

Boise City Canal Company

1864 -2020

This document is an abridged version of the history of the Boise City Canal Company compiled by Roy Cuellar in 2020 as an internship through BSU. Thank you to Roy and Bob Reinhardt from BSU History Department for their diligence in bringing forth the history of the Boise City Canal Company.

The Canal's Route

After the Boise City Canal leaves its track parallel to Warm Springs Ave, it crosses to Broadway's west side and parallels Grove Street Ditch. The Canal's initial point of diversion begins behind the Warm Springs Golf Course. Its path then runs down the southside of Warm Springs Avenue until it crosses under Broadway, parallels Grove Street until it reaches Capital Boulevard. The Canal then turns to the northwest, running underground through downtown Boise until it crosses under State Street near 16th Street. It resurfaces and continues northwest following the valley's gradually descending terrain. The Boise City Canal terminates near Collister and Hill Road, where it joins the Farmers Union Canal (Figs.1&2).¹

New Neighborhoods

Today the brick house built by one of the BCCC's first Directors, Cyrus Jacobs, near the corner of Sixth and Grove, still stands on Boise's Basque Block and is a local historic attraction. A few doors east of Jacobs' modest home once stood a three-story house built by C.W. Moore. The Moore family occupied their home for a little over a decade before moving to Warm Springs Avenue. This move signaled a change for the future of Grove Street. Like other Boiseans, C.W. Moore's attention was interested in developing Kelly Hot Springs for geothermal energy use in the area. The advent of newly installed streetcars made commutes to work farther from downtown Boise easier. This new technology increased the attractiveness of residences located away from Boise's original city center. Harrison Boulevard, a street name inspired by the recent presidential visit to Boise, also attracted new residents. These new neighborhoods began drawing residents away from Grove Street as they developed into fashionable districts of their own. For Grove Street and the rest of the Boise City Canal, change was happening.²

Gradually as residents moved into Boise's newer neighborhoods along Warm Springs Avenue and the North End's expanding areas such as Harrison Boulevard, the residential areas

¹"Boise Valley Ditch Idaho State Historical Society Reference Series," 171&517,1974

²Suzanne Sermon, Michelle Hall, and Meggan Laxalt Mackey, *From Eden to Asphalt: a Landscape Analysis of Boise's Grove Street* (Boise, ID: Boise State University, 1994), 4-5.

on and around Grove Street began a gradual shift towards commercial development. In 1894, the Oregon Shortline built a new railroad depot at Front Street between 9th and 10th Streets, and electric streetcars moved freely, transporting commuters from one end of the city to the other. Ironically, the agricultural success of BCCC irrigation, which drove the growth and development of downtown Boise, inevitably led to its displacement. In 1897, the City Council began authorizing street paving and the installation of concrete sidewalks. With the smooth surfaces that pavement offered, the first automobiles began to appear in 1903, displacing horse-drawn wagons and needing their own off-street dedicated parking places. With the increased use of motor vehicles in the downtown corridor, the open spaces and residences along Grove Street began shifting towards a "higher and better use" as commercial properties displaced the well-watered homes leaving the need for irrigated water behind. In 1916, after relocating to Warm Springs Avenue, CW Moore donated two of his original Boise town lots where Moore's original home and gardens had stood to create a children's park on the northside of Grove Street.³

As Boise gradually grew towards the West, newcomers built and established houses, ranches, and farms in areas containing seasonally dry natural watercourses. These watercourses typically carry seasonal runoff from the foothills towards the river. Today these watercourses are actively managed and tiled in through culverts. However, in the Boise Canal's earlier days, stormwater would find its way into the Boise City Canal and flow into seasonal creeks and return to the Boise River. Depending on how much rain there was, this phenomenon did not typically create a problem. The spring of 1913 was different when Boise City Canal Company was diverting its runoff waters into Sand Creek, which is in the vicinity of where Edward's Greenhouse currently resides on Sand Creek Street south of Hill Road. The Canal's water that emptied into Sand Creek, combined with seasonal melting snow, caused the creek to overflow its banks, spreading sand and debris on the Heron Ranch. The ranch owner, Mrs. Fedelia Heron, filed a suit for \$2700, which eventually settled.⁴

Mrs. Heron's issue with seepage was not unheard of or a problem unique to the Boise City Canal. The historian Mark Fiege wrote that engineers admitted their inability to comprehend and predict these seasonal occurrences fully. In 1918, Arthur Powell Davis, the chief engineer

³Suzanne Sermon, Michelle Hall, and Meggan Laxalt Mackey, *From Eden to Asphalt: a Landscape Analysis of Boise's Grove Street* (Boise, ID: Boise State University, 1994), 6

⁴"Flood Damage To Ranch," *Idaho Statesman* (Published as *The Idaho Daily Statesman*), August 22, 1913, p. 6.

for the U.S. Reclamation Service, admitted that "some of the difficulties encountered are of such nature that no method of foreseeing them appears possible."⁵ Three decades later, in 1949, Boise's postwar expansion brought a series of related events centered on the Boise City Canal where engineers did see methods, which, when acted upon, became workable solutions.

1949: A Watershed Year

On February 15, 1949, *The Idaho Statesman* reported Ada County workers used a steam pumper on the Sand Creek siphon under State Street to remove a clog of ice that stopped localized flooding and allowed the creek to run free. The story also reported that the Boise City Canal (Boise City Canal), serving as a stormwater runoff plume through the North End, was clogged with ice, causing water to overflow its banks, and workers sandbagged the banks to abate the problem.⁶ Today the Ada County Highway District (ACHD) manages that runoff, and the seasonally dry creek bed is part of the Stewart Plume. The water is transported underground across the North End and passes under the Boise City Canal, streets, and yards in a series of buried culverts.

On May 4, 1949, *The Idaho Statesman* ran an exciting story about an engineering success, which has become an attraction that countless visitors to Julia Davis Park enjoy every day. The city developed a plan to divert storm waters carried by the Boise City Canal into a "lagoon" located in Julia Davis Park. City Engineer J. L. Morris said, "an automatic release of excess water in the ditch would be possible [after a floodgate installation] in the vicinity of Lewis and Hains Streets." Typically, excess flood water had been overflowing onto the lower ground near Municipal Park. The flood gate installation diverted the water into a newly created bypass ditch designed to carry the excess water from the Boise City Canal under Front Street and into the first of two ponds on the east side of Julia Davis Park.⁷

On July 6, 1949, *The Idaho Statesman* ran another story that would prove significant to the Boise City Canal's future. At the request of a citizen's delegation, the Boise City Council directed engineers to survey the canals and ditches in Boise to help determine a plan that would

⁵ Mark Fiege, *Irrigated Eden: The Making of an Agricultural Landscape in the American West* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2015), 28.

⁶"Storms Bring Tough Jobs To City Crews," *Idaho Statesman* (Published as *The Idaho Daily Statesman*), May 15, 1949, 16.

⁷"City to Turn Canal Excess Into By-Pass," *Idaho Statesman* (Published as *The Idaho Daily Statesman*), May 4, 1949, 16.

help prevent drownings in open waterways. A recent loss of a two-year-old child in the open ditch had prompted the citizens' request. Ada County Prosecutor James W. Blaine said, "the survey would include whether it would be best to cover or relocate the ditches, and the cost of each project." The citizen committee included a census of small children living in the vicinity of the canals. At later council meetings, discussions on financing the covering continued.⁸

The series of events that 1949 proved defining for the Boise City Canal. The conclusions and recommendations of the City Council's 1949 studies resulted in the downtown reach of the Boise City Canal underground through downtown Boise. The area centered around Grove Street, which took three decades to transition from a desert to an irrigated Eden, began a second seventy-year transition into a paved cityscape. This Transition locked the Canal into a zig-zagging route from the intersection of Warm Springs Avenue and Broadway, which stays underground until the water resurfaces on the northside of State Street at 19th and Ada Streets, to irrigate the suburban lawns and gardens of Boise's North End.⁹

Renewal and Remembrance

In the 21st century, CW Moore Park exists with one of the original waterwheels, some grass, benches, and a kiosk display of some of the street's original structures. "Ironically, in its attempt to recreate the past, the park stands as a stark reminder of the loss of social connection to the land," said historian Susan Sermon.¹⁰ Another reminder of the above-ground Canal is on Boise's Center on the Grove is an art sculpture by artist Amy Westover on 9th and Grove Street. Westover's impressive work stands as a distinctive representation of the waters that flow beneath it for those who stop to read its accompanying placard.¹¹ Engineer Morris' Bi-Pass floodgate is now remote-controlled in real-time by telephone, allowing water managers an easy method of keeping the park and zoo ponds at a constant depth. Boiseans know the lagoons at Julia Davis Park as the Paddleboat and Zoo Boise Ponds. Both destinations attract thousands of visitors a

⁸"Canal Hazard To Be Studied By Engineers," *Idaho Statesman (Published as The Idaho Daily Statesman)*, July 8, 1949, 24.

⁹Suzanne Sermon, Michelle Hall, and Meggan Laxalt Mackey, *From Eden to Asphalt: a Landscape Analysis of Boise's Grove Street* (Boise, ID: Boise State University, 1994), 7-8.

¹⁰Suzanne Sermon, Michelle Hall, and Meggan Laxalt Mackey, *From Eden to Asphalt: a Landscape Analysis of Boise's Grove Street* (Boise, ID: Boise State University, 1994), 6-7.

¹¹"Grove Street Illuminated & Boise Canal," Grove Street Illuminated & Boise Canal | Boise Arts & History, 2020, <https://www.boiseartsandhistory.org/explore/collections/public-art/grove-street-illuminated-boise-canal>.

¹⁷Roy V. Cuellar, Mike Harrison, Boise City Canal Tour . Personal, September 22, 2020.

year. Other than the impressionist sculpture on the Boise Centre, the waterwheel in CW Moore Park, and the Julia Davis ponds, little proof remains that the Boise City Canal once ran above ground along Grove Street and through downtown Boise. The area in and around Grove Street became *Old Boise* during Boise's urban renewal period of the late 1960s through the 1980s. On a slower pace, Boise's urban renewal projects have remained ongoing through the Capital City Development Corporation (CCDC).

The area west of 16th Street is a mix of pre-and post-war homes. The eclectic mix of architectural styles indicates where older homesteads once stood adjacent to agricultural fields, which later saw suburban development. It is a transitional zone, which stands as a testament to how the BCCC's operational model has proven resilient with time. As a business entity, the BCCC predates Idaho Statehood and is one of the City of Boise's oldest institutions. Over the decades, the company's shareholder base has evolved from fruit orchards, cultivated fields, and homesteads into a lengthy list of urban and suburban users, including municipal golf courses, municipal parks, tract-homes, and schools.

As older homes change, owners and new owners seek to update and remodel. Occasionally the company receives requests to reroute the Canal. Recently on Warm Springs Ave, one homeowner whose lot's topography did not allow for a route diversion was given a permit to bury the channel in large culverts and run it along its original track beneath the new addition. Farther down the street on Warm Springs, another homeowner faced with a similar building challenge will eventually divert the channel towards the rear of their lot to facilitate the footprint of their home's new addition.¹²

Some of the day-to-day operational challenges are consistent with those of the past. Maintenance crews face a continual process of removing excess leaves and debris from the Canal. The BCCC must regularly trim vegetation that impedes water flow through the channel and be vigilant for grass clippings and yard waste that may plug the water downstream.¹³

Winter rains running over frozen ground and ice in the Boise City Canal still present serious off-season maintenance issues. With climate change, the increasing incidences of a phenomenon scientists call Rain-on-Snow is as much a challenge now as it had been in the 1949 incident above State Street. Once the ground is frozen and no longer absorbs the free-flowing

¹²Mike Harrison, Boise City Canal Tour. Personal, 2020

¹³Alan Winkle (Boise, Idaho, n.d.).

stormwater, localized flooding is often quick to follow.¹⁴

Often news of diminishing resources is part of the story. In the Spring of 2016, BCCC President Alan Winkle penned a newsletter article for the North End Association expressing a substantial present and a bright and changing future for the Canal and its laterals. "The canal company is certainly a part of the fabric of the North End and helps make it the unique neighborhood that it is." Winkle's article highlighted that in 1869, there were only six miles of the original channel and eight miles of laterals. Over the past 151 years, the system has steadily grown to include twelve miles of Canal and twenty miles of laterals. Idaho water law has a "use it or lose it" approach to water resources. Keeping with the spirit of Idaho's water law, the BCCC always seeks to use its allocation productively and is actively seeking new shareholders. The BCCC is always looking for new shareholders.¹⁵

So far, the BCCC has one major pressurized irrigation shareholder. Boise Schools has 51 shares for pressurized watering of the 55.5 acres surrounding Hillside Junior High, which may be a sign of the times more than an exception to the traditional flood irrigation BCCC has provided. Perceptions of technology change from generation to generation. Many younger North End homeowners grew up with programmable sprinkler systems, which ran at pre-set times with little or no additional efforts. For some established flood irrigators, the opposite is true. Tall rubber boots, mid-night hours, and a continual opening and closing of floodgates are the norm. If looking forward, the BCCC is also actively looking for future and current shareholders seeking to install new or retrofit their property to pressurized irrigation systems. Any resident whose parcel has access to the Canal or one of its laterals is welcome to apply for shares. Another possibility is for an adjoining neighborhood or block to form a local improvement district. This option would bring water to parcels that otherwise would have been too far from BCCC water access.¹⁶ Boise Ordinance No. 5819, as amended on October 28, 1997, mandates that new residential projects use available irrigation sources first before accessing public utility domestic water sources.¹⁷

¹⁴Jaakko Putkonen and Gerard H Roe, "(PDF) Rain-on-Snow Events Impact Soil Temperatures and Affect Ungulate Survival," ResearchGate (Geophysical Research Letters, Vol 30, No. 4, February 26, 2003), 37-1

¹⁵Alan Winkle (Boise, Idaho, n.d.).

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷Jeffrey C Fereday, "Rural Water Use in an Urbanizing Environment," *Rural Water Use in an Urbanizing Environment* (July 8, 2010), 7.

²³Roy V. Cuellar, Karl Woods, CCDC. Personal, 2020.

Landscape Architect Christopher Hawkins has studied urban canals and their potential for multiple use corridors. As early as 1983, when the city redesigned the CW Moore Park, notions and ideas were beginning to stir about the possibility of bringing the Boise City Canal back above ground in that section of Old Boise.¹⁸ In 2018, discussions started at the Capital City Development Corporation (CCDC) about daylighting a Boise City Canal stretch along Grove Street. CCDC Project Manager Karl Woods described this potential project "as a historic streetscape designed to celebrate the canal." This project would be similar to the daylighting of Indian Creek through downtown Caldwell, Idaho. The right-of-way width for the Canal in Boise would be narrower than Indian Creek's natural watercourse, but the length down Grove Street is open for discussion among the project's potential stakeholders. There are multiple engineering and water management issues to consider with pursuing a daylighting project of this size. Once the Canal is back above ground, safety is the first natural concern. Secondly, freshwater flows through the Boise Canal seasonally, presenting a year-round challenge for a water-centered project.¹⁹

For many years, the geothermally heated homes along Warm Springs Avenue have discharged their processed geothermal water into the Boise City Canal during the heating season. This cooled water flows into the bypass located on Broadway, which takes it to the Julia Davis Ponds. The project offers a year-round water feature, a fresh water supply in the months when the river's flow runs. Planners have discussed the possibilities of incorporating a four seasons water feature combined with a landscaped green belt type walking path along the exposed canal banks. As the planning and feasible studies continue, the CCDC has proposed a 2022 target date to begin construction.

As the Boise City Canal continues through its second century of serving the valley, it may once again become a prominent feature in downtown Boise's cityscape. With good 21st century planning, the Canal that nicknamed Boise "The City of Trees" will run free again, and Grove Street's storied past will have come full circle.²⁰

¹⁸Roy V. Cuellar Christopher Hawkins, Landscape Architect. Personal, November 20, 2020.

¹⁹Roy V. Cuellar, Karl Woods, CCDC. Personal, 2020.

²⁰Roy V. Cuellar, Karl Woods, CCDC. Personal, 2020.

Timeline: Boise City Canal Company (BCCC)

1860 – 1869:

An Act of Congress officially organized the Territory of Idaho on March 3, 1863.

July 4, 1863, the new Fort Boise was established in the Idaho Territory during the Civil War.

An 1869 Legislative Act formed the Boise City Canal Co. New management began to oversee the City Canal, which residents later referred to as the Grove Street Ditch.

March 8, 1869, the Idaho Territorial officially incorporated the Boise City Canal Co.

1870 - 1899:

By the end of 1870, the cumulative claim filings for Boise River water totaled fifty-one. Development continued along the Grove Street Ditch from 1870 - 1880.

In March 1879, excavation began widening the "Boise Valley Ditch" to ten feet.

July 3, 1890, the Territory of Idaho achieved statehood.

1891 - 1899:

Work on street paving and concrete sidewalks in Boise started in 1893.

1900 - 1965:

On May 4, 1949, the city and the canal company agreed to the diversion of stormwater from the Boise City Canal to the ponds at Julia Davis Park.

In July 1949, the Boise City Council began studying the covering and relocation of open canals in the city after the accidental drowning of a two-year-old child.

Rapid urban expansion during the 1950s plays a role in reshaping downtown Boise and its surrounding neighborhoods. The ever-changing cityscape forced the route of the Boise City Canal underground.

Between 1965 and 1972, urban renewal continued to impact the Canal's downtown portions on its underground route from Broadway & Warm Springs to 19th and Ada Street on the North End.

1966 - 1999:

As a result of a 1974 critical review of Boise's urban renewal in Harper's Magazine, the raising of the Egyptian Theatre and demolition of sections east of Capital Boulevard were halted and are now known as Old Boise.

In 1983 while planners were redesigning CW Moore Park, Landscape Architect Don Belts discussed the heritage and need to bring the Grove Street section of the Boise City Canal back above ground and into the daylight.

During the late 1980s, construction began on I-184, creating the Myrtle and Front Street corridors with the new Ada County Courthouse and University of Idaho Water Center.

2000 - 2020:

On May 1, 2012, the Boise City Canal Company's 1869 water right was affirmed by the Fifth Judicial District Court in Twin Falls, Idaho. The affirmation was part of the multi-year Snake River Basin Adjudication (SRBA) process.

The BCCC was granted Water Right No. 63-20041 by the SRBA, a legal process that began in 1987 to determine the water rights in the Snake River Basin drainage. The Court completed the Final Unified Decree for the SRBA on August 25, 2014. The agreement is available for viewing at www.srba.idaho.gov

2018: Renewed discussions to possibly daylight the Canal's buried portion along Grove Street by Capital City Development Corporation (CCDC) planners.