



RESIDENTIAL

In the early 1920s, the most common way to obtain a residential building site in Eugene continued to be the purchase of a lot from a developer. These lots were generally in platted subdivisions located near the downtown core and the University of Oregon. Individual property owners would then construct a residence on their property, often with the assistance of a builder and/or architect. This practice resulted in neighborhoods with a variety of sizes and styles of houses. Yet, a sense of continuity existed due to the interlocking street system, uniform lot sizes, and development requirements, such as set-backs, that these subdivisions generally imposed.

The acquisition of building sites in the River Road area did not conform to this practice, however. Donation Land Claim (DLC) owners west of River Road tended to partition off small sections of their property at a time, with 5- to 10-acre parcels being sold directly to individuals, not to land developers. The land was outside of the city limits and was, therefore, served by septic tanks and not subject to City of Eugene zoning regulations and land division rules. New lots were generally sited along existing roads, which tended to follow or dead-end at original claims and subsequent property lines. Due to the sale of lots to individual owners, single family houses dominate this neighborhood.

This practice of subdividing to take advantage of existing roadways is quite apparent in the central section of the neighborhood. Properties between Horn Lane and Howard Avenue have River Road frontage, yet the lots stretch east or west for hundreds of feet, creating long narrow parcels. This development pattern is also evident in the portion of the original L.E. Davis DLC which sits along the Willamette River. From

Miller's Little Farms No. 1
LANE COUNTY, ORE.

Scale: 200 ft. = 1 inch

The above plat of land lies 2 3/4 miles due north from the business center of Eugene and is for sale in tracts as platted at prices from \$75 to \$125 per acre, subject to change without notice. Terms 20 per cent cash and balance on or before 5 years at 6 per cent in. It lies on macadamized road leading into Eugene, on telephone line and good school is near, in a splendid neighborhood of enterprising people. This land will produce anything that grows in the Willamette valley. To get the highest revenue out of this land it should be planted in English walnuts 40 feet apart, or 30 trees to the acre. At 12 years old these trees will produce 100 pounds of nuts each, worth 15 cents per pound wholesale. Between the rows of walnuts plant peach trees 40 feet apart which at four years old will produce 150 pounds worth two cents per pound. Between the rows of peach and walnut trees plant two rows of blackberries, or raspberries, which at two years old produce full crops, always saleable in the Eugene markets at 3 to 4 cents per pound. While the trees and shrubs are small the ground can be cultivated to potatoes and other garden truck and as they grow and shade the ground, the berry bushes may be taken out and eventually the walnut will crowd out the peach trees and yield from \$500 to \$1000 per acre yearly, without any cultivation while the ground between them may be planted to grass and yield good cow pasture.

I also have a large list of stock farms, timber lands, seaport property at Florence in this county, city and suburban property in Eugene and Springfield.

I have been in the Real Estate business in Eugene since 1882 and know the country thoroughly. References any bank or business house in Eugene.

Geo. Melvin Miller
Rooms 20 & 21 McClung Block, EUGENE, OREGON.

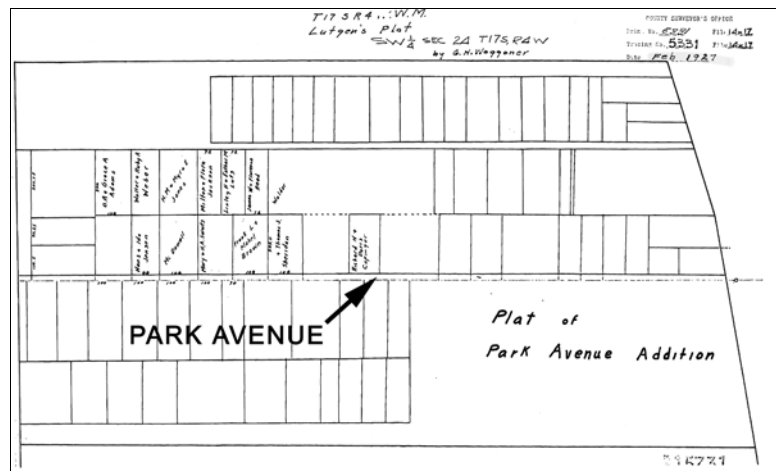
Real estate ad from the Morning Register Industrial Edition, 1907.

approximately Park Avenue south to Hansen Lane, parcels extended from the east side of River Road to the edge of the Willamette River.

Without a grid street system to guide it, this pattern of residential development in the River Road area continued to add to the area's history of odd-shaped lots. These non-typical configurations were first created by the DLCs. While the original claims were generally rectangular in shape, they did not always result from straight lines and were not always lined up with other claims. Adding to this configuration were small parcels of land that went unclaimed and the application of the section-land system over the original claims, which created "fractional" sections.

In 1925, the River Road neighborhood received its fourth plat, the Park Avenue Addition. It was located on the west side of the River Road intersection and consisted of 19 lots of approximately 0.32 acres each. Park Avenue was both the first addition to the record since 1910 and the first subdivision in this area to feature individual building sites. Prior to this, the lots in new additions had consisted of at least 3 acres each. Two years later, E.S. Lutgen platted his land to the northwest of the Park Avenue Addition into individual building lots. Although all 20-plus parcels were rectangular in shape and had a depth of 200 to 225 feet, the frontage along Sunnyside Drive ranged from 70 to 108 feet. As a result, this area contains the neighborhood's greatest concentration of residential buildings dating from the 1920s and 1930s.

In the later 1920s, two major factors affected the development of the River Road area. First was the 1926 decision to site the new Southern Pacific Railroad yard and shops just to the west of the neighborhood, creating an impermeable boundary. As a result, new suburban housing was built along River Road, and on nearby lanes and side streets, to house the population influx brought by new jobs at the rail yards.¹ The second



Park Avenue plat of 1925.

factor was the automobile and the development of roads. As living outside of the city core became more feasible, residential development outside of downtown in the "fringe areas" began in earnest. The River Road area became popular as people were willing to locate in the agricultural areas. In addition to the freedom it represented, the rural lifestyle was also seen as an escape from high rents and high taxes.

By 1930, the population of the River Road-Santa Clara area had reached 1,462, nearly double from the prior decade. This represented about 9 percent of Eugene's 18,901 total residents. The original donation land claims in this area had been divided into approximately 300 smaller parcels. As indicated by the 1931 Metsker map, this piece-meal development continued to occur in a somewhat haphazard manner.

The Depression brought residential development in the entire community to a slowdown. During the early 1930s, no new subdivisions were filed in the Eugene area. As the economy began to improve, new construction was reactivated, but it was initially concentrated in the established parts of town. One exception was the Sunny Lea Addition platted on the property of Frank Horn. It contained five long blocks and dead-end streets that stretched from Horn Lane two-thirds of the distance to Howard Avenue. In 1937 the developers were advertising “½ acre lots for sale. \$150-\$350 terms.”



Sunny Lea development tract office on Horn Lane. Fay M. Bennett, Manager, in doorway. Photo courtesy of Lane County Historical Museum (GN2025)

By the end of the 1930s, Eugene's construction had resumed and its population had inflated. The population of the River Road-Santa Clara area increased by nearly 60 percent during the 1930s. In 1940, the area's population was 2,545, a figure representing 12 percent of the population of the city of Eugene. The following year, Bert Dotson a neighborhood resident, devised a “simple, unique house-numbering system for the lanes branching off River Road. Dotson proposed assigning address numbers based on the number of feet properties are located from River Road [i.e., 295 Sunnyside Drive – 295 feet from River Road]. Prior to acceptance of ‘the Dotson plan’ [presumably by Lane County and/or postal authorities] area addresses consisted of the usual rural route-box number combinations.”²



Single-family residence under construction in the Sunny Lea housing development. Photo courtesy of Lane County Historical Museum (GN2026)

This period of development in the late 1930s was brief, however, as the United States prepared to enter World War II. In April 1942, a national “Stop Order” was issued for building construction, as materials were to be conserved for the war effort. This order limited the investment in commercial, industrial and recreation structures to less than \$5,000, in farm buildings to less than \$1,000, and in residential construction to \$500. This order contributed to the slowdown of the building industry during the war years, as timber production was re-oriented to the war effort and workers were increasingly unavailable.

Following World War II, the size and population of Eugene exploded. The community experienced the same suburban growth that was sweeping the nation, particularly due to the growth of the timber industry. Between 1940 and 1950, the population of the city of Eugene skyrocketed. The 1950 census showed 35,879 residents, a 72 percent increase from a decade earlier. During that same period, the population of the River Road-Santa Clara area also more than doubled, to 6,412 residents. This was about 18 percent of the population of Eugene proper. "Due to its location near most of the area's sawmills and the railroad, River Road and Bethel-Danebo received the bulk of suburban growth north of Eugene."³ During this time, the automobile courts that had been established along River Road began to act as low-rent housing facilities. This included acting as a temporary shelter for families building homes in the neighborhood and as a permanent residence for the more impoverished.

With this growth came significant changes to Eugene's residential development patterns. In 1946, the Gilbert Addition, west of Highway 99 in the Bethel area, was platted, the first subdivision filed outside of the metropolitan area after World War II.

"This growth reflects the sense of prosperity and forward-looking attitude that had returned to Eugene. However, it did little to ease the housing crunch in the short term. As a result, veterans placed tiny trailers on the outskirts of town and constructed houses without attention to building codes. Between 1930 and 1960, and especially between 1945 and 1955, population in fringe areas grew much faster than inside the city. The fringe referred to such outlying neighborhoods as Friendly, Glenwood, Bailey Hill, Bethel, and River Road."⁴

A strong economy led to a building boom, and 60 new additions were platted between 1946 and 1950. These subdivisions ranged widely in size, from a handful of homes to a neighborhood with over 200 units. Of the 14 plats filed in the River Road neighborhood during this time, the number of lots ranged from 2 to 24. Many of these new plats were owned by developers, who planned to fill the tracts with standardized, economical houses.

It was no longer necessary for individuals to buy bare land on which they would construct a residence. They could now purchase ready-built houses located in developer-built suburban neighborhoods in Eugene. The look of residential architecture began to change, with the introduction of new technologies which provided for an increased variety and type of building materials. It became popular and "modern" to incorporate large plate glass; applied masonry, such as tile, stones and brick; and new roofing materials, such as tar and stones.

Another change in residential development patterns following World War II was the introduction of subdivision design innovations. This included curved streets and cul-de-sacs, which were particularly popular as they reduced the use of land for streets to a minimum and helped with siting issues on difficult parcels. However, the introduction of these new elements would serve to further complicate road patterns in the River Road area.

World War II also introduced the technique of mass production to the housing industry, such as standardization of plan, production line techniques, and an assembly line approach to construction. Instead of using a lone group of workers from start to finish, this approach utilized specialized crews, such as framers, plumbers, and electricians, who moved from house to house completing a single task. This allowed developers to build tracts of repetitious houses, most of which were not sold until after completion.

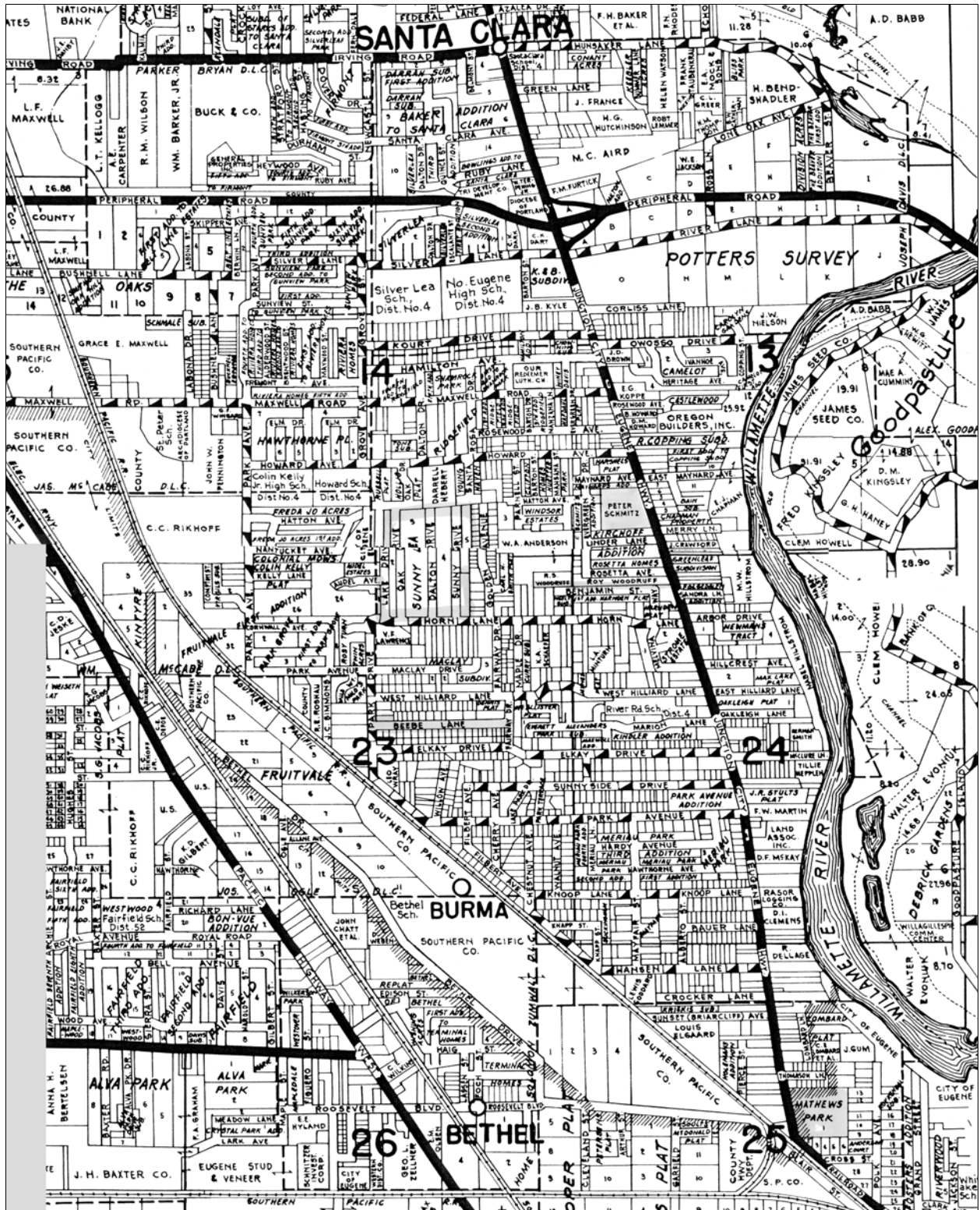
In the same vein were house plan books, which had been produced for decades by such companies as Sears and Aladdin. Construction of the chosen plan was done on-site, on bare land already owned by the buyer. The company would ship all the materials necessary, from pre-cut lumber and glass panes to nuts and bolts, directly to the construction site. Most companies offered a variety of floor plans and a range of options, such as garages and basements. Some houses were designed specifically for future additions, such as a bedroom wing.

New development in the River Road area resulted primarily from the replat of older subdivisions, such as the original 5- to 10-acre lots in The Oaks, and the “infill” of vacant parcels that were already surrounded by development. Such infill led to the creation of “flag lots,” which result from partitioning off the back half of a lot which already has a house on the front portion. Plats initially remained relatively small, ranging from 2-24 lots each. The rural feel of this area, which previously had been covered by small farms, began to evolve into a distinct residential district. Building lots started to become more uniform in size and shape and streets began to conform to the grid pattern, features which had previously remained largely absent from the area.

During this period of development, some of the remaining family farms were also platted into new additions, including the orchards of Jerry Beebe. In the late 1940s, houses were constructed on land formerly cultivated by the family. Residences were also appearing on the former Walker walnut orchard, now the Meriau Park Addition. The plat covered the area south of Park Avenue to Knoop Lane and extending west from River Road to Mayfair Lane.

A 1953 study of the rural-urban fringe in Eugene determined that the primary motivations for moving to these areas included less congestion, more room; better for the children; unable to find housing in town; proximity to employment or business; room for garden; cheaper land and lower rent; and lower taxes. Beginning in the 1950s, “we see subdivisions plunked down in the middle of orchards and farming land. Open fields, horse pastures, orchards, abandoned orchards, and idle land are mixed with rows of modern suburban houses. The voices of children playing in the fields mix with the noise of the farmer’s tractor.”⁵ A 1952 aerial photograph of the River Road neighborhood reflects the infiltration of housing into this former agricultural area.

There was an ironic result of the continued and increasingly popular “fringe living,” where open space was a main attraction: the individual building lots began to get smaller, and thus, closer together. In the early 1900s, new plats had lots ranging in size from 3 to 14 acres, because properties generally contained pasture, field, and/or orchards. The 1925 Park Avenue Subdivision was the first truly residential subdivision, with corresponding lots of about one-third acre. By 1945, during the post-war boom, the



Metsker map from 1968 showing shrinking lot size and new road construction in the River Road area.

average lot was reduced to about one-quarter of an acre. The subdivisions platted in 1950 decreased lots to less than one-fifth of an acre, or 0.20 each, though individual lots varied from 0.15 to 0.21 acre.

Subsequent development has remained consistent with this approximate lot size. The exception appears to be 1955 and 1960 additions consisting of nine parcels or less, where the average parcels are closer to one-third acre. Whether by owner design or as the result of an odd-shaped property, lots returned to the average one-quarter and one-third acreage. Examples include the 1955 Schmalls Subdivision, with nine lots of 0.37 acres each, and the 1960 Briarcliff Subdivision, with six 0.23 acre lots.

The population of the River Road-Santa Clara neighborhoods had increased to 11,210 residents in 1960, or 21 percent of the city's total population. This represents an increase of 74 percent from the prior decade, as compared to a growth rate of 42 percent for the City of Eugene. Due to this rapid pace of development in River Road since World War II, it is estimated that 45 percent of the area's residences were constructed between 1940 and 1959.

Between 1960 and 1964, the River Road neighborhood had a record-breaking number of new additions. Of the 23 projects, a few were infill or replats consisting of just a few parcels, such as the three-lot Neely House subdivision. However, at the other end of the spectrum were the 83-lot Camelot Plat and the 75-parcel Park Grove. These plats represent the introduction of large-scale residential subdivisions to this neighborhood, where, previously, the biggest addition consisted of 27 lots. Not surprisingly, the balance of the current River Road area street system was created during this time.

These large additions were providing homogeneity to the area's landscape patterns, due to their consistent lot sizes and connecting streets. In 1962, Lane County revised its subdivision ordinance to create a "Minor Subdivision," which consists of three lots or less. The ordinance required that all new lots face an existing street, regardless of the size or shape of the underlying parcel. As such, it had the tendency to promote the continued piece-meal division of land that characterizes the River Road neighborhood.

Residential Endnotes

¹Sims, Mike. "River Road History Survey." Unpublished correspondence, 6/13/05, 2.

²Sims, 3.

³Sims, 8.

⁴Wright, Sally and David Pinyerd. *Eugene Modernism, 1935-65*. (City of Eugene Planning & Development, 2003), 4.2.

⁵Spyrou, Michael. *Land in the Suburbs: Spatial Patterns of Lots in the River Road-Santa Clara Area, Eugene, Oregon*. University of Oregon Thesis, Department of Geography, 1973, 2.