



Idaho State Historical Society

Fast-growing Kuna began as a rail stop on the Union Pacific's Oregon Short Line. Pictured: raising the flag at the tent that held Kuna's first public school, 1909.

Catching up with

KUNA

by Jessica Lane

Kuna was first established in 1882 as little more than a dusty stop on the Oregon Short Line Railroad. Nothing then in the sparse settlement yielded a clue that it would eventually evolve into an agricultural oasis anchored by a city with subdivisions sprawling across what was once southwest Idaho desert. Until the recent housing crash, Kuna was in the throes of a frontier-style land rush. And local leaders are braced for even more growth once the market again turns bullish. But without the railroad's presence at the outset, Kuna may never have gained a foothold in its harsh environment. The settlement began after railroad managers in the East bypassed Boise, thinking its location along the Boise River was impractical for a railroad. Instead, Oregon Short Line workers laid tracks 15 miles to the south and built a small station house at a spot they would name "Kuna," a Native American word supposedly meaning "the end."

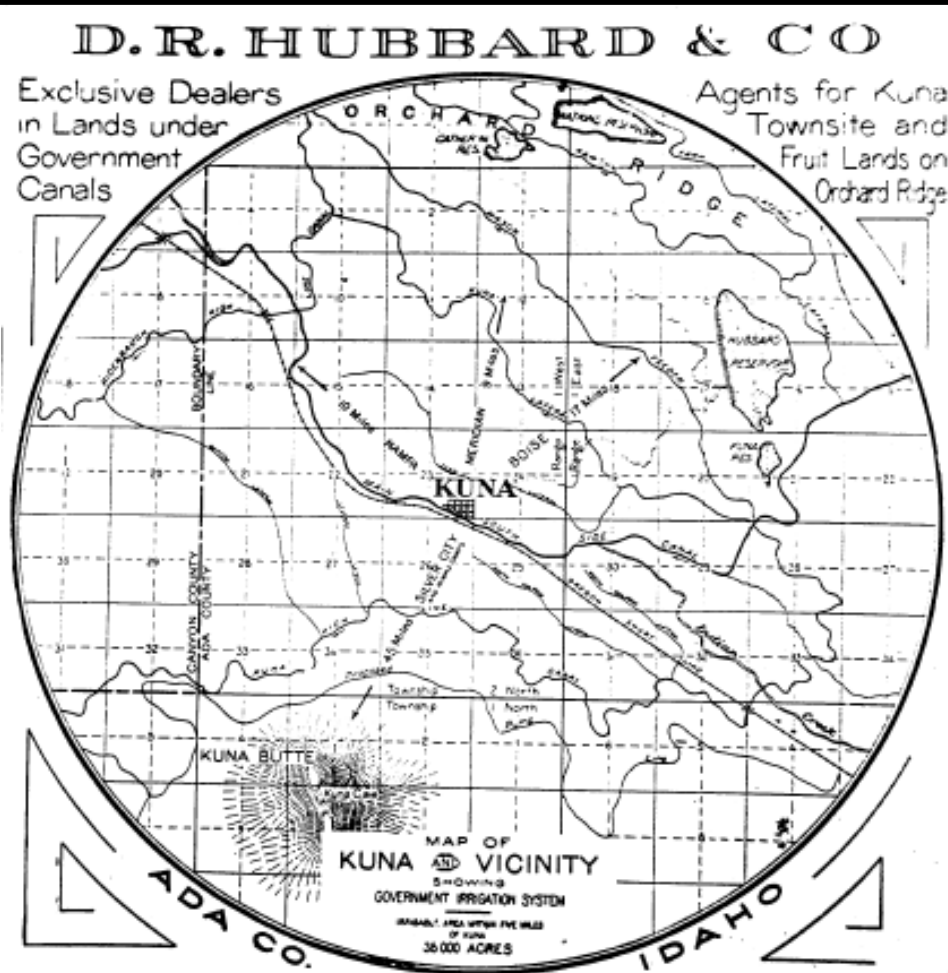
News of the station's location along Indian Creek was ill received by Boise's leaders and citizens, who felt that the stop at least should have been

40 growing closer

called Boise Station, despite its distance from the city. Leaders feared that freight shippers and businessmen in other states wouldn't do business with the city if they didn't know what or where Kuna was. They carried their protest in 1883 to the opinion pages of the local newspaper, *The Idaho Tri-Weekly Statesman*. Led by editor Milton Kelly, the paper published a series of articles in September of 1883 ranting against what he considered the "ugliest, nonsensical name that could be picked out of Indian jargon for a railway station." The bitterness reflected Boise's keen disappointment that the railroad they had longed for was situated 15 miles away and carried a name that did not reflect the importance of their city. The first train reached Kuna Station on September 25, 1883. From there, supplies were transported by wagon to Boise or the mining camps of Idaho City and Silver City. Rail passengers could take a stagecoach to Boise or continue on to Winnemucca, Nevada. The small station served as Boise's main rail connection until the Idaho Central Railroad laid track between Nampa and Boise in 1887. That September, Kuna Station was closed and its brief existence as a railroad town came to an abrupt halt.

The name Kuna stuck, however, and soon came to be a reference for the area surrounding the former station house. Kuna gained a renewed sense of purpose when the F.H. Teed family filed a 200-acre claim for settlement in 1904 and later opened a post office. The Teed homestead was later sold in 1909 by lottery and became the town site for Kuna. Settlers had to travel to the Snake River for their water source, but in 1909 a well was dug after the Bureau of Reclamation provided \$16,000 in bonds to finance the drilling. That same year, builders finished work on Arrowrock Dam and the New York Canal and thousands gathered to watch water flow from the canal to its destination in Lake Lowell near Nampa. Completion of these systems meant an inexpensive and readily available water supply for enterprising settlers. With water flowing, promoters mounted a campaign to attract additional settlers. Midwest businessman D.R. Hubbard issued an open invitation in national newspapers calling for enterprising individuals to "have a part in the building of a city." He advertised that 35,000 irrigable acres within five miles of Kuna were available for settlement, describing the new paradise as a "town site on a beautiful plateau overlooking the canal and depot grounds, with an outlook that charms all who see it" and promising that the development of the town would be an "incredible opportunity."

By 1912, Kuna contained a blacksmith shop and the first homesteaders were clearing the land for homes and businesses. At the time, Kuna was little more than a small agricultural community with a few families making up the general population. In 1916, Lucy Teed, one of homesteader F.H. Teed's



Idaho State Historical Society

Kuna promoter D.R. Hubbard sold farmsteads with water from the New York Canal, 1909.

daughters, wrote about her experiences as a Kuna pioneer. She boasted that by 1916 Kuna had seen great success as an incorporated town with a population of 250, sanded streets, electric lights and power, an accredited school, multiple churches, a bank, newspaper, physician, post office, two general stores, a hotel, a barber and many other amenities—a remarkable



Idaho State Historical Society

Frank Fiss built Kuna's first mercantile store in 1909. City lots sold for \$100.

accomplishment in such a short period of time. In the ensuing years, Kuna slowly built itself into a town almost solely focused on agriculture. Kuna's population remained stable at between 500-600 in the 1950s and '60s. Then it nearly tripled to 1,767 by the end of the 1970s.

The first concerns about Kuna's rapid expansion and sustainability began to surface in the late 1970s as growth was surpassing the city's economic base. The *Valley News* reported that in 1972 the population of Kuna consisted of almost 100 percent "old timers" and farmers, but by 1979 the ratio had changed to 2-1 newcomers. The challenge became how to manage rapid growth while maintaining the small town atmosphere that Kuna residents cherished. Duane Yamamoto, the mayor at that time, declared that "growth is unstoppable," but that the city hoped to preserve its rural atmosphere while coping with issues like inadequate water and sewer systems, additional police protection and expansion of the business district. Kuna's growth stabilized in the 1980s as the town held steady at about 2,000 residents. Then homeowners discovered Kuna. Fueled in part by migration from Ada and Canyon counties, population in the 1990s tripled to more than 6,000 and then more than doubled in the next 10 years to reach 16,100 in 2010. More than 60 percent of Kuna's homes were built between 2000-07.



Library of Congress HABS/HAER

The U.S. Reclamation Service, founded in 1902, remade West Ada County with well-engineered irrigation canals. Pictured: canal building near Kuna, 1907.

The city limits now envelop more than 17 square miles, a jump of 14 square miles over the last six years as the city annexed several new developments. Kuna now reaches the boundaries of Meridian and its subdivisions spread to within four miles of Boise, expansions of territory that have led to jurisdictional disputes with Kuna's neighbors.

With a surge of population coming to southwest Idaho from other states, Steve Hasson, director of Kuna's Planning and Zoning Department, believes many people prefer Kuna because they can build on cheaper land but remain close to amenities in Ada County such as the airport, major industry and Boise State University. Other areas of Ada County have placed limits on where development can still occur. As city planner Troy Behunin explained, "Developers cannot go toward the Foothills and cannot go east or north, so Kuna becomes a logical choice with its affordable land and a city that is welcoming any and all development."

Kuna continues to face the challenges a large populace brings. "As a city begins to grow and develop, so do its needs," said Mayor Scott Dowdy.

44 growing closer



Larry Burke

The Kuna School District has added new schools to accommodate growth. Construction is well underway on the latest, Silver Trail Elementary.

With an increasing population, the demand also rises for infrastructure like water supplies, roads and schools. Kuna is in a constant race to keep up, and the city is responding with a variety of measures designed to enhance services. In 1998, for example, the city spent more than \$2.5 million to expand its water and sewer system. The expansion was intended to handle six years of growth but barely lasted for three. In 2005, Kuna issued a moratorium on building permits because the city had once again run out of space for sewage pumping equipment and local sewer ponds were in violation of county odor requirements. The city recently completed a water and sewer treatment facility that includes 13,000 hookups to accommodate new development. But then growth stopped, and area landowners who formed a local improvement district to build the water system found themselves in a financial bind. Thinking their land would be more valuable with sewer connections, 59 landowners agreed to have their property assessed to pay off a loan to build the new system. When the market disappeared in 2007, they were left with huge assessments but had no way to sell their land to raise



Land for sale is still plentiful in Kuna, and 21st century homesteaders are encouraged to bring their own builders.

the money. Some faced foreclosure. The city agreed to pay a small portion of the loan; meanwhile, some property owners are contesting the assessments and the validity of the local improvement district in court.

Transportation is another concern as increasing numbers of drivers funnel onto area roads each day. Kuna hopes the eventual widening of the

Meridian-Kuna Road and the opening of the new Interstate interchange at Ten Mile will improve traffic flow to and from

Kuna. Collector roads are impacted most by growth, said Ada County Highway District Commissioner John Franden. "Existing roads have carried the growth, but in time we will have to widen them." The highway district has already installed stoplights at several intersections on the Meridian-Kuna Road to regulate the flow of high-speed traffic.

Kuna schools mirror community growth, with enrollment doubling over the past 10 years to the current 5,000 students, according to Jay Hummel, who has been involved with the district for 30 years as a patron, principal and now, superintendent. "When I was hired the board chair asked me, 'Is there any way you could possibly hang on to the great things about the small Kuna we all love while we are growing way too fast?' That is a challenge we all face," said Hummel. District patrons stepped forward to help in 2007 by approving a \$25 million bond to build an alternative high school, classrooms and an auditorium at the high school and a new elementary school, Silver Trail, that will open in 2011. "The new elementary will help us ... we'll be OK for at least five years if the growth rate right now continues," said Hummel, who explained that enrollment growth now is 2-3 percent annually compared to 6-8 percent before the housing market cooled. One of



Larry Burke

After annexing several subdivisions, Kuna, with its familiar water tower, has expanded its city limits from 3 to 17 square miles since 2005.

Hummel's biggest growth-related concern is student safety during the busy morning commute when as many as 2,000 students walk to school. "People leaving for work and kids going to school at the same time is a huge issue for us," he said.

As far as the city is concerned, continued growth is very much welcome. The city and its officials are gearing up to be ready to "rock and roll anywhere in the community," Hasson said. Despite the slow economy, home construction in Kuna continued to surge when most cities experienced a stagnant market. Building permits for single-family homes in 2008 jumped more than 12 percent over the previous year. And fueled in part by the first-time homebuyer credit, the city saw a spike in requests for building permits during three months in 2009. Kuna is eager to spread the word that the city is "business friendly." Fewer rules and regulations is one of the selling points

the city emphasizes. For example, to hasten the construction of a new Walgreens Drug Store, the city quickly approved special-use permits over a three-month time frame. The national chain decided to move its construction schedule up 9 months. The city intends to develop a stronger commercial sector that will enhance local businesses, add local jobs and diversify the local tax base. Kuna supports between 1,000-1,200 jobs. "Currently, Kuna is lacking a strong economic foundation. The city is primarily a bedroom community to Boise. Most Kuna residents commute to other cities for work and return to Kuna to sleep," said Mayor Dowdy. More than 12,000 Kuna residents leave the city for work, with an average commute time of 26 minutes. A vibrant local economy, anchored by more national businesses, will accelerate the transition from commuter to full-fledged community. Commercial and retail operations need "sufficient rooftops" in order to consider building in an area. As Walgreens and a new Les Schwab tire store illustrate, national companies are beginning to eye Kuna because they see a growing population that is in need to services.

Long-term solutions are needed before Kuna outgrows itself any further. The city spent \$250,000 over a three-year period to analyze its water systems and fundamental services, update population projections and present solutions for changing growth patterns. The city issued a new Comprehensive Plan in 2009. More than 300 pages, the plan is an official policy document to guide future development within city limits and the area of impact over the next 20 years. The city will use the document when preparing project plans, reviewing development proposals and adopting land use and transportation ordinances. The city also updated its land use map in 2009 and the new version will serve as a blueprint for future growth. "We had a tremendous turnout for our map overhaul, and are confident that it truly reflects the city's wishes and what is best as a whole," explained planner Behunin.

With Kuna evolving into a more family-oriented community, some have called for more open discourse with the city to ensure that citizens' needs are being met. Concerned residents like former New York businessman John Lamanna are part of grassroots efforts to encourage the community to become involved in the planning the city's future. "Kuna, while growing, can still be seen as somewhat backward and suffers from being surrounded by larger, more established cities," he said. Rather than follow in the footsteps of Meridian or Eagle, Kuna wants to forge its own identity while looking at a long-term vision, said Mayor Dowdy. "Change is coming to the valley whether we like it or not. Embrace it or get sucked into it unprepared. The fact is, the valley is a magnet for growth." Kuna continues to welcome

48 **growing closer**



AshtonChris

In 2008 the city approved a 3,400 acre annexation that increased the size of Kuna by 50 percent. Pictured: vanishing farmland in West Ada County.

growth, but plans to keep its roots in agriculture and preserve open spaces to provide “ventilation” between other cities. However, there is now more of a market for “houses instead of corn” and economics will drive many of the growth decisions.

Kuna’s proximity to two popular tourist attractions could enhance the city’s long-term stability. Kuna is a gateway to the Birds of Prey National Conservation Area and the Western Heritage Historic Byway. The conservation area is home to the largest concentration of nesting raptors in North America. Its rich ecosystem supports 15 different raptor species and a variety of animals. The area also holds significant value from a cultural standpoint. Human presence dates back about 10,000 years. Large boulders washed in

the canyon by the Bonneville Flood feature an array of petroglyphs and numerous archaeological sites are within the conservation area. The historic byway begins in Kuna and continues over 40 miles to Swan Falls Dam, the first hydroelectric project on the Snake River. The route provides access to historic and natural sites such as the Snake River Canyon and some of the best-preserved areas of the Oregon Trail. The continued protection and support of these lands could mean an increase in tourism—and a much-needed boost to Kuna’s economy. Effective management of the open spaces around the city also could lead to a stronger economic base. Kuna’s primary heritage lies in its agricultural roots. The first homesteads were built on farms and more than 100 years of successful agricultural tradition has followed. Beets, grain, wheat, beans, mint and corn are a few of the crops cultivated near Kuna. Proper management and protection of agricultural lands will ensure that prime agrarian and ranching locales remain important to Kuna’s historic function as a city.

The 2009 Comprehensive Plan sheds light on the possibilities that lie in store for the small agricultural community that evolved from a controversial station house. At first glance, Kuna may seem like nothing more than the mirror image of any other mid-sized town in America. However, Kuna is the result of a unique historical background and geographical place. Whether one views Kuna’s growth in a positive light or remains skeptical of “excessive” development, it is clear that the city cannot stand still. Change is very often an uncomfortable and costly process. Can Kuna’s bullish approach to growth be sustained in the face of a recovering economy and increasing competition from other cities? Only time will tell. Regardless, it is important for residents to take an active role to create a community that develops in the ways the citizenry desires and to maintain its small-town ambiance in the face of continued growth. Just as in the homesteading days of D.R. Hubbard, there is an opportunity once again to be a part in the “building of a city” in Kuna.

• • •

Jessica Lane is seeking a BA in history with an emphasis on the American West, with graduation anticipated in Fall 2012. She plans to pursue a master’s degree in public history for a career in historical writing.