

College weekend

D.W. HIRSCH | special to spark

If you want to get away from it all without being too far removed from it all, State College is your kind of town.

You won't be zipping through a dizzying dash of tourist sites here; this is a town celebrating 100 years of banking in 2004. Just over the mountain, dropping into the scenic ditch known as Happy Valley, lay simpler countryside explorations.

However, after a relaxing day, the nightlife roars with the proximity of Penn State's University Park campus snuggling right up to the town. You don't have to bleed blue-and-white to keep yourself occupied either on or off campus.

State College is almost dead-center in the state of Pennsylvania, and it's one of the friendliest towns to navigate.

The Visitor's Bureau (800 E. Park beside Beaver Stadium, [800] 358-5466) is just off U.S. 322 as you enter town. There is free downtown street parking after 6 p.m.

If you're too tired to walk or want to sightsee on the cheap, the Blue Campus Loop and White Town Loop busses offer free public transportation on and off campus.

THINGS TO DO:

So where do you start? Let's face it, with a Big Ten college producing one in every eight college alumni in the U.S., there's always something happening on the Penn State campus. Check out Nittany Lion happenings at www.events.psu.edu. There you'll find a listing of all campus activities, a sampling of which is represented here:

If you're needing a Shakespeare fix, there are plenty of theater groups to stimulate your mind. Upcoming performances at Center for Perform-

ing Arts (www.cpa.psu.edu) include "Rent," "La Traviata," and the National Acrobats of Taiwan. The Penn State Thespians (www.clubs.psu.edu/up/pennstatethespians/) is the oldest continual student organization on campus and the fall's performance is "Cabaret." The University Resident Theatre Company (<http://www.theatre.psu.edu/performances/season/2004/schedule.html>) offers "Noises Off" in November.

If the latest concert event sells out in Philadelphia, consider the Bryce Jordan Center (www.bjc.psu.edu) as

an alternative. Lipizzaner Stallions marched on the same stage as Prince, Ludacris, Matchbox Twenty, Spark-favorite Journey, and John Tesh. (There's no accounting for taste.) The 16,000-seat Jordan Center hosts circuses, Big Ten Basketball, and music performances. If the mood strikes you midday, you can often acquire same-day tickets.

For the cultured excursions, don't miss the two premier art galleries in town, Douglas Albert Gallery (107 McAllister Way, [814] 234-9822) and the Palmer Museum of Art on campus

(www.psu.edu/dept/palermuseum; [814] 865-7672). Palmer's fall exhibits include the surrealist touring collection by New York Julien Levy as well as art by Kurt Seligmann and an 1893 lithograph by James Abbott McNeill Whistler.

Downtown shopping provides everything from comic books to beads to music to cigars to 60s paraphernalia. Mark your calendar for the Annual Tree Lighting on Nov. 18 in Central Parklet ([814] 238-7004).

A wonderful assortment of pursuits exists just outside city limits. Climbing the legendary Mt. Nittany (www.mtnittany.org) is the classic hike for local residents, tourists and returning alumni. It's an easy hike for area daytrippers, so don't feel intimidated by the thought of "climbing a mountain." Choose to walk the one-mile trail if you're feeling mildly woody or the 6-mile trail to glimpse the secret valley up top. Regardless of the path chosen, you'll be rewarded with stunning views of the campus and community.

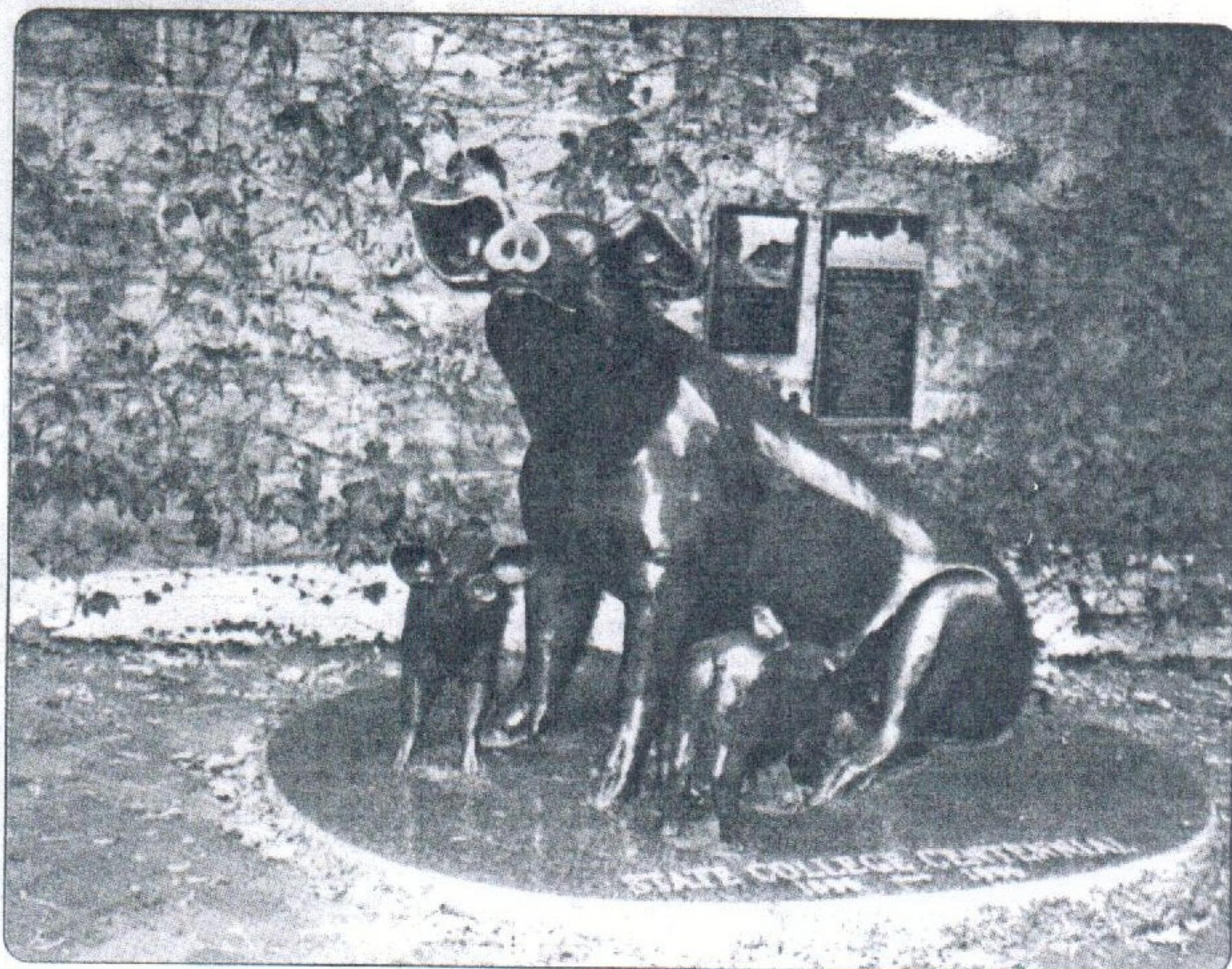
Penn's Cave in Centre Hall (www.pennscave.com, [814] 364-1664) fascinates young and old alike with dripping water. Guided one-hour tours in America's only all-water cavern depart on the hour on flat-bottom motorboats. The temperature's a

chilly 52 degrees, so dress warm. There's also a 90-minute vehicle tour of the nearby wildlife park, but the real fun is panning for gems near the visitor's center. Feeling lucky? It's open daily mid-February through Nov. 30 and weekends only in December.

THE place to ski in central Pennsylvania is Tussey Mountain (www.tusseymountain.com, [800] 733-2754 or [814] 466-6266). For \$15 or less, you can ski down several slopes, schluss around the snowboarding park, and snowtube down the 1000-foot ride at Avalanche Canyon Tube Park. Open early December through late March for your wintery activities.

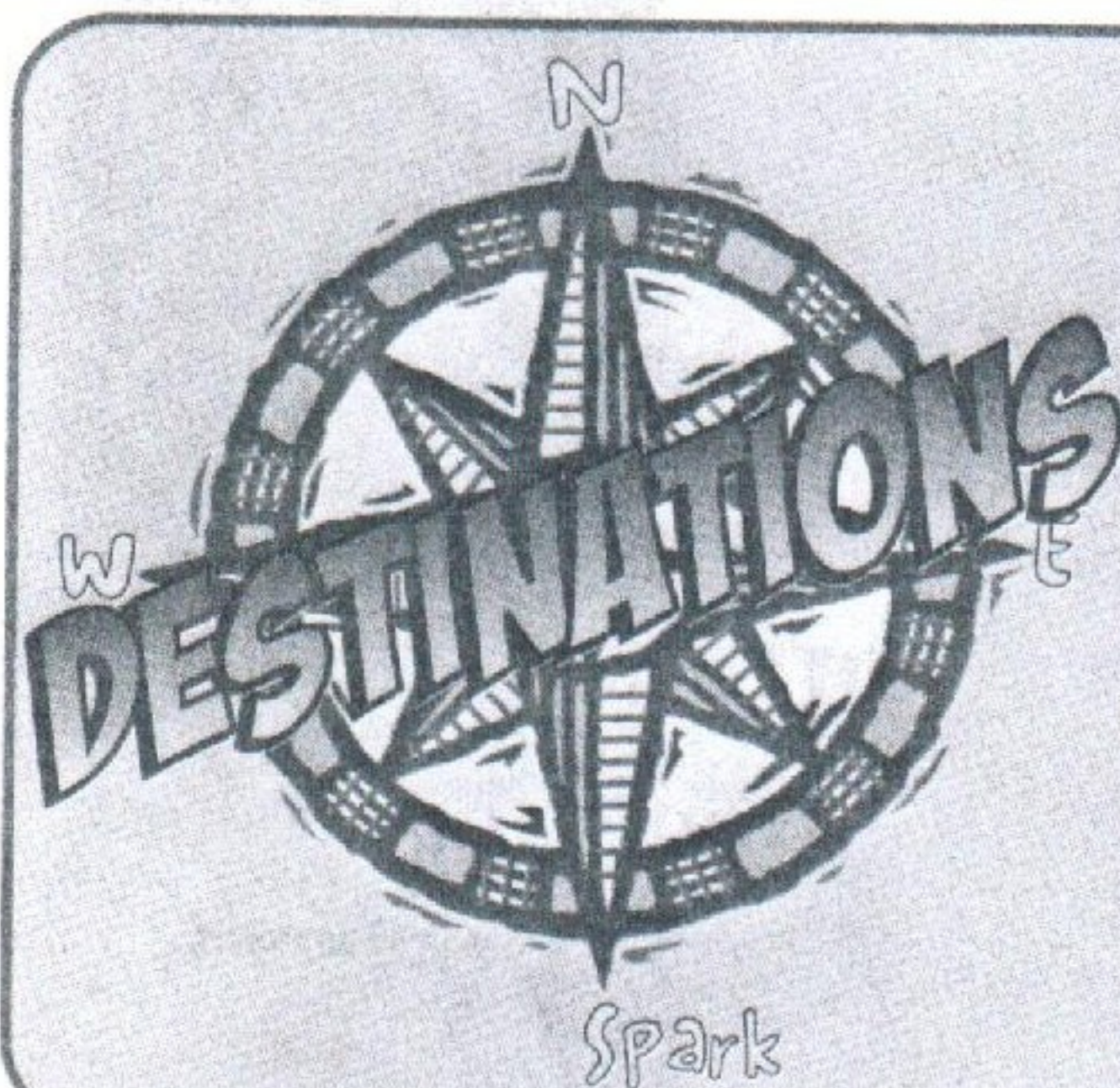
Duffers do it in style on the 36 PGA-rated holes of Penn State Golf Courses (www.psu.edu/golfcourses, 1523 W. College Ave., [814] 863-0257). Whether you play the Blue Course (par 72) or the White Course (par 70), you'll find a challenge.

Venture a scant 7 miles east of State College and you'll discover Mount Nittany Vineyards & Winery (www.mtnittanywinery.com, [814] 466-6373). Open since July 1990, you can sample this family-run winery's award-winning Chambourcin, Riesling, and Chardonnay Tuesdays through Sundays. The winery is closed for the month of January, so stock up before the holidays.



The Centennial Pigs, a sculpture erected in 1996 to celebrate the agrarian roots of the State College area. Right.

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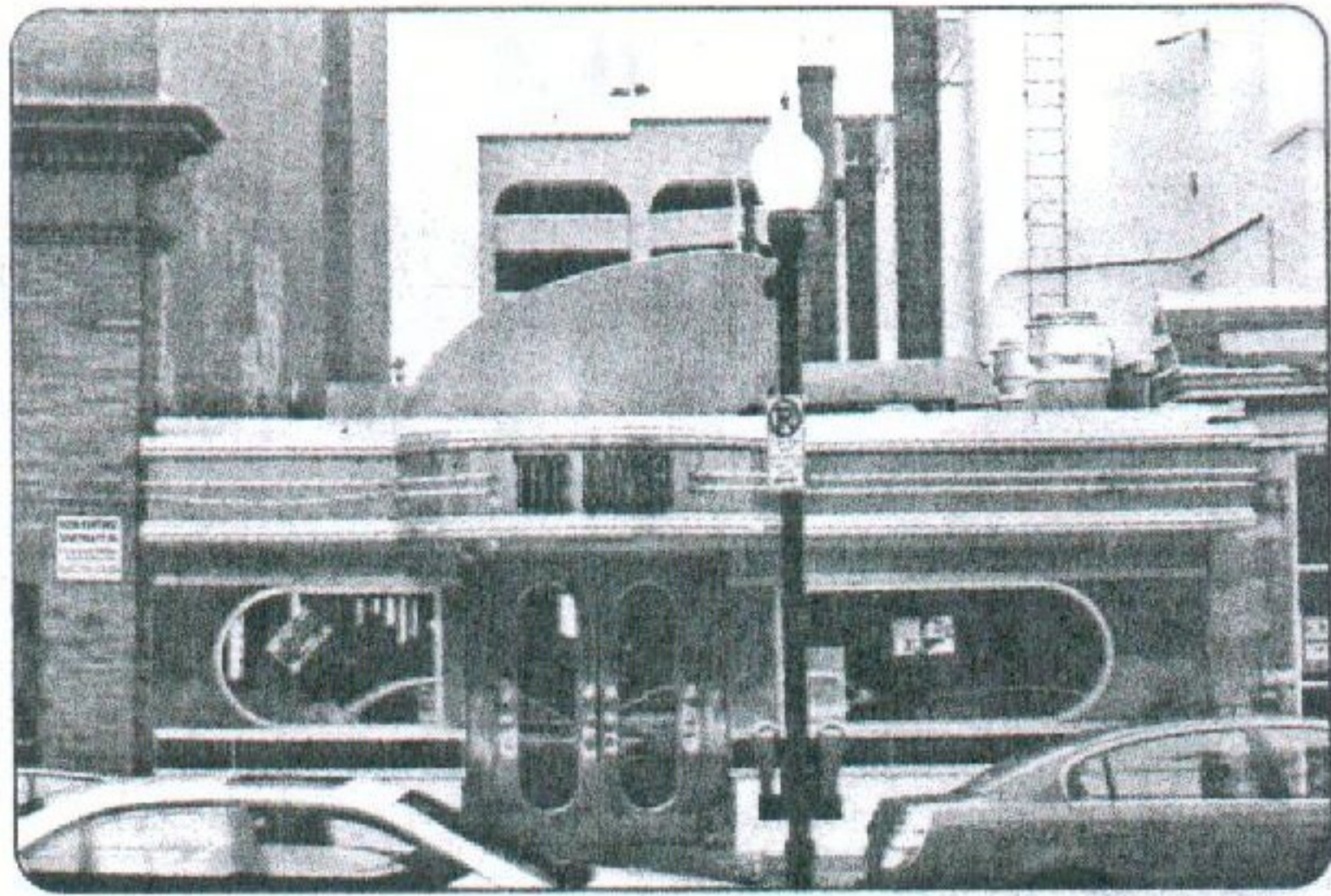


Where:
**STATE COLLEGE,
PENNSYLVANIA**

Directions:

From I-95 north, get on U.S. 202 north and take it to Pa. 100 north. Take the Pennsylvania Turnpike to Exit 247 ("Harrisburg East"). Take Exit 1-A immediately onto I-283 north. Follow all signs for U.S. 322 west towards Lewistown. You'll go up mountains, so check your car's engine before you leave for the four-hour drive.

Info: www.statecollege.com



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Grab a bite to eat at diners where you can gorge all you like and still afford to tip.

PLACES TO EAT:

The good news: you're in a college town, and the exchange rate between the working world and collegiate prices is exceptional.

Ye Olde College Diner at 126 West College (www.thediner.statecollege.com, [814] 238-5590) is a 24-hour food emporium. Their Grilled Stickies are world-famous, popular at breakfast or for late-night munchies. You'll leave well-fed with change in your pocket as the most expensive menu items are \$6.95 (for a 6-oz. ribeye steak, potato, tossed salad and bread OR breakfast of steak and eggs with two eggs, homefries, toast).

The 1950s theme diner **Baby's Burgers and Shakes** (131 South Garner St., www.babysburgers.com) is as much an experience as it is an eatery. The gum-chewing waitstaff plop down at your booth while taking your order, popping bubbles in your face. Voted Best Burger by the locals, you can chomp full-size burgers or bite-size Whimpy baskets with fries for under \$5. They make the best vanilla Diet Cokes in town.

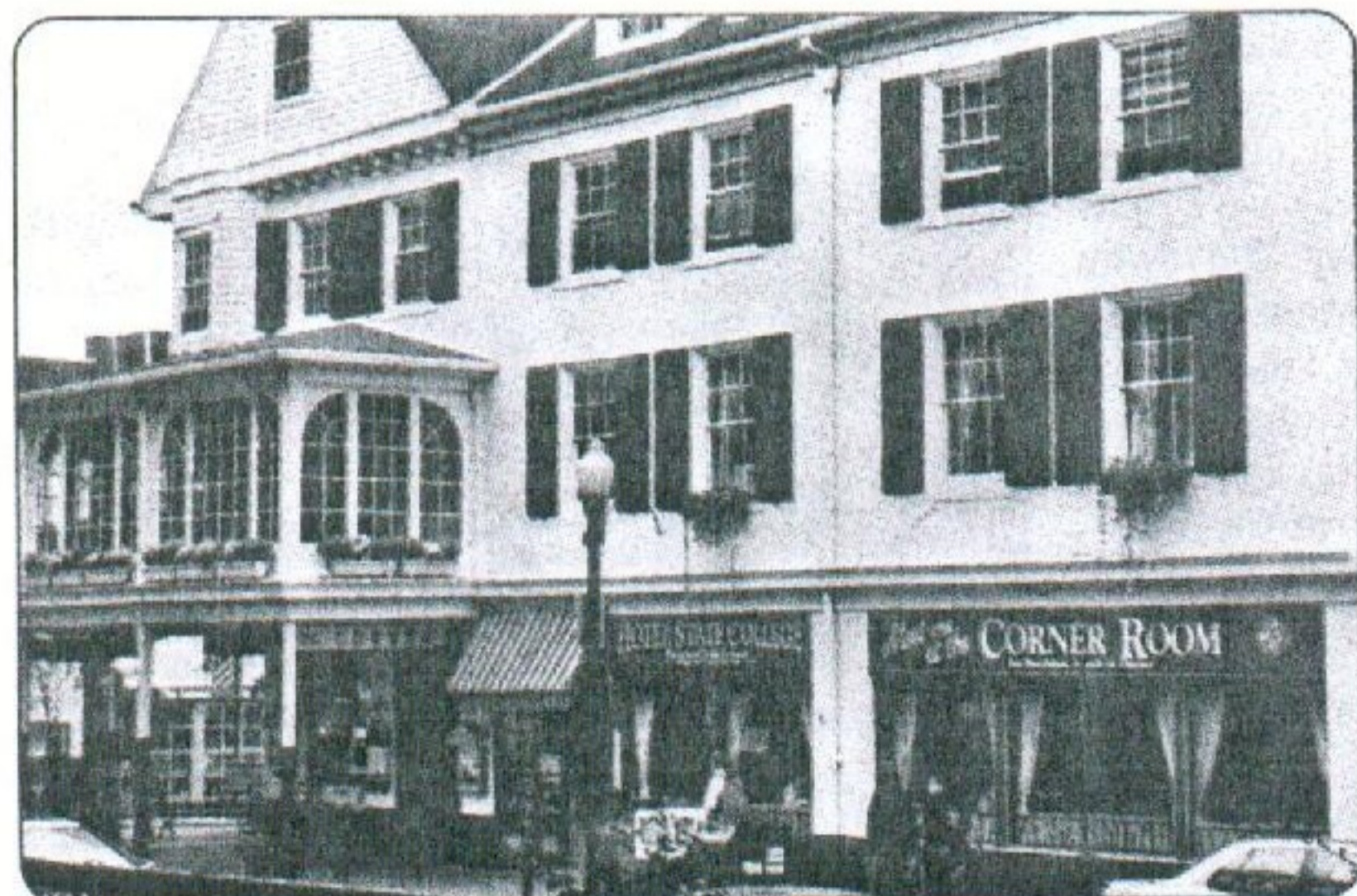
The offerings change daily at **The Tavern** (www.thetavern.com, [814] 238-6116) on 220 E. College Avenue,

but you'll always find veal, steak, pasta, chef salad and veggie platters on the menu. The restaurant opens at 5 p.m. each day and it's worth the wait to dine on formal fare while in jeans and a sweatshirt. The dark wood is a soothing contrast to the hustle and bustle on the downtown streets.

There's a bar on every corner, or so it seems. Drinking at **Zeno's Pub** (100 West College Avenue, [814] 237-4350) resembles hanging out in someone's basement, but their Around the World in 80 Beers will enlighten you. Sing along to the "Gilligan's Island" theme and learn the gestures to "The Unicorn Song" with the Phyrst Phamily at the **Phyrst** (111 E. Beaver Ave., [814] 238-1406), 38 years old and still State College's only Irish pub. Beware Cherry Bombs! If you're seeking sophistication, sip an appletini at **Tony's Big Easy Bar & Bistro** (129 S. Pugh St., www.tonys-bigeasy.com) while jazz plays in the background.

PLACES TO STAY:

I'm giving up a personal secret here, but proximity on the cheap is best found at **Imperial Motor Inn** (118 S. Atherton St., [800] 782-0716, www.imperialmotorinn.com), located on the edge of town.



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Beautiful old buildings line the streets of State College, Pa.