

# Northern Kentucky: Cincinnati's Stepchild

By R. L. Katz

What would we do without Northern Kentucky? What if there were no river and therefore no one "across the river"? What a deprivation that would be! Whom could we feel better than? For whom would our skyline swagger? And whom would we be keeping in a state of wide-eyed wonder with the spectacle of our gleaming white, reinforced concrete sports palaces, if not our cross-stream backwoods buddies? What would happen to our keen sense of moral rectitude if it were not being constantly exercised to sweaty indignation by the sirens' songs and goblin howls from the camps of lust and abomination on the flip side of the basin? How could we ever compensate the Runyanesque among us for the loss of our very own deflowered Southern belle, our urbanized version of *Tobacco Road*, "only a block and a bridge away," where old whores with pitted faces sit on the stoops of deserted buildings, fumbling with their silver crosses, drinking and spitting hot old stories out while rag-clad urchins listen?

Alarming enough, there is activity in Northern Kentucky threatening these and other of our most deeply cherished notions about the area. New freeways, industrial development and burgeoning investment potential are changing the face of Northern Kentucky. And the question now is whether the old mythologies, reinforced by Cincinnati-based media and by fond memories of a more colorful era, will survive the onslaught of this economic reality.

"There are two images which Cincinnatians tend to have of us: the mob-operated den of iniquity, or the one you get driving south on I-75, that we are a suburban extension of Cincinnati,"

says Bob Brewster who directs a social service agency in Newport's urban core. "Both images are wrong, and it hurts, because we are Cincinnati's stepchild. We need them."

That three-county area across the river, with its lovely hills, quaint valleys and bewildering variegation of governmental units (over 100 altogether), is not as much Cincinnati's neighbor as its

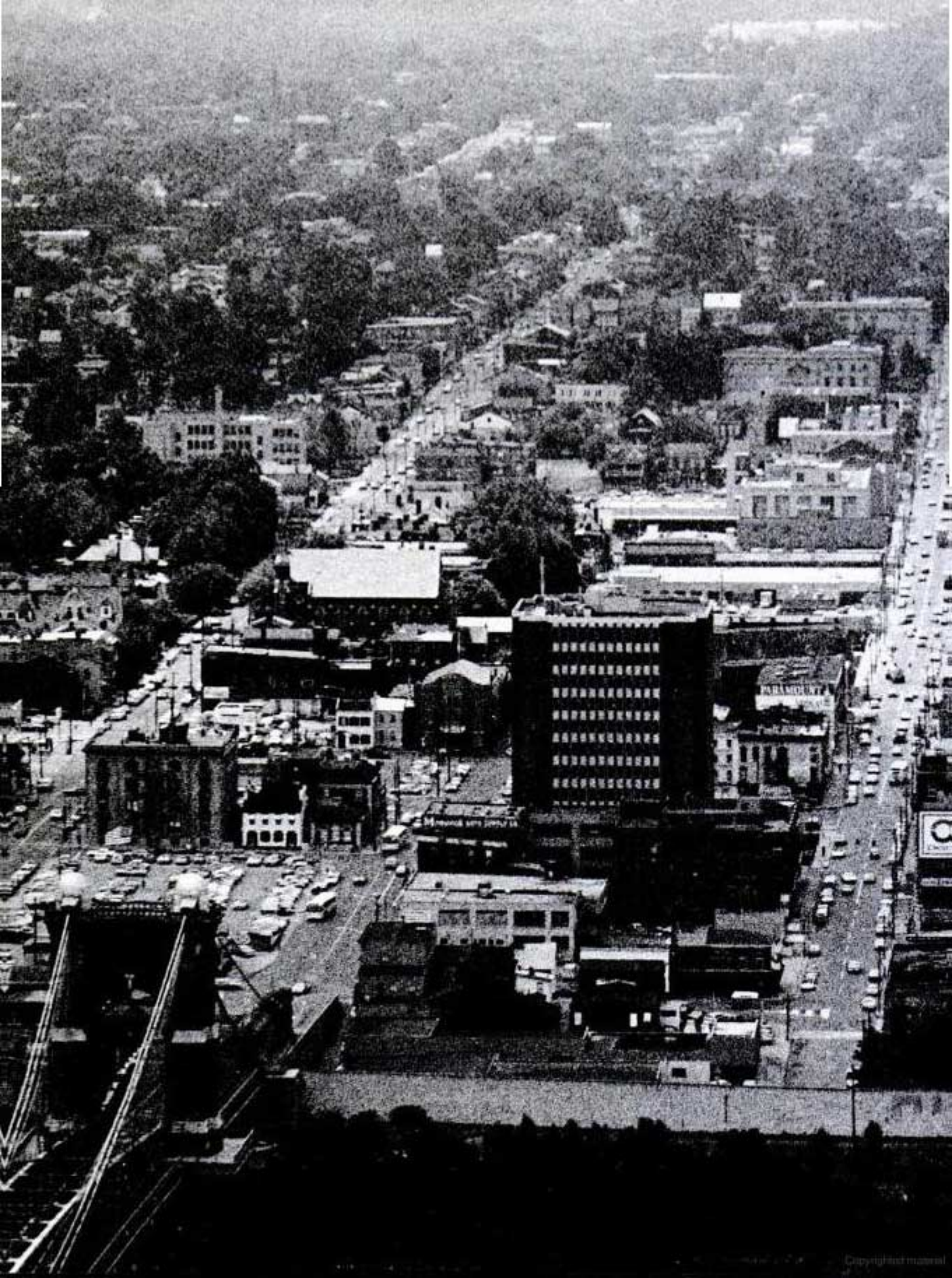


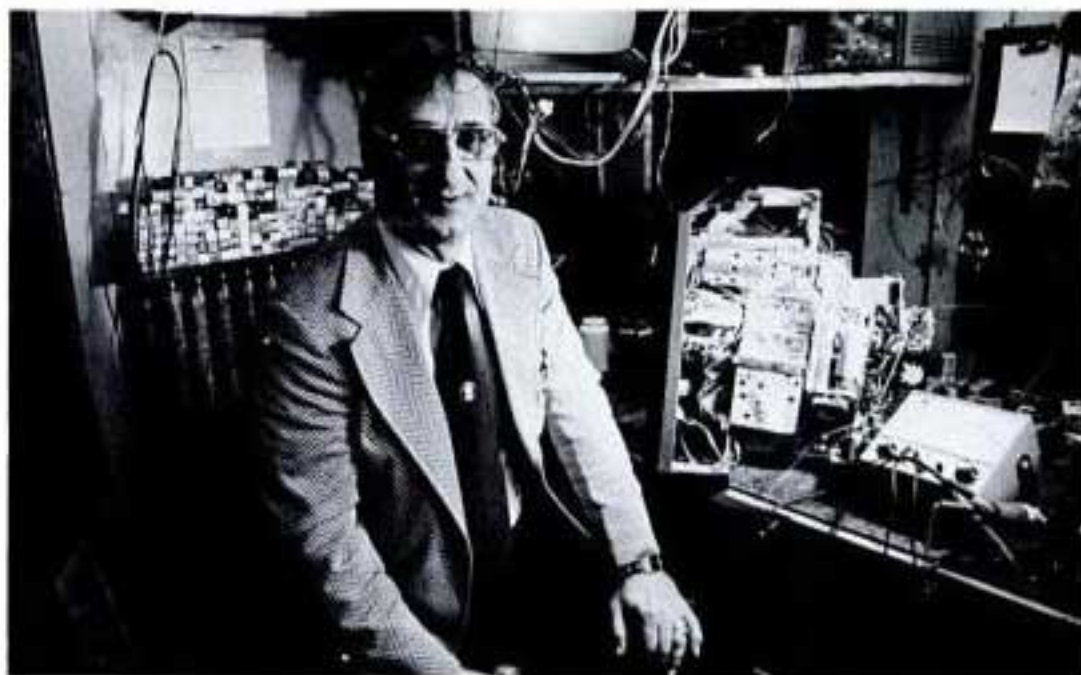
**The Social Worker:** "There are two images which Cincinnatians tend to have of us: the mob-operated den of iniquity, or the one you get driving south on I-75, that we are a suburban extension of Cincinnati," says Bob Brewster, director of Newport's Brighton Center.

economic dependent. And though the manner of that dependency is changing, the fact is not. As the man in the TV ad says, "One of Greater Cincinnati's finest furniture stores is in Greater Covington." It's been taken for granted for years that Northern Kentucky exists, not for itself, but as a service community for Cincinnati. It's a good place to go antique hunting, or to put an airport. And of course, it's been the traditional pit stop for the lusts and fancies of Cincinnati and her visitors. For whatever reason, Cincinnatians simply don't consider Northern Kentucky an independent community. "How seriously can you take a place that doesn't even have its own phone book?" asked a cab driver on the way to the airport.

Cincinnati has directly benefited from this unholy state of things across the river: she became one of the nation's leading convention centers, and it wasn't just the zoo or the symphony orchestra that lured the conventioners. Ironically, revenues from visitors and conventions helped Cincinnati meet the expenses of "good" government, while the mob flourished across the river.

While Cincinnati has brushed off the syndicate crime in Northern Kentucky as "Kentucky's problem," Kentucky legislators have looked on the northern counties simply as "Cincinnati's problem." From the 1920's through the early '60's, the state government in Frankfort neglected Northern Kentucky, a policy which was encouraged by the syndicate bosses who pulled the strings. There's an old saying in Northern Kentucky: "The Licking is a wider river than the Ohio." It illustrates graphically the rivalry and mistrust which have characterized the intra-county politics of the





**The Mayors:** Top, Newport Mayor Johnny "TV" Peluso, who feeds stray dogs and distributes Wheat Chex and free shoes at election time, keeps office hours as mayor in the back of his TV repair shop. Above, Covington Mayor George Wermeling, who earned the nickname "King George" when he wore a crushed velvet suit to his inauguration, believes Covington, asleep since the 1920's ("like Brigadoon"), is beginning to wake up.

area and contributed to their sense of being cut off from the rest of Kentucky.

But this image is at long last changing. At 28, Terry Mann, a state legislator from Northern Kentucky's 67th District, is representative of the new wave of young politicians who are giving Northern Kentucky a new look and fresh hope.

"We've been Frankfort's stepchild, too," says Mann, "but it's been partly our own fault. Since the Northern Kentucky caucus was formed five years ago, we've been making more unified proposals to the state legislature, and it's beginning to pay off." Indeed, a free-way system, with massive interchanges which generate marvelous accessibility (and spectacular accidents), is being gouged out of the Kentucky hills. Commercial development is booming near Florence, and an industrial site is

planned for South Covington. It has become fashionable to speak of the new spirit of cooperation which imbues the leaders of Boone, Campbell and Kenton counties. Promotional schemes abound.

"Millions of investment dollars are already pledged," says Walt Donlevy, director of the Northern Kentucky Chamber of Commerce. "Optimism is the prevalent feeling over here. And it could have happened 25 years ago if Cincinnati's leaders had been more cooperative." It almost looks as though Northern Kentucky is ready, if not completely to cast off its stepchildhood, at least to make it pay off, in terms of positive communal values.

But there is one major problem: an image hangover from the old days of high rolling and low living. "Sin City" is a deeply entrenched myth, and it is not difficult to understand why. New-



port, as everyone knows, was the center of a multi-million dollar syndicate gambling operation, with its concomitant infrastructure of bookmaking, prostitution, and systemized payoffs to police and elected officials. It offered everything in the way of high-class entertainment and sophisticated pleasure that Las Vegas does now. But things got ugly, and when Bobby Kennedy's Justice Department came in to put muscle behind George Ratterman and the Committee of 500, the syndicate pulled out of the Kentucky hills and headed for the Nevada desert. Nonetheless, many people, in Cincinnati and elsewhere, still think of Newport as a latter-day Gomorrah. And if Newport is Gomorrah, you know what that makes Covington. It's quite an embarrassment to some people. Others are downright angry about it.

"We have been victimized by the news media," a former Newport city official told me. "Every new, young reporter the *Kentucky Post* gets writes a 'Sin City' piece within six months. Newport's still living down headlines from 30 years ago."

**"That three-county area across the river . . . is not as much Cincinnati's neighbor as its economic dependent. And though the manner of that dependency is changing, the fact is not."**

One of Newport's most consistent headline makers is Johnny Peluso. Johnny "TV" Peluso, Newport's volatile 53-year-old mayor, feeds stray dogs in front of his television shop, distributes Wheat Chex and free shoes at election time, and writes letters to the governor, pleading with him to look the other way so that old folks in Campbell County can play Bingo ("It's one of the few pleasures they have left in life . . ."). He also has a \$21 million scheme for a luxury hotel, which would be connected to Cincinnati's riverfront plaza by cable cars, and would, he insists, save Newport. The scheme gained national notoriety as the subject of a recent *New Yorker* article. He makes great copy.

"I've got nothing to hide," says Johnny "TV", but he does object to all the large, very wet blankets which he claims the press throws over any entrepreneurial thrust in Newport — most of which he seems to be behind.

"The news media have harped on Newport to the point where they've killed it . . . Why don't they ever print any of the good things we've done?" One tends to be skeptical: when Peluso ran against Ratterman in that celebrated election, "they" — the *Kentucky Post* — endorsed Peluso's political opponents. As he describes his adversary relationship with that paper, it is easy to see



**The Poverty:** Left, a back alley in Newport. Above, a doorstep on Central Avenue in Newport. "I am very angry about the old 'Sin City image,'" says Bob Brewster of Brighton Center, a social service agency also located in Central Avenue. "There is crime here, but it's poverty-related crime."

why Peluso makes so many people nervous: "They always endorse the other man, but I tried to be fair with them. Fourteen years ago, when I put up two men, a mayor and a city commissioner, I told them then they weren't going to beat me. I'll get them both elected, and the people don't even know them, but they'll put faith in old Johnny TV. And I got them both elected!" It is in tones of genuine outrage that he adds the kicker: "Then they had some guy buy one of them out and sold me down the river, and I couldn't get the job done."

It's apparent the job hasn't been done in Newport. The city continues to be haunted by decisions (or the lack of them) which were made 15 years ago during the gambling heyday. For example, the expressway ramps built in that time span, strangle the city rather than open it up. Newport also suffers from an unusual form of urban blight: there are dozens of condemned and abandoned buildings, many of which are the former sites of the now-departed industry of illicit pleasure.

If Peluso's lively past and continuingly controversial conduct make his testimony suspect, there are other, younger members of the Northern Kentucky scene, voicing similar concerns. Bob Brewster is one of these. Brewster, executive director of Newport's Brighton Center, is a social work chieftain whom the business people and "concerned citizens" of the Community Chest admire. Intelligent, businesslike and committed, he has made Brighton Center one of the most respected social-service agencies on either side of the river. And yet Brewster agrees with Peluso about some crucial matters, and, to some extent, supports him.

"I am very angry about the old 'Sin City' image," Brewster said. "The 'mob-operated den of iniquity' is a joke . . . It's simply not here anymore. George Ratterman was elected when I was a sophomore in high school. There is crime here, but it's poverty-related crime. How can you get good law enforcement when there isn't enough money to pay police an adequate wage?"

"I blame the people of this county," Brewster added. "They organized to fight the evils of big gambling, and then they forgot about Newport. They should renew their commitment . . . They can't just let this city drown. But the 'image' thing is a problem."

The "image problem" also severely affects Newport's relationship with the rest of the state. "There are intelligent people in mid-state with whom I have contract dealings who just won't come to Newport," says Brewster. "I have to go down there. They're afraid. They actually think there's complete debauchery in the streets! People such as myself are viewed as missionaries, in the Salvation Army sense, which, of course, couldn't be farther from the truth."

Maybe Brewster's mid-state associates have been reading Frank Weikel. Basically a pedantic gossip columnist, Weikel does reflect the traditional attitude of Cincinnatians to things "across the river," an attitude that can be both patronizing and pejorative. Consider this example from a recent column: "Last Sunday I suggested Covington, Ky., police look into the activities of a former police official from their community for gambling activities." By a brilliant sleight-of-syntax, Weikel conveys the impression that the Covington police run a "community for gambling



interests." (Sounds like a resort for retired gangsters.) He goes on to inform Newport police that "a former police officer of their community is rumored around Newport night-life circles as having a prostitution operation in their community." Using the time-honored technique of good pornography, Weikel simply supplies a formula of loaded words and leaves it to the imagination to flesh out the details. He knows his readers have been trained to accept as natural and pleasing the association of such words as "Newport," "police," "former officer," "prostitution" and "gambling."

The good news in the same column is even more disparaging. To show that he is aware of the "positive side," Weikel congratulates Newport police "for a long overdue crackdown on persons drinking in cars in parking lots behind liquor stores and on nearby streets," a statement that does nothing to repair previous implications that Northern Kentucky police are a brotherhood of gamblers and pimps but does reinforce our image of Newport as a square-mile, human sewer. Finally, he adds this last item: "Incidentally, many of those buying the booze and drinking it in public places are from the Cincinnati area and not Newport citizens." Of course! Isn't that what Newport's for?

Clearly, there is a double standard which governs public opinion. Conduct which would be inexcusable in Cincinnati is winked at if carried out in Northern Kentucky. A case in point is the political resurrection of Gerald Springer. Having resigned from Cincinnati City Council after it was revealed that he had consorted with a prostitute in Northern Kentucky, Springer was returned to office by an electorate hardly known for its liberal or indulgent tendencies. Certainly, the election outcome made good sense: honesty, energy and talent ought to be the only criteria for public office, and Springer came through the incident with none of these qualities impaired. But what if Springer's dalliance had taken place, not as it did, at the President Motor Inn in Highland Height, with its associations with spectacular vice, but, say, at the Carrousel in Roselawn? Would the public reaction have been the same? Most likely not. At the very least, more people would have been surprised.

After all, the image of the fleshpots of Northern Kentucky is enshrined from early adolescence within the erotic reveries of male Cincinnatians. If your locker-room stories didn't have Newport or Covington as the *mise-en-scène*, they just didn't make it. Perhaps the most telling indication of Northern Kentucky's stepchild status is its susceptibility to such an unflattering popular myth. One of the reasons for this image is Northern Kentucky's lack of direct ac-



**The Affluence:** Antebellum houses in Covington's Riverside Drive and Second Street area are being renovated. Left is Laidley House, 404 E. Second St. Top, Fallis House, 412 E. Second St. Above, Carneal House, 405 E. Second St.

cess to the mass media, notably television. Lacking their own local TV outlets, Northern Kentuckians depend on the three major Cincinnati stations for news, and they feel slighted.

Broadcasters, required by the FCC under threat of license revocation to ascertain the needs of the community in which they operate, are very touchy about this. So, every year at license-renewal time, TV brass seek out and record the ideas and requests of community leaders and citizen groups, including those in Northern Kentucky. One of the things Northern Kentucky Caucus members have been asking for is coverage of Kentucky's General Assembly in Frankfort, a means, they feel, of making the legislature more responsive to Northern Kentucky's needs and of combating the extraordinary voter apathy. (Some candidates in the last Newport City elections — in a city of

roughly 25,000 — won with less than 1200 votes!).

"It falls to the legislators themselves to inform the voters in Northern Kentucky about what's happening in Frankfort," says Terry Mann, "because we're largely without the tool of electronic media." Ed Winterberg, a Covington lawyer running for Congress from the fourth district, concurs: "Kids here will know the name of Ohio's governor, but not know who Kentucky's governor is. But I do think the Cincinnati TV people are trying to give us more coverage."

"We go to Columbus all the time, but Frankfort might as well be Frankfurt, Germany," explained one Cincinnati news anchorperson. "We're just not committed to really covering Northern Kentucky, even though we say we are. We throw them a few sops, but normally it's the 'bomb approach.'... Something has to be fairly sensational to get

us over there." And then he added a variation on a familiar theme: "We virtually ignore Covington, but we'll go to Newport sometime because it's more colorful."

Even one of the newspapers, *The Kentucky Enquirer* — a limited operation with only a Sunday and once- or twice-weekly editions — goes piggy-back, wrapped around the Cincinnati parent publication, *The Kentucky Post*, however, is a fully staffed independent operation, the only major daily in Northern Kentucky. It is the exception which proves the rule about the community's lack of media power.

Under the editorship of Vance Trimble, who came to the *Post* after winning a Pulitzer Prize for his work in Washington exposing congressional nepotism, the paper has acquired a readership of about 60,000 and a reputation for sensational journalism. "We are an aggressive paper," says Dave Brown, associate managing editor for news at the *Kentucky Post*. "We cover only Kentucky news and can afford to give local stories more space and a lot of follow-up."

There is too much follow-up and aggressiveness to suit some readers. The Elsmere police recently filed a strong complaint with the owners of the paper, Scripps-Howard, charging that the *Kentucky Post*, by printing the explicit details of a sensational rape case and virtually identifying the victim, seriously undermined their ability to persuade future rape victims to come forward. The *Post* of course, has been zealous in the cause of exposing police corruption, and there is not a great deal of affection for Trimble on the part of the Northern Kentucky F.O.P.

Whatever the objections to its style of reporting, there is no doubt that the paper has been an accurate, factual and comprehensive source of information to the community which it serves. However, the paper probably plays less of an active role in the affairs of the community than it would like. The candidate it endorsed for the last Covington mayoral elections lost badly, and Peluso positively delights in their opposition. Perhaps this is because the citizens of the area, although they read it, don't really accept the *Kentucky Post* as being their paper, but instead, seeing the *Cincinnati Post* lurking within, perceive it as one more indication of their community's supplemental status.

One of the organizations most concerned with that status, or at least increasing its cash value, is the Northern Kentucky Visitors and Convention Bureau. The Bureau, directed by Reginald Smith, recently sponsored a 'community awareness' program, at which more than 50 area leaders, representing business, industry and citizen's groups, met to set goals and priorities for a massive promotion-renovation scheme

to be carried out in West Covington. The plan is to turn a 40-block area into something called "Rhinelander Park" and to attract dozens of restaurants and shops, all with a "German Village" theme.

Smith evinces the no-nonsense approach of the professional PR man: "We have a product to sell here, and it's a good one. For too many years Northern Kentucky has been the backdoor to Cincinnati. But there's no reason it can't become the front door." Covington, it sounds, is being packaged and promoted like some sort of Kentucky Fried Schnitzel. Perhaps the reason "doors" enter so strongly into Smith's imagery is that his organization is funded out of the tax collected on hotel rooms.

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The riverfront is being polished up, too. Cincinnati certainly has nothing like Carneal House (1815), the Fallis House (1850), or the Laidley House: three of the beautiful ante-bellum residences in Covington's Riverside Drive and Second Street area, which are being renovated as prestige luxury apartments. Lee Wilson, of the Northern Kentucky Heritage League, goes out of his way to be gracious in the comparison: "Of course, nobody lives there, but Dayton Street isn't bad . . . if you like late 'bastard' Victorian."

Add to all this activity the city's plans for a shopping mall on Pike Street and an industrial park in South Covington, and it's apparent that much is happening in Covington. But not, except for the modest Liberty Street Mall project, in Newport. Why? Part of the reason is image, Newport's reputation as Sin City. But in addition, Covington has a long successful career in annexation; Newport has not. Covington has developed a high level of citizen participation; Newport has not.

"People don't know that Covington has \$100,000 homes . . . in Kenton Hills," says George Wermeling, Covington's 40-year-old mayor. Wermeling earned the nickname of "King George" from his constituents when he wore a crushed velvet suit to his inauguration ("coronation," some say). He is enthusiastic, and his eyes sparkle when he speaks of Covington's prospects and of the central role played by annexation.

"During the period from 1900 to 1925, Covington tripled its population and quadrupled its land area. Then came the Depression and the gambling, and

people just lost interest. The city went to sleep, like *Brigadoon*. It's just now awakening. Covington should be the residential and commercial hub of Northern Kentucky." Since the early '60's, Covington has annexed surrounding area and now boasts an area of nearly 10 square miles and a population of more than 50,000. It is now the second largest metropolitan area in Kentucky, second only to Louisville. Not only does this give the city a sizable tax base, including some high-income citizens, but it makes Covington eligible for direct federal Community Development grants, as Newport is not. Most of the organizations with titles that begin "Northern Kentucky . . ." have their offices in Covington, one indication of the city's prominence.

This is not to say that Covington doesn't share many of the same problems Newport has. The syndrome of poverty-related crime may very well be worse in Covington. But the average Covingtonian is not subject to the alienation which Bob Brewster describes: "Newporters tend to laugh at themselves. They've seen their community caricatured for so long in the press, change seems impossible."

"I think we feel better about ourselves than they (Newporters) do. . . . We feel we have a better quality of elected official, police and so on. Of course, Cincinnatians tend to lump us together. I get kidded about living 'overseas'," says Tom Beehan, president of the Covington Town Meeting and one of many Northern Kentuckians who work in Cincinnati.

If you ask such Northern Kentuckians where they live, they give you the name of a city. If you question people from any other part of Kentucky (except for Louisville or Lexington), they mention the name of their county. It is a revealing difference. To reach its full potential, Northern Kentucky needs to foster an area-wide sense of community. The best aspects of what is happening in Covington must seep across the Fourth Street bridge to Newport, and the encircling suburb-cities up on the hills must be willing to forego a measure of their independence and come to see the problems of the two riverfront urban areas as their own. The Northern Kentucky Area Planning Commission has already done a study on the feasibility of inter- and intra-county government. Eventually, as economic development continues, there will probably be just one governmental unit for the three counties. And then Cincinnatians will find across the river not a gangster-run playground or a suburban extension — not a stepchild — but a full partner. **J**

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*R. L. Katz is a native Cincinnati and editor of Rivertown Times.*