

A major revival is under way among the University's across-the-street neighbors as new and existing owners pump life into businesses that appeal to students and non-students alike.



Turning the **C**ORNER



After a long sleep, Campus Corner is back—bolder, brassier and more appealing to a new generation of OU students and Norman residents.

The commercial shopping district, the University's neighbor for nearly 90 years, historically has harbored basic services, eclectic shops and student gathering places, with businesses coming and going regularly over the years. Survivors have weathered vast changes in the University, the economy, consumer shopping preferences, postwar demographics and the fate of the OU Sooners.

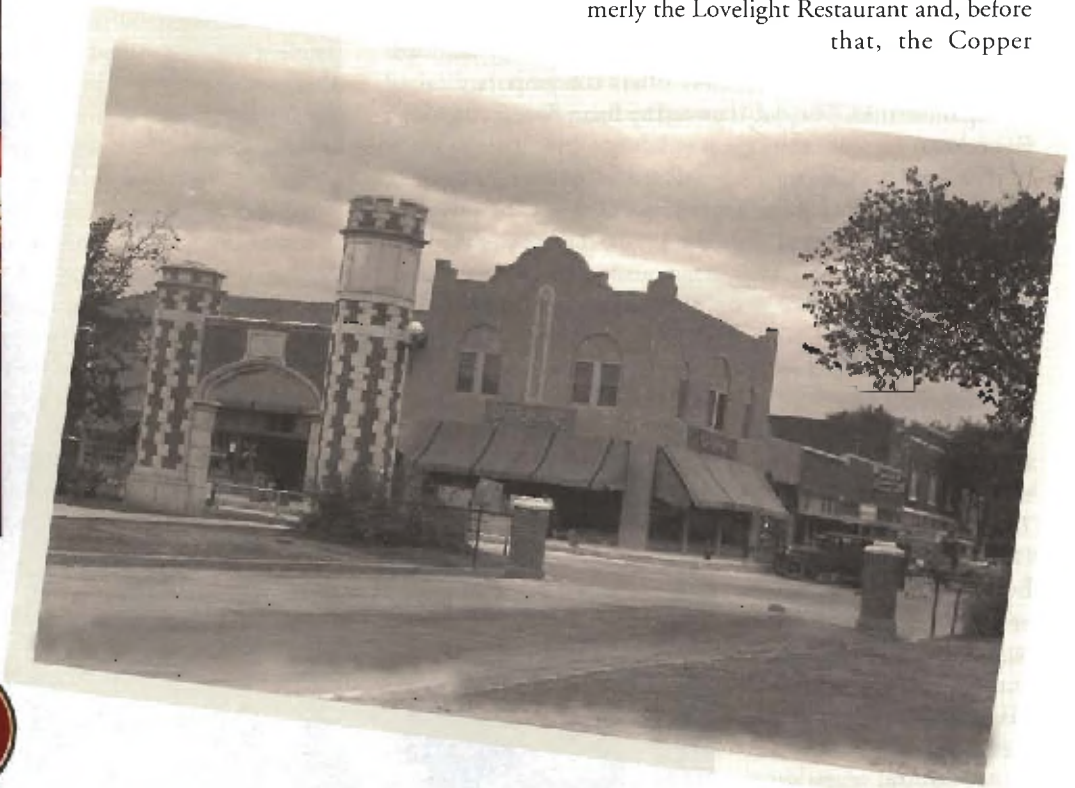
This time, however, major developments on "the Corner" have resulted from a quiet revolution. Properties are being consolidated, with their owners organizing to deal with long-standing challenges. Funds are being set aside for area improvements.

The Corner is undergoing a building boom and establishing new businesses known to draw today's consumers. Big, splashy sports bars—lunch spots by day and student hangouts by night—have been the first wave of businesses calculated to "turn the Corner."

Louie's Deli & Bar occupies the former Campus Corner landmark Town Tavern at Asp and Boyd. Owners Hal Smith and Sooner football coach Bob Stoops are adding a pool room next door in space that had been an ice cream parlor.

Around the corner on Asp, the old Quarterhouse is being gutted for the new Logan's Sports Bar. Across the street, Al Eschbach's Hall of Fame Sports Bar & Grill opened last year in what many years ago was a TG&Y variety store. Owners are Eschbach, a longtime local radio sports personality, and Howard Klubeck, who also owns Othello's, the Italian restaurant at 434 Buchanan that Patsy Benso operated for 30 years.

Another sports bar, Malone's Cavern, tucked in between Asp and Buchanan in the old Walter Mitty's location, is near La Luna Mexican Restaurant (formerly the Lovelight Restaurant and, before that, the Copper



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Up and coming hot spots like Al Eschbach's Hall of Fame Sports Bar & Grill are breathing new life into properties along Asp Avenue.

Kettle). Malone's is next door to Sugers, a club featuring "exotic dancers" that has held a long lease on the Corner.

Other dining and entertainment establishments have emerged or undergone renovations over the past year. At 747 Asp, in an art deco building with a rooftop patio that for many years was University Cleaners, the Seven47 offers contemporary casual dining and drinks. The club is owned by Brian Bogert and Court Roueche.

The Red Dirt Café was reopened as the Red Dirt Bar & Grill, purchased by Rob Goodner from Tim O'Brien. The anchor of the Corner's music scene since the 1980s, the site was the local landmark Liberty Drug, where a famous soda fountain attracted hordes of sailors and bobbysoxers throughout World War II.

Moe's Southwest Grill opened in December 2004 at 788 Asp. Owner Tom Howard specializes in custom-prepared Mexican and American fare with extended hours to 3 a.m. Thursday through Saturday to accommodate overflow from the clubs, as does Lori Treisa's Ruby's All Night Diner at White and Buchanan. Treisa also operates The Deli, a late-night bar that for years has featured some of the best-received musical groups in the area.

At 750 Asp, where several small restaurants have failed in recent years, two young chefs have opened the Turquoise Café. Rich Hull and Adam Westby



blend their backgrounds in French cuisine with Southwest ingredients to keep the 20-seat establishment swarming with breakfast and lunch patrons. At 217 West Boyd, Gino Rosani has completed an extensive remake of New York Pizza & Pasta, adding more upscale, "genuine Italian" fare and a full bar.

Campus Corner has suffered its share of wrenching change since the early 1900s, when most OU students lived north of Boyd and passed through the district on their way to and from classes. In 1929, according to newspaper accounts, a fire destroyed most Campus Corner businesses on the west side of Asp. The shops were rebuilt, just in time for the Great Depression.

Most Corner buildings have been renovated many times, some approaching a century of commercial use. Owners and tenants have found it necessary to demolish interior walls, rewire, replumb and essentially rebuild to meet changing city codes.

After World War II, a new generation of students on the GI Bill strained the resources of the University and Campus Corner. Student housing shifted from boarding houses near the Corner to on-campus dormitories. Fraternity and sorority houses also left the area to concentrate southwest of the campus. Students had cars, and parking, an afterthought in earlier days, became a necessity.

In the '70s, retailers began a long westward progression to malls and strip centers with better access to the newly built Interstate 35. Mobility came with a more casual life style. Many men's and women's clothing stores on Campus Corner, long at the forefront of elegant fashion, moved away or simply closed for good.

The McCall family had three such establishments, two on the Corner and one downtown, the last closing in 1991. "It used to be, men wore suits of clothes—students, too," the late Sam McCall lamented then. "Most people just don't wear suits anymore."

Generally, Sooner football breathed life into the Corner with victorious game-day crowds pouring through the shops and frequenting

Rich Hull, owner and chef of Turquoise Café, left, and sous chef Adam Westby play to a packed house for breakfast and lunch at 750 Asp.



Harold Powell opened a men's apparel shop on Boyd Street in 1948, the company growing into a fashion trendsetter for both men and women throughout the country. The Powell family has had a presence on Campus Corner since 1927.



Mariah Pinkerton, above, and her mother, Barbara Fite, offer an eclectic blend of home furnishings, antiques, jewelry and contemporary clothing at Antique Garden, 323 W. Boyd.

the restaurants. But when the Sooners lost, so did the Corner. A few special events like music festivals and an annual bicycle race drew spectators and shoppers, but OU holidays were bleak times for Campus Corner businesses.

Forerunner of today's sports bars was Town Tavern, whose blurry 50-year history and OU football were inseparable. The tavern was common ground to students, athletes, beatniks, hippies and punk rockers, as well as artists, townies and game-day celebrants, who came for the beer, camaraderie and "the finest greasy spoon menu in town." The walls of Town Tavern were covered with plywood panels listing Sooner game records, year by year.

Longtime owner Ernie Wilson, who operated the tavern for 19 years, sold out to Bette Mafucci in 1976. In mid-1988, tax problems forced the sale of Town Tavern and its fixtures, including the yellow, smoke-coated Sooner schedules, which fetched a hefty price.

In the early '80s, Campus Corner merchants and property owners began to feel the bite of diminishing revenues and the failure to maintain the area's infrastructure. Many complained of the need for more parking and the city's neglect of street maintenance and services. As late as five years ago, Campus Corner was plagued by problems of deteriorating property, darkened streets, crumbling sidewalks, vandalism and other crime. The Campus Corner Merchants Association struggled to find long-term solutions.

The turnaround began in mid-2001, when the City of Norman replaced sewer and water lines on Buchanan Street and reconfigured Asp Avenue to handle two-way traffic. In 2002, the Norman City Council designated Campus Corner a "tax increment district" with the ability to set aside some tax revenues for common area improvements—utility work, lighting, security systems, landscaping, signage, traffic controls, parking, curbs and sidewalks.



A stabilizing influence on the Corner began in 1927, when Elton and Ruby Powell purchased the Sooner Shop, a drugstore and soda fountain, later the Town Tavern site. After returning from military service in 1948, the Powells' two sons, Dee and Harold, launched long business careers on the Corner.

Dee Powell opened a popular soda fountain and card shop known as Dee's, in business for 37 years at 333 West Boyd. Later Dee's soda fountain was replaced by a grill that grew famous for Sunday morning breakfasts and charbroiled hamburgers.

Harold Powell began Harold's Men's Apparel in 1948. The flagship store, which later included women's wear, remains at 329 West Boyd. Harold's stores proliferated throughout the country, and the company recently was sold to a Dutch corporation. The corporate headquarters of Harold's Stores Inc. had been the former Boomer Theater on Asp, which had ceased showing motion pictures by the mid-'70s. The building is now vacant, awaiting some new purpose.

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From left, Rainey Powell, Judy Hatfield and David Box represent a new generation of property owners who are investing personally and professionally in the revitalization of Campus Corner. The trio have renovated existing properties and attracted new businesses to the historic area.

Over the years, the Powell family acquired a substantial stake in Campus Corner, their 28 holdings dominating Boyd Street, most of Buchanan and much of Asp. Harold Powell's son, Rainey Powell, manages 329 Partners, the family's real estate business. The management group's priorities are renewing storefronts, attracting promising new tenants, completing major renovation projects and adding new parking spaces.

The Powell group still owns Harold's Outlet Barn (a site formerly Rickner's Book Store and later Ratcliffe's) at 575 South University Boulevard. In earlier days, the location was known as the Tee Pee Building, where an upstairs dance floor was a center of campus social activity.

A passionate new voice joined Campus Corner property owners in mid-2001. Norman Realtor Judy Hatfield and talent agency owner David Box formed a partnership to purchase several properties on Campus Corner from absentee land-

Tobin Vigil, the owner of Buchanan Bicycles since 2001, has brought a fresh look and a new breed of bikes to the shop that opened in 1973.



lords. They now own buildings occupied by Brothers Eatery & Pub and La Luna Mexican Restaurant on Buchanan Street, the Sunshine convenience store, Victoria's, Ruby's All Night Diner, The Deli and six loft apartments on White Street, along with Malone's, Sugers, Turquoise Café and parking lot properties on Asp. Box also owns the Satellite Building on White and Asp and his talent agency building at University Boulevard and White Street, across from the First Presbyterian Church, established on the Corner in 1951.

"I think we can recreate Campus Corner and make it better than it was," Hatfield says. "The charisma of Campus Corner is returning."

Among other property owners involved in Campus Corner improvement are Lawrence and Edna Earle Webb, who own six storefronts on Asp, where for 33 years they operated The Webb, a popular women's shoe store. "We're glad things are picking up," Edna Earle Webb says. "People are spiffing up their properties. I'm so proud."

Jim Miller and his father, the late B.C. Miller, owned Miller's Bike Shop on West Boyd Street for many years. The bike shop closed, and the property leased to U.S. Cellular last year. Jim Miller and his wife, Deanna, own several buildings on Boyd and along the east side of Asp.

The Millers also own a vacant lot at Boyd and DeBarr Streets and have attempted unsuccessfully to get the property zoned for a parking garage. "If Campus Corner needs help, it needs parking," Miller says.



Campus Corner has been defined by White, Asp, Boyd and Buchanan Streets and University Boulevard. In the early '50s, retailers on the Corner numbered as many as 140. That number has declined to about 75 today, primarily because shops and restaurants have

grown larger. Some have survived long-term, defying the turbulent changes around them. Most are “niche” businesses offering products or services not easily duplicated or found elsewhere; a sampling reveals the wide range of these unique enterprises:

- Nancy Russell has operated Cookies-N-Cards for 21 years from various locations on the Corner. Her shop at 754 Asp is crammed with imaginative gifts from around the world, hand-made jewelry, greeting cards and her own home-baked cookies, brownies and cheesecake swirls.
- Keith Allen, a former director of OU Student Activities, and



Tamel Sisney, manager of OU Authentic, organizes an inventory heavy on crimson and cream for the Sooner faithful. The store specializes in equipment and gear worn by Sooner legends.

two buddies opened Brothers Eatery & Pub on Buchanan Street in 1983, gaining fame for copious piles of crayons and paper tablecloths for doodling, yard-tall flagons of beer and hamburgers named for OU coaches. Today, Allen is sole owner of Brothers and a satellite, Stepbrothers, at 423 Webster.

- Joe Walden started Campus TV on White Street 45 years ago. In 1993, he switched from repairing television sets to selling accessories such as drumsticks, guitar strings and repair parts for musical instruments.
- Jim Greenshields has serviced long-obsolete typewriters for over 40 years. He still repairs the noisy iron monsters at Greenshields Typewriters & Printing on White Street, but he makes his living from job printing.
- In 1993, Emilio Salinas opened Pepe Delgados, an authentic California-Mex restaurant at 752 Asp. Last year Delgados expanded into a building next door and added a bar.
- Also in 1993, Manila Whitehorse opened a small haircutting salon, Take Five Hair Company. The two-level salon on Buchanan Street now has 16 chairs. Last year Whitehorse also

opened CUT, a five-chair shop, just up the street in Harold’s Square.

- Beth Talvitie has owned Deco Dence, a retro clothing and accessories shop for 17 years. The shop, now at 307 White, brims with women’s clothing, gifts, books, lamps and many remnants of 20th-century fads. While cheered by the distinct upswing in traffic on the Corner, she worries that the big sports bars dominating the area may be a mistake. “Do we want another Bricktown?” she asks. “The bizarre thing about all this: There are no bookstores left on the Corner. Don’t students read anything besides textbooks?”

Shops specializing in licensed OU apparel, souvenirs and memorabilia have long drawn Sooner fans to the Corner, especially on game days. By far the oldest is Grover Ozmun’s Balfour of Norman, in business for 30 years, now located on West Boyd. Merchandise ranges from sportswear to tailgate party supplies with a variety of Greek-letter gift items.

Ozmun’s competition is clustered around the corner on Asp. At OU Authentic, owner Jeff Grantham specializes in “game-used” athletic gear, some of it purchased from the OU Athletic Department. Owner Suzy Canon is known for making OU shirts, flags and windsocks for Suzy’s, which also carries its own laser-engraved glassware. In addition to standard Sooner wear, Maria Porkka and Helen Wolney, owners of Apothem Sooner Sportswear, stock hand-made lampshades and pillows and do custom embroidering.

Retail fashion stores are making a comeback on the Corner. Savvy, a women’s clothing store, has settled into

763 Asp. Bethany, a new women’s accessories store, will be opening next door.

Two years ago, Barbara Fite moved her Antique Garden shop from a west Norman strip mall into the original John A. Brown department store building on West Boyd, stocking it with artfully designed settings of new and antique furniture and accessories from the Paris Flea Market and other world centers.

“When we moved here, sales reps called this ‘the death corner,’” Fite says. “But I think this is one of the prime retail spots in Oklahoma. Campus Corner has tons more charm than Utica Square in Tulsa. It’s more like Highland Park in Dallas.”

Fite insists people are tired of “big box” stores and shopping malls. “They want the unique shops and small restaurants. The Corner just has inherent charm. It’s got that excitement and vitality.

“Campus Corner has the feeling it had 30 years ago.”

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