

# Area 3 station is perfectly cast

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By Steve Johnson

The building is hardly an architectural jewel, even by Chicago Police Department standards. Its exterior is basic brick, its design from a school that might be called "Standard Municipal."

A poster in the main lobby of the building, the department's Brighton Park Area 3 headquarters, depicts "Police Department Haircut Standards," or at least the standards that existed back when all men, not just club-crawling hipsters, wore sideburns.

The drab, cocoa-brown walls, slow-turning ceiling fans and decrepit furniture further the feeling of having stepped back in time, as though Humphrey Bogart might be tucked in a side office somewhere, smoking unfiltered cigarettes and talking tough to an informant.

The proposed closing of the 3-story building, recommended in a departmental reorganization report endorsed Wednesday by Mayor Richard Daley and Police Supt. Matt Rodriguez, would not seem likely to inspire reaction any more profound than a shoulder shrug.

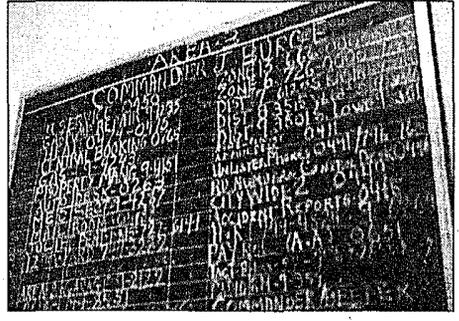
Yet even though cynicism, not sentimentality, is the stock attitude of veteran police officers, detectives there Thursday spoke of the place, one of the department's oldest, with, if not love, then affection.

"It's like somebody selling your house right from under you," said Detective Pete Koin, one of 130 stationed there who will be reassigned to other area headquarters if the department follows the consultant's cost-cutting recommendations. "It's a dirty shame. I've been coming here 22 years."

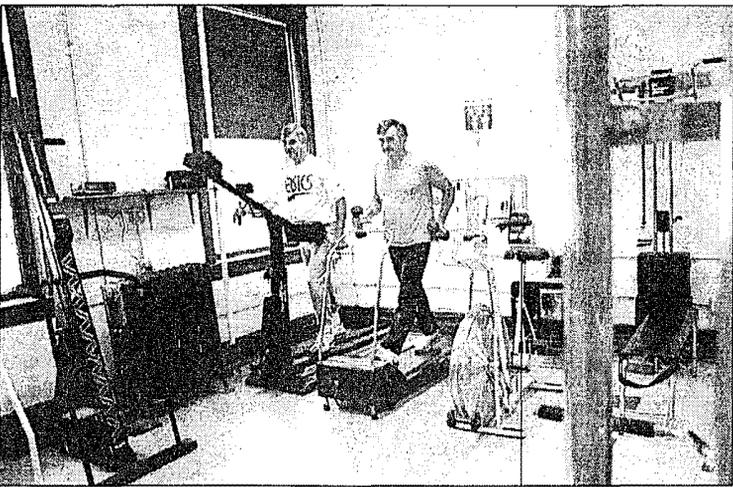
Searching microfiche voting records as part of an investigation into a con game, the gray-haired, no-longer-lean Koin laughed as he remembered the figure he cut when he started working in the building, located at Pershing Road and California Avenue.

"I had blond hair," he said. "I weighed

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Tribune photos by Vei Mazzonga



The entrance to the Brighton Park Area 3 headquarters (above) shows the age that gives it so much of its character and lured Hollywood filmmakers. Age also is the reason a consultant's report on revamping the Chicago Police Department recommended that the building at 3900 S. California Ave. be closed. Detectives Skip Dorn and Ed Budz (left) work out in the station's makeshift gym, which was converted by the officers assigned to Area 3, while the old roster (top), with 'J. Burge' still in command, is another piece of history.

# Station

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165 pounds."

Another detective in the room, doing some routine paperwork, shouted, "I guess for sure we're closing. We don't have any envelopes."

The detectives found out they were on the death list, said Detective Henry Leja, when a TV cameraman arrived on Wednesday.

"This guy comes running in with a camera, said he wanted to take pictures of the place," Leja said. "We said, 'Why?' He said, 'Cause it's closing.' That's how we found out."

Even before Wednesday, the place had its share of notoriety. Its commander, Jon Burge, is suspended from the force, awaiting a Police Board decision on whether he should be fired. The city has charged Burge with police brutality in a 1982 incident that allegedly occurred in the old Area 2 headquarters, charges that he has been cleared of three times prior.

For both suspects and cops, the building is rather unpleasant, climatically, said a detective. "Cold in winter, hot in summer," he said, and Burge's replacement, acting commanding officer Lt. John Regan, described its heating and electrical systems as "antiquated."

That, of course, explains most of the charm of the place. In an era when new Chicago police buildings are low and slick, the Area 3 headquarters is a structure whose dim and narrow hallways resonate history.

Built around the turn of the century, its north outside walls boast two doors—one marked "Patrol," one "Ambulance"—from which horse-drawn vehicles once emerged. A second-story door that now leads nowhere used to be the egress from which the fuel for those original police cruisers—hay—would be tossed.

As best as the men working there can remember, the building housed a South Side police academy in the 1930s and 1940s, before being converted into a district station house in the 1950s and then, in the 1960s, into its present incarnation, home to violent-crimes and property-crimes detectives whose turf includes the rough-and-tumble Englewood neighborhood, Chicago Lawn and Brighton Park.

The building also hosts youth of-

ficers and a backup police communications station.

No beat cops work out of there, but residents of the surrounding neighborhood expressed, mostly, dismay at news that the station would close.

"I feel a little safer having them here," said Mary Novisikis, 80, a 54-year resident of the area. "When my house was burglarized, they were nice to me."

"I hate to see them close it," agreed her neighbor, Kim Howell. "There are already a lot of gangs coming around here."

Jerry Witherspoon was more adamant. "Kiss this area goodbye if they do that," said the 37-year-old construction worker, who's been living four years in the house on 39th Place that once belonged to his grandmother. "We'd have gangbanger city."

Residents and cops aren't the only ones who'll miss it. In recent years, even as one of its old first-floor cells is now being used as a broom closet, it has had pictures of Harry Truman and Babe Ruth on the walls—not because any of the detectives is a particular fan of the two, but because Hollywood has come knocking—and redecorating—with regularity.

In period costume, or in its present, very realistic approximation of an aging urban station house, the building has been immortalized in films of differing artistic merit, among them "Bad Boys," "Code of Silence," "Above the Law," "Lady Blue," "Naked Face," and "Next of Kin." Scenes from several episodes of the "Crime Stories" television series took place there, and all the glitter has meant cameos for several of the police officers.

Detective Skip Dorn said he was in a scene in one true-crime made-for-TV movie. "I just stood around as a detective, acting natural," Dorn said.

He also appeared in "Next of Kin," starring Patrick Swayze. It was typecasting. "I stood around the office."

Dorn said there had been rumors about the building's demise for over a year. "It just solidified the rumor," he said Thursday, working out on a cross-country-ski simulator in the small weight room the detectives installed themselves.

"This building's got a lot of character," he said. "You see the buildings now, they're one floor. They're functional." He said the word with distaste.