



RECREATION & SOCIETY

In the early days, entertainment and recreation consisted primarily of socializing among neighbors, friends and family. Celebration of various milestones of life – births, deaths and marriages – were important events. Larger social activities revolved around churches, schools and other community gathering points. One early entertainment venue, however, was the Lane Opera House, established in 1869 in downtown Eugene. Hosting performances by traveling acting troupes, as well as other community events, it must have attracted people from all over Eugene and the areas beyond city boundaries as well.¹

Perhaps one of the most intriguing recreational attractions in the immediate River Road area was a horse racing track. Owned by Ben Merriau, the track was reportedly located near the pond at the west end of Park Avenue. It was in operation between 1910 and 1930.² Another race track had been established closer to town in the 1870s by James Huddleston. It was located where the Lane County Fairgrounds sit today. Starting in 1884, racing was popular as part of the Lane County Fair and the presence of the track resulted in the later establishment of the fair grounds on that site in 1923.³ Huddleston's early track may have set the precedent for racing as local entertainment, and Merriau likely followed Huddleston's lead in establishing a race track for entertainment and profit. Merriau [sic] Lane, built in the mid-1950s at the west end of the Walker Addition, was named for Merriau.

Much later, more businesses catering to the recreational whims of the River Road community were established. Venues like the Firs Theater provided entertainment and a social gathering place. The Firs Theater opened around 1950 and was located in a building reminiscent of a war-time Quonset hut. In the late 1950s, the theater was converted to a bowling alley and renamed the Firs Bowl.⁴ Fairfield Lanes and Empire Bowl were two other bowling venues located along Highway 99. In fact, the late 1950s saw notable growth in local entertainment, perhaps due to the residential boom that happened around this time. The Green Acres public golf course was established at 1375 Irving Road.⁵

Since the late 1800s, outdoor recreation has also been enjoyed by residents throughout Eugene and the Willamette Valley. Just as today, people enjoyed being in the natural landscape and participating in outdoor pastimes. For residents of River Road, as for many Eugene citizens, summer trips to the Cascade Mountains and local rivers and lakes were probably common. Hot springs on the McKenzie and the Willamette's Middle Fork were popular destinations, while camping, picnicking, boating and other activities could be enjoyed in a multitude of places.⁶ With the advent of improved transportation, the coastal beaches were also not far away and after the early 1940s,

the proximity of Fern Ridge Reservoir to the west of Eugene may have attracted many River Road residents to its shores for recreational purposes.

Social Groups and Clubs

It was not long after Eugene's founding that citizens began to join together to pursue common pastimes, opinions and causes. Many early local organizations were spawned by the events of the Civil War. Even in Oregon, people felt the impact of this war and reacted to it. The Union Club was one of the first to attract those in opposition to slavery and the secession of the South. The Ladies Aid Society worked to provide assistance to soldiers. Before 1900, the city was already host to many fraternal organizations as well. The Sons of Temperance, the Order of the Free and Accepted Masons and the Independent Order of Oddfellows all had established lodges in Eugene at this time.

Because of the agricultural focus of the River Road community it is not surprising that early social organizations in the area revolved around farming. Starting in the late nineteenth-century, agricultural practices began to be influenced by fraternal and business organizations. Granges were organizations of farmers and growers, at the national, state and local levels, that aimed to address issues important to farmers and unite them against problems such as transportation disputes and costs, and fluctuating produce prices. In 1873, the Oregon State Grange was established to address issues statewide. It was quickly followed by local grange organizations. Springfield Grange Number 12 was the first in Lane County. Near the River Road area the Santa Clara Grange and Irving Granges were established around 1920. These Granges served as social gathering places for farmers and their families, as well as venues for the conduct and discussion of business.⁷

Founded in 1914, the River Road Women's Club was first known as the River Road Social Circle. The first seventeen members were lead by President Florence Ktelzing and their goal was to promote the social, intellectual and philanthropic betterment of the community. The Women's Club did this by lending assistance to needy families in the River Road area, sewing for the Red Cross and performing other charitable duties. When the first local PTA was organized in 1923, the River Road Women's Club became closely allied with the group, no doubt because many women were members of both organizations. The Women's Club also became involved with the Corvallis Children's Farm⁸, an orphanage located on a working farm, which opened around 1923. Funds were raised for these causes and many other charitable donations through dinners, plays and socials hosted by the club. In 1936, a clubhouse was constructed for the River Road Women's Club, which up until that time had gathered in the homes of its members. Mrs. Helen Harnden was President at the time the plans were realized. In 1935, a lot at 1055 River Road was purchased for \$350 cash. This depleted the club's treasury to only \$12, but was a good investment. The club borrowed \$1,000 the following year and purchased lumber and other materials. Construction relied on the volunteerism of people in the community, especially the husbands of club members. Clarence Lombard, after whom the River Road area's Lombard Lane was named, was the husband of one of the charter members and a professional contractor. He was

responsible for supervising the workers and the project. The clubhouse was completed in three months and allowed the club to expand its activities and fundraising efforts exponentially. This made for quick pay-off of the loan acquired to build the clubhouse and allowed for the purchase of a piano, furnishings and dishes. Since that time, the River Road Women's Club has operated on the policy that all funds gained from the use of the clubhouse go to maintain the facility and any extra earnings go to worthy causes in the River Road area, Eugene and beyond.⁹ Sadly, the club was disbanded in the 1990s.



Former River Road Women's Club (1936) at 1055 River Road. Photo provided by City of Eugene.

Complimenting the River Road Women's Club, the area also had an active chapter of the Kiwanis Club, which at the start was a men-only charity organization. Notable yearly events hosted by the club were a pancake feed held at Emerald Park and a chicken barbecue at River Road Market. In partnership with the Eugene Hunt Club, the River Road Kiwanis group also sponsored a charity horse show at the Lane County Fairgrounds. This was a prominent event for much of the city, as well as the River Road neighborhood, and prompted special appearances by celebrities and other prominent people.¹⁰

Scouting was a popular activity for community children and grew in popularity around 1930. The first scout troops were sponsored by the River Road School PTA. Boy Scout Troop 66, Girl Scout Troop 66, and Cub Scout Pack 66 all met at the school for regular meetings and participated in many community activities. They were well regarded by the community and won many troop and individual achievement awards. The scouting movement continued to grow over the years and after World War II, additional troops were also established in association with Trinity Methodist Church, Howard and Silver Lea elementary schools.¹¹

Other activities aimed at the young residents of the River Road area were sponsored by or held at local schools. In addition, "Funteen" dances for Kelly Junior High students and seventh and eighth graders from St. Peter's Catholic School, were held at Emerald Park. Held on weekend nights during the school year and occasionally during the summer, these dances featured local bands and were a popular social outlet for students.¹²

Neighborhood Groups

As residential development in and around the River Road area increased after World War II, a suburban, family-oriented atmosphere was cultivated. Soon neighborhood groups formed to ensure the safety, livability and beautification of their neighborhoods. The River Road Community Organization (RRCO) formed to "advocate on behalf of the people living in the area and represent the community organization's views to Lane

County, City of Eugene and other decision-making agencies, on matters affecting the general welfare, growth and development of the area....”¹³ The Active Bethel Citizens (ABC) neighborhood association was established in 1974 and presided over the Bethel neighborhood, to the west of the River Road area and Highway 99. The ABC constitution explains the mission of the organization: to advise the city, school district and other entities on the improvement of the neighborhood’s livability, to resolve concerns of residents, to promote a sense of community and self-reliance, and to keep residents of the area informed.¹⁴ These are goals typical of many other neighborhood organizations, including the River Road Community Organization, the Trainsong Neighbors in the Bethel Triangle area, the Industrial Corridor Community Organization, and the Santa Clara Community Organization.

Parks

The River Road Park and Recreation District acted as the custodian of parks and public recreation in the area. Established in 1954, Emerald Park became an important venue for community life. Originally offering playground equipment and a picnic area, the park later had more elaborate facilities. In 1961, a community center and indoor swimming pool were added to the facility. This allowed the park to offer activities such as swimming lessons, public swimming sessions, summer day camps and after-school recreation facilities. Local schools and playgrounds had previously been the location of such recreational activities, but with Emerald Park as a dedicated arena with adequate facilities, the Park and Recreation District took responsibility for orchestrating activities at the new site. The River Road Swim Club was established when the Emerald Park pool was constructed. The club provided both instruction and competition in swimming and diving for elementary and junior high school-age children. The club and its members earned many local and regional titles and the club is credited with providing a start for many young athletes that would go on to compete at the high school and college levels.¹⁵



Emerald Park (1954) in the River Road area. Photo provided by City of Eugene.

Other early parks in the River Road area include Awbrey Park, which was established by Lane County in the early 1960s, under the supervision of the Santa Clara Grange. It was named for a local pioneer, Milton T. Awbrey. Walnut Grove Park is located on the site of a historic walnut orchard, with vestiges of the orchard still remaining. It contains a pond that was once used as a borrow pit and is now kept in a natural state dedicated to the preservation of turtle habitat.¹⁶ Other parks are scattered throughout the River Road area, having been

established from the 1970s up to the present in an attempt to promote green space, while the nearby Willamette River provides an ever present natural element.

Newspapers

The River Road neighborhood was served by the same publications as the city of Eugene. Early newspapers, which were expressly published for political purposes, included the 1858 *The News*. Due to their combative nature and singular viewpoints, most early newspapers were short-lived, lasting just one or two years. The first long-term publication was the 1864 *Oregon State Journal*. As the Journal tended to report the Republican viewpoint, it was joined shortly thereafter by the Democratic-leaning *Eugene City Guard*.

At the turn of the century, newspapers began to provide more coverage of local issues. In 1910, the University of Oregon established its own newspaper, *The Daily Emerald*, to keep both students and the general public apprised of happenings on campus. In 1930, two of the community's three newspapers, both incarnations of previously political-based publications, merged into the *Eugene Register-Guard*. The *Register-Guard* purchased its remaining rival, the *Morning News*, in 1943 to become the sole subscription-based paper in the community. Eugene remained a one-newspaper town throughout the 1960s and into the present.

Radio

Following World War I, radio developed as a popular form of public communication and entertainment. The River Road neighborhood's proximity to Eugene provided access to this relatively new technology. In 1927, KORE became the first commercial radio broadcasting station in Eugene. It was the only radio station serving the local market until the late-1940s, when it was joined by KUGN, KASH and KERG. These four stations dominated the local airwaves until the early 1960s, when an additional six broadcast stations were introduced to the Eugene community.

Telephone & Telegraph

Besides the written letter, the earliest form of long distance communication was the Pony Express, established in 1860, which in turn was put out of business by the completion of the transcontinental telegraph in 1861. Throughout the early 20th century, two companies served local residents: the Postal Telegraph Cable Company and the Western Union Company. However, due to advances made by the US Postal Service and telephone companies, Postal Telegraph went out of business in the mid-1940s. Western Union continued to do business in Eugene throughout the 1960s.

Local telephone service was provided by Pacific Northwest Bell, a successor to Pacific Telephone & Telegraph. The company maintained a monopoly on Eugene throughout

the 1960s. The Pacific Northwest Bell facility, located at 112 East 10th Avenue, was substantially enlarged in both 1944 and 1958 to accommodate the company's growing number of customers.

Television

In April 1954, local television came to River Road when Eugene's first station began broadcasting. KVAL-TV, on channel 13, was an NBC affiliate for nearly 30 years before switching to CBS.¹⁷ Three years later, a local business group that included Chevrolet dealer Julio Silva and his daughter, Carolyn Chambers, began the necessary permit and licensing process toward starting Eugene's second TV station. KEZI-TV took to the air in December 1960 on channel 9, and has remained Eugene's ABC affiliate under Chambers' ownership.

Eugene would not be served by full-time affiliates of the three original major commercial networks until the fall of 1982, when KMTR-TV first appeared on channel 16 as the area's new NBC affiliate.

Cable TV arrived in Eugene in the mid-1950s, supplementing local programming with Portland channels and the state-owned educational station, KOAC-TV. Later, a cable channel known as PL-3 would air educational and public-service programs originating at the University of Oregon.

Recreation Endnotes

¹Carter, Elizabeth and Michelle Dennis. *Eugene Area Historic Context Statement*. (City of Eugene Planning & Development, 1996), 32.

²Sims, Mike. "River Road History Survey." Unpublished correspondence, 6/13/05, 13.

³Carter, 71.

⁴Sims, addendum.

⁵Wright, Sally and David Pinyerd. *Eugene Modernism, 1935-65*. (City of Eugene Planning & Development, 2003).

⁶Carter, 52.

⁷Carter, 42.

⁸The Corvallis Children's Farm opened around 1923 and was originally an orphanage located on a working farm. Now known as the Children's Farm Home School, the facility continues to serve as a residential treatment center offering therapeutic and academic instruction for children and families with mental illnesses.

⁹Beebe, Ellen. *The River Road Women's Club History*. April 1956.

¹⁰Sims, 2.

¹¹Sims, 12.

¹²Sims, 12.

¹³“River Road Community Organization Charter,” updated as of January 2002.

¹⁴City of Eugene Website. “Neighborhoods – Associations Info,” from *www.eugene-or.gov*, as of 10/13/05.

¹⁵Sims, 12.

¹⁶City of Eugene Website. “Parks and Open Space,” from *www.eugene-or.gov*, as of 10/13/05.

¹⁷Sims, 6.