

# The Sellwood Bee

## 1931-1956: Hard Times & Recovery

*"The publishers offer this Golden Anniversary edition to the residents of this community as a tribute to all who have gone before, as well as those still on the scene, who have contributed to the advancement and well being of this locality—our little city within a city."*  
— Fern and Howard Hilson, owners, publishers, editors, Sellwood Bee, Oct. 4, 1956

BY EILEEN G. FITZSIMONS  
for *The Bee*

As the 1930s began, hundreds of Sellwood residents still earned their living in the neighborhood. Major employers included the East Side Lumber Mill/Oregon Sash & Door Factory at the foot of Spokane Street; the Oregon Worsted Company woolen mills at Willsburg (south of today's Tacoma Street-Johnson Creek Boulevard overpass), the streetcar and interurban train barns at 13th and Linn Streets. There were, of course, many independently-owned stores and businesses in both Sellwood and Westmoreland, as well as jobs in Fulton (now John's Landing), and downtown Portland. But as construction slowed and orders for manufactured goods began to drop, employment hours were shortened and then jobs were eliminated altogether.

In the early 1930s several small fires and then a final conflagration burned the East Side mill on the north side of Spokane Street. Recalling his memory of the fire which occurred when he was a four-year old, one man marveled at the size of the blaze, and then said, "Of course I didn't realize it at the time, but that was the end of my dad's job."

In hard times, those with the thinnest blankets are the first to feel the cold. By the first "official" year of the Great Depression, it was evident that some families had already hit bottom. Neighbors rallied to help each other, and the Sellwood Moreland Relief Committee was formed. In December of 1930, *The Bee* announced that twelve families were destitute, and that donations of food, clothing, bedding, fuel, and money would be collected at the relief center, located at a 13th Avenue business. Readers were assured that "an investigating committee of ladies would see that applicants were worthy".

Individual merchants were aware of their customers' circumstances. According to the late Beulah Schmoker Houde, her mother struggled to support six children when their father was confined to the Veteran's Hospital, and later died. Mrs. Schmoker worked in a rug reweaving factory on S.E. 17th, and Beulah remembered the generosity of grocer Hugh Knipe, who let them charge food at his store, paying what



Looking northeast from the roof of what today is Starbucks at S.E. Milwaukie Avenue at Bybee, taken around 1952. The truck in the center of the photo was the Bybee Avenue Grocery delivery truck, owned by Estes Griffith.

they could. Some businesses couldn't carry their customers for very long. At a recent Sellwood School reunion, Ken Thompson recalled that his father's grocery at 17th and Tacoma went out of business because his customers couldn't pay.

In May, 1932, *The Bee* was encouraging passage of a \$400,000 city bond measure to help the jobless. Families would be paid "\$24 a week for five or six weeks. The man must pay his rent, carfare, and as much of his grocery bill as possible. However, the money is usually gone in two to three weeks...jobs have been cut to one week in eight, so the relief burden remains tremendously heavy."

In these circumstances, abbreviated childhoods were common. Depending on their age and family situation, some students were able to finish high school, but others left before graduation, or began working after the eighth grade. They took any jobs they could find, and wages were pooled to support the family. Sometimes a good job didn't last long. Mr. Thompson graduated from Benson High School in 1934 and began working in a machine shop. When the Longshoremen went on strike six months later, orders were cancelled and he was out of a job. Those who lost their homes moved in with other family members or struggled to make monthly rent payments in smaller houses or apartments. Lawns were dug up and became vegetable gardens. In 1930, the PTA mothers at Llewellyn School canned several hundred quarts of tomatoes to be used in cafeteria lunches.

Slowly, a few federally-funded government projects began to provide occasional short-term employment. Two of these impacted the

Eastmoreland and Westmoreland areas. The first was construction of the "super highway", also called 99E/McLoughlin Boulevard, which began in Oregon City and gradually moved north to Portland. Until completion of the highway in 1937, Westmoreland and Eastmoreland were connected at two points, at both Bybee (via the overpass) Boulevard and at Reedway Street.

The highway construction provided jobs and quicker access between east side towns, but created a physical barrier between the two Morelands. And the transportation improvement was a signal to Fred Meyer that the area might be ready for construction of one of his new shopping centers.

As soon as the final route of the "super highway" was determined in 1930, Meyer purchased six acres of property just north of the Bybee overpass. Seven years later as the new road opened, he approached the Portland Planning Commission with a rezoning request—from residential to commercial. Homeowners in both Westmoreland and Eastmoreland objected to perceived property devaluation issues, while Westmoreland merchants feared loss of business. The interest groups coalesced against a common "enemy", and the application was denied (in 1950 they had to repeat their effort when Meyer tried a second time).

The second permanent improvement that occurred during the Great Depression was the creation of Westmoreland Park. The area between the two Moreland plats was left "as is" in 1909, although after World War I it was used for a few years as an airplane field. A subdivision plan ("The Fairways") had been filed in 1928, but the high water table turned

out to make it an expensive piece of property to develop. In 1936 the City of Portland swapped another piece of land for the 46-acre "Fairways", and applied for Works Progress Administration (WPA) funds to transform it into a luxurious public park.

The federal government awarded funds to grade the land, add some drainage pipe, and construct the casting pond. These improvements provided a short burst of work for several hundred men, as the pond was dug by hand, and the dirt moved with wheelbarrows. However, completion of the park had to wait for post-WWII prosperity.

For many people, the 1930s was a period of prolonged anxiety. Teenagers with dreams of college or a career scrambled to find any work at all. When WWII began, thousands of young people, both men and women, joined the service or were drafted. For their parents and spouses, the second half of the 1940s was a time of continuing unease and despair, especially if their children had been lost in the war. At home, everyone faced food and materials rationing. Housing was at a premium, especially when the Kaiser shipyards began operation. It was during the war years that some single-family homes, especially south of Tacoma Street, were subdivided into apartments.

Between 1945 and 1947 *The Bee* was under the ownership of Mr. and Mrs. Hudson Reeves, who in turn sold it to another couple, Fern and Howard Hilson. The Hilsons remained as hands-on owners, publishers, and editors for more than 20 years—and *The Bee* continued as a neighborhood newspaper, covering "big" stories as well as personal tidbits. It also included snippets of neighborhood history, in the form of reprinted news items from past issues.

In 1949 the paper changed the name on its masthead from "Sellwood Bee" to "Sellwood-Moreland Bee". In spite of the Korean War, the neighborhood began to hum with activity. Some businesses, notably the bank and Shaw's Furniture Store, left Sellwood and moved to Westmoreland. Couples married, and remodeled older houses, or occasionally built new ones in the popular "ranch" style.

Automobiles became an affordable form of transportation, and gasoline was no longer rationed. The "Sunday drive", when the entire family rode around in their car (for pleasure), became a common form of recreation. And newlyweds began to produce the first generation of "baby boomers."

A recent conversation with lifelong resident Linda (Rhoton) Schwartz provided details about growing up in the neighborhood beginning in the mid-1940s.

Her earliest memories are of living

in the wartime housing project called Kellogg Park (south side of Ochoco Street). She enjoyed those years, because she had so many playmates of the same age. Her dad was a railroad brakeman, working from the Brooklyn train yards. She remembers walking by the Barnum & Bailey circus train that parked on the tracks north of the Bybee overpass; she watched Harry Truman speaking from the caboose of a campaign train, and saw flatcars of camouflaged tanks, trucks, and other large equipment passing through the neighborhood, bound for the Korean War.

For a few years, peddlers continued to call on homes, including the man who sharpened knives, vegetable vendors, and best of all, the Ann Palmer bakery truck from North Portland: A nickel for a fresh glazed doughnut was a highlight of her grade school years!

Later, her family lived in several houses in Westmoreland, before settling into the one in which she lived while attending Llewellyn Elementary School, Cleveland High School, and college. Linda recalled that until the 1960s the neighborhood remained self-sufficient, and "you could buy anything you needed, from plumbing supplies to a prom dress" in Sellwood or Westmoreland. For her, the closure of Brill's Department Store on 13th Avenue marked the demise of that street as a shopping destination.

Linda recalled that compared to her parents' childhoods, she and her sister were very fortunate. Her father had a steady job, and her parents, who had lived through the insecurity of the Depression and WWII, did not want their two daughters to have to do the same. Her mother would shop at Rapp's clothing store on Bybee Boulevard (today the space holds a sushi restaurant). According to Linda, that store featured expensive designer outfits that her mother found hard to resist. Sometimes, too, she and her sister were live fashion models of Rapp's outfits at "Young Oregonian" mother-and-daughter luncheons.

Linda found ways to earn money by catching the early morning "picker's busses" to outlying farms, where she harvested strawberries and string beans. When she was older, she worked at the Eastmoreland Golf Club to pay for tuition at Portland State University. She eventually married Jim Schwartz, a fellow student from Llewellyn School (their first date at the Moreland Theater; their wedding was at Moreland Presbyterian Church), and they settled into a house on Rex Street, where they raised two children. She now designs the display windows in the Stars Antiques Mall on Milwaukie Avenue, which she recalls as being the location, first, of a Mode O'Day dress shop, and later a Cornet variety store.

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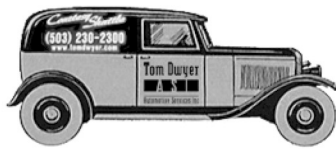


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