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Dentist Harlan P. Ustick platted his streetcar township in 1907. Pictured: the 1908 First Bank of Ustick, a survivor from the trolley era.

Ustick on the brink of

PLACE

by Ted Venegas

The Ustick townsite once had acres of orchards, an effective public transportation system and a largely self-contained community environment. Over time, the automobile replaced the Interurban rail system and suburban development in Boise methodically devoured the orchards that once characterized the area. Consequently, the neighborhood lost the sense of place it once held, and so lost its community and historic identity. Long-time resident Gladys Clymens recalled when Ustick was still considered a place. "Even as a child living in the townsite during the 1940s and 1950s, I thought of Ustick as my home town. It had not yet become a suburb of Boise." Alarmed by the continued erosion of their community and lack of input on development decisions, neighborhood leaders organized into one of Boise's most effective neighborhood associations. They have since made strides in determining their own future and have taken on issues such as infill development, historic preservation and, more recently, the controversial Ustick road-widening project. However, Ustick continues to teeter on the brink of place. Local policy decisions will ultimately determine if this historic

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Boise community will regain its former identity or continue to fall into fragmentation.

Prior to World War II, agricultural communities like Ustick were common across the country. Farmers and ranchers brought produce to these centers to be shipped and sold. Their families attended the churches and schools and shopped at the markets. Beyond this, these townsites served as places where rural people met each other, communed and discussed the issues of the day. In modern urbanist terminology, they existed as “place,” familiar and vibrant to those who lived, worked and socialized within their boundaries. Many of these areas lost their sense of place as transportation and development policies resulted in the conversion of villages into suburban strip malls and parking lots. Where public transportation once centralized communities, automobile-centered planning has fragmented them. In *How Cities Work*, Alex Marshall metaphorically describes this phenomenon in comparing pre-World War II communities to modern ones: “Newer places have no fabric at all. It’s the difference between a well-knit sweater and a pile of yarn.” The old Ustick townsite fits Marshall’s metaphor well. Though it is an older neighborhood, the loss of the Interurban railway, low interest in the area’s history and the lack of growth management turned what was once a well-knit sweater into an indiscernible pile of yarn.

One of the most important threads knitting Ustick together was its Interurban rail system. While apple orchards formed the economic base for the farming communities in the west valley, public and product transportation built the foundation for townsites. The streetcar system spurred development of the areas around Boise and helped make suburban growth popular. By the turn of the century rail had been laid throughout the valley, connecting remote farming communities such as Eagle, Star and Middleton. In 1907, the Boise Valley Railroad Company completed the streetcar lines running west from Boise to Fairview Hill and Ustick. Ustick Road later had rail tracks running along its full length connecting Caldwell to Boise. The Interurban, as the popular rail system came to be known, was completed by 1912 and allowed farmers to ship their produce easily from outlying areas into the commercial hub of Boise. Just as important, it allowed rural residents to commute in an affordable and timely manner, socially and economically connecting these small, remote communities to each other. Early schedules show that a person could hop the trolley in Ustick and be to Boise within 20 minutes. Today’s automobile commuters would be hard pressed to match that time on the congested roadways.

The rail company ownership roster listed some of Boise’s founding families, including Lemp, Ustick, Sonna, Pierce and Noble, who as stakeholders

in the valley had ample incentive to see it prosper. In the long run the enterprise did not prove to be solvent, as expenses were extremely high and profitable years were few and far between. By the 1930s, the automobile had replaced rail as the dominant form of personal transportation, effectively



A Victorian lady advertises cola on Ustick Road. The store opened in 1912.

sounding the death knell for many rail systems throughout the western United States. The Interurban managed to hang on until 1928, when its heyday as an initiator and connector of communities ended.

One of the Interurban's biggest supporters was dentist Harlan P. Ustick. Though he was one of Boise's pioneers and founders, little information on him is available. What does exist ties him to various business ventures in the valley. Dr. Ustick moved from Ohio in 1903 to the agricultural settlement between Boise and Meridian, where he purchased a ranch-style house and ran the third-largest apple orchard in the valley. It was under his influence that the Interurban was routed along Market Street in 1907, later renamed Ustick Road, and along the land that he had newly acquired and

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platted. The initial 110 plots that he purchased came to form the original Ustick townsite. A 1907 *Idaho Statesman* article exclaimed that, "Ustick would soon be a live bustling village ... although little effort has been made to sell the lots, 28 have already been sold." Today there are few remnants of



Cattle guards at a West Boise trolley crossing. Streetcars linked Boise to Ustick in 1907.

the village that bears Dr. Ustick's name. The store, the bank and the school are the only public buildings that have survived time and progress, and each has undergone a number of incarnations over the years. Period residential homes still dot the neighborhood, including Dr. Ustick's original home, but even these are becoming rare as developers scurry to acquire valuable land.

Despite its history and the fact that many pre-World War II residents still call Ustick home, the neighborhood continues to spiral into a blighted state. Residential and commercial development projects not fitting with the existing form have altered the character of Ustick so much that its historic identity is hardly recognizable. During the 1990s a number of concerned Ustick residents banded together in an effort to promote a historic district designation for the old townsite, hoping to preserve what little remained. The movement for this type of designation among Ustick residents intensified and blossomed, especially as development and infill projects loomed over their neighborhoods.

As part of the West Valley Neighborhood Association, the community came together to put a voice to Ustick's legacy and future. The city of Boise was receptive to the idea of historic districts to combat the rapid growth and urban sprawl that were consuming farmland and open space at an alarming rate. With as much, if not more, history than other historic districts, Ustick residents were confident that they had something significant to offer. Tricia Canaday, the Boise historic preservation planner at the time, commented that with historic district status Ustick residents would "gain the reassurance that their historic fabric will be maintained and preserved." This became increasingly important to Ustick residents who had witnessed a pattern of strip malls, big box stores and cookie-cutter houses becoming more prominent throughout the region. The neighborhood had begun to understand that in order to restore and preserve place, while staving off undesired development, they would need to organize and put together a vision.

In anticipation of historic district designation, community leaders and activists in 1997 collaborated to form a united vision for the area and pressed the city for action. Ultimately they looked to Hyde Park and Harrison Boulevard in Boise's North End as examples of what they would like to see for Ustick. Hyde Park, once a neighborhood commercial center, had become a destination point for visitors who enjoyed the history, architecture and quaintness of the area. But consensus among residents and the city deteriorated into philosophical and economic disagreements. The concept of historic preservation collided with Idaho's deeply-rooted tradition of property rights. Idaho is a state built on the western tradition of individual and property rights, and more often than not this mentality encourages policy that trumps the common good. Though most Idahoans might agree on the importance of historical heritage and preservation, they likely would not agree that this should interfere with the rights of people to do as they wish with their property. With these obstacles to overcome, the vision for a historic district in the

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old Ustick townsite dissolved as quickly as it had evolved, and the area's identity continued to teeter on the brink of extinction.

Though the opportunity for a historic district appeared lost, the hope for a rebirth of the Ustick townsite still lingered in the minds of many neighborhood residents. Some community leaders looked for ideas that might settle the central differences that continued to divide the neighborhood. By the late 1990s, concepts such as Smart Growth and New Urbanism became common vernacular in planning and urban studies circles. These ideas stressed a return to an era when architecture resonated with a sense of place, communities were pedestrian-friendly, and public transit was both accessible and affordable. Their philosophies were the antithesis to the sprawling suburbs that sucked life out of the towns and cities and made humanity more dependent on the introverted and soulless automobile.

In *Suburban Nation* Andres Duany states that Americans have been "building a national landscape that is largely devoid of places worth caring about." Our American heritage has embedded us with the idea that it is our God-given right to have our plot of land, tall fences and complete privacy from the outside world. Unfortunately, this has alienated us from the community, and indeed Americans are in the process of desensitizing themselves to the need for community. Reversing this negative trend has become the goal of planners, architects and environmentalists, as well as that segment of the public concerned with problems associated with rampant, unregulated development.

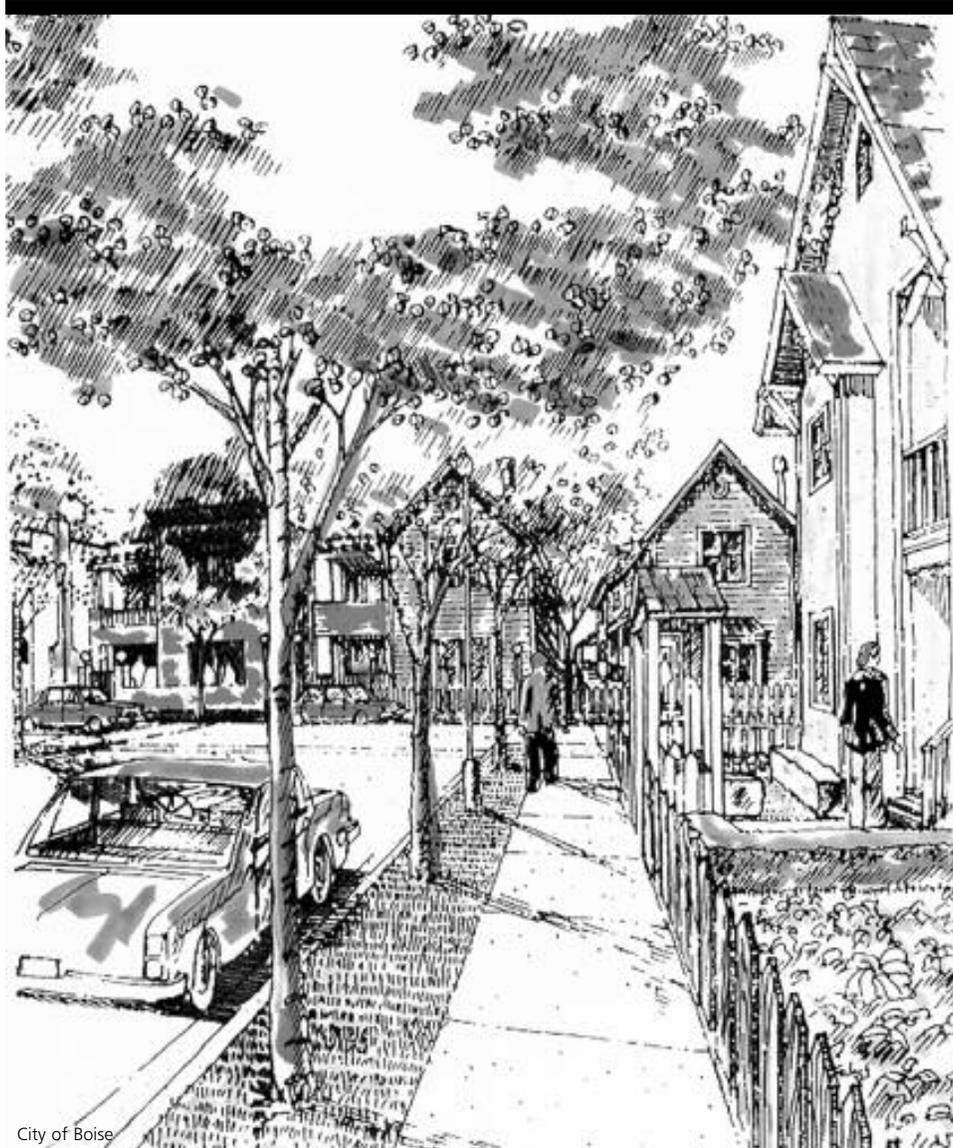
In the spirit of this New Urbanism ideal, a team of students and researchers from the University of Idaho's Urban Research and Design Center (IURDC) in Boise approached the West Valley Neighborhood Association (WVNA). The design team was initially presented with a number of local neighborhoods to choose from, including historic areas of Vista, Pierce Park and Ustick. They chose the Ustick townsite neighborhood because it presented an opportunity to work with an area that had a history of community as well as an organized and motivated neighborhood association. The team proceeded with a grant from the Treasure Valley Futures Project, a non-profit organization that studies the links between transportation and land use. The WVNA was specifically interested in this project because it provided an opportunity to reinvent the neighborhood without the challenges associated with a historic district. The IURDC plan emphasized the importance of designing around the historic identity of the old Ustick townsite, keeping in mind both the integrity of the older structures and the traditional agricultural identity.

In 1999, just months after the IURDC project was completed, the neighborhood association solicited the Boise State University Department of Public Policy and Administration to conduct a neighborhood survey, the results of which contributed to the final draft of the neighborhood plan. The goal of the survey was to get an idea of how the Ustick residents viewed their neighborhood and what kind of future development patterns they would like to see. Results indicated that the neighborhood's vision conformed to each of the models created by the IURDC design team: citizens valued a pedestrian-friendly community, an environment conducive to human interaction and a neighborhood atmosphere that acknowledged its historic identity. Clearly, the residents desired a neighborhood model that resembled, or at least paid tribute to, the way Ustick was before the Interurban gave way to the automobile and the farms to urban sprawl. They also wanted a traditional marketplace that recreated the social and communal impressions that the Ustick village once had. The overriding theme was the townsites' yearning for place in its most genuine context of familiarity and community.

The final version of the neighborhood plan, completed in 2001, focused on five central components: land use, community design, transportation, parks, recreation and cultural resources, and economic development. Each component encouraged neighborhood interaction, which is critical in reclaiming place and identity in the community. Progress on the five planning components has been slow, however. A grant for funds to write a preservation ordinance that would give residents some control over future development was not approved. The Ustick neighborhood plan was adopted by the City of Boise, which made it a part of the city's comprehensive plan. But until language from the plan is implemented as ordinances or codes, Ustick will continue as it has, with few safeguards placed on the history and integrity of the area.

One of the most pressing issues in Ustick revolves around transportation corridors and their future expansion. In 2006, a plan by the Ada County Highway District (ACHD) to widen Ustick Road to five lanes was met with local criticism and led to a jurisdictional dispute, with the ACHD claiming control over city roads and the City of Boise claiming control over land use issues, including the protection of neighborhood integrity. After a long debate and an eventual lawsuit, the ACHD won in court and Ustick was widened to five lanes, without the neighborhood's suggestions for separated sidewalks and landscaped medians to promote pedestrian activity and calm traffic flows. Though the old townsites neighborhood was not immediately impacted by the project, neighbors have been told that future widening will

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City of Boise

Boise's 1997 master plan proposed walkable streets, corner stores and bus stops for Ustick from Mitchell Street to Maple Grove.

eventually extend into their area. This spurred them to take a proactive approach, and to gain better leverage they are working with other neighborhood associations along Ustick. Resigned to the idea that widening will occur, the WVNA provided a proposal of its own to ACHD for any projects impacting the old townsite. The plan includes the classic boulevard-style expansion with landscaped medians and turn lanes, detached sidewalks, bike lanes and large-growth trees framing each side of the road.

Most Boiseans, unaware of the rich history of the Ustick townsite, tend to have little concern for its future. Development decisions that threaten the neighborhood's integrity might go uncontested or even meet with approval from outsiders who only want their morning commute to go more smoothly. One way to combat this mentality is through historic and cultural education. Neighborhood leaders would like to see some sort of historic recognition for the area in the form of a centennial celebration or historic entry signs. But a lack of funding has resulted in the status quo. Decision makers must understand their roles in determining how our communities will evolve. When we allow markets to dictate growth with little or ineffective regulation, the result is disconnected communities and inefficient transportation systems. We also tend to lose pieces of our past because in the commercial world, history is not seen as economically valuable. It is past time for local governments to come up with a creative solution that reevaluates the paradigm of land-use and infrastructure planning. A more holistic approach that takes into account social concerns as well as the environment and property rights is the only way to a sustainable future.

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