

Mathews' downtown plan took vision, guts

Tennessean, The (Nashville, TN) - Saturday, June 7, 2008

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There is a scene in a certain Christmas movie when George Bailey looks around at what Bedford Falls is like without him.

Pottersville is a place of gloom and despair. The wind whistles down deserted alleys. Crime is the only sidewalk pedestrian.

Think of what downtown Nashville would be like if Bobby Mathews had never been born.

The warehouses along Second Avenue North, crawling with country music fans, would be crawling with rodents. Or leveled forever. There would be no L&C Tower. No Hatch Show Print. No Ryman Auditorium.

Nashville, in the late 1970s, was a daytime downtown.

"If I worked past 5 o'clock, and I walked out to go to the garage, the traffic was done and you didn't pass anybody in any direction," recalled Eddie Jones, then head of the Nashville chamber. "The downtown work force was 35,000 people who came in at 8 a.m. and left at 5 o'clock, and the town shut down."

Downtown was down

There were still remnants of downtown's retail heyday, with two department stores left on Church Street. The original Service Merchandise was still open on Lower Broadway, as was the Acme Farm Supply store.

But about the only life on Second Avenue was in Phillips and Quarles hardware store, Nashville Sash and Awning, and Murdock Mendelsohn, an establishment that sold department store fixtures.

Plans were in the works to tear down the Ryman. The only theaters left showed porn. And the honky-tonks weren't quite as charming as they are now.

Along came Bobby Mathews. An impish man, with wit and reason, he was easily bored by the usual hobbies like tennis and golf.

"He told me, 'I get in the car and drive around and look at land and figure out what could this be?' " Jones recalled.

And that's what he did on Second Avenue. He wooed the Old Spaghetti Factory franchise

to open there at a time when young families were moving to the suburbs and "eating out" meant Shoney's.

'One of the shapers'

Some people laughed at Mathews. Said he was crazy. Others got it, and joined in.

"A bunch of them made money off that, and Bobby made some money," Jones recalled. "But it was also an emotional thing with him. He loved downtown. It took the vision, and then it took the guts."

Both Jones and Ann Roberts, head of the Metro Historical Commission, used the word "visionary" to describe Mathews. Roberts watched as he bought up 16 buildings on Second and then did the same around downtown.

"He was one of the shapers," she said. "He certainly had more to do with shaping the legacy of downtown than anyone else. He really understood what makes a city urban."

Bobby Mathews will be buried today. He leaves behind a family who loved him, a thriving city and business, and a vibrant downtown. Plus, he was a very nice man.

His was, truly, a wonderful life.