



GOVERNMENT

One of the first families to file a donation land claim in the lower Willamette Valley consisted of Eugene and Mary Skinner, who arrived in 1846. By the following year, the Skinners had opened a trading post in their cabin, and in 1850 received authorization for Skinner's Post Office. The next year, the town site for Eugene City was platted, bound by Water Street to the north (along the river), Pearl Street to the west, Eighth Avenue to the south, and the alley behind Ferry Street to the east.

In 1853, Eugene City became the Lane County seat. A courthouse was constructed along the town square at Eighth Avenue and Oak Street, and was joined two years later by the County Clerk's office. In 1858, the community had its first jail, a stone building also located on the public square. Eugene City was incorporated in 1862, and in 1864, was re-incorporated with slightly smaller boundaries. A city council was established and Eugene Skinner became the first mayor.

A new city hall, which included a firehouse and bell tower, was constructed in 1883. The following year, a privately owned waterworks company was chartered, and in 1887 the city granted a franchise to the Eugene Electric Company. The following year, the name of the city was officially changed from Eugene City to Eugene. In 1900, the community's first hospital was established.

The first car arrived in Eugene in 1904. By 1906 the number of automobiles had increased to a total of only four. However, by the following year, the city had awarded its first street paving contract. Also in 1906, the city granted a franchise for the construction of an electric street car line. In 1908, a new post office was constructed on Willamette Street near Sixth Avenue. By the 1910s, "the local government was clearly becoming more involved in development matters in the community...."¹

The Eugene community was directly involved in World War I. "The first troops from Oregon were called up on July 25, 1917. Locally, two artillery companies and a University ambulance company formed and went overseas. The University of Oregon organized a reserve training program that provided military preparation for troops."² In 1919, the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) was established on campus and the Red Cross swelled with volunteers.

Following World War I, the community focused on its growth and social activities. During the Depression, assistance was provided from the federal New Deal programs, such as the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). In the mid-to-late 1930s, the CCC assisted in a massive tree planting project on Skinner Butte (1934), helped construct Civic Stadium (1938), and built the Willamette National Forest building on West First

Avenue. The only federal government project to be completed in Eugene during the Depression was the construction of a new post office on Willamette at East 5th Avenue.

Utilities

In 1905, the Willamette Valley Company purchased the private water works. The following year, a sewer leakage into the millrace caused a serious outbreak of typhoid fever. As a result, the city of Eugene purchased the water system in 1908. That same year, a “bond issue permitted the purchase of Skinner Butte for the development of a municipal water and light department.”³ The Eugene Water Board was established three years later, and began to update and upgrade the city’s water system. In 1912, new turbine pumps were installed at the Skinner Butte plant. Two years later, a new well for city water was established, followed by a new reservoir on College Hill in 1915.

During the 1930s, the Eugene Water Board (now the Eugene Water and Electric Board or EWEB) provided electricity directly to the River Road neighborhood. It was one of the few areas outside of the Eugene city limits that the board included in its service boundary. However, the Board had a policy of not constructing or owning water mains outside of the city limits. Instead, EWEB would sell water to local districts that would distribute the water through a system they owned and maintained.

In 1941, the River Road Water District was formed, operating as a special purpose entity. The district provided water, street lighting and fire protection services to its residents. In the late 1940s, EWEB began to rebuild its electrical distribution system in the neighborhood due to postwar growth. This project included two new substations in the River Road neighborhood; one near the 800 block of River Road and the other just off Howard Avenue.

By 1961, the River Road Water District was EWEB’s second largest customer, just behind the Bethel Water District. Of the total water consumption that year, 60% was for business and industry, while 40% was for residential purposes.⁴ That same year, EWEB constructed a high-voltage connection and a new substation, just north of the River Road neighborhood, to handle the area’s growth. In 1965, “Pacific Northwest Bell built a new switching facility on the east side of River Road, just north of Maxwell Road. The River Road area got two new prefixes, 688 and 689, to replace the ‘Diamond’ numbers it had shared with Eugene.”⁵

Fire Services

It wasn’t until 1913 that the City of Eugene’s fire department purchased its first gas driven fire truck. However, horses and carts remained in use for the next few years until the fire department was fully motorized. In 1920 the fire department purchased new fire trucks. The carts continued to be used at the smaller outlying stations, such as the one on Elmira Road in the Danebo area. Lane Rural Fire District provided services to the River Road neighborhood from both the Danebo station and the one established on

Irvington Drive in the early 1930s. However, upon the establishment of the River Road Water District in 1941, fire protection was provided through a contractual agreement with the Eugene Fire Department. The fire station on Irvington Road has since been razed.

Planning

In 1948, Eugene adopted its first zoning ordinance. The following year, Lane County was the first county in Oregon to create its own planning commission. “The commission’s first act was the adoption of a zoning ordinance that applied to the fringe areas and along highways, which prohibited businesses within 800 feet of a school. The ‘fringe areas’ referred to then-outlying neighborhoods, such as Friendly, River Road, Bethel, and Bailey Hill that were growing rapidly following World War II.”⁶

Between 1945-1955, the urban-rural sector grew faster than that within the city, as Eugene expanded toward the west and northwest. By 1950 alone, fringe residents comprised one-quarter of the Eugene Water and Electric Board’s water customers, which was equal to the number of city residents.⁷ However, “fringe dwellers actually paid less for water than city residents, because city dwellers had to pay a sewer fee.”⁸ At the time, most residences in the River Road area were outside of the city limits and were served by septic tanks.

In 1954, the first streetlights were installed in the River Road area, by a local civic group in cooperation with EWEB.⁹ That same year, the River Road Park and Recreation District was formed. Shortly thereafter, Emerald Park was opened at 1400 Lake Drive, complete with playground equipment and picnic area. In 1961, the district opened the community center and indoor swimming pool.



Emerald Park in the River Road area in 2005. Photo provided by City.

In the mid-1950s, Lane County used federal timber receipts to improve roads serving the fringe developments, such as Royal Avenue and Barger Drive. Later, such funds were used toward building Beltline Highway and the Northwest Expressway. “In those years, most local governments viewed the promotion of development to be one of its responsibilities.”¹⁰ Accordingly, in 1960, for the first time, the city annexed large areas north of the Willamette River. Four years later, the seven square-mile Bethel-Danebo annexation added more than 7,000 people to Eugene’s population.

Government Endnotes

¹Carter, Elizabeth and Michelle Dennis. *Eugene Area Historic Context Statement*. (City of Eugene Planning & Development, 1996), 58.

²Carter, 90.

³Carter, 71.

⁴*Eugene Register Guard*, 3/11/61.

⁵Sims, Mike. "River Road History Survey." Unpublished correspondence, 6/13/05, 5.

⁶Holt, Kathleen and Cheri Brooks, eds. *Eugene 1945-2000: Decisions that Made a Community*. City Club of Eugene. (Eugene, OR: Xlibris Corporation, 2000), 64.

⁷Stone, Norman, F. *Bountiful McKenzie: The Story of the Eugene Water & Electric Board*. (Eugene, OR: Parkston Company, 1986), 61.

⁸Holt, 63.

⁹Sims, 10.

¹⁰Stone, 63.