



## A “Municipipool” History

Boise’s first municipal pools, Lowell and South, opened during the summer of 1953 marking the culmination of a roughly twenty-year campaign by citizens and civic organizations for a city owned and operated public swimming pool. Prior to the construction of the Lowell and South pools, the Natatorium on Warm Springs Avenue was Boise’s only public pool. Privately managed and located in the eastern portion of the city, the single pool could not sufficiently serve Boise’s growing population and was inconveniently located for citizens living outside of the downtown core.

By the early 1930s, public pressure for a municipal swimming pool was building. Newspaper accounts detail how the city parks board addressed this pressure in 1930 and again 1931. In 1930, it was reported that Morrison-Knudsen had offered the city an area of land just east of Julia Davis Park on which it had been working. The park board acknowledged the generosity of the Morrison-Knudsen offer, but noted there were considerations that needed to be addressed prior to taking on a pool project. These included identifying funding as well as the need for a clean water source. “The water from the river and from the canals has been pronounced by health authorities as utterly unsafe for bathing purposes and some purification system will have to be evolved before the city can sanction a public pool.” Newspaper records indicate plans to build a concrete swimming pool in Julia Davis Park were circulating during 1931. The park board ultimately understood the desire and the need for a municipal pool, but stated “It is the aim of the park board to be as economical as possible and to co-operate [sic] with the city in holding taxes down as low as possible. The board has little money to spend on new projects.”<sup>1</sup>

As the 1930s progressed, public pressure for a municipal pool continued to mount, and local children even lent their voices to the issue. In February 1932, the Boy Scouts were given ceremonial control of Boise’s municipal government for a half day. Among the actions undertaken by the Scouts was the passage of an ordinance

allowing for a municipal pool. Boise Mayor John J. McCue agreed the issue was of high importance. As the Great Depression gripped the city, *The Idaho Statesman* noted that Mayor McCue intended to petition the federal government for funding to aid a number of local projects including the hoped-for municipal swimming pool. The newspaper commented the mayor was "...concentrated on a community plunge, where, as he visioned it, thousands of children and adults could swim safely, in clean water, each afternoon. The mayor said he had not prepared any data on the plan yet, but would get at it immediately and bring his suggestion to the city council." It is unclear from newspaper accounts how the issue of federal funding played out, but the city's plans for a pool appeared to change course in 1934. During that summer, the Natatorium was severely damaged in a storm, and the building was condemned. Boise's only public swimming pool became inoperable, and in the aftermath, the city considered taking over the Natatorium and converting it into a municipal pool. Negotiations with the Boise Water corporation, owner of the Natatorium, commenced, but ultimately failed. The Natatorium remained in private hands.<sup>2</sup>

By 1935, a new administration had assumed leadership in Boise. Newspaper records indicate that while the new mayor, Byron E. Hyatt, initially supported plans to find a suitable location to construct a municipal swimming pool, he eventually pivoted his focus to other municipal needs he felt were more pressing. During the summer of 1936, the Natatorium reopened as an outdoor pool. The mayor expressed his belief that the city should wait and see how well the Natatorium fulfilled the public need for a swimming pool before undertaking such an expensive construction project. *The Idaho Statesman* quoted Mayor Hyatt as stating "'Of much greater immediate importance,' he continued, 'is the question of sewage disposal. Here is a project of importance to the city and to the valley alike. If we continue to dump our raw sewage into Boise river we may ultimately find ourselves, and incidentally the farmers of the valley, in a serious situation.'"<sup>3</sup>

During the 1940s, agitation for a municipal pool was occasionally covered by *The Idaho Statesman*. In 1943, the "As She Says" columnist noted "The only public pool in Boise is filled to overflowing – with swimmers – and the need of a fine municipal

pool was never greater.” In June 1945, the newspaper published an editorial complaining that the Natatorium had failed to open due to labor shortages and that the community could be better served if the pool were taken over by a civic organization. In 1947, the Boise Junior Chamber of Commerce (Jaycees) organized a postcard campaign to request the city hold a bond election to fund a municipal swimming pool. The Jaycees estimated roughly 1000 citizens signed postcards. The city eventually began leasing the Natatorium for a few hours each day, Monday through Thursday, during which children could swim free of charge, but the concept of a municipal pool continued to be discussed by the community. In 1949, the issue was finally submitted to Boise voters via a bond election. The city sought \$135,000 to build a municipal pool on the Boise Junior College campus as well as a footbridge across the Boise River from Julia Davis Park to facilitate access. *The Idaho Statesman*, while agreeing that a municipal pool was much needed for the growing city, argued against the bond issue. The newspaper did not agree with the proposed location of the pool on the Boise Junior College campus or with the shared use agreement between the city and the college. Ultimately, Boise citizens agreed, and the initiative failed with the majority of voters casting ballots against the bond.<sup>4</sup>

After the failure of the 1949 bond, local civic organizations continued to promote the idea of a municipal pool. The Boise Exchange Club began studying the issue and engaged with the city, the Jaycees, and the school district to determine the best path forward. The Exchange Club promoted the possibility of another bond issue which would fund three municipal pools located across the city rather than one pool in a central location. The club also favored the pool designs of Wesley Bintz, an engineer from Lansing, Michigan whose company built above ground, ovoid shaped pools. The Bintz pools, it was argued, required a smaller footprint than traditional sunken pools as the support facilities, such as restrooms, showers, and dressing rooms were located beneath the pool decking. Proponents noted the above ground designs saved municipalities money by requiring less land acquisition, reducing excavation costs, and creating accessible plumbing infrastructure. Although, Bintz pools were not regulation size for swim competitions, the city's recreation director



noted that these pools were intended as recreation places for neighborhood children, not as facilities for competitive events. In 1952, multiple local service clubs agreed to the formation of a steering committee to petition the city to hold a \$200,000 bond election to renovate the aging Natatorium in the city's East End and build two new pools, one in the North End and one on the Bench.<sup>5</sup>

The city agreed to hold the \$200,000 bond election to fund the proposed pools. Supporters of the bond argued that the city had approximately 11,000 school-aged children, and that one public pool, the Natatorium, was not able to provide swim lessons and swimming for all children and citizens interested. The Boise swimming pool committee also "...said that moving recreational facilities into residential districts is a national trend, the advantages being the safety factor of children attending without the necessity of their parents taking them to and from the pool, plus the saving in transportation costs to the average family." The bond election was held July 15, 1952 and passed with the required two-thirds majority. Mayor R. E. Edlefsen responded by agreeing to begin the process of modernizing the Natatorium and constructing the two new pools near Lowell Elementary School and South Junior High School. Edlefsen noted that a 1952 steel strike might prevent access to the needed steel which, in turn, might affect how quickly construction could take place, but he was hopeful the pools would open the following summer.<sup>6</sup>

By the end of August 1952, city officials had entered into contract negotiations with pool designer Wesley Bintz. During the pool design and construction phases, Bintz occasionally visited Boise in person. When Bintz requested the city provide him with names for each of the above ground pools, Mayor Edlefsen joked that perhaps they should be named "...Boise pool number one, two, and three." He theorized that a subset of people would always be unhappy with the chosen names and using numbers might decrease complaints. Construction of the pools and renovation of the Natatorium began at the beginning of 1953 and was handled by local contractors J. O. Jordan and Son.<sup>7</sup>

Construction of the Lowell and South pools was completed in time for summer 1953. The Lowell Pool opened to the public on June 20<sup>th</sup> and reached capacity

during its first afternoon in use. The formal dedication of the pool took place amidst much fanfare two days later. The dedication was heavily attended, and *The Idaho Statesman* estimated 1,235 people visited the pool on its dedication day. By necessity, city staff had to institute “swimming shifts” in order to accommodate everyone. One week later on June 30, 1953, the South Pool opened to the public. Renovations to the Natatorium, which included changes such as shortening the deep end and removing the stone diving platform, were not completed until later that summer. The new Natatorium pool officially opened in mid-August.<sup>8</sup>

Bintz pools, once a mainstay in many cities across America, have largely disappeared from the municipal landscape. In a 2018 article, the *Lansing State Journal* estimated that while about 120 Bintz pools had been built in the United States between the 1920s and the 1950s, only a handful remained in place with even fewer still in operation. The Lowell and South pools exemplify many of the hallmarks of Bintz’ patented designs. “While Bintz’ designs varied, the vast majority of his pools has [sic] specific features: They were egg-shaped, which allowed for an easy transition from the deep end to the shallow end. They also housed all of the operations and the locker rooms underneath the pool. Visitors would typically enter the pool area through a staircase past the locker rooms.” Boise’s two Bintz pools feature Art Moderne architecture which is visible in their identical facades featuring sleek modern lines.<sup>9</sup>

Boise’s first municipal swimming pools proved extremely popular, and the city invested in additional facilities over the next four decades. By 2000, the city owned and operated a total of six outdoor municipal pools located in neighborhoods across the city. Borah Pool was constructed in the late 1960s, Fairmont Pool in the early-to-mid 1970s, and Ivywild Pool in the late 1990s.<sup>10</sup>

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