

Still Standing

South Park has gone from a sheltered suburb to a crime-ridden war zone to a near wasteland. And Burger Park has managed to survive it all.

By Katharine Shilcutt, published: January 13, 2011



Burger Park's dinner rush starts at 5 p.m. and stays busy until it closes at 7:30 p.m. (photo by Groovehouse)



Martin Luther King was once called South Park Boulevard; it was changed in 1977. (photo by Katharine Shilcutt)



The thin burgers are made with fresh, never frozen, beef and plenty of cheese. (photo by Groovehouse)



Seven days a week, the Burger Park food stand turns out 400 to 500 burgers a day. It isn't part of a chain, national or regional. It isn't known for its gourmet cuisine. It doesn't have gleaming granite countertops or even indoor seating. But for Texans who like their patties thin with plenty of cheese and fixings, Burger Park produces a very nearly perfect burger.

Its owners are a couple, Oak Kim and her husband Gil, who came to Houston from South Korea in August 1979 and purchased the place from its original owner in 1995.

They have operated all this time in a part of Houston world-famous for its notorious excesses. Burger Park, on MLK Boulevard, is in the heart of South Park, an area bounded by Loop 610 and Sims Bayou, Cullen and Mykawa. South Park became the stuff of legend as it almost cannibalized itself in the '80s and '90s with violent robberies and drive-by shootings. The pedophile rapper South Park Mexican didn't help its reputation when he was convicted and sent to prison for 45 years in 2002.

Some say the crime levels are down now because there's nothing of worth left to steal.

Yet some have stayed the course. And so did this lone hamburger stand with its fries and slushies and special \$4.32 deal for a combo — catering mainly to neighborhood people. The couple is Korean-American, the neighborhood almost solidly black, although Hispanics have been moving in increasingly. Whites are missing, long gone to newer suburbs.

None of that matters to the 62-year-old Kim. She says she loves her customers and they love her right back.

"I don't have any problems at all," she says about the neighborhood. "I hire security guard because you never know. Nowhere is safe. But we never had a problem."

"People are sometimes drunk, I just talk to them nicely. Sometimes they ask for free food, I give them a little package. I have good reputation. Mostly people are very friendly." When her husband, Gil, is out for the day, the customers ask about him. When he's there, he's dispensing hugs to customers in line. That is, if they don't get to him first with embraces of their own.

In fact, the Kims hope that their son will take over operation of the place in about five years and carry on the tradition. They look beyond the bombed-out yards, the abandoned elementary up the street, the rusting signs and see not only an acceptable present but the potential, if not the promise, of a good future.

It's hard to believe it now, but South Park started out as a suburb. The neighborhood was created in the 1950s for middle-class whites and their baby boomer kids. A reflection of the postwar time period and of the homebuyers themselves — who were mostly returning war veterans — the streets in South Park are named for famous World War II battles and generals: Pershing, Mountbatten, Guadalcanal, Iwo Jima and even Bataan, the infamous death march in the Philippines.

The one-story homes had cedar shank siding; some more affluent homeowners were able to afford aluminum. Lawns were well-kept and children rode their bikes everywhere. Famous people were growing up here: movie actress JoBeth Williams and basketball's Clyde Drexler.

"Everybody looked after everybody," recalls Ralph Gonzales, 60. Gonzales, my stepfather, grew up in South Park until graduating from Sterling High School in 1968 and moving to Alief, where he became a Houston Police Department officer soon after graduation. He's been married to my mother for 20 years now, and it's always been known that he grew up in South Park. But he rarely speaks about it apart from my mother teasing him about being head cheerleader at Jones, and one of the most popular guys in school. Memories of his old neighborhood seem somewhat painful when viewed through the lens of what South Park has become today.

When I told him that I'd been visiting a burger joint in his old neighborhood for a few months, having fallen in love with their burgers and slushes, he was initially irritated with me for going over there alone, especially at night. Once the paternal protectiveness subsided, he began to reminisce with me about South Park one evening. Gonzales is a big and boisterous man, six feet tall with a gun still permanently holstered on his hip. But he speaks softly about South Park.

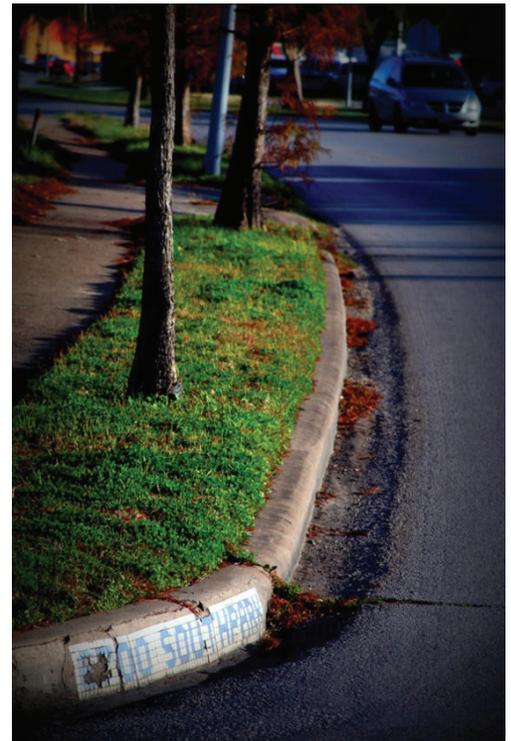
"I never felt alone or frightened. There was some adult out there always looking after you. As a kid, I felt safe."

Before Burger Park, burger stands like Price's and Kip's Big Boy ruled the neighborhood, as did places like the one-screen King Center Drive-In and Palm Center, a majestic shopping center on Griggs Road anchored by a JCPenney. Boy scout lodges and small, family-owned businesses rounded out the area, with the occasional pawn shop and drive-through liquor store attesting to the solidly blue-collar nature of the residents.

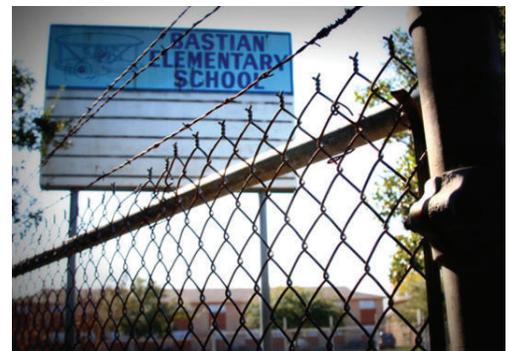
In 1968, the street that Burger Park is located on was still called South Park Boulevard. Loop 610 — just to the north of Burger Park — was still brand-new. It was the construction of the Loop that many former residents believe was the first nail in South Park's coffin. "You would've thought that it would make the area grow, but it didn't," Gonzales said.

"The Loop took away from the area. It stripped it of its innocence and made it a part of the city, with all the traffic coming through. Sure, the Loop was a good thing because you could get around now. But it opened up South Park to a lot of outside influences."

The forced integration of Jones and Sterling high schools in the 1960s hastened the changes as whites scattered to newer suburbs like Pasadena



You can still see the old South Park street lettering in certain places. (photo by Katherine Chilcutt)



The old Bastian Elementary is now closed and has fallen into disrepair while it waits to be sold. (photo by Katherine Chilcutt)



The brand-new Bastian Elementary on West Bellfort is a sign that South Park is not forgotten. (photo by Katherine Chilcutt)

and Pearland.

Pam Redd's family moved to South Park in 1967; they were the first black family on the block.

"We had very welcoming neighbors on both sides," she recalled of the neighborhood itself, just down the street from Burger Park. "Not everybody was friendly, of course, but our immediate neighbors were."

The 1973 graduate of Jones High still remembers Burger Park. "They had the best burgers. Ever."

"It took forever for them to make the burgers, but it was so worth it," Redd recalled. "I always got extra onions on mine. You could smell the burgers for blocks." She used to sit outside under the broad awning or on the curb on Dieppe Street, eating and talking with friends.

With a laugh, she remembers cutting class and walking to Burger Park from Jones High School to get her burger fix when it was nice outside. "We would skip school to go there and bring the teachers back a burger. They just looked the other way."

She has some less happy memories as well, as when one of her next-door neighbor's friends came over and accused her of being "an 'N-word' lover," Redd recalled. "We were in the garage playing and this little girl came over, saying these nasty things. My parents had always told us that if someone said something like that, to just walk away, because it's not worth it. They're just ignorant." So Redd and her friends did just that: ignored the little girl. But Redd's little dachshund mix Skippy had other plans.

"Skippy ran out and bit her!" Redd says, still seemingly stunned by her dog's actions. He was on a leash, Redd says, but the tiny dog still managed to bite the girl hard on her upper thigh. "My neighbors defended us," Redd remembers, when the little girl's parents came around later that evening to find out what had happened. "They told her parents that she'd been harassing us, and that was the end of it."

Redd, now 55 and the principal of Tipps Elementary in the Cy-Fair school district, says South Park used to be like a small town where people could walk anywhere, even at night.

The last of her family moved out when her mother sold their old house five years ago and moved to Beaumont. It was the end of an era, and although Redd still has friends in the neighborhood, things just aren't the same. "I was sad," Redd says of the news stories about South Park in the 1980s and 1990s, of the way the neighborhood and the homes deteriorated. "Those were those three-bedroom, one-bathroom little 1950s houses, and they were very nice at the time we moved in." She continues: "But the people who moved in after didn't have those same values. They were renters and maybe qualified when they shouldn't have. Either they didn't know how to keep them up or they just couldn't afford to take care of the houses."

Redd lives in Cy-Fair now, in the same neighborhood where she's the



A few bricks are all that's left of HPD's Park Place substation in this now-vacant lot. (photo by Katharine Shilcutt)



This abandoned grocery store was once a hangout for nearby Jones High School students. (photo by Katharine Shilcutt)



The Brighter Hope Missionary Baptist Church is set in a quiet field not far from Jones. (photo by Katharine Shilcutt)



A hand-painted sign greets church visitors. (photo by Katharine Shilcutt)

principal of Tipps Elementary School. “I moved out here,” she says, “to try to get that same feel we had in South Park, like being in a small town but not really.”

Dave Straughan, who retired as a sergeant in the robbery division at the Houston Police Department in 1993, and whose rookie beat included South Park, says that by 1971, the tides had started to shift. Like my stepfather’s family, many of the neighborhood’s original residents had left. “Integration was still fairly new and there was still a lot of fear,” Straughan recalls. “People just picked up and moved.”

“There were still some white neighborhoods north of Griggs, but everything south of that had gone black. Professional blacks, you know. Nurses, teachers, city workers, the like. It was a mixture of good, working-class people.” But, he says, “it was pretty much the same as all the districts at that time in south Houston.”

To Straughan, though, it was more than just white flight that was responsible for the changing face of South Park. “I think it was the age of the neighborhoods by then,” he says. “The working folks moved out into the suburbs and the people that moved in were of a lower income. The houses by then were deteriorating; they required a lot of maintenance to keep up.”

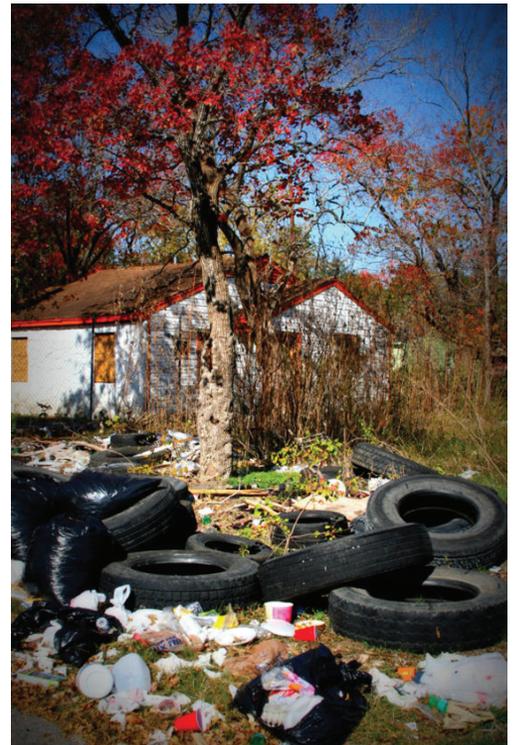
At the same time, South Park was beginning to get what Straughan calls “interesting.”

Just to the east, “Telephone Road was wild and wooly around the Loop,” Straughan remembers. “Southeast Houston already had a reputation for being pretty rough, and Telephone Road had a national reputation for being pretty wild. It had good neighborhoods and good people, but it had pockets of people that were known for living on the wild side.”

“It kept the police hoppin’ and busy,” says Straughan. In 1973, he and his partner were called to a drugstore where a man robbing the pharmacy for drugs started pistol-whipping patrons at the counter for extra money. Straughan and his partner got there while the man was still inside; a chase and gunfight ensued. Police cornered the robber at a nearby gas station and shot him to death. “He made a last stand and he lost. Poor people on the Loop had to see it all,” he says sadly.

Burger Park started out differently as well. Founded in 1968, it was originally called Bonus Burger. It sold cheeseburgers for 25 cents and was owned and run by an older white man named Harry Reesby. It was more than 20 years before Reesby put burglar bars on its windows for the first time — the neighborhood violence in the ‘80s prompted the change.

The Kims bought Burger Park in 1995, after Reesby had passed away. The Kims had originally run a cafeteria in the Heights, but were looking for a busier restaurant that would allow them to support their college-aged kids. Although the parking lot wasn’t as large as Oak would have liked — “We have a small parking lot — five or six cars and it’s full — so sometimes they park double. We try to buy next-door property, but they



Many front yards and vacant lots are strewn with trash and old tires. (photo by Katharine Shilcutt)



A large portion of the homes in South Park are abandoned. (photo by Katharine Shilcutt)



A retro sign stands alone where Loma Linda Mexican Restaurant once served guests. (photo by Katharine Shilcutt)

don't want to sell it." — they settled in and quickly became fixtures in the South Park neighborhood.

They didn't make too many changes to the existing operation.

"I add on chicken nuggets and chicken sandwich [to the menu]," Oak says. "When I took it over, they don't have anything else, just hamburger and French fry. Slushes were there, but only one machine. Right now I have two machines." They churn endlessly throughout the day, dispensing a drink that can best be described as a slightly softer New Orleans-style snowball in a cup. Strawberry is the best-selling flavor.

Their other two changes involved the burger recipe: Reesby used 75/25 beef. Oak uses 85/15; less fat, but without sacrificing flavor. And, more important, the meat is never frozen. "They used frozen meat, but I use fresh meat. I pay more," she says, "but they deliver it every morning."

Inside, the quarters remain cramped, the ordering line snakes around a single metal bar mounted to the floor. Three successive layers of floor have been worn down over the last 42 years, back to bare concrete in places. Paint on the metal bar and the metal grate that separates customers from the cashier has worn away, too.

It's a cash-only place where almost everyone gets the cheeseburger.

By the late 1980s, South Park was no longer considered a suburb, as neighborhoods that close to the Loop had more or less become consumed by the larger urban cityscape. Instead, it was dominated by drive-by shootings and drug dealers, especially along Burger Park's street: Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard.

Gonzales, who retired as a Houston Police Department sergeant after 30 years on the force, describes a very different South Park during that time from the neighborhood he knew as a child.

"In the '80s and '90s, it was bad. HPD was chasing guys up and down Bellfort and MLK. Folks were knocking over liquor stores, hijacking people," he says. Neighborhood Nights Out, organized to help residents prevent crime by getting to know one another, were rarely attended as people were too afraid of leaving their homes at night. Violence pervaded the entire community. Deaths grew increasingly random and senseless.

Three days before Christmas in 1989, Howard Garrett Jr., not yet 19 years old, was shot to death after a fight at a car wash on MLK. He was just blocks from his home on Pershing. Barely a year earlier, another 18-year-old had been found beaten to death in his very own home, just off MLK. Kenneth James Moore had laid undiscovered in his small apartment until a security guard found him one night during rounds. A year prior, a 36-year-old nurse named Barbara Jean Johnson and her 63-year-old mother were shot to death in their car on the South Loop that forms South Park's northern border, as Johnson's children — only ten and 16 years old — watched from the back seat. The violence was everywhere, rampant.



This store's notice to would-be troublemakers goes mostly unheeded. (photo by Katharine Shilcutt)



There are very few grocery stores in South Park. This one is abandoned. (photo by Katharine Shilcutt)



Many of the residential homes along MLK have been converted to businesses. (photo by Katharine Shilcutt)



Burger Park is quiet between its lunch and dinner rushes. This is the best time to sneak in for a bite without a wait. (photo by Katharine Shilcutt)

In the late 1980s, a Houston Chronicle article looked at reasons why blacks chose to remain in increasingly dangerous neighborhoods like South Park. One resident, Ernest Blackmon, told the reporter how he felt more comfortable in a “mixed environment” with both whites and blacks — which South Park still had to some degree back in 1987 — but that “the primary advantage of living among whites is that such an area is less likely to fall into poverty and disrepair.”

Blackmon further stated, “The chances are better that your children won’t be eaten up by rats and roaches. If you live in an all-black neighborhood, the people downtown want to do very little for you, even in this which is an historical area.” He had no idea how right his statement would turn out to be only six years later.

In 1993, the City of Houston was debating how to spend a \$57.5 million cash surplus under the Lanier administration. By that time, the simple infrastructure itself in the neighborhood — the veins and arteries that run silently under the streets, keeping bathtubs filled and toilets flushing — had become rusted-out and busted up. Councilman Al Calloway wanted to spend the surplus on fixing the “decrepit water and sewer lines” in South Park and its neighboring areas. But — as the Houston Chronicle reported at the time — Calloway admitted that “residents in neighborhoods such as South Park or Sunnyside may die before the projects are done.” The surplus was never spent.

The floods of October 1994 — still remembered for the 25 inches of rain that fell in one day, displacing over 10,000 people from their homes — didn’t help matters. South Park experienced heavy flooding and damage when nearby Sims Bayou overflowed its banks. Many houses and businesses were devastated by the high waters, but very few residents had any flood insurance at all. Some residences and businesses were never repaired and were left to rot. Residents sank further into despair at the brutal waves of destruction that seemed aimed at their community.

A Houston Chronicle article from 1993 described South Park during the early ‘90s solely in terms of violence: “South Park was a war zone, a place of nightly shootings, fistfights, police harassment and strife. There, the right amount of money could buy any weapon, even hand grenades. Seven-year-old children knew how to handle pistols.”

But, Gonzales says, even that period in South Park’s history eventually came to an end.

“The criminal element destroyed itself,” he states, plainly.

“You can only steal so much before it’s all gone. You gonna break into a house already has the door hangin’ off it, ain’t nothing inside but dirt? The bad guys moved on to Alief, Hiram Clark.”

And South Park now? “Pickins is slim over there,” he sighs.

These days, South Park is undergoing yet another change: an influx of Hispanic residents, from 16 percent in 2000 to nearly 20 percent in 2009. That number is expected to jump to 22 percent in five years, while the number of black residents is on the decline: 82 percent in 2000 compared to an estimated 77 percent five years from now. Census data shows no white people living in the area at all.

An examination of average home prices in the area shows that the median home price is \$50,400 — an increase of 15 percent since 2000. This sounds promising until another statistic is revealed: The median income is a mere \$33,196 per year, which is nearly 15 percent less than ten years ago. The most expensive listing for a single family home on HAR.com right now — a completely remodeled three-bedroom house on Bataan with granite countertops in the kitchen — is less than \$78,000, its asking price recently reduced in a bid to attract buyers. The modest house, built in 1955, has been on the market for months.

Attesting to that low annual income is the fact that only 55 percent of South Park’s residents are high school graduates. Part of this anemic rate could be attributed to the number of immigrants who are flocking to the area: The foreign-born population has increased nearly 10 percent in the last ten years. But it also speaks to the disappointing graduation rates at nearby Sterling and Jones high schools. In 2007, the Associated Press in conjunction with Johns Hopkins University pronounced both Jones and Sterling to be “dropout factories” after a study showed that only 60 percent of the entering freshman class actually made it to their senior year of high school, much less graduated. The study further showed that more than half of the students zoned to the two schools voluntarily chose to attend different high schools in HISD.

Residents are still protective of the neighborhood, however. As I drove around to get photos of the old Bastian Elementary School — now replaced by a shiny new building on West Bellfort — people eyed me warily each time I hopped out of my car with camera in hand. One woman pulled her SUV up close to mine and demanded to know what I was doing.

My stepfather was with me in the car that day, showing me his old house on Northridge and pointing out long-gone landmarks. He hadn't been to South Park in years. "That used to be a 7-11," he pointed to a gutted gas station, looking like a scrap heap on the corner of MLK. "It was always getting knocked over like a sumbitch." The woman's angry demands drew Gonzales out of the car, and he strode over to her and explained that he was showing me around his old neighborhood.

Attitudes shifted in an instant as they chatted about old dentists' offices and grocery stores, and camaraderie replaced the mistrust. The residents who still care about South Park are guarded now, hardened by the crime and the drugs that swept through like a maelstrom.

On a recent evening, I took my cheeseburger and fries out to one of the little metal tables that perch under the awning outside Burger Park's front door. The joint was busy, as usual, with people waiting and sweating outside in the heat.

"Watch those fries," came a voice from behind me. "They're relentless."

I turned around to see a man watching me with a smile as I unpacked my burger and handled the fries like nuclear materials. They're always scorching hot, burning your fingers if you attempt to eat them in the first five minutes.

We laughed together, then proceeded to complain about the humid weather for nearly the length of my meal.

As I began packing up my trash to go, the security guard wandered over to me. He's stationed at Burger Park every evening starting at 3:45 p.m. until the stand closes at 7:30 p.m.

"Good evening," he said casually as he ambled over. "Hot enough for ya?"

As we chatted amiably over the remnants of my lime slush, the sweet syrup slowly staining my tongue green, he segued out of nowhere, "You know, I ain't ever seen no trouble out here."

"It was sure bad in the '80s and '90s, but that was a long time ago," he said softly as he looked into the distance.

It seems like a long time ago as you sit at one of the tables, gazing at the blown-out, nearly postapocalyptic scene around you. It's quiet even in the evenings, with only a trickle of traffic cruising by on MLK. All around, abandoned businesses, junked-out cars and empty

houses crest the landscape.

South Park is an overgrown garden these days, its soil only able to be tilled by the most determined or the most desperate. It shows no sign that it will grow again any time in the near future.

Burger Park glows like a beacon amidst the clutter and distress, offering a warm meal at a good price and a sense of belonging that can't be purchased at any cost. Will it still be here in another 42 years? Who knows? Oak Kim hopes so. "Five more years, maybe my son will take it over," she says. He's expressed interest, and she's excited at the idea of a family-run business spanning the generations.

Inside the warm burger joint, men are working the screaming hot, 450-degree grill like a set of pistons. The woman at the register always has a smile for the customers, despite how quickly she works. There never seem to be any parts of the well-oiled machine that fail.

Oak attributes that to the workers themselves: "Most of the workers here are all cousins and sisters. They work here for nine or ten years." She calls them her family. She calls her customers an extended family, and it's clear she values them every bit as much as they do her and her burgers.

"They push me to do better and keep going," Oak smiles.

For now, the little white burger joint stands as a testament to witnessing and weathering transition. Even if everything around it has changed — and even if successive generations of residents or ineffective policies or waves of crime may have failed this neighborhood — Burger Park never has.

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