

Neighborhood Walk: Holly Street

By **Michael Barnes** |

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A comprehensive tour requires an experienced guide.

For the Holly Street neighborhood, that guide would be **Danny Camacho**. The community historian and retired food service worker has lived in this East Austin district for 60 years.



Traffic, businesses and civic trends have ebbed and flowed, but Taylor-born Camacho (pictured) still walks the same streets, now with a cane and a smiling face that mirrors a childhood of flickering fireflies, informal circus parades, bleating goats and chickens clucking so loud they competed with the yammering yard dogs.

Holly Street — hemmed in by Chicon Street and Pleasant Valley Road, East Seventh Street and Lady Bird Lake — is the 10th Austin neighborhood explored on foot for this column, the fifth one east of Interstate 35. Geographically, it differs little from the East Cesar Chavez neighborhood turf to its west, with the obvious exception of the dinosaur-like, decommissioned Holly Street Power Plant that overshadows the single-story houses and has fueled so much of the area's politics.

The land is defined by two gentle, almost imperceptible rises in the Blackland prairie, one just below Canterbury Street, where Camacho lives, the other near East Sixth Street and the railroad tracks on the neighborhood's northern, industrial boundary.

Below the first rise, hardwood bottomlands spread around a man-made lagoon on Lady Bird Lake, which takes a sharp left turn below the hood. Camacho remembers when the Colorado River was no absolute impediment to youthful exploits, before the Longhorn dam was completed in 1960.



“Sometimes you could walk across the river when the water was low, especially during droughts,” says Camacho, whose Central Texas roots stretch back to the 19th century. “But when it was up — floods, one or two a decade — there was quicksand and whirlpools. It could turn on a dime.”

Pecans and cedar elms — surprisingly few oaks — predominate the interior land above the lake. Many of the pecan trees are reaching their last years and tumble dangerously onto the houses that date to early 1900s.

Possoms, raccoons and squirrels, along with chattering sparrows, compete with the domestic animals. The former farmlands near Camacho’s house were not developed by builders, but rather sold as lots, many of them in the Driving Park Addition, to working-class whites and World War I veterans, who erected varied cottages and bungalows.

“One (veteran) had been gassed and suffered from insomnia,” Camacho remembers. “Another was a multiple amputee who sat on the porch of the stone house across the street watching out for everybody.”

Area Mexican Americans, previously bunched on the bottomlands or near the industrial sector, moved into the hood’s central residential zone following World War II.



“It’s a neighborhood of porches,” Camacho says, as we pass a particularly inviting wrap-around. “Not for decorative function but for practical function. In the heat of the day, you did as much as you could in the cool of the porch. And being out there was a prime means of communication.”

Now young white couples, mostly renters, refresh the cycle of settlement.

Virtually no tall farm houses or Victorians tower above the street line, unlike those clustered in an older zone to Holly Street's immediate west. Corner grocery stores and other services honeycomb the zone, although fewer these days than during Camacho's youth, when some streets were topped with dirt or caliche.

"They actually were one-room additions built onto already existing homes," Camacho says of family grocerias. "They faced the street and had a separate entrance."

The nearest modern supermarkets are now on East Seventh Street or across the river on Pleasant Valley Road, neither directly in Holly.



South of Cesar Chavez, where Camacho and I strolled one fine day, several social fixtures are named after **Hamilton Metz** — longtime school board president, county and state tax assessor — including the elementary school (opened in 1916, reopened after extensive renovations in 1992), the park, pool and recreation center.

For a long time, this school served mostly whites, while Latinos were steered to the sprawling Zavala Elementary School (built in 1935) north of what was then East First Street.

"Even with the close proximity, I can remember in the '50s that there was a difference in these, in effect, two still very different neighborhoods," Camacho says about how Holly is riven, north-south, by what is now East Cesar Chavez Street.

On a later weekend, I walked those long streets north of Cesar Chavez, where the social foundations include towering Cristo Rey Catholic Church and the tidy Santa Rita Courts, the first public housing project funded and built under the 1937 Housing Act.



The Livestrong Foundation is found here, too, but it's more a creature of gentrifying East Sixth Street than of the Holly hood behind it.

A revelation (to me) in this northern sector were several narrower streets — Santa Rosa, Santa Maria, Santa Rita, Matamoros and others — where the tiny houses are built right up to the street, separated by concrete courts and a cacophony of snarling guard dogs.

Along the railroad tracks, industrial enterprises — considered job magnets and amenities when first developed in the 19th century — nowadays give way to artist studios, then to newer lofts and apartments along East Sixth.

Although a few restaurants, coffee shops and bars have reached this area, it's still the least established stretch of Sixth's 3.4 miles of segmented entertainment districts.

Back on busy Cesar Chavez with Camacho, some shops sit empty like ghostly reminders of an earlier age. Yet the old stem continues to support bustling businesses such as quinceañera boutiques, ancient bars, auto shops, a food trailer court.



“There never was a segregated, distinct Latino business district, just here and there,” Camacho says. “(Not) like the black districts along East 11th and 12th streets.”

The patterns of business growth followed utility. Newer immigrants from Northern Mexico and Central America, for instance, still need bundled services like washaterias, public phones, familiar food, nightlife.

Always an outlier, Mr. Natural, a decades-old restaurant, bakery, juice bar and health food store, is set to expand into a postmodern mini-tower next door, we discovered.

The point of convergence along this thoroughfare, however, is Juan in a Million, the always packed Mexican restaurant overseen by former teacher **Juan Meza** (pictured), also a patron of area causes.



"I love the neighborhood and the schools and the teams that play for them," Meza says. "If they need anything, we give what we can."

One of the singular attractions along the district's southern verge is the 10-year-old **Lorraine "Grandma" Camacho** Activity Center, named for Danny Camacho's activist mother. The handsome building with a tall atrium manages mountain biking, kayaking and canoeing programs, film production and other activities.

Grandma Camacho earned that loving sobriquet, by the way. Part of her public life was invested in activism — she embraced labor organizer Cesar Chavez when he visited Metz in support of better schools for Latinos — but she also personally looked out for area kids.

She worked in the cafeterias at Metz and Zavala, seeing every student, every day. For two years, as the new Metz was constructed, and the students were bussed to Webb Elementary in far northeast Austin, she, like other parents and grandparents, accompanied the children on their daily runs. Her home served as a morning drop-off point.



"My mom would make toast and fruit jam along with juice for the kids," Danny Camacho recalls. "When I'd leave to catch the bus to go to work, there would be as many 20 or 30 kids in the living room/kitchen."

Right on the shores of that river is the big eyesore, formerly also an earsore and still a political hot potato: the Holly Street Power Plant.

“Holly was meant to benefit all,” Camacho says. “But the neighborhood bore the brunt.”

Camacho remembers at least three fires that forced neighborhood evacuations, not counting a chlorine spill from the nearby city tanks that also terrorized neighbors. Every day and night, the same people were expected to just put up with the industrial noise.

The struggle over what to do with the plant has been covered by the media in detail. Some of the City of Austin’s gestures to humanize the monster — such as “placating art” as Camacho puts it — and mitigation payments haven’t speeded up demolition.

A “first bolt removal” ceremony was on Nov. 4. The land under the plant may never be repurposed because emergency vehicles must access the electrical substation that will remain.

While linked parks, sports fields and a former water park — now the Fiesta Gardens events center — lie west and south of the plant, Metz Park to the immediate north predates the behemoth. The land was acquired in 1933; the recreation center was built in 1972, expanded in 1975 and 2006.

Site supervisor **Milly Hernandez**, who grew up nearby, organizes games, crafts, meals and social events, especially for children and seniors. She remembers when gangs had turned the surrounding park into a drug market.

“We used to walk everywhere,” Hernandez says. “But at one point, you couldn’t walk when gangs were around.”

Today, newcomers and longtimers see the park and center as a second home. “Everybody who walks through that door is related,” Hernandez says “We treat them like family.”



Henrietta Torres (pictured) has lived a block or so away on Canterbury Street for 55 years. “Too long,” she jokes. A daughter with a husband and one child, as well as a son with his two children, live within a few blocks of the house that her father purchased for \$7,500.

“It’s in our culture,” Torres says. “You stay close by.” Life goes on for those grew up, raised children and grew old in the area.

“If you stay in one spot, the whole world comes to you,” Camacho says. “Then passes on.”

Photos: Rodolfo Gonzalez