.

"placemaker," outdoor public art which could help define and reinforce the identity of the area.

He had already had success with murals in Old Takoma and urged a similar approach in the needed revival at the Junction.

There was a perfect canvas in the brick wall of the storefront at the corner of Sherman and Carroll. Sandra Philpott, a local artist who had participated in the Old Town murals, offered a nostalgic collage evoking Takoma's Victorian past and the committee gave the go-ahead.

Phillpott gathered elements from historic photos to create a unique image. The policeman is Sgt. John Barry, the crossing guard at the railroad in the days before the underpass. Honoring the trolley cars that passed through the Junction, she portrayed the beloved "Dinky line" on its way to Sligo Creek. Children and flags and dogs aspoke of the bucolic childhood possible in this railroad suburb six miles from DC.

Then there was the enigmatic elephant, seemingly added from her imagination.

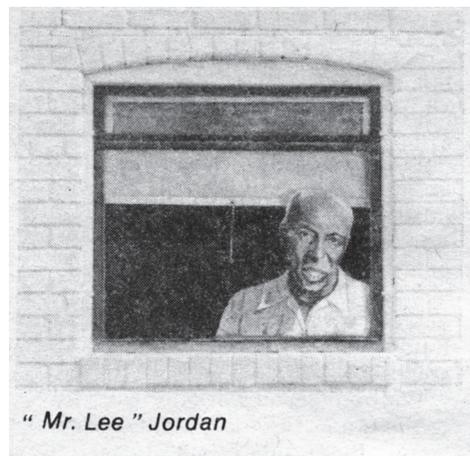
Folks like Roland Dawes in his barber shop half a block away vividly remember the carnivals that brought the elephants to town in his childhood. "They came twice a year and set up a Ferris Wheel in the vacant lot on the corner. There were games of chance, and the elephants."

In addition to the 14 ft by 16 ft mural, Philpott created a set of five "trompe l'oeil" family portraits tucked into each of the boarded-up windows on the side of the building. They represented the diverse set of personalities important to Takoma history, including:

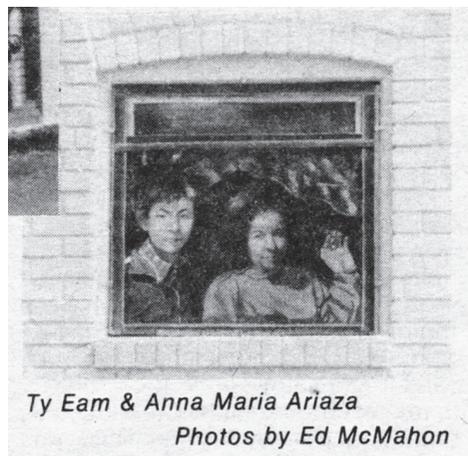
- B.F. Gilbert (the visionary behind Takoma Park),
- Pamela Favorite (early storekeeper),
- Lee Jordan (founder of the Boys and Girls Club),
- Goldie Hawn (actress),
- Anna Maria Ariaza of Guatamela and



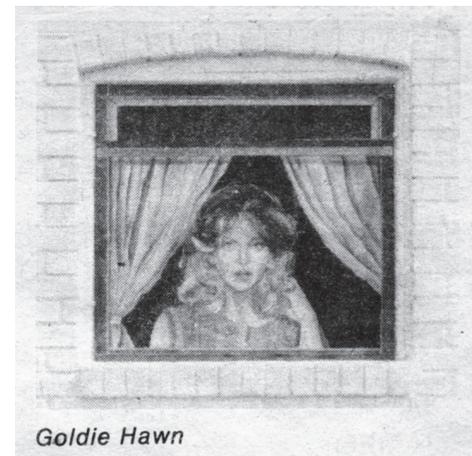
Pamela Favorite



"Mr. Lee" Jordan



Ty Eam & Anna Maria Ariaza  
Photos by Ed McMahon



Goldie Hawn

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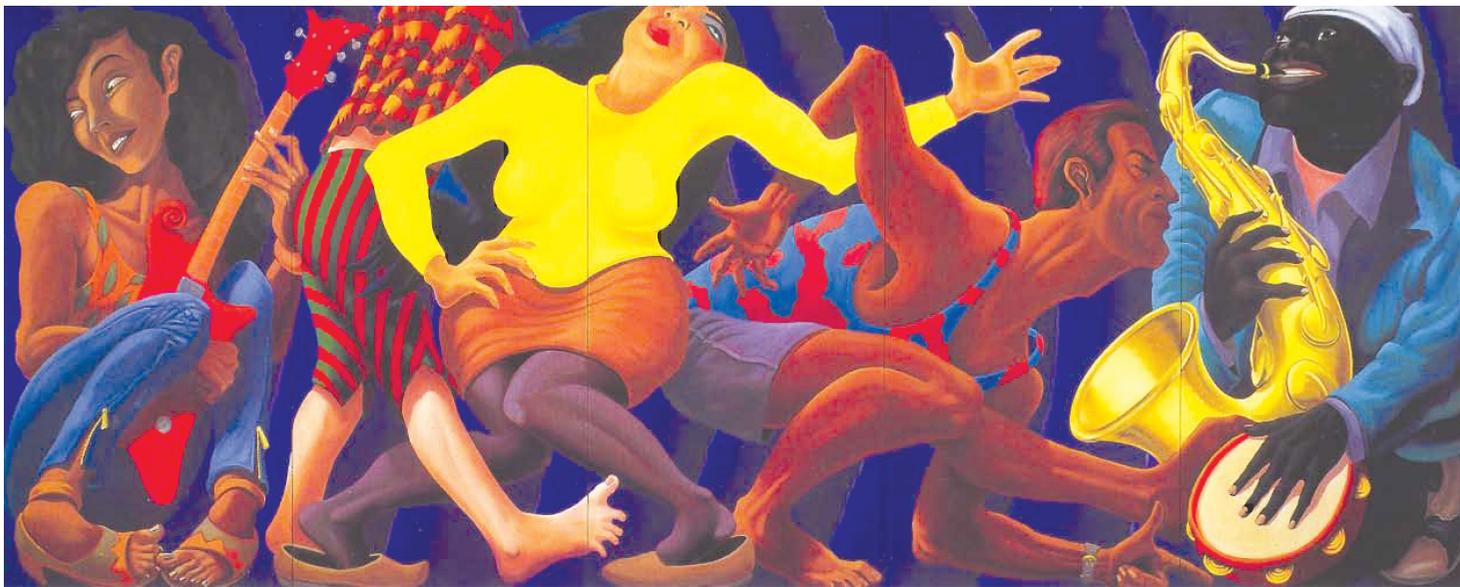
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Jim Colwell's "Guardians of the Neighborhood" has been a popular addition to Takoma Junction.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JIM COLWELL

Ty Eam of Cambodia (recent arrivals who represent Takoma Park's ethnic heritage and diversity).

In the years since Philpott finished her work and moved to Harrisburg, High's Convenience Store has given way to TJ's Market but the mural remains, albeit somewhat worse for wear.

It turns out that Sandra used ordinary house paint and applied it directly to the bricks. Even a recent touchup several years back failed to halt the deterioration.

The portraits faded more quickly than the larger mural and were eventually painted over with other images. Luckily, a plaque commemorating their names remains on the wall near the mural.

The carnivals halted once Shell built a gas station on the empty lot (perhaps 1940) and there was no longer any place to set up.

Ironically, that gas station became the next canvas. Abandoned sometime in the Sixties it was briefly resurrected as the "Sister Cities Thrift Store."

For more than a decade, Takoma Park enjoyed a rich cultural exchange with its Sister City of Jequie, Brazil. Students from each town regularly switched places. The thrift store was a needed source of funds.

By 1990, however, the cement block building was vacant again. The Revitalization Committee seized the opportunity to create a pocket park on the corner dedicated to B. Y. Morrison, the

genius behind azaleas.

McMahon remembered using open space money to fund the project. Public art once again became part of the package.

A new call for projects went out nationwide, and more than 100 proposals were received. But one local artist -- Jim Colwell, a piano restorer by trade -- had a winning idea.

McMahon recalls that Colwell's jazz combo, reflecting the diversity he saw in Takoma Park, was the hands-down favorite of the Arts Committee.

Jim remembers "There was some controversy with the design. I originally had an old man playing the guitar on the left, but I was asked to substitute a Latina. And the central figure was dressed in a lower-cut dress than you see today. Even with the alterations some folks took umbrage.

"When I was installing the finished mural, the owner of Turner Electric would come over every day to rail about how much he hated it. I just keep saying I was the hired help."

Today the exotic caricatures in hte mural, known officially as Guardians of the Neighborhood," define the Junction as much as the Victorian mural across the street.

In an effort to ensure the survival of "Guardians," the city has slated the building for roof repair and replacement of

the tiles on the pillars.

Thanks to a grant from the reconstituted Takoma Park Arts and Humanities Commission, John Hume of Sligo Tile Co. will replace the tiles with decorative tiles. Designed to reflect "Tales of Mystery and Wonder," the new tiles will depict Motorcat, Roscoe the Rooster and the elephant of carnival fame among other fanciful images.

The most recent mural is the largest, covering the side wall of the Takoma Park-Silver Spring Co-op. A new arrival at the Junction, the Co-op took over the Truner Electric building (which once housed a Safeway) in 1998.

In 2003, the large blank expanse of brick inspired Co-op employee Aslia Schwartz to envision a quirky tree motif to help identify the store.

Look carefully at the artwork and you will see how she created a mosaic effect by painting each brick a different shade of brown.

Collectively the three murals have not solved the underlying problem of how to revive the Junction, but they have enhanced the historic context and identity, even as the debate continues about the possible future scenarios for Takoma Junction. More about that debate next month.

*Diana Kohn is Education Chair of Historic Takoma.*



The Elephant

## Deadline extended for Takoma Park Folk Festival T-Shirt Design Contest

The deadline for the Takoma Park Folk Festival T-Shirt Design Contest has been extended until June 20, the organizers announced last week. "Due to a problem with the Festival's website, some people have been unable to access the contest's rules and entry form," said Kevin Adler, Festival chair. "We want to encourage as much participation as possible, so we feel that it's fair to extend the deadline for two weeks."

The winning entry for the Festival

will be used for t-shirts sold at this year's Festival, and the artist will receive \$200. Designs should reflect the music, dance and cultural heritage displayed at the Folk Festival. A panel will judge the entries on originality, artistic merit, suitability for reproduction on a shirt, and reflection of the themes of the Festival. Full instructions are available at [www.tpff.org](http://www.tpff.org) or by sending an email to [info@tpff.org](mailto:info@tpff.org).



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