

Bessemer Bike Tour

© 2012 Bessemer Historical Society DBA Steelworks Center of the West
www.steelworks.us



This historic bike tour was created in 2011-2012 to commemorate the 125th anniversary of the neighborhood and the publication of “Forged Together: The Bessemer Neighborhood Context Study” written by Jeffrey DeHerrera, Cheri Yost and Adam Thomas of Historitecture, LLC for the City of Pueblo. This bike tour highlights some of the rich history of the neighborhood, and a few buildings and structures that made it what it is today. Please remember to ride safely while on this tour, wear a helmet, and obey all traffic rules and regulations.

The town of Bessemer organized and was incorporated by the Minnequa Town Company in 1886. The new town provided all municipal services including dozens of retail shops, tailors and dressmakers, groceries, coffeehouses, saloons, and barber shops along the principal main street, Northern Avenue. A city hall building built on the southeast corner of Charles Street (later renamed Abriendo Avenue) and Central Avenue (renamed McCulley Avenue) housed city offices, jail, municipal court, fire station and community meeting room.

By 1891, city functions had outgrown the building and a new Bessemer City Hall was built at 1207 E. Evans. Bessemer Police services and jail cells continued to be used in the city hall building on Evans Avenue until after World War I. The Fire Department continued to occupy the civic building until 1939 when WPA workers completed a new fire station at 1201 East Evans. When developed, the town of Bessemer was 3,460 acres.

In 1894, the town of Bessemer was fully incorporated into the city of Pueblo. Residents had the option of purchasing affordable homes built and leased by CF&I’s Minnequa Town Company. The subdivision, called Minnequa Heights, contained hundreds of four- and five room homes west of the steel mill. Though most of the residents were employed by the steel mill, many others worked for area businesses or for one of Pueblo’s dozens of smelters. Boarding houses were also built by the company and rented to single men.

As Pueblo was considered an “open” town, residents had the option to purchase homes from competing mortgage companies. The Bessemer area remains largely devoid of any formal, high-style architect-designed buildings. This fact is not surprising considering the working-class nature of the neighborhood. The majority of houses in Bessemer served the purpose of providing a comfortable shelter only; they were never intended to exude the flashiness and high styling of houses on the North side, South Pueblo, or Mesa Junction neighborhoods. Few, if any, records remain documenting the architectural firms that built houses in the Bessemer neighborhood.

Minnequa Town Company houses are usually categorized as simple box forms usually capped by a hip roof with some type of ornamentation to distinguish one house from the next. This ornamentation could be parapet walls to evoke a certain style or brick or stucco wall treatments.

Houses almost exclusively in this form are of both one- and two-story designs. Some examples received ornamentation to differentiate one house from the next, or sometime two houses of the same design were constructed consecutively. The Minnequa Town Company was most active from 1900 to 1905. The description of this form and other similar homes of this era and form would be called Classic Cottages. Though most of the residents were employed by the steel mill, many others worked for area businesses or for one of Pueblo's dozens of smelters. Boarding houses were also built by the company and rented to single men. Water service was provided to customers through the Pueblo Water Service Company. As part of the many social programs undertaken by the company in the early part of the 20th century, contests encouraged the best yard and garden.

Near the end of the 19th century, large populations from northern, eastern and southern Europe escaped religious persecution or political oppression and sought refuge in America and a chance of a better life. Many of these groups settled in the Bessemer neighborhood of Pueblo, finding work at Colorado Fuel and Iron's Minnequa Works or in a nearby smelter. These new residents brought with them traditions and customs of their homelands including religion, food, folk music and dance. These played an important role in the life of the workers helping to create a sense of community while maintaining a social and cultural identity and made Bessemer one of the most diverse areas in Pueblo.

By 1890, one out of every five residents were an immigrant according to census records. Ten years later, 55.3% of the residents in Pueblo defined themselves as new immigrants or first-generation Americans. Native ethnicities were listed as Italian, Austrian, German, Irish, Swedish, Greek, English and Canadian. The Hispanic population, which had decreased briefly between 1880 and 1900, began to increase by the beginning of the century. Numerous newspapers provided local news to Bessemer residents, many written in multiple languages. Smaller independent newspapers such as the Bessemer Indicator, La Voce Del Popolo, Abruzzo-Molise, Pueblske Novice, and Coloradeno provided news written specifically about the Bessemer and Minnequa neighborhood. The ethnic makeup of the community can be seen in its many houses of worship including European Orthodox, Baptist, and Catholic parishes. The Jewish community, although large in presence, did not have a synagogue in Bessemer but worshipped at one of two synagogues on East 2nd or West 15th Street. Many of these churches organized by the immigrant communities still exist today including St. John the Baptist Greek Orthodox Church, St. Michael's Orthodox Church, St. Mary the Help of Christians Parrish, and St. Francis Xavier Parish. The Minnequa Town Company Cottage style of architecture is probably the most identified in the Bessemer neighborhood.

~~~~~



### **1. Start at the Steelworks Center of the West Museum, 215 Canal Street**

After the creation of the Colorado Fuel & Iron Company's Medical Department in 1881, the Medical Dispensary division was maintained under the supervision of the company's Chief Surgeon, Dr. Richard W. Corwin. The dispensaries treated minor illnesses and injuries. More serious ailments were treated at the Minnequa Hospital. With the help of nurses, a team of

physicians oversaw the dental, optical, and overall medical health of the employees and their families within each mining district and at the Steelworks. Doctors made daily house calls in addition to seeing patients in the dispensaries. Doctors were instructed to treat all illnesses with the exception of sexually-transmitted diseases and those incurred during the commission of a crime. In 1901, the Minnequa Works Dispensary moved from a site within the Steelworks to a building adjacent to the company's new administrative offices along Canal Street. The six-room Spanish Mission style building contained waiting, drug, consultation, surgical and storage rooms, in addition to sleeping and office quarters for attending physicians.

In 1902, as the Minnequa Steelworks employee numbers exceeded 5,000, the Dispensary handled an average of 75 cases daily. In addition to a medical facility, the Minnequa Works Dispensary also served as the company employment office from the 1950s into the 1990s.

On April 16, 1881, Dr. Richard W. Corwin assumed his position as Chief Surgeon of the Colorado Coal and Iron Company (precursor to the Colorado Fuel & Iron Company.) Corwin was born on a farm in Binghamton, New York and spent his youth at Narrowsburg, on the Delaware River and in rural Virginia. The constant stimulation of nature inspired young Corwin to apprentice as a taxidermist at the age of 14 with Dr. John G. Bell, a noted authority on the subject. His hobby was to prove useful in his undergraduate years at Cornell University, where he supported himself as a taxidermist for the school's museum. Later, the University of Michigan appointed Corwin curator of the school's museum. While in Ann Arbor, Corwin enrolled in medical courses. He graduated in 1878, after which he completed a medical residency at St. Luke's Hospital in Chicago. While employed at CF&I, Dr. Corwin traveled widely to study advanced medical practices and hospital procedures, implementing many of them at Minnequa Hospital, including new treatments for traumatic injuries, and operating room sterilization procedures. Under his direction, the medical department became a leader in the field of industrial medicine. The facility expanded to include a nursing school, chemical laboratory, a team of skilled surgeons, physicians, dentists, optometrists, obstetricians, dieticians, neurologists, pathologists and x-ray technicians. Dr. Corwin was also responsible for the creation of the Sociological Department in 1901, which concerned itself with the moral, educational and recreational needs of employees and became a ground-breaking program after which other large companies modeled their own courses.

~~~~~

2. Follow Abriendo Avenue north to corner of Baystate and Abriendo. Turn left on Baystate. Follow to corner of Baystate and Evans. This was the site of the Colorado Supply Company Store.



The roots of the Colorado Supply Company Store date to the late 19th century as a subsidiary of the Colorado Fuel Company. As Colorado Fuel and Iron Company and smelting operations increased, the population of Bessemer grew and mercantile and specialty stores became an integral part in the lives of the residents. The Colorado Supply Company Store, a subsidiary of CF&I, provided residents with meat, produce, bakery and dry goods, hardware, furniture, prescription drugs, carpets, and men's, women's and children's clothing. The company

stores also sold equipment and tools necessary for work in the mines and the mills, including safety equipment, picks and shovels. A special department sold Navajo rugs with prices from \$2 to \$75. Located originally on the corner of Northern and Abriendo Avenues, the Pueblo store was the largest of all the CSC outlets. By 1902, heavy business required expanding to a facility at the corner of Baystate and Evans Avenues. Touting itself as being the most modern facility in Pueblo, the store provided rapid delivery service by motorcycle and truck twice daily throughout the entire city and employed 135 people at its peak. The store also maintained its own repair shop, and mail order department. The store caught fire on January 15, 1953, destroying the contents and the building.

~~~~~



**3. Follow Evans south one block to the corner of Evans and Canal. Look over to the left to the corner of Abriendo and Canal. This was the site of the Steelworks YMCA.**

In response to its labor policies of the 1910s in the mines and mills, the Employee Representation Plan called for a partnership with the YMCA to begin as a concession management made to CF&I employees and a gesture of goodwill by the John Rockefeller family, chief shareholders of the company at the time. Constructed in 1920, the mammoth building was an imposing 4 story structure, 208 by 126 feet with a brick and cut stone exterior topped with a red tile roof. The Steelworks YMCA opened in 1920 at a cost of over \$500,000 with a modern cafeteria, eight-lane bowling alley, barber shop, tile lined swimming pool, movie theater, classroom spaces, reading room and auditorium. Here, social dances, concerts, theatrical performances, sporting events, and other entertainments were made available to employees and their families. Due to lack of use in the 1950s, CF&I sold the building in the late 1950s and it was razed in 1963.

~~~~~



4. Follow Evans to the Bessemer Ditch

Slicing through the neighborhood as if carving it in half is the Bessemer Ditch. The precursor to the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company, Colorado Coal and Iron president A.H. Danforth, along with W.L. Graham and James B. Orman incorporated the Bessemer Ditch Company on May 31, 1888, though some of the corporations' water rights date to the 1860s. Contrary to popular belief, CF&I never used the water in its steelmaking practices; through the ditch route traverse the grounds of the plant, CF&I only used water from Lake Minnequa in its cooling processes. It was built to irrigate farms on St. Charles Mesa, just east of town, a function that continues today. The ditch enters the neighborhood at the offset intersection of Adams and Stone Avenues, running south parallel to Stone and Northern Avenues where it makes a slight adjustment before continuing south to Baystate Avenue. At Baystate, the ditch curves east for four blocks before curving south again at Pine Street. The ditch curves east again before running onto the grounds of the Steelworks. The ditch remained in a useful state without major

interruption until the Flood of 1921 damaged much of the channel. The flood widened the ditch at several points, washed away much of the sediment liner, and destroyed several small wooden foot bridges. Reconstruction began one week after the flood occurred, with the goal of diverting water into the ditch. Minor repairs were made to the ditch in the 1960s and 1970s including repairing the wooden foot bridges and installing a chain link fence around the ditch to address complaints. By the mid-1970s, complaints from residents of damage from water seepage into their basements, crawlspaces and foundations and the Bessemer Ditch Company sued the Bureau of Reclamation, the agency in charge of the Fry-Ark Project for losses incurred by the ditch company. Property owners were forced to repair their buildings at their own expense. In 1982, the federal government paid \$1.5 million to line half of the Bessemer Ditch with gunite and the remainder of the ditch was lined in 1989.

~~~~~



**5. Continue to follow Evans south several blocks to Joliet. Turn right on Joliet and follow to corner of Joliet and Orman to the site of St. John Neumann School, 2415 E. Orman Ave. (formerly Lakeview Elementary School)**

In 1971, a Catholic alternative to public education in Pueblo ceased to exist. During the subsequent years, certain clergy and the laity saw the need to reestablish an alternative. Approval of Bishop A. Buswell was sought and obtained in January, 1977. John Neumann Catholic School was incorporated in the State of Colorado in July 1977 and in September of that year, under the leadership of a 10-member Board of Directors, the John Neumann Elementary School opened with an enrollment of 87 students in kindergarten-6<sup>th</sup> grade. In September 1979, a facility at St. Mary's Education Center was leased to accommodate the middle school students. The Assumption School Building was rented and housed the elementary students. In the spring of 1982, Bishop Arthur Tafoya leased the former Seaton High School to the St. John Neumann System and in August, Pueblo School District No. 60 voted to lease the former Lakeview Elementary School to the John Neumann System. With an addition of a preschool in 1985, the school system was organized that elementary students were at the Lakeview Building, middle school were in the Seaton building. In 1994, the St. John Neumann System decided to consolidate the two schools into one building and purchased the Lakeview Elementary Building from Pueblo District #60 for \$175,000. It currently provides education to children preschool-8<sup>th</sup> grade. The building was built in 1905.

~~~~~



6. Follow Orman north to Aqua. Turn left on Aqua and follow to Lake to Fire Station #4, 2201 Lake Ave.

This \$3.8 million fire station, which opened in April of 2012, replaced the former fire station servicing the Bessemer neighborhood which was located at the corner of Evans and Mesa. The new station was paid for with a \$2.7 million in federal stimulus funds as well as a list of other sources, including \$247,000 from the Pueblo Urban Renewal Authority and \$200,000 from the state Department of Local Affairs.

~~~~~



## **7. Notice Lake Minnequa to the west of the Fire Station**

Developed in 1872 by the Central Colorado Development Company (a forerunner to Colorado Fuel and Iron Company), the artificial “Lake on the Mesa,” held water diverted from the St. Charles River and was used by the steel mill for quenching and cooling operations. The lake, about 160 acres at its widest point had a capacity to hold 6 million gallons and was situated 42 feet above the highest elevation in the community with steel pipes used to divert water directly into the steelworks. As demands on water usage increased, new reservoirs were constructed south of Pueblo and assured ample water for all furnaces and mills. In addition to its use in steel production, Lake Minnequa became a gathering place for the public. At the turn of the 20th century, trees and flowers were set around the reservoir and sports such as boating, fishing and swimming became popular pastimes. In 1902, an amusement park opened near the lake providing a plethora of activities for area residents and was used until 1940. In 2009, the City of Pueblo purchased Lake Minnequa from the steel mill and has been working on revitalizing the area into a public park and recreation area.

~~~~~



8. Note Lake Avenue taverns and bars to the south

The evolution of the business district of Lake Avenue business district served as the gateway to the city for travelers along Highway 85 while the southern portion of the Avenue concurrently filled in with additionally relatively large housing. Development along the thoroughfare ensued slowly, lacking any major growth until the Postwar period of the 1940s when construction of the combined Highway 85/87 commenced. The expanded highways, along with Americans’ obsession to see their country via automobile brought higher traffic onto Lake Avenue. Savvy proprietors capitalized on exploding traffic with the building of nightclubs, restaurants, gas and service stations, and motels—anything that catered to the travelers. The Pueblo Chieftain reported the 1940s and 50s as the golden era of Lake Avenue, when the strippers brought the noise of busy cash registers to the avenue. The area’s first two clubs moved into the neighborhood during the time, the 85 Club and the Broken Dollar (known by frequent customers as the Busted Buck) as well as the neighborhood’s first trailer court. Two establishments, the Flame Room and the Impala, found their way to the avenue by the 1950s, adding to the mixture of bars, strip clubs and other adult entertainment venues. In 1959, Interstate 25 opened and traffic naturally was diverted away from Lake Avenue. Very little development occurred along the avenue, though many unimproved lots remain.

~~~~~



## **9. The site of the former Minnequa Club**

The Minnequa Club, Pueblo’s first social club, opened in 1892 and was enjoyed by CF&I management, executives and their families until the financial hardships of the steel mill hit in the mid-1980s. In the early days, the grounds included a polo field, stables and a golf course. There were sailing regattas and until the late 1940s, swimming was enjoyed in the lake. The

club bustled with costume balls with foot-tapping music from live orchestras drifting over the water. Members attended style shows, wedding receptions and banquets, with many well-known personalities speaking within its walls, including now-retired U.S. Supreme Court Justice Byron White. A heated outdoor swimming pool was built in 1954 and enlarged in 1960. St. Mary-Corwin purchased the clubhouse in 1989, when it became an education center. The hospital hoped to use the site for future expansion, but a cost study revealed it would cost \$350,000 to bring the building up to safety codes and the decision was made to demolish the building. Although demolition was expected to begin in January of 1995, there was a lengthy delay after more pockets of asbestos were found in the crawl space, the old pool house and covering hot-water pipes. Demolition began in June of 1995 and the razing of the building was completed by the end of the summer.

~~~~~

10. Turn around and follow Lake to St. Mary Corwin Hospital, 1008 Minnequa Ave.



With the inherent dangers of heavy industry, the Colorado Coal and Iron Company hired Dr. Richard Corwin to set up a medical department for its employees in 1881. The first clinic, set on steel mill grounds, was a converted six room house and served as both dispensary for treatment of minor illness and small hospital for major injuries. A year later, a typhoid fever outbreak among employees forced company officials with the assistance from the Denver and Rio Grande Railway to sponsor the building of a larger, permanent hospital on East Abriendo. As the steelworks' employee numbers grew, a new hospital was built on a 20 acre tract between Orman and Lake Avenues. Opened in August of 1902 at a cost of \$30,000, the new hospital included three wards, executive offices, ward for communicable diseases, surgical unit, physicians' residence, recreation hall, well house, stable and light and power plant. It had the ability to care for 200 patients at a time.

Keeping his patient's needs in mind, Dr. Corwin was active in the design of the new facility. After much research, he suggested the idea of ramps rather than elevators or stairs to ease in transferring patients from one floor to another. He also advocated for the installation of showers rather than traditional bathtubs, and an abundance of windows allowing as much natural sunlight into the rooms as possible. Lead lined walls, ceiling and floor in the operating room, Corwin believed, was ideal for keeping the operating rooms sanitary and free from germs. He also promoted the idea of cabinet stations set in the middle of the hallways within the wards stocked with fresh linens, towels, bandages, and other medical supplies for convenient retrieval by nurses. Minnequa Hospital physicians and attendants were available 24 hours a day.

A nurses home, pathological and laboratory unit, and chapel were added to the campus by the end of the 1920s. Following Dr. Corwin's death in 1929, the name of the hospital changed to Corwin Hospital to honor the years of dedication and service of its Chief Surgeon. By the late 1940s, CF&I was ready to get out of the hospital business while St. Mary Hospital, operated by the Sisters of Charity, was desperately trying to raise funds to expand.

Convinced of the Sister's good work, CF&I's board of directors voted to transfer ownership of Corwin Hospital to the Order in 1948. The merger of institutions brought another merger--that of the names of the two hospitals to St. Mary Corwin Hospital, the name that remains to this day. The Sisters continued to meet the needs of their patients and in 1953, decided to raze the old St. Mary's Hospital located at the corner of Quincy and Grant and focus on expanding St. Mary Corwin Hospital. The growth of the hospital was completed by constructing a new structure entirely around and over the existing institution, a first in American architectural history. In 1957, the new St. Mary-Corwin Hospital, with nearly 500 beds, was dedicated. The hospital continues to offer state of the art equipment and resources, including intensive care unit, cancer center, on-site blood bank, and many other medical amenities.

~~~~~

**11. Continue north on Lake and stop at the site of the Minnequa Amusement Park, near the corner of Lake and Lakeview**



With the smelters and steel mill flourishing at the turn of the century, it was the Minnequa Town Company which put up \$50,000 to develop a 28-acre amusement park on the north shore of Lake Minnequa in the spring of 1902. The park was open daily from Memorial Day to Labor Day. Entertainments included a baseball park and grandstand, boat house and dock on the lake, merry go round, bathing and concession stands and booths that offered games of chance invited hours of fun for Puebloans. At the grand opening, 12-pound dynamite cannon boomed at 1:00 in the afternoon and the doors opened. The Morris Military Band performed musical numbers to entertain the masses that chose to partake in the carousel and merry go round, food booths, bathing house, along with viewing a trapeze act and theatrical performances of "HMS Pinafore." Just two months later, an estimated 10,000 people attended Independence Day activities at the park which expanded to include a new novelty of the time: moving pictures on a large canvas screen. The next summer, a theater that seated 1,000 spectators was added along with a roller coaster. Celebrities of the early 1900's who played to audiences at the theater included French dramatic actress Sarah Bernhardt, socialist and politician Eugene Debs and actor Lon Chaney. With the availability of automobiles, families chose to entertain themselves by driving to other locations within the city and the park suffered greatly. The park closed as a result of a lack of income during the Great Depression of the 1930's and was razed June 9, 1940.

~~~~~

12. Follow Lake around the corner to Lakeview to view the historic powerhouse. This structure supplied electrical power to the hospital in the early days of operation.



~~~~~

**13. Turn around and go back to Lake. Follow Stone north to Graham, then around Graham to Danforth. Follow Danforth back to McCulley Ave.**



**14. Continue east on McCulley Ave. to Orman and cut through to the Bessemer Park.**

With the development of the neighborhood, the Minnequa Town Company began to pressure for a park in 1899 as a marketing strategy tailored to the changing demographics from a working neighborhood full of unmarried men with no dependents to that of families. In August 1899, residents in Park District Number 2 indebted themselves \$10,500 for the cost of the grounds, planting grass and setting out the trees and putting all in good condition. Before this park was built, residents walked over one mile to the parks in South Pueblo for recreational opportunities. The park opened in phases between 1905 and 1907. Plans for the new Bessemer park included a band stand and baseball diamond, but it remains unknown if these were ever constructed. During the 1930s, the Works Progress Administration constructed a 40x120 foot wading pool, bathhouse and baseball diamond. In 1954, Pueblo City Council officially changed the name of the park to Minnequa Park. Minnequa Park became the third park in the city to have a swimming pool. A major overhaul of Minnequa Park facilities occurred in 2006 when the city of Pueblo constructed a \$538,000 bathhouse and a \$400,000 spray park.

~~~~~

15. Follow McCulley east to the corner of Abriendo and McCulley Ave.– stop at the empty lot site of the first Bessemer City Hall. This is a 4 way stop.



Working with a five member town council, Bessemer's first mayor, J.S. "Spence" Stuart, maintained order, collected taxes and improved the lives of Bessemer's citizens. Before streetcars made their way down Bessemer streets, horses and buggies provided easy transportation from one destination to another. Benton Yackey, hired by the Santa Fe Avenue merchants, made four trips daily driving a stagecoach between Bessemer and downtown Pueblo. By 1884, electric lines for the streetcars were installed to run up and down Evans, Berkley and Northern Avenues. Twenty years later, the intersection at Northern and Evans was paved, the first in the neighborhood. In April of 1911, more than 5,000 residents witnessed the first gas streetlights illuminated along Northern Avenue with a grand festival celebrating the "Great White Way." The peak of Bessemer's population was 11,000 in 1911. As the population increased family owned groceries or general mercantile stores formed to meet the needs of residents.

~~~~~

**16. Follow Abriendo Avenue south to 1534 Abriendo, Continental Oil Building (currently Pueblo Electric)**



Though many businesses contracted in the years following the Panic of 1893, one company expanded its operation in Pueblo, Continental Oil. In 1894, Continental Oil began construction of its new Pueblo quarters west of the Steelworks with the Pueblo Chieftain reporting the construction was necessary due to the greatly increasing business of the company at this point, which during the past year, has nearly doubled. The new location

featured 5 buildings consisting of a 40 by 80 foot warehouse, an engine and boiler house, an office building, and wagon sheds and stables. The company also erected 11 storage tanks at the site with a capacity of 100,000 gallons, the largest tank storing 35,000 gallons for their products. The layout of the building allowed for future growth of the site, and the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad even constructed a sub line to service Continental oil. When Continental Oil moved its operations back to the original site on D Street in the Union Avenue in the 1950s, CF&I purchased the buildings and converted the building into offices. Presently, Pueblo Electric occupies the building.