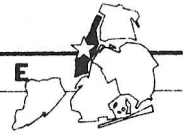


The City

U P P E R W E S T S I D E



It Takes a Village a Year To Unearth Local History



Richard Perry/The New York Times

Searching for the past in Park West Village.

It started with an e-mail over the building list-serve: Does anybody know the history of Park West Village? Winifred Armstrong, a resident of 30 years, knew some of it, and wrote back, and then gave a lecture on the subject. That was how, a year ago, some Park West Village residents turned into amateur historians, pursuing the story of the black neighborhood that existed there until their complex was built in the 50's.

The old community, dating from at least the early 20th century, was centered on 99th Street between Central Park West and Columbus Avenue, now a parking lot and a playground. That stretch of street was literally buried under Park West by one of Robert Moses' slum-clearance projects. The removal of the residents provides one of the most harrowing sections in "The Power Broker," Robert A. Caro's biography of Moses.

The residents say their research shows the community was no slum at all. Early on, they met Jim Torain, who grew up on 99th Street and now lives in the Bronx. "It was an active, thriving, prideful, intelligent place," he said. "We were all interconnected."

He showed the new residents pho-

tographs of the old tenement stoops running down to the Ninth Avenue el, and told them about Coma's, the Greek grocer that gave out friendly credit, the spring dances, the Condor and Python athletic clubs, the Reliable bar, Castle's candy shop, and St. Jude's, the Episcopal chapel.

Mr. Torain said that Billie Holiday's mother had run a restaurant on 99th Street, and that the doo-wop singer Earl Lewis, the actress Butterfly McQueen, who played Scarlett O'Hara's maid in "Gone With the Wind," and James Earl Jones's father had all lived there. Some former residents still hold yearly reunions, he said.

Many others have come forward, offering their stories. So the residents of the housing complex that swept away a bustling neighborhood pursue the history of that buried community. As tenants facing gentrification and escalating rents, they see connecting with the past as a tool for present battles.

"We create our own history," said Ms. Armstrong, who works as an ecological economist at the Regional Plan Association. "The neighborhood has been vibrant and it is vibrant." **ANDREW FRIEDMAN**

The Park West Village Neighborhood History Group was formed to explore the history of Park West Village and the surrounding neighborhood through research, taped interviews, talks, walks and workshops and to make this information accessible through materials collected for the New York Public Library (Bloomingdale Branch) and through publication.