

---

# Jean Ovitt

Jean Ovitt's experiences with Judson House fall into two categories: a brief visit in 1958, when she stayed at the house, and a longer commitment, from 1968 to 1974, when she was involved in the arts program.

---

## MARCH 1958

**A**t Ohio State University, both before and after Howard Moody came to New York, Judson Memorial Church was a bit like the Holy Grail. So it was that during spring break in 1958 the Ohio State Glee club was to give a concert at Carnegie Hall and I decided to make my second trip to New York City, the first on my own. Only the young assume their expectations will be fulfilled. I don't remember how I arranged to stay at Judson House.

Driving in New York City can be a little intimidating for the first time at night after a ten- or twelve-hour drive. I had no idea where Thompson Street was, let alone how to get there. I said goodbye to my traveling companion who went off to Long Island, put the car in a garage (I have no idea where), and called up Judson House. A short time later I arrived there in a cab, more than a little befuddled. I was welcomed and led to a room so tiny there was room only for a bed, a chair, and a chest. Men were on one floor, women on the other. A pretty depressing shower room was down the hall. I was too excited to be on my own in New York City to care.

Washington Square and surroundings were very different then. Buses still came through the Arch into the square, where they turned around and went back up Fifth Avenue. Neither the highrises of Washington Square Village nor the other buildings east of Judson existed, but the process of demolition and construction called Urban Renewal had begun.

My stay was brief, less than a week. There was a big kitchen downstairs in the house, and people often gathered around a table to eat and talk. Someone on my floor showed me her room. It seemed that everybody fixed up their own space, so the other rooms seemed

at least homey. It would be nice to say that the visit made me want to return. This was not the case. I was fascinated but intimidated and in over my head. Yet who knows? One of the other Ohio State migrants gave me a book, and I spent the last night in New York reading *Catcher in the Rye*.

## 1968: THE CONGREGATION MOVES IN

I moved to New York in November 1968. Judson House had changed again and was now a runaway house, although not for long. In 1969, after the runaways left, it would never be a residence hall again. I am not sure the building was in much worse shape than when I visited in 1958, but times had changed, and there was no way to renovate the space and make it into an acceptable dormitory.

The staff and the congregation began to use the space in different ways. Staff continued to live at Judson House and, while Grace House was being renovated, so did Howard and Lorry Moody. The congregation began to use the rooms on the ground and first floors more intensively. Many meetings and discussion groups now took place there.

Now that the students and runaways were gone, many of us who were at loose ends or figuring out what to do with our lives just spent time hanging out around the house. Sometimes we just talked, at other times we cooked and ate together. Puppies and kittens were growing up in the garden, including Tony Clark's golden retriever and John Tungate's cat, Toby. After a visit to the Midwest, I returned with armloads of hostas. These and other plants got added to the garden.

There was always some work to do, such as scraping and painting. John Tungate gave classes in home repair. No one was sure what to do with the space, but that did not mean it was not used. There were committee meetings, parties, classes, discussion groups. For those of us who often hung out during those years, it was also a last chance of being able to live cheaply in New York and not have to worry much about whether we were earning enough money. The sixties were over, but it wasn't yet the eighties.

## A GALLERY AGAIN?

By late 1969 I began to feel the lack of the visual arts at Judson. Jon Hendricks had left in June of 1968, and with him went the Judson

---

Art Gallery. The Judson Dance Theater was in its last year. We had theater, and Al Carmines's first oratorio, *Christmas Rappings*, was about to have its premiere. But I missed the visual element. I looked around to see if others felt the same way.

A small group of people got together to see if there was still a need for a gallery. We thought that if we could provide a space and the interest, people would come. It was not so easy to agree on what kinds of shows we would have or want to have at Judson. This was the period of concern over "participatory democracy." Building consensus was the theme of the day. We did agree to two shows: a photography exhibit by Theresa Wright and a painting show "About Purple" by Sharon Gold.

The committee disbanded after about a year. The committee approach was not considered successful and the Judson Board wanted the gallery space for other uses. There were a few other shows in the gallery space, but these shows were individual and not part of the little committee's efforts. I know of shows by Lee Guillatt and Lyn Miller. There were other shows at Judson during the 1970s, but these, like the Flag Show of 1969, related to political and social issues.

As for the need I felt for a dialogue with visual artists, such was not to be. The timing was wrong. It was a period when many maintained that painting was dead, and multimedia was the art of the day. Also, what painting there was in the 1970s was monumental in size and often took over entire rooms and buildings. Judson's little gallery had become irrelevant. A new community of artists, young and daring, did not appear for another decade, and their center was the East Village.

---

**JEAN OVITT**

lives in New York City.