They called it "Nightmare on 40th Street" -- a 2.2-mile example of urban life gone very wrong.

By day, it was a corridor of weeds and broken bottles, abandoned houses, graffiti, exhaust fumes and rumbling, horn-blowing, radio-blasting, tire-squealing traffic. Endless traffic.

At night, when the creatures of the dark came out -- prostitutes, drug dealers, gangbangers -- things got worse.

From behind their locked doors, honest residents of the San Diego neighborhood of City Heights could hear gunfire in the no man's land along 40th Street. From time to time, they saw empty houses go up in flames.

And nearly every night, they listened to the clatter of police helicopters, which some took to calling the City Heights Air Force.

In the mornings, residents picked used condoms and needles out of their lawns, and they cursed the name of the entity they saw as their afflicter -- Caltrans.

The problem was a freeway the California Department of Transportation wasn't building through the middle of the neighborhood.

By the late 1980s, the long relationship between the state agency and the community of City Heights had grown deeply dysfunctional.

Few then would have predicted the coming of a day such as this Friday, when Caltrans employees and community activists likely will shake hands and congratulate one another -- on the same side, in the end.

Their common bond: the grand opening of the final segment of Interstate 15.

If things go according to plan, a band will play. Schoolchildren will sing. And smiling people in suits will speak into microphones.

The grand opening will mark the beginning of two-way traffic on four of the freeway's eight new lanes. The last four lanes are expected to open by summer.
This newest section of freeway cuts along the boundary between Normal Heights and Kensington, through the heart of City Heights. Representatives of the neighborhoods are expected at the ceremony.

Wounds from internal battles over I-15, now old history, likely will still be tender. But at the finish of a saga begun in 1957, the overriding sentiment in the Mid-City area, particularly in City Heights, is a vast sense of relief.

"The community has already paid the price to have this thing done," says Michael Sprague, president of the City Heights Town Council. "Everything negative has already happened. When you've been anticipating something for 40 years and it finally happens, it's a good thing."

Yet even Karen Manley, who spent 13 years pushing for the interstate to be completed, observes, "Here we are celebrating a freeway, instead of protesting one. It's so weird."

Manley lives on Central Avenue, beside what once was the nighttime battle zone of 40th Street.

"There were people (in the neighborhood) who said, 'I'm going to die before we see this freeway,'" she says, "And that actually happened to two or three of them."

Congress approved the National Defense and Interstate Highway Act in 1956, authorizing the construction of 42,000 miles of four-lane highways throughout the country.

In 1957, someone suggested an extension of the original design, to connect Air Force bases in San Bernardino and Riverside counties with defense-related sites here.

Within the city limits of San Diego, the proposed route followed 40th Street, between Adams Avenue and Landis Street, through vintage Mid-City neighborhoods. About 250 homes lay in its way.

From the moment of that proposal, some portion of the future was suspended for the 2,000 or so people in those homes and for their neighbors.

But the plan was not adopted until December 1968, after heavy lobbying by local politicians. Delays and revisions consumed much of the next quarter-century.

Other sections of I-15 were constructed, but for various reasons -- inflation, recession, a gas crisis, earthquake retrofitting -- the "missing link" through Mid-City never got built.

Meanwhile, families living in the freeway's path were reluctant to sink dollars into caring for houses the state soon might tear down. Why paint? Why plant a tree?
"People stopped doing repairs," Sprague says. "Every two or three years, they were told, (the freeway was coming) 'Oh, in another two years.'

The result, he says, was "20 years of no maintenance."

Families who outgrew their houses moved away rather than adding on. They could not sell their former homes, so they rented them. The percentage of absentee landlords skyrocketed.

"And as conditions went down, who you rented to went down," Sprague says. Too many tenants "didn't know their addresses because they weren't going to be there long enough to receive mail."

Blight set in and, Sprague says, "spread for blocks. It affected rents for a mile."

Caltrans began buying houses along the 40th Street corridor. Some were torn down or moved. But some were boarded up and left empty. Money for purchases came in fits and starts.

Progress was also slow, transportation officials said at the time, because before a house could be moved or demolished, an array of workers, from employees of gas and electric companies to asbestos inspectors, had to be coordinated.

At one point, there was a shortage of asbestos inspectors.

From her home on Central Avenue, "right where all the action is," Manley saw graffiti bloom on walls. People broke into the abandoned houses.

"There were homeless people in there," she says. "There were a lot of transients. They were taking the aluminum off the windows. Digging up the trees from the lawns and selling them. Scavengers. There was prostitution and drugs."

Yvonne Paczulla of Wightman Street remembers those days clearly.

"We had the prostitutes in the grass, on our lawns," Paczulla says. "You'd come out in the morning, and you'd find condoms and needles on the lawn."

Once, she says, a neighbor opened his car door to find a prostitute and client transacting business inside.

Other parts of City Heights also were under siege then, for more reasons than just the freeway. The community's violent crime rate in 1988 was 19.42 per 1,000 persons while, citywide, violent crime occurred at a rate of 11.84.

This, in a neighborhood that had been much like North Park, originally. San Diego police Sgt. Gary Mitrovich grew up in City Heights through the 1960s and 1970s.
Mitrovich remembers walking all around the area as a boy, without fear or concern about crime. Then high-density apartment complexes were built and other changes came along, including circumstances in the freeway corridor.

In the meantime, traffic on 40th Street grew worse.

"The number of cars using it went up and up and up and up," Sprague says.

Signals were set to move vehicles going north and south over 40th Street as steadily as possible, he says. So, at times, traffic headed east and west backed up for blocks.

When it clogged on Wightman Street, Paczulla says, "The cars would turn their radios up while they were waiting on the traffic light. My windows would rattle. Boom-boom, boom-boom. People would throw trash out their car windows. Throw beer cans and bottles."

One of Paczulla’s neighbors became so frustrated, she says, he would yell at the drivers.

"When they'd stop for the light, he'd chase after them, throw their trash back at them," Paczulla says. "I said, 'Ken, we don't want you killed.' "

Rickey Atkins’ family moved onto 40th Street in 1959.

"The traffic wasn't too bad through the late '60s," Atkins says. "But in the middle '70s, it started coming. Cars. Semis. Loud motorcycles only 30 feet from our front door."

The trucks shook the house.

In the crush of traffic, tempers of drivers flared. When Atkins' father, Bob, braked to turn into his driveway at the end of a day, Atkins says, "people would tailgate. We'd get a lot of people who would cuss at us, blow their horns.

"You’d get to the point, you’d pull into your driveway, get out of your car and want to hurt them."

The family never opened their front door in those days. They kept the television loud so they could hear it. Once a week, Atkins’ father hosed off the front porch. Black soot ran in streams.

And sometimes, Atkins says, "There were drive-by shootings out in front of the house. You could hear guns. It was scary. You’d hear a car come by and pop-pop-pop-pop-pop."

He remembers how upset his father used to get.
"He would stay up late at night," Atkins says. "He couldn't sleep because of the noise. He went to City Council meetings. He used to call Caltrans. He used to write them letters.

"He invited anyone on City Council to come down and spend one night at his house."

Eventually, Bob Atkins and his wife, Betty, joined neighbors in a group they called I-15 Now. Bob became chairman. Manley of Central Avenue was a founder.

"We were angry at Caltrans because they seemed like this big bureaucracy that you couldn't get through to," Manley said.

The group believed a freeway was inevitable. They also believed the finished road could not possibly be worse than the nightmare the community was living. Their philosophy became: Just do it. Get this over with.

Not everyone agreed with I-15 Now. Some in the neighborhood were dead set against any freeway.

Others wanted the freeway covered, making it almost like a tunnel below the community's surface -- a plan calling for more time and money.

The division of opinion was deep by the time Christine Kehoe was elected in 1992 as the area's representative on the San Diego City Council.

"Bitter," Kehoe says. "There are people who still don't talk to one another."

Bob Atkins and others of I-15 Now held meetings in their homes. They passed out fliers up and down the streets. They sent out press releases. They made signs. They organized rallies.

They hired a lawyer and began working on a class-action lawsuit. They gathered 1,075 signatures on a petition and took it to the City Council. They sent a copy to Caltrans. They began to draw attention.

Then, in the early 1990s, things began to improve.

A groundbreaking was held in March 1992. Bob Atkins wore a Santa Claus suit to the ceremony and carried a sign reading, "Miracle on 40th Street."

Five months later, he was dead of a heart attack at age 57. Atkins' wife told Manley she thought stress over the freeway caused it.

"After he passed away, my mom didn't seem the same," Rickey Atkins says.
Betty Atkins died in 1998.

The momentum of the groundbreaking evaporated when Caltrans' funding from the state fell on hard times and retrofitting continued.

Steve Russell, executive director of the El Cajon Boulevard Business Improvement Association, says Kehoe and Assemblywoman Susan Davis were the salvation. Russell calls them "the tag team that worked on the state and local levels to put this project back in the budget and make it happen."

A second groundbreaking was held in May 1996.

Rickey Atkins attended. When it was over, he started to walk away.

"I turned around and looked back," he says. "I saw a sign that said, 'Remember Bob Atkins.' The sign was just sitting there, next to some empty chairs."

If in the old days the freeway was a symbol of all the things wrong in City Heights, it now has become the reverse.

At the grand opening, the plan is for posters and a PowerPoint presentation to lay out the array of community development projects recently completed or upcoming.

Foremost among them is the $100 million Urban Village project, which has brought much construction -- a police station, an elementary school, a swimming pool, tennis courts, a library, a theater, a community center and an adult education center.

And soon: a shopping center and two more schools.

Private development also has begun.

Property values are rising, by all reports.

The keystone of the good news has been the completion of the freeway, Russell says.

The bed of the I-15 "missing link" has been dug 25 feet below the level of the Mid-City neighborhoods it passes. Sound-reducing walls have been erected. One block of the freeway will be covered, with a park built on top.

Manley says where she lives on Central Avenue, "there are about 25 kids who play in the street, and they're going to love playing in that park."

Two other parks also will be created, one near each end of the freeway segment.
Once Caltrans began construction, Manley says, "They have worked on this freeway 24 hours around the clock. On Saturdays."

That meant noise. But, "I never cared," Manley says. "I just felt better. That meant they were working faster."

Assemblywoman Davis says Caltrans "became sensitized" to what residents were going through and then "really partnered with the community."

The project engineer gave residents his telephone number.

Sprague says that good will toward Caltrans has run so high, "neighbors have looked out for machinery and material."

"What was initially a very antagonistic relationship has turned out a positive one," he says.

After the grand opening ceremony, two-way traffic will be directed onto the "missing link." Interstate 15 then will run for 1,439 unbroken miles from Sweetgrass, Mont., near the Canadian border, to the Naval Station at 32nd Street.

Traffic through Mid-City is expected to quickly more than double, to 110,000 vehicles a day. But the roar of cars and trucks and motorcycles will be 25 feet below street level.

Leaving 40th Street, for the most part -- at long last -- in peace.

Caption: 4 PICS 2 MAPS
1. New heights: A girl ran toward Central Elementary School in City Heights, a neighborhood long disrupted by the construction of a segment of Interstate 15 (left of sound wall). With the freeway finished, parks and other beautification projects are planned for the area. 2. The missing link: Signs pointed the way to Interstate 15 from the University Avenue overpass at 40th Street. The grand opening of the freeway's final stretch is Friday. 3. Peace and quiet: Karen Manley, a Central Avenue resident who spent 13 years pushing for Interstate 15 to be completed, in front of her home with granddaughter Tyffani Selinsky and the family's cat. "There were people (in the neighborhood) who said, 'I'm going to die before we see this freeway.' And that actually happened to two or three of them." (A-17) 4,5. Finally! The four lanes of Interstate 15 will be open to traffic beginning Friday. The eight-lane corridor, including on- and off-ramps, should be completed by the summer. Park improvements and landscaping should be completed sometime next year. (A-17) 6. A long struggle: Rickey Atkins (right), who lives on 40th Street, looked out on Interstate 15 with a neighbor, Trey Burkhalter. Atkins' late father, Bob Atkins, was an early leader in a neighborhood group called I-15 Now. (A-17) 1,2,3,6. LAURA EMBRY / Union-Tribune photos 4,5. SOURCE: Caltrans, PAUL HORN / Union-Tribune