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PHOTOS BY CAMILLE BRECHT

The signposts of history hugging the margins of 63rd Street are easy to miss.

The wooden marker that highlights the intersection with the dusty Santa Fe Trail juts awkwardly from the lawn slab in front of a UMB Bank. The ornate metal placard that commemorates Big Blue Battlefield, the site of a Civil War clash, is dwarfed by the 18-wheelers rumbling in and out of a Pepsi distribution center.

In recent years, it has become a *Pitch* tradition to get out and explore our city, one street at a time. In 2004, we went cruising down Metcalf in Johnson County. The following year, we took a jaunt along State Avenue in Kansas City, Kansas. We crossed the Missouri River to North Oak Trafficway in 2006 and returned to the urban-core commerce of Prospect in 2007. Each year, we met colorful characters and discovered untold stories that made us love this cowtown just a little bit more.

This year, as I wandered down 63rd Street, I noticed the hallmarks of history and evidence of the past. I saw the packed parking lot at Fox's Drug Store, where the sign thanks customers for 70 years of patronage. From behind a rusted, chain-link fence, I surveyed the old 63rd Street Drive-In, now scattered with the skeleton scaffolding that hosts a weekly

swap meet. I peered in the windows of an eerie, still-vacant building that's nearly swallowed by vines, where John and Mildred Caylor were murdered in their Bible store in 2004.

But 63rd Street, from Raytown to Mission Hills, still pulses with living history hidden in plain sight.

The other cars in the parking lot leave a wide berth for Dave Wehner. His vehicle is out of context with the Curves fitness center, the Apple Supermarket and the very notion of a strip mall.

Inside Ginger's Restaurant, Wehner is the center of conversation, standing in the middle of a dining area that smells of buttered toast and pumpkin-spice candles. Inside this 40-year-old institution, folks are finishing off their biscuits and gravy, lazily drawing out their conversations to fill their retirement days. None seem surprised that Wehner has arrived in a black buggy made of wood — a horseless carriage propelled by an early 20th-century engine.

"It does a whopping 17 miles per hour," Wehner says, sarcasm thinly disguising his pride.

He's been fixing up hot rods for nearly 35 years. His father was a gear head, he says, inspiring Wehner's love of cars. His first project was rebuilding a 1965 Mustang. There would be plenty of others — a 1939 Ford **continued on page 10**



Sloane (left) and Casey Simmons are creative catalysts.

ROAD MOVIES

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Coupe, the horseless carriage at a car show in Drexel. He sees one and has to have it.

The waitress, Dede Meade, breezes by as the men chat. Always in motion, she chirps greetings to regular patrons and addresses strangers as “darling” or “sweet pea.” She’s been coming to Ginger’s since she was pregnant with her son. He’s turning 30 this year.

Without stopping her rounds, she joins their conversation for a second.

“You took that golf cart and made it into a fire engine,” she says to Wehner. “That was my favorite one.”

Wehner smiles. That one was a beauty. He added a ladder, sirens, lights, the whole shebang. The guys from the Raytown Fire Department took it for a spin on the greens during a charity golf tournament in 1997.

Today, though, Wehner is cruising in the horseless carriage. It’s an odd vehicle to classify, and Wehner says he needs to find out what kind of license plate will let him “scoot” legally down Raytown’s side streets.

But this hot rod was designed to be an outlaw. White lettering across the back bumper reads: “Run and Shine.” Under the black canopy that shades him as he drives, Wehner has lined up six brown ceramic jugs plugged with cork stoppers — his homage to the bootleggers who hauled moonshine during Prohibition.

He would never outrun the cops in this slow-moving buggy.

“But I joke that I’m going to race the Amish and kick their butt,” he says with a laugh.

Catch Neal Clevenger if you can.

Look here first: the Raytown Equestrian Center, a sprawling white barn surrounded by green pastures and hemmed in by a white picket fence that keeps horses from clomping into the parking lot of the medical building next door. On the walls of the center’s office, next to framed photos of award-winning horses and trainers dating back to the 1940s, there are notes from Clevenger.

“This phone is for barn personal use only! No personal call’s aloud!”

No? Try here: Raytown Car Wash, a vintage outfit with a wrought-iron sign and

aging speakers that pipe out tinny versions of “Stand By Me” and “Dream Lover.” The office is locked, but Clevenger’s handwriting is scrawled on a note that promises, “Be Back Soon.”

Late mornings, Clevenger is on duty in the back room of a squat stone building, as the manager of the Raytown Water Company.

His ambition was apparent as soon as he returned from the University of Missouri-Kansas City in 1962 with a degree in a business management. His first enterprise was the car wash. Times were different back then. He bought the ground with a handshake. “I didn’t have a lease,” he says.

He was still a car-wash proprietor when he fell in love with a Japanese karate expert. Mitsue Inaba was on a U.S. tour in the early 1970s when Clevenger’s mom, a martial-arts fan, met Inaba at a Raytown exhibition and then introduced the young athlete to her son. They corresponded for three years before Inaba moved to the small Missouri town to marry the aspiring entrepreneur.

Their empire grew quickly.

“After the car wash, people got to know us,” Clevenger explains. “As the old-timers retired, they’d ask, ‘Would you buy my building?’”

The Raytown Clinic’s current location was the site of the city’s first doctor’s office. Across the street from the water company was Raytown’s first big grocery store. Raytown’s first two-story building — now a shoe store — was a few doors down.

Clevenger owns them all.

“I’ve got a lot of firsts,” he says with a weary smile.

Clevenger bought the equestrian center in 1992. The land had been owned by cigar magnate Miles Moser, who ran a profitable racetrack. The local fame lingered as the track became a horse stable and boarding facility; the manager, Sug Utz, had a reputation as one of the best breeders in the nation. He died last year, Clevenger says.

But that property holds little sentimental value for Clevenger. He grew up on a farm, rode in the local saddle club and trotted in Raytown parades, but unlike the family car wash, the barn is just an investment, something to hold on to until the right developer comes along. Clevenger already has more work than a normal business day can hold.

“They call me a workaholic,” he says. “I should be in AA, but I’m legal.”