

# Tallahassee Mall brings back memories

THIS IS THE FIRST OF THREE INSTALLMENTS ABOUT THE TALLAHASSEE MALL SPANNING THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE.

*TaMaryn Waters, Tallahassee Democrat*

There was a time when Tallahassee Mall was *The Mall* — a regional destination for everything. Bridal attire. Suits. Fine china. Furniture. Who can forget March Madness at Gayfers?

People flocked there. For a business lunch, dinner or date at the Brown Derby. Definitely for Levi's jeans at the Yankee Peddler.

Fast forward 40 years. Dark stores now outnumber electric signs. There are more empty store fronts than tenants.

But the mall is due for a renaissance. Security guards patrol construction zones as passersby steal glimpses of demolition activity. Curiosity is bubbling as the mall undergoes massive renovations to become an indoor-outdoor shopping center and a home for entrepreneurs and the arts.

By Christmas, the mall — renamed the CENTRE of Tallahassee — will be transformed.

As they await the big reveal, longtime Tallahassee residents are reminiscing about the mall that's as much a part of their childhood as a first kiss.

Dena Coukoulis practically grew up at Tallahassee Mall.

Her parents relocated from New York to Tallahassee to open three stores: The Yankee Peddler, Status Quo and Pantation. Coukoulis fondly recalls walking from Sealey Elementary School to the mall with her sister, Georgia. They'd always go to the Orange Julius, a kitschy snack store with a signature drink. The girls loved eating California dogs.

"Then it was kind of fun being a mall rat," said Coukoulis, a warm smile stretching across her olive-skinned face. "Everybody always hung out at the mall."



**Dena Couloulis' parents owned three stores in the Tallahassee Mall. She talks about some of her memories with reporter TaMaryn Waters in this video.**

Tallahassee Mall sat at the edge of town when it first opened circa 1971. Parking lots overflowed with Chevy Novas, Dodge Chargers and Plymouth Furies. Cars were stamped with Alabama, Georgia and Florida tags. The mall soon eclipsed the two-year-old Northwood Mall, the city's first shopping center mall a short ride south on North Monroe Street.

The newcomer was bigger. It was an indoor mall with national retailers. Local shops swarmed to be near the action.



**Wallace "Wally" and Linda Frohock connected at the Brown Derby and have been married for 36 years.**  
*(Photo: Photo courtesy of Linda Frohock)*

In time, residents and visitors didn't mind the drive to the other side of town for an opportunity to shop at Gayfers, Montgomery Ward and Woolco. They'd play at Putt Putt Golf or watch a movie at Twin Cinema. Young beauties were annually crowned Miss Gayfers or served on the Teen Board. Families shopped for the holidays. Newbie parents fretted over picking the perfect crib.

Morrison's Cafeteria, which later became Piccadilly's, served down home food. Nothing fancy, just good southern meals. Or residents enjoyed dinner and dancing at the Brown Derby, famed for its salad bar, prime rib and Napoleon steaks when it opened in 1974.

Linda Frohock remembers a chance encounter at the Derby. As she and her Delta Zeta sisters soaked in the social scene, a handsome face emerged from the dance floor.

Would you like to dance, he asked.

Yes, she said.

May I have your phone number, he asked, after a few more dances.

Yes, she replied.

She's been married for 36 years to Wallace "Wally" Frohock, but she still remembers the day as if she's back on the Derby dance floor.

They returned to their special place for countless Saturday night meals before it was torn down in 1992 to make room for a new wing behind the mall. Now it's a parking lot and patches of grass.

"We never just walk through the mall," said Linda Frohock, who today shops occasionally at Belk.

Her husband chimed in, "The mall is depressing now."

Becky Parsons, a transplant from St. Petersburg, adored the Derby, a 6,000-square-foot restaurant. A couple of White Russians cocktails made for a lively Friday night while waiting to be seated.

The final reward was a noisy, crowded dining room and a plate of huge tender prime rib, a huge baked potato and crispy onion rings. Then, on special occasions, she devoured the Derby's pie of vanilla ice cream on a hot brownie.

"There was nothing else like it in Tallahassee," Parsons mused. "It was truly an excess-at-all-levels experience, and it was ours! The magic of the Derby was something we couldn't imagine losing, as well as shopping at the mall that was no longer "out on the edge of town."

Nostalgia is as much a comfort to past and present customers as it is to former mall employees. Lucille Willis, 95, worked in the better dress department at Gayfers until she retired at age 72.

"I enjoyed my work. I was ready to get up every morning and go," Willis said. She laughed out loud recalling the number of times customers called in from Quincy or Thomasville, Georgia, saying they were en route and wanted Willis to pull out dresses for them to try on.

Ah, the good old days.

If Coukoulis closes her eyes, she can still see the muscular dystrophy fundraisers that attracted hundreds of people. Or the time, at the age of 7, Coukoulis entered her jet black Pekingese pup in a dog show at the mall.



**Dena Coukoulis, 7, participates in a dog show at the Tallahassee Mall with her Pekingese pup named "Yang."**  
*(Photo: Photo courtesy of Dena Coukoulis)*

Oh, and the people who came in her pop's store. They delighted Coukoulis and her family.

The Doobie Brothers, a classic rock band with hits like "China Grove," performed at Florida State's Pow Wow in the 1970s. Before they hit the stage, the band bought Levi's at the Yankee Peddler. After the show, the band returned and dined on a Greek feast prepared by Coukoulis' parents.

"Yeah, it's kind of cool. Anybody who wore Levi's bought them from the Yankee Peddler," she said. Memories flowed out like water. She rattled off stores she recalled as a young girl.

She's excited about the mall's future. But a hint of sadness washed over her while talking about changes to come. A part of her childhood is being torn down.

"When I went to the movies last week and saw all of the construction, it made me a little teary-eyed," Coukoulis confessed. "But I'm excited for the change, and I think Tallahassee is ready for the concept they are planning on that property."

