

The Virgin Islands
DAILY NEWS
A Pulitzer Prize-winning newspaper

April 2002

REMEMBERING WHEN

By Davida Siwisa James

A few weeks ago I heard a DJ doing a commercial and he referred to the store as in 'the Old Lucy's building.' My mind's eye immediately zoomed in on the street and the building. But that's because I used to shop at Lucy's Market in the late 70s. It occurred to me that anyone just arrived in St. Thomas who wanted to get to that store to take advantage of the super duper savings was going to have a darned hard time finding it. What does in 'the old Lucy's building' mean to you? What does that mean to the person who just arrived a month or so ago, donkey years after Lucy's closed?

Nothing.

The DJ...and the writers of the commercial could have said, it's 'between the Market Square and Mr. Dollar,' or the street parallel to Marianne's going towards the waterfront." Those references would have related the store's location to an existing building or business. But we tend to think of places in relationship to what was and in to the places that are part of our personal history.

I once got into a taxi on a return visit to St. Thomas and I asked the taxi driver if Libra Brothers was still in Sub Base. He whipped his neck around to stare at me and asked, shocked, "what you know about Libra Brothers?" My asking about Libra Brothers restaurant, the once popular spot on the shore side of where the WAPA offices are located, dated me. And when I drive back in that area, it is not the marine supply place I see. I see Libra Brothers and I remember the delicious meals I had there.

The same thing happened when I asked a woman in a waterfront shop if this was the building that used to be Sparky's. She told me that Sparky's was on Main Street and they sold perfume. No amount of assurances on my part would convince her that Sparky's was a popular restaurant that stood for countless years where we now stood. But she had just arrived in St. Thomas a couple of years before. The store that existed was her only reality. It is the same for today's visitors and newer residents who see Lover's Lane. Yet for many of us, we remember Sebastian's and we can still hear the music and the laughter.

We each have these pictures in our minds of what was. We consider places 'new' if they weren't there when we lived there. And we become part of the fabric of a building when we watched it being built. There is a history making effect to watching fields turn into shopping malls and stores that stood as one thing for umpteen years become something else. You don't have to be 60 or 70 years old to have this sense of what was. You don't have to be 'over the hill.' Everyone has this sense of placing things according to our own experiences. I heard a 24 year old man speaking to a friend and he said, "yeah, that was back in the day." That's young people's hip talk for saying, 'that was then. That was a while ago.'" Even at 24, he had a 'back in the day' to refer to.

I wonder how long it takes for us to refer to a place as the place it currently is and not its former life. It is comforting to have seen a place grown and change, especially if the change has been for the better. Though, unfortunately, that is not always the case.

These references to what 'was' are telling of our feeling about a place, but I wonder if it is also exclusionary. Do we care if the people who don't have our history or our memories know how to get to the old Lucy's building? Pretty soon, Cinema One will be another establishment. I believe a church. How many years will it be referred to as the 'old Cinema One' building? Though it may have declined lately, how long will people who had first dates there and met their future wives or husbands there stop thinking fondly of it as the place they stole a first kiss in the darkened theater. When we start off a sentence with, "you know, where so and so used to be?" are we dismissing the person we are speaking with because we aren't including them in what 'is' rather than trying to take them back to what our reality 'was'?

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