

# Once-thriving neighborhood exists in oral history alone

The modest frame houses lining Lee Street in the River Street neighborhood have changed little over the years.

Although the River Street neighborhood as a whole has turned into a low-rent district characterized by federally subsidized housing, Lee Street has remained intact as one of Boise's oldest residential communities.

That's one reason the Idaho Historical Society is researching the street for possible nomination to the *National Register* as a historic district.

"It's different because it's really intact and the houses haven't changed much or been butchered. You can see the way they looked at the turn of the century," said Susanne Lichtenstein, an architectural historian researching Lee Street.

And, she said, "Lee Street is in the middle of HUD housing. We don't want to see that (street) obliterated by more HUD housing."

The cottage-like homes along Lee Street were built between 1903 and 1905, before the railroad came to that part of town and

spawned commercial and industrial development.

In the early 1900s, the River Street neighborhood was a thriving middle-class community, which served as a cultural and recreational center for Boise, according to Mateo Osa, who has compiled an oral history of the area.

But, Osa said, when the Oregon Shortline railroad tracks were laid along the northern edge of the area in 1893, the River Street community became isolated from the rest of downtown.

The area was opened to commercial and industrial development in 1928 and factories and warehouses sprouted. Soon afterward, the neighborhood became less desirable and residents began moving to other parts of town, Osa said.

In the 1940s, the aging residential community transformed from a middle-class to a working-class neighborhood, where people with lower incomes could find housing.

It wasn't until the late 1950s and early 1960s, however, that Lee Street was opened to blacks.

One reason attributed to the late influx of blacks on Lee Street was the negative attitudes of landlords toward blacks, Osa said. And, he said, it is likely that early Lee Street property owners were fairly selective in renting their homes, not only to blacks, but to whites as well.

Today, there are about 20 homes along Lee Street. About half are owner-occupied and the other half are rentals, Lichtenstein said. Some of the homes have been rehabilitated using federal Community Development funds.

Because of the scarcity of information on the early history of blacks on Lee Street and in Boise, Lichtenstein and Janet McCulloch, another architectural historian, are conducting a minority survey.

They hope to find more details on the black community by searching through old census reports, school records, prison records and city directories that list information on blacks. In addition, they are relying on oral histories from blacks who have lived in Boise for many years.



This row of homes along Lee Street in Boise, right, has remained essentially unaltered since the early 1900s; tiny home above is among many that intrigue historians



Statesman photos by David Tinney

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