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## South of the Tracks

*Housing segregation isolated the marginalized.*

by Pam Demo

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The streets of Ash, Lee, old Lovers Lane/Pioneer Street/Pioneer Walkway comprise more than a century-old distinctive street grid within its larger River Street neighborhood. The streets drew culturally diverse working-class neighbors struggling to make ends meet. The now tattered and disintegrating setting and its unique cultural history was home to immigrants, people of color, and those who the city's other neighborhoods could not or would not accommodate.

*River Street, south of the tracks, Colored Town, river rats* were collective terms imposing Otherness on residents who lived along the streets in the former railroad district south of Grove and north of the Boise River. The city north of the now-missing tracks stigmatized and segregated the neighborhood lying between the Boise River and the railroad district. When the Outside cared to take notice, its take on the neighborhood was skewed.

After 1893, when the Oregon Short Line reached Tenth Street Station, oil tanks and warehouses bordered the railroad district. Developers filed densely platted additions that filled vacant land. By 1912, small wooden houses lined Lee Street, Ash Street, and Lovers Lane. Several were unique in style and few remain standing today.

Permanent residency was an exception. A single wage-earner supported a household, and blue-collar employment or no employment was the norm. Extended families and boarders commonly lived at a single address. With few exceptions, residents were working-class, at home in the neighborhood until they could afford to leave.

### *Stigmas and Stereotypes*

Juanita Aberasturi Iribar clearly recalled “across the tracks” stigma that came with growing up Basque on Ash Street in the 1920s and 1930s. For Juanita, stigma was clear in the epithets “river rat,” “poor white trash,” and “black Basco.”

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DARWIN OSWALD/DAHO STATESMAN

Lovers Lane on Pioneer Street epitomized the Otherness that white Boiseans stigmatized. “Pioneer Street was a street, a block maybe,” Cherie Buckner-Webb remembers. She lived on the street as a toddler in the 1950s until her family broke the color barrier with a move to Boise’s North End. “There were shanties when I was growing up,” said Buckner. “Maybe only two, three or four of them were functioning maybe as juke-



South of the Oregon Short Line, about 1900

Previous page: Erma Madry Hayman at 617 Ash Street

joints, but they weren’t even enough together to be juke-joints.”

Still, the street with its district called Lovers Lane had a bawdy reputation for gambling, bootlegging, and prostitution. Black soldiers stationed at Mountain Home and Boise’s Gowen Field were welcomed. Boise police left the district alone. Carousing was ignored “as long as you kept it off Main Street,” said Buckner-Webb.

But Doris Thomas of Lee Street felt no need to lock her doors. Recalling the 1950s, she remembers a vibrant mix of black and white and immigrant neighbors. All found ways to make a living. When circumstances changed, they found reasons to move on.

In the 1950s and 1960s, few residents owned their homes. South of the tracks was mostly rentals. Safe and neighborly, it was a tight-knit enclave of Basques, African Americans, European immigrants, Chinese, Hawaiians, and resident working-class whites.

## *Working Mother of Six*

Doris Thomas lived in the Lee Street neighborhood for 60 years. As a mother of six and lifelong restaurant worker, she loved the mix of neighbors and the endless opportunities for kids growing up down by the river, south of the tracks. Vacant lots abounded, nearby ballpark events were free entertainment, kids skated at the Riverside Dance Hall, and everyone learned to swim in the river. When the circus came to town, it set up a block away. Families listened to the radio, walked uptown to the public library, sat on their porches to visit, went to the ballpark for games, and played cards. Most had no cars and little money but made the most of what entertainment they could easily and cheaply create themselves.

Doris came from Missouri to Boise in 1926. She first lived on Ash, then moved to Lee. She and her husband Jack worked in the restaurants, coffee shops, and bars while raising five sons and a daughter. When Jack died at age 61, he was still employed in a restaurant uptown. Years later, in 1980, Doris retired at 1114 Lee, her hands crippled by years of waitressing.

Doris's perception of her neighbors' commonalities and differences was expressed in terms of those belonging to the neighborhood as being "residents of Idaho" or "residents of the neighborhood." For her and others, longtime residency outweighed ethnicity in determining who was different; time living in the neighborhood trumped skin color. Her neighbors "weren't the ones that came from the outside," she explained. Those from the outside were different. "They're the ones you had the trouble with."

Known as "Mrs. Jack," Doris walked home on 11th and Pioneer streets from her late-night work shifts at The Grill, The Casino, and other eateries. She respected her Lee, Ash, and Pioneer neighbors and in return she felt at ease walking to work late at night on dark streets south of the tracks.

Following Prohibition, the Thomases lived at 1119 Lee for almost 13 years. Doris claimed that the previous "Austrian" residents at 1119 were bootleggers. The men had rigged the window sills with springs that, when triggered, revealed hidden storage for liquor. Her years of working



Bernease Rice and her son, Lee Rice, II, near River Street, about 1950

RIVER STREET DIGITAL ARCHIVE

Boise's restaurants, especially the night shifts, meant that Doris Thomas was familiar with the city's cast of characters who bootlegged during Prohibition, ran gambling establishments, and ran women. Clearly it all happened as readily uptown as it did down by the river. Uptown racial discrimination was more perplexing, distressing, and corrupt in Doris's eyes than was gambling, boozing, or running women in the Main Street hotels and side-street rooming houses. Blacks were not allowed to be served, she was told by her bosses.

She noted that during the war, visiting black servicemen received the same restaurant and bar discrimination as did Boise's black citizens: they might order at the counter or bar but they certainly had to drink and eat out on the curb. White patrons shunned eateries and staff that readily served African Americans. The waitress from down-by-the-river was piqued by uptown racial distinction and disrespect. For Doris, prejudice on the city streets surprised her. "It doesn't seem to me like the prejudice would be that bad, but it was," she said.

In 1965, Doris Thomas was widowed and living in an elegant red-brick house at 1114 Lee. For a lifetime she was proud of her working-class history, her neighborhood, and the ties that bound neighbors of all colors and cultures together. "It was a nice area . . . a grand area."

### *Blacks and Basques*

Robert Gilmore, a black Boisean who lived on Lee Street, was active in Boise's 1907 Colored Progressive Club. Gilmore worked as a porter for W. M. Sharps in 1910 while supporting his wife and five children. Between 1912 and 1913, the Gilmores and three children were living on Grand, not more than four blocks from Lee.

In 1910, the black Thorpe family and Elijah Glass, a black miner, were neighbors on Lovers Lane. The Mayos and Wilsons residing on Ash, the Mayfields and their neighbors on Miller, and the Gilmores on Lee were families of color, designated in the U.S. Census as "Mu" (Mulatto) or "B" (Black).

By 1920, according to the Black History Museum archives, 63 blacks lived in Boise. Alex Simons, a barber, lived on Ash. In

the 1930s, Marie Maynard resided at 1118 Miller next door to the Buckner/Lawrence family, and a black family lived at 1114 Lee Street.

Black residents lived at 1114 Lee from 1961 to 1963. A River Street relative recalled visiting them at the elegant brick house in the early 1960s. Thereafter, until the late 1970s the River Street area was home to many in Boise's black community. Pioneer, Ash, Miller, River, and Grand, South 13th, 14th, and 15th, and Lee continued to define 70 years of the community's "place" in the city.



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Warner Terrell, Jr., of South 14th Street, 1920

Boise's Basques mostly clustered near the Grove Street boarding houses. By 1903, some lived on the north end of Ash Street as well. The first residents were single men, mostly sheepherders who wintered in Boise. By 1915, entire families lived on Lovers Lane and its intersection with Ash. Families and individuals had moved onto Lee by 1917, remaining next door and down the alley from their extended families and friends at the intersection of Ash and Lovers Lane until the 1950s. While the men left town to work on the ranches, the women and children remained at home. Cousins, nieces,



Basque immigrants,  
Boise, 1911

siblings, mothers, and grandmothers gathered into single-family dwellings next door or down the alley at the Lee/Ash/Lovers Lane intersection.

In 1912, one of Boise's first Basque *frontons* (handball courts) was in use on Lovers Lane at the intersection of two alleys, a block north of the original River Street alignment. Henry Alegria recorded in his memoir that in 1910 Jose Eguren lent \$1,000 to Domingo Zabala to build the two-walled fronton at 631½ Lovers Lane. Zabala resided next door to the fronton, then moved to Nampa in 1915, leaving it to Manuel Aberasturi. Marselino and Marie Arana briefly operated a bakery in it in 1916.

More than a dozen Basque families lived in the neighborhood between 1930 and 1952. Doris Thomas knew them all but found it hard to talk to the older ones because they were “old country” and spoke only Basque, whereas their children spoke Basque but also learned English.

Juanita Aberasturi Iribar entered first grade speaking only a few words of English. Her brother Juan spoke none. Speaking only Basque, both children picked up English “on the streets” and as best they could in school. Their family lived on Ash from 1917 until 1935. The women often visited on a bench outside the Aberasturi's barn while the men were away for much of the year. “Basques are very clannish,” Aberasturi Iribar observed in a 2005 interview. The next-door houses at 1118 and 1120 Lee were long and close together so the women could visit through the open windows.

By the 1930s, many Basques turned to businesses other than herding as they settled in the Boise Valley. In 1952, Ignacio Alegria's family was the last of the Basques to move from the neighborhood, closing a chapter on 50 years of immigrant *Euzkaldunak* and *Amerikanuak* Basque presence in the Ash/Lee neighborhood.

By the 1930s the ethnic mix also included Hawaiians, Greeks, and Slavic Eastern Europeans. Bohemian Czech-Slovak immigrants rented on South 14th Street, and a Japanese family lived nearby.



TODD SHALLAT

### *Housing Was Humble*

The red-brick house at 1114 Lee was an elegant and unique face in the neighborhood with its gables, steeply sloped roofs, decorative shingles, ornate front porch, and iron fence. In 1905, machinist Frank Lathrop was its first resident. Subsequent history reflects long- and short-term residencies of several to at least seven people, including railroad and freight-yard workers. Restaurant owners William and Emma Matevia were owner-residents from 1925 to 1943, taking in occasional boarders. The Matevias installed the neighborhood's first phone, which anyone could use, day or night.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 1930 the Matevias' house was worth \$3,000, one of the highest values in the neighborhood. The house at 633 Ash, which later became the Thomas family home for years, was valued at \$3,500.

Lathrop-Matevia house  
at 1114 Lee Street, lost  
to urban renewal



Matevia owned the popular Pure Food Café on Main Street between North 10th and 11th streets. Jack Thomas worked as a cook at Matevias' café, and for years the family rented 1119 Lee from the Matevias. By 1944, Matevia had moved across the street from 1114 Lee to 1119 Lee, the house he formerly rented to the Thomases.

Maude Bailey was another long-term resident at 1114 Lee. In 1950 she remodeled the front porch, and 6 years later



ERMA HAYMAN

Erma Madry (Hayman) at the piano with the family's band, about 1915

she built the red-brick garage on the alley. Into the early 1960s, 1114 remained a well-kept, distinctive residence with its expanse of gleaming hardwood floors, oak woodwork, and unusual bay windows. Four years after Jack's death, Doris moved into 1114 and occupied it until her death in 1986, lamenting her inability to keep it up.

A history of house photos captures the decline and fall of once-handsome 1114 Lee Street. In 2006, the faded face was

leveled and replaced by a dirt parking lot. The rise, decline, and fall of 1114 Lee reflect the rise, decline, and fall of its neighborhood.

Doris Thomas saw how things had changed over the 60 years she had spent on Ash and Lee: “I think they really call it a slum area now from what they used to,” she noted in 1980. As an elderly white woman among white and black neighbors, her view of neighborhood decline was not related to safety but to failure of landlords to maintain property and choose tenants carefully.

In a 1980 interview, Dorothy Buckner put the issues of substandard housing and landlord-tenant relations squarely on the shoulders of the few white landlords who had long owned most of her Pioneer Street neighborhood. Buckner’s daughter, Cherie, explained her family’s incentive to leave their black neighborhood in spite of the difficulties they would face trying to move into white neighborhoods north of the tracks. She recalled that along Pioneer, “housing was humble” and that there was stigma associated with being from south of the tracks.

Although the Buckner women spoke of pride for their neighborhood, by 1957 they could afford to live elsewhere and get out from under the thumb of landlords. The family moved to the North End and stayed there in spite of what Buckner-Webb described as a “first-class cross burning” on their front lawn after they had moved in.

Erma Hayman lived in her well-kept house on Ash for more than 50 years. In a 1980 interview she stated that the ethnically mixed neighborhood was the only part of town blacks could live in. Elsewhere in town, when they found out she was black, “the first thing they’d say was that [the house] was sold.”

Independently or collectively, poverty, cultural difference, and skin color inspired stigma. Buckner-Webb remembered hearing it time and again: “‘That’s where the colored people live; that’s where the so-and-so-live.’ I say, ‘Hate to disappoint you or disprove your ignorance, but look at the census records.’”

## *Neighborhood Business*

Neighborhood grocery store owners and entrepreneurs must have felt every inch “blue-collar” as they struggled long hours as sole proprietors of neighborhood-supported stores south of the tracks. John Phillips, white businessman and long-time Lee Street resident, was a driver for Falk’s department store in 1908, then owned neighborhood Pearl Grocery from 1917 to 1930. White businessman Roland Crisp eventually acquired the Pearl and later established Grand Avenue Market, a laundromat, and other businesses on South 12th and Grand north of Ash and Lee. Other neighborhood grocery stores included Zurcher’s and Brown’s, but all succumbed when K-Mart arrived in the late 1960s and settled nearby on newly gentrified, reclaimed river-bottom land. Doris Thomas recalled that when the big store drove the small ones out, without a car she could no longer conveniently walk to a laundromat or grocery store.

On Pioneer Street, enterprising Luther Johnson collected rent and looked after property for white landlords renting to black and white tenants south of the tracks. “Because many people didn’t want to be bothered dealing with ‘those folks,’ they would hire him to collect the rent,” said Cherie Buckner-Webb of her grandfather. Her grandmother ran a boarding house on Miller. Together, the Johnsons saw business opportunities and took advantage of them in a time and a tough place where success was the result of one’s own making.

Residents were at home on their streets and knew the importance of being good neighbors. They were forthright about their jobs and took pride in what they did for a living as domestic and restaurant workers, cooks, bartenders, clerks, and store owners. Doris Thomas raised her family by waitressing from the 1930s to the 1970s. Her husband earned \$3 a day working 12-hour days, covered their rent, and finally bought a house. “We didn’t ever make a lot of money, but we didn’t go into debt,” Doris recalled.

## *Decline of the Neighborhood*

What was left standing along Miller, Ash, Lee, and Grand in the 1950s has been gradually removed and replaced

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with low-income housing, empty lots, and commercial development, obliterating the integrity and history of this culturally unique neighborhood.

Zurcher's Cash Grocery  
on South 13th Street

Removal, replacement, and alterations to residences occurred throughout the River Street neighborhood's history so that by 1980, much of the streetscape and residential area had been removed. Deconstruction proceeds inexorably: Ash Street is now devoid of all but one of its original dwellings, all lost to street realignments, commercial conversion, multi-unit housing endeavors, and lot leveling.

Longtime residents saw their small neighborhood deteriorate and blamed decline on landlords who failed to maintain properties or carefully screen new tenants. Longtime residents felt that "outsiders" brought trouble with them. Renters came and went, establishing no ties with their neighbors and leaving property in disrepair.

Warehouses, traffic, commercial-size blocks and their delivery-friendly street grids, and vacated industrial real estate persist in 2016. The trains are now missing, as are whole residential blocks overwhelmed by decades of sharing the neighborhood with steel, concrete, cinder block, and noise.

A 60-year-old trailer park occupies the southeast edge of the neighborhood. With the orderly layout of trailers along Lee

and South 11th, steel and aluminum multi-unit housing was introduced to the neighborhood more than 30 years before the four concrete-and-brick-box apartment buildings were stacked on Ash and Lee. The trailer park remains much as it was in the 1950s.

The historic neighborhood is riddled with landlord-leveled lots slowly being walled in by concrete warehouses that squat on the edges. Trucks load in the alley. If their bulk is out of sight for some in the neighborhood, their diesel fumes and noise confirm their industrial presence.

Proposed city redevelopment plans to preserve the remnants died. House by house, the Lee and Ash grid is disintegrating and disappearing as homes are leveled, landscaping is scraped clean, and lawns are stripped bare of grass and shrubs. The one remaining constant, imperturbable in its concrete and asphalt presence, is the street configuration.

Long-silent voices expressed concern for their neighborhood's future well-being more than 35 years ago. Years of photo inventories reveal the rise and decline of property integrity. What urban renewal triggered in surrounding neighborhoods more than 40 years ago, landlords are vying for on the streets of Ash and Lee. With no architectural integrity of structures or setting, a new neighborhood is clearly the future here. Those along Ash and Lee who struggle to make a living will be forced to move elsewhere whether they can afford to or not.



**PAM DEMO** is a long-time Boisean. This chapter is based on her 2006 master's thesis, "Boise's River Street Neighborhood: Ash, Lee, & Lovers Lane/ Pioneer Streets – The South Side of the Tracks."