

Cousins Dence King, 10, and D'Anthony Rushon Bryant, 8, wait for their grandmother Delwyn King to finish her shopping at North Hills. The mall, Raleigh's first, thrived in the 1970s as a place to shop and to gather.

ESSAY BY JUNE SPENCE ■ PHOTO BY SUSANA VERA

North Hills: a memoir

Soon North Hills Mall will be no more. In its place will sprout more of the upscale shops and premium offices now encroaching the asphalt perimeter like kudzu. I suppose it's time. North Hills has long been homely elder sister to Crabtree Valley Mall, its demise slow but inexorable. Today its shabbiness is trumped only by South Hills Mall in Cary, the Little Match Girl of retail, and perhaps some of the original Burlington outlets. Citizen Kane (local developer John Kane) and his crew will pretty up the site and no doubt improve it immensely. Soon all will be gilded and posh, and if the rumors are true, pedestrian-friendly and rife with high-density housing and retailers great and small. Still, I'll dearly miss the hulking beige decrepitude that was my marketplace, my town center.

I grew up going to North Hills Mall. I knew it most intimately from the mid-1970s to the early '80s, when I went there with my family. The parking lot teemed with station wagons and VW Beetles then. Raleigh was stolidly middle-class and Six Forks north of Strickland was still Out in the Middle of Nowhere, as in *Why Would You Want to Live There?* Perched on the lip of the Bechtline, the cusp between old Raleigh and new, North Hills was my mall in a way that Crabtree never was and the prematurely dubbed Triangle Towne Center can never be.

North Hills didn't put on airs. Whatever brought the kids was worth doing. Twice a year they used to scatter sawdust on the ground floor promenade and host a petting zoo. One crank of the gum-ball machine dispensed enough feed pellets to fill a child's cupped palm. I learned some important things on these occasions, such as: a. Goats like synthetic fabrics as much as natural ones; and b. llamas spit. Imagine a petting zoo

From Infant to Junior to Misses, I marveled at stuff and disdained stuff and wanted stuff I couldn't have and got stuff I didn't want.



During back-to-school sales, the Record Bar, still open in 1989, gave away book covers featuring diburns.

NEO FILE PHOTO

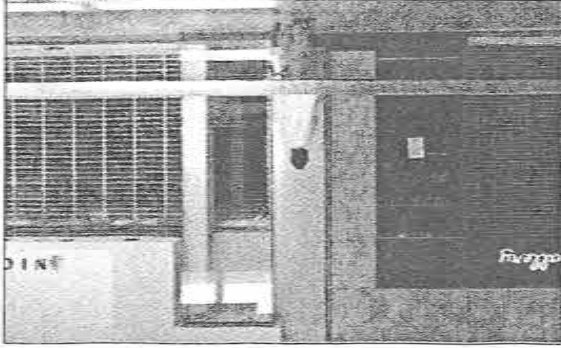
at Crabtree! Inconceivable — unless they were staging some elaborate promotional for pushmina.

I thought my very first Christmas gifts with my own allowance from a long-standing North Hills tenant, World Bazaar — a proto-Pier One. These included a bamboo back-scratcher and a fat monkey carved out of a coconut husk. Likely these items were not on my parents' wish list, but they were well within my budget. The exotic items at World Bazaar fired my imagination; I longed to travel to distant ports of call. Supper at North Hills was generally a

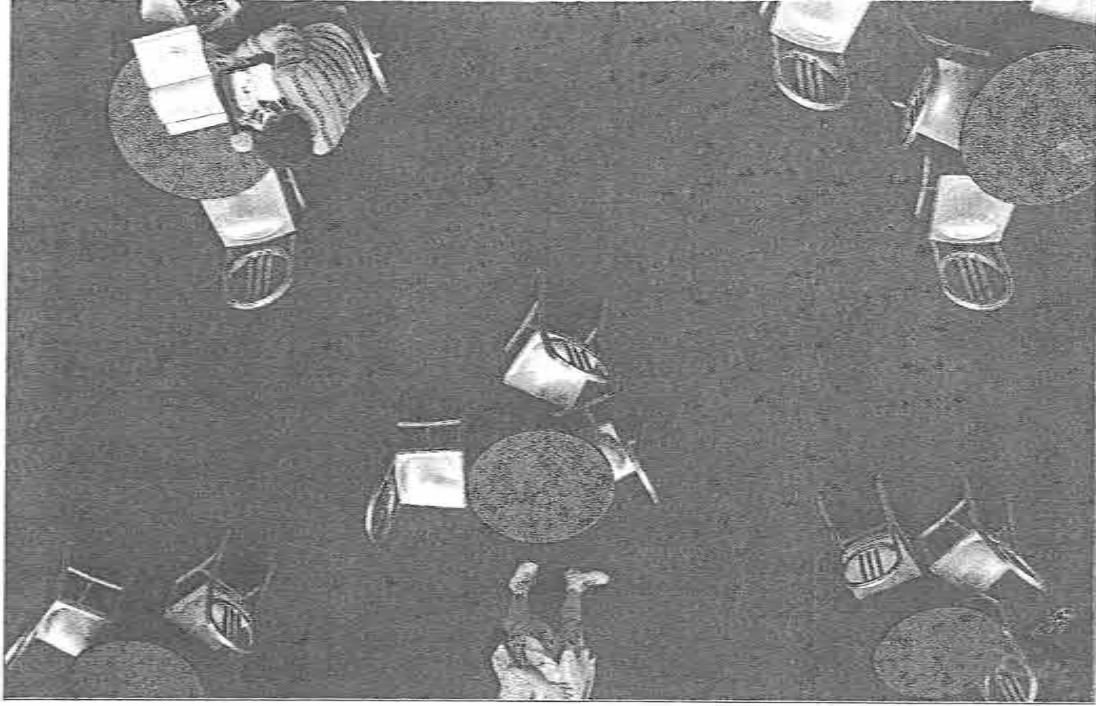
chili dog and fries from Scotty's, or maybe a Chick-fil-A. There was a steakhouse at North Hills, too, but we never went: too expensive. About once a week my family ate at K&W cafeteria. I was nervous giving the servers my order as I slid my tray along the rails. If they asked before I'd chosen, they'd go on to the next person while I hovered there, wracked by indecision, and it was hard to catch their eye again. Sometimes the missed opportunity dictated my choice of entrees: I'd want Salisbury steak, but end up with fried fish farther down the

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Last stop: Woolworth's. Upstairs the powders and perfumes and lotions, plus a small diner with swivel stools. Downstairs the cheap canvas sneakers and bathmats and parakeets and fish.



Shoppers who come to North Hills today find shuttered stores as the mall begins its transition to the new life its owners hope for.



During North Hills' heyday in the 1970s, special promotions and sales drew shoppers to local stores and big chains.

NAO FILE PHOTO

Through the years

1963: North Hills Shopping Center opens at Six Forks Road and the Bellline. It's considered the boondocks.

1966: Ivey's opens.

1967: North Hills

becomes the first

enclosed mall between

Washington and

Atlanta. A newspaper

story announces: "To

paraphrase the old

proverb, there's gold

in them that North Hills."

In its heyday, North Hills

draws shoppers from all over Eastern North Carolina.

May 29, 1972: On Memorial Day, 11 people are

shot, four fatally, by a gunman in the North Hills parking

lot. The shooter, a 22-year-old high school janitor, then

kills himself. No reason is ever found for his actions.

August 1972: Crabtree Valley Mall celebrates its

grand opening.

December 1979: According to its manager,

North Hills Fashion Mall and Plaza closes out the

decade with record sales. J.C. Penney, Ronson, North

Hills Pharmacy and Record Bar complete extensive

remodeling during the year; five new stores open — The

Cheesecake Company, Hooper's ladies sportswear, The

Gap, Joyce-Selby shoes and Ragamuffin, a restaurant.

June 1980: Three North Hills stores — J.C.

Penney, Ivey's and Woodworth — begin regular Sunday

afternoon shopping hours.

August 1980: Developer Ed Richards sells the

mall to KLM Royal Dutch Airlines pension fund.

February 1983: Now 20, North Hills Fashion

Mall begins a major renovation. With the new look, the

mall hopes to attract younger, more affluent customers.

October 1984: North Hills celebrates its "grand

reopening" after an 18-month, \$3 million renovation

that features eight new stores. Raleigh Mayor Avery

Upchurch and Miss

North Carolina

Francesca Adler are

on hand.



NAO FILE PHOTO





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May 1990: Arkansas-based Dillard's announces it will buy Levy's.

1991: North Hills

gets another face-lift in response to the opening of Crossroads and the expansion of Cary Towne Center.

1993: The mall announces that Woolworth will leave to make way for more desirable tenants.

1994: Plans for Triangle Town Center off Capital Boulevard are announced. North Hills Mall is for sale again.

December 1995: North Hills Mall releases details of a three-year, \$50 million expansion to be completed by the end of 1998. K&W Cafeteria closes.

1997: Expansion is delayed until 1998.

1998: Nags Head Properties purchases the mall for \$11.5 million but has no firm redevelopment plans.

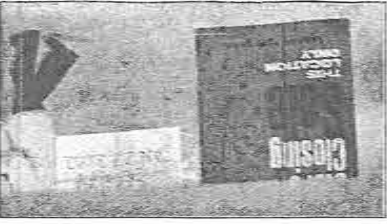
2000: Nags Head Properties seeks to sell North Hills Mall and rename it The Lassiter.

December 2000: Developer John Kane buys North Hills Mall. Kane already owns North Hills Plaza across Lassiter Hill Road from the mall. He'll renovate

March 2001: Dillard's announces it will move to Triangle Town Center when it opens in 2002. The North Hills store will close.

December 2001: North Hills Mall has its last holiday shopping season. Most of the mall will be demolished to make way for larger stores.

January 2002: Neighbors and North Hills loyalists await specifics from Kane about his plans.



COMPILED BY NEWS RESEARCHER DENISE JONES

NORTH HILLS

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line. I would try anything that landed on my tray, right down to the gelatin cubes, but my favorite entrees were the chicken and dumplings or the spaghetti served with an ice-cream scoop. The giuay noodles and sauce retained the shape of the scoop. I'd alternate between slices of chocolate or lemon meringue pie for dessert. All the adults smoked cigarettes, and their smoke mingled freely with the smell of cooked food and a sort of fog hung over the dining room. I did not find it unpleasant.

At summer's end when we went back-to-school shopping, I learned the bynames of fashion. The Gap was for Levy's only then; store-brand knock-offs were subject to peer ridicule. If you were tentative to fads, you might find yourself conspicuously toting a lunchbox when everyone else had gone back to brown bagging, or still scribbling with an erasable No. 2 pencil in a season of erasable Bics. Book bags or backpacks were for a time verboten, carrying more books than could be deftly tucked under an arm suggested you favored learning and put you in the enemy camp. When the right items had been procured, my sister and I would raid The Record Bar for its free book covers printed with album art. In the fourth grade all of my school levels were protected by Shaun Cassidy's smash hit LP, "Under Wraps."

The arts supply store, Hungate's, untitled me with its smoochy charcoal sticks, papers of every texture, and any besawood plank meant for some Latinian construction project. Through glass I could monitor the progress of the adjacent hobby shop's sprawling miniature train set. His expansion across rolling hills of green felt seeming relentless, ever-more my shyness and scrupulous pines, end-to-end bartershops, ice-cream parlors and general stores. Pinky and people frozen in attitudes of greeting, waiting or work. Bright enamel-covered boxes, barely pasting at the station.

Last stop: Woolworth's. Upstairs the powders and perfumes and lotions, plus a small diner with sweet stools. Downstairs the cheap canvas snaz-and neckties and parakeets and fish. We seldom left home needed constant replenishment. When North Hills housed the public library, the arrangement seemed custom-made for my mom being paged over the intercom, my face would burn with shame because she was holding down two jobs while I browsed and dabbled, neglecting my math homework. My then-boyfriend worked at the place that made big cookies, the ones they slice like a pizza. During his tenure the company developed a big granda cookie, but some trademark issue prevented them from calling it granola in their promotions, so they named it Granola-ia and put miscellaneous items in a granola in their promotional items. My sister got her prom dress at Ranson's, a boutique whereupon we quickly lost contact.

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were at opposite ends. By the time Dillard's bought out Levy's, they'd both remodeled, and my mom was living out of state, so she missed out on a mighty clearance sale. Dillard's gutted the place, drew out all the fixtures and furnishings, everything with a friend. We found a lot of torsos, stray limbs. Nothing left intact.

Death in the parking lot

On May 29, 1972, the year Crabtree opened, a 22-year-old school janitor with \$30 he'd borrowed from the bank, paid his father the \$30 he'd borrowed, purchased a .22-caliber Martin rifle and opened fire in the North Hills parking lot. He struck 11 people, wounding seven and killing four. Five, he turned the gun on himself. Nobody knows why there was a lot of shooting going on. People were still talking about the sniper in Texas. George "Segregation Forever" Wallace sent his condolences to the people of North Carolina from his home in Alabama.

My dad's best friend, R.B. Stokes, was there when the shooting began, and he dragged a wounded person to the people of North Carolina from his home in Alabama. My dad's best friend, R.B. Stokes, was there when the shooting began, and he dragged a wounded person to the people of North Carolina from his home in Alabama.

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Once teeming with shoppers on Raleigh's northern outskirts, North Hills is quiet these days. MOUVREAN CREECH READS WHILE HAVING LUNCH ON A RECENT SATURDAY. STAFF PHOTOS BY SUSAN VEA



full, blond hair swiveling and skin so tan against the white satin, but I hated her back then and couldn't see it. Later I borrowed the dress for my junior prom, which I attended with the cookie guy, and I was not one bit beautiful. That wasn't supposed to matter, because we were going to the prom to be ironic. But I wanted to be ironic and beautiful.

I went away to college and I lived out of state for several years after that. Each visit home brought some startling change to my attention. I'd turn down a street. I thought I knew Shelley Road, for example) and it wouldn't take me where I wanted to go (Shelley Lake nowhere in sight). Driving into downtown from 401 I discerned to my astonishment a sort of skyline. Coming in from the opposite direction on Atlantic Avenue, I saw it again, a cluster of skyscrapers (well — tallish buildings, let's say) rising from the tree line. Habitation from that core were new schools and subdivisions, brew pubs and jazz clubs, sushi bars and day spas, all suspended in a matrix of shopping centers. The traffic had gotten serious and turned upscale military, jeeps and trucks and all-terrain hybrids glossed up and shod with beely tires, maverick chrome grills like grinning teeth bearing you down. They love past North Hills, that plain brown loaf, and so did I.

Now it is Ghost Mall. Tumbleweeds and the stray bargain-hunter drift past the wretched stores. What makes me still love North Hills is what killed it: the quiet refuge it came to provide, a Zenlike retreat during the holiday hustle. Its makeover attempts over the years made me not for it, though the results were not unlike a face-lift angled desperately for a comeback. Perhaps its very failure to thrive absolves it from the sins mall are said to represent: heedless development, greedy consumption, decadence and waste. It didn't change nearly so much as Raleigh did, which made it steadfast but doomed. I don't know what North Hills means to me. It's a place I went with my family, or with one parent or another, then just my sister, just my friends, or by myself. From infant to junior to Misses, I marveled at stuff and dabbled stuff and wanted stuff I couldn't have and got stuff I didn't want. Meanwhile, it kept the rain off my head. No more and no less. To pay my respects, I'll wander the halls and purchase cut-price mementos until the place is rubble, for time is the Ultimate Clearance Event, reducing malls and mountains and men alike. Everything Must Go.

June Spence is the author of the short story collection "Missing Women and Others" (Riverhead Books). She is the 2001-2002 Kenan-Westing Writer at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She offers her thoughts to North Hills security officer Oscar Taylor, who congratulated her memories of businesses at the mall, reminded her of cheer and validated the existence of the petting zoo.

In high school I had a very stern but scrupulously just algebra teacher who moonlighted as a manager at J.C. Penney. Whenever I heard her voice I went with my family, or with one parent or another, then just my sister, just my friends, or by myself. From infant to junior to Misses, I marveled at stuff and dabbled stuff and wanted stuff I couldn't have and got stuff I didn't want. Meanwhile, it kept the rain off my head. No more and no less. To pay my respects, I'll wander the halls and purchase cut-price mementos until the place is rubble, for time is the Ultimate Clearance Event, reducing malls and mountains and men alike.

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