

My Center City Rocked in the Sixties

By Bonnie Eisenfeld

When I tell people I have lived in Center City Philadelphia since the mid-sixties, they usually say, "Oh you must be so excited by all the wonderful changes since then." Yes, I love all the new restaurants now, and the truth is that I thought Center City was pretty great back then also.

We had a lively social scene, with Friday after-work happy hours and weekend apartment parties where people met each other in person and then phoned each other on landline telephones. There were no answering machines or voicemail; if we weren't home, the caller just tried again later. Dates resulted from friends' introductions (sometimes blind dates) and meeting people at work.

We had noteworthy traditional restaurants including two named Bookbinder's, each claiming to be the original; Arthur's, where tuxedoed waiters made fresh Caesar salad tableside; the Three Threes, housed in a rowhouse at 333 S. Smedley Street; the Happy Rooster with its French flavor; two Pubs serving London broil, baked potato, and a wedge of iceberg lettuce topped with Russian dressing; the Pub-Tiki, offering Polynesian ambience, wonton soup filled to brim with meat and vegetables, and a pu-pu platter of appetizers to share; and Da Vinci (gourmet Italian).

Musicians such as Dizzy Gillespie, Maynard Ferguson, and Lou Rawls performed at jazz clubs—Pep's and the Showboat. We had a choice of many movie theaters, the Theater Guild series of first-run plays at the Forrest, the Philadelphia Orchestra performing at the Academy of Music, and "little theater" at Plays and Players. On special occasions, we went to the Latin Casino nightclub at 13th and Walnut. Although most places frowned upon unescorted women sitting at the bar, a few places were known to attract singles: McGillin's Old Ale House (still there), the



Easter fashion show in Rittenhouse Square, 1969 – "Semifinalists for fashion excellence in the teen-age young lady group included two pants suits and twins in identical outfits in the Rittenhouse Square Easter Promenade. Pants suits are, judges decided, 'not really appropriate' for Easter Sunday," reads a contemporaneous caption.

Venture Inn, and the Bellevue Court. The Gilded Cage coffee house featured folk music performers and no alcohol.

We had authentic Jewish delis with interesting characters staffing the counter; Taylor's Country Store with a pianist performing during lunch; Kelly's on Mole Street (later the Oyster House); and Chinatown. On Sunday morning my friends and I would eat brunch at Day's Deli, 18th and Spruce. On a work day, we often ate a quick lunch at Woolworth's five-and-dime-store counter. We would shop for food at Great Scot (now Rittenhouse Market), and buy fresh tomatoes, corn, and cantaloupes from New Jersey farmers' trucks parked on the street.

On summer weekends, there was a mass exodus to the Jersey shore, and Center City seemed like a ghost town if you were unlucky enough to be left behind. For those not exiting the city, Fairmount Park offered live music at the Robin Hood Dell and theater-in-the-round at Playhouse in the Park.

We shopped in person for clothing and household items at four department stores:

Wanamaker's, Gimbels, Lit Brothers, and Strawbridge & Clothier. We would go from department to department, trying on, charging, and sending. Other retail stores included Peck & Peck, Bonwit Teller, Blum's, and the exclusive Nan Duskin for women; and Brooks Brothers (still open) and Jacob Reed for men. Each retail store had its own charge card, good only at that store. If we didn't pay our monthly bill on time, the store would close the account.

We received news through newspapers, radio, and network TV. At that time, Philadelphia had a second daily paper, *The Evening Bulletin*. We also had the weekly *Welcomat*, covering local news and the arts.

There were no ATMs so we had to cash checks at banks or supermarkets. If we ran out of money by Sunday when neither of those was open, we would amuse ourselves by going to the Art Museum and walking along Boathouse Row, or staying home listening to music on large vinyl platters played on turntables attached to multi-part stereo systems with huge speakers and reading the Sunday newspapers. Those were the good old days!

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