

# GREENBELT BOOK REFLECTS BOISE'S PAST

By Bob Evancho

"The river now," writes Jim Witherell, "is Boise's pride. Yesterday, however, it was Boise's neglected backyard. The Greenbelt was a strip of industries and amusements: railroads, gravel pits, packing plants, sawmilling, health spas and baseball."

So begins Witherell's book *History Along the Greenbelt*, a reference guide to 21 historical sites on or near the Boise River. Throughout the book's 131 pages, Witherell's text—gleaned from newspaper articles, historical documents and other archival material—provides a concise and informative look back at the river's past. Thirty-seven black-and-white photos from the Idaho State Historical Society help tell the story.

Witherell, an amateur historian and senior research analyst for the Idaho Transportation Department, wrote the book as a field guide to provide background information on the 17 signs that mark historical sites along the Greenbelt. (One of the more familiar landmarks is the Airmail Service marker northeast of Bronco Stadium near the Broadway Bridge on BSU's Campus Lane.)

Witherell, who attended Boise Junior College in the mid-60s, began compiling information for the signs and the field guide as part of Ada County's participation in Idaho's Centennial celebration. The Meridian resident spent late 1989 and early 1990 conducting research and writing the book; it was released in late 1991. Fourth-grade teachers in Boise and Meridian were issued copies.

The Greenbelt is undoubtedly one of the finest features of Idaho's capital today. But as Witherell indicates in his introduction, the popular, open-space corridor along the banks of the Boise River was not always so picturesque and appealing.

Take Yates Park, for instance, says Witherell. Between 1906-1917, the 37-acre park served as the western end of Boise's streetcar system.

The main attraction at Yates Park, now part of Veterans Memorial State Park, was a river-fed rowing pond. And although boats were available at no charge, the pond was "scarcely popular," says Witherell, and at times it could be downright unpleasant.

Noting that Boise's two main slaughterhouses and the local glue factory were less than a mile upstream, Witherell writes: "It was the practice of the time to dump offal and by-products directly into the river. In low water [during] summer months, the park's lagoon became a natural collector, turning the pond unsavory."

Like Yates Park, other points along the Greenbelt in Witherell's book no longer exist:

- Kelly Hot Springs, a spa and resort, was open from 1871-1914.

Located on the river about eight miles west of Boise, the facility's geothermal water provided mineral and steam baths and featured a hotel, dance pavilion and restaurant. During the early 1900s, Kelly Hot Springs became an exclusive club that served liquor. In 1906 the complex burned down. After the owners rebuilt it, the hotel and clubhouse were destroyed by fire again. Overzealous temperance groups were suspected of arson both times.

- The Natatorium was the largest facility of its kind in the United States when it was built in 1892. The structure covered 150,000 square feet and had two Gothic-style towers that rose six stories at their apex. In addition to the indoor pool, the facility contained 50 dressing rooms, parlors, billiard rooms, a cafe and formal dining room. In 1934, part of the roof collapsed in a windstorm, and the building was eventually torn down. Adams Elementary School on Warm Springs Avenue now occupies the site.

- Airway Park, later called Braves Stadium, was Boise's baseball facility from 1939-1963. At one point, it boasted a capacity of 5,000 seats. Featuring minor league affiliates with the New York Yankees and Milwaukee Braves, the stadium was where the Idaho Fish and Game office on Walnut Street now stands.

- Boise Municipal Airport opened in 1926. The runway was expanded and hangars and a passenger terminal were added during the late 1920s and '30s. Eventually, the airport and its surrounding area became BJC when the city decided a bigger airport



Witherell's book provides more information to the Greenbelt historical markers.

was needed to accommodate larger aircraft.

"The [airport's] land was set aside for Boise Junior College in 1938," writes Witherell. "Final ownership of the old field transferred in 1939, being sold to the college for \$1. As the airfield was being phased out ... the college was being phased in."

Other chapters are devoted to Diversion Dam, Table Rock Quarries, Logger Creek, the Davis Orchard (now Julia Davis Park), Memorial Bridge, Chinese Gardens (now Garden City) and McClelland's Ferry (now the Eighth Street Bridge) among several others.

*History Along the Greenbelt* is Witherell's second book on local history. In 1989 he wrote *The Log Trains of Southern Idaho*, which was printed by Sundance Publications of Denver.

Proceeds from the book are used to maintain the Greenbelt historical education program.

Even though the book was written on a volunteer basis, the historian in Witherell wouldn't let him quit. "It was the project," he says, "I couldn't walk away from."