

## PITCHER THIS

In 1930 the heirs of Mann S. Valentine III (1858-1929), son of The Valentine's founder, donated more than 100 ceramic pitchers to the museum. Over time half were deaccessioned. Fifty-one pitchers remain, most with no known association to Richmond beyond their Valentine provenance. "It's not unusual for people to collect spoons or eyeglasses who then want to transfer them to a museum," explains Chief Curator Meg Hughes. **DISPOSITION:** *The pitcher will be sold at public auction. If no interest, witnessed destruction.*





# STORIED OBJECTS

THE VALENTINE IS REEVALUATING  
ITS COLLECTIONS TO DETERMINE  
WHAT ITEMS BEST TELL RICHMOND'S  
STORIES, AND WHICH SHOULD GO  
TO MORE SUITABLE HOMES

by Harry Kollatz Jr.  
photos by Jay Paul & Justin Vaughan



**I** F YOU'VE EVER HAD TO CLEAN OUT A STORAGE SPACE OR THE CONTENTS OF A HOUSE – EITHER YOUR OWN OR FOR SOMEONE UNABLE TO UNDERTAKE SUCH A PROJECT – YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT THE VALENTINE IS CURRENTLY GOING THROUGH.

The museum, which holds approximately 1.5 million objects in its main building and in off-site storage, is engaged in an intensive reassessment of its collection— really a collection of collections— so that it can better tell the many-layered story of Richmond. The technical term for the process is “deaccessioning.”

Some objects date to the museum’s 1898 founding by Mann S. Valentine Jr., meat juice/health tonic

magnate and an inveterate collector.

Meg Hughes, The Valentine’s chief archival curator, underscores that museum holdings are not static. “They are always evolving,” she says. “Even in the early days of The Valentine, things were coming in, and things were going out. Collecting is based on the mission and the functions and needs of the institution and the community it serves at that point in time.”

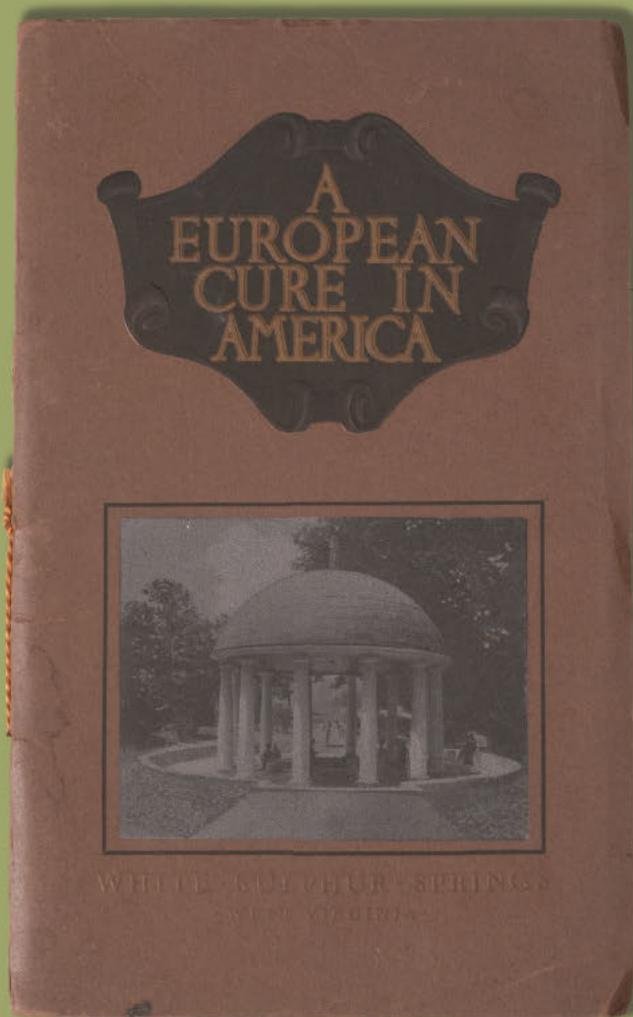
While The Valentine prunes its

collections, the museum continues to bring in objects with stories to tell: Among recent acquisitions are the late author Tom Wolfe’s typewriter, which he received from his Richmonder father, and the firefighter’s penknife used last December to cut loose the stubborn drape during the unveiling of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts’ Kehinde Wiley statue, “Rumors of War.”

STORIED OBJECTS | CONT'D ON P.170 >

## GETTING IN

Robert Emmett "Bob" Golden (1871-1941), a "committed observer," spent his professional life writing for newspapers and composing fiction, plays and even a musical comedy. For the Richmond News Leader he covered the political melodramas of City Hall. In 1912, Golden covered the Virginia State Fair, and this badge gained him entry and permission to write about his experience. This piece, gifted by Helen G. Jenkins, went on display as part of 2019's "Dressing Identity." *The badge will remain in The Valentine's collection.*

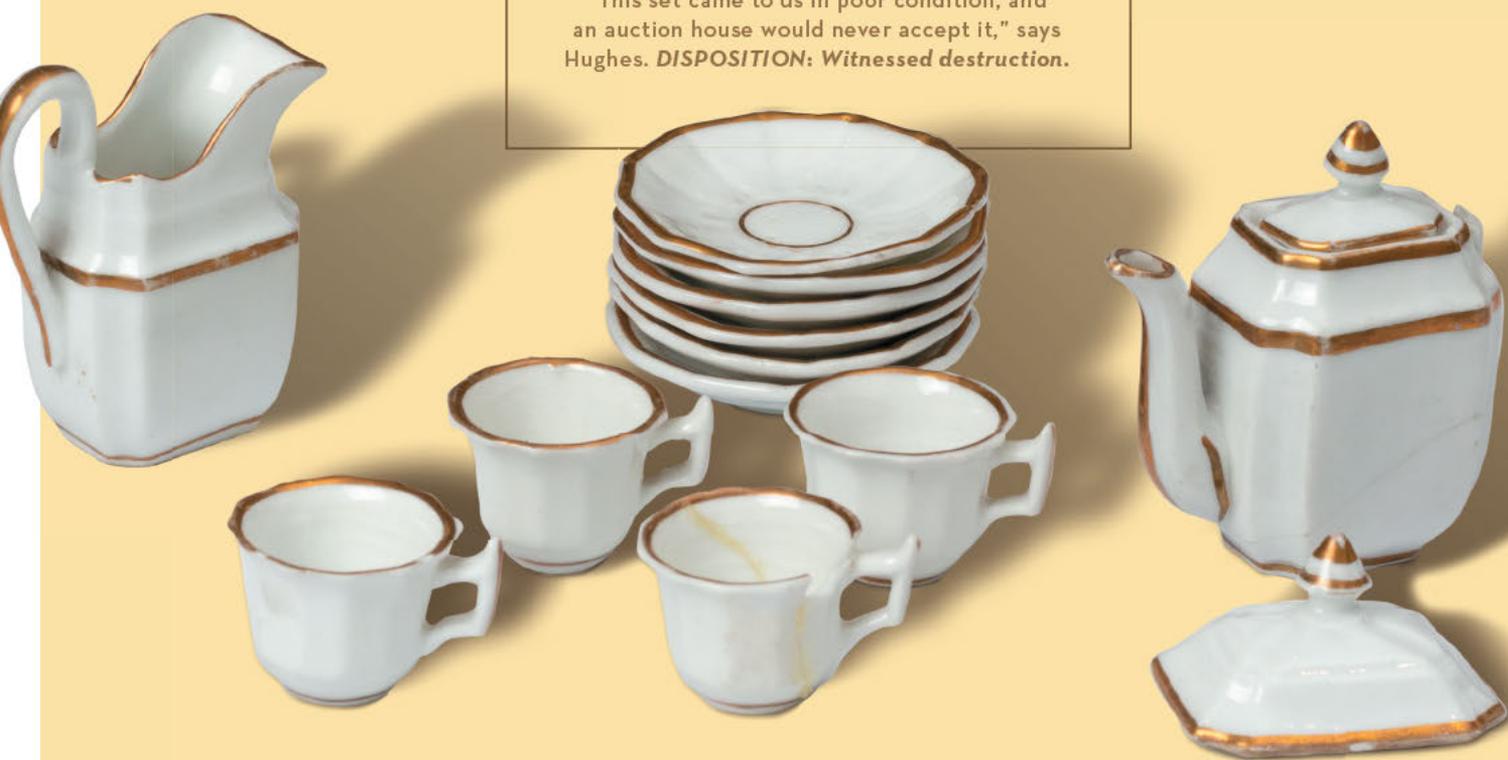


## BOOKIN'

"A European Cure in America" is a 1918 booklet about the features and benefits of White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia. "Richmonders traveled to spas in West Virginia," says curator Meg Hughes, "and we have photographs of Richmonders at White Sulphur Springs, but this came to us from an estate, and there's no direct connection." *The booklet will go to the West Virginia Museum and Archives.*

### MISFIT TOYS

An 1850s doll's tea set, white with gold trim, came from Bessie Chamberlayne, but the pieces are nearly in pieces. "We have more than 100 of these sets," Hughes says. Most of them can't be attributed to a specific child. The Chamberlayne family is represented in other objects at the museum. A wardrobe of theirs is on view at the Wickham House. "This set came to us in poor condition, and an auction house would never accept it," says Hughes. *DISPOSITION: Witnessed destruction.*





### HANDS OFF

Mrs. A. Edloe Donnan donated these circa 1930 mismatched white kid-leather gloves. "We don't know whether they were ever worn," Hughes says. "If there was some reason that they wore mismatched gloves, that would be a wonderful story to know, but at this point there is no way for us to find out if or why that happened."

**DISPOSITION:** *Witnessed destruction.*

## CONTAINS HERITAGE

The state-supported Pamunkey Pottery School of the 1930s-40s produced decorative vases for the tourist trade. This piece was used for generations as an educational tool by The Valentine. Hughes says, "Now that we have recognized tribes in Virginia, we've decided to return this to the Pamunkey tribe, who are looking forward to getting the vase back."





## COVER ME

A coverlet from the 1820s or '30s, was made from materials grown and spun in Botetourt (later Roanoke) County. The piece came through the Gish family, descended from German settlers who arrived in the state following the American Revolution. "This should go to an institution in western Virginia," says Hughes.

## ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTION

Consultant Wendy Jessup, whose specialty is preventive conservation, has assisted The Valentine in its deaccessioning process. She first came to Richmond in 2017 when a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities brought her to the museum from Washington, D.C. — where she's consulted for the Smithsonian, among others — to analyze The Valentine's general collection and review proposed architectural improvements.

"Most people — me — think of a place in terms of square feet," says William J. Martin, The Valentine's director for more than 25 years. "Well, Wendy came and talked about how much space things take up. If it's a sculpture, for

example, it sits there and doesn't occupy a bunch of room, but people have to walk around to look at it."

Jessup determined that if The Valentine kept collecting at its current rate, that within a quarter century, storage and exhibition of its items would

require a 400,000-square-foot building.

Martin blinks, agape. "Well, I don't know from 400,000 square feet. What does that mean? We looked at it, and that's about the size of the terminal building of Broad Street Station — the Science Museum of Virginia."

This led to The Valentine reexamining its fundamental purpose. "We'd been asking the wrong question," Martin says. "What dawned on us is not, 'Where are we going to store all these collections?' but, 'What collections do we need to have and add to?'"

Thus began the museum's effort to reassess its holdings. "The Valentine has a really wonderful opportunity to look at what they've got and critically examine the stories they want to tell across the full spectrum of what it's like to have lived — and live — in Richmond," Jessup says. "To their credit, The >

### LOVE OFFERING

"Cupid's Sanctum," an 1867 wood engraving from Harper's Weekly, depicts love as a battlefield. "This was probably purchased from a rare book dealer," Hughes says, "and it's got a Valentine's theme, but the subject has nothing to do with Richmond."

*DISPOSITION: Sale at public auction. If no interest, witnessed destruction.*



## NO VIEW HERE

Virginia Lee Kiser's etching, "Blackwell-Thames River, London" isn't related to Richmond. Kiser (1884?-1957), originally from Roanoke, later moved to Los Angeles. "This piece is going to Taubman Museum of Art in Roanoke," Hughes says. "They're excited for the prospect, and there's a higher chance of it being seen by more people there."



Valentine is making a concerted effort to tell all these stories of an interesting and vibrant place. It's not just about rich white guys in suits."

### SHOULD IT STAY OR SHOULD IT GO?

Not every city can boast of an institution like The Valentine. The devotion of the museum for more than a century to collecting, preserving and interpreting Richmond stories evolved into compelling exhibitions, intriguing tours and worthwhile community events.

Mann Satterfield Valentine II parlayed a meat nutrient extract he devised to improve his dying wife's health into a business, Valentine's Meat Juice, which financially supported his propensity toward collecting things — many things. Mann Jr. and his artist/historian brother, Edward, enjoyed similar interests. At Mann's 1893 death, his bequest left a lifetime of acquisitions and the 1812 Wickham House with the organizing principle for a museum. The Valentine Museum, the first private museum in the city of Richmond, opened in 1898.

Edward assumed the role of president, which he held until his death in 1930.

"Some of what [Mann Jr.] got hold of in the earliest days came from the first Virginia Museum on Capitol Square," Martin explains. That museum, open from 1817 through 1832, featured an assortment of arrowheads, fossils, plaster casts of classical sculpture, oil paintings and creatures both taxidermied and living. The ambitious project couldn't support itself from Richmond's population of 10,000 (half enslaved), many of whom could not afford to pay the 50-cent entry fee more than once (half that for children and, on occasion, "people of color"). Despite innovative programming that included nighttime entertainment, the display of a mechanical chess player and fireworks, the museum failed and orphaned about 20,000 objects. The Valentine family acquired some of them, although how many and which ones isn't clear. When The Valentine opened as a museum, those old Virginia Museum pieces served as a ready-made core for exhibitions.

As a result, "we have these ethnographic objects that have nothing to do with Richmond," Martin says. "We have Pacific Northwest indigenous materials — wouldn't it be wonderful to return these to the tribes? So we need to find an institution in that part of the world which can properly receive them."

Closer to home, a vase made by the Pamunkey Pottery School during the 1930s-'40s and sold for the tourist trade, came to The Valentine for educational purposes. The vase will be returned to the Pamunkey tribe, which has a museum and cultural center of its own.

Leslie Cheek Jr., the VMFA's theatrical and enthusiastic director from 1948-68, inherited from his father 20 eclectic shaving mugs. Somehow, they ended up in the Valentine's collection.

Cheek's family's Nashville estate, Cheekwood, is today a house museum and botanical garden. Martin called to ask if they would like the shaving mugs back.

"And their curator's jaw dropped," says Martin, imitating the gesture. "What? You mean you have them?" A period photograph of the room allowed the >

Cheekwood curators to return the shaving mugs to their exact former arrangement.

The mugs are just one of the many objects for which The Valentine seeks a happy return.

Museums and archives realize that since they now and will continue to have limited resources, they must identify low-performance pieces.

Hughes explains: "Objects that sit on shelves with no associative provenance, no story, that aren't in exhibition condition or in condition so that a researcher can come and access [them], they are in the museum world called 'lazy objects.'"

#### ALWAYS EVOLVING

"A finished museum is a dead one," declared Laura Bragg, Valentine director from 1928-30, a time when a woman holding such a position of authority was rare. Helen McCormack, Bragg's intimate friend, succeeded her as director from 1930-40. McCormack oversaw the relocation of Edward V. Valentine's sculpture studio to Clay Street. Both women understood The Valentine's mission even when the son of its founder, Granville G. Valentine, seemed at times to lose sight.

Granville, who succeeded to the museum's presidency, wanted materials assembled by Algernon and Mary Hammond Sullivan brought into the museum's collection because he seems to have believed money might follow the accession. Neither Bragg nor McCormack felt the assortment of decorative works and paintings would bolster the museum's mission. Martin paraphrases letters written by the women in their anxiety: "If we take this material in, it'll be an embarrassment, we'll be run out of the museum world," he recounts, "and between them they're saying, 'Mr. Valentine keeps calling, when will there be a Sullivan show?' And they're wondering how they can avoid committing to this."

The "Sullivan donation" came — and went. Museums have in the past accepted objects to fill interpretive gaps until better quality pieces come along. The majority of the Sullivan Collection underwent gradual deaccession.

Programs evolve, too. Before the creation of other Richmond museums, The Valentine took the cultural lead. Prior to the 1936 formation of the VMFA, many Richmonders' acquaintance with anything resembling fine art came from Valentine exhibitions. Later, supplemental history, science and arts education — offered to children regardless of race — evolved into what ultimately became the Children's Museum and the Science Museum of Virginia.

Today, The Valentine continues to redefine its connections to the city and beyond. A community conversation series delves into the evolution of Richmond's persistent issues, recently exploring transportation, access to green spaces, the city's eviction and housing challenges, and more. Its Richmond History Tours explore Hollywood Cemetery, Richmond's murals and city neighborhoods. Its annual History Makers awards recognize good works in the community. Current exhibitions include "#BallotBattle: Richmond's Struggle for Suffrage" and "Voices From Richmond's Hidden Epidemic," featuring oral histories and portraits of Richmonders affected by HIV/AIDS.

#### SOMETIMES, HEADLAMPS

On the strength of the Jessup study and their own realizations, the museum board and the staff embarked on a six-month self-examination last year. This led to 20 meetings of the collections group. They asked rigorous questions: Does it represent our community? What story is not getting told? How is this better addressed? Will this or that object have a better life in another institution?

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Bill Martin, Valentine Director

"We did [the study] in a very Valentine way," Neelan A. Markel, chair of the museum's board of directors, recalls. This entailed bus tours to Highland Park, Barton Heights and Fulton Hill and conversations about the importance of these neighborhoods within the larger scope of our city. The museum conducted surveys to determine what it lacked in its exhibitions and what people wanted to see more of.

"To say that there weren't some emotional moments while we're doing this would be a lie," Martin recalls.

Jessup offers that in her line of work, she takes the long-term view. "The preservation and care is about the people who come after us, so that the children and their great-grandchildren can understand how we lived to better appreciate how they got to where they are."

Which is heady stuff.

"We've had some quite serious meetings," Markel says. "And we've had fun meetings. You can and should do both. It's necessary for the process. The other day, some of the staff were in a storage facility wearing headlamps to get a better look >

at things. I dread cleaning out my attic. They're loving it."

Some objects present a quandary. The Valentine takes out printed public announcements to describe an object to see if anybody can claim it. If, after doing their due diligence, a proper home cannot be found, then a determination is made between auction or "witnessed destruction" — that is, an item is disposed of so it cannot be retrieved from a landfill.

"We are fully sharing what we're doing and how we're doing it," Markel explains. "This is an exciting time to be at The Valentine."

#### 'IS THIS MR. VALENTINE?'

One of the unique challenges of The Valentine is that people want to donate objects to the institution. "Everybody's Marie Kondo-ing," Hughes says of the Japanese organization expert who inspired a movement to de-clutter thorough her books and television

program. An upheaval in the relationship between people and their things is occurring across the culture. "The Baby Boomers are getting rid of stuff," she adds.

Auction houses are overwhelmed. And have you been to a flea market lately?

Each donation is considered, although some must be politely turned away, like inherited family silver. Or decorative pitchers.

A figurative sculpture by artist and historian Edward V. Valentine, whose re-created studio is a part of the museum, however, would be a suitable acquisition, but not necessarily a given.

In 2017, the city of New Orleans removed a statue of Confederate president Jefferson Davis created by Valentine that is a copy of Richmond's Monument Avenue statue. Martin received a call from an official. "Is this Mr. Valentine?" came the query. "No, but I'm the director," Martin replied. "I work here."

The official related how the artist receives the right of first refusal for the return of removed public art.

"Well, I appreciate your offer," Martin responded, "but we already have too many Jefferson Davises in this town."

However, should the recommendations of the Monument Avenue Commission be implemented, and Richmond's Davis statue be removed from its Monument Avenue perch, what better place for the figure to go than into the space that made him, especially since some argue the statues belong in museums?

"We have a studio that can take one more [Valentine sculpture]," Martin says. "And why not reinterpret monument-making in the early part of the 20th century? And examine the artist's role in perpetuating the Lost Cause? Edward Valentine would make [a statue] for anybody who'd pay him. There's a whole piece to this story that we are perfectly suited to tell." ■

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BY HARRY KOLLATZ JR.

FLASHBACK

# Carnival Row

A grandfather of Richmond festivals transformed downtown Broad Street with lights, music and action

**R**ichmonders realized something big was in the offing.

In the spring of 1900, at 10th Street by City Hall, there arose an impressive 60-foot-high triumphal arch made of wood and covered by sculpted plaster. Paid for almost entirely with children's dimes and designed by the architectural firm of Noland & Baskervill, it bore a message written in capital letters by incandescent bulbs: "WELCOME."

The Richmond Carnival and Free Street Fair ran for one momentous week, May 14-19, filling downtown from Adams to 12th streets and attracting more than 100,000 people to a dazzling array of entertainments and diversions.

The fair interrupted traffic, closed schools and suspended government business.

This was an era of great fairs and exhibitions: the World's Fairs in Chicago (1893), London (1899) and Paris (1900). Richmond's leaders of commerce wrapped their own mercantile motivations in the finery of aesthetic aspiration and civic boosterism.

The Richmond Carnival Association contracted the Bostock-Ferari company, a modern touring carnival business based in New York. In April, a committee traveled to New York to judge the shows for any potential to offend public morals. Among the approved attractions were an array of quasi-anthropological and fully exploitative presentations, including an "African village" with "genuine Boer people" and natives "representing the various ... tribes of the vicinity," as well as a "genuine gypsy camp" at Jefferson and Broad giving "perfect insight into the life and habits of this peculiar people," with fortune-telling. Meanwhile, the

"Streets of All Nations," spread over Ninth, 10th and Capitol streets, promised former residents of nations from Germany to India; Japanese jugglers; and a "Hindoo Theatre with dancing girls, magicians, etc."

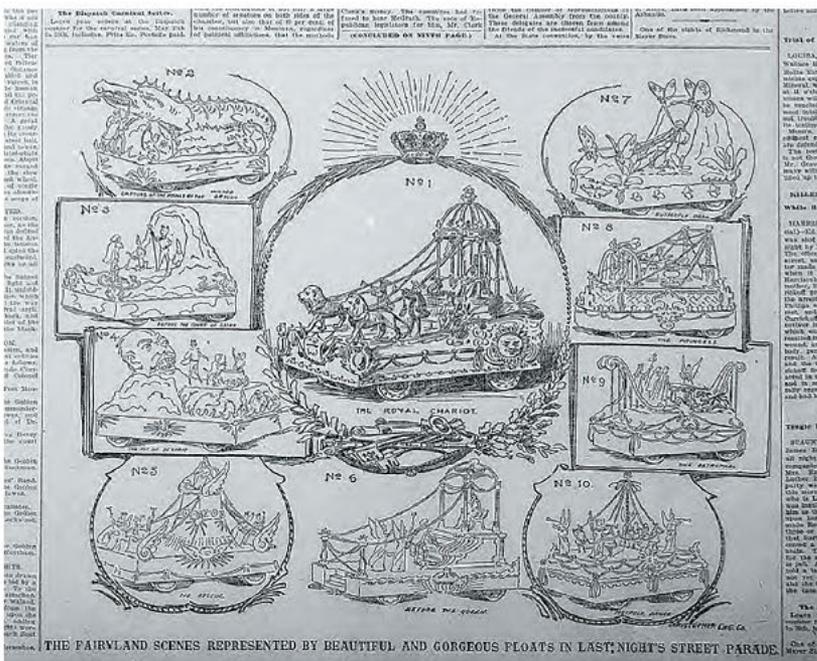
Bostock's offerings also included the Crystal Maze of 60 mirrors, a European-constructed Venetian gondola ride powered by singing gondoliers on the triangle lot at Broad and Brook (where today Maggie Walker's monument stands), and trained animals in seven cages — among them 20 lions and a boxing kangaroo. The Richmond Dispatch touted how the entire "Bostock Aggregation" required 20 60-foot-long railroad cars for transportation.

Besides these imported diversions, the carnival association also offered up a floral parade, military demonstrations and a choir of 3,000 public schoolchildren.

At noon on May 14, the festivities began, with several bands converging upon the stand between Third and Fourth streets — all playing "Dixie." This started the prayer and speeches, including Richmond Times publisher Joseph Bryan's discourse tracing the city's history from the Civil War to the rebirth that the fair exemplified.

At around 9 p.m. in the Richmond Auditorium (later remade for Virginia Commonwealth University's Cary Street gym), the coronation of Henry Lee Valentine as king of the carnival was witnessed by some 12,000 people.

The next evening, in a pageant full of flowers and band music, "tens of thousands" of spectators witnessed a Fairyland Parade headed by King Henry and his court. Each horse-drawn float depicted its own tableau, from a prince's fall into the Pit of Despair to his betrothal to Sleeping





*(Left) Businessman Henry Lee Valentine was crowned king of the carnival. [Opposite page] A Fairyland Parade featured horse-drawn floats depicting elaborate fairy tales.*

Beauty. The illusion and reality combust when the Pit of Despair caught fire on Adams Street and the Royal Car's drapery ignited at First Street. Fire extinguishers quelled the flames without injuries.

Sponsoring enterprises built substantial pavilions that provided showrooms for companies' wares, comfort for visitors and sites for hourly promotional contests: Kaempf's on Ninth Street was ready to award the prettiest lady clerk of any carnival booth a box of candy, while the Benevolent and Protective Order of the Elks promised a box of El Truro Cigars to the ugliest out-of-towner, as decided upon "by a committee of ladies."

The promise of cigars also lured passersby to throw balls "at the head of a black man with the unbreakable skull," as the Times described it, reporting with

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### **The fair interrupted traffic, closed schools and suspended government business.**

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the typical and casually cruel tone of the day. A "fakir" handed three balls to tossers for a nickel. The balls flew, and the man's head jerked and dodged without injury. Then a man "weighing a full 200 pounds" took matters into his ample hands. His first two direct hits did nothing. Then the target caught sight of a friend and began distractedly talking. The thrower "gave three awful swings of his great arm and hurtled the ball," which

hit its mark square on the target's crown, but the projectile bounced, shattering a "French plate glass window in Smithdeal's Business College. ... Then the ball rolled off in a corner, well satisfied with its work." The head man finished his conversation then announced, "Keep it up, gem'men; the harder they come, the more I likes'em."

Newspaper accounts blithely employed epithets to describe nonwhite entertainers and spectators alike. John Mitchell Jr., the black editor of the weekly Jackson Ward-based Richmond Planet, largely eschewed coverage of the fair, though the Planet did mention a rough-hewn log cabin on display, because inside there was not only an oil painting of Thomas Jefferson, but also the work of James Conway Farley, a pioneering black photographer operating as the Jefferson Fine Art Co. at 523 E. Broad St.

On the final evening of the fair, a massive crowd surged around the large stands between Third and Fourth streets on Broad's north side to observe a cakewalk dance performed by, the newspaper assured, "genuine negroes" of Jackson Ward. The cakewalk originated in the plantation South, where slaves competed through dance for a special cake; their choreography satirized formal white dances mashed up with their own inventions for comic lampooning. This day's demonstration ended not in laughter but screams.

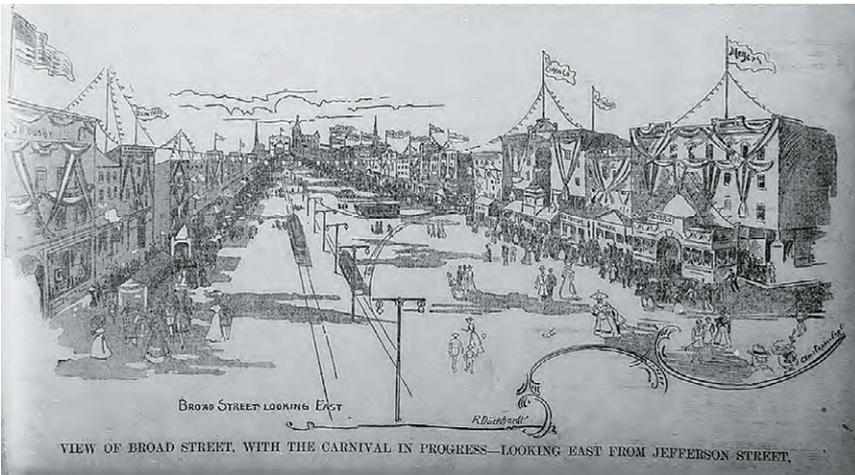
A disturbance caused by a mule-driven streetcar attempting to pass through the crowd moved the mass of spectators against the platform. In search of a better view and an escape from the press of bodies, more than a dozen boys had clambered upon the security railings 12 feet above the street. The support "broke with a crash," tumbling the youngsters into the throng on the sidewalk below and causing a frightened rush. When the crowd momentarily cleared, 12-year-old Robert Lee Smith, "a small colored boy," as the Times put it, was found alive but trampled, his left leg broken and body bruised. An official on the stand urged the cake- >



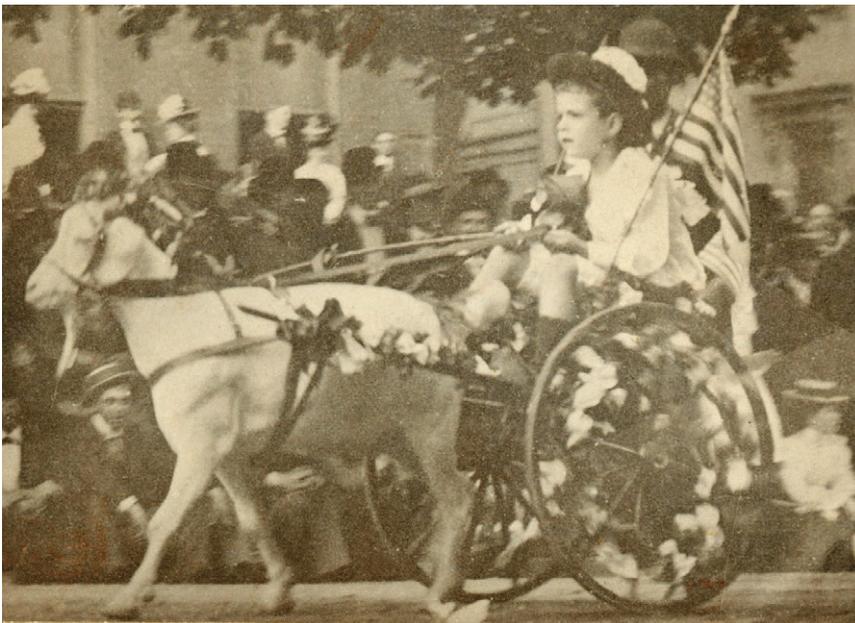
*[From top]*  
Broad Street retailers built fanciful kiosks for displays. At Fourth Street, the entry for women's and children's clothing store Kaufmann & Co. is dark blue and trimmed in white with a dome lit by 250 incandescent lights.

The Richmond Dispatch provided this rendering of festivities looking east from Foushee toward the carnival arch and City Hall.

In the floral parade, George King drives a cart adorned with scarlet poppies and pulled by a snow-white goat.



BROAD STREET, LOOKING EAST  
VIEW OF BROAD STREET, WITH THE CARNIVAL IN PROGRESS—LOOKING EAST FROM JEFFERSON STREET.



walk to continue to prevent a stampede. The entertainment resumed, and “the excitement was soon forgotten,” the Times reported, “as they cheered their favorites in the rag-time performance.”

At midnight, the Bostock aggregation dismantled its attractions to get on the road for Scranton, Pennsylvania.

Public mentions in the papers by carnival organizers began making suggestions that the festival become an annual “permanent institution.” Valentine, the carnival’s short-lived king, advocated a Tri-State Association comprising Virginia, West Virginia and North Carolina, to be capitalized by \$25,000 to \$50,000.

The subsequent lawsuit by the family of Robert Lee Smith for \$2,500 in damages wound its way through trials and counter-trials. The Dispatch editorially called for dismissal due to the potential for Richmond to incur bad publicity. Yet the Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals in January 1903 upheld the claim, albeit for \$500.

The settlement left the association with \$230, which went to the Virginia Home for the Incurables, and enthusiasm for another spring event faded.

Richmond couldn’t quite quit the carnival arch, though.

City officials debated its fate, while the United Daughters of the Confederacy noted the popularity of the carnival arch for visitors and photographic opportunities and considered a version for Monroe Park. That concept didn’t take hold, and the carnival arch’s crumbling cornices threatened to “involve the city in a damage suit,” as the Dispatch described. The cornices got removed, and decorators for the autumn conventions of the Odd-Fellows, Firefighters and American Bankers dressed the shabby arch in flowers and bunting. By Oct. 20, it was taken down, and the last of the carnival’s visible memory finally vanished.

Some decades later, broader-based festivities have evolved to embrace neighborhoods and various ethnicities, animals (though not boxing kangaroos), food, art and music — celebrations where everyone is now WELCOME. **14**

EXILE

EXILE

EXILE

EXILE

Door-Prize: \$50

## Exile, the shop of trash culture necessities and 'rock 'n' roll rags and jewelry,' filled a niche in customers' closets and lives

by Harry Kollatz Jr.



The sign in front of Exile depicted a heart on one side and on the other, a brain. A visitor to the 822 W. Grace St. shop read the symbols and informed owner Mimi Regelson, "I get it. 'Open heart, open mind,'" she recalls. "And that wasn't intentional. But if I had a really

good exchange with the person, and they left without buying anything, I felt that I had profited."

Exile was where a generation of Virginia Commonwealth University students, musicians, artists and the fashion-forward bought their first Doc Martens, discovered Manic Panic hair dye and chose body jewelry. Prior to social media, Exile served as a gathering place. People stopped by to say hello, catch up, "and leave an hour later with a supply of merchandise," remembers artist Melissa Burgess, "like socks, or a belt, or a most extraordinary vintage sweater. There was always the perfect antique treasure." Besides the advertised "rock 'n' roll rags and jewelry," Exile also hosted art exhibitions and performances.

The shop grew into a "combination of an art project and a community center," Regelson says. "It was definitely a store for the misfit toys. As far as being a successful business model, it really wasn't."

Though Exile has been gone since 2011, its spirit lives.

Lauren Healy-Flora came to Richmond to attend Virginia Commonwealth University in 1998. She describes discovering the jam-packed shop-in-a-house as a rite of passage. "Going in there was like therapy," she says. She became a fashion photography stylist (sometimes working for Richmond magazine) and often used clothing and accessories from Exile. She formed an enduring friendship with Regelson.

Today, Healy-Flora operates Blue Bones Vintage with her husband, Jeremy Flora, at 310 N. Laurel St., around the corner from the now-vanished Exile site. Regelson works for Blue Bones, hunting down vintage wares. "Mimi's my only buyer," Healy-Flora says. "That seat's taken." >



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Mimi Regelson at Exile's second location at 822 W. Grace St. For the record: She never wore Doc Martens.

Gabora (named for a side-show character), poses by the Exile sidewalk sign. The shop's pit bull was later featured in a short film by Mark Brown, "Gabora vs. Godzilla."



## Setting up Shop



In the mid-1980s, at age 30, Richmond native Regelson was living in New York, running the office for a managing editor at the publisher Avon and then Warner Books in Manhattan, when she began to tire of her harried life.

"I was overworked and not earning enough," she recalls. "And I started thinking, 'Why am I living in the city when I'm too tired or too busy to enjoy it?'"

Thus, she and her then-partner Charlie Ilario, who worked in vintage stores and collected clothing and records, moved back to her hometown, the more affordable Richmond, to open a shop expressing their mutual interests in clothing, music and subculture, ranging from rockabilly to GWAR, and from screwball comedy films to the transgressive B-movies of Troma Entertainment.

Regelson's mother, Sylvia, owned Ouroboros Art Pottery & African Arts in Mechanicsville's Antique Village, which she still operates today at age 94, going in two days a week (down from her pre-pandemic six).

Ilario, who was "a rabid Rolling Stones fan," as Regelson recalls, thought the name "Exile" was a natural fit, given the store's first location at 1309 W. Main St. and the Stones' 1972 album "Exile on Main Street," as well as the couple's relocation from New York. Regelson didn't share the Stones affection, but she adds, "I later married a Tibetan in exile, so it seemed more appropriate."

On a hot afternoon in August 1986, Burgess and her friend Matt Linkous, lured by the open door through which wafted Johnny Thunders' music, became the first customers to cross Exile's threshold. Burgess bought a riveted leather men's watchband that she still has today.

Through the years, she made numerous purchases at Exile: vintage sweaters, a giant taxidermy barracuda, a folk-art model of the Hotel John Marshall that lights up. "You never knew what you'd find," she says.

Regelson and Ilario set up shop in the Caribbean-colored Uptown, a rising commercial district near VCU, but during the first six months, the shop suffered four break-ins. Replacing the shattered display window exceeded the shop's minuscule budget, which led them to board it up instead. That made the store look as if it were closed, until artist David B. Frye came along to find Regelson distraught about the situation. He offered to paint the boards and turned it into an art installation, using black tape to make the image of a car battery in the corner with the name "EXILE."

"So it looks really punk rock," Frye recalls.

The bands Mudd Helmut, Ten Ten and Sexabilly Avalanche performed benefit concerts for Exile at The Pyramid Club and other venues. Regelson worked three temp jobs and slept on the store's floor to make ends meet.

Despite the damages to the store, rent came due, and the general feeling Regelson received from the building's owner was that Exile needed to move on.

## Larger Than Life



Opening in its second location at 822 W. Grace St. in 1987, Exile blossomed amid the vegetarian Grace Place restaurant, the big green jutting box of Don's Hot Nuts, the final screenings at the Biograph Theatre and the complexities of a neighborhood adjacent to an expanding VCU.

It's the location Regelson on occasion

finds herself dreaming about. "It's the store, and I'm running it in some fashion, but it's a labyrinth," she says.

Which makes dream sense, considering the plethora of stories and larger-than-life characters from this period: Gustave Heiss (1941-2015), he of the great-

"You never knew what you'd find."

— Melissa Burgess,  
Exile's first customer  
and longtime shopper

er than 6-foot stature, stentorian voice and dramatic mien, often hefting a briefcase full of sketches and notes, a beloved member of the extended Exile cast who for years took out the trash for a dollar; the bands rehearsing in the basement; the shop dogs: a one-eyed Husky named Bosco (whose howling from the bottom of an unknown 25-foot well beneath a Fourth Street porch brought rescue and ultimately adoption by Regelson) and the small pit bull Gabora, devourer of bubbles and destroyer of recyclable cardboard; and the store's curtained display cabinet containing a stuffed and mounted cat that, despite a written warning, startled some visitors.

The upstairs gallery of art and music, curated in part by Snakehandlers and Useless Playboys musician Jonny Cecka (1963-2017), offered intriguing counterculture presentations, including "GWART," the first exhibition of props and costumes from the shock-trauma rock-opera art >



Regelson in front of Exile at 822 W. Grace St. The building was demolished as VCU took over the block around 2009.



collective GVAR. In alternative culture periodical *Throttle* (1981-1999), writer Jimmy Blackford noted how at the show's December 1990 opening, GVAR member Beefcake the Mighty smote a protesting "nun" and "priest" to lampoon *Style Weekly's* refusal to cover the event "because it wasn't art."

In May 1991 came "War Peaces," inspired by the Persian Gulf War, the last major exhibition of the Urban Artists Amalgamated collective (1987-1991). The opening featured a performance by musician/choreographer Robbie Kinter and dancer/writer Cheryl Pallant.

The February 1993 "Heartbreak" show was a dark take on Valentine's Day, with the work of 18 artists, among them Michael Clautice, Georgia Myers and Fred Weatherford, as well as Lorraine Ellison (1958-2015), who went on to national exhibitions. Visitors wrote their anonymous stories of love gone wrong in "The Book of Heartbreak." Paul Teeple's aptly named "Hammer a Nail" invited visitors to do just that into a heart figure.

Former Exile employee Margaret Reed, now a Social Security claims attorney, recalls how during store hours, guests went up to the gallery, "and they

stayed a long time, writing their tale of heartbreak, and then you'd hear the banging of the hammer."

Downstairs, shoppers might find a midcentury modern lamp and multitiered lampshades, silk smoking jackets, gowns that women wore in silent films, studded leather jackets, kitten heel pumps, biker jewelry, an anatomy chart, an alligator purse and vintage pinup postcards. Reed keeps one of these postcards on her desk today. It depicts a woman on the beach holding a fan of playing cards across her presumably bare chest. "Tame by today's standards," she says with a chuckle.



Gustave Heiss, an anchor member of the shop's repertory characters, posed for a February 1992 fashion spread in *Circuit* magazine. He took out the shop's trash each day for \$1.



Exile was known for its inventive window displays, especially at Halloween.



## Doc Martens, Manic Panic and Pierced Nipples



Exile rummaged about in the past while also looking into the streets of the day, which made customers of not only skate rats and rockers but also every variety of the curious. Potential shoplifters, however, may have hesitated when they spotted an effigy head alongside a sign threatening a karmic curse for their misdeed.

The store became a go-to for film and television productions and touring bands. Courtney Love was apparently rude there, and nobody remembers what she bought. A pair of vintage bifocals fascinated Billy Bragg. Marilyn Manson's retinue, without the performer, prowled the shop. They took pleasure in using the Manson company card for their purchases. Exile employees were seldom star-struck because, whether celebrity or counter clerk, they all worked in the circus.

Betty Migliaccio, today an EMT and firefighter, helmed the store's counter

from 1992 to 1997. She describes how customers seized upon a fresh batch of Doc Martens. "We'd receive a shipment and then not get one for eight months," due to customs issues, she says.

Exile stopped selling Docs about 15 years in, when the manufacturer, Air-Wair USA, started making the boots in China. The company, says Regelson, dropped longtime distributors that had popularized the brand to cut better deals with chain stores.

Regelson also fielded occasional calls from parents who were exasperated by brightly colored Manic Panic hair dyes. >

Regelson and Kathryn Harvey opened World of Mirth, a toy store/vintage housewares shop, above Exile in 1993.



# EXILE

Vintage Clothes & Housewares,  
Silver Jewelry, Studded Leather,  
Manic Panic, Body Jewelry,  
Cool Footwear

822 W. GRACE ST.  
358-3348



# NOTE

Tuesday, Nov. 4th  
(a trash culture necessity)

Always civically engaged, Exile held voter registration drives.

She responded that hair grows back, and dyeing your hair purple was among the least dangerous experiments for their daughters.

Body adornment attracted customers who displayed their hardware while sharing their stories.

"I saw more nipples and navels at Exile than I've seen in my life," Migliaccio says, laughing. "It was kind of neat that they felt comfortable enough with us to show their weeping, oozing, disgusting piercings. They'd be like, 'I think I need to change this ring out,' and it'd be infected. 'Dude, you gotta go back and have them look at that. Just don't drop trou.'"

Body jewelry became redundant as tattoo and piercing parlors began to proliferate in Richmond.

Exile furthered its punk and post-modern curiosity shop appeal through Regelson's discerning acquisitions at estate and yard sales and buying expeditions beyond the city.

Michael Ryan, today an artist and professor living in Oakland, California, counts as formative his six years at Exile's counter, where he was known facetiously as "Metal Mike," though his heavy metal

days were past him. "At the store, I might be listening to Afro-funk," he says.

Ryan once accompanied Regelson on a buying trip to Las Vegas, and he enjoyed seeing how Regelson picked clothes and her choices in vendors. But they tired of the city's overwhelming gaudiness.

As a palate cleanser, they rented a car and traveled to Death Valley. "Where things come and die — that feels good to us now," Ryan reflects. "That was both our alley."

## World of Mirth, and More



customers sometimes became employees. Randy Dugan studied English literature at VCU and co-founded the band Sliang Laos. He met Cecka and eventually joined the Exile staff.

Dugan credits the Exile experience as a direct influence on his later career. His music and experience working on

the occasional commercial and film that came through town led him eventually to a career in film and television in Los Angeles. He's now a two-time Daytime Emmy Award honoree for his producer job on the long-running soap opera "Days of Our Lives."

"I learned a lot of vocabulary at Exile that still helps me today at work," he says. "If a costumer talks about a snood, shrug or kitten heel, I know what he means." Exile taught Dugan to handle a clothes steamer, and he gained empathy for how annoying it can get having to sort through a rack of clothing to find the right garment.

For years at Exile, sales were not rung up on a cash register. The machine, Regelson thought, occupied too much space. Instead, a drawer with a cash divider sat in the jewelry display case. Each item in the store's inventory was assigned an alphanumeric tracking number, and transactions were recorded on carbon paper. Checks were verified by calling an 800 number, and credit card impressions were made on a hand-operated device. Banks requesting immediate verification eventually required the store to auto-

mate through the phone line, though sometimes the process was interrupted by an incoming call.

One day a voter registration effort set up in front of the store drew the attention of congressional candidate Bobby Scott, who came by to offer encouragement.

"A stripper and a lesbian were 'manning' the table for me, and Bobby Scott stopped to pose with them at their registration table," Regelson recalls. "Of course, they weren't wearing identifying signs but still were alternative-looking, so it was nice that he wanted to show that he represented all people and not just the straight-looking ones. That

always endeared him to me." And perhaps to voters, as Scott has now been a member of the House of Representatives since 1993.

During its earlier years, Exile's sign had been constructed from plastic bones ordered from a novelty catalog. "They came individually wrapped," recalls architect and film location advisor Isaac Regelson, Mimi's brother. "You'd get one big femur." Over time, the elements caused the bones to deteriorate. Painting the name in the distinctive lettering offered the most elegant replacement.

At Exile, Regelson and friend Kathryn Harvey (1966-2006) discussed collaborating on a coffee shop or a wacky toy store/

vintage housewares shop. Operating Exile, however, kept Regelson plenty busy. She invited Harvey to become a managing partner and use Exile's second floor for the toy store concept.

The new shop got its name after Regelson discovered, while browsing at Whiting's Old Paper, an ephemera goldmine at the Antique Village, the book "World of Mirth Shows: The Largest Midway on Earth" by Bob Goldsack, which described the Richmond origins of the World of Mirth traveling carnival (1933-1963). Transporting this wild menagerie of animals and personnel, rides, games and attractions required 50 to 80 railroad cars. >



Shop pups Bosco (above) and Gabora (right) inside Exile, their natural habitat.

From Whiting's she also bought period World of Mirth posters to hang in the new toy shop to provide a thematic unity for the space.

World of Mirth opened above Exile on Aug. 6, 1993 — the same day a tornado ripped through Petersburg and Colonial Heights. After two and a half years Harvey went out on her own, opening World of Mirth at 2925 W. Cary St. on April 1, 1996.

Regelson soon opened Exile Upstairs, a showroom for vintage furniture and housewares from the 1940s to 1970s, along with contemporary furnishings by regional artists. She took pleasure in the arranging.

"She put stuff together in a way that you'd say, 'I want this whole room!'" former employee Reed recalls.

Regelson and Ilario parted ways romantically and professionally about a year after moving Exile to Grace Street, and Ilario went on to cut hair at Pine Street Barber Shop. They remained friends, however, and Ilario's daughter, Maria, grew up in Exile and enjoyed being a store kid.

Now a Brooklyn-based archivist and collections manager for an artist's estate, she muses, "Growing up there was tremendous. I was so young, and I may have taken for granted how cool it was. Mimi is so much about inclusion and community. It's so ingrained in me. Even though I was tiny, I was a part of it. It wasn't like hanging out with my parents' friends."

Maria accompanied her father for frequent drop-ins (her mother worked at Grace Place). Her first lunchbox came from World of Mirth upstairs. She walked shop dogs Bosco and Gabora, and she'd take naps curled up in the large bookshelves used for displaying sweaters. She'd get nervous scootching through the eerie mannequin storage to the rat-motif bathroom.

At age 16, she started assisting with the theatrical window displays. "Exile was a constantly growing art installa-

tion rather than a store," she says.

Exile, through its advertising, underwrote art, street and film festivals, and music events, and in 1993 the store hosted a benefit to aid the owners of the arson-destroyed Kokopelli club by displaying "strange and twisted artifacts" pulled from the wreckage.

The shop likewise supported the late-1990s Capital City Barn Dance with its programs designed by musician Wes Freed. (In 2019, a collection of Freed's work was published as "The Art of Wes Freed: Paintings, Posters, Pin-Ups & Possums.")

"My thinking is that if you think you're cool, you're not cool."

— Exile Owner Mimi Regelson

## The Final Years

Both Regelson and her brother held positions in Grace Street's neighborhood and business association as the group attempted to negotiate a period of transition along Grace Street with VCU gobbling up entire blocks — including the 800 block. The sale of 822 W. Grace precipitated the store's third and final move down the street to 935 W. Grace St. in 2006.

At this location, employee and artist Noah Scalin launched his Skull-a-Day creative project, making skull forms out of everyday objects, which he documented

on a blog that later turned into a book.

A dinosaur head was mounted on a wall as though it were a big game trophy.

Sarah Callaway worked as Exile's last employee, and she recalls the early 2000s as a daunting and stressful time for Grace Street. "Mimi was such a mother to so many people," she says. "That place was amazing. It praised avant-garde creativity."

During the 1990s, the 800-900 blocks of West Grace had boasted more than 30 independent businesses. The extent of the subsequent university-driven and chain-brand alterations made the area nearly unrecognizable to those who knew the street in its livelier and grittier days.

During the store's final years, Regelson found herself again facing a demanding schedule that afforded her time for little else — she was in the same situation that prompted her departure from New York. She muses, "I thought the longer I did it, the easier it would get."

The street-culture milieu that the shop supported and celebrated became more diffuse and accessible through other means — like the Internet. "Exile had run its course," Regelson says. "It was the only one of its kind for a long time."

In 2011, the store closed with a clearance sale of everything down to the fixtures after 24 1/2 years in business.

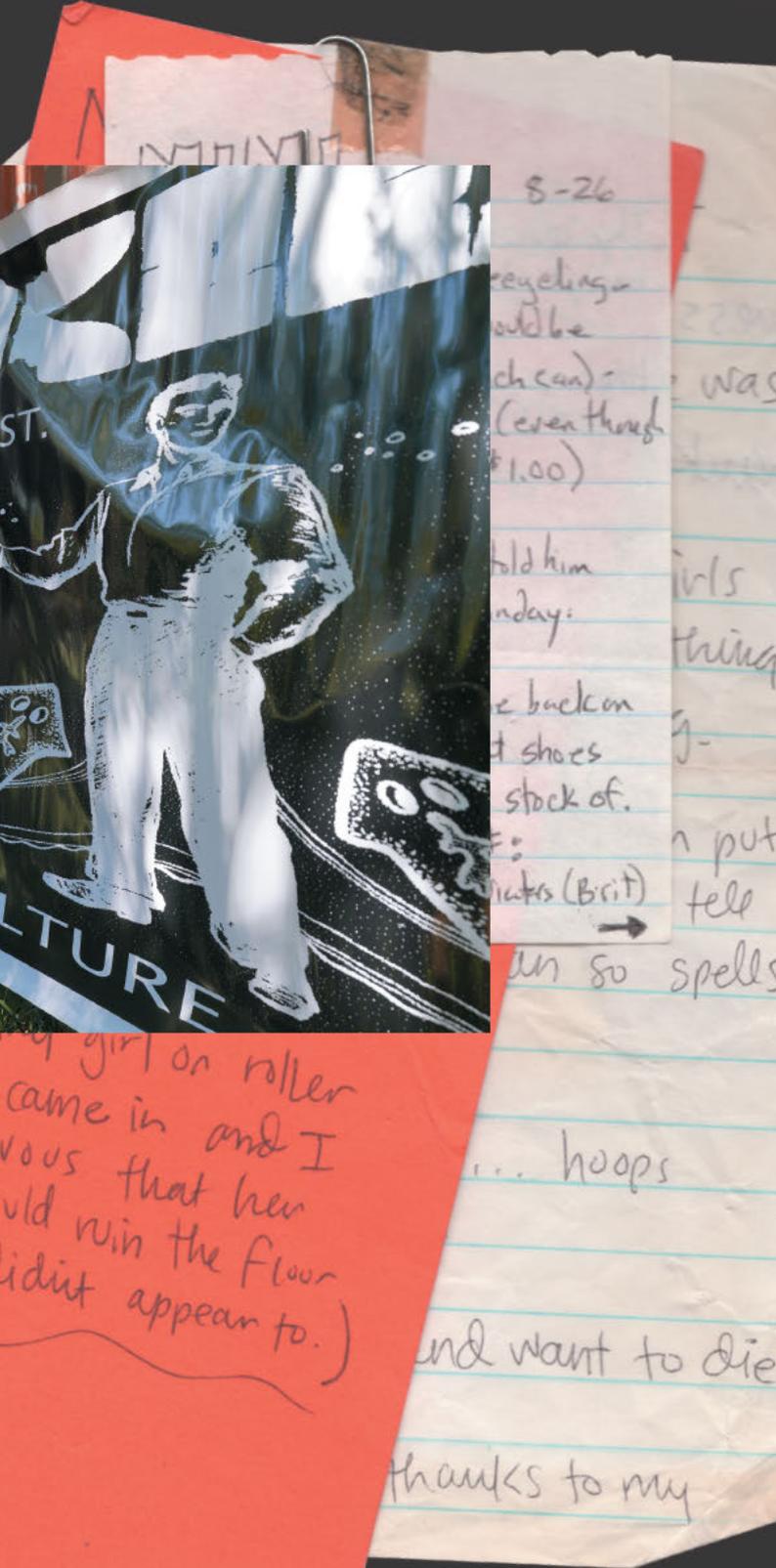
That half-year resembles how a phonograph needle is lifted from a record to play the music on the other side, rather than an end. But ends came: Gustave Heiss died at age 73 in 2015, Ilario at age 62 in April 2020.

"The funny thing about it is, people came to us like we were cool," Regelson says, laughing. "We were the uncoolest in school, the rejects. My thinking is that if you think you're cool, you're not cool."

Dugan responds that although Regelson may think she was uncool, "She had fantastic taste, always looked great, and was very kind. What more to cool is there?" ■



Mimi Regelson, today, poses with a banner that hung in Exile's last location.



... girl on roller  
skates came in and I  
was nervous that her  
skates would win the floor  
(but they didnt appear to.)

Employees left notes for Regelson reporting on shop activities.