

# 9

## B Street

### *Park Events on the Western Edge*

**H**istorically, the west side of B Street has been open land, much as one sees it now. This break in settlement makes B Street the western edge of the Old North.

In the earliest Davis years, the lands to the west of B were open fields. When the Davis High School—the large red brick structure fronting Russell Boulevard—was established in the late 1920s, the immediately adjoining land became athletic and other school-related fields.

The high school population grew and that building was vacated when a new and larger facility opened on Fourteenth Street in 1960. The “big red schoolhouse” at this location was subsequently sold to the City of Davis for use as the City Hall, which it continues to be. The open field along B Street and behind City Hall is now public and named Civic Center Park.

### **Why B Street Is “Crooked”**

Unlike other Old North streets, B Street is crooked and bends at Sixth. Why?

As reported in Ch. 3, the six blocks in the southern of the two tiers are an 1871 extension of the original 1868 grid. That grid was (and is) laid out parallel to the railroad. But, the railroad is not exactly north and south. Instead, it “tilts” about 13 degrees to the northwest. Therefore, all blocks oriented to it are also tilted some 13 degrees.

This tilt is in conflict with the federal, state, and county practice of, where feasible, orienting roads exactly north-south. The plotters of Bowers Addition began its five blocks by orienting to the railroad. But, at B Street they were in conflict with the north-

south principle used by Yolo County road planners. How were the two principles to be accommodated at this intersection?

**B Street Residences, Residents, Rentals**

B has a population and housing profile that is considerably different from the other five streets.

**1. RESIDENCES.** B Street is last among the six streets in its percentage of:

- 1) residences (9 of 281 or 3%),
- 2) signature homes (8 of 146 or 5%), and
- 3) lot-dominant structures (9 of 182 or 5%).

**2. TINY/HIDDEN ABODES.** It is also last in its percentage of tiny and/or hidden abodes (1 of 60 or 2%).

**3. RESIDENTS.** As one can now expect, B Street has the fewest residents (22 of 609, or 4%).

**4. RESIDENTS IN SIGNATURE HOMES.** But, B ranks a heady first in the percentage of its residents who live in a signature home or in an ancillary abode on the same property (typically a converted garage or an apartment unit behind the lot-dominant signature home) (22 of 22, or 100%).

**5. OWNER-OCCUPIED SIGNATURE HOMES AND ALL RESIDENCES.** Likewise, B is first in the percentage of residential units that are owner-occupied signature homes (7 of 9 or 78%). All the other streets are much, much lower on this score.

**6. OWNER-OCCUPIED VERSUS RENTAL SIGNATURE HOMES.** Most B Street signature homes are owner-occupied (7 of 8 or 88%). It is far above any other street, most of which cluster in or near the 40% level. Stating this finding in the reverse: *B Street ranks lowest in the percentage of its signature homes that are rentals (12%).*

**7. ABSENTEE LANDLORDS OF RENTED SIGNATURE HOMES.** Focusing only on rented signature homes, we find that the only landlord on B Street has an out-of-Davis address on the county tax roll . This produces a dramatic “100%” statistic, which is of course misleading. The larger fact is that *B Street is dominated by owner-occupied signature homes.*

As is evident, B Street’s statistics are markedly different from those of every other street . It is much smaller in number of structures and people. Its houses are more frequently built in later decades and the rate of owner-occupancy is spectacularly higher—but based on a very small number of structures. So, B Street is special in these ways—and also in other ways we will see in the following pages.

Their decision was apparently to orient four of the five blocks to the railroad but to accommodate on the western edge of the western block. Therefore, B was bent at Sixth.

Interestingly, the accommodation was (and is) partial rather than total. B's bend is still about five degrees short of the some 13 required for true north-south. The reason for this may be that to go the full distance would have effectively eliminated home sites on B (rather than only make some of them awkwardly shallow). (By the way, full north-south is achieved one block west, at A Street.)

### **The Fifth and B Intersection**

For most of Davis history, Fifth Street extended from B Street to the railroad track. In Fig. 9.1, we see that the street now called Russell Boulevard (to the left in the photograph) curved into B Street without intersecting with Fifth.

But, in the mid-1960s, Fifth was widened, connected to Russell Boulevard on the west and extended across the railroad to the east. As is clear in Fig. 9.1, a large section of the northwest corner of Central Park had to be cut off in order to make Fifth Street meet Russell Boulevard.

**9.1.** Fifth Street terminating at the Davis High School Gymnasium, 1946. (Excerpt from Eastman Collection Photo B-4705, Courtesy, UC Davis Special Collections)



### **The Davis High School/City Gymnasium**

The brick building at the intersection of B and Fifth streets was built as and still is a gymnasium (Fig. 9.2). Originally a part of the Davis High School, it has been a public facility since the school district sold the 12-acre high school site to the City of Davis in 1979. With a \$1.5 million bond measure, the high school building, which is now the City Hall behind this gym, was internally

#### 4 *Guides to Streets and Homes*

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reconstructed into modern office space, while preserving the historic external appearance. The restoration work included this gym, which is historic on the outside but modernized on the inside.

A “modified Romanesque” structure, it was constructed in the mid-1920s, burned down, and was rebuilt in 1938 (Yusavage 1992).

**9.2.** Originally the Davis High School Gymnasium, this building at Fifth and B is now the Civic Center Gymnasium.



The swimming pool to the north of the gym on B Street was constructed for high school use in 1958. It is now a city facility named the Civic Center Pool.

#### **526-30 B Street: The School District Administration Building**

Continuing the history of the Harby Block begun in the last chapter, 526-30 B Street was completed in 1949 and served as an “intermediate” or “junior high” school for nearly 30 years. The same conditions of population explosion prompting the street changes described above also, in the late 1970s, led to relocating the junior high school.

**9.3.** 1960 aerial view of 526-30 B Street. (Excerpt from Davis Joint Union High School 1960 yearbook inside cover aerial photograph)



In 1979, this building became the administrative headquarters of the Davis Joint Unified School District of Yolo County (Fig. 9.3).

### **The High School Athletic Field**

For more than 30 years—from the late 1920s to 1960—the field just west of B Street that is now Civic Center Park was the athletic field of the Davis High School.

Over most of that period, Dewey Halden, who came to Davis in 1928 and was the high school's first coach, trained football, track and other teams on it. In Fig. 9.4 we see him with one of his early teams and with B and Sixth streets in the background. Happily for him, his commute to work was short, for he lived at 619 Sixth, just four blocks east and behind him in Fig. 9.4. (Happily also, 619 Sixth is a carefully cared for though remodeled classic bungalow.)

Retiring from the school system after 34 years, in 1962, “his dedication to all athletics prompted the school to not only name the new high school's field after him in 1961 but to start the Halden Relays in 1962” (Orendor 1996, 35).



**9.4.** Fabled coach Dewey Halden (left) and one of his early teams, about 1930. B Street is behind them. 645 C Street is on the left. The roof and chimneys of 301 Sixth are visible behind the heads of the boys in the middle. On the right, 603 C Street is under construction. (Courtesy Isabel Sparks)

### **Social Events on B Street**

The scarcity of B Street's residents and residences is counterbalanced by the abundance of its social life and events. Its proximity to Civic Center Park creates physical and social space for gatherings. These include the following.

**GAMES AND STROLLING ON THE CIVIC CENTER PARK FIELD.** There is a softball diamond in the Civic Center Park, just across from Sixth and B streets. Davis has a robust set of softball leagues organized through the City's Department of Parks and Community Services that has used this field in the evenings from early spring to late fall. On many evenings, there is a lively social scene at this field.

In addition, at various times in the day sundry types of sporting teams practice and dogs walk their owners.

**"BREAKFAST WITH THE BUNNY" EASTER PARADE AND "EGGSTRAVAGANZA."** The Davis Senior Center at the southeast corner of Seventh and A streets is a public facility and part of Civic Center Park. Its availability for indoor events combined with its surrounding public, open space creates an inviting locale in which to stage events combined with parades.

Prominent among these is the annual Easter “Breakfast with the Bunny” for children at the Senior Center, which is followed by a parade along B Street to the Downtown (Fig. 9.5), where there is an “Eggstravaganza,” “featuring egg decorating, pictures with the bunny, cookie decorating and much more!” (Advertisement, DE, 3-4-98).

**9.5.** Parents and children strolling in the Easter Parade, B Street, 1998. 636 B is on the left and 626 B is in the middle-right.



**THE DAVIS TURKEY TROT 5K/10K.** Since the later 1990s, on the Saturday before Thanksgiving, an event called the “Davis Turkey Trot 5K/10K” takes place on the Civic Center Field, the greenbelts and streets of Davis, and—most especially—on B Street.

Long distance runners and their friends and families, numbering in the thousands, congregate on the field, start the race from the school administration parking lot on Fifth Street, and end on B Street at the 600 block, a scene shown in Fig. 9.6.

**9.6.** The 600 block B Street finish line of the 1997 Davis Turkey Trot.



### **301 Sixth Street<sup>†</sup>**

301 Sixth (Fig. 9.7), the house next door (at 309 Sixth), and 636 B were the first three houses built on B Street. 636 B was constructed in 1926 and the other two built close to or not long after that date (all three appear on the 1933 Sanborn map).

The ARG surveyors characterize 301 Sixth as a “Cottage Revival house . . . sheathed in stucco” (ARG, 275).

9.7. 301 Sixth Street.



“The main roof is hipped with a cross gable projecting on the west end toward the street. The fenestration is inconsistent and the overall composition is asymmetrical. There is a brick chimney projecting from the hip roof. The entry is on the east side of the projecting gable portion of the house. A small uncovered porch is present” (ARG, 275).

### **309 Sixth Street<sup>†</sup>**

One of the citizen volunteers helping with the 1996 cultural resources survey of this block described 309 Sixth Street as “Hansel and Gretel cute” (Fig. 9.8). While not a formal architectural concept, the phrase does help to capture what the professionals from ARG described as the “particular charm that emanates from its fanciful facade. The decorative relief stucco or exterior plaster work is quite nice . . . . The house is a unique example of the eclectic cottage home” (ARG, 278).

More formally, 309 Sixth is, like 301 Sixth next door, a “Cottage Revival stuccoed residence.”

“A prominent and centered cross gable marks the front elevation. The cross gable has an attic vent, decorative relief patterns and two small windows.

“One of the series of decorative patterns on the cross gable is arched quoining. The roof is covered in red clay tile that is laid in patterned rows with a double row along the ridge.

“The entry is on the east side of the cross gable and is discernible by the small patio surrounded by a low wall” (ARG, 277).

**9.8.** 309 Sixth Street.



### **The 600 Block of B Street: Preview of Post-War Styles**

A number of the homes facing B Street in the 600 block provide a preview of post-World War II suburban ranch-style residences. Built about 1940, they reflect the new tastes of an about-to-emerge America.

One way to see how these houses move toward a new style is to stand back from them—on the sidewalk on the west side of B Street. Strolling north from Sixth to Seventh from that distance helps one see their *long, low, and horizontal* lines.

The contrast is, of course, with most houses on most other Old North streets, which are more compact, stylized, and vertical.

As one might predict from other things reported about B Street, it has no bungalows, a style whose time had passed by about 1930.

### **301 Seventh Street<sup>†</sup>**

301 Seventh Street (Fig. 9.9) is what architectural specialists call a vernacular cottage, by which they mean a house

designed and constructed by ordinary people without the “assistance” of architects or other high culture workers.

A cabin, 301 Seventh is very definitely vernacular and of uncertain date and origin. It does not appear on the 1921 Sanborn map, but it clearly was built long before that year, which means it was moved to this location from someplace else, probably in the 1920s, for it does show up on the 1933 Sanborn map.

9.9. 301 Seventh Street.



The HEC and ARG surveyors both liked this house and describe it as “project[ing] a clean, simple, vernacular image” that “gains some dignity from its fortunate proportions” (HEC, 174).

Technically, “the roof is gabled and the porch is a simple shed supported by square posts. There are lean-to additions to the rear. The house has wide shiplap siding and six over six double hung windows” (ARG, 119).

### **Major Old Home Demolition Along Seventh Street**

The 1933 Sanborn map shows 14 homes (and *no* apartment houses) fronting the north side of Seventh Street between B and G. All but a few of these were torn down after World War II (mostly in the late '50s and early '60s) to make way for the major apartment complexes now seen along Seventh: the Orange Tree at 311; the Markham at 335; the Kensington at 601, 609, 615 and 617; and, Longview Properties at 701, 703, and 713.



In one common-sense reckoning, the Old North starts at the corner of Fifth and G streets and one moves into the neighborhood by going north and west from that corner.

In that logic, in arriving at Seventh and B, we have reached the end or at least the outer edge of the neighborhood. Our trip and this guide are in this sense finished.

But not quite. “Start and finish” and “beginning and end” have a temporal as well as a physical meaning. Having looked at the Old North *past* in the chapters of Part I and at its *present* in Part II, what about the *future*? What do “start and finish” mean in terms of *time*?

This is the topic to which I come—and with which I end—in the Epilogue, “What Future for the Old North?”