

In 1960, when Otie Blankenship moved to Hilliard, he saw a scattering of blue-collar subdivisions and a lot of farms.

The town was so slow, he likes to tell people, you could stand in the road and argue about sports and not get hit by a car.

The school district's reputation was strong but not as strong as the stench that swirled around the failing sewage treatment plant.

But much has changed.

A steady stream of traffic glides by on Main Street. About every fifth vehicle is a dump truck on its way to or from any of the dozens of construction sites in Hilliard.

After sundown, Blankenship likes to watch the blur of the taillights as they pass his saloon. He owns Otie's Old Hilliard Inn and Pub and is known around town as an amateur historian and civic leader.

He came to Hilliard after a stint in the Army and never left.

He found work in Sparky's, a bar at the center of town — a collection of brick buildings and empty storefronts divided by railroad tracks and punctuated by an aging grain elevator.

"When I came here, there wasn't much going on, but then it didn't take much to impress me, coming from the coal fields of West Virginia," said Blankenship in his best Otie-speak, delivered with a raspy but friendly voice. It sounds as if it has been stretched from those coal fields to central Ohio and back.

He opened Otie's Towne Pub in 1965 in one of Hilliard's few prominent buildings — a brick structure built about 1870 that had been a general store and post office.

It was a workingman's bar and remained blue-collar for years. Blankenship responded to Hilliard's growth a decade ago by adding a restaurant to the bar.

In 1990, he changed the name to Otie's Old Hilliard to reflect a change in eras and to keep the heritage of Old Hilliard alive.

As a member of the Old Hilliard Commission, Blankenship has worked to

Old flavor preserved

bring more than \$1 million worth of landscaping, brick sidewalks, ornamental streetlights and more to the historic district.

The railroad tracks have been ripped up, and the track bed soon will be turned into a paved path for biking and hiking. The path will be part of Rails to Trails, a program utilizing old rail lines as bike paths, and will some day link Hilliard to hundreds of miles of trails in the Midwest.

Four Old Hilliard buildings are on the National Register of Historic Places, and the city is working to bring more shops and restaurants into the district.

"The town has gone from mostly families with a single wage-earner, who probably worked in a factory, into a bedroom community of double-income

families," Blankenship said.

"But even with the switch to professionals, the people are still the same. Hilliard has always drawn hard-working people."

Not everyone approves of the changes.

Blankenship said some old-timers hate to see row after row of houses springing up from soil that used to be part of a family farm. But he believes Hilliard will always retain its small-town feel.

"This will never be Upper Arlington or Dublin; it will never be run by big bucks," he said. "I can't ever see this becoming the kind of town where you have to be a bank president to sit on City Council."

The changing times have turned Sparky's — the watering hole where Otie learned the art of saloonkeeping — into Scoops, a trendy ice cream shop with the requisite '90s offering of gourmet coffees.

Hilliard's metamorphosis has wiped away the hayseed town with a substandard sewage treatment plant and replaced it with a bedroom community known as a "hot city on the move" by real estate agents.

Blankenship said that metamorphosis was reflected recently in a conversation he had with a patron at the other end of his bar.

"One of the old boys was in here and he said, 'You know, Otie, nowadays I don't mind telling people I'm from Hilliard.'"

Once the city secured a water contract with Columbus in 1974, Reynolds started thinking about ways to use sewer and water lines to strengthen Hilliard's image and tax base.