

The Forgotten Creek: Ralston and the Co-op

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Introduction

Being a resident of any city means a connection to the events and resources of that area. Being from Iowa City means an association with corn, pigs, and the Iowa River. The river runs through the city and one of its tributaries is Ralston Creek. Ralston Creek runs through a large portion of downtown Iowa City and to many it is a bunch of smaller creeks rather than one continuously flowing creek. To many residents Ralston Creek is as a drainage ditch, if it is seen at all. In studying why Ralston Creek is seen and treated in this way the study of the New Pioneer Co-op and its relationship to the creek is very important. The New Pioneer Co-op's relationship to the creek is based on the way that it affects the store. By this we mean, the co-op only cares about the creek when the creek begins to invade the co-ops space and ruins the way the co-op runs as a business. The co-op is a business that stands for eco-friendliness and follows up on the going green parade, but they do not seem to care as much about the nature that lies behind their parking lot until they have to work to prevent that living creek from invading the store.

History

According to the land survey records of the late 1830's there was sedge, willow, and buffalo grass in the Iowa City section of Iowa. At the perimeters of Iowa City, section 10, there were many oaks, black and white alike. There were many references about oak in the survey notes as well as the field notes. These trees must have been common in this area before major building occurred. In the field notes there was also a reference to "bottom lands covered with timber" as well as "sand 1st quality oak openings". The bottom lands reference may be talking

about the lands around the Iowa River or Ralston creek. I do not understand what the “sand 1st quality” means unless it is referencing the area around the banks of the river.

The current building in which the co-op is located was built in 1946. Prior to that there was a railroad track that ran along the creek. The railroad was the Burlington Cedar Rapids & Northern Railroad. We have not done follow-up on time frame of these tracks nor do we know its relation to the creek, though a possible problem with a train being too close to the creek could be contamination of the creek. Trains of that day may have run on coal, which would release chemicals or other debris into the area. Based on the microfiche Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps of 1933-1944 these railroad tracks lasted up until 1944. That means that the railroad tracks were taken out just before the first grocery store Iowa City Farm Store was put on that plot¹.

Based on the title of this store one can assume that it was a corner grocery store around the same time as many other local grocery stores were also being built such as John's Grocery. Shortly after in 1952 the Big B No 2 grocery store took over this location. They stayed in business from 1952 through 1956 according to the records that I had access to (City Directory). The two year gap between the Big B and the Me Too groceries is unknown. This building may have been vacant during this time period or the Big B turned over access to the Me Too. Either way the Me Too took over in 1958 (City Directory). The Me Too was located at the lot until the New Pioneer Co-op began renting it in 1977 (Co-op website).

Flooding

¹ (A note about addressing of all this information: currently the co-op is addressed as 22 S. Van Buren Street, but in doing research it was realized that it has not always been 22. The first few grocery stores could be found in the Iowa City directory under the address of 26 not 22. It remained that way until the co-op. Meeting with a former employee of the grocery store that was in this location before the co-op helped to finalize the addressing to ensure that all the other buildings were also at this exact location).

Flooding has been an issue for the owners of these different grocery stores. It is known from conversations with a former employee of the Me Too as well as newspaper stories that the Me Too grocery flooded in 1972ⁱ. This flood impacted to store by flooding waist high, but this flooding did not cause long term or structural damage. The Me Too was able to come back from the flood. In more recent years flooding has been a major concern. This concern is legitimized due to flooding in 1993 and the flooding potential during the floods of 2008. Sarah Walz has been a co-op board member for four years and she stated that in those four years, the co-op has sandbagged during three of themⁱⁱ. Sandbagging may not be the best means of protecting the co-op from flood damage. The best means of protecting the creek is unknown, but there are plans that can be executed that attempt to strengthen the creek.

The creek has become a major source of anxiety for this establishment, but that has not always been the case. Back in the seventies when the co-op moved in they “didn’t think of it as the menace it is now”ⁱⁱⁱ. This shows a certain lack of understanding of the creek and its relationship to their business. Though the co-op carries flood insurance that insurance would not be helpful if a major flooding incident were to occur. Carbrey stated that financially, the co-op would not be able to reopen at that location if such a disaster were to occur^{iv}. The amount of insurance money the co-op would receive is tiny in comparison to the amount of capital already invested in the co-op, by way of freezers, shelving, electronics and overall product.

Wildlife

The amount of wildlife on this area of the creek is minimal. There does not seem to be much wildlife besides ducks. The co-op does come in contact with the ducks that play on this stretch of the creek because the ducks have wandered into the parking area. Also, if bread is outdated for sale, the employees put the bread in the creek for the ducks to eat. It’s a “party for

the ducks” according to Theresa Carbrey^v. Though there are ducks, there does not seem to be much other wildlife that impacts the co-ops relationship to the creek.

Clean-up

The new pioneer co-op is a business built on the idea of eco-friendliness, “green”, and sustainability. The Iowa City co-op location runs along Ralston creek and this creek lies within co-op property lines. When we went to the co-op to investigate creek ownership the employee we talked to was uninformed of the fact that the co-op owned the creek. This may be due to a common misconception that one cannot own a creek; therefore they would assume that the creek was not owned by the co-op. This may lead to a lack of concern towards the creek. The co-op employees do not clean the creek regularly, but if there is noticeable debris they are responsible for its removal. They do not sponsor any creek cleans, but they do host a volunteer clean up annually around Earth Day^{vi}. This helps to promote the overarching ideals of the New Pioneer Co-op. In owning the creek one could ask how much responsibility do they hold as owners, what do we expect them to do with the creek, and how far should we expect one person or business to go? There are programs that work with private owners of the creek in which they can get the creek banks assessed and restored and the city will work to reimburse the majority of the money put into the project. The owner of the creek is expected to pay the upfront costs. This may be more possible for establishments like the co-op, but can we tell them to do this or should they do it on their own?

Theresa Carbrey has done some work on the banks of the creek by cleaning out debris. She has attempted to plant some native grasses such as big blue stem. Alien plants stifled her plan by invading the same area causing death to the grasses that she tried to plant^{vii}. This sort of clean-up is potentially beneficial to the creek in more than one way preventing floods as well as

increasing the aesthetics of the creek banks. These grasses have benefits but nature ultimately dominates and can ruin simple plans like this one. Later we will discuss some other potential plans for bank restoration and flood prevention.

Location

Since 1946, a grocery store has been the business of the block and this may have had an impact on the decision making of the co-op ownership. In owning a corner grocery they had the perfect location for foot traffic of students, faculty and other citizens of Iowa City. More recently there has also been a surge of bicycle traffic. Having an aged facility gives this store a feeling of authenticity and familiarity, but with all the recent flooding activity and potential the co-op is now actively searching for a more stable location. A location in which there is less concern about excess rain and flooding disasters. In relocating, the co-op may lose the feelings associated with the ‘feel’ of the current co-op establishment. Moving is not currently being publicly broadcast because there is more to this move than just relocation. Sarah Walz discussed the “politics” of moving^{viii}. The money that it would take to buy a new building, sell the old building, transport the goods and get the system up and running again.

Future & Recommendations

The most crucial aspect of the future of Ralston Creek is educating the public of the creek and its overall importance and global connection. The people that have the most contact with the downtown district of the creek are college students and they seem to care the least about how the creek looks and how the creek is treated. This is evident in walking along the creek and seeing beer bottles and pizza boxes along with larger debris like bicycle and microwaves. College students are not the only ones that have contact with the creek so it is relevant to spread the word of the creek; that all those little creeks that run through the city are really one big creek that

needs care and attention in order to help improve the quality of not only the creek itself but the Iowa River, the Mississippi River and eventually the Gulf of Mexico. Without this education and compassion the creeks quality will continue to degrade. As the water quality declines so does wildlife and human quality of life. There is a chain reaction to the creek and the role that it plays in human and animal life.

Creek awareness is particularly necessary to businesses like the co-op which has the creek flowing behind it threatening to flood over and ruin business. Luckily living in Iowa City there are options for ways to reduce the flooding potential and improve the overall appeal of the creek. According to email correspondence with Brian Boelk, a civil engineer, there is a private restoration and stabilization project. The focus of this project is to get private creek owners to stabilize creek banks in the area they own to improve the overall creek quality. The benefits of this project are improving creek water quality and bank stability. The only downfall is that the owner must pay upfront costs of having the banks restored and the city is usually able to reimburse 70-95%^{ix}. Meaning the owner does have to pay some of the cost, so it is important for them to understand how important their contribution is. Getting neighbors involved and increasing project size is in the best interests of all involved including contractors that would come and do the work. There are better rates and potentially better rebates if more than one property is involved in this project. Other projects would involve the implementation of pervious pavement or rain-gardens as a more useful way of dispensing of water^x. If the excess water is able to run into rain-gardens or into pervious pavement it does not rush into the creek causing flooding.

The plot of 22 S. Van Buren Street has undergone major changes since the arrival of settlers in 1830's. It started out as trees and grasses that eventually gave way to a railroad

company. Following the destruction of the railroad a stream of corner groceries dominated this area and today is the new pioneer co-op. Ralston Creek has caused this location some damage over the years due to flooding and is now one of the major reasons for the co-op wanting to relocate to a more stable area. The co-op does not come in to contact with much wildlife besides ducks and the occasional drunk college student throwing trash in their creek^{xi}. Though the co-op owns the creek they do not host any official clean-ups. There is a lack of care for the creek on the part of the co-op and more needs to be done to educate people that there are things we can do to help restore the quality of the creek and it starts by knowing that this is one creek that connects the world together.

ⁱ Steve Miller, personal interview, 25 March 2010.

ⁱⁱ Sarah Walz, personal interview, 31 March 2010.

ⁱⁱⁱ Theresa Carbrey, phone interview, 31 March 2010.

^{iv} Theresa Carbrey, phone interview, 31 March 2010.

^v Theresa Carbrey, phone interview, 31 March 2010.

^{vi} Jason Thrasher, email message, 7 April 2010.

^{vii} Theresa Carbrey, phone interview, 31 March 2010.

^{viii} Sarah Walz, personal interview, 31 March 2010.

^{ix} Brian Boelk, email message, 7 April 2010.

^x Brian Boelk, email message, 7 April 2010.

^{xi} Jason Thrasher, email message, 7 April 2010.

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