

Village's immigrant imprint is fading

When Heidi Wooley speaks of her beloved German Village, her words carry a certain wistful melancholy, as though it might actually once have been possible to build a Mannheim just south of Downtown. "This whole thing has become gentrified and changed," Wooley said yesterday from her Thurman Avenue home.

When she came to the village, in 1965, the ethnic imprint of the immigrant stock that had populated Columbus' South Side a century before was yet quite apparent. Her predecessors had stuck it out through the ugliest years of anti-German sentiment during World War I, when books were burned, when Schiller Park became Washington Park, when befuddled recent immigrants were herded to the lawn of the Statehouse and pressed to swear oaths of allegiance to their adopted nation. Not born until 1939, in Mannheim, Wooley never knew the anti-German hatred in what is now German Village and was too young to grasp its genocidal counterpart in the anti-Semitic venom of Hitler's rise.

"I remember that we had to run to the air-raid shelters," she said of one of her earliest recollections. "When I was 4 years old, my mother and I had to go down into the bomb shelter below our apartment." The apartment building was hit, part of it collapsing and trapping Heidi and her mother in the basement shelter.

"We had to be dug up from there," she said. "It took several hours. One or two months after that, we moved in with relatives in the Black Forest and lived there until the war was over." After the war, Wooley's mother, Evelyn, who had been a commercial translator in peacetime, returned to that work as U.S. occupation forces employed locals at American military bases. Eventually, Heidi, who spoke German, English and French, began leading tour bus trips to Bavarian castles and other German historic sites. She met and began dating Columbus native David Wooley, a GI intrigued by her country's rich history and art.

"I'm going to have to go back home," he told her in 1960. "Do you want to go with me?"

They married in a small German parish church, moved to America and eventually to German Village. "It looked deplorable," she recalled. "But there were people who were really dedicated. The German Village Commission has worked very hard."

Yet she sometimes feels like an outsider in the historic district that takes its identity from her ethnicity. "The people I'm closest to are fading," she said. "The people I see out when I'm walking, they're mostly professional people — you have to be to live here — and many of them are nice."

Today, David is in a nursing home.

Heidi sits among her German newspapers and magazines, watching the world on Thurman Avenue roll by. She is a long way from qualifying as the last German in German Village, but the crowd is thinning. Retired columnist Mike Harden writes Wednesday and Sunday Metro columns.



MIKE HARDEN | DISPATCH

Heidi Wooley, born in Mannheim, Germany, married a U.S. soldier after World War II and moved to German Village in 1965. She has seen the enclave shift from gritty to gentrified.