

Monroe St., Downtown Phoenix

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South side of Monroe Street, between Third and Fourth streets, in the early 1950s.

To many newcomers, it must seem as though the Phoenix Convention Center has been on Monroe Street forever, when actually it is an artifact of recent times, a modern monument to downtown Phoenix renewal. Not too long ago, however, Monroe Street had an identity of its own, which evolved from the days when the city numbered fewer than 20,000 people. The street was a place for kids.

This photograph shows the south side of Monroe Street, between Third and Fourth Streets, in the early 1950s. A Sears store can be seen in the distance, on the corner of Second Street. The building topped by a cross is St. Mary's Girls High School, and beside it is an additional building, Madonna Hall.

At far left is a barbershop. Next to the barbershop, but outside the photograph, is a candy shop. All of the businesses were part of a small culture that revolved around Phoenix's schools. Phoenix Union High School and St. Mary's Boys High School were less than two blocks away, and the playground of St. Mary's Elementary School was directly across the street.

St. Mary's Girls High School, built of brick in 1919 and later remodeled, originally housed boys as well as girls. The high school was founded in 1917 and at first occupied the top floor of one of St. Mary's elementary schools.

The school was staffed by the Sisters of the Precious Blood, whose convent house stood at 400 E. Monroe Street. (That building was torn down after having served as the diocesan center for 30 years.) The nuns were successful teachers, especially of professional business practices. Local businesses eagerly hired graduates because

they were motivated workers with solid training and good skills.

The high school remained coeducational until the Jesuits opened Brophy Preparatory Academy on Central Avenue in 1928. Then the boys left St. Mary's en masse, and it became an all-girls school once more.

In 1938, St. Mary's Church opened a boys' high school of its own two blocks away on Polk Street. And in 1944, Madonna Hall was added to the girls' campus. Third Street became an unofficial lovers' lane between the schools and Phoenix Union's students passed by as well.

Victor Kramer, who graduated from St. Mary's Elementary School in the early 1930s, describes below how the barbershop and candy store on Monroe Street served the students in the area.

The barber's name was Newell Cordon, and the kids liked him. He had a nice smile and looked like Bing Crosby. He got lots of business from St. Mary's grade school students; anytime you were there, you were likely to see students waiting to get a haircut. The charge was just two bits (a quarter, for those too young to remember when change was real money) and when you were finished, he gave you a ticket for the candy shop. You took it next door and got your choice from a selected assortment of goodies.

Eventually Cordon closed the shop, probably in the 1930s, and according to Kramer, went into the barber and beauty supply business. Phoenix had a strong barbers union then, and Cordon must have been popular with the members, because the other Phoenix barbers all bought supplies from him.

Time removed the little corner of Phoenix pictured here and made it a place where kids rarely come. St. Mary's Girls and Boys High Schools consolidated, and eventually the Diocese sold the land that the girls' school stood on. It was a sign of the decline of the central city, and the need to build new attractions there.

Phoenix Union, once the mightiest high school in the state with 5,000 students, declined as parents chose the suburbs, and it finally closed. In 1991, the consolidated St. Mary's High School left the area for a new campus farther north on Third Street. And St. Mary's Elementary School, jammed with 800 students in 1950, dwindled to little more than 100 before closing in 1993.

Today, there is little to remind older Phoenicians that the area was once a neighborhood. Only St. Mary's Basilica remains, which time has stripped of its children.