

34 livable places



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Boiseans frolic in the boating lake at Pierce Park near the Collister Station, about 1908.

Creating **COLLISTER** by William Blackadar

Nestled against the northwest Boise foothills, the greater Collister area was once a distant trolley stop in an agriculturally centered community three miles away from the hustle of Boise City. Today, it's a place with deep community roots, stemming from early generosity and maturing into the neighborhood that residents have molded into a community. Bordered by State Street on its southwestern edge, Pierce Park Lane to the west, Cartwright and Hill roads to the north, and Taft and 36th streets to the south and east, the Collister area exists comfortably between the downtown economic center and the residential expansions toward Eagle. But due to its location, the Collister area, like many Boise neighborhoods, faces the challenges of urban sprawl.

The Collister neighborhood derives its name posthumously after Dr. George Collister, called a "pioneer" in his Oct. 19, 1935, obituary in *The Idaho Daily Statesman*. Upon graduating in 1880 from Heron Medical

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College in Cleveland, Dr. Collister was convinced by his sister Julia, who already lived in Idaho, to leave his native Ohio and move west. Being the wife of Idaho Supreme Court Judge Joseph Huston, apparently his sister was a persuasive woman. Dr. Collister and his wife Mary Elizabeth moved to Boise, where he opened a downtown office on Main Street in June of 1881. Advertising as a specialist in pediatrics, Dr. Collister was one of the first to bring public health services to the Treasure Valley. He served twice on the city council, where he was instrumental in creating numerous health and sanitation ordinances. He served as city and county physician and was physician at the Idaho State Penitentiary and at the Soldier's Home, according to his obituary.

An avid writer and horticulturalist, Dr. Collister became the owner of one of the valley's first peach orchards. Shaded by nearly 11,000 peach, prune and various other fruit trees, Dr. Collister built a 20-bedroom mansion overlooking the developing orchard on some 245 acres owned by him and his sister a few miles west of the city limits on Valley Road, now State Street. Though many of the orchard's original trees have since died or been cut down, numerous others still bear fruit to this day. Collister's mansion, built by the noted architectural firm Tourtellotte and Hummel near the junction of present-day Sycamore and Taft streets, was converted into the Elks Rehab Medical Care Center after Dr. Collister's death. The house has since been torn down and Boise City Fire Station No.9 now occupies the original home site. Of the 245 acres that Dr. Collister owned, about 150 acres were donated for a new school site, leaving ample open space for children to play. First opened to students in the fall of 1911, Collister Elementary on Catalpa Drive is currently Boise's smallest elementary school, serving 185 students from the Collister neighborhood. The remaining acreage was subsequently sold to R.H. and Elton Davidson, who subdivided the newly acquired land in 1944, forming the heart of what is now called the Sycamore neighborhood, nestled between Taft and Sycamore streets and Catalpa Drive to the north. The Sycamore neighborhood is unique because of its 101 acres of similarly designed and oriented lots; the acreage was divided into 98 7/8-acre parcels that allowed one horse, one cow and 150 chickens on each, believing that lots could be self-supporting with room for a large garden. To this day, special covenants make it the only neighborhood in Boise that still formally allows agricultural stock on each lot.

Officially existing outside of the Boise city limits until the mid-1970s, the Collister neighborhood was tethered to the bustling city by rail at the dawn of the 20th century. The Boise Interurban Railway Company constructed a main stop and shelter at the intersection with Valley Road and Collister,

wrote historian Arthur Hart in the Jan. 9, 2007 *Idaho Statesman*. Terry's State Street Saloon currently occupies the site of the old Collister Station-Boise Interurban stop. With the completion of the Collister Mercantile Company in 1910 at the same intersection, the Collister area had the begin-



Collister Depot on Valley Road, about 1910. Today the site of the boardwalk depot is occupied by Terry's State Street Saloon.

nings of a small, quiet, agricultural community. Mixed use in nature, the wood-framed building operated as a grocery and general store through the 1940s.

Some historians believe that State Street's width can be attributed to the streetcar. Rather than building new tracks or roads over already-existing rail bed, it was not uncommon for planners and engineers to synergistically incorporate rails alongside or within roads. Now all but a memory, Boise's bustling trolley system has had ripple effects through time. Without the advent of the trolley at the beginning of the 20th century, the Treasure Valley would arguably look much different than it does today. With investments in and along the trolley line, many distinct neighborhoods in the country became notable destinations, including the Natatorium, the city of Caldwell, and Pierce and Curtis parks in Boise. The planners of the new Boise

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Walter Pierce's interurban railroad linked Collister to Caldwell via Middleton.
Pictured: Car No. 99 at the Middleton substation, about 1920.

and Interurban line realized from the beginning that the electric trolley cars could generate extra revenue if they created special destinations for pleasure seekers. School kids on field trips, church groups and families on Sunday outings began riding the cars for picnics, holidays or birthday parties ... or just to see the sights along the way. One could ride the rails from downtown Boise to Collister Station for a mere 5 cents.

Walter E. Pierce, a successful entrepreneur from Kansas, promoted one of the first "destinations" along the trolley line. Being the sole real estate broker in the new North End and Resseguie developments closer to the city, Pierce turned his attention further north along the rail line that he had invested in, which sparked the development of what is now known as Pierce Park. With the new Interurban running down State Street (Valley Road) and throughout the valley, remote land in the country became accessible. In a matter of a few years,

Pierce Park provided a grand recreation spot for the modern electric world when it opened in 1908. A mere three miles from Collister Station, the park featured an electric-lighted entrance archway, picnic areas, a baseball diamond and a dance pavilion, among other things.

But today's Collister is far different than the idyllic community that thrived 100 years ago. Cities are an evolving collection of communities built by people to serve their vision of well-being. Dr. Collister originally envisioned a rural lifestyle near Boise where he could enjoy his orchards and be close to the cultural and economic hub of the valley. The development of the



Real estate tycoon Walter E. Pierce pioneered the Boise-to-Caldwell interurban railroad. In 1908, he opened Pierce Park.

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A neighborhood in renaissance: The 36th Street Garden Center, above, is a recent addition to the commercial life of Collister. In 2008 the City of Boise also opened its first neighborhood branch library in the Collister Shopping Center.

Interurban streetcar line made the area more accessible, prompting the creation of one of the valley's early suburbs. Today we see a similar pattern—people want a bit of country near an urban area. Then as transportation corridors are built to serve these first groups, more people follow, filling the open space that they sought to enjoy. First it was Collister, then Eagle. Now Star and points west are seeing this evolution. Thus, Collister has gone through a decline as people saw the area as neither rural nor suburban nor urban. Some observers say it is a community that has lost its sense of place, lost its sense of identity. Rurally and socially intertwined with the bustling economic centers of downtown, the 'New North End' and the now more tony subdivisions toward Eagle, the Collister neighborhood may be straddling the line between possible blight and continued development.

Threatened by infill, sprawl, crime, noise and suffocating traffic, to name a few, residents, as well as the rest of the city, are taking steps to change the neighborhood for the better. Through a combination of coordinated efforts by its residents and Boise City initiatives, Collister is now an example of a neighborhood in renaissance. Today, the area is seeing revitalization that started with a few committed residents. The Collister Association has developed a neighborhood plan that has become a part of Boise City's Comprehensive Plan. The association has advocated before the Ada County Highway District to improve the major State Street arterial and eventually construct a roundabout at 36th Street. The roundabout will be the final infrastructure improvement in what is becoming a small commercial node that includes the local junior high school and the redevelopment of the old nursery renamed as the 36th Street Garden Center that now includes retail, restaurant and work-live space. As a result, it is projected that over the next 20 years, households in this area could grow by 7 percent and jobs in the area could increase by 25 percent. This urbanization is supported and encouraged by the city through neighborhood grants to improve local infrastructure such as sidewalks and direct investment with the 2008 opening of Boise's first neighborhood library in the refurbished Collister Shopping Center. In the first six months more than 70,000 individual visits were made to the new branch library, and the library loans about 16,000 items every month. The future is bright for the area, with plans to create a high-speed bus rapid transit system on State Street, thus giving residents an alternative to the auto and relieving commuter pressure on the local roads. The construction of a roundabout will increase the pedestrian access between the junior high and nearby businesses and homes. New townhouse developments, new commercial ventures and a renaissance of neighborhood services blend with Collister's unique character, where residential rural lots nestle among new and old subdivisions, where roosters can be heard in the morning and cattle graze on a summer evening.

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William Blackadar will graduate from Boise State in May with a BA in environmental studies. He resides in Salmon, where he guides white-water trips and works on his family's ranch. He may attend law school in the future and will continue running wild rivers throughout the world.