**Story of Historic Independence***

Overview

The people and events which have shaped the history of Independence weave a colorful story and reflect, at the local level, historic themes of national and regional significance. Many factors have come together to give the community its own unique character, however, two major themes run continually through the fabric of the city's history. These are transportation, the movement of people and goods, and the environment: rich soil, mild climate, and gentle topography. These two factors had a significant influence on settlement and subsequent development patterns.

Frontier Period: 1846-1861

Prior to 1841, the only known people in Polk County, besides Native Americans, were transient traders and explorers. There is no evidence of any sustained trading or exploratory activity in the Independence area.

During these years, hundreds of people undertook the grueling journey across the Oregon Trail – lured to the Willamette Valley by reports of its fertile soils and mild climate. Prior to 1850, settlers could claim only squatters rights, but passage of the Donation Land Act in that same year entitled a man to 320 acres of free land, 640 acres if he were married. The law thus encouraged both settlement and marriage and legitimized the claims of earlier settlers.

The first man to take advantage of this law in the area which would become Independence was Elvin A. Thorp. Thorp had been a member of the first group of wagon trains to arrive in the area. The party was made up of several families from Council Bluffs, Iowa, led by Elvin's father, John. They left Missouri in May 1844 following the Platte River to Fort Laramie and continuing on the Oregon Trail to The Dalles (DAR 1927:39). At this point, they loaded onto boats which took them around the "Cascades". They arrived in the Independence area in June 1845.

That same month, Thorp staked a claim just north of Ash Creek and in the southeast corner of the claim platted a small town site. Today this area is referred to as either "Old Town" or "Thorp's Town" of Independence. It was bordered on the south by Ash Creek and to the east by a steep escarpment which was also the boundary of C.P. Cook's Land Claim. In order for his town to have river access, Thorp received an easement from Cook to extend the streets across his property and down to the river. This was vital to the community's welfare, for until the coming of the railroads, the river was the major form of transportation.

Mrs. Thomas Burbank, wife of an early pioneer who settled several miles southwest of the town site, is credited with suggesting the name of the Missouri town of Independence for

*Excerpts from the City of Independence Historic Resource Inventory 1984-85

the new settlement. Not only was it the starting point for many emigrants who came across the Oregon Trail, but also one source reports it as Thorp's hometown. Thorp consented to the name of the condition that the Burbanks move to the new town and build a store – some reports indicate a residence –on two lots he would give to them (Hubbard n.d., n.p.). Both Thorp and later, Henry Hill, who platted the "New Town" of Independence, encouraged settlement in this way.

The new town grew slowly during the first several years. The earliest know structure was a log house built by Thorp near the intersection of Grand and Marsh Streets (Newton 1971: 4). This type of structure was commonly built during the early settlement period. Timber was readily available and it provided a quick construction method.

By 1847, finished lumber was available from Silverton sawmill to residents of the town who were willing to haul it 30 miles. Two such individuals were Thomas Burbank and J.E. Davidson, who are believed to have built the first store in Independence – the exact location is unknown – with milled lumber from Silverton (Hubbard n.d., n.p.). Another early building, constructed c. 1846, was Bill Tetherow's saloon. Sid Newton, a local historian, believes it was located at the intersection of Log Cabin and Boat Landing Streets. It was also reportedly used as the first church and schoolhouse (Newton 1971:4).

In the years between 1846 and 1861, two events occurred which would have a significant impact on the town's development. The first was the discovery of gold in California in 1848. Due to its relative proximity to California, the Pacific Northwest became the natural supplier of goods to the hoards of people who descended on the mines. The Willamette Valley supplied an abundance of flour, lumber, wool and fruit. The small town site of Independence, advantageously located on the river, became the major shipping point for produce from the surrounding area. Many farmers used rafts to get their products to the docks in Independence, floating the Luckiamute and Willamette Rivers to transfer to waiting steamboats.

Although many residents left for the gold fields, many stayed behind to profit from the increased demand for goods. The town grew rapidly in the decade that followed: Israel Hedges opened a blacksmith shop; Robert and Luther Ground's livery stable was established; a brick kiln and yard was built on the site which would become the Valley and Siletz depot; and a small sawmill was constructed at the intersection of Water and Grand Streets ("The Westside" 1890). Warehouses and boat docks were built along the river at the foot of Boat Landing Street expending south to Ash Creek and commercial buildings went up along Grand Street (Pomeroy, n.d.:2).

During the 1850's, numerous institutions were established: a circulating library was organized and a one-room log cabin became the town's first schoolhouse. In 1852, a Post Office was established in the general store. The proprietor, Leonard Williams, was the

first postmaster (McArthur 1982:385). Mail was carried, for a number of years, by the steamboat "Canemah", built and operated by Absolom F. Hedges with service from Oregon City to Eugene and points in between. Ferry service across the Willamette River was also initiated during this period.

Growth continued at a steady pace until 1861. In December of that year, a combination of heavy rain, warm temperatures, and melting snow led to a devastating flood. The entire commercial core was swept away as well as docks and warehouses along the river. In the years that followed, the town would rebuild itself, but in new directions.

There are no inventoried properties dating to this early period of settlement. The lack of above-ground evidence is due to the approximately 700 residents and in 1890 there were approximately 1,000 residents (Business Directories 1880:269, 1890:267). With increasing numbers of people came an increased need for information and news. In 1876, the town's first newspaper, "The Weekly Telegram", was established. It was followed by the "Riverside" in 1879, which was superseded by the "Westside" in 1883.

In 1885, an innovative ferry system across the Willamette was instituted. It was to draw considerable attention to the town and be copied throughout the world; the ferry was held in position by a cable set at the top of two 100-foot poles, 966 feet, seven inches apart. The ferry operated well into the 20th century (Pomeroy n.d.:2).

The coming of the railroad significantly changed life for people throughout the West. It allowed for the exchange of people, products and ideas at a faster rate than ever before. In Independence, the first train came down the tracks in December 1886, seven years after the City Council passed an ordinance to give Oregon-Western Railroad Company right-of-way down the middle of 2nd Street. Soon there was daily passenger and freight service to Portland and points south. Many small stations along the line developed into towns, and many towns that were not on the line began stage service to meet the trains. From Independence, there were soon regular stages to Dallas, Salem, and even to Arlie and Kings Valley. Prior to the construction of the Independence-Monmouth Railroad in 1890, there was also a regular stage to Monmouth.

The Independence-Monmouth Railroad was one of the shortest independent lines in the world. The two and one-half mile run made one stop at the small community of Talmadge, midway between the two cities. The line was supported by the racetrack there, which was well-known throughout the west and attracted some of the "finest horseflesh in the country" (Pomeroy n.d.:3). On race days, the engine was busy all day hauling spectators who had come on excursions from Corvallis and as far away as Portland.

Many of the institutions, attitudes and amenities which mark the town's character to the present were created during this period: a mayor-council form of government was

established; electricity and telephone lines were installed; two banks were established; water works completed; fire department organized; and most of the major commercial buildings standing today as well as numerous residential structures were constructed during this time.

The majority of early residences are primarily "vernacular" in concept. They are typically one and one-half to two stories, gable-roofed, either L- or T-shaped, with wide shiplap siding. Several are known to be of box construction, and square nails are found on many.

Another residential style dating from this period is the Rural Gothic Revival. Two excellent examples are the Dr. John E. Davidson House at 887 Monmouth Street, c. 1878, and another residence also owned by Davidson, 487 3rd Street, c. 1875 (later moved to 242 D Street). This style is typified by an L- or T-shape plan, vertically scaled fenestration – frequently Gothic-arched, steeply pitched gable roof, and vertical massing. (The house at 242 D Street is particularly noteworthy for the extreme pitch of its roof, giving it the name "Split a Raindrop" House.) Porches were usually located at gable ends or where the L or T came together.

Beginning in the 1880's, railroad transportation began to make available standard building materials including mass-produced decorative elements. Mail-order houses and pattern books also became readily accessible, resulting in increased standardization of styles and more elaborate detailing.

Styles common to this period which reflect the improved transportation system are the Queen Anne, Eastlake and Stick styles. Generally, these were a somewhat smaller scale and less ornate version of the style found in larger urban areas. A good example of this is 40 S. 4th Street. Basically "vernacular" in form and mass, this small residence has Queen Anne style decorative elements such as flash glass, brackets, turned posts and balusters, and bay windows.

The development of the commercial core area followed the same pattern as most Willamette Valley towns. The earliest buildings were generally small wooden structures, one to two stories, with gabled roof, sometimes with false front and prominent cornice. Often a wooden porch, canvas awnings and/or plank sidewalk extended across the front, providing protection from the elements. Early photographs indicate Main Street was at one time densely packed with structures of this type (OHS Photograph Collection) from B Street south to Monmouth. None of these remain, however, primarily due to economic growth and fire.

Many of the major commercial buildings existing today were constructed in the 1880's and 1890's. They consist primarily of unreinforced masonry buildings. The brick for several of these came from a local brickyard owned by J. R. Cooper ("The Westside", 1895). With the exception of four examples described below, decorative detail was often limited to the cornices and fenestration. The Cooper Block (206 S. Main), built in 1895, is an excellent example of a Queen Anne commercial corner building, combining many elements of the style, including an octagonal tower, fanciful round-arched windows, and projecting roofed bays.

The commercial area also has three good examples of the Italianate style: Sterling Savings Bank (302 S. Main); the old Sloper's Hall (268 S. Main); and the old Fraternal Hall (184/194 S. Main). Characteristic elements include: vertically-scaled massing; frequently asymmetrical shape (sometimes with tower as in the Sterling Savings Bank building); tall windows, often round or segmental arched; and prominent bracketed cornices.

<u>Early Modern Period: 1900-1930</u>

The early modern period from 1900 to the 1903's brought significant advances in city development, although the population remained relatively stable. The early years of the century saw a leap in population from approximately 1,200 in 1902 to 1,800 in 1905 (Business Directories, 1902, 1905). It remained at the 1905 level, with minor fluctuations, until 1931 when the Great Depression drove many residents away in search of jobs.

A new development in the field of agriculture during the late 19th century was to have quite an impact on the character of the city. In the rich alluvial soil which bordered the river and its tributaries, the seeds of an important new industry were sown which would give Independence the distinction of being the "Hop Capitol of the World": between 1900 and 1940, the growing, cultivating and harvesting of hops was the town's largest industry and greatly enriched the city's coffers (funds).

Each year, beginning in July, thousands of pickers descended on the city, coming by boat, wagon and train for the hops harvest. They bedded down in tents in the hop yards, slept on straw, and cooked on sheet iron camp stoves. Each September, the town celebrated with a "Hop Festival". At the height of the hop era, in the 1920's and 1930's, there were

close to 4,600 acres in the surrounding area planted to hops. One yard was located on the site of the present Riverview Park: the large natural amphitheater was at that time called the "Hop Bowl" (Craven interview 1985). Hop prices tumbled in the 1940's due to competition from foreign markets and new production methods for beer. By 1950 there was virtually nothing left for the once thriving industry. Many of the existing buildings constructed during this period are testimony to the prosperity of the time.

Rapid advances in technology also contributed to the changing character of the city. Until the coming of the automobile, railroads and prior that river traffic, provided the primary means of transportation. With the increased popularity of the automobile, however, and the resulting "Good Roads Movement", paved streets began to appear throughout town (six streets, including Main Street, were paved in 1912) and to extend far beyond the city limits. A major casualty of this development was the Independence-Monmouth Railroad, which was discontinued in 1917. Construction of Highway 51 greatly stimulated the development of auto-oriented commercial strips, unrelated to the older commercial core of the city. Today this strip is the focus of commercial activity in the city and reflects the powerful influence of the automobile on the environment.

Another development during this period was construction of the Valley and Siletz Railroad. In August 1910, a forest fire burned a large area where the town of Valsetz is located today. In order to salvage the burned timber, the Cobbs and Mitchell Lumber Company constructed the Valley and Siletz line. Operation began in 1918, at one time carrying passengers as well as freight – primarily timber and hops. Today the line is owned and operated by Willamette Valley Railroad. The depot was located on Monmouth Street and is no longer standing.

Both the older residential areas and the historic commercial core of Independence are composed primarily of late 19$^{th}$ century buildings intermixed with structures built during the first three decades of the 20$^{th}$ century. A wide variety of stylistic types are represented in the Early Modern period, from a continuation of the romantic Victorian building tradition to a return to classicism as illustrated by the old Public Library (1929). The emergence of the ubiquitous Bungalow style also took place during this time.

The Bungalow style was popularized throughout the nation by trade magazines, especially "The Craftsman", published by Gustav Stickley from 1901 to 1916 (Clark 1984:145). Stickley, influenced by the English Arts and Crafts movement, advocated fine craftsmanship, structural honesty, and the use of natural materials. The Bungalow ethic also promoted clean living and good health. Many companies offered pre-cut houses which could be delivered by rail and constructed on arrival. Many variations of the style were built in Independence, ranging from the gaping grin of the Cockle House (814 S. Main Street) to the modest proportions and detailing of the Craven House (32 S. Third Street).

Of particular note is the prominent Eldridge Residence (675 Monmouth Street). Constructed in 1914 for K.C. Eldridge, owner of the Independence Creamery, this residence and its setting form a harmonious whole, consistent with Craftsman principles. Characteristic elements of the style are seen in the low-pitched roof with wide overhanging eaves, exposed rafters and decorative brackets.

The Vernacular style also continued to be built well into the 20th century. There are 14 examples in the Historic District which date from this period.

Another residential style built in the early years of the 20th century is the American Basic (also known as American Foursquare, Classic Box, and Transitional Box). These are large rectangular, two-storied, hip-roofed porches, generally with horizontal siding – either shiplap or bevel – with porches extending across the front of the lower story. The Stryker House (684 Fifth Street) is an example of this type.

A variety of revival styles were also built during this time. Of particular note is the Cooper-Walker House (224 Third Street). This large Colonial Revival style house was built in 1909 for J.S. Cooper, a prominent businessman.

The American Renaissance style is represented in the Independence Elementary School. Built in 1925, this handsome structure is an important focal point for the surrounding residential neighborhood and serves as an excellent nucleus for the Historic District.

The City of Independence is notable for the design, scale and architectural uniformity of its commercial core as well as residential neighborhoods. Although many structures have been altered over the years, most have retained a sufficient amount of physical integrity to contribute to the overall charm and sense of place within specific areas of the City.