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ATLANTA DOWN UNDER

They Can Hear the Old Rinky-Tink Now

By REESE CLEGHORN

THE IDEA of reviving Atlanta's deserted underground streets, haunting reminders of how the city was a century ago, has been moving some imaginations.

Here is where we left that subject (a flashback, in the style of the old flicks):

Under Alabama Street, an older Alabama Street exists. At least two and perhaps four blocks of it, with original street-level store fronts, livery stables and saloons, is regarded as reclaimable, along with some of the side streets.

It is possible to enter this part of "underground Atlanta" from the present Alabama Street, though all is now dark and forbidding, used mainly by trucks for deliveries to below-street-level entrances of Alabama Street buildings.

Still, on that underground Alabama Street you may see, at No. 38, a gilded inscription indicating the Lowry Bank, founded in 1861, and across the street from it is the stone arch that once marked the entrance to one of the meat packers of Packinghouse Row. The Atlanta Chamber of Commerce held forth at No. 44, and at No. 69 people reveled at Paul Hentschel's Saloon.

So much for the scene.

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A MONTH AGO, when I wrote about the possibility that this and perhaps other parts of "underground Atlanta" might be carefully re-created in the style of earlier days, the whole thing was only an idea in a few heads.

The Civic Design Commission had been looking into the possibilities. What appeared in print about the idea moved a good many people to call Paul Muldawer, a young architect who is on the commission, to express enthusiastic interest. He welcomes such calls. And he now reports that he and others of the commission have been moving along with more explorations of the prospects.

I also have had many responses, and that suggests to me that the idea would be a popular one and a re-creation of the old Atlanta would draw plenty of customers. Among those who have reacted happily to the idea are the people at the Atlanta Convention Bureau, who obviously would have something very unusual to tell our visitors about.

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SO A SMALL LIST is now being compiled by Mr. Muldawer indicating who thinks what about this still-aborning idea:

One caller would like to put in a night club and lounge in the 19th century decor, if other entrepreneurs would join him down under; and now there also is a suggestion that an old



locomotive (or the dining car of an old train) be rolled down the tracks that still exist and placed within reach of the visitors.

Mr. Hugh Starr has called me and told of a rare collection which I did not know existed. Mr. Starr for many years has been collecting old mechanical music devices. He has more than 50, most of them large and valuable.

One, for instance, is a seven-foot-tall mechanical organ with 256 pipes, vintage 1910, which bursts into a frenzy of "Let Me Call You Sweetheart" when Mr. Starr flicks it on.

There is an old band organ that whips out "Old McDonald" on 13 brass trumpets, 98 wooden pipes, a bass drum, a snare drum and a cymbal, all of it a veritable cacaphonic extravaganza of early automation. (Hear! hear!)

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MR. STARR'S COLLECTION also includes a player piano that has eight separate slots for nickels (apparently so that one's enjoyment could be prolonged without the necessity of leaving the bar); a genuine Violano-Virtuoso, circa 1912, which combines violin and piano music in a mechanical rhapsody; and, sir, a band organ that plays a continuous roll of music 650 feet long.

Now: Mr. Starr is pondering whether a revived "underground Atlanta" might have room for a museum of old musical instrument curiosities.

An even more obvious entry might be a drug store of early vintage, perhaps equipped with the paraphernalia of the early soft-drink industry in Atlanta. I shall not mention any commercial names here (other than that of the late Violano-Virtuoso company), but there is one firm in town that does, in fact, spring to mind.

Minds are beginning to whirl on all such dazzling prospects. In fact, some people are even said to be hearing the faint, ghostly notes of a rinky-tink.

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MEANWHILE, THERE IS only one bit of discouragement. The Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority has been eyeing our underground city with an undisguised hankering. It thinks it might like to place the downtown Transit Center (meeting place of the north-south and east-west subway lines) in "underground Atlanta." It, too, is studying the area.

But there is a large area in this underground city; and the only part of it which is being considered for a revival of the past is the short stretch under Alabama Street. Certainly it would be a shame, and perhaps it would be a kind of disaster, if that area had to be sacrificed to rapid transit.

Anyone who has a serious interest in all this should make himself heard. This part of Atlanta's heritage is too good to lose to disinterest and the march of the great giant Progress.