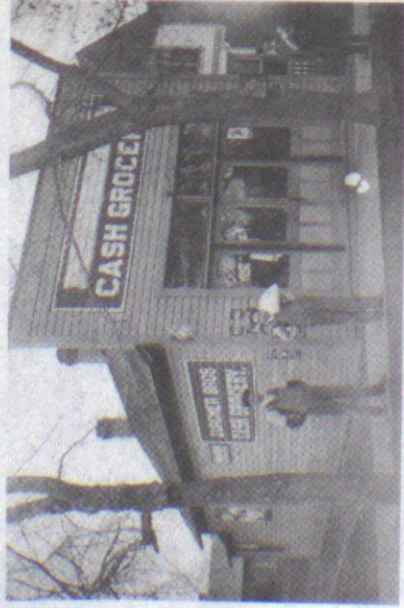


DOWN RIVER

THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE OF A HISTORIC BOISE NEIGHBORHOOD

BY CHRISTIAN A. WINN

I am standing in the River Street neighborhood of Boise, at the corner of S. 11th and W. Lee Streets, counting the number of trailer homes lined up and leaning against a fast afternoon wind.



THIS ONE-TIME GROCERY IS STILL STANDING ... BUT THE BUILDING HAS BEEN REBORN AS A MARTIAL ARTS SCHOOL.

Seven. There are seven trailer homes, their designs streamline, their two-tone pastels fading. Across S. 11th are load-bearing docks attached to a boxy concrete block-long building that houses the West Coast Paper Co. Up Lee Street crooked iron fences stand in front of early-century Victorian bungalows. Some are tidy and preserved. Others sag and buckle. Further up, a brown-wood apartment building, circa 1975, maintains an awkward pose. It is quiet here. No cars drive by but the hushed whir of traffic pitches from Myrtle and River Streets.

The neighborhood is an incongruous scene—a mixing of eras and ethics, of styles and anti-styles. Walking up Lee past a police sub-station and a community center onto Grand Street and toward S. 13th there is spotty evidence

of a once-vital neighborhood. Standing with a row of neat houses is what appears to be an old grocery and that is now Karatedo Doshikan. Across the street an empty lot lays littered with liquor bottle glass and old pipe work. The specter of “place” still lingers and floats, but it is clear that the River Street neighborhood has crossed over and will never be what it once was.

The relevance of history, living and otherwise, begs to be examined here. Questions of what was lost and how it was lost seem right and necessary. So much of Boise, architecturally and culturally, has been decimated through the years. One need only visit C.W. Moore Park at the corner of 5th and Grove and see the neatly arranged remnants of important buildings that have been torn down. It is important to understand and remember what has happened to neighborhoods like River Street, to learn what this place was so that we might know what it can become.

There are new plans for this place, but questions remain. What stood on these empty lots? Who lived in these homes? Who walked on these streets?

Boise’s River Street area has a fascinating history. “Modern” development of the neighborhood began nearly 140 years ago. The surrounding property was homesteaded by a man named John McClellan and his family in 1863. McClellan floated logs

married in 1865. Lover’s Lane became Pioneer Street near the turn of the century, and as part of an urban renewal plan in 1979 it became Pioneer Walkway.

Some of the River Street neighborhood land became Boise’s first park. Boiseans could enter the privately owned Riverside Park on Miller Street between S. 10th and 11th Streets. It was a big and opulent place with an outdoor roller rink and dance pavilion, a bandstand and a baseball field. There was an outdoor theater whose summer 1906 offerings included three months of the San Francisco Opera Company who had lost their own house during the earthquake and fire.

Boiseans played baseball on the Riverside Park diamond, whose bleachers held nearly 1,000 spectators. On July 4, 1907 the park hosted Weiser native Walter “Big Train” Johnson. An estimated 5,000 people came to Riverside Park to cheer the pitcher who was soon to join the American League’s Washington Senators and go on to a hall-of-fame career.

Riverside Park was socially and culturally vibrant. Served by a Boise Traction Company streetcar from 1902 until the park’s closure in 1912, a warehouse now stands where the park’s festive structures once did.

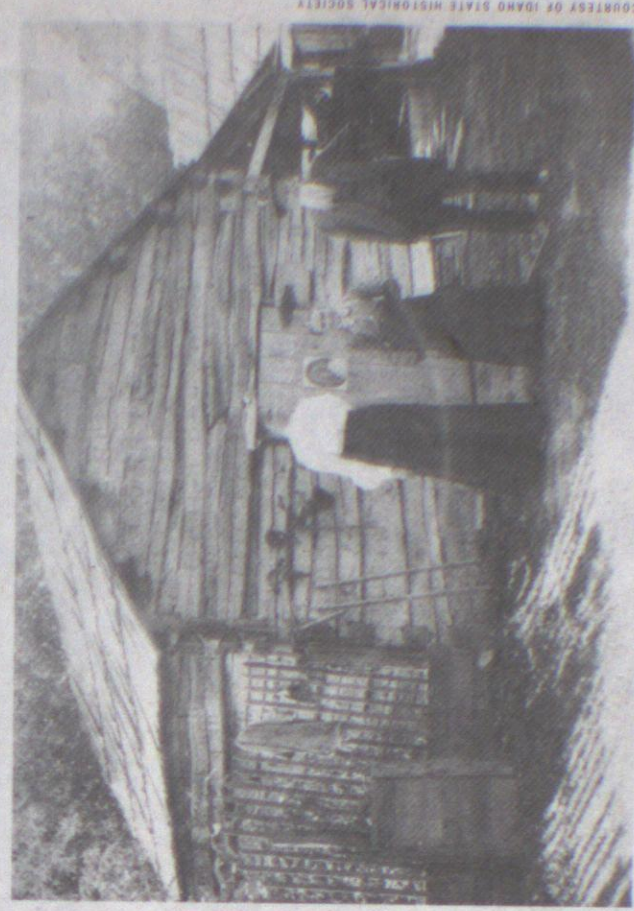
Just to the downtown side of the River Street neighborhood, the Oregon Short Line Railroad laid tracks in 1893 that ran parallel to Front Street, and the company constructed a sandstone depot at the intersection of 10th and Front.

Trains departed and arrived on a stub line from Nampa at the depot that was designed and decorated with bracketed eaves, swooping dormers and a “Prussian helmet” tower. This depot was used until 1925 when the new—and still standing—mission-style depot was built at the end of Capital Boulevard.

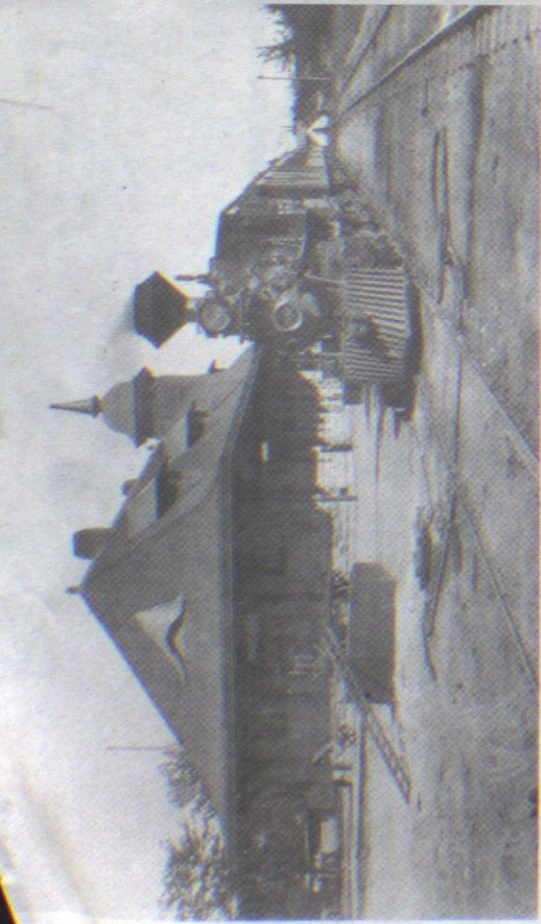
The old depot stood until 1947, when it was demolished to make room for a freight station that served the surrounding Barber Spur switching yard. The yard supplied rail cars for the warehouse district known today as 8th Street Marketplace. A network of rail lines, switching yards, and a roundhouse also flourished where the Broadway-Chinden connector is today.

down the Boise River and built the first residence in the area—a framed cottonwood shack that resembled the still-standing O’Farrell Cabin on Fort Street. McClellan also farmed orchards on the floodplain land that ran from the river approximately to where River Street sits today. The Boise River had a somewhat different path before it was diked and rechanneled and in 1952 dammed at Lucky Peak, and McClellan built and operated a ferry over the section of the river near his homestead for a time, ultimately replacing it with a toll bridge.

The swath of land that today is the Pioneer Walkway was originally named “Lover’s Lane” by John McClellan. He named the narrow roadway, which works its way from downtown Boise to the river, for his business partner, who



JOHN MCCLELLAN AND CLAN: THE ORIGINAL SETTLERS IN THE RIVER STREET NEIGHBORHOOD.



THE LATE, GREAT—IF SMALL—TRAIN STATION THAT STOOD UNTIL THE 1940S.

The establishment of the rail system essentially separated the River Street neighborhood from the bulk of the city, and relegated it to “the other side of the tracks” status.

Attached to such a moniker were issues of race and prejudice. Thus, in the early part of the century the River Street neighborhood became a place where a great number of Boise’s African Americans lived. Hispanics, Eastern Europeans and some Basques moved into this neighborhood as well, because it tolerated diversity.

Through the early and middle years of the century, African Americans were not terribly welcome in downtown, and out of a real need and desire in the 1920s and 1930s the River Street neighborhood began to open its own African American entertainment establishments. Pioneer Street became a social corridor, harboring honkytonks and gambling and drinking houses. Around the mid-night hour during the 1920s and 1930s the narrow Pioneer Street was said to be too swollen with foot and automobile traffic to drive through.

The neighborhood became a haven for minority servicemen from Gowan Field and Mountain Home Air Force Base throughout the 1930s and into the years of World War Two. After the war there was a further influx of African-Americans and minorities moving to the neighborhood, and it continued to be a vibrant and integral, if somewhat sequestered, part of the city. In short, River Street was a real neighborhood. With its grocery store, and churches, and places for kids to buy candy, the River Street quarter was as dynamic as any part of Boise.

The Idaho State Historical Society Library houses a thorough and storied oral history of over a dozen African Americans who lived in the River Street neighborhood.

Bessie Stewart, an African American and longtime resident of River Street, was interviewed and recorded by Mateo Osa in 1981. She spoke to some of the prejudices a black woman faced living in Boise. She talked about shopping for material with a friend at the downtown Penny’s.

“So we joined the line,” Stewart said. “And when it got to us, this girl just talked and talked to another girl there,

she just wouldn’t look at us, she would not wait on us at her counter where we were standing—we just stood there, and we’re going to give her a chance. She would not wait on us.”

Stewart continued: “But we had a lot of trouble in the stores. We did, and the Japanese people, they couldn’t get served, and the Chinese people—they couldn’t get served. We’d all stand there looking, we couldn’t get waited on.”

Dorothy Buckner, in a similar interview with Osa, recalled elements of Pioneer Street’s storied

past, as well as prevalent racial attitudes of the 40s.

“This was another place on Pioneer Street and a rundown joint,” Buckner said. “You know, and the guy had an enormous, beautiful, neon sign put out on this raggedy, rundown, knocked-out house. There was a fireplace built inside, you know, and the great big sign ‘Barbeque,’ it was Blackjack’s place, a barbeque joint you know. Well, it was said that he had the best sauce in town—I don’t know which sauce it was in mind because it was a cover for a whore-home.”

Buckner went on: “It was okay because everybody hung out there, all the soldiers and everybody because Daddy said the police would do anything to keep the niggers off Main Street, you know, he said, ‘It doesn’t matter,’ he said. Because I’ve often wondered, ‘Gee, how can you get away with this?’ And he said, ‘Look, as long as you keep the niggers off of Main Street the white folks are so happy.’”

Into the 1940s and 50s the stigma of “the wrong side of the tracks” increased as did the size of the tracks themselves. The industrial build-up of the Front and Myrtle Street corridor spread into the River Street neighborhood as zoning laws were changed. The fabric of the district began to unravel as some of the old homes were torn down

to build commercial structures.

The neighborhood became less than unified, less than cohesive, and into the 1960s and ‘70s—though much of the old neighborhood was technically standing—the quality of “place” began to decline. Industry continued to creep in, some office buildings were erected, and a heightened neglect of residential aspects of this district took root. Rents, which had always been fairly low here, got lower still.

Into the 1970s and ‘80s the River Street neighborhood was not particularly safe, nor attractive. More of the old homes were torn down, business parks were built along the river, the rail lines were removed. Front and Myrtle streets were widened, and in 1992, the connector off-ramp was built.

The cohesiveness and vitality of a historic Boise neighborhood was dismantled.

To walk its blocks today, little remains of what once was. What does remain, is the challenge of how to remedy civic mistakes and integrate this piece of the city back into the weave of downtown.

This challenge was central to the Capital City Redevelopment Corporation’s (CCDC) Pioneer Corridor Design Competition. Though the River Street neighborhood, as a connected, kinetic place, ranks among the lost elements of Boise, there are new plans and

suited for reinvention. Its location as a link between downtown and the river is ideal for both business and residential interest. There are slabs of empty land. There is history in this borough. Pioneer Walkway weaves neatly through the proposed redevelopment. Access to the freeway, to Boise State, to parks and the greenbelt, to downtown shops and bars and restaurants is just right.

John Bertram, president of Planmakers and a member of Walker-Macey’s winning design team, has kept his office in a restored 1906 Victorian bungalow on S. 13th St. since the 1970s. Bertram, whose business is planning and urban design, knows a great deal about the history of the River Street neighborhood, and of Boise.

“My interest is to build a community, and a neighborhood,” says Bertram. “I want to bring good architecture and good planning to this neighborhood. These things are important.”

I am struck, sitting in his place of work, by how wonderful and right the design of this house is. The scale, the quality, the craft of the place is comforting and sad all at once. Houses are not built this way any longer, though it seems they should be. This ethic, these values, appear to have dissolved, and I wonder can anyone, in this time, correctly revamp, or even return a continuity to such a neighborhood as River Street. Understanding what has come



THE FOUNTAIN, BANDSHELL AND GAZEBO THAT WAS RIVERSIDE PARK.

optimism for this community. The competition’s aim was to “spark interest in mixed-use urban development in the River Street neighborhood around it.”

The recently announced winner of the CCDC competition was Walker-Macey of Portland. The team includes Seattle artist Norie Sato, urban designers McKibben + Cooper and planner John Bertram both of Boise. Their winning design provides a framework for CCDC to integrate residential, retail, and industrial growth and redevelopment in the River Street area. It is a detailed and comprehensive design plan that may take up to 20 years to fully implement. The River Street area is particularly

before may help.

“We’ve really lost the neighborhood itself,” Bertram adds. “It went with a lot of downtown. We’ve lost a lot of the ethnic mix, and that’s something that we don’t want to be gone. We’d like to carry through a lot of the architectural history of this neighborhood, of Boise.”

Through his office’s front window the view is a weedy gravel strip of land and an asphalt parking lot, beyond which stands a soulless white-stucco and glass-block office building. Bertram nods to the scene. “We don’t want dull architecture,” he says. “We really need to take it a step up, to attract innovative developers. That’s how we’ll save this place.” **EW**