

## The Art Deco Pools of Boise

By Brandi Burns

May 17, 2011

Before 1945, Boise was still a small western town, its boundaries not yet encompassing the Bench or stretching farther west than 28<sup>th</sup> Street. The City boundaries had not encroached into the foothills, or reached the Penitentiary to the east. This changed during the post-WWII years when Boise abandoned its charter and started to annex the surrounding developed areas in the county. The story of the construction of the pools at South Junior High and Lowell Elementary are a part of this larger story of growth in Boise. In this essay, a history of the schools will be explored and how they fit into the development of Boise's history, and then the history of the pools will be examined in context of the growth of Boise.

Lowell Elementary opened in 1913 as a two-story school, and through subsequent years was added to for an increasing student population. Additions occurred in 1926, and again in 1947. The 1947 addition included a new gymnasium, a library, and eight classrooms.<sup>1</sup> According to the 1949 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, the addition was constructed with reinforced concrete walls that were brick faced, and the corridors were concrete floors. The 1916 addition, which is on the north side of the building, matches closely with the original 1913 construction. The south side of the building is the 1947 construction and is sufficiently different from the 1913 portion that onlookers would not confuse it with the original building. However, the 1947 construction is over 50 years old and can be considered historic in its own right. According to the Boise School District, Lowell's enrollment increased during the 1940s, and had class sizes averaging at 47. This growth would have been consistent with the increase in population

*Lowell Elementary*



---

<sup>1</sup> Boise Architecture Project, "Lowell Elementary," *The Boise Architecture Project*, <http://boisearchitectureproject.org> (accessed May 10, 2011).

in the county’s suburbs that were close to Lowell Elementary and along State Street. Despite the additions, continued suburban growth led to overcrowding at Lowell, according to a 1951 article in the *Idaho Daily Statesman*.<sup>2</sup>

Before and after World War II, the Bench grew dramatically. This caused some concern to the City of Boise because of the Bench’s potential to incorporate as its own city. This fear existed because the only route from downtown Boise to the Bench was through Capitol Boulevard. J.M. Neil describes the situation in his manuscript, “City Limits: The Emergence of Metropolitan Boise, 1945-2001,” as a “perilously slow” process with the goal to create a connection from downtown Boise to the Bench through 16<sup>th</sup> Street.<sup>3</sup> In confirmation of the fear, by November 1947 the Boise Bench Planning Board had formed and started to actively speak against annexation, saying that it “would restrict much of the freedom and independence we now enjoy.”<sup>4</sup> To prevent incorporation of the Bench, Mayor Howard promised in 1948 that the city was working on a second crossing of the Boise River.

Coinciding with this suburban unrest, a new school to serve the needs of the growing Bench had been in the works from about 1941.<sup>5</sup> South Junior High was built in 1947-1948, and in 1949 an addition was built.<sup>6</sup> The *Idaho Daily Statesman* reveals that a third addition was possibly added in 1951. The article details a dedication of the

*South Junior High*



<sup>2</sup> “Junior Highs’ Overcrowding Receives Study,” *Idaho Daily Statesman*, October 2, 1951.

<sup>3</sup> J.M. Neil, “City Limits: The Emergence of Metropolitan Boise, 1945-2001,” unpublished manuscript, 22.

<sup>4</sup> J.M. Neil, “City Limits: The Emergence of Metropolitan Boise, 1945-2001,” unpublished manuscript, 23.

<sup>5</sup> “South Junior High School Ceremony Held,” *Idaho Daily Statesman*, February 10, 1951.

<sup>6</sup> “History of the Boise School District,” *Independent School District of Boise City*, [http://www.boiseschools.org/district\\_info/history.html](http://www.boiseschools.org/district_info/history.html) (accessed May 10, 2011).

\$750,000 building, one of the “most modern intermediate education plants in the nation.”<sup>7</sup> The ceremony was attended by 900 people, who listened to 90 minutes of speeches and music, and then took a tour of the new classrooms.<sup>8</sup> The school was Art Deco in style, which is marked by straight lines and step backs that pay tribute to the machine age. Unfortunately, all that remains

South Junior High Monument



of the historic school is an odd monument made of the Art Deco portion of the library wall. South Junior High served the growing older student body population living on the Bench, and enrollment all over the district continued to rise from 6,254 in 1940-1941 to 8,990 in 1949-1950.<sup>9</sup> Among the changes in enrollment other programs were introduced that aided the creation of the pools at South and Lowell.

A summer program was initiated in 1940 by the City of Boise and the Boise School District to serve the growing student population. The program was recognized nationally and still exists today.<sup>10</sup> In 1953 the construction of the pools were completed and swimming was added to the list of available activities in the two neighborhoods.

South Municipal Pool



Tourist brochures from the 1950s list the neighborhood pools open for swimming and newspapers advertised swim competitions. However, to get to this point the Lowell Elementary and South Junior High neighborhoods had to campaign for the construction of the pools.

<sup>7</sup> “South Junior High School Ceremony Held,” *Idaho Daily Statesman*, February 10, 1951.

<sup>8</sup> “South Junior High School Ceremony Held,” *Idaho Daily Statesman*, February 10, 1951.

<sup>9</sup> “History of the Boise School District,” *Independent School District of Boise City*, [http://www.boiseschools.org/district\\_info/history.html](http://www.boiseschools.org/district_info/history.html) (accessed May 10, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> “History of the Boise School District,” *Independent School District of Boise City*, [http://www.boiseschools.org/district\\_info/history.html](http://www.boiseschools.org/district_info/history.html) (accessed May 10, 2011).

The Boise Swimming Pool Committee worked with the city and the neighborhoods in order to get the opportunity to vote for a \$200,000 bond that would provide for the construction of two new pools, “one to be located in the vicinity of Twenty-eighth and State Streets, and the second in the South Junior high school area on the bench,” and remodeling and improvements to the Natatorium pool, also owned by the City.<sup>11</sup> On July 16, 1952 the bond was approved, but only



*Lowell Municipal Pool*

by a margin of 134 votes. Mayor R.E. Edlefsen announced that they would work quickly to get the pools built for the next season, but he was worried that the steel strike might slow down deliveries of building materials, which would delay construction.<sup>12</sup> Fortunately for Boise, the steel strike of 1952 only lasted until July 24, 1952 and the Lowell and South pools were completed for the swimming season in 1953. Lowell’s capacity of 250 swimmers was reached the first night it was open on June 21, 1953, and South opened with similar success a week later.<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps the most interesting aspect about the Lowell and South pools is that they are both above ground swimming pools in the Art Deco style. The above ground pool was popular in the 1950s, so that particular aspect is not surprising. However, the Art Deco style was popular from the 1920s to the 1930s, with some interest stretching into the 1940s. The construction date for the pools falls out of this period, which leaves the question of why this particular style was chosen? It is possible that some of the last Art Deco buildings built in Boise are the Lowell and South pools, and it is also possible that a revived interest in Art Deco surfaced in Boise during the 1950s. In either scenario, the two pools provide great amenities to the neighborhoods, as well as wonderful funky architecture remnants from the 1950s.

---

<sup>11</sup> “Voters Okeh Swim Pool Bond Issue; Project Approved by Narrow Margin of 134 Ballots,” *Idaho Daily Statesman*, July 16, 1952.

<sup>12</sup> “Voters Okeh Swim Pool Bond Issue; Project Approved by Narrow Margin of 134 Ballots,” *Idaho Daily Statesman*, July 16, 1952.

<sup>13</sup> “Younsters Swarm at New Lowell School Swim Pool,” *Idaho Daily Statesman*, June 21, 1953.



*Side view of Lowell Pool*

#### Resources:

The resources consulted for this project included the Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps; *Idaho Daily Statesman* articles; building permits for the Lowell and South pools (which only provided contemporary information, not original construction details); the Boise Architecture Project website; the Boise Independent School District histories for Lowell Elementary and South Junior High; vertical files at the Idaho State Historical Society Archives; and an unpublished manuscript by J.M. Neal that is located in the Boise City Department of Arts and History office.