

Community Development: 1912 – 1945 in Phoenix By Sarah Schenck

Community Building & Civic Life

Influential organizations such as business clubs were the core of community development in the early 1900s. Groups like Rotary Club (1914) and Kiwanis Club (1917) functioned for social, ameliorative, and civic purposes. Businessmen and professionals in particular were attracted to these organizations to exert their power over urban affairs (VanderMeer, 2010). The Phoenix Women's Club operated towards the goal of cultivating a more cultured and moral society through their municipal housekeeping activities. They focused on creating schools and a public library, as well lobbying for city beautification projects. They extended their activism beyond closing saloons and ending prostitution to pushing for a juvenile court and a probation system, as well as for prison reform (VanderMeer, 2010).

The Built Environment

A glimpse at the built environment of Phoenix in the early 20th century provides insight into the community development that occurred as the city transformed from a town to a city. On February 14, 1912, the day Arizona joined the union, the people of Phoenix and those from all over the state gathered in crowds along Washington Street to celebrate. Two main lines of electric street cars running along Third and 10th streets overflowed with passengers, bringing in residents from Kenilworth and Orangewood, the growing subdivisions beyond downtown's borders that spanned from Seventh Street to Seventh Avenue and north from the railroad tracks to Van Buren Street. At the time, nineteen blocks of Downtown were paved, mostly along Washington Street and Central Avenue. By 1930 this expanded to 77 paved streets. Thousands

joined together at the five story concrete Hotel Adams the night Arizona became a state to celebrate and dance the hotel's new balcony, rebuilt after a fire that burned ornate, formerly wooden building in 1910. Many Downtown Phoenix hotels offered sleeping porches that provided relief from the heat night in the summer months.

As people flowed towards center of town they undoubtedly passed irrigation ditches that ran along many of the streets, balancing along wooden planks that allowed passage. These were stemming from features of Arizona's canal system.



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Community Assets

Community assets were essential to the development of Phoenix as a city. The arts in Downtown were an important form of financial capital that fueled the development of institutions intended to foster practices and values that would make Phoenix a more cultured and modern city in order to promote tourism and viability. This is evident with the creation of the Shriener Auditorium, Heard Museum and the Orpheum Theatre in the 1920s. As a direct result of New Deal construction programs after the Depression, North High School, Phoenix Junior College, and Arizona State Teachers College were built, furthering education and increasing social capital. A representation of the booming retail economy forming in Phoenix was the concentration of department stores including “Kress’s, J.C. Penney, Newberry’s, Korrick’s, Goldwater’s, Switzer’s, the Boston Store, Montgomery Ward, and Sears that all resided within a four-block area” (Davies, 2009).



The outdoor environment also served as a notable asset to community bonding and the development of popular culture. Phoenix's ideal climate brought people together for outdoor concerts, dances, and movies in Encanto Park and Riverside Park. “Irrigation ditches were key to Phoenix's growth, as were the canals to which they were connected. They carried water essential to the area's farms and ranches, as agriculture drove the area's economy. The canals served a dual purpose in summers when residents struggled with the heat. Families would join each other along the banks, particularly where shade trees

had been planted years earlier” (Craven, 2012). An even more popular location for community gathering was the tree-lined lake of Phoenix Park which especially drew in tram riders at 16th Street and Washington.

On a governmental scale, political capital improved city services in 1924 with the emergence of a civil service system. Not long after, the year 1930 brought Phoenix's first zoning ordinance, and consequently development along major streets. The aviation industry in Phoenix proved to be a major economic asset to the city as well, first with the growth of Sky Harbor Airport in 1937, and then during WWII as army air bases popped up in the West Valley and in Mesa.

Community Challenges

The major challenges of the Phoenix community in the early 20th century were issues occurring in the nation at large. Racial segregation was one of them, demonstrated by the separation of African American school children in 1909, and eventually the construction of George Washington Carver School in 1926. This clearly was a dividing factor for the community at large that deterred the otherwise progressive nature of Phoenix such as seen with women gaining the right to vote in 1914. Furthermore, in 1934 “the 'business of sin' was alive, as brothels proliferated along Jefferson, Madison and Jackson streets between Central Avenue and Fourth Street” (Davies). Although Phoenix did not suffer from the Great Depression as severely as many older American cities did, it brought a small share of economic community challenges. Within Phoenix, “six banks and two building and loan associations failed, shops closed, and construction halted” (Davies).

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