

Daylighting Caldwell

Urban renewal transforms an asphalt floodway.

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by Dean Gunderson

On Sunday, December 30, 2001, Bryan Dines's life changed when a large portion of the building that housed his business Like Nu Car Wash collapsed into a mostly forgotten waterway, Indian Creek, in Caldwell, Idaho. Unfortunately for Dines, the portion of the floor structure under his car wash that had been built in 1911, along with the old corrugated iron and concrete deck, finally corroded from below. Its nearly century-long exposure to the rushing creek's water and humidity had taken its toll. And although many Caldwell residents were surprised that a business had suddenly collapsed into a forgotten waterway, Dines's insurance company was even more surprised. They, too, were not aware that the building had been built over a running creek. They simply refused to cover any of the damage.

Many Caldwell residents forgot about Indian Creek, but the small river still coursed its way under much of the community's downtown, under roadways, vacant lots, parking areas, and many downtown buildings. As the country grew more automobile dependent, Caldwell began covering portions of the creek to provide more street crossings and to make more land available for real estate development.

A History of Water and Steel

Caldwell was founded in 1883 on the sure knowledge that America's westward progress would continue unabated—and that this progress would roll on steel wheels over steel rails. The Oregon Short Line Railroad Company and its sister organization, the Idaho & Oregon Land Improvement Company, staked out a desolate corner of land located just east of the confluence of the Boise River and the smaller Indian Creek. The company's front man, Robert Strahorn, platted the new town's streets to run parallel to Indian Creek, which was smaller and less prone to flood than the nearby Boise River.

Strahorn named this new town after his business partner, Alexander Caldwell. Strahorn's wife, Carrie Adel, later wrote in her memoir about Caldwell, "[There was] not a tree, nor a sign of habitation on the townsite—on the white desolate glare and clouds of alkali dust—it looked like a place deserted by God himself."



Yet, for the Strahorns, this godforsaken tract of land struck a chord of entrepreneurial fervor, for this was not the only townsite they had founded for the railroad company. In addition to founding Caldwell, the Strahorns had also founded the county seat communities of Hailey, Shoshone, and Weiser in Idaho and Ontario in Oregon. All of the sites for these communities provided a critical asset for the railroad company: access to water for their steam locomotives from waterways that did not regularly flood to any great extent. In Hailey it was the Big Wood River, in Shoshone it was the Little Wood River, in Weiser it was the Weiser River, in Ontario it was the Malheur, and in Caldwell it was Indian Creek.



OREGON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Some of these communities had larger nearby rivers to quench their railroad thirst, and they flooded every year, swelling over braided streams like vernal clockwork. But Indian Creek still held onto its own chaotic secret. It, too, occasionally flooded, especially when helped along by human activities in the form of raging irrigation water. In the early spring 1894, Orchard Dam burst. The dam had been constructed some 40 miles east of Caldwell along the course of Indian Creek, creating a reservoir in a natural depression. Water from the Indian Creek Reservoir was intended for surface irrigation of farmland, but when the dam burst, it sent

The railroad bought Robert Strahorn to Idaho where he founded several communities including Caldwell.

mud-choked waters coursing down narrow Indian Creek, causing it to overflow its banks and flood much of the young town's Main Street.

In early spring 1910, a warm spell led to an early thaw of winter snow. This glut of water washed away a portion of the levee on the newly constructed New York Canal. The Reclamation Service, quick to avoid a disaster, opted to divert a portion of the high water down into Indian Creek. They sent messages to the residents and business owners of Caldwell by 3 a.m., giving the town a 7-hour head start to move to higher ground before the creek breached its banks. The water kept rising for another 8 hours. Before it was finished that spring, all of Caldwell's downtown streets were under more than 3 feet of water.

These floods were not natural occurrences; they had been caused by changes made to the hydrological network of the Boise River Valley, modifications made to divert natural waterways for agricultural surface irrigation.

The Slow Loss of Indian Creek

Early settlers in Caldwell viewed Indian Creek as a fortunate and beautiful waterway that graced the town. In 1906, the Forward Club, a women's group dedicated to improving the cultural and educational footing of the young town of Caldwell, had as one of its principle goals for the community the construction of "a greenbelt along Indian Creek."

The creek figured prominently in the social and civic life of Caldwell residents. With a burgeoning agricultural industry taking root, provided by ample surface irrigation water, the community regularly celebrated its newfound economic success with events held along Indian Creek. Yet an inadvertent impact of a growing agricultural industry was the community's reliance on the small creek to carry away the considerable waste flowing from farm fields, animal pens, and meatpacking plants. According to Lee Van De Bogart, project engineer for the City of Caldwell, when the town was founded, the average flow in Indian Creek was a mere 3 to 5 cubic feet per second



COURTESY OF COLLEGE OF IDAHO

Robert Edmund Strahorn and his wife, Carrie Adell Strahorn



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Downtown Caldwell in
1907

(cfs). Yet, by the 1920s, the flow rates had increased with the advent of agricultural field drainage and effluent to a peak of 270 cfs—a 5,400% increase! Even at its lowest point, before the irrigation laterals opened in April, the creek ran at 130 cfs. With so much waste choking Indian Creek, its reputation as a pleasant place to relax and its role as a centerpiece of the community faded.

As Dessie Cole, a longtime resident of Caldwell, recalled, “Caldwell just smelled to high heaven.” The idea of Indian Creek, what was flowing through it, and what it smelled like was so repugnant that she and her husband kept the presence of the creek a secret from their young son. Even though they lived just across from the stream, their boy was almost 5 years old before he first saw Indian Creek.



J. SMITH/FICKR

Caldwell before Indian
Creek restoration, about
1975

A Confluence of Cars

Soon, city leaders began a concerted effort to cover the creek. This would serve two purposes: it would make more land available for development within the city center, and it would encapsulate the atrocious smell of the once clean running water. Most important, it would open up additional crossings of Indian Creek to automobile traffic and eliminate the narrow wooden bridges that divided the city. Caldwell

had become a car-oriented city that appeared to have no river at all. This allowed many surrounding farms and industries to increase their discharges into the creek since it was hidden from sight.

By the early 1950s, after the creek was encased as it went through the downtown area, it was only possible along the outskirts of Caldwell to catch a glimpse of Indian Creek—either east of town along 21st Street past the rodeo grounds along the train tracks, or west of town just before the creek flowed into the Boise River, next to the sewer treatment plant. You were forgiven if you thought the natural stream was simply an unnamed agricultural drainage lateral because it looked just like any number of other such ditches, overgrown with rushes along its steep, artificially straightened banks and devoid of wildlife.

Yet, with the passage of the federal Clean Water Act in 1972, industrial discharges into streams like Indian Creek were deemed illegal. Slowly, the waters of the stream cleared and fish and wildlife began to return. But by this time, almost two generations had passed since the community hid the creek, and many newer residents were unaware that a live stream ran under the very heart of their city.

Top on the List in the New Millennium: Dines's Former Car Wash

Just before the turn of the millennium, Garret Nancolas, the newly elected mayor of Caldwell, began to investigate ways to turn around Caldwell's declining downtown. Despite years of effort to improve automobile access throughout the downtown area, businesses had simply chosen to relocate.

To foster renewed interest in the community, Mayor Nancolas sponsored several college-led investigations that would look at possible innovations. One of these efforts was a design charrette, which included students from the Caldwell-based College of Idaho, the Idaho-Montana

chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects, and the National Park Service. This effort focused on planning for a network of parks and greenbelt pathways throughout the community and the downtown that had been recommended by the Forward Club in 1906.

Immediately after Dines's car wash had collapsed, Mayor Nancolas called a town meeting, asking the public what, if any, help the community could provide for this downtown business. The mayor had already declared a state of emergency to notify the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in hopes that they could render aid. This was even more urgent, since Dines's insurance company had just notified him that it would not cover the loss.



ZIBOISE ON FLICKR.COM

As a result of this town meeting, the public agreed that the city would pay for the initial cost of the removal of the most precarious portion of the collapsed car wash building. The city paid \$13,750 from the city's emergency fund and placed a lien on Dines's car wash property to ensure that the community would be repaid. Unfortunately, Dines ultimately had to surrender the property in lieu of repayment on the lien,

Other cities in the country, such as San Antonio, Texas, have revitalized their communities by creating public spaces along waterways.

confounded by an inability to pay accumulating property taxes on a business that could not operate. The City of Caldwell was able to acquire the property at a significant discount, allowing the community to focus restoration resources to what would become a small public park.

According to Caldwell City Council president Rob Hopper, the design charrette was a resounding success. “The technical expertise of the National Park Service and American Society of Landscape Architects, combined with the guidance of local residents and experts, resulted in a plan that will, for the first time, make our community vision a reality.”

Tearing Down Walls, Righting Old Wrongs, and Bringing in the Sun

By September 2003, the first-ever Indian Creek Festival was held to celebrate the first portion of the Indian Creek to be restored—the segment approximately one block to the west of the collapsed car wash site. The celebration included the dedication of a public sculpture that decorated a new pedestrian bridge to a new landscaped plaza. The event was a 1-day event that was held in an adjacent parking lot.

“I’m amazed at how well it’s come together and how much excitement it’s created,” Mayor Nancolas exclaimed. “Enthusiasm tears down walls.” By the following year, the annual celebration had grown to a 2-day event. The kickoff for the celebration was the demolition of the last remaining portion of the old car wash building and the removal of the old corrugated iron and concrete floor, bringing sunlight to a portion of Indian Creek that had not been exposed to fresh air for nearly a century.

Long-time Caldwell resident Gina Lujack said, “It’s going to be wonderful! It’s been a real pleasure to witness that the city heads have all turned the same direction. No one is against this. I think that in the long run, this planned progress we have is going to be better than a boom!”



IDAHO PRESS TRIBUNE

The community enjoys a revitalized downtown during the annual Indian Creek Festival.



ADAM ESCHBACH, IDAHO PRESS TRIBUNE

Color fills the landscape during Caldwell's Winter Wonderland Christmas light display.

Over the next 3 years, the city worked to develop a set of guiding principles and ordinances that would reaffirm the importance of Indian Creek and the role it would play in the downtown's redevelopment. In June of 2007, 35 years after the adoption of the National Environmental Policy Act and



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the Clean Water Act, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which was charged with implementing the acts, awarded a \$200,000 grant to the City of Caldwell to help in its effort to restore Indian Creek. Jim Werntz, Idaho Operations Office director for the EPA said, “Caldwell employed smart-growth principles ... (making the) Indian Creek restoration and creation of nearby green space the centerpiece of the downtown revitalization.”

Construction begins in 2007 to uncover Indian Creek.

This is not to say the restoration of Indian Creek proceeded without a hitch. In 2008, coinciding with the announcement of a new redevelopment planning effort and the ribbon-cutting ceremony for the new park on the old car wash site, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) declared that all of downtown Caldwell was at imminent risk of flooding.

Not to be thwarted, the city announced new incentive efforts to encourage downtown redevelopment. This city-funded incentive package would be available for any new downtown development and would include a 60% cost share for downtown streetscape improvements (such as lighting, benches, irrigation, and trees), a new \$500,000 transportation grant, a downtown-wide Wi-Fi system, a police bike patrol rotation, and the potential reduction in permitting costs for LEED-certified buildings.

“One of the key reasons that we became interested in the Caldwell downtown was the Indian Creek project,” said Skip Oppenheimer, president of Oppenheimer Development Corporation. “I think we pictured it being enormously attractive and important. It adds a very distinctive quality to downtown Caldwell. Very few cities have that to offer.”

That year, the fifth annual Indian Creek Festival was held, and it had now grown to overshadow the Egg and Dairyman Days celebrations of the 1920s. In the 1920s, hundreds of people came to Caldwell for picnics and a massive tug-o-war across Indian Creek, a war between the “brains and brawns” of townspeople.

In 2009, after the city had spent nearly \$200,000 to reanalyze FEMA’s data and adding to it the new grade and flow information from the Indian Creek daylighting effort, FEMA agreed to downgrade the flood risk in downtown Caldwell. Perhaps not surprisingly, the key information that led to FEMA’s change in position was the crafting of a partnership agreement between local governments, including both the City of Caldwell and the adjacent City of Nampa.

In this agreement, an old wrong was righted. The New York Canal would play a central role in the protection of downtown Caldwell. In 1910, the Reclamation Service had diverted water from the canal into Indian Creek to minimize flooding of properties due to a failure of a levee wall on the canal. This had flooded all of downtown Caldwell. Under the new partnership agreement, the very same gates on the canal—where it crosses the natural Indian Creek riverbed, about 14 miles east of downtown Caldwell, will be adjusted to accept

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A functional water wheel is a prominent feature along Indian Creek.

any potential floodwaters that may inundate the downtown. This arrangement will ensure that during a flood, a minimum of 2,500 cfs of water flow will stay in the canal.

In 2010, Caldwell introduced further administrative streamlining to help encourage downtown redevelopment. This new “red carpet” treatment expedites the approval processes for new projects that meet certain energy-efficiency guidelines. Furthermore, if these projects help generate new jobs, help restore historic buildings, and adhere to more stringent design standards, the redevelopment projects could qualify for partial funding from the city’s urban renewal agency.

In 2015, five full blocks of Indian Creek flow freely through downtown Caldwell. According to Eljay White, Caldwell’s finance director and city treasurer, nearly \$1.5 million each year, over the next 8 years, will flow from the city’s urban renewal efforts, much of it capitalizing on the shining jewel of a restored creek. The City of Caldwell is now poised for a renaissance of its downtown as the beauty of Indian Creek brings pride to the townspeople.



DEAN GUNDERSON has a master’s degree in community and regional planning from Boise State University. He has received regional and national recognition for his architectural, furniture, urban design, and sculptural work and is committed to improving the quality of life within his community through livable design.