

Greater Boise

written by Doug Copsey
photographed by Bill Grange

“**T**here are very few communities in the country that can boast the number of wonderful parks we have up and down the river,” says Jim Hall, Director of Boise City Parks & Recreation. “When you start at one end and go all the way through, there are more than a dozen river parcels that add up to hundreds of acres.”

At one time this incredible resource was little more than a dumping ground. Old refrigerators and car bodies lined its banks, along with all manner of debris. Then in 1964 a consultant hired by the city to write a comprehensive plan suggested acquiring land along the river to create a continuous “green belt” of land running through the entire community. That suggestion sparked a grass-roots effort to clean up the river. By 1967 Arlo Nelson had produced the Boise River Comprehensive Greenbelt Plan & Design, and three small parcels of land had been donated to the city to launch the project.

Parks have always been a key element of this ambitious plan, and the city continued to develop them as opportunity and money allowed. The first was Julia Davis, followed—as the companion piece to this article describes—by two more anchor parks in the downtown area. They too were named after prominent women in the community, a romantic tradition that has seen a resurgence in recent years.

The first instance was Bernardine Quinn Riverside Park, on the north side of the river near Pleasanton Avenue. The land was donated to the city in 1997 by Bernardine’s husband Maurice Harold Quinn, founder of the Quinn Robbins Construction Company. A 22-acre pond features a fishing dock, with plans in the works for more docks and beach areas for canoeing and kayaking. The rest of this former gravel operation site has been restored to natural open space, and provides another stepping stone for the greenbelt bike path along the river.



Immediately downriver, work is underway on the Esther Simplot Park. The city already owned 39 acres, and a million dollar donation from J.R. and Esther Simplot in 2003 enabled it to buy the remaining 16.5-acre piece that completed the parcel.

“It’s going to be mostly a swimming hole park,” says Wendy Larimore, development coordinator for the project. “There are already two ponds on the site, and we’re planning to connect one of them to the Bernardine Quinn pond with a flat water channel so kids and families can tube up and down between them.”

That will keep tubers off the main river channel, where a whitewater park is also under construction for kayakers. The city will provide access and run that operation along with the park itself. In addition, a new footbridge is scheduled to cross the river this summer, connecting the park with the greenbelt on the Garden City side near 36th Street.

The completion upriver of the East ParkCenter bridge in the fall of 2009 gave a green light to the newest project in what the city calls its “Ribbon of Jewels,” Marianne Williams Park.

“This will be more of a natural park,” explains development director Kelly Burrows, “a kind of combination of Kathryn Albertson and Ann Morrison parks.”



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The 70-acre parcel, donated in 2005 by Marianne's husband Larry Williams, will feature a pair of ponds amidst landscaped green space and paved pathways at its east end, and a large natural wetland area that can be accessed along the Dallas Harris Nature Path. With the exception of the greenbelt bike path, the whole park is designed for pedestrians only. Bicycles, skateboards and roller blades will be forbidden, allowing visitors to take advantage of the natural amenities.

The greenbelt bike path will then be rerouted from Warm Springs Avenue down under the Park Center Bridge to run along the river through the west end of the park, opening up an area that the public has never before had access to.

"Every time I go in there I see deer, herons, and bald eagles in the winter," Burrows says. "People will be able to fish the river along there, and we're trying to get water rights to the two ponds so we can stock them and they'll be fishable as well."

Rough grading was done throughout last winter and will be completed this spring, along with wetland mitigation, so that irrigation systems can be installed and planting begun this summer.

"One of the most exciting things about this project," says Burrows, "is that we're reestablishing the flood plain so that it works properly through this part of the river. In a lot of places from Barber Pool on down, the banks have become eroded and bare. Restoration and new vegetation will make for a gradual cutback and benefit all those homes on the south side of the river that often get wet when the river gets above 7,500 cubic feet per second."

What began as a greenbelt bike path along the river nearly 50 years ago has now become a system of parks and trails that not only follow the Boise River, but branch out from it like roots from a tree, touching many lives along the way. In a subsequent installment of this series, we'll examine how this unique system is being managed and developed by an historic coalition of cities and civic organizations. Don't miss it! **B**