

PROJECT SUMMARY

SURVEY OF LEE STREET NEIGHBORHOOD

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This project was funded with the intent of gathering information about Black settlement patterns on Lee Street. Such data could conceivably enhance not only the chances for nomination of Lee Street as a historic district, but also increase the ethnic awareness of the community.

Due to the scarcity of material compiled so far pertaining to Blacks, I felt a grass roots type approach would be an appropriate means toward a significant contribution. By reaching a sizeable portion of aged and knowledgeable Blacks through oral history interviews and by compiling demographic data through archive research, I feel that this goal has been attained.

Owing to the limited time schedule I faced on this project, I also realized that it would be extremely difficult to come up with any sort of ruling theories for the subjects involved, although I do think that the topics of concern have been refined.

For orientation on Blacks in Boise, I was fortunate to have the help of a third generation native Idahoan, Sherie Thompson. She supplied me with an initial list of contacts, an assessment of my interview questions and some valuable ethnic insights. ✓

Thanks to the help of Madeline Buckendorf and Stacy Ericson at the Oral History Center and Sue Lichtenstein and Janet McCullough at the State Historical Library, I was able to come up with a list of questions which basically asked: When and why did Lee Street become (predominantly) open to Blacks? Were there other distinct concentrations of Blacks elsewhere in Boise? What type of work did they do? What social organizations did Blacks have? What was their relationship with the white community?

By looking at the evaluation of Lee Street, I think some clues can be found to these questions, as well as furthering an understanding of the area.

Lee Street is one segment of what is commonly called the River Street neighborhood. This area is presently bounded by Front Street and the Boise River on the north and south, and by Capitol and Americana Boulevard on the east and west. Residential construction began there in the 1890's; by 1910 the area was almost entirely developed and served as one of Boise's oldest residential neighborhoods.

The thriving middle-class area featured Riverside Park, which was located south of Miller Street between Pioneer and Ninth Streets. Riverside Park included a dance hall and an outdoor theatre. Thus it served as both a cultural and recreation center for Boise.

What was probably to become the most significant development, however, occurred in 1893 when railroad tracks were laid along the northern edge of the area. The Oregon Shortline Railroad served both Boise passenger traffic and wholesalers on this line. This development began to isolate River Street from the downtown area.

In 1928 the city zoned River Street unrestricted "F" zone. The original residential neighborhood remained intact while industrial and commercial growth took place on all sides which further isolated the area.

It wasn't long before residents began to find the area less desirable and relocated in other growing residential areas of Boise. The migration continued until when in the early 1940's the aging neighborhood began to open itself up to lower income people. It became over the years an area of low cost rentals and one of the few places in Boise where Black people could find housing.

These characteristics remained fairly constant until in the latter 1960's. Housing and Urban Development (HUD) put money into River Street as a preliminary project in the form of a Neighborhood Development Program (NDP). This program wasn't nearly as extensive as Urban Renewal in its normal context. What funding there was got cut off when President Nixon's administration placed a moratorium on housing which stopped federal planning involvement.

Other government surveys and unfinished projects have left the neighborhood residents wary and somewhat distrustful of government intentions. The area has, however, received Community Development funding. Pioneer Street walkway and River Street Community Center serve as examples of these funds.

Lee Street itself was targeted for funds resulting in the rehabilitation of the houses at 1120, 1118, 1110, 1108, 1127, 1125 and 1123 in the early 1970's.

Probably due to its high density of significant style architecture, Lee Street was targeted for such action, which is also presumably why Lee Street is being touted as historical district material while other streets such as Miller, Grand, River and South 12th through 16th are not.

Another distinct feature of the street is its difference in terms of Black settlement. Although the River Street area became one of the few places Blacks could find housing in 1940's, they have lived in the area many years prior to that time on all streets except Lee Street.

Warner Terrell I's family lived at 527 South 14 at least by 1909, the Edward Washington family was related to the Terrells and lived there on 14th at the same time. A few other Black families were thinly scattered throughout the area for many years. (Warner Terrell, Idaho Oral History Center).

Lee Street seems to have been without any consistency of Black inhabitation until the latter 1950's or early 1960's. A retired serviceman, Alex McKenzie, and his wife were known to have lived at 1114 Lee during that time.

Not long afterward, Pat Phillips moved into 1123 Lee while in 1965 his sister, Jean, moved into 1118 and Lee Street has had Black residents ever since. Interestingly, though, a porter named Robert Gilmore is listed in the 1908 City Directory at 1121 Lee and there was known to be a Black man in Boise with that name at the time.

One reason attributed to the late influx of Blacks on Lee Street was the negative attitudes of landlords towards Blacks. (Dorothy Buckner, IOHC) I also think that it is likely that early Lee Street owners were fairly selective about who they rented to, Black or White.

Early Blacks were quite well distributed throughout Boise, however, two areas were thought of as having significant Black populations in the 1910-1930's.

One was the River Street neighborhood, the other being around the 800 block East Bannock area where Mary and Claude Buckner, R. B. Smith and Doc Hanna to name a few, resided. (Mary Buckner, IOHC)

Census data supports the idea of block pioneers living in many parts of Boise in the 1880-1900's. However, one problem is that the 1900 census accounts for only 47 Blacks in Ada County whereas oral sources and clippings file articles at the Historical Library indicate there was between 100 and 120 in Boise just after the turn of the century.

Work is presently being done by Sue Lichtenstein to shore up the census data through a city directory search of names of people thought to have been in the area. Many of these names have been mentioned to me by old timers such as Mary Buckner, Warner Terrell and Leona Horton.

As to why the early Blacks came to Boise, the only consensus I came up with was that it was just part of the natural <sup>migration</sup> mitigation of people looking for something better. I originally suspected that, like Pocatello, the railroad was responsible for bringing most Blacks to the area. Although at least two pioneers, Warner Terrell I and Edward Washington, were railroad men for awhile, census and interview information indicates that other occupations were more prevalent.

Early Blacks, especially women, didn't seem to have much trouble finding work in Boise. Many service type occupations were open to the pioneers. They were hired as porters, waiters, barbers, shoe shiners, caterers, day laborers, carpenters, cooks, house cleaners and farm workers.

Noticeably few Blacks had access to skilled or professional occupations, instead they had to take whatever work they could find. Citing both their lack of education and the relative absence of opportunity for members of their ethnic extraction as main reasons. (Clara Terrell, IOHC)

Once these service occupations became saturated, Black laborers were more of the seasonal, transient nature and with the advent of the Depression, Boise's Black population dropped to around 80, where it stayed until the early 1940's when the second World War brought many Black servicemen to Gowen and Mountain Home bases. (Warner Terrell, IOHC)

From the war years until the early 1970's was most likely the time in which the River Street area came closest to an equal black-white population; otherwise it has always been a predominantly white neighborhood. (Doris Thomas, IOHC)

The increase in the Black population in Boise during World War II intensified a situation that had been evident at least since the 1930's, this situation was the discrimination surrounding housing and restaurant service for Blacks. (Erma Hayman, IOHC)

For whatever reasons, a sizeable portion of the White community seemed threatened by the increase of strangers, if nothing else. This was evidenced by the increased difficulty for Blacks to find housing. Servicemen's families ended up in one area they would be accepted and could afford. It is also probable that many were used to Black neighborhoods in the cities they came from and preferred to live among their "own kind."

Whatever the case, due to the immediacy of their situation, many servicemen and their families had neither the time nor the money to legally battle the discrimination issue. (Dorothy Buckner, IOHC)

In terms of restaurant discrimination, Blacks had either been refused service or forced to eat outside of several Boise dining establishments since at least the early 1930's, according to an elderly White woman. (Doris Thomas, IOHC)

When it comes to issues of discrimination, I've found that many older Blacks are more inclined to acknowledge that such instances took place,

rather than delve into detail of their experiences. Noting that prejudices were everywhere at the time they seem resigned to accept their lot yet are quick to point out the improvements which are found today.

Substantial improvements in discriminatory practices seem to have taken place some time after the Civil Rights Act of 1966. (Bessy Stuart, IOHC).

Like any culture, social activities play an important role for Blacks in Boise, card parties, house parties, luncheons, dances at the GAR Hall and a Black USO during World War II were some of their means of entertainment.

More significantly, however, social activities often evolved around their religion. Services were conducted at either St. Paul's Baptist Church or the Bethel AME (Methodist) Church. The importance of the church in Black culture cannot be overstated.

St. Paul's Baptist Church is still located at 124 Broadway Avenue. It was built in 1921 by Mary Buckner's father, William Riley Hardy, grandfather Lewis Stakes and friends. Prior to that time, the Baptist congregation met in various member's homes. (Mary Buckner, IOHC)

The original Bethel Methodist Church, on South Sixth Street, was set up in the latter 1900's, reportedly by a Reverend Bukar. It was later moved to 18th and Idaho. The Methodists seemed to have had the first Black church in Boise whereas the Baptists had the first congregation. (Mary Buckner, Warner Terrell, IOHC)

Another interesting social activity for Black men was gambling. Luther (Pistol) Johnson ran a couple of gambling houses during the war years. The first was at South 13th Street and later was moved to Pioneer Street. Other interesting personalities such as Blackjack, Big Mama and Judge Grimes also flourished in that locale. (Dorothy Buckner, Warner Terrell, Doris Thomas, IOHC)

Reportedly the gambling activities had a twofold purpose. One was obviously to satisfy the men's desire for gambling and socializing in that environment. The other was to keep Blacks out of the already racially sensitive downtown area. (Dorothy Buckner, IOHC)

In terms of the Black experience in Boise, not to mention Idaho, there is obviously still much work to be done.

Almost certainly there are other elderly and knowledgeable people who would serve as valuable sources of oral history.

Those who came in the 1940's and stayed would be desirable because they experienced not only the unique circumstances surrounding the war but also those surrounding the civil rights movement in Boise. Oftentimes such interviewees are quite candid sources due to their exposure to a different mentality of that generation.

Questions as to the thoroughness of early census data, particularly that of 1900, have been raised in light of evidence of an "Afro-American Municipal League" which in 1903 had over 100 Black registered voters in Boise.

Evidence of a "Colored Club" in 1911 at 10th and Idaho Street and a "Mission House" at 810 South 13th in 1914 creates notions that life for Boise's earlier Blacks was different than in later years. If so, why? Interestingly, none of my interviewees knew anything of such organizations. Erma Haymen did state that she heard Boise's early Blacks were much more socially active.

There is much archive data yet to be compiled. Prison records, mortality records and railroad records would also augment the collection.

A collection of data pertaining specifically to Boise's two Black churches would also constitute a significant contribution. Appropriately Dr. Mamie Oliver and Janet McCullough of the Historical Library have already begun work on St. Paul's church.

There is also evidence that the whereabouts of the original 1919 NAACP Charter for Boise is known by Charles Parley. This article, among

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the other mentioned information, I feel would greatly enhance documentation and understanding of the Black experience in Boise.

Sources:

Bertram, John. Interview conducted by Mateo Osa, December 18, 1980.  
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The Idaho Statesman, March 11, 1968.

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Parley, Charles. Interview conducted by Mateo Osa, January 26,  
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