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## The Preservation Gap

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## The Preservation Gap—John and Sheri Freemuth

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When we moved to Boise in the mid-1980s we each found something to love about our new community. For one, it was the historic buildings and neighborhoods, and for the other, the river and the foothills. We believed we were fortunate to settle in a town that valued both cultural and natural resources. In the more than twenty-five years that we have called Boise home, we have observed the ways in which residents and visitors appreciate, value, and advocate for their environment. That appreciation has alternately surprised, disappointed, and delighted us.

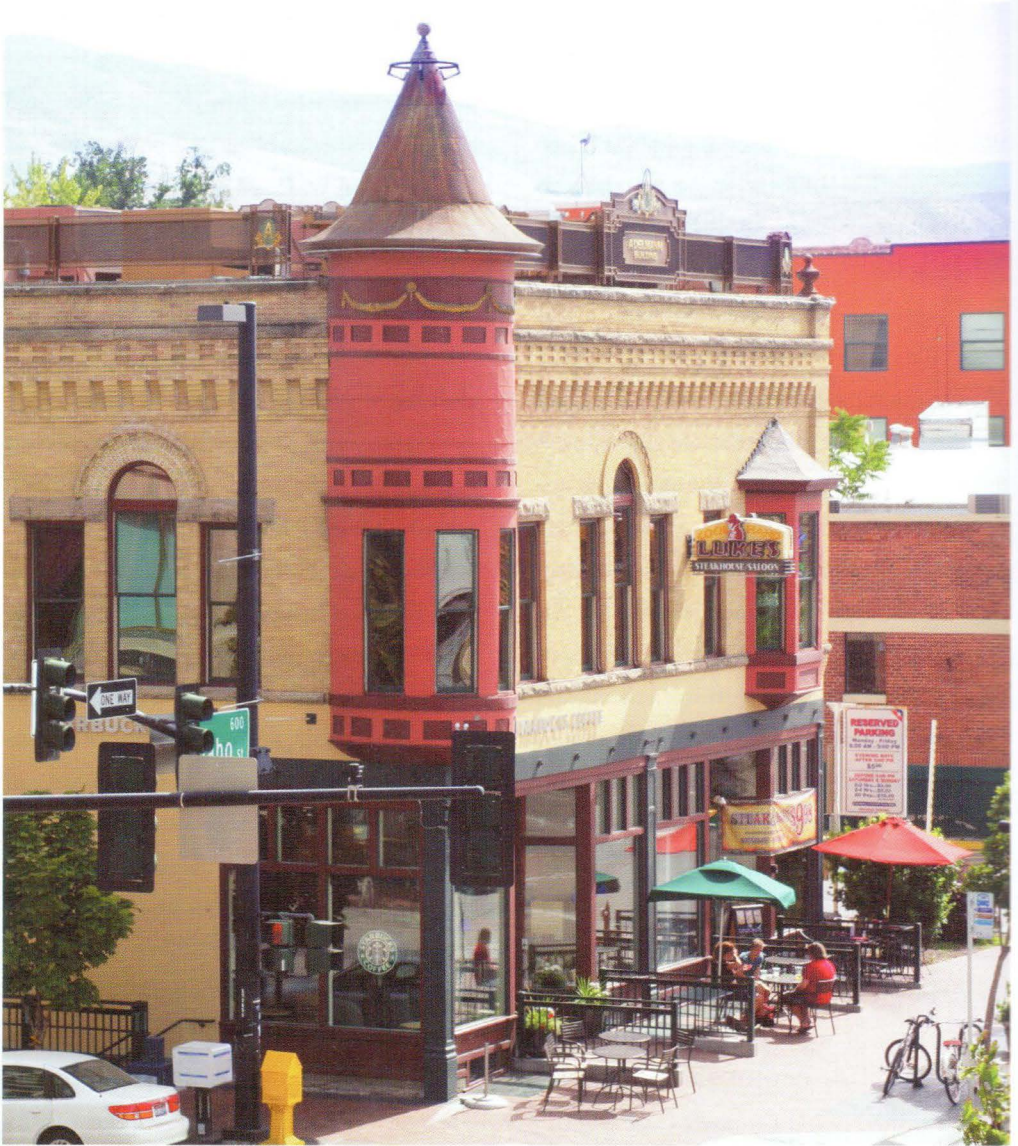
At first Boiseans told us tales of the early days when many more historic buildings decorated downtown. In fact, the Eastman Building's ashes were hardly cold when we drove into town, stirring up memories of the lost Pinney Theatre, Central School, and old City Hall. It wasn't long before we actually met some strong advocates of the days when the Egyptian Theatre was spared, Old Boise was resurrected with shops and restaurants, and a warehouse district was redeveloped. Likewise, tales of old car bodies littering the Boise River were still fresh in people's minds, even as plans for a Boise River Festival were just formulating.

Our arrival followed some significant strides in cultural and natural resource protection of the eighties, but Boise was soon struggling with other choices for future growth. Our downtown lost the beloved Royal Block on Main Street—three large ur-

ban structures from the early 1900s designed by local architectural firms Tourtellotte and Hummel and Wayland and Fennel. But other buildings—the Alexander, the Empire, and the Union Block among them—were redeveloped and enhanced an emerging downtown scene. The Greenbelt (a concept initiated in the 1960s) was expanded beyond the city's core through acquisitions, easements, and negotiations to ultimately extend (on the north bank) to Lucky Peak at one end and Eagle Road on the other.

These efforts enhanced our environment and ultimately improved Boise's quality of life. Many preservation efforts required a coalition of public agencies and private interests working together for a common good and sustainable solution. Some successes—Kathryn Albertson Park or the Esther Simplot Performing Arts Academy—have been the vision of a few or the gift of an individual. It is fair to say that the large policy changes—multiple historic district designations and trail system improvements—have occurred when many Boiseans see how their quality of life will benefit, without regard to whether the issue is merely about historic preservation or environmental protection.

While alliances could be formed between agencies and advocates of either natural or cultural resources, these groups don't always mix. For example, the start of the twenty-first century found Boiseans struggling to respond to a large influx of new residents and investment,



Constructed in 1902, the Adelmann Building continues to dominate the corner of Idaho Street and Capital Boulevard in downtown Boise. The handsome turret was added in 1937, becoming part of Fong's Tea Garden restaurant for some fifty years. Unknown source.

passing large public bonds in the process. Concerned about the impact to the Boise foothills as one of our treasured vistas and recreational areas, citizens rallied for a two-year property tax serial levy that would ultimately raise \$10 million for open space conservation. Meanwhile

with the passage of a school bond, the Independent School District of Boise City closed some neighborhood schools, built others, disposed of property and demolished historic buildings.

It would seem that a coalescing issue might be the loss of the Treasure Valley's



important farmland, historic agricultural buildings, and open space during the past several decades. Changes in land use policies to permit more residential development of previously designated agricultural lands, along with demand for expansion of smaller cities, contributed to the spread of suburban housing and commercial strips. With the recent economic decline, residents have reflected on those losses and are beginning to grapple with ways of addressing sprawl.

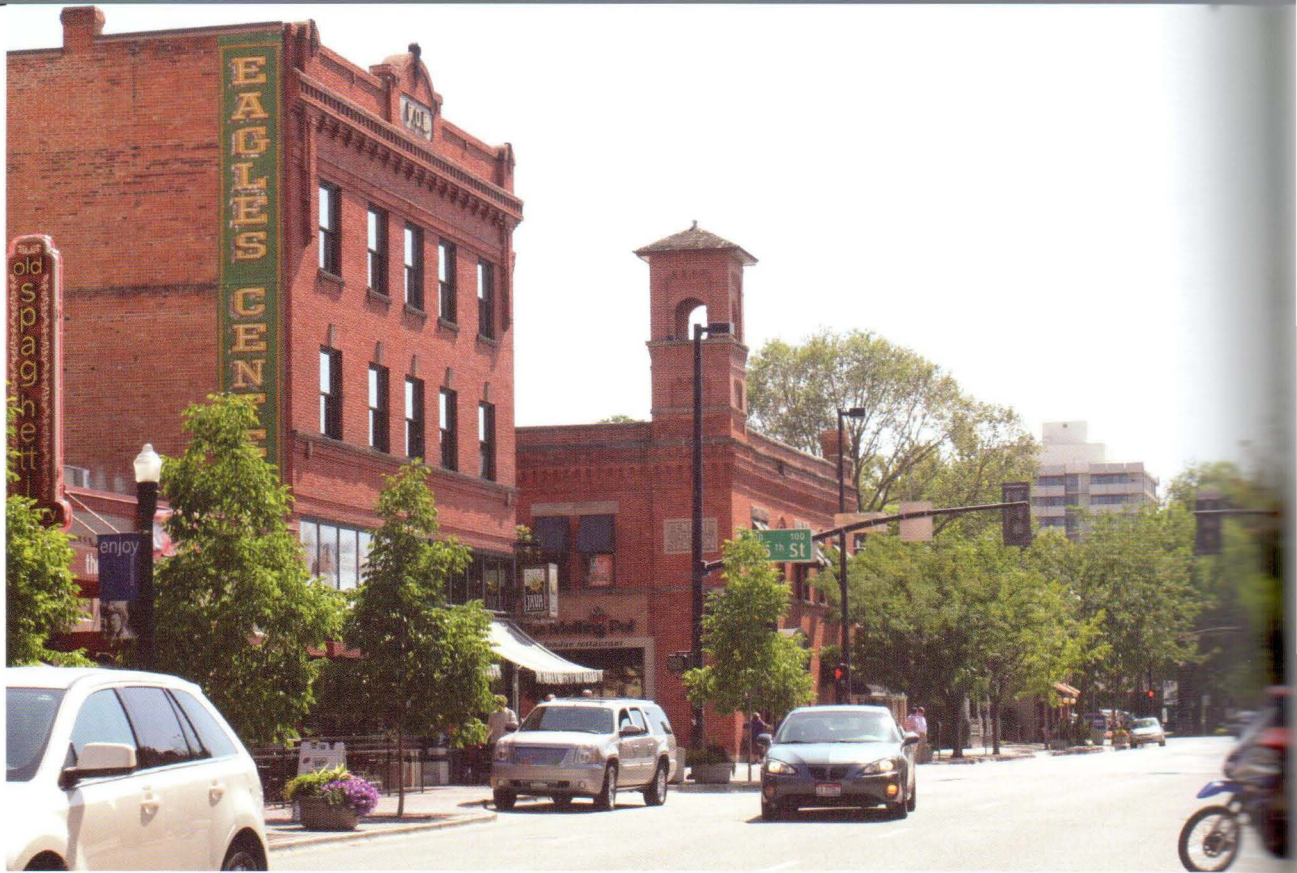
What if alliances had been formed early on with natural and cultural resource groups

to save these farmlands? What if together these advocates had informed local decision makers about the value of land with exceptional soil and irrigation, or the viability of historic homesteads and farm outbuildings for re-use and redevelopment? Would we be looking at a different landscape around us, one that is more authentic to who we are? We think so. Aside from the rare coalition building that occurs when an issue like Castle Rock appears, what would seem like a likely alliance hardly ever develops. Those who care about the natural world work hard on its behalf, as do those who focus on the



Anchoring Old Boise at the corner of 6th and Main Streets, the Pioneer Tent Building is home to a white horse on its roof. The building stands today because Joan Carley bought it in 1974 and renovated it, preserving its integrity. Courtesy of Idaho State Historical Society.





The brick building with stone corbels at 6th and Idaho was built in 1911 for the Fraternal Order of the Eagles. Across the street is the Romanesque Central Fire Station, now a restaurant. The signal bell and fire pole from Boise's first fire station (1880) remain part of the building. Source unknown.

built environment. But why don't they work together more?

There are grounds to suggest that it could be so. In the early 1930s, Horace Albright, then director of the National Park Service (NPS), took a ride with President Franklin Roosevelt along the Blue Ridge Parkway and pointed out the site of the second Battle of Bull Run. The conversation was part of Albright's goal of transferring battlefield and other historic sites managed by the War and Agriculture Departments to the Park Service. Roosevelt agreed. This transformed NPS over time into an agency that became a custodian of cherished American culture and self-identity. Other federal agencies pay attention too. For example, we know of Forest Service

employees, both current and retired, who worked diligently to restore and protect the Landmark Ranger Station in Valley County, earning national awards in the process.

Of course, agencies like these are specialized and the "natural" side and the "historic" side often pass each other by; but not, seemingly, by as far as the advocates for each of these causes. The reasons are not clear, certainly, but perhaps at least part of it can stem from ill-informed and simplistic beliefs among some that all things human are an anathema to the natural world. The need to focus on specific issues of concern to members, funders, and the core mission of an advocacy group also play an important, understandable, and legitimate part.

Perhaps historic preservationists have not clearly articulated that saving the investments of the past 150 years is good for our environment. Early Boiseans built homes first on the flatlands adjacent to the river and later on the near benches and hills that afforded views of the growing valley. Then schools were constructed at appropriate intervals to educate young Boiseans, houses of worship arose for the faithful, museums and parks were designed for community enjoyment, and tree-lined streets linked them all. This was the original version of sustainable community development. Preserving and reusing these structures consumes fewer resources, reduces carbon dioxide emissions, and causes less construction waste. Natural resource advocates could broaden their perspective on how conservation and heritage are interrelated. The valley's earliest residents relied on the abundant natural resources—the river, the foothills, the forests. The era of settlement—sparked by trapping, mining, and agriculture—depended on the proximity of various natural resources. Today citizens who love the outdoors choose to live here so they can recreate and experience what our region has to offer. This is our heritage and being good stewards for future generations is a priority for all of us.

So, perhaps a strategy of communication and network building could allow these

groups to form various responses to proposals that threaten our natural and our cultural heritage. Sometimes one group would lead, other times that group would follow, but they would be together, closing the preservation gap. We are reminded of something the late Wallace Stegner once said: "A place is nothing in itself. It has no meaning, it can hardly be said to exist, except in terms of human perception, use and response." Both our historic and our natural places would benefit if we could see that we share responsibility for those places, and Boise, Idaho, might be an excellent place to demonstrate how cooperation is possible.

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