

Window on diversity

Near East Side neighborhood has a great view of Cleveland's ethnic mix

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The Stefanec brothers, barbers all, are leaving the suburbs to move into Cleveland's near East Side, their old neighborhood.

They operate a shop near downtown but grew weary of commuting. Recently, Frank and Steve headed for the city.

"I'm the last to dive in," John says. He and his wife, Irma, are joining the others in a cluster of apartments they own near Stefanec Brothers Barbershop on Superior Avenue.

The 'hood today, though, is quite different from the one he and his brothers grew up in. Stefanec has seen his clientele change over his years of cutting hair.

In the five decades since his family immigrated from Slovenia, the cultural landscape of the mile-and-a-half-long wedge of dense industry, commerce and dwellings has turned upside down.

The Payne-Sterling neighborhood, as most of the area between St. Clair and Chester avenues from East 18th Street to East 55th is called, has shifted from being a largely Eastern-European community to one in which East Asians prevail. It's also become perhaps the most ethnically diverse in town — as well as the most misunderstood.

"It's so industrial you might not even know people live there," says Algis Rukonas, executive director of the International Service Center, a refugee resettlement agency that tracks regional immigration.

"But there are still Croatian and Serbian property owners and others from the former Yugoslavia," he says. "Plus, there are African-Americans, an Ethiopian community" and a pocket of Sudanese immigrants.

Cleveland Councilman Joe Cimperman, whose Ward 13 includes the neighborhood, adds to the list Puerto Rican and other Latino families who live in an enclave around East 32nd Street.

"And we've got Koreans and Burmese, and, yeah, white Yuppies and artists taking advantage of the live-work lofts going up in old buildings," he says.

Growing Chinatown

But Cimperman, Rukonas and others who watch the neighborhood say the biggest and fastest-growing ethnic group is Chinese.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARVIN FONG | THE PLAIN DEALER

Barney Fong cleans a Stefanec Brothers Barber Shop window from the sidewalk on Superior Avenue in Cleveland's Payne-Sterling neighborhood.



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Brothers John Stefanec (standing, far left) and Steve Stefanec (standing, far right) get help cutting hair for a diverse clientele from their nephew, David Stefanec (standing, middle) at their barbershop on Superior Avenue.

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