

A Tale of Two Roads

A short drive along South Orange Avenue transports you from a promising past to a troubled present.

BY PETER GOLDEN

TAKE A RIDE UP SOUTH ORANGE AVENUE FROM the Vailsburg section of Newark to Glenview Road in Newstead, the hilly top of South Orange—only 2.7 miles, according to the odometer. But during your ride across this busy strip of Essex County, you cross a bridge between two worlds, past and present.

Yesterday sits right at the corner of Sanford Avenue. Sacred Heart Church, a marvel of Italian Renaissance-style architecture built in the 1920s, seats 2,500 worshippers. Glancing heavenward at the apostles etched in the stained-glass windows, you see sunlight transform into rainbows.

Today is a little harder to find here, but you'll spot it right on South Orange Avenue, a stone's throw from Sacred Heart, welded to a tall pole. The sign warns DRUG SALES IN THIS AREA ARE VIDEO TAPED AND REPORTED. Then you notice that the storefronts along this urban stretch of the avenue are protected by metal shutters. Maybe you remember that last summer an 84-year-old woman died here after somebody snatched her purse and ran over her with the getaway car.

If you live here and yearn to move up in the world, you head west along South Orange Avenue. For a century it's been the traditional route traveled by the Irish and Italians leaving the Ironbound section of Newark for Vailsburg, where they purchased tidy houses and grassy yards with enough room to view the sky. Vailsburg was once home to many of Newark's police officers and firefighters, a neighborhood of churches and grocers and barber shops and movie theaters and bars that cashed paychecks and served good food. "That's how I remember it," says 35-year-old Jimmy Cryan, whose father, John, owned Cryan's Pub. "We stayed in Vailsburg until 1980, and I hated to leave. But it wasn't the same. Too much crime,

and most of the customers moved away."

John Cryan relocated his family and his business to South Orange, opening Cryan's Beef & Ale House a couple of blocks off South Orange Avenue. Jimmy owns the place today, a happy landmark in South Orange Village, the center of my teenage universe back before some madman invented the mall.

Driving west on the avenue, you discover that only a few blocks separate city and suburb. The village seems to rise up like a tree-shaded kingdom, with its lovely houses, quaint village center, and spacious parks for sledding and Little League baseball. It was a post-war American Dream town, where one's childhood was supposed to ride on in memory as vividly as the autumn scent of burning leaves. Although this illusion didn't survive the three decades between the annihilation of Hiroshima and the frantic U.S. exit from Saigon, the surface tranquility remains.

Gazing back down toward Vailsburg from the corner of South Orange Avenue and Glenview Road, you wonder about the historical riptides that forever altered these 2.7 miles. James Howard Kunstler, author of *Home From Nowhere* and other books on the decline of American cities, believes the changes began after World War II. "This nation decided to become a drive-in utopia," Kunstler says, "and the move away from cities to the ersatz countryside of suburbia was subsidized by federal government policy in the form of mortgage guarantees, low-interest loans, and highway-building programs."

The 1967 riots in Newark didn't help. Twenty-six people died; 1,500 were wounded. Private property damage surpassed \$12 million. More than 1,000 businesses were destroyed.

ABOVE: A sculpture titled *Hatteras Dunes* at Kroll Plaza in South Orange.





Afterward, the westward migration turned into an exodus. The African-American population of South Orange grew to 31.3 percent in 2000, up from 3.4 percent in 1970. This demographic shift has been even more dramatic at Columbia High School, which serves South Orange and neighboring Maplewood. When I graduated from Columbia in 1971, only a handful of my classmates were black. Today that figure exceeds 50 percent.

How comforting to think that blacks and whites have found a semblance of Dr. King's dream in South Orange. When hip-hop star Lauryn Hill, a town resident, won the 1999 Grammy Award for Album of the Year, there was an integrated outpouring of pride. And property values still climb, due in part to the NJ Transit train that reaches Manhattan in 34 minutes.

But one senses more history in the wind. At a board of education meeting in May, community leaders and residents alleged that nonwhite students at Columbia were more likely to be disciplined and less likely to be assigned to honors or Advanced Placement classes. If all goes well, adjustments will be made. If not, perhaps more people will find themselves standing on South Orange Avenue, turning their eyes west.

Peter Golden wrote about his 30th high school reunion in the September issue. He grew up in Maplewood.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The avenue in Vailsburg; Sacred Heart Church; A sign of the times; The avenue passing South Orange Village Hall.

