

Boise's Lee Street area now mostly a memory

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Photos by Joe Jaszewski / The Idaho Statesman

The view from Erma Madry-Hayman's Ash Street home is now of newer homes, apartment complexes and office buildings. She and her 100-year-old home are one of the only remaining connections to the Lee Street neighborhood, which was home to many of Boise's black residents after World War II.

Little remains of early working-class, black neighborhood

By Denise Oshodi
The Idaho Statesman

Erma Madry-Hayman quietly sits inside her nearly 100-year-old sandstone cottage. She squints as she reaches into her nearly 100-year-old memory.

"I know it's one of the oldest houses in the neighborhood..."

She's lived in the same one-bedroom house on the corner of Ash and River streets for six decades. With chunks of her old Boise neighborhood long gone, she and her house are among the last connections to the fading Lee Street neighborhood.

The area, just off River Street near the Connector, dates back to the early 1900s

and offers a glimpse of where many of Boise's blacks lived after World War II. The Lee neighborhood offered affordable housing to the working class, according to state historical documents, and offers low-income housing to its residents today.

But the look and feel changed over time. Aside from Madry-Hayman's house, the neighborhood's old architecture remains mostly on Lee Street, which has homes with hipped roofs, gable windows and wooden

See Lee Street on page 6

At IdahoStatesman.com
Link to a survey about the Lee Street neighborhood at Library of Congress Web site



Erma Madry-Hayman's stone home on Ash Street near River Street is now surrounded by new development. Efforts in the 1980s and '90s to preserve the area were unsuccessful, and now little remains from the neighborhood's early days.

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"We had to live here. I tried to buy property other places a long time ago. When they found out I was black, the first thing they'd say was that it was sold."

ERMA MADRY-HAYMAN, as quoted in the "Ethnic Landmarks" exhibit at the Boise State Student Union Art Gallery

Lee Street

From page 1

designs resembling fancy fish scales. One house has a short fence with detailed wrought-iron designs. Some houses seem well-kept, and others look like they're falling apart.

When people familiar with the neighborhood think about who's left from that era, they point to Madry-Hayman. Decades ago, Madry-Hayman had several neighbors on either side of her on Ash Street.

Now, she lives next to busy River Street. Her neighbors include offices for Morgan Stanley, Piper-Jaffray and The Golden Eagle.

"There's just kind of a whisper left" of the neighborhood, says Susan Stacy, a local historian who researched the neighborhood for the city Historic Preservation Commission in 1995. She suggested the area be nominated for the National Register of Historic Places because it has a unique working class historic value.

"It's a slice of life," she says. "Sometimes those houses don't last as long as they should."

Preservation efforts were unsuccessful

"We've let poor Lee Street down," says John Bertram, a local private urban designer who lived in the neighborhood in 1969. "The government structure let it slip through the cracks ... I would love to see us save that block, but so far we haven't seen anyone champion it."

Part of the dilemma, Bertram says, is that neighbors historically struggled to meet basic living needs and couldn't focus on preservation. Many of the homes were rentals, and they kept aging without major upgrades, Bertram says. And the grand areas like Warm Springs Avenue and Harrison Boulevard tended to be the neighborhoods where efforts for preservation took place.

History and historic preservation tend to swing in favor of the rich and famous, he says, not average people.

"The neighborhood is fragile. These are the last little pieces," Bertram says. "Gradually, it's losing its sense of place."

There were a couple of short-lived attempts that stalled in the early 1980s and mid-1990s to get the Lee Street neighborhood officially designated as a national historic district. The neighborhood is highlighted in a Boise State University exhibit on Boise's disappearing ethnic landmarks.

Boise City Councilman Jerome Mapp says he never heard about these attempts to get the neighborhood on the historic registry but said he will consider looking into the matter. The area is slated for redevelopment into more dense, mixed-use spaces as part of the redevelopment plan for River and Myrtle streets, which calls for office space, retail space and infill housing.

Mapp says he knew some people who lived in that neighborhood, but most of them have died. If the neighborhood "can't be preserved," he says, "if it can't be salvaged, then we need to do something else. And I don't know what that something else is."

Neighborhood declined over several decades

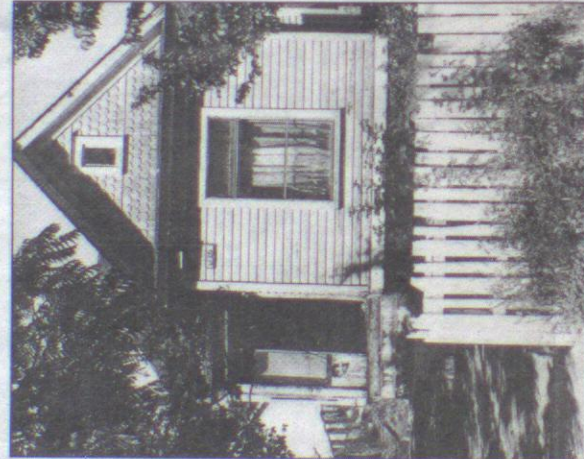
In the 1920s, just about anything could be built in the area. During the Depression, some people lived in shacks along the river. New residents rented.

Some black servicemen's families moved into the area after World War II, when they faced real estate discrimination in other parts of town.

"We had to live here," Madry-Hayman once said, according to the "Ethnic Landmarks" exhibit at



Joe Jaszewski / The Idaho Statesman
Erma Madry-Hayman enjoys the afternoon sunlight from the porch of her Ash Street home. Efforts stalled in the 1980s and mid-'90s to preserve the Lee Street neighborhood, where Madry-Hayman lives.



A home on Lee Street in 1970 shows the style of house characteristic of the area.



The Idaho Statesman

Learn more about Idaho's black history

Visit the Idaho Black History Museum at 508 Julia Davis Dr.

The museum used to be home to the St. Paul Baptist Church, where many Boiseans from the Lee Street neighborhood went to church. The current exhibit is titled "The Invisible Idahoan," and its first part showcases images and information on black pioneers from 1805 to 1919. Hours are 11 a.m. to 4 p.m., Wednesday through Saturday. Call 433-0017 for more information.

Visit an exhibit on Boise's disappearing landmarks

The Lee Street neighborhood is highlighted in the "Ethnic Landmarks" project now on display at Boise State's Student Union Art Gallery through Feb. 3. The gallery is open 7 a.m. to 1 p.m. daily. The exhibit, which points out how 10 ethnic groups made their imprints on Boise, is sponsored by the Boise Mayor's Office and Boise State's College of Social Science and Public Affairs.

Lee Street never got historic designation

The State Historic Preservation Office deemed the Lee Street Neighborhood eligible for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places around 1980, according to a 1995 survey report, but the city objected. The preservation office moved to the National Park Service and the Park Service agreed the neighborhood was eligible for nomination. The effort stalled. The two remaining blocks of the Lee Street neighborhood are still not registered as historic.

Registering the neighborhood does give owners and the local government incentives to preserve the historical value of the area, Bertram says. When it comes to city planning, a place listed on the national historic register would encourage officials to consider and incorporate its historical qualities in their plans, he says.

Also, the National Register of Historic Places offers some property owners tax credits or grants for help with the rehabilitation of their historic places. Having the special designation can also raise the property values on buildings, Bertram says.

the Boise State Student Union Art Gallery. "I tried to buy property other places a long time ago. When they found out I was black, the first thing they'd say was that it was sold."

River Street was a narrow residential street that dead-ended and resumed a couple blocks north when Madry-Hayman moved to Ash Street in the mid-1940s. At least two dozen homes in that

neighborhood have disappeared since 1956, according to old insurance maps and documents.

Boxy concrete warehouses cropped up west of the neighborhood. Sometime before 1980, River Street was extended through the area; the houses on the former residential street were erased from maps. Warner Terrell's uncle lived in one of those houses. Terrell, now 65, would come over and play

marbles in the dirt as a kid. "It was kind of a quiet residential area," he says.

The neighborhood was probably half black and half white in the '40s, '50s and '60s, Terrell says. The community gathered for house parties — playing records and socializing. "It was about the only place that African Americans could buy property," Terrell says.

Many blacks living in the neighborhood worked as waiters, shoeshiners, car detailers, janitors, chauffeurs and gardeners, he says. Once the job and real estate markets opened up after the '60s, a lot of blacks moved out, he says.

"The thing I miss most is the closeness," Terrell says. "It was a pretty close community. Everybody got along."

Some of the remaining homes deteriorated during the 1970s. "For the most part, the houses in the area have seen little remodeling, renovation, structural or cosmetic changes," a state historic survey of the neighborhood said in 1980.

Darlene Steiger and her husband ran a demolition company that around 1981 tore down two cottages next to Madry-Hayman's house, according to a city demolition permit. In their place now stands a small apartment building.

The houses were condemned and the city contracted with the business to remove them, Steiger says. The floors were rotted out, and the houses needed new roofs and paint.

"They were so rundown," she says. "Transients lived there."

Steiger says she lived near the Lee Street neighborhood when she was young. She recalls going there to play kick the can and how friendly the neighbors were. When her husband tore some of the houses down, "it was very sad to see them go," Steiger says.