

## MILESTONES

### RIM SHOT

Brighton's automotive row comes to a dead end.

By DAVID J. WALLACE

Family-owned business landmark **Ellis the Rim Man** has quietly closed after 84 years and three generations on Commonwealth Avenue, hastening the transformation of Brighton's once-bustling "automotive mile" from car sales, parts, and service retailers into housing developments and other uses.

The three-story red brick building, with its distinctive Ellis the Rim Man billboard, is to be converted into the **Media and Technology Charter High School**, with the deal expected to be closed this summer. Housing developments are also sprouting up all over the neighborhood near the Brookline border, including 32 apartments planned for the former state police crime lab.

The Ellis building has a grand central central staircase and terra cotta detailing from the time it was built in 1918 as the New England headquarters for Lincoln automobiles, says owner **Ed Ellis** of Newton, who's worked there since 1959. Ellis wistfully lists accessories he once sold that now are standard equipment—air-conditioning, seatbelts, side mirrors, turn signals. His son, Steve, will remain in the wholesale parts business, supplying dealers and repair shops.

"When I started in the business in 1960, you could buy any car or truck made in the United States within a two-mile radius of here," says Ellis, 64. He can recall the fanfare



HUB LANDMARK: After 84 years Ellis is gone.

on Washington's birthday every year when visitors paraded down the street to shop for new cars.

Now, the old **Chevrolet** dealership is a supermarket, and the former home of **Foreign Motors** sells wireless phones. Some echoes remain: There's a Buick Street a few blocks away, and trolley drivers still announce "Packard's Corner," where the fabled car company had its showplace at the intersection of Brighton and Commonwealth avenues.

Ellis jokes that he may set up a kiosk at the corner of Babcock Street and Commonwealth Avenue and make a new career doing what he's always done: giving directions and providing change for parking meters and the T.

## HIGH-TECH

### Smooth Operator

A directory for the numbers glut.

Picture the 21st-century version of Lily Tomlin's switchboard operator, Ernestine. Well, she's open for business in Lowell.

**NetNumber.com** hopes to attract people who want to simplify the fast-growing jumble of home, work, and wireless phone, fax, pager, voicemail, and other numbers by putting them all into a single, streamlined, searchable database. In the same way 4-1-1 became a familiar way to find a telephone number, this global database system, called **ENUM**, promises a comparable standard.

**Gartner Dataquest** analyst **David Fraley** says he is enthusiastic about the potential for this fledgling technology, though some other

observers have concerns about personal privacy and security.

The directory and an accompanying call-switching system (Hello, Ernestine?) are also a step toward widespread voice communication directly over the Internet, which has so far been limited to people who could reach only others who have compatible equipment. The system would use a microphone, speakers, and special software. Businesses are likely to be first on the ENUM bandwagon, using it to route calls over the Internet as a way to lower telecom costs.

"It will begin in the office and then spread to the consumer," says NetNumber CEO **Glenn Marschel**. "And when it gets to the consumer it may get to teenagers and kids before adults. Parents like it because it doesn't tie up the primary phone line." —David J. Wallace