The Biggest Little Trailer Park:

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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ABSTRACT
This dissertation examines the history of Sun Valley, Nevada, from 1938 (at the signing of the Small Tract Act) to 1976, the year when the era of unregulated and unplanned use of trailers came to an end (at the signing of the Manufactured Housing Construction and Safety Standards Act of 1976). Sun Valley is a case study in land use and policy, planning and non-planning, various waste problems, and in the use and benefits of trailer housing. The case of Sun Valley fits into the broader contexts of suburbanization and development in the western United States. As such, the history of Sun Valley suggests that there is a complex layer of regional history that has yet been unexplored. This dissertation uses the histories of planning, land use, trailer housing, and waste to contribute to a history of the rural landscapes of the Reno and Sparks region as a part of the urban west. The problems of Sun Valley history (waste, trailer housing, non-planning) are the product of the federal land policy that gave rise to its early settlement. BLM agents warned settlers (and applicants) of the problem of planning for new settlement in the region, and precisely the problems they outlined became permanent parts of Sun Valley. Residents left behind a meaningful body of textual artifacts in their sales ads for land in Sun Valley. These documents illustrate sellers’ interpretations of the place, a perspective that otherwise would remain unknown. They illustrated that trailer housing, while sometimes a selling point, was a means to an end: trailers enabled the settlement of the area, and as they remain the most dominant housing form on this landscape, they also remain the vehicle through which settlers continue to acquire and inhabit this rural western landscape.
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CONTENTS
ABSTRACT
i

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
ii

CHAPTER ONE
Introduction
1

CHAPTER TWO
The Small Tract Act
and the Remote Nevada West
1938-1968
24

CHAPTER THREE
Origins and History
of Sun Valley, Nevada
1942-1965
53

CHAPTER FOUR
Planning and Non-planning
in Sun Valley
1955-1973
91

CHAPTER FIVE
Trashing Sun Valley
1951-1976
119

CHAPTER SIX
Land and Trailers
in Sun Valley
1970-1976
156

CONCLUSION
188

BIBLIOGRAPHY
201
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

“Just north of Reno and just south of nowhere is a town full of trailers.”

-Tupelo Hassman

This dissertation is a history of Sun Valley, Nevada, a settlement made up mostly of trailer homes on the northern boundaries of Reno and Sparks. Its development was driven by the availability of trailer housing but also as a result of federal land disposal policy. The development of Sun Valley led to problems with various forms of waste on the landscape which contributed to the deteriorating appearance of the trailer housing. As important as local government efforts to manage these problems were, poor planning on the part of the Washoe County government led residents to have to manage the growth of Sun Valley themselves.

Sun Valley is a “census designated place” in Washoe County, part of the area known to residents of the greater Reno and Sparks areas as the North Valleys. Nearly 20,000 people live in Sun Valley, nearly one-tenth of the population of Reno itself. Sun Valley is approximately seventy percent white and thirty percent Latino. Due to its complex relationship with the government of Washoe County, Sun Valley remains “unincorporated.” While it straddles the city limits of Reno and Sparks, Sun Valley is secluded from those cities.

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2 In addition to Golden Valley, Lemmon Valley, Panther Valley, as well as Stead, Cold Springs, Black Springs, and the more middle class suburb to the East of Sun Valley, Spanish Springs.

3 United State Census Bureau, (census.gov/quickfacts), accessed March 2017; 230,000 people live in Reno, nearly 100,000 in Sparks.

4 Ibid.
While developers built conventional housing tracts at the periphery of Sun Valley in the 1980s and 1990s, and while early settlers sometimes built brick and other conventional houses throughout the area, Sun Valley is made up mostly of trailer homes, just as Tupelo Hassman observed. As such (because trailers are taxed at a lower rate than conventional houses), there exists an insufficient tax base to provide Sun Valley with the basic services it needs. Sun Valley residents rely on the help of the County for services and infrastructure, yet the County has been reluctant in providing those necessities.

The median price for a rental home in Reno is just over $1,000 per month at the time of this writing; the median in Sun Valley approximately $960. Sun Valley is not a drastically cheaper place to live than elsewhere in the Reno area. As a result, it remains a

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matter of choice to live there based on something other than economics. The appeal may be the third-acre lots; the seclusion; the relative absence of regulation; or perhaps an affinity for trailer housing. It is a place people go perhaps to escape the cities. Yet this is not a recent phenomenon. In the 1970s, economists discovered that sixty percent of residents would still choose to live in Sun Valley even if they had the money to live elsewhere.\(^7\)

Sun Valley residents often manage their own growth problems, mostly revolving around waste and housing. As a result of this relationship with the county, Sun Valley is perceived by the county as a problem, evidence for which I find in county records and other documents (and explore in depth in this dissertation). These documents illustrate what Sun Valley would become, a place made up of people who find difficulty acquiring services from a county that lacks the resources and willingness to provide them. The documents also illustrate another emphasis of this dissertation, the role planning and non-planning have played in Sun Valley’s history. Yet, in conversation with residents, it never seemed that life in Sun Valley was problematic the way government records indicate. Instead, residents perceive Sun Valley of the past and present as a relatively normal community of working class people who settled there out of economic necessity or in search of land and affordable homeownership, a process that is perhaps unique to no place.

While problems of planning and regulation are the constant threads of Sun Valley history, there are more pressing concerns for residents than how a property is zoned and

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what kinds of building and construction are permitted by the county. There is, for example, poverty, a condition in which nearly twenty percent of Sun Valley residents live. While on the map Sun Valley appears suburban because of its physical relation to Sparks and Reno, the middle class nature of the American suburb does not exist there. This remains an important piece of the Sun Valley puzzle: in this suburb there are very few middle-class people.

While poverty statistics reveal a grim outlook on life in Sun Valley, nearly seventy percent of homes there are owner-occupied. Only 46% of Reno homes are owner occupied. Sun Valley statistics suggest that there is a different pattern of residential settlement there, one that values ownership over aesthetics, where the realities of class are not concealed by conforming to the middle class image of suburban housing. Yet the statistics reveal more than mere poverty. Only seven percent of Sun Valley adults over age twenty-five have attended college. The low rate (compared with Reno, where more than 30 percent attended college) suggests that there have been more pressing concerns than higher education among Sun Valley residents. Work for many Sun Valley residents has been limited to service jobs in Reno and Sparks (casino, warehousing, and service industries no doubt responsible for the low need for college-level career

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8 Ibid.


10 Census; “Reno City, Nevada,” “Sun Valley CDP, Nevada.”

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.
As a result, the average per capita income in Sun Valley is $17,000, 35% lower than Reno where it is $26,000, 45% lower than the national average of approximately $29,000.\textsuperscript{14}

Sun Valley is 15 square miles of land with 6,600 housing units and a population density of 1,300 people per square mile (just over half the density of Reno’s 2,100 people per square mile).\textsuperscript{15} The average population density for Washoe County in general is 66 people per square mile, and 24 for Nevada as a whole, suggesting that (while much of the state is rural and scarcely settled) there exists a markedly cramped environment in Sun Valley by comparison, especially for a people (as I uncover in this dissertation) who found the relatively rural landscape a compelling enough reason to live in Sun Valley instead of Reno or Sparks proper.\textsuperscript{16}

Sun Valley residents most often interact with county regulators when the conditions of their neighborhoods become intolerable. Based on population, spacious Sun Valley lots are as appealing today as they were 70 years ago when Harry Gepford first subdivided and sold land there. And just as that land was appealing enough to attract applicants to the Small Tract program that enabled settlers to live on five acres if they could find a way to do so, the tradition of adapting to trailer housing in order to make landownership achievable remains part of Sun Valley life. Yet, it is not the statistics that


\textsuperscript{14} Census, “United States.”

\textsuperscript{15} Census, “Reno” and “Sun Valley.”

\textsuperscript{16} Census, “Washoe County, Nevada.”
make Sun Valley an exceptional place. It is the place that exists beneath those social forces, the land, the housing, the neighborhoods, and the landscape that continue to make Sun Valley stand out. Just as Hassman wrote in 2012, Sun Valley is a town full of trailers.

Under the Small Tract Act of 1938 (STA), the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and its predecessors the General Land Office and the Grazing Service allowed for a pattern of land disposal that took a permanent shape on lands north of Reno and Sparks. That pattern involved settlers taking land that was otherwise unusable or unappealing, using whatever housing they could afford in order to settle it, and struggling to find adequate infrastructure as more and more people took to the land (just as BLM agents predicted). In most cases, settlers used trailer housing in order to afford settling on or acquiring Sun Valley land, and the sequence of events that followed over the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, are the subject of this dissertation.

BLM agents warned settlers against the use of trailer housing and of the dangers of settling remote lands. Those dangers included isolation from surrounding communities and becoming a burden on the resources of those communities and local governments. The warnings suggested to applicants the likelihood that they would, in fact, be responsible for their own well-being in the face of these obstacles. In settling these unsettled, assumedly unappealing parts of the west, settlers would be on their own to get by as best they could.17

17 I use geographer Suzanne Reimer’s (et. al.) concept of “getting by” to mean struggling financially to navigate the complexities of low incomes and costs of living, mainly associated with housing costs. Her work is specific to fragmentation in the labor force and “sociospatial divisions of labor” that result in workers holding multiple jobs in order to afford their housing and other costs of living, a cyclical process
The bureaucratic fears of improper development and poor planning in fact materialized to become Sun Valley. As a result, Sun Valley and its residents lived in the state of tension with the county government that arose from poor planning and the management of these problems. The problems were difficult to solve and came, instead, to define much of the Sun Valley experience. Sun Valley became a permanent landscape created by processes that were experimental and expected to be temporary (as evidenced by the use of temporary trailer housing). It is the permanent result of BLM’s search for settlers to take the unappealing parts of the region and use them for little else than to get by.

Sun Valley is part of a west not of the frontier but also not of the contemporary urban west. Instead it lies somewhere in between. With its roots in the rural landscapes of the region, Sun Valley is part of a suburban west. Scholarship in this field often focuses on major metropolitan regions (such as San Francisco, Portland, Phoenix, and Denver, for example) and their development patterns and histories. I analyze Sun Valley in this context because it contributes to the intersections of urban and western United States history by illustrating the effects of non-planning, waste, and trailer housing, each of which are pivotal in any urban study and each of which took a unique shape in the Sun Valley case. Unusual landscapes such as Sun Valley are as illustrative of the complexities of urban western history as are the histories of major cities. Additionally, the Sun Valley case allows for the use of land policy as the foundation out of which many of these

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processes took shape. And the use of land policy in Sun Valley history illustrates the role (and the appeal) of the rural landscape in the development of western places.

Sun Valley is significant because it illustrates the ways trailers were symptomatic of a history of non-planning in the suburban west context. The problems of waste arose in the development and growth of Sun Valley to further complicate the tensions between Sun Valley residents and the county government, problems that were already apparent in the management (or lack thereof) of run-down conditions of Sun Valley housing and the ineffective planning processes that allowed those conditions to materialize.

As western historian Carl Abbott has argued, the terms “city” and “country” did not necessarily categorize urban and non-urban life so simply in the twentieth century west. And indeed Sun Valley is part of what Abbott called the “nonmetropolitan west”: “much of the open west looks as though it has escaped the influence of the big city, but in fact urban growth over the last half-century has not only reshaped cities and suburban zones but also set the terms of life for virtually all of the nonmetropolitan west.”18 The way Sun Valley interacted with the urban influences of Reno, the way Sun Valley as a suburban zone was reshaped, and the ways in which the “terms of life” in Sun Valley were affected by these process, are the focus of this dissertation. The story of Sun Valley is one not of country, not of city, and not of suburb. It is something different that lies at the intersections of these three types of places. The processes involved in its development and settlement remain pivotal in the study of each of these three varying landscapes in the western US.

While its proximity to Reno and Sparks suggests a suburban quality, the prevalence and condition of trailer housing in Sun Valley prohibit such a distinction. The trailer homes have aged rapidly, some not gracefully. While it remained separate from the urban communities of Reno and Sparks, it was closely connected to those communities because Sun Valley provided a housing solution to Reno and Sparks at a time when no other community in the region could.\(^\text{19}\) Sun Valley was a suburban space where landownership was within reach for people who likely would not have achieved it elsewhere, yet the homes were not conventional or suburban-looking, and the residents were not middle class. It was something altogether different that materialized in Sun Valley.

This study finds the origins of Sun Valley not just in the suburban growth of Reno and Sparks but in a twentieth century land disposal program, the Small Tract Act (1938) through which the BLM made five acre parcels of land available to settlers willing to live permanently (which they had to demonstrate by constructing a livable dwelling) on it. Much of that land was remote and arid, usable for little more than living in whatever dwelling the settler could construct. The land was mostly unappealing. BLM officers attempted to prevent settlers from experiencing the hardship of isolation as they distributed the parcels, but the problem was difficult to avoid and became a permanent

\(^{19}\) Early- to mid-twentieth century Reno was, indeed, characterized by a dramatic housing shortage, posed most distinctly by the city’s divorce industry, which caused constant population booms. See Mella Harmon, “Divorce and Economic Opportunity in Reno, Nevada during the Great Depression,” (MS Thesis: University of Nevada, 1998); also William Rowley, “Reno and the Desert of Buried Hopes,” in *East of Eden, West of Zion: Essays on Nevada*, Wilbur Shepperson, ed., (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1989), 119-133.
characteristic of this landscape as those lands were gradually transformed into places like Sun Valley.

In addition to land policy and disposal (chapter one), chapters include analyses of land and property sales (chapter two), the weaknesses of local planning practices (chapter three), waste and junk issues (chapter four), and residents’ responses to the regulatory problems of Sun Valley trailer housing (chapter five). Sun Valley illustrated the ways these development problems played out in the region. Sun Valley was the product of both involvement and non-involvement by planners and the local county government. Each of these phases suggest that the development of Sun Valley relied principally on residents’ efforts to deal with them when government efforts fell short.

While much of the land north of the Reno area was initially settled in the twentieth century under the Small Tract Act, over time, lands were acquired by investors and developers who purchased lands from Small Tract settlers. Among these was Harry Gepford, the primary developer of Sun Valley. In his sales advertisements, Gepford portrayed Sun Valley as a rural place by describing the landscape as ideal for farming and ranching and emphasizing the openness of the land. After witnessing the difficulty of building conventional homes on this land, Gepford began to market Sun Valley as ideal for trailer homes, suggesting that he encouraged quick settlement, even if it brought the problems of this relatively new form of housing.

In the 1950s, after only a few years of development (Gepford’s first advertisement for a Sun Valley property was in 1947), residents had already grown frustrated at illegal dumping as the area’s hillsides and empty lots grew cluttered with garbage, some resembling dump sites. To make matters worse, the City of Reno soon attempted to
relocate its landfill to the Sun Valley area, and residents’ frustrations with waste continued to grow and become part of the Sun Valley experience. Western settlement involved a different waste problem than eastern cities in the twentieth century because waste problems in the early twentieth century generally dealt with crowded cities that lacked space for storing waste. That garbage proved problematic in this case study illustrates the ways in which Sun Valley history is a useful contribution to the study of the problems of western development.20

As Sun Valley grew, its residents bore the burden of solving the waste problems. The Sun Valley volunteer firefighters were among the most active in organizing the efforts. The firefighters organized cleanup campaigns that brought residents together to clean up Sun Valley neighborhoods in order to solve both of the problems. Sellers during the 1950s and 1960s emphasized cleanliness in advertisements, while problems of waste in Sun Valley seemed to be getting worse.21

Despite growing challenges posed by waste and trailer housing, Sun Valley residents adapted to the new landscape and developed the desire to stay. Historian Robert Hine argued that in creating new communities in the west, settlers existed “in a definable space, and its geography and architecture [fed] its sense of belonging together.”22 Hine’s


definition made physical geography and architecture central to understanding a people’s “sense of belonging together.” Trailer homes were the element of Sun Valley’s physical landscape (in addition to waste and junk) that instilled in residents this sense of belonging together. Most residents lived in them and thereby suffered the poor treatment of a county government that created policy for Sun Valley explicitly based on the prevalence of trailer homes.

One of the responses I emphasize was Sun Valley sellers’ efforts to focus not on the trailer housing that made up the landscape, but instead to focus on the land itself. Land was the original appeal of settling the region, as Chapter One explores. Sellers later insisted that the homes were not nearly as important, that buyers should consider looking past them in contemplating life in Sun Valley. Yet at the same time they were emphasizing the real value of the trailer homes. It was because of those same trailer homes that the settlers had a means to inhabit the land. This complex relationship underlies the significance of both trailers and land in Sun Valley. In the intervening chapters, recounting the problems of planning and non-planning, waste, and the efforts of residents to manage their community on their own, emerges the history of Sun Valley. Sellers came full-circle to a point where, in fact, the land that initially drew people to this place continued decades later to serve as its primary appeal.

This study is informed by geographers John Jakle and David Wilson, who in *Derelict Landscapes* (1992) argued that the relationship between disinvestment, abandonment and decay are the result of the modern American attitude toward the built
environment, which in many places has become utilitarian rather than people-oriented.\textsuperscript{23}

When a community is not worthy of investment or conventional development, it can experience cycles of decay and disinterest by government bodies as well as investors and potential residents. Sun Valley residents responded to these processes by cleaning up their community on their own, struggling for better services from the county, and working (in their sales advertisements) to convince people to want to live there.

In \textit{Wheel Estate} (1991), the most detailed and influential account of mobile homes and mobile homes in American culture, historian Allan Wallis explored the mobile home’s development in the early-to-mid twentieth century as a means through which Americans were able to migrate west. Trailer housing enabled a mobile people to make homes in harsh and undeveloped parts of the region.\textsuperscript{24} Chapter Five explores the complex

\textsuperscript{23} John Jakle and David Wilson, \textit{Derelict Landscapes: The Wasting of America’s Built Environment} (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1992); James Howard Kunstler, \textit{Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America’s Man-made Landscape} (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994); Jane Jacobs, \textit{Death and Life of Great American Cities} (New York: Vintage, 1961), in which the author openly attacks modern city planning, calling for a return to the walkable living environments that refused to accommodate sprawl. Both authors show the lasting frustration with suburbanization and development patterns that are not people- and community-centered. These works relate to the Sun Valley case by establishing the framework for community development patterns that emphasize the outcome of planning for development rather than planning for a sense of community.

\textsuperscript{24} In doing so, Wallis connected (albeit briefly) the meaning of the mobile home with the West and the people who settled it: “In Turner’s formulation, mobility was equated with individuality. Wilderness provided the challenge, but it was Americans’ willingness to move to meet the challenge that allowed the wilderness to have its regenerative effect” (Allan Wallis, \textit{Wheel Estate: The Rise and Decline of Mobile Homes} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) 45. Also, John Fraser Hart, et al., \textit{The Unknown World of the Mobile Home} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002); Adam Rust, \textit{This is My Home: The Challenges and Opportunities of Manufactured Housing} (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2007) in which the author explores personal and policy stories outlining the realities with which modern mobile home owners live. Also informative on developing a view of the mid-century mobile home were Robert Mills French and Jeffrey Hadden, “Mobile Homes: Instant Suburbia or Transportable Slum,” \textit{Social Problems}, Vol. 6., No. 2, Autumn 1968; Frederick Bair, “Mobile Homes: A New Challenge,” \textit{Law and Contemporary Problems}, Vol. 32, No. 2, Spring 1967; more recent scholarship valuable for the present study include Bige Saatcioglu and Julie Ozanne, “Moral Habitus and Status Negotiation in a Marginalized Working Class Neighborhood,” \textit{Journal of Consumer Research}, Vol. 40, No. 4, December 2013, 692-710; Margarethe Kusenbach, “Salvaging Decency: Mobile Home Residents’ Strategies of Managing the Stigma of ‘Trailer’ Living,” \textit{Qualitative Sociology}, Vol. 32, No. 4, 2009, 399-428; Lee Irby, “Taking Out the Trailer Trash: The Battle Over Mobile Homes in St. Petersburg, Florida,” \textit{The Florida Historical
role of those homes as they came to be perceived by residents as the principal means through which their settlement was possible, an especially meaningful practice as criticism aimed at trailer homes and the people who inhabited them grew in the twentieth century.

Scholarship has recently established that mobile homes, from early-century trailer camps to the modern trailer park, have concentrated in poor neighborhoods often at the edges of towns.\textsuperscript{25} With them, sociologists Bige Saatcioglu and Julie Ozanne argue, come “tribal-like social stigma,” and residents assumed by outsiders to be “crude, ignorant, and lacking in control.”\textsuperscript{26} Much of the contemporary social science literature on mobile homes and mobile home communities emphasizes this problem of stigma and prejudice.\textsuperscript{27} Trailer life is associated with underprivileged and working class life, with young people or the elderly living on limited incomes, harkening back to the early twentieth century expression that trailer homes were for the “newlywed or nearly dead.”\textsuperscript{28} Sun Valley was designed to be affordable and in turn affordable housing itself came to define the physical landscape just as it would define the way the place would be perceived. The landscape

\textsuperscript{25} Saatcioglu and Ozanne, 695.

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{27} Margarethe Kusenbach, in “Salvaging Decency: Mobile Home Residents’ Strategies of Managing the Stigma of ‘Trailer’ Living,” (\textit{Qualitative Sociology}, Volume 32, 1999, 399-428; “the negative image of trailers dates back to before World War II when small, makeshift accommodations on wheels originally meant for vacationing became popular permanent homes for low-income retirees and migrant workers. The use of trailer homes expanded during World War II in providing housing for defense industry workers near manufacturing plants. Due to the serious housing shortage after the war, the use of many such homes and communities, meant to be temporary, continued” (Kusenbach, 400).

\textsuperscript{28} Wallis, et al.
came to be defined by affordability and the social and economic struggles associated with building an affordable community.

In *Crabgrass Frontier* (1985), suburban historian Kenneth Jackson uncovered many of the ways in which non-urban cultures materialized at city boundaries.\(^\text{29}\) Much suburban development, he argues, has been the product of development that made use of new technologies (automobiles and freeways, for instance) and relieved inner cities of crowding. In this formula, the case of Sun Valley can be interpreted as a suburban history with a different appearance and a different outcome. In Sun Valley, new technologies (in this case housing rather than transportation technologies) served to alleviate a growing housing and space problem. Additionally, Jackson argued that the modern American suburb was the product of mortgage subsidies that effectively enabled the federal government to promote the growth of suburban development for middle-class Americans.\(^\text{30}\) In Sun Valley, however, the un-suburban suburban space (unconventionally built and not middle class) materialized as the result of federal policy, not of mortgage

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Jackson defined suburban as “a planning type and a state of mind based on imagery and symbolism” (Jackson, 5). Sun Valley certainly would not fit the imagery of suburbanization, with site-built tract homes in subdivisions with wide streets and shopping malls. But Jackson also explained that “American suburbs come in every type, shape, size: rich and poor, industrial and residential, new and old” (Jackson, 5).

subsidies as Jackson suggested. Mortgage subsidies aimed at middle-class homebuyers were not a factor in the origins of Sun Valley. Rather, this place was built on working class necessity. The pattern that BLM instigated in the initial disposal of these lands, in which settlers would adopt whatever form of housing would enable them to live there, set an enduring pattern for Sun Valley.

This work relies most heavily on an interdisciplinary historiography of trailers and trailer life. The disciplines range from public policy and geography to anthropology, sociology, and fiction. Geographer Michelle Rhodes argued in *The Manufactured West* (1998) that the mobile home played a vital role in the development of western towns because the western population in the postwar era grew faster than the conventional housing market could support.\(^{31}\) Rhodes’s argument is a useful framework for this study but it must be reconfigured in order to accept that trailer housing in Sun Valley was not merely a safety valve for a growing population. While it did provide the growing Reno and Sparks populations a place to get by through decades of increasingly insufficient housing supplies, it originally enabled people to settle areas that otherwise might not have been settled.\(^{32}\) Without the trailer home, these people would have had difficulty settling

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\(^{31}\) Michelle Jo Ann Rhodes, *The Manufactured West: House Form and Region* (MA Thesis: Simon Fraser University, 1998). Rhodes’s case study was Evergreen, a suburb of Kalispell, Montana. Her argument was, “the increased presence of manufactured housing since World War II exhibited a cyclical growth pattern in response to population pressures in small towns and on urban-rural fringes,” and that population growth in the west exceeded the region’s ability to provide housing (iii).

\(^{32}\) Mella Harmon, *Divorce and Economic Opportunity in Reno, Nevada During the Great Depression* (Master’s Thesis: University of Nevada, 1998): “Housing transients and passers-through was one of Reno’s earliest economic ventures...the census reported the population of Reno to be 12,016, with 2,617 dwellings,” in 1920 (86-7). By 1930, 18,529 residents and 4,282 residences (87); By 1940, 21,317 and 7,309 (87).
this part of the region. Trailers were inexpensive, transportable, and enabled people to live in places like Sun Valley where they were unable to build conventional houses.

In the primary sources, two Sun Valleys emerge: one of representation and one situated in the real material conditions of Sun Valley life. Local sales advertisements illustrated the way Sun Valley property owners marketed their properties and created perceptions of the community. The most useful sources in telling the story of how Sun Valley residents wanted to represent their homes and their community were the classified advertisements that landowners published in local newspapers (Reno Evening Gazette and Nevada State Journal). These advertisements are sunny accounts of a place that otherwise was only represented in news coverage that focused on the problematic, often troubling, aspects of life and development in Sun Valley. The ads remain one of the few bodies of sources that reflect the way Sun Valley residents wanted their community to be perceived. Communications scholar E. S. Lorimor pointed out in “Classified Advertising: A Neglected Medium” that “classified advertising is largely regarded with condescension by the trade and virtually ignored by academia.”

A more complete story of Sun Valley would perhaps not be achievable without these ads. In writing advertisements for the sales of their properties, Sun Valley residents told a significant part of their own story.

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34 Lorimor’s study pointed out the dramatic increase in the importance of the classified ad in the twentieth century with the growing demand for housing (Lorimor, 17).

35 As literary scholar Philip Round pointed out in The Impossible Land (2008), “storytelling makes a place tangible in the human imagination—to those who live there, and to those who only hear the stories” (Phillip H. Round, The Impossible Land: Story and Place in California’s Imperial Valley (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008) 1).
In his study of housing advertisements, geographer John Eyles explained, “[sellers] must take into account the natures of the products which they are trying to sell, but they can also make those natures mean something to us. Advertisements must build up significance from elements of an understood and shared meaning-system or cultural code.”

Portraying the trailer home as a meaningful and worthwhile purchase required the seller to convey that such a purchase would serve a purpose. Sellers knew that trailer homes would not appeal to conventional home buyers, and therefore they chose their language carefully in attempts to appeal to those few readers who would be purchasing a trailer in Sun Valley.

The Sun Valley of the classified ads was an imagined one with a specific purpose: to make people find Sun Valley appealing (first and foremost), and to make people want to live there. Sources such as these depict how sellers wanted the community to be perceived rather than outlining actual events that took place there. As historian David Wrobel observes, sources intended to promote or sell a place or a product are unreliable in constructing a historical past unless the intentions of the authors are disclosed and analyzed openly. However, advertisements (even seemingly trivial classified

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36 John Eyles, “Housing Advertisements as Signs: Locality Creation and Meaning Systems” (Geografiska Annaler, Volume 69, Number 2, 1987) 93.

37 Historian David Wrobel argued that memories “are not just recollected or reproduced, they are constructed, even invented” (David Wrobel, Promised Lands: Promotion, Memory, and the Creation of the American West (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002) 13). Perceptions produced in the local classified ads and elsewhere generated a shared memory of the Sun Valley landscape. Sellers portrayed a community that buyers needed for economic reasons. Additionally, they uncovered issues that were pressing at the time (cleanliness, condition of housing, the pursuit of rural life, etc.), about which they were educated in the advertisements.

38 Wrobel, 4.

39 Ibid.
advertisements) are also meaningful sources because they give a voice to the people who produced them and the audience for whom they were intended. They illustrate the way residents wanted the place to be portrayed and perceived. In composing their advertisements, Sun Valley sellers were selling Sun Valley. Their ads are artifacts of a community’s history created by the residents themselves, hence their importance in constructing a history of the place.

Sellers created the ads with the intention of selling their properties, and as such, may not have been entirely honest about their properties or about the part of Sun Valley in which they were located. But the ads, whether exaggerated or truthful, suggest common themes in Sun Valley representation. Sellers portrayed a place that was clean if they thought buyers were concerned about waste; they emphasized modern housing in times when buyers may have been concerned about the problems of trailer homes; and they illustrated a freedom from regulation at a time when buyers were concerned with the growing influence of county planners. The ads depict a place that was different from the reality that unfolded on the ground. They illustrate a reaction and a response to the realities of Sun Valley’s development which the rest of the chapters explore in newspaper reporting, minutes of government meetings and other government documents.

While the classified advertisements are meaningful and remain crucial in the telling of this story, they do not tell the whole story, and do not serve independently as evidence for the problems and changes that occurred over time. More concrete are the minutes of the Washoe County Board of Commissioners, whose conversations and decisions affected policy while simultaneously affecting Sun Valley residents’ lives and the condition of their community. They also reveal that perceptions of the place and the
problems associated with trailer housing that impacted government processes. The Sun Valley of the minutes was a place troubled by waste and trailer housing. While this story also unfolded in the local press, the details of the minutes were seldom found there. The minutes fill in the gaps left by news coverage and the advertisements by uncovering what transpired at the local government level regarding Sun Valley’s development.

In connecting these two bodies of sources, this dissertation reveals two Sun Valleys: one where people coped with problematic housing and living conditions that grew increasingly problematic over time; another where sellers portrayed clean, rural landscapes and open space in efforts to sway buyers into overlooking those realities. These sources, in addition to local press coverage, residents’ memories collected in author interviews, and socioeconomic data collected by social scientists, portray a complex Sun Valley. The place was a model for the problems of housing and development in the absence of proper planning especially in the context of relative isolation.

In the 1940s and 1950s, with a growing number of applications for land disposal in the west after the end of World War II, BLM officers commonly wrote letters to Small Tract Act applicants describing why their applications were denied. These letters outlined BLM officers’ explanations for why remote parts of the region should not be inhabited. Among the reasons were isolation and the hardship that would ensue as the result of struggling to obtain adequate services and infrastructure. They go on, sometimes briefly, sometimes in great detail, to explain the problems of hardship and isolation and why BLM’s unwritten policy was to discourage living in such conditions in the remote west. The letters illustrated the bureaucratic fine line between usable and unusable in BLM’s
efforts to parcel out these unused and unappealing lands. BLM officers portrayed a region that could only be settled with great caution. Sun Valley, however, grew in precisely the conditions that BLM was attempting to avoid. Sun Valley was developed in an area of high STA activity. Just as was the case for the original settlers on those Small Tract parcels, Sun Valley served as a place where people could have inexpensive land if they were willing to accept that prosperity and abundance were unlikely. The tradition of just getting by that was instilled on parts of the region by STA was continued and made a permanent part of the landscape with the development of Sun Valley.

Much of Sun Valley’s history exists in the memories of the people who lived there in the 1950s at the height of its growth. In interviews, current and former residents describe a community that was ordinary. Trailer homes were seldom a subject of their conversation, nor were waste or illegal dumps; yet these seemed to be the most pressing issues in news sources and in the minutes. This disparity suggests that the documented history was inconsistent with residents’ lived experiences. Interviews portray a community that struggled with hardship, where residents responded by acting to remedy their own development problems with what they described as a close-knit community spirit. They emerged with a strong sense of independence and connectedness to their community, able to act independently of the local county government, which was often absent in the planning and management of Sun Valley’s growth. Interviews with people who did not live there, however, tend to emphasize the shacks, old trailers, and junk that characterized the place. These interviews also acknowledged the persistence of a people who were somehow willing to survive in such an environment. To outsiders, Sun Valley
is not the place depicted by residents. Historical sources shed light on both Sun Valleys and on their troubled interactions.

Coverage of Sun Valley’s development in local newspapers (*Reno Evening Gazette* and *Nevada State Journal*) illustrated the ways that people from Reno, Sparks, and Washoe County perceived Sun Valley and its residents. While there was the occasional account of community gatherings or celebrations, coverage of Sun Valley events primarily focused on development problems. From substandard housing to unplanned development, the newspapers portrayed a community in a constant state of distress.

Finally, just as in former resident Tupelo Hassman’s novel *Girlchild* (2012), Sun Valley has emerged elsewhere in regional fiction. In her collection of short stories, *Battleborn* (2012), author Claire Vaye Watkins described a young child living under the porch of his parents’ Sun Valley home. While exaggerated, the imagery was not far from the portrayals by local newspapers of living conditions in Sun Valley in the 1950s and 1960s. The recurring sentiment in news coverage and fiction alike was a sense of outrage that children could grow up in such a place. Indeed, local newspapers all too frequently published stories about children found by authorities in unlivable conditions. These conditions, the people and the processes responsible for creating them, are the subject of this dissertation. Watkins’s and other stories created a sense that development issues created a complicated place for people to live and raise families. There was also a

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40 Claire Vaye Watkins, *Battleborn* (New York: Penguin, 2012), 44. “Do you really want to hear this?” Watkins wrote, “About the father who made his son live under their porch in Sun Valley, about the hole the boy bored up through the floor so he could watch his stepmother brush her hair in the morning.”
sense that Sun Valley (the community that materialized on those unappealing former BLM lands) was a harsh environment and that the people there would struggle, at best, to get by.

Sun Valley history illustrates the difficulties in making these parts of the unappealing west into livable places. In the face of mounting waste and worsening housing conditions, Sun Valley residents turned part of this harsh western desert into a community that may not have been beautiful (by suburban or any other standards) but was a place where they were willing to live in order to get by. Sun Valley history speaks to the perseverance of people who were able to settle a place where so many were unable or unwilling to live. As Tupelo Hassman pointed out, “with its dry, harsh climate and harsher reputation, Reno could not support suburbs of a middle-class kind.”41 It was precisely this context out of which Sun Valley emerged.

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41 Hassman, 6.
CHAPTER TWO:

THE SMALL TRACT ACT AND THE REMOTE NEVADA WEST, 1938-1968

In March 1949, Reno resident Joseph Patrick O’Brien applied for a parcel of land under the auspices of the Small Tract Act of 1938 (STA). The land was just north of the city and O’Brien claimed he intended to farm it.1 The regional BLM office declared that the land was “not valuable” for that use.2 Land north of the Reno area was considered “more valuable for subdivision into five-acre tracts,” than for agriculture.3 The decision confirmed that if O’Brien were able to farm on the tract, then STA was not the appropriate way for him to acquire the land. It appeared BLM had other intentions for the arid and unused lands that surrounded Reno.

Sun Valley took shape in precisely the area where O’Brien sought to acquire land. And, in fact, much of that land was initially distributed under the Small Tract Act. The program was designed to find settlers who were willing to transform five acres into a home and nothing more, assuming agriculture and irrigation were out of the question due to aridity. As the program gained popularity in the 1940s and 1950s with a demand for postwar housing and land, the undeveloped valleys north of Reno and Sparks began simultaneously to populate. As the lands transitioned from federal to private ownership,

2 Ibid.
BLM was wary of the problems associated with allowing people to make homes on the isolated desert landscapes. The concerns of isolation and hardship about which BLM continually warned applicants in the west became permanent features of the development that ensued in Sun Valley.

In this chapter, I argue that under the terms of the Small Tract Act, BLM sought resilient settlers to inhabit a harsh landscape, and that the problems associated with that pattern of settlement (mostly related to lack of infrastructure and planning) remained visible on the landscape as STA popularity declined in the 1950s and into the 1960s. Interactions among federal agents, local county governments, and individual settlers illustrated the many problems associated with relative isolation and scarcity of resources in this unsettled landscape. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the resourcefulness that settlers demonstrated when they set out to take ownership of their small tracts by surviving in whatever housing they could afford and manage to construct on their lands. Trailer housing was far from conventional in the 1930s and 1940s when STA was introduced, but by the 1950s, this was no longer the case. While BLM agents were reluctant at first to accept it, trailer housing enabled the settlement of the problematic lands that BLM was eager to distribute.

As historian Leisl Carr Childers wrote, “the Great Basin remained wasted land which resisted conventional methods of cultivation and existed outside the scope of normal agrarian economic production. Nevertheless, people did settle the region…not

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everyone stayed, but those that did formed the nucleus of many small rural communities.”

Many of these places, like Sun Valley, took shape outside of urban boundaries yet defied suburban norms of conventional housing and middle class life. Instead, these settlements functioned under the influence of nearby local governments for basic services while remaining connected to urban commerce for jobs and other necessities, developments which BLM agents foresaw as complicated and burdensome for all parties involved.

Art historian Kim Stringfellow observed in *Jackrabbit Homestead* (2009), “by the time the Small Tract Act was enacted in 1938, the federal government determined that the majority of public lands still available for homesteading in the lower forty-eight states were essentially inadequate for previous intended uses, such as farming and grazing.” As they administered STA, BLM agents redefined the barriers to western settlement and made the remaining land available to a new class of settler. BLM expected this new settler to build a home on the land and live there, nothing more. Through STA, BLM began the process of deciding which lands would be considered usable under the new program as well as how the five-acre parcels would be surveyed and distributed.

Historian Jacob Sowers is one of few scholars to study STA in detail. He finds its origins in the 1920s and early 1930s when California physician James Luckie proved the health benefits of sending his asthma and tuberculosis patients to live in the dry climate.

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of Twentynine Palms in the central Southern California desert.\textsuperscript{7} Luckie asserted that life in the desert cured his patients of these and other respiratory diseases. When Paul Witmer, a supervisor with Interior’s Office of Land Management in Washington D.C., learned of Luckie’s success, he proclaimed that “the desert had great promise.”\textsuperscript{8} Witmer and his staff were excited at the possible renewed interest by Americans in these unsettled western lands. However, the agricultural requirements in Interior’s various land disposal programs, which up to this point were still mandatory, would have to be omitted if a new program was to succeed.\textsuperscript{9} The Department of the Interior reported that “the act had its origins in suggestions for legislation arising from experience with land settlement in Southern California. Persons who desired to settle in desert areas mainly for health reasons had found that there was no public land law under which one could acquire a tract of public lands for such purposes.”\textsuperscript{10} The department claimed “small tracts” would be ideal for people seeking a climate that was “particularly suitable for respiratory ailments and vacationers,” and that there was “an active market” (demand) for such land.\textsuperscript{11} The movement of people to the western deserts for health reasons gave western lands a new purpose, suggesting that the climate had healing powers and that there was a reason for people to want to settle such land, even if commercial or agricultural potential

\textsuperscript{7} Jacob Sowers, “A Phenomenology of Place Identity for Wonder Valley, California: Homesteaders, Dystopics, and Utopics” (Doctoral thesis, Kansas State University, 2010), 75.

\textsuperscript{8} Sowers, 77.

\textsuperscript{9} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{10} United States Department of Interior—Bureau of Land Management, \textit{The Small Tract Act: Guide Book for Managing Existing Small Tract Areas}, April 1980, 4. On June 1, 1938, President Franklin Roosevelt signed STA into law.

were lacking. Settlers were willing to attempt settling it because there were benefits associated with rural life in the west, whether it was the experience of relative isolation or the health benefits of desert air. The attraction in Southern California was the restorative effects of desert living, but elsewhere in the west, the emphasis would be the availability of nearly free land.

BLM deemed many tracts “unsuitable for homestead entry,” because moisture was “insufficient for agriculture.” Therefore, land disposal under acts with agricultural or irrigation requirements were not feasible. According to BLM, in lands classified for STA use, the cost of water was “too high in relation to prospective returns from the land.” Applicants seeking to acquire larger land holdings under the Homestead Act or the Desert Lands Act were directed by BLM officers to re-apply under the Small Tract Act if the agricultural provisions of these former acts were not likely to be satisfied in a particular area.

BLM claimed to classify parcels as suitable for STA use “based upon such factors as topography, location, access and availability of public facilities.” Applications were “rejected where the land is unsuitable for settlement and homesite development because of rough topography, lack of an available water supply, and inaccessibility.” While the program was designed to encourage people to use lands that were otherwise useless,

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13 Ibid.


15 Ibid.
BLM did not aim to put people into situations where their sustained settlement on that land was not feasible. The goal of STA was not to subject settlers to unnecessary hardship. In order to avoid causing such hardship, inaccessibility remained (along with aridity and rugged topography) among the primary disqualifying criteria for land to be usable under STA.

Settlers would only be granted one five-acre tract under STA. This allowed as many new settlers as possible a chance to claim land and implied that BLM believed there would be consistent interest in doing so. Building and maintaining this interest was one of BLM’s primary goals under STA, but the lands were rural and isolated which made creating a public interest in and demand for the program a challenge. The often isolated places where lands qualified for STA disposal meant problems for county and state governments that were responsible for managing the rural areas. Backlogs of applications demonstrated that there was a significant demand for landownership under STA. BLM agents rejected Small Tract applications for land that was already approved for use under Homestead or Desert Lands applications because such classification implied that the land was irrigable and therefore valuable beyond mere residential development. STA classification was reserved for land that was not. Aridity kept the land classification process simple: “Entry under the homestead or desert land laws was

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not practicable in these areas since no irrigation water was available.” Interior assigned these commercially unusable lands to STA applicants making otherwise useless arid western land valuable under the terms of the new policy.

BLM counted individual residential settlement among its top priorities. STA plots were leased for an initial three-year period for approximately twenty-five dollars in fees. Lessees were required to build a home during this three-year period, demonstrating their intention to permanently settle the land. After three years (but no more than five, during which they would lease the land for an average of $1.25 per acre), applicants had the option to purchase their tract outright for its appraised value (usually five to ten dollars per acre) if they had constructed and inhabited a home on it. From application fees to the lease and eventual purchase, a five-acre small tract cost only a few hundred dollars.

From 1940 to 1944, the General Land Office (GLO) received an average of 330 applications for small tracts per year. In 1945 alone, as war veterans returned home in

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24 Guide Book, 10. Also, Historian Marion Clawson argued that the Small Tract Act was “important as a means of getting small areas of land into private hands.” (Marion Clawson and Burnell Held, The Federal Lands: Their Use and Management (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1957), 109.)
need of places to live, GLO received over 3,000 applications for small tracts.\textsuperscript{25} By June 30 of that year, Interior had surveyed and classified over 45,000 acres in the western US (mainly in California, Nevada, and Arizona) for distribution as small tracts.\textsuperscript{26} By 1949, after a decade of activity (and under the management of the new Bureau of Land Management), there were 7,500 active Small Tract leases.\textsuperscript{27} Three years later, there were 25,000, yet only 300 parcels sold outright to the applicant after the leasing period expired.\textsuperscript{28} The numbers indicate that the program was popular, and indeed, generated much settlement in the region. Data indicates that settlers continued to view these settlement opportunities as temporary, however, because so many STA contracts did not result in the purchase of the land.

Citing the U.S. Supreme Court’s ruling in \textit{Burfenning v. Chicago} (1896), BLM did not classify lands under STA or any other program that were within or near city limits because such lands were likely to be used for suburban development.\textsuperscript{29} \textit{Burfenning} demonstrated that a land disposal policy preserved (and in some cases created) a rural pattern of settlement in the west but not at the expense of suburban growth. STA applications for lands that were already zoned for residential use or were expected to be zoned as such in the future, were rejected.\textsuperscript{30} Similarly, in an effort to avoid burdening

\textsuperscript{25} \textit{Guide Book}, 10.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid. 37,000 of those 45,000 acres were confined to San Bernardino County, California.
\textsuperscript{27} Muhn and Stuart, 72.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
nearby communities and local governments with sporadic new development, BLM rejected applications for parcels that prevented adjacent landowners from easy access to their land.\(^{31}\) Aside from the Burfenning argument, BLM reserved the right to cite any reasonable factor affecting a parcel of land in its decision-making processes.\(^{32}\) Among these factors were current, future, and potential land uses.\(^{33}\)


\(^{32}\) Case A-30639, “Appeal from the Bureau of Land Management: Homestead application rejected.” Nevada, August 31, 1967. Edwin H. Richardson, applicant. BLM did not allow prior misclassifications to dictate the most appropriate current and future uses (Case A-28592, “Appeal from the Bureau of Land Management: Homestead application rejected.” Nevada, February 21, 1961. John James King, applicant.). For instance, lands that were classified under the Homestead Act but were struggling to sustain irrigation for agriculture were often reclassified as “more valuable and suitable for small tract suburban occupancy than for agricultural use” (Case A-28592.). Further, after applying for and being rejected for a parcel under the Homestead Act, applicants were not allowed to change their application to seek part of that parcel under STA (Case A-26835, “Appeal from the Bureau of Land Management: Application for homestead entry rejected.” Idaho: March 26, 1954. Esther N. Freese, applicant.). This was due in large part to the classification process that was required by BLM to take place before BLM considered completed applications for the land (Case A-26835.). Land was only distributed for the purpose for which it was classified. Also, BLM rejected applications when land was potentially usable for other necessary public services such as airports (Case A-25775. “Appeal from the Bureau of Land Management: Small tract application rejected.” Blackfoot (Idaho): April 11, 1950. James P. Kelly, applicant. Further, lands that were expected to be used as “power site reserves” or other utility grounds, and lands that had or were expected to have mining claims filed were also excluded from use under STA (Case A-28740, “Appeal from the Bureau of Land Management: Small tract application rejected.” Idaho: February 8, 1963. John Rovetto, applicant. Also Case A-29389, Arizona: September 20, 1963. Nina Werner, applicant. Also Case A-24669, Arizona: August 15, 1947. Bob Barber, applicant. Also Case A-29584, Utah: September 26, 1963. Barbara Storey, applicant. Also Case A-31063, Nevada: April 1, 1970. Ernst Higbee, et al., applicants (also referenced as “United States v. Ernest Higbee, et al.”)). Also Case A-27521, Idaho: December 9, 1957. John Rovetto, applicant. Also A-24691, Roseburg (Oregon): March 30, 1948. E.J. Schneider, applicant. Also Case A-25858, Roseburg (Oregon): May 31, 1950. Duane B. Smithers, applicant. Additionally, applications were “rejected where the land applied for is withdrawn as a part of a Public Water Reserve and is needed in connection with the development of a water conservation program for the area” (Case A-25839. “Appeal from the Bureau of Land Management: Small tract application rejected.” Los Angeles: December 7, 1950. Lillian H. Gaddis, applicant.). Lands that were “withdrawn from entry” pursuant to other acts, such as the Reclamation Act of 1902 (common on western land), were “not subject to disposal under the Small Tract Act.” (Case A-25874. “Appeal from the Bureau of Land Management: Small tract application rejected.” Los Angeles: June 26, 1950. Margaret Awalt, applicant.)

\(^{33}\) Any tract that was first classified by BLM as “more suitable for a recreational site” was rejected (Case A-26805. “Appeal from the Bureau of Land Management: Small tract application rejected.” Phoenix: February 8, 1954. George T. Aldridge, John E. Aldridge, applicants.). BLM reserved these lands in their commitment to improving the community-focus of new western development. BLM made efforts in their classification and approval processes to ensure that the lands they distributed under STA would benefit surrounding settlers and communities. The policy would adapt to surrounding land uses so as to make settlement more permanent. It would ease the process of settlement for new settlers (having access to
Geographer Paul Starrs argued, however, that in administering western land programs, “the farther west, the more fraught with problems was the application of legislation.” BLM stated that “the law itself placed few restrictions on the conditions under which a small tract may be leased or sold. However, various requirements were established by regulations of the Department of the Interior to carry out the intent and purpose of the act in relation to other public land laws.” Implementing STA in the western US, far from the legislators and officers who created and administered it, was a challenge.

Some applications for small tracts were delayed for years (sometimes five or more) pending the processing of other claims to the land in addition to the delays caused by ongoing backlogs of applications which BLM was often too understaffed to process promptly. “No matter how hard Bureau adjudicators worked,” historian James Muhn observed, “the backlog of cases grew each year. Between 1953 and 1960, the number of

existing resources) and prevent causing strain on existing communities and local and state governments who would have to manage new developments taking shape in their rural areas. Many applications were denied because a public agency planned to use the land for the benefit of surrounding communities. If lands were “sought by a municipality for recreational purposes,” BLM would give preference to the locality (over an individual applicant), but the land had to be “classified as suitable for such disposition” (Case A-26805. Also Case A-25458, The Dalles (Oregon): January 5, 1949. B.G. Shepherd and Ludwig F. Hartung, applicants. Also Case A-28721, Oregon: April 29, 1963. Otis W. Anderson, applicant.). BLM gave local governments and their recreational sites preference when the land was in a location that could benefit surrounding communities, for parks, etc. Recreational classifications were “in the public interest” (Case A-26805. “Appeal from the Bureau of Land Management: Small tract application rejected.” Phoenix: February 8, 1954. George T. Aldridge, John E. Aldridge, applicants. Also, Case A-28603, Phoenix: August 16, 1961. Joseph M. Schuck, applicant.). Once classified as a small tract, however, BLM claimed it might change the classification were it discovered that the land was more beneficial for recreational use (Case A-26805.). Recreation and residential development were regarded as equally important. Case A-24589, “Appeal from the Bureau of Land Management: Private exchange under section 6 Taylor Grazing Act, rejected.” Carson City: April 4, 1947. Peter M. Smith, Byron A Morgan, applicants.

34 Starrs, Paul, Let the Cowboy Ride: Cattle Ranching in the American West (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 54.


36 Case A-28975/A-28976, “Appeals from the Bureau of Land Management: Sale of small tracts authorized at prices higher than the prices at which applicants were first allowed to apply for purchase.” Nevada: August 6, 1962. Kenneth W. Swallow, et al., applicants.
unclosed cases and unanswered applications increased from 25,000 to 45,000." The backlogs were a good sign: STA created a growing demand for settlement in places that BLM had previously perceived as unappealing.

BLM officers did not allow the growing demand to inflate land values for STA disposal. Appraisals for small tracts were generally low, ensuring that landownership remained within reach for applicants. While BLM claimed to give fair-market appraisals on small tracts, historians Marion Clawson (who also held various executive-level positions with Interior) and Burnell Held pointed out that “land made available under the Small Tract Act is usually priced below the competitive market.” At the very least, BLM required the purchase price to cover the costs of surveying the land. For applicants, one of the most appealing features of small tracts was this low cost.

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37 Muhn and Stuart, 90.

38 One of the broader purposes of STA was to “promote the beneficial use of public lands and at the same time to safeguard the public interest in the land” (“Land Sublease is Forbidden on U.S. Tracts,” Reno Evening Gazette, September 12, 1955, page 8). BLM measured tracts by “location, character, and demand,” judging not only the likelihood that a parcel was useful for a particular purpose, but whether or not people would be interested in living on it (Case A-27047. “Appeal from the Bureau of Land Management: Application for homestead entry rejected.” Nevada: January 14, 1955. Darwin M. Cecil, Joseph Casaletto, applicants).


40 Guide Book, 7. Uses other than residential ones were rejected, especially those that would “interfere with its proper use” (Case A-24156, “Motion for Rehearing: motion denied.” September 18, 1945. Southern Nevada Industries, LTD, applicant.). “Proper use” was, by this time, defined for small tracts as residential. While the original text of the Small Tract Act included business and recreational sites, applications for these uses were minimal. For the first decade and a half of STA administration, only surveyed land could be distributed under the Act. BLM rejected claims for parcels that required the removal of any evidence of past use, such as fences (Case A-25661. “Appeal from the Bureau of Land Management: Homestead application rejected.” Salt Lake City: April 21, 1949. Mathoni M. Pratt, applicant.). Removal of fences and other structures would “create serious problems of range management,” and rejection on these grounds was “in the public interest” because approval would cause problems for managers of grazing districts (Case A-25661.). Additionally, fences were remnants of settlement, indicating that there was something worth protecting, that the land there was not without use.
In 1954, Congress enacted a series of STA amendments to allow unsurveyed parcels to be included in distribution. The change allowed BLM to classify and distribute parcels under the policy without the expense of surveying and marking the parcels individually. Rather, previous surveys and maps could be used by BLM agents to determine vacancy and that the land was usable under the program. The resulting decrease in BLM expenditures ensured that the cost of Small Tracts remained low. In addition to this crucial change in the law, amendments also authorized small tract distributions to businesses and local and state governments, which vastly increased STA disposal activity and increased the amount of land BLM believed could be transformed from unsettled to developed. The amendments caused a dramatic surge in STA applications, which peaked in 1955. According to application numbers, STA was nearly inactive by 1960.

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42 Like other land disposal programs, STA helped eliminate the class barriers that stood in the way of the average American’s ability to own land. While other land policies “played farmer against the land.” STA asked only that settlers call the West home. It aimed to attract anyone eager to settle and make a home in the rural west, but it also attracted working people who could benefit from a land program that would afford them the landownership and lifestyle that might have otherwise been out of reach. Paul F. Starrs, Let the Cowboy Ride: Cattle Ranching in the American West (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1998) 41: “Since the time of the Louisiana Purchase, U.S. land policies have played farmer against the land; private land for farming is to be wrested from an unaccommodating nature.”

43 Guide Book, 5. Also Muhn and Stuart, 90. In many cases, if land was not likely to be surveyed in a timely manner, BLM would grant a “pending classification” exception (Guide Book, 24.). Under this exception, parcels could not be claimed or applied for by other applicants, and was not available for post-lease purchase until the “pending” phase was removed. Swiftness made the process work in favor of willing applicants.

44 Muhn and Stuart, 91.
Figure 2: While Small Tract applications out-numbered other land programs, it reached its peak in 1955 and was in decline by 1960.\textsuperscript{45}

If BLM determined that distributing land in a particular area “would not be in the public interest,” applicants could lease it for a limited term, under the condition that they vacate the land upon the expiration of the lease and not plan to inhabit the land permanently.\textsuperscript{46} If a parcel was classified as “suitable for small tract purposes,” BLM would not allow it to be used for any other disposal program.\textsuperscript{47} Suitable for STA use meant unsuitable for other purposes. So if a parcel was expected to fail at agriculture, it

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{46} Guide Book, 24. Also Case A-26222, Los Angeles: May 4, 1951. Albert Mendel, Edwin A. Roberts, applicants. In many cases, when applications for a specific region were few or non-existent, BLM put thousands of acres up for auction. These auction sales took place without the leasing requirement of the Act in order to expedite permanent settlement (Guide Book, 24). While applications for unsurveyed land were declined, applications for unsurveyed parcels received preference when the parcels were later surveyed and became available (Guide Book, 6. USDI, Case A-25646/25721, “Appeals from the Bureau of Land Management: Small tract applications rejected.” Los Angeles: June 28, 1949. Myrtly B. Muntean, Terrance B. Black, applicants).

was assigned to the roster of small tracts. STA was the disposal program of last resort, to be employed when public land was unsuitable for other disposal programs.

There were problems associated with distributing parcels to individuals without addressing their connection to nearby cities. Such disposal posed an increasing concern for BLM because of the potential burdens it would cause cities or other local governments. Those city and county governments would bear the costs of providing services to people settling these lands and BLM’s treatment of this problem was under constant scrutiny from those local governments. While many applications and appeals demonstrated BLM’s tendency to award small tracts to individual settlers, some parcels were supposed to be distributed as “community sites” because of the complications associated with isolation. Without a sense of connectedness to nearby communities, settlers faced greater hardship and the effort at permanently settling and inhabiting the rural West was more likely to fail. However, in 1946, Assistant Secretary of the Interior, C. Girard Davidson argued that the disposal of public lands in small parcels under the Small Tract Act would not inhibit the growth of communities or of setters’ intentions of


49 Case A-24443, “Appeal from the Bureau of Land Management: Application rejected.” Carson City: November 8, 1946. Benjamin C. Spencer, applicant. A report published by the Department of Interior in 1980 explained the Small Tract Act as follows: “The Small Tract Act of June 1, 1938, authorized the Secretary of the Interior, in his discretion, to sell or lease any tract, not exceeding five acres, of vacant, unreserved public lands, or certain classes or reserved public lands, which he may classify as chiefly valuable for residence, recreation, business or community sites” (Guide Book, 4).
being connected to nearby cities. While physical remoteness was acceptable under the STA philosophy (as a matter of necessity), isolation (a choice on the part of the settler) was not. BLM reported that as a matter of policy, “isolated settlement would be avoided if it imposed heavy burdens on local government,” indicating their disapproval of isolation. BLM made this effort to assist both the settler and the nearby cities, aiming not to burden either with the consequences of isolation. Not only would the program encourage more permanent settlement but local governments would not encounter added costs associated with doing so.

By the mid-1950s, the Reno BLM office was among the busiest in the nation because of the demand for small tracts in the area. More than three-quarters of STA leases in northern Nevada were made in the area between Sun Valley and the nearby Reno Army Air Base, causing a dramatic population increase on the lands north of Reno and Sparks. Seventy-five percent of Small Tract leases in Nevada between the years 1938 and 1955 took place in the highlighted area:

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52 BLM required “evidence tending to show that purchasers of small tracts could pay total charges which might confront individual householders if all of the different services needed” and all the “necessary facilities for community life” (Case A-27772).


Figure 3: Small Tract Act transactions populated the areas between Reno and Sparks and the Reno Army Air Base (“Reno Stead Airport” in the image), especially encouraging the growth of Sun Valley.\textsuperscript{55}

BLM was reluctant to dispose of public lands too close to existing towns and cities under STA. Their correspondence indicated that they were aware that such disposal increased the longevity of settlement on the tracts. As a result, the areas north of Reno and Sparks were popular among small tract applicants in the state.

BLM claimed to have a “long-standing policy of cooperating with local governmental officials” and that it would refuse “to classify the lands under that act,” if doing so created problems for local governments and other agencies.\textsuperscript{56} Cooperating with local governments indicated that BLM wanted to uphold STA’s goal of making the

\textsuperscript{55} U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management, General Land Office Records. Accessed September 2014. This Interior depiction shows the 76% of the area’s Small Tract settlements that took place in the highlighted area, Reno’s North Valleys, including Sun Valley.

\textsuperscript{56} Case A-30520.
distribution of lands less difficult for settlers, nearby communities, and local governments alike. They also claimed that they would “cooperate with local governmental officials to assure that proper development of an area will be effectuated by the disposal or lease of the public lands.”57 “Proper development” implied that BLM took local governmental needs into consideration in disposal practices.58

While BLM had been administering the program since 1938, it became a recurring problem for the Washoe County, Nevada, government in 1955.59 On March 23, 1955, Washoe County commissioners met with BLM representatives E. R. Greenslet and A. L. Simpson to discuss applications for Small Tracts in Washoe County. County representatives agreed that many of the areas BLM proposed to distribute as Small Tracts were “unfit for residential use.”60 Greenslet and Simpson agreed that BLM would not distribute lands to applicants who were unable to meet county building standards. Over the next decade, the County Commission would repeatedly hear from applicants and

57 Case A-30520.

58 One BLM policy (“State Selection for Internal Improvement”) stated that where “the classification of land as proper for selection by States…is preferred over the classification of land for small tract purposes” (Case A-26745, “Appeal from the Bureau of Land Management: State selection rejected.” Nevada: May 20, 1953. State of Nevada, applicant.). States were given preference over individual applicants since state management of the land would mean the land was no longer under the watch of BLM. In 1955, Orme Lewis, Assistant Secretary of the Interior, addressed the “state problem”: “merely because land can be properly classified as suitable for small-tract application is not sufficient reason for refusing to classify that land as proper for State selection” (Case A-26952, “Appeal from the Bureau of Land Management: Small-tract applications rejected.” Nevada: February 11, 1955. Isabel Gunnerson, et al., applicants). Lewis went on to point out, “where a State selection conflicts with an attempt by a private person to obtain the same land, the State selection should ordinarily take precedence, for the reason that Congress has obligated the United States to fulfill certain statutory land grants to the States” (Case A-26952).

59 According to geographer Jacob Sowers, STA was considered by the federal government an “expendable domestic-centered measure” and therefore went “unfunded throughout [WWII]” (Jacob Sowers, “A Phenomenology of Place Identity for Wonder Valley, California: Homesteaders, Dystopics, and Utopics,” (Doctoral thesis, Kansas State University, 2010), 79). After that, it took nearly a decade to gain appeal and support throughout the western states.

BLM officers eager to settle rural Washoe County. The county’s objection represented a clash between BLM and local governments, a problem BLM officers intended to avoid but were unable to do. Local fire officials were present at many of the meetings and stated that many of the proposed small tract areas would be difficult to reach in emergencies. The tracts were too isolated to be safe for settlement, especially since any services residents of the county were entitled to would be very difficult to provide. As the small tract areas north of Reno and Sparks transformed into Sun Valley throughout the 1950s and 1960s, these services, especially fire protection, would remain problematic.

BLM officers met again with the Washoe County Commission on January 20, 1956, asking for approval to dispose of lands in the county’s jurisdiction. Commissioners maintained that until the county or the state was able to construct roads to remote areas, they would not vote in favor of the land disposal. Additionally, commissioners wanted to delay approvals until they and their staffs established a county building code that would assist in managing development that took place in the remote areas. In proposing that improvements to the building code come first, the commissioners wanted to establish what constituted substandard housing. BLM had dealt with the problem since requiring only “permanent [dwelling] improvements” in STA contracts. Settlers sometimes interpreted the clause in ways with which BLM did not agree, such as installing trailers on the land instead of building conventional homes. The problems caused by these early

62 See Chapter Three of this dissertation.
64 Minutes, Book T, 27, September 20, 1956.
STA cases stimulated the local county government to want to regulate the new kind of development and to establish codes to manage the new growth.

Over the next seven years (from 1956 to 1963), as BLM dealt with a constant flow of STA applications, Washoe County commissioners were advised by planners, engineers and other staff not to allow STA development in rural Washoe County. Foremost among the county’s reasons was its inability to enforce building codes in the remote areas. Additionally, the county did not believe it was responsible for developing roads in areas that were not regularly traveled. The county was not prepared to manage the remote development STA was initiating. County officials decided that they would contact the appropriate federal offices and members of Congress to suggest that BLM “adopt a more responsible small tract policy which will not disregard local ordinances.” The county claimed that BLM was enacting land policies that showed no regard for geography, which made road construction and improvements both difficult and expensive. County engineer George Oshima urged commissioners to insist that BLM’s small tract maps from then on “be designed with attention to topography.” The county argued that BLM was engaging in poor planning practices, which the county was not prepared to remedy. However, the county claimed it would not object to STA

66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
69 Ibid.
70 Minutes, Book X, 239, April 15, 1964.
71 Ibid. Also, Minutes, Book W, 428, September 5, 1963. Also, Book X, 373, September 25, 1964. Commissioners argued that much of the rural county was “not suitable for residential development” simply because of sewer and septic needs. Additionally, commissioners pointed out that many of the rural areas
classification within its boundaries if BLM made it their policy to warn applicants of the potential dangers of living in these remote areas and the conditions that would arise from attempting to live in the poorly planned places that materialized from this practice of land disposal.⁷² BLM representatives agreed to do so. In addition to this precaution, BLM acknowledged that it would contribute funds for any road construction and maintenance that was necessary for STA disposal in remote parts of the county.⁷³ BLM and the Washoe County commissioners agreed that living under these harsh conditions was permissible given full disclosure and consent of the settlers.

After a decade of similar interactions with BLM, Washoe County commissioners assembled a list of criteria that would simplify the small tract application process. The county outlined six reasons that they would reject an application: existing improvements on a parcel were substandard; the land use did not conform to county ordinances; no plans existed to improve a given area and provide services; parcel sectioning showed no regard for geographical conditions; there was a lack of adequate roads; or if STA disposal transferred the burden of managing development from BLM to the county.⁷⁴ BLM and the county agreed that parcels and existing improvements would be brought up to county code by either BLM or the applicant before the applicant was permitted to reside on the land.⁷⁵ The county argued that these “deficiencies” needed to be corrected by BLM that were near populated areas would not be usable under STA because they were potentially usable for public parks.

⁷² Minutes, Book X, 404, October 26, 1964.

⁷³ Ibid.


⁷⁵ Ibid.
before the lease was finalized. BLM conceded that it would emphasize the development of lands that already conformed to existing land use patterns and would attempt not to be a burden on county resources by allowing remote and isolated settlement. Over the course of two decades of administering the Small Tract Act, BLM focused on avoiding isolated settlement and preventing the hardship it might cause settlers as well as local governments.

Once assigned a small tract, applicants were expected to settle on it permanently. There was one exception: if occupants were unable to “construct improvements” due to “unforeseen or unavoidable misfortune,” the land could be transferred to a better qualified applicant. In many cases, lessees were unable to construct improvements on their tracts within the initial three-year period. STA envisioned land going to settlers who intended to make it their permanent home, signified by the erection of a permanent dwelling. BLM renewed leases if it meant avoiding the hardship that could be caused by evicting people from the land.

77 Minutes, Book Y, 334, August 16, 1965.
The policy on renewal decisions was weighed against the hardship that non-renewal would cause settlers.\textsuperscript{82} In 1965, small tract settler James P. Hart requested that the lease on his tract north of Reno be renewed with the understanding that the improvements he made to his property were expensive, though he still did not satisfy the improvements required by STA.\textsuperscript{83} BLM called the improvements requirement a “necessity,” and decided that Hart’s failure to construct adequate improvements waived his right to the subsequent appraisal, sale, and transfer of ownership.\textsuperscript{84} Hart claimed his small tract was geologically restrictive and that he was unable to plant grass, drill wells, and other necessities to “put it into a condition for living.”\textsuperscript{85} BLM did not deny the difficulty in settling the land and turning it into a livable place, so they allowed Hart to begin his lease period anew, enabling him additional time to demonstrate that he would be able to live on the land permanently.\textsuperscript{86}

BLM officers were sympathetic to hardship claims but demanded proof, stating that they would take hardship into consideration in cases of failure to construct improvements.\textsuperscript{87} They explained that they would be sympathetic if “nonrenewal of the

\textsuperscript{82} Backlogs inspired a policy amendment in 1952 that stated “where the holder of a small-tract lease fails to comply with the requirement in his lease that a substantial dwelling be constructed on the leased land, he is not entitled to a renewal of his lease” (Case A-26382, “Appeal from the Bureau of Land Management.” Los Angeles: July 29, 1952. Arthur Dether, applicant).


\textsuperscript{84} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{86} Ibid.

lease would cause extreme hardship to the lessee.” STA was not intended to make settling the region difficult, its purpose was to make it easier. BLM made exceptions to its own policies when doing so meant settlers would be more likely to settle the land permanently. In cases where proof was sufficient, BLM allowed one additional leasing period for applicants to construct a home before requiring that they vacate the land.

At issue in hardship cases was not only what the rejected renewal would do financially to the settler, but whether the hardship stemmed from the settler’s inability to construct a conventional home on the property. Even if the settler missed the deadline for filing renewal paperwork, BLM officers were reluctant to remove them from the land if they had nowhere else to go, upholding the agency’s commitment to avoid creating burdens for local governments and nearby communities. This tendency also upheld the original goal of the act, which was to find people willing and able to settle otherwise unusable or unappealing parts of the region. Avoiding hardship was beneficial to the goals of the policy, so flexibility and exceptions were strategic on the part of BLM.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the Washoe County Commission repeatedly disputed BLM’s treatment of STA applications, consistently pointing out “the lack of roads improved to county specifications.” Roads connecting small tracts to highways, main

88 Ibid.
89 Case A-30273.
90 Ibid.
93 Case A-30520. In January 1967, the Washoe County Commissioners objected to the classification and use of land east of Sparks as Small Tracts because building and sanitation standards were not met by previous occupants (Case A-30520, “Appeals from the Bureau of Land Management: Small tract
roads, and nearby communities were essential to ensure the longevity and permanence of Small Tract settlements, and Washoe County commissioners believed the road issue would become too burdensome in their eventual management of the land. The case also illustrated the fact that roads signified permanence in these settlements. In order for small tracts to become permanent, state and local governments would have to ensure mobility to and from them. BLM relied on these local governments to ensure isolated settlers could join the regional community.94

In August 1964, small tract settler Nils Langenborg claimed that U.S. Highway 395 was built over his property north of Reno, which cost him 30% of his land.95 Langenborg appealed his original contract with Interior, claiming he was owed compensation for the lost land, or that Interior owed him more land to compensate for the loss.96 Interior denied each of Langenborg’s requests, arguing that he knew the land was expected to be used by the state for the highway project, and that it was his choice to settle that particular parcel nonetheless.97 BLM agents argued that this was the

94 BLM continued to cooperate in order to achieve proper development. “Proper development,” according to BLM, required individual homes first. In addition to the benefit of individual tracts being developed and maintained by individuals and families, keeping small tract parcels in relative proximity to one another would encourage the growth of community and combat the effects of isolation. “Scattered settlement,” claimed BLM, would simply not be allowed because it would inhibit this process in addition to causing problems for local governments (Case A-30529, “Appeals from the Bureau of Land Management: Small tract applications rejected.” Nevada: January 17, 1967. J. Wayne Gattshall, et al., applicants). The land was not necessarily “unusable,” but instead it had been “misused” and was left in an unusable condition. The County rejected the assertion that the land was useless (which STA classification implied) because it had, indeed, been used. The land had been misused and neglected to the point that the County prevented new development until past problems were remedied. Overall, this particular use would have burdened the county with construction and maintenance of roads.


96 Case A-30011.

97 Ibid.
consequence of allowing land disposal near existing cities. Settlers were told that there were scenarios in which sections of their parcels could be used by state and other agencies in such cases. That much federal land surrounding Reno was available for small tract leases created a steady demand which helped populate the areas north of the city. However, the program also triggered conflict between BLM and Washoe County over the viability of settling the vacant lands near an existing populated area, as the latter struggled to manage areas in the county that without STA would have remained undeveloped and simpler to manage.

Upon receiving a small tract from BLM, it was the responsibility of the individual to decipher not only how a local government would provide services, but how he or she would build the improvements necessary to satisfy BLM’s requirement. BLM claimed that “to qualify as a residential site, land must be suitable for seasonal or year-round use as a home for a family.” In the 1950s, BLM was still apprehensive about the use of trailer homes to satisfy STA’s residence requirement because the purpose of the act was to encourage permanent settlement in the region by insisting that the tracts were for “use as a home.” But it soon appeared to the agency that temporary housing (trailers) could, in fact, enable permanent settlement. Trailer housing in this context was inhabited by people willing to live in harsh conditions in order to get by. Much successful STA settlement was made possible by this form of housing and by the people willing to use it.

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98 BLM explained that “small tract sites will be considered in light of their effect … upon the communities or area involved, and in light of availability of schools, utilities and other facilities” (Case A-30529, “Appeals from the Bureau of Land Management: Small tract applications rejected.” Nevada: January 17, 1967. J. Wayne Gattshall, et al., applicants).
100 Ibid.
By the late 1950s, BLM ultimately sanctioned trailer housing in an effort to attract settlers to the land. A new era in land policy, development and housing took place under STA, out of which emerged new communities defined by the prevalence of trailer housing.

STA required unconventional methods of settlement. Intergovernmental strife aside, housing oneself on a remote tract led many settlers to rely on alternatives to conventional housing. It was difficult to obtain a bank loan to build a home on land to which the lessee did not hold the title. So, many opted to import a trailer home instead. At the same time, they could not get the deed from BLM if there was no home on it according to STA guidelines. STA thus initiated a settlement pattern that required an unconventional form of housing in order to succeed. The growing use of the trailer, still a new housing form in the 1940s and 1950s, enabled an adaptable people to occupy remote parts of the region. But trailers brought temporariness to a pattern of settlement that BLM intended to be permanent. Northern Nevada settlers were quick to adapt to trailer housing, but struggled for decades to cope with biases against that form of housing.

According to BLM guidelines, trailers were temporary dwellings and would not be classified as “improvements.” In a Small Tract denial letter, BLM stated, “the term

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101 Adam Rust, *This is My Home: The Challenges and Opportunities of Manufactured Housing* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2007).


104 Subsequent chapters address the problem of stigma associated with trailer housing.

105 Case A-30630, 1962-1966. Stanley C. Haynes, applicant. BLM agents decided in Haynes’s case (and others) that the mobile home in which he lived for reasons of economic necessity, did not satisfy Interior’s definition of “Improvement.”
'improvements’ includes any structures of a permanent nature placed upon land which tend to increase the value of land but excludes a house trailer or other mobile property which is not permanently affixed to the land.”106 Many small tract settlers demonstrated that after the initial three-year term of their lease expired, they could buy the land inexpensively and then get a home loan from a bank to build a conventional house. Trailers made settling the land possible in the interim. The growing availability of house trailers in the 1950s and 1960s and the willingness of people to use them made this new pattern of settlement appear to be more permanent.107

BLM’s main concern was whether a temporary dwelling signified permanent settlement. Applicants struggled over whether the BLM officer who inspected their small tract would accept a trailer home as demonstrating the settler’s intent to keep, maintain, and live on the land permanently. Trailers were a viable solution to the difficulty of settling a harsh landscape. In order to survive in harsh and remote parts of the region, people settled in whatever ways they could. Sun Valley emerged as people sought to make settlements permanent using unconventional means. They struggled through the problems of scattered and seemingly unplanned development and the harsh realities of trailer life; through the paradox of living permanently in temporary housing. When settlers found themselves in a pattern of unplanned development, they had little choice but to find resourceful and unconventional ways to survive.

106 Ibid. Even trailer homes connected to septic tanks and wells did not satisfy Interior’s improvements requirement (Case A-30188, October 1, 1964.).
STA aimed to populate remote parts of the west. In doing so, it established a pattern that, over the course of the mid-twentieth century, rendered the stereotypical rugged western settler into the modern mobile home dweller. Local governments and nearby communities were left to cope with the problems that accompanied this new kind of development, which involved residential growth without any commercial, agricultural or other economic developments to sustain it. The impacts of this policy on people, on the land, and the institutions settlers relied on to create a permanent pattern of settlement is evident in the interactions of BLM, STA applicants and local governments charged with overseeing the settlement.

The Small Tract Act was a postscript to a nineteenth century homesteading tradition that moved a resourceful population westward. By requiring only that recipients of the five-acre tracts live on them, obstacles to settlement were reduced. Federal and local governments agreed that with full disclosure of the risks involved, they would not only allow settlers to inhabit relatively remote lands under the auspices of the act but would work to find ways to provide them with services.

Yet these conditions required a compromise on the form of housing that would enable settlers to do so. Out of this formula arose a settler who, facing a harsh landscape, persevered and created a way of life that came to be defined by the trailer housing that enabled the settlement. Development accelerated in the area that would become Sun Valley and Reno’s “North Valleys” because of the Small Tract program. It was successful in northern Nevada due largely to the availability of trailer homes and people willing to live in them, people who would remain there, in those trailer homes, indefinitely. Trailer homes in the area that would become Sun Valley were a solution to
the challenges of settling the area, but living in them would continue to cause these settlers trouble. In the following chapters, these troubles (planning and non-planning, trailer housing, waste) are analyzed at greater length, focusing on the results of the type of settlement that took shape in Sun Valley as it grew into what would eventually become a permanent community of trailer-dwellers.
CHAPTER THREE:
ORIGINS AND HISTORY OF SUN VALLEY, NEVADA, 1942-1965

In July 1881, William Emmett Lemmon established a cattle ranch in the “Long Valley” north of Reno.¹ A decade later, the Reno Weekly Gazette and Stockman reported that regardless of the appeal of successful ranching ventures like Lemmon’s, the rural valleys north of Reno were uninviting.² As the area began to populate over the next two decades, the reputation of the valleys did not improve. One local reporter characterized the area in 1915 as “a barren waste of sand and sagebrush.”³ It was this image that people moving to the valleys north of Reno and Sparks faced for the decades to follow. Lemmon’s “intelligent farming” (as locals praised his work) impressed fellow ranchers and he left a lasting impact on the region.⁴ In 1916, there were 40 families living in what was by then called Lemmon Valley, sustaining the ranching landscape Lemmon created.⁵ Around this time, the Southern Pacific Railroad Company acquired land in anticipation of new development in the region, but by the 1920s began selling acres by the thousands to absentee landowners as they discovered that there was little or no demand from non-

¹ Reno Evening Gazette, July 27, 1881.
² Reno Weekly Gazette and Stockman, June 18, 1891.
³ Reno Evening Gazette, December 17, 1915.
⁴ Nevada State Journal, “Obituary: W. E. Lemmon,” October 3, 1913. On October 12, 1913, three decades after starting his ranch, William Lemmon died, leaving the valley to bear his name and the reputation it maintained under his watch. The Oregon native ranched successfully in the North Valleys for nearly fifty years.
⁵ Reno Evening Gazette, April 10, 1916.
ranchers. Growth in the North Valleys was slow over the coming decades, much of it unreported in local newspapers.

Following attacks on Pearl Harbor in 1941, the United States Army sought ways to use lands in the west to prepare secluded bases for a new era of defense strategy. Lemmon Valley was selected by the Army later in December of 1941 to house an air base that would specialize in flight training. A local reporter predicted, “there are great days and enormous changes immediately ahead for Nevada, it is up to our people to make the most of them.” Lemmon Valley was chosen for its “natural ‘fortifications’ afforded by the high Sierra…providing a well-equipped field where military fliers [could] land in time of emergency.” The military benefited from wide open yet secluded spaces on which to build their facilities. The rural isolation of the Washoe County landscape was for once appealing to the federal government and as part of new military operations, received national recognition. Land that was otherwise unappealing and that had been perceived as unusable was suddenly in demand. Between ranchers like Lemmon, the Small Tract land disposal program, and the installation of the new Reno Army Air Base, the valleys north of Reno began to populate. The US military valued the land for precisely the demanding conditions to which it subjected its inhabitants. Historian James Hulse observed, the air base provided soldiers with “special training on how to survive in

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6 Ibid.
7 Nevada State Journal, December 6, 1941; December 7, 1941; December 8, 1941.
8 Nevada State Journal, December 8, 1941.
9 Reno Evening Gazette, November 4, 1941.
harsh climates...in remote areas.” And yet the harsh, remote conditions of these lands kept them vacant until such twentieth century forces created interest in settling them for various purposes precisely because they remained vacant and unused.

![Site of Lemmon Valley Air Base](image)

Figure 4: Lemmon Valley, site of the U.S. Army air base north of Reno (circa 1941). The Sun Valley site would lie south of Lemmon Valley and north of the Reno-Sparks border.

In the 1940s and into the 1950s, Small Tract Act (STA) activity increased. The pattern of development it initiated involved problems of isolation and infrastructure burdens on the local governments. Obstacles aside, STA generated new demand in the unsettled lands north of Reno and Sparks. Sun Valley grew as a result. People began to

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11 Ibid.

12 Reno Evening Gazette, November 25, 1941. See also, Minutes of the Washoe County Board of Commissioners, “Lease between Washoe County and the United States of America,” Book P, page 80, August 27, 1942. The original lease agreement was for a 160-acre parcel.
occupy this place that was relatively isolated from surrounding communities. In addition to the housing demand created by the Reno Army Air Base in the 1940s, Sun Valley eased an ongoing housing shortage in Reno related to legalized gambling and the city’s famous divorce industry, as well as a generation of returning war veterans in need of affordable housing. Sun Valley was an isolated settlement on lands that were previously believed to be unappealing and somewhat useless. Its survival and growth demonstrated, just as the US military before it, that this remote part of the region was, in fact, usable.

Sales advertisements of Sun Valley in the 1940s and 1950s, board minutes from county government meetings, local press coverage of Sun Valley development, and local memory as revealed in interviews, reveal the origins and history of early Sun Valley. These sources also trace the ways sellers marketed Sun Valley while grappling with the problems that arose from its development. Sparks businessman Harry Gepford was the original developer of Sun Valley. Gepford, in his efforts to embellish and exploit the rural nature of Sun Valley, faced two challenges: one in which he and other sellers aimed to portray Sun Valley as a suburban place, exploiting postwar boom in suburban flight from cities, emphasizing its closeness to the cities of Reno and Sparks; and another that introduced and immediately associated Sun Valley with trailer housing as a practical means to settle that landscape permanently. The two separate processes worked toward

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different goals: the former to appeal to a suburban buyer, a less successful strategy; the latter to a working class or economically constrained buyer, a more successful strategy.14

The growth of the North Valleys alleviated the area’s growing housing demand. In the 1930s and 1940s, before RAAB opened, Reno and Sparks experienced a dramatic housing shortage caused by the combination of a growing gambling industry in addition to the housing needs of the divorce trade, which brought thousands of new residents to the cities each year.15 As one Reno resident reported in 1930 to the Reno Evening Gazette, “If we do not have a present shortage of housing, there is at least a shortage of the houses that people want.”16 Another resident observed, “the people of Nevada are as sound and have the same rugged qualities which were possessed by the pioneers of sixty and seventy years ago.”17 With those “rugged qualities” residents would turn the open lands into something new. In response to this housing situation, the Reno Evening Gazette reported in 1942 that a “small military city sprung up in less than a year on Lemmon Valley’s barren wasteland.”18

The communities that blossomed around RAAB had to solve the challenges of rapid population growth, adding to the housing shortage issues that already afflicted the Reno and Sparks areas. As RAAB expanded its training operations over the course of the 1940s and 1950s, the noise from the air base impacted the quality of life for surrounding

14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
18 “First Big Bomber Makes Landing at Reno Air Base,” Reno Evening Gazette, November 25, 1942.
residences. Military personnel sought housing that was far enough away from the base to escape the noise without having to live in Reno or Sparks. Sun Valley was eight miles to the southeast of RAAB, half the distance to Reno. The sparsely populated area began to grow throughout the mid-1940s and into the 1950s, in response to housing needs of both the city and the nearby air base. Situated comfortably between the two places, Sun Valley provided a solution at a time when area residents were in no position to disdain new housing alternatives. With decreasing need for the air- and flight-based training conducted there, RAAB was classified as “temporarily inactive” in 1945 and officially deactivated by the Department of Defense in 1948. In 1949, the county began selling fixtures and buildings from the property, anticipating a full closure. Two years later it was reopened to house the Nevada National Guard, which it did until the mid-1960s. All the North Valleys needed to populate in the 1940s was a developer to parcel the area out from the now-privately held lands that made up much of the area. Acquiring much of his land from STA buyers and local banker and developer Walter Harris, Harry Gepford filled that role.

Harry Lee Gepford was born in Mason County, Illinois, in 1880. He and his father moved to California in 1895, settling near Fresno. In the town of Laton, they worked in

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various construction businesses, the most successful of which was a road and railroad building company which operated in California, Oregon, and Washington. In the early 1920s, the young Gepford opened a successful automobile dealership in Fresno while also investing in farms in the Coalinga and Huron areas. In these years, Gepford became well-acquainted with rural development, and came to respect and appreciate the rural way of life and the people working to survive in the harsh west.

Already successful in business, Gepford moved to Sparks, Nevada, in 1928. By 1930, he opened a furniture store that would remain a success until his death three decades later. It was from Gepford’s Furniture that he collected payments on his properties, many of which would become Sun Valley. By the time of his retirement in the 1940s, Gepford owned thousands of acres in and around Sun Valley. He bought the land from various sources, much of it from landowners such as Reno banker Walter Harris, some from the U.S. Grazing Service and the BLM, and some from previous Small Tract Act recipients.

During the 1930s, Gepford went door to door to Sparks residents, offering them cash for their used furniture. He paid them fair prices for furniture they were willing to sell, at a time when work and money were hard to come by. He then sold the used

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25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 “Harry L. Gepford: Taken by Death,” Nevada State Journal, December 10, 1963. Elmer Rusco’s research on “Poverty in Washoe County” (Reno: Bureau of Governmental Research, 1966) refers to Gepford’s predecessor as “Gordon Harris, a landowner in the valley prior to the purchase of land by Mr. Gepford.”
furniture in his store. Gepford is remembered by Sun Valley residents as a generous man, building Sun Valley on a tradition of handshakes. He appreciated working-class people and aimed to help them as he ventured to sell his land to them.

At the time of Gepford’s first real estate advertisements in 1947, Sun Valley was unknown to Reno and Sparks buyers. Because of its placement at the northern edges of

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28 William Farr (Sparks Fire Chief, retired), author interview, 2012.

29 Farr, author interview, 2012; Severt, author interview, 2014.

30 Rusco wrote, “Sun Valley as an area where numbers of people live is a recent phenomenon. Nothing could be discovered for this study about the history of the area prior to about twenty years ago…Sun Valley began to develop significantly about 1948…H. L. Gepford of Sparks bought up some of the land in the Valley, which had previously been used for grazing sheep, laid out streets, and began to sell house sites. In 1950 he bought more land to sell as house sites and expanded again in 1951 and 1952” (Rusco, 42).

31 Photo courtesy Reno Historian Neal Cobb. Inherited from the Gepford family private collection.
those cities (bordering mostly federally-owned and recently disposed STA lands),
Gepford experimented briefly with representing his lands as rural by describing the soil
and the mountains, for instance, in an effort to capitalize on the potential appeal of
undeveloped land. As the 1950s approached, Gepford quickly adapted his method to one
focused on the appeal of suburbanization, a process that in the postwar era offered escape
from growing cities with the allure of larger residential lots and less crowding. Over
time, Sun Valley could not be represented as suburban because the realities of working
class life became increasingly apparent. Gepford and other sellers responded by
appealing again to the rural character of Sun Valley, suggesting that portraying the place
as suburban was ultimately not successful marketing. Over time, sales advertisements
(along with other records of Sun Valley history) demonstrated that Sun Valley fell
somewhere between these two poles. It was not quite rural because it was too developed
and it was not suburban because the homes were not conventional and the residents were
not middle class. This tension would come to define the Sun Valley experience.

As Gepford was parceling out and selling Sun Valley, its new residents
frequented Washoe County Commission hearings where they expressed two ongoing
concerns. While water, septic, and other necessities were common concerns, residents
insisted that the roads and their modest, undeveloped public park were priorities as well.
The roads that connected Sun Valley properties were unpaved and decayed rapidly as

32 Kenneth Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States (Oxford: Oxford
University Press, 1985), 133. Also, Gwendolyn Wright, Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing
in America (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981); Dolores Hayden, Building Suburbia: Green Fields and
American Suburb, 1820-1939 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988); Joel Garreau, Edge City: Life on
The Rise and Decline of America’s Man-made Landscapes (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994).
traffic increased. The residents also emphasized to the county their desire to extend Sun Valley’s main road into Reno or Sparks, connecting them more effectively with those cities.

Upon subdividing his land holdings in Sun Valley, Gepford frequently advertised them for use with mobile homes because the land was unsuitable for conventional site-built development.33 Just as the BLM was learning around this time as well, Gepford realized that to encourage the use of the trailer was to allow a pattern of development that enabled people to survive on the land with minimal investment. Trailers enabled people to become homeowners and to get by if they were willing to accept less than optimal conditions. Gepford sold lots ranging from one-quarter to 100 acres, advertising them for sale as “little farms.”34 He marketed the area as a “workingman's paradise,” conducting the sale and financing of the land himself.35 In the office of his furniture store, Gepford collected payments from buyers and maintained his own receipts and loan records. His real estate business grew on the buy-here-pay-here style, rarely using banks or mortgage

33 Jon Wardlaw, “A Natural Resource Inventory and Analysis of Sun Valley, Nevada (Master’s Thesis: University of Nevada, 1989). Wardlaw’s detailed analysis (designed to showcase his then-new computer research methods), showed that Sun Valley topography was not suited for residential building because of low quality soils that could not accept concrete foundations, sewer systems, etc. Gepford’s suspicions showed tremendous foresight. Classified ads during this period would commonly advertise a parcel of land with the supposed benefit that the property would come with a “trailer overlay” which indicated that the Washoe County government also believed the land in Sun Valley was best suited for trailers.

34 Nevada State Journal, August 19, 1947, Classified Advertisement. This ad specifically advertises “Sun Valley Little Farms,” and makes it clear that the lots and roads are "sandy," which many still are today.

companies to facilitate his land sales. Gepford developed a network of unpaved roads and watched Sun Valley begin to populate.

Gepford’s first advertisement for a land sale in Sun Valley ran in the *Nevada State Journal* on July 31, 1947. The name “Sun Valley” had not yet been coined:

![Figure 6: Harry Gepford’s first Sun Valley advertisement.](image)

Gepford’s advertisement was listed under “ranches.” He emphasized that the property was usable and livable, that the land was good, and that it was close to the cities. The advertisement pointed out that the lands were “good for subdividing” which suggested the large size of the properties in the area. Gepford pointed out that the concerns associated with aridity were not without remedy: his properties included “good wells.”

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36 Ibid. Farr describes an industrious profit-seeker who at the same time conducted his land sales with a consciousness of working peoples’ needs, especially war veterans. Gepford was said to avoid using banks, etc., in order to better serve the buyers, to be able to offer them deals that otherwise could have remained out of reach. Severt, author interview, 2014. Richards, author interview, 2015. Severt recalls an overwhelming admiration for Gepford among Sun Valley residents into the present-day. Richards recalls that Gepford instilled a “giving spirit” into Sun Valley, a tradition he saw carried over into the community-builders who succeeded him in turning Sun Valley from a development of parcels into a community.

Gepford’s actions, according to residents and others, were those of a thoughtful man who, while amassing a substantial profit on the sales of his properties, set the stage for the spirit of giving and a sense of community for which Sun Valley residents would praise him a half-century after his death.

37 In his land sales, Gepford gave special treatment to war veterans, and sometimes offered them the deed to the property before their loans were paid in full (Farr, author interview, 2012). Gepford and the buyer saved money through property tax waivers offered to war veterans, which required that they hold the deed to the land (Nevada Department of Veterans Service, “Veterans Tax Exemption,” general description, (veterans.nv.gov), accessed April 21, 2014). Gepford’s practices, like RAAB before him, prompted the growing veteran population of Reno to move to Sun Valley.

38 *Nevada State Journal*, July 29, 1947. Classified advertisement. His selling points were the well (“water at 26 feet”), the quality of the land (“sandy soil,” “good soil,” “flat sage brush land,” “very little rock,”) and the proximity to Reno and Sparks.
the nearly three weeks before his next advertisement, Gepford settled on “Sun Valley” as a name for the place he would build. The name of the new community appeared in print for the first time on August 19, 1947. The advertisement read:

![Advertisement Image]

Figure 7. Gepford’s first use of the name “Sun Valley.”

The transition from “Ranch” to “Little Farm” was not a complicated one to make, and the new advertisement was half the length of his first attempt to sell Sun Valley. This time, however, rather than advertising with other “ranches,” Sun Valley was sold under “LOTS and SUBDIVISIONS,” appealing to a wider customer base. Whether describing Sun Valley properties as “ranches” or “little farms,” Gepford’s advertisements maintained an emphasis on Sun Valley’s separation from Reno and Sparks while reminding buyers that this new place was near those cities.

Historian Kenneth Jackson observed, “at the heart of all suburban growth is land development—the conversion of rural or vacant land to some sort of residential use.”

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39 *Nevada State Journal*, August 19, 1947. Classified Advertisement. The description from the advertisement, “level, sandy, loam soil,” indicated concerns over land quality. Gepford portrayed the land as level in addition to the farming and agricultural potential for the loam soil that he insisted dominated the area.

By this definition, Sun Valley was suburban. The land was rural and, through the efforts of the federal government and developers like Harry Gepford, was transformed into “some sort of residential use.” “Suburbia,” Jackson wrote, “pure and unfettered and bathed by sunlight and fresh air, offered the exciting prospect that disorder, prostitution, and mayhem could be kept at a distance, far away in the festering metropolis.”  

The mid-century fascination with non-urban places “bathed by sunlight” could very well have inspired Gepford’s name for the new place. While unconventional and mostly unplanned, Sun Valley was an escape from the worlds of gambling and divorce which were coming to define Reno life.

![Image of Sun Valley circa 1940s](Image of Sun Valley circa 1940s, the view of Chocolate Drive, a main road leading to Reno and Sparks, facing Sparks to the southeast. Stocke Family Private Collection.)

Sun Valley, however, did not meet the middle-class and conventional building ideals associated with Jackson’s conventional suburban ideal:

> The detached house and the sizeable yard became the symbols of a very distinct type of community—the embodiment of the suburban ideal…such residences were attainable only by the middle and upper classes. For most Americans life consisted of unrelenting labor either on farms or in factories, and slight realization in

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41 Jackson, 70.

42 The Stocke family expressed great pride in this particular view of how Sun Valley once looked. In their photo collection, this image was described as “early 1940s.”
decrepit lodgings. But the image had a growing attraction in a society in which urbanization’s underside—the slums, the epidemics, the crime, the anomie—was so obvious and persistent a problem. The suburban ideal offered the promise of an environment visibly responsive to personal effort, an environment that would combine the best of both city and rural life and that would provide a permanent home for restless people.  

The development of Sun Valley was the product of developers’ efforts to create a place where residents could get by. It was a place where city and rural life met in order to house those “restless people.”

By September 1947, in his search to develop the suburban space that would provide a “permanent home for restless people,” Gepford’s sales campaign had become more aggressive with a more noticeable presence in the newspaper. Two of his ads appeared just inches from one another on the same page, one under “LOTS AND SUBDIVISIONS” and one in the next column under “RANCHES.”

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43 Jackson, 71-2.
44 Ibid.
The advertisements emphasized how level the land was and its proximity to Reno and Sparks and portrayed qualities of the properties that could appeal to both rural and suburban buyers.

There was little variation in Gepford’s advertising in the first year. By May 1948, he had abridged his sales pitch to a simpler version of the earlier attempts, settling on language that was brief, emphasizing affordability. Gepford’s business was to offer sizeable and inexpensive properties. The main feature of Gepford’s May 1948 advertisement was the acreage, some parcels as big as five hundred acres. As Gepford struggled to sell these relatively large parcels, he devised a plan to make selling lots more

Figure 9: Two of Gepford’s advertisements with different target audiences.  

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efficient. In June, Gepford petitioned the Washoe County Commission for a permit to subdivide the land he owned in Sun Valley into potentially hundreds of one-third acre parcels.\textsuperscript{47} Their immediate approval suggested that they were eager to see the area developed and set the coming wave of Sun Valley’s development into motion. The approval was a move away from the rural toward a pattern of suburban development that would take shape on the Sun Valley landscape.

Gepford had a monopoly on Sun Valley land sales in this first year, from June 1947 to October 1948, when the first competing ad appeared just inches from his “ACREAGE FOR SALE” advertisement.\textsuperscript{48} Gepford’s advertisement emphasized variety in size, “one to 500 acres,” in addition to affordability (“very reasonable”). His competition, an anonymous “private owner,” borrowed from Gepford’s language of flexibility: “ONE TO FIVE ACRES,” allowing buyers to choose how much land they could afford. Later that month, another anonymous advertisement for a “housetrailer” in Sun Valley appeared in the local newspaper. The housetrailer became popular in Sun Valley housing, and Gepford’s competition beat him to the punch in advertising one, initiating the early association between Sun Valley and its predominant form of housing. This variety created the impression that Sun Valley was still a blank canvas, an undeveloped place that was just waiting for people to make use of it.


\textsuperscript{48} Reno Evening Gazette, October 11, 1948. Classified advertisements. Gepford’s early competition, published four ad spaces beneath his, appeared anonymous.
In November 1948, another anonymous competitor began advertising properties for sale in Sun Valley. The advertisements closely resembled Gepford’s, even using the same language to describe a property’s affordability. The competitor’s advertisement appealed to the buyer’s budget, advertising “One acre in Sun Valley. Reasonable.”

There was no mention of proximity to Reno or Sparks, no mention of the land’s quality, no offer to subdivide into the buyer’s desired lot size. Alongside efforts to portray the landscape as rural and affordable with an emphasis on lot sizes, appeals to economic constraints were equally important. Rural living and affordability were not difficult to sell in conjunction, and Gepford and early sellers made the association stick. Gepford’s competition continued to reappear, even closer to Gepford’s ad space. Gepford’s advertisement from March 1949 made no mention of Sun Valley, only describing the location of the land as “2 miles from Reno.”

The ad, however, described the scenery and location more than previous ads: “in a cove with South Slope overlooking Reno and the Valley.” As Gepford attempted this new sales pitch, his competition coincidentally received the advertising space directly beneath his. The point of the competitor’s advertisement was direct: “One Acre,” and “Reasonable.” Gepford’s advertisements painted a picture of Sun Valley that his competition did not. His properties were marketed to create the image of a community that was rural yet connected to the cities, a community that had charm and character, a landscape that was worth seeing.

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50 Gepford’s going rate was $150 per acre; $250 for properties close to the main road, Sun Valley Drive (Richards, author interviews, 2013; 2015)

Gepford returned to his original method, advertising multiple sizes and prices to allow his buyers to select the size that worked best for them. This time his emphasis was on the setting while still emphasizing proximity to the cities: “In country near Reno and Sparks.” The ad listed different sizes and qualities. Based on the two prices for the 10-acre tracts (one for sale for $1,000, the other for $1,500), Gepford’s tradition of offering a variety of sizes now extended into quality; one could purchase a thousand-dollar, ten-acre property or a fifteen-hundred-dollar, ten-acre property. Enabling buyers to choose sizes and qualities meant that Sun Valley would be flexible, it would be whatever buyers wanted it to be. Like the small tracts BLM was distributing, Sun Valley was a place that people could shape as they saw fit. Sellers capitalized on this adaptability. Economic hardship shaped the Sun Valley landscape. The land itself mattered because what was on the land (trailers, unfinished buildings) was often not appealing.

In an “unfinished” or unimproved property, the emphasis was on the land:

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Gepford’s April 1949 advertisement emphasized “Building lots,” not at “1 acre” but at “150 x 275 ft.” (41,250 square feet, 2,310 square feet short of a full acre). The selling point was the land. The language of the advertisement was directed at the resourceful buyer who may have been able to complete projects or otherwise put the land to use. But these uses were secondary to the size of the parcel. The parcels were appealing for their spaciousness as well as for the potential the land represented to industrious and resourceful buyers. Gepford’s emphasized the versatility and adaptability of the land, while making sure to reaffirm that the real benefit of moving to Sun Valley would be the land.

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By 1949, in his second full year of Sun Valley advertising, Gepford’s sales approach was more varied than ever before, appealing to buyers in the market for a ranch, cabin, house, land, and even to those who simply wanted a lot with a well. Ranch, cabin, and land categories each, however, demonstrated Gepford’s ongoing emphasis on land. Whether he was selling a relatively large estate (295 acres) as a ranch or a smaller (ten acres) property with a stable, Gepford’s efforts established the anything-goes, unplanned nature of Sun Valley’s development. Potential uses aside, Gepford wanted the first words of his advertisement to emphasize the size of the property he was selling.

Gepford soon developed a menu-style layout for his advertisements in which a list of lot sizes was accompanied by a range of prices. The menu suggested that while he was still concerned with appealing to those with economic constraints, he had larger and more expensive parcels to sell to the less constrained buyer as well. By this time he was referring to Sun Valley as a “SUBDIVISION,” which he proclaimed was “NOW OPEN.” There was something for everyone in Sun Valley.

![SUN VALLEY LANDS](image)

*Figure 13: Two new selling points of this suburban property: financing and freedom from zoning.*

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Gepford emphasized land in addition to proximity to Reno and Sparks as he made sure to point out that his properties were “priced right,” and available in a variety of sizes, as was customary in his advertising (Figure 9). In this ad, however, he illustrated the way he viewed and wanted others to view Sun Valley, as a place where there were possibilities for people to make a home in an affordable community. The rural way of life was not reserved for ranchers. Additionally, Gepford offered financing (“Cash or terms”), opening Sun Valley to people who could not pay full price in cash as well as to people who were unable to secure bank or other financing. Offering financing without the involvement of banks or other lenders was Gepford’s way of making Sun Valley available to everyone and was familiar to him from his experience buying and selling properties elsewhere and from the operation of his furniture business. That his properties were within reach for lower-income or working-class residents illustrated the welcoming and adaptable character of the growing community, while also hinting at the eventual “anything-goes” attitude that would take shape in his development.\textsuperscript{56} The attitude that appeared to characterize the development of Sun Valley was likely interpreted by Gepford to mean “everyone welcome” in order to assure that he widened his base of potential buyers. Under Gepford’s watch, land ownership was accessible to working class buyers as he proclaimed that Sun Valley would become the “workingman’s paradise.”\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{56} Gepford consistently addressed infrastructure, one of the most pressing concerns for Sun Valley residents. With telephone service and electricity, Sun Valley properties were becoming more modern, more flexible, and more widely available to buyers who were unable to purchase property in addition to investing in utility needs. In these ads the community was growing increasingly flexible and open to everyone, the community was becoming increasingly turnkey while remaining primarily rural in character.

\textsuperscript{57} \textit{Nevada State Journal}, August 19, 1947, classified advertisement.
Gepford also wrote advertisements to promote economic development for Sun Valley.\(^5\) The potential buyer was promised free rent on a bank building in addition to the promises of “plenty of business, no competition.” Gepford insisted, however, that the buyer “be a workingman’s friend.”

One ad promoted “business locations in new town site,” proclaiming that Sun Valley was a business- and development-friendly new place to be. Gepford’s advertisements reflected his desire to create a community complete with residents, homes, neighborhoods, and a commercial center.\(^5\) There were opportunities in Sun Valley for people to make a home, start or participate in a growing community, and be involved in commercial and civic activities of the nearby cities, although residents could also remain independent of those places should they choose.

The volunteer fire department was among the first priorities of Sun Valley residents who were concerned about their apparent lack of safety in a community made up of trailers. Local firefighters represented a need for safety, especially given the relatively isolated condition of Sun Valley. William Farr, chief of the Sparks Fire Department, said that Sun Valley would not have grown were it not for its volunteer firefighters.\(^6\) The volunteer fire department served not only to fight fires, but its station

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\(^5\) Gepford’s most ambitious ad: more than seeking buyers for his domestic plots, this one was written in search of substantial investment for Sun Valley. *Reno Evening Gazette*, August 22, 1949. Classified advertisements

\(^5\) *Reno Evening Gazette*, August 30, 1949. Related to Gepford’s attempt to inspire economic development, in December 1949, the Washoe County Commission voted to deny Sun Valley a connection to the Plumas-Sierra Cooperative Power Company.\(^5\) The commissioners insisted that the denial was in the best interests of Sun Valley residents and developers because Plumas-Sierra’s competitor, Sierra Pacific Power Company, was better positioned to provide gas and electric service to Sun Valley because of the proximity of power lines and other equipment.

\(^6\) Farr, author interview, November 2012.
served as a meeting place. It was the command station from which volunteers organized firefighting efforts in addition to other activities that gave residents a sense of community.61 One resident in particular, Bud Stocke, was responsible for the growth of this vital organization of residents that remained at the heart of life in Sun Valley in these early decades.

Charles “Bud” Stocke moved to the scarcely settled Sun Valley from Sparks in 1947.62 A roofer by trade, inexperienced and untrained in firefighting, Stocke observed the immediate need for Sun Valley to have a fire crew of its own, even one made up of untrained volunteers.63 In 1948, he and other concerned citizens established the first fire station in Sun Valley. The central location of the new Sun Valley Fire Station was a dramatic improvement over the previous arrangement in which Sun Valley residents relied on the Sparks Fire Department to respond to fires from seven miles away. With no major connecting freeways in Reno and Sparks, the distance from Sparks to Sun Valley took nearly thirty minutes to travel. If a fire in Sun Valley involved a trailer, it was likely in ashes by the time fire trucks arrived.64 Although not officially within the Sparks city limits, Sun Valley residents relied on services from that relatively distant city. This nominal connection to city services made life in Sun Valley difficult. The volunteer fire department was a symbol of independences from the cities, yet also symbolized a sense of isolation in the Sun Valley experience.

61 Captain Bill Richards (Sparks Fire Department), author interview, March 6, 2015.
62 Richards, author interview, 2015.
63 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
Before founding the Sun Valley Volunteer Fire Department, Stocke had no experience in firefighting. Nonetheless, in 1948, due to his passion for keeping Sun Valley safe and his dedication to Sun Valley issues, he was selected by his fellow volunteers to be the first chief of the Sun Valley Volunteer Fire Department. Later, he was recognized and commended by the Sparks Fire Department for playing this crucial role in the growth and safety of Sun Valley, protecting the community while simultaneously taking the burden off the Sparks Fire Department.

Stocke was frequently observed by his fellow firefighters running carelessly into burning homes to rescue victims without regard for his own safety. His son-in-law, William Richards, a fellow Sun Valley volunteer (and later a captain in the Sparks Fire Department), frequently ran into burning homes to ensure Stocke’s safety, since Stocke consistently put other people’s well-being ahead of his own. It was this sense of responsibility that motivated Stocke to begin the volunteer organization that would become the pillar of Sun Valley. Not only did the volunteers serve the needs of Sun Valley residents, but they were also recognized by BLM for their effectiveness. Soon after the fire station opened, the Carson City BLM office selected Sun Valley to house its wildland fire engine. In exchange for housing the truck and their willingness to assist with fires in the BLM jurisdiction, Sun Valley fire crews were able to use the equipment

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65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid.
for their own firefighting needs.\textsuperscript{71} BLM’s relationship with the volunteers was a mutually beneficial one. Fires were less of a threat because the now properly equipped firefighters were present in Sun Valley around the clock.\textsuperscript{72} BLM’s inadvertent role in the growth of Sun Valley was twofold with the evolution of the volunteer fire department.

In 1948, Stocke joined his son-in-law William Richards, and fellow Sun Valley residents Bill Brooks, Dave Sequoia, Mel Brown, George Smith, Jim Frances, and Joe De Maco to become the original crew of the Volunteer Fire Department.\textsuperscript{73} By 1950, more than twenty more residents of Sun Valley signed up to volunteer, many of whom were also joined in service to Sun Valley by their wives.\textsuperscript{74} In addition to addressing Sun Valley’s need for fire protection, the volunteer fire department became the meeting place for Sun Valley residents.\textsuperscript{75} Volunteers held neighborhood meetings in the small building they used as a fire house.\textsuperscript{76} Over time, that fire station moved to different buildings around Sun Valley, always remaining the central meeting place where residents gathered both to celebrate and hold community functions in addition to discussing the growth of Sun Valley and the problems of managing that growth.

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{73} Richards, author interview, 2015.
\textsuperscript{74} Nevada State Journal, “Big Range Area at Sun Valley Swept by Fire,” July 4, 1951.
\textsuperscript{75} Richards, author interview, 2015.
\textsuperscript{76} Farr, author interview, 2012.
Yet, in the true spirit of Sun Valley, the volunteer firefighters, too, were on their own. In 1952, Washoe County commissioners voted not to compensate Reno and Sparks city firefighters for responding to fires in Sun Valley and other locations in the county’s jurisdiction. Under this arrangement, volunteer firefighters were crucial in fighting fires and in gathering residents to address Sun Valley issues. Over the next half-decade from 1953 to 1958, the voters of Sun Valley wanted their organization to receive official recognition. They petitioned the Washoe County commission to allow them to incorporate a fire district complete with a board of directors. Two weeks later, the

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77 Photograph circa mid-1950s. Courtesy Stocke Family (Bill and Jeannie Richards).
78 Minutes, Book R, page 513, October 2, 1952.
80 Ibid.
commission approved the request and enabled Sun Valley firefighters to form their own official fire district. The official recognition meant that the volunteers who assembled to protect and provide for their neighbors and their community were sanctioned by the county government to be the overseers and protectors of the community that they built. Another six weeks later, however, additional Sun Valley residents returned to the County Commission stating that they were unaware of the original request to transform their volunteer fire station into a county sanctioned district. Assistant District Attorney William Raggio agreed that the procedures used by residents and the county commission in the original petition were incomplete and that the district attorney’s office required residents to start the process from the beginning. With these legal and bureaucratic obstacles seeming to stand in their way, Sun Valley continued as before with volunteer-only fire protection.

On November 7, 1958, County and Reno Fire Department officials (by this time assuming responsibility from Sparks Fire for the Sun Valley district) established formal boundaries for the Sun Valley Fire Protection District. The volunteers showed a dedication to Sun Valley and as it grew they were able to focus on the issues of development that had started taking place alongside the need for fire protection. Foremost among these concerns was junk scattered frequently across Sun Valley properties that

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81 Minutes, Book T, page 410, October 20, 1958.
82 Minutes, Book T, page 438, December 5, 1958.
83 Ibid.
made matters of fire protection more difficult. The volunteers were the first to organize community-based grassroots efforts to work at solving the problem.\textsuperscript{85}

Over the next two years, from 1958 to 1960, the Sun Valley volunteers continued to face scrutiny from the county over their ability to fight fires in their community. Official county firefighters, the Washoe County Civil Defense Fire and Rescue, reported that Sun Valley firefighters were causing problems by interfering with fire and rescue calls in the Sun Valley area.\textsuperscript{86} The county firefighters petitioned the commission to request that the district attorney’s office draft an ordinance stating that they, not the Sun Valley volunteers, had the sole legal authority to respond to fire calls in Sun Valley.\textsuperscript{87} County commissioners granted the Civil Defense Fire and Rescue its request and that organization assumed official firefighting responsibilities for Sun Valley.\textsuperscript{88} While the volunteers remained active, they would be subordinate to county firefighters. The volunteers served as a reminder that Sun Valley residents were capable of providing essential services for themselves with or without county government help.

In the summer of 1960, Chief William Farr of the Sparks Fire Department attended county commission meetings to act as mediator between the volunteers and the county fire crews.\textsuperscript{89} Farr informed commissioners that Sun Valley volunteer Melvin Brooks had prepared a petition containing the signatures of more than two hundred Sun Valley residents who wanted to remain under the protection of the local volunteers rather than the county fire department.

\textsuperscript{85} Explored in depth in Chapter 4 of this study.
\textsuperscript{86} Minutes, Book U, page 396, May 20, 1960.
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{88} Minutes, May 20, 1960.
\textsuperscript{89} Minutes, Book U, page 442, August 5, 1960.
than with county firefighters.\textsuperscript{90} Sun Valley residents and their volunteer firefighters wanted to remain in control of their own community and its safety.\textsuperscript{91}

By 1961, county officials proposed a new district organization for county fires that included cooperation between County Fire and Rescue, BLM, and the Nevada Division of Forestry.\textsuperscript{92} This new structure prevailed for a year until the district attorney’s office declared that the commission had no authority to create it.\textsuperscript{93} Additionally, BLM, NDF and other firefighters complained that county fire crews were not, as the agreement required, making their equipment and other resources available for the joint efforts.\textsuperscript{94} Commissioners and area fire officials debated and came to the conclusion that to solve the problem, they would establish a fund for the salary and benefits of four additional firefighters who would serve on the Sparks Fire Department solely to fight county fires in Sun Valley and surrounding areas.\textsuperscript{95} They also agreed that the Sun Valley volunteers would remain on call, and that a new pay system would allow them $6 per fire.\textsuperscript{96} It was beneficial to keep the volunteers on call because they were local and residents would not

\textsuperscript{90} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{91} Ibid. Also, Minutes, Book V, page 191, June 20, 1961. County fire warden George Berrum claimed that fires in the county were, in fact, so problematic as to warrant an overhaul of the county fire code to enable county firefighters better success in fighting fires.

\textsuperscript{92} Minutes, Book V, page 191, June 20, 1961.

\textsuperscript{93} Minutes, Book W, page 37, August 15, 1962.

\textsuperscript{94} Minutes, Book W, page 20, July 20, 1962.

\textsuperscript{95} Minutes, Book W, page 37, August 15, 1962. Four salaries plus benefits totaled $26,282.

\textsuperscript{96} Ibid. Also, Minutes, Book W, page 85, September 25, 1962, in which Sun Valley volunteer fire chief Bud Stocke prepared a list of all his members to be kept on file by the Nevada Industrial Commission, granting the volunteers an official status in the wake of the department’s struggles with the county and other fire agencies for the autonomy to fight fires in their community.
have to wait up to thirty minutes for Sparks crews to reach fires in Sun Valley. By keeping the volunteers in place, the county recognized their value in protecting Sun Valley.

As Gepford worked to sell Sun Valley and the volunteer firefighters worked to protect residents, roads remained a growing problem. RAAB staff requested that the county consider constructing a road that would connect the air base with Sparks, where base staff claimed most of its personnel lived. The proposed road would send base staff through Sun Valley, bringing non-resident traffic through the community that otherwise would have remained disconnected from these surrounding communities. As the future of RAAB remained uncertain (and the responsibility of the Department of Defense, not the Washoe County government), the road was only developed long after RAAB was closed.

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97 As Captain Bill Richards of the Sparks Fire Department argued, by the time a Sparks fire truck arrived in Sun Valley, if a mobile home was involved, it was in ashes. Richards, 2013; Richards, 2015.

98 Attorney William Hammersmith, representing the residents of Sun Valley, collected 625 signatures of residents who wanted the county to decide, once and for all, that their community needed a better-organized fire protection district (Minutes, Book Five, page 516, September 15, 1971). Hammersmith argued that the county needed to comply with the request since the number of signatures on the petition represented more than half of Sun Valley property owners (Minutes, September 15, 1971). While the original impetus was the repeated failures of cleanup campaigns to instill lasting change in the image of the Sun Valley landscape, volunteer fire chief John Reinhold pointed out that most Sun Valley residents lived in mobile homes that required immediate response from the fire department (Minutes, September 15, 1971). Sun Valley homes presented a heightened risk to firefighters which made the volunteer presence a necessity (Richards, 2012; Richards, 2015; Farr, 2012. Firefighters most often found themselves responding to mobile homes in ashes, rather than having an opportunity to prevent a house fire from completely destroying a residence, as was more likely with fires in conventional houses). Reinhold pointed out that while Sun Valley volunteers responded quickly to fire calls, there should be an official station with a paid staff serving in that post around the clock (Minutes, September 15, 1971). Representatives of the Sun Valley water district (later organized as the General Improvement District) suggested that they would be prepared to divert half of the fees they collected for water service to be used to fund the establishment of the new fire district (Minutes, Book Five, page 565, October 26, 1971). Hammersmith admitted later that this particular form of organization was not within the county’s authority to establish (Minutes, October 26, 1971).

The proposal was the first attempt to connect Sun Valley to surrounding communities other than its primary route into north Reno.

As early as 1955, with road building at the forefront of residents’ and county government agendas, Sun Valley residents requested that the county improve a road to connect Sun Valley to Reno and Sparks. The main road that Gepford and others initially installed was only dirt. As the Sun Valley population grew, the need for that road to be paved became urgent. Additionally, the road was Sun Valley’s main connection to the cities of Reno and Sparks.\(^{100}\)

Concerned residents of Sun Valley continued to seek improvements to their community. Once the main road, Sun Valley Drive, was paved with county and state funds, residents observed an increasing danger of drivers speeding through the community due to the minimal presence of law enforcement.\(^{101}\) While speeding drivers were a consequence of development and population growth, they created a problem in Sun Valley to which the county did not respond. Volunteer firefighter Melvin Brown approached the county commissioners to bring the community’s problem to their attention.\(^{102}\) On behalf of Sun Valley residents, he pleaded for the county to assign a deputy sheriff to patrol Sun Valley. A law enforcement presence in the community would prevent people not only from speeding on the main road, but also from acting unlawfully in the community, thus counteracting the progress that concerned residents were making. Brown volunteered to perform this law enforcement function without pay, to observe and

\(^{100}\) Ibid.

\(^{101}\) Minutes, August 20, 1955, Book “S” 450.

\(^{102}\) Ibid.
report speeders to the sheriff’s office. The commissioners claimed that the sheriff’s office was, in fact, patrolling Sun Valley, yet Brown’s testimony suggested that they were not. That people did not observe speed limits in Sun Valley suggested that an “anything goes” spirit was endangering residents. Mounting problems were opportunities to demonstrate that Sun Valley residents were continually willing to provide the services that the county did not provide for them.

Concerned residents returned to the county commission in 1957, claiming that the roads in Sun Valley were still in disrepair, that they were never improved to county standards, and were a hazard for the residents who had to drive on them. One reason for the deteriorating state of the roads was the illegal dumping of garbage alongside them, a problem that would soon come to define the Sun Valley experience. Because he had spent the previous decade buying and selling Sun Valley properties and developing the place into what it had become, the Commission asked Gepford to contribute financially to the repair and maintenance of the unpaved roads. Gepford complied and paid $13,000 in fees to the County which then paved Sun Valley Drive and various connecting roads that held Sun Valley together.

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103 Minutes, Book T, page 219, “Roads-Sun Valley,” December 20, 1957. It was also revealed at this meeting that many of these roads were on lands donated to the community by Harry Gepford to enable Sun Valley to function. Gepford’s tradition of giving and generosity to the people and community were established early and were long-lasting (Author interview, Susan Severt, August 2014). Later, residents requested that the county establish street addresses for Sun Valley properties, suggesting that there was no structure to the way properties were organized on the Sun Valley landscape (Minutes, Book U, page 199, “Sun Valley – Street Numbering,” September 8, 1959).

104 Minutes, December 20, 1957. The dumping and waste problem in Sun Valley is examined in depth in Chapter 5.


106 Ibid.
Gepford’s Sun Valley was “a working man’s paradise,” a place where people could make a home on a budget. He continued to advertise a place where the “prices are right,” and emphasized that he offered reasonable terms. Through his financing, Gepford was taking on a degree of risk in order for Sun Valley to materialize.108

By 1960, Gepford had donated more than ten acres of his land to be used by Sun Valley residents as a public park.109 Residents, however, had to appeal repeatedly to the County Commission for help cleaning and maintaining the lot while they waited for it to be transformed into a usable recreational space. Initially, it was used by residents and outsiders alike to dump garbage.110 In June 1965, residents approached the commission again to remind them of the vacant land, pointing out that nothing had yet been done to

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108 A July 1952 ad emphasized “houses unfinished” (*Reno Evening Gazette*, July 11, 1952. Classified advertisement). Buyers could purchase one of Gepford’s famously inexpensive tracts of land, still sold in a variety of sizes, finance through Gepford, and even get this head-start with the building of a new home. This lasted until Gepford and other Sun Valley property owners learned of the ways mobile homes could solve each of these problems. By this point, if a property owner was selling a property without a dwelling, he or she had to make it clear to buyers, because more than inexpensive tracts of land, they needed housing.

109 Minutes, Book U, page 84, “Sun Valley Park,” April 6, 1959. While the park land was donated by Gepford it was named to honor landowner Walter Harris who sold Gepford much of his Sun Valley land.

turn the parcel into a park and that the dumping and waste problem had only grown.\textsuperscript{111}

By the following spring, enough residents volunteered their time and labor to begin improving the park in addition to donating many of the materials.\textsuperscript{112} By funding the project themselves, Sun Valley residents only needed the county’s approval to move forward with the project. It took residents the course of a decade to develop the parcel into a community park.\textsuperscript{113} Their effort demonstrated a willingness to take community-building into their own hands, with or without the help of the county government. Yet the nascent park was another abused space that served as a daily reminder of the growing waste problem in Sun Valley, a problem that residents worked to solve with only reluctant support from the county government.


In addition to serving as a recreational space once residents were able to clean and begin to maintain it, the park served as a polling place and for other civic needs. Their “park” helped to transform Sun Valley from a sporadically developed, unplanned place into one that demonstrated independence and connectedness among residents. These struggles with roads and the ten-acre park were the first major challenges Sun Valley residents faced in their efforts to build a community out of an unplanned rural development. The roads, however mismanaged and underdeveloped they may have been, connected Sun Valley to Reno and Sparks; but the park was to connect Sun Valley residents to one another. The land where the park was built was Gepford’s parting gift to the people of Sun Valley.

On Sunday, December 8, 1963, Harry Gepford died of natural causes at the age of 83. Sun Valley, residents claimed, retained the community spirit he spent the last decades of his life building. At the time of his death, the community continued to grow rapidly. What land Gepford could not sell, he donated to the residents collectively. In doing so, he gave Sun Valley the spaces it lacked. Early in Sun Valley’s development, residents expressed a desire for recreational space. As with their many other development problems, the need for recreational space was to be solved by improvisation. Residents made with what few resources were available to them.

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116 Susan Severt (Activist and Sun Valley resident), author interview, August 12, 2014.

117 In November 1959, a group of residents petitioned the county commissioners for permission to use a Sun Valley gravel pit for a turkey-shoot (Minutes, Book U, page 243, “Sun Valley Gravel Pit,” November
Sun Valley sellers claimed in their advertisements that their community was “worth seeing.” Others portrayed Sun Valley as enticing with adjectives like “beautiful,” a compliment to Gepford’s work, and a testament to his success as developer. One seller claimed, “must see to appreciate.” Whether the glowing language was justified or not, Sun Valley remained welcoming to people in need of housing solutions to meet their financial needs. A buyer purchasing a trailer home in Sun Valley likely did so out of financial necessity. Gepford had built an affordable community, but one in which he wanted residents to take pride. While moving to Sun

9, 1959). Two months later, other residents asked the commission to use that same gravel pit for a motorcycle racing event (Minutes, Book U, page 318, “Gravel Pit,” February 5, 1960). Commissioners approved the requests, and the residents continued to make use of the Sun Valley landscape in ways that seemed unconventional (Minutes, Book U, page 406, “Sun Valley Motorcycle Races,” July 20, 1960. Also, Minutes, Book V, page 118, “Sun Valley Pit,” (Nevada Trailblazers motorcycle racing group apply to use the Sun Valley gravel pit for the year) April 5, 1961). After several years of using the gravel pit for motorcycle riding and other recreation, residents proposed to convert the space into a park that could also serve as a flea market on weekends (Minutes, Book 5, page 549, “Sun Valley Flea Market,” October 5, 1971).

Then, in June 1974, residents approached the commission to argue that motorcycle riding in and around the Sun Valley gravel pits had become a problem. One resident claimed motorcycle rides in Sun Valley had caused a widespread “abuse of property” (Minutes, Book 9, page 25, “Sun Valley – Motorcycle Riding,” June 5, 1974). Riding in the hills and around the gravel pits brought a level of traffic through Sun Valley roads that the community was not prepared to manage. Additionally, the gravel pits were destroyed and neighborhood lots were destroyed, causing financial damages to owners. While the residents’ pleas suggested a sense of urgency in dealing with the growing problem, the commission’s response was simply that the motorcycle problem was “being looked into” (Minutes, Book 9, page 103, “Sun Valley – Motorcycle Riding,” July 25, 1974). It was essentially the first concrete claim that residents made to the county to suggest that the condition of their community was in jeopardy. It was also the first instance in which Sun Valley residents were left to feel largely neglected by the county government that took over as the overseer of Sun Valley’s growth from its developer.

118 Reno Evening Gazette, January 9, 1963, classified advertisement: “ONE ACRE: Nice 4 bedroom home, more than 1 acre completely fenced, in Sun Valley, worth seeing. $12,600 total price. Low down, excellent terms.”

119 Nevada State Journal, August 14, 1963, classified advertisement: “SUN VALLEY: Ideal view lot (1 acre) for your mobile home or house. In beautiful Sun Valley. $1650. $300 down, $35 a month.”

Valley may have been motivated by financial struggle, it did not imply that residents could not also be proud of the place where they ended up.121

Just before Gepford’s death, one seller advertised a “real cute” property in Gepford fashion:

![Figure 16: Gepford-style, selling the ranch.](image)

Sellers promised buyers that Sun Valley was gaining in popularity and appeal.123 They claimed Sun Valley was appealing and “growing fast,” which implied to potential buyers that Sun Valley must be a decent and affordable place to live and where their property values would increase, or at least not decline.124 Sellers relied on a combination of appeal and affordability as inducements to make Sun Valley stand out.

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121 Severt, author interview, 2014. Land that he could not sell, he donated, not to organizations or to charities, but to the people and the community he loved. The majority of this donated land being used by members of the community as a public park, where the children of the community would have an outdoor place to play, knowing that many who lived in trailers may not have had the luxury at home.


Sun Valley was shaped by resourceful sellers who adopted whatever marketing strategies were necessary to sell their land, just as BLM had done when it began parceling out the area under the Small Tract Act. Sun Valley was a place for working class buyers where trailer housing was an acceptable, even necessary, part of the landscape. Harry Gepford was such an important figure not only because he bought and sold the lands that became Sun Valley, but because he took the land for which BLM struggled to create a use and turned it into a place where people wanted to live. Gepford encouraged the use of trailers in order to make the settlement work, just as BLM had done under the Small Tract Act. Sun Valley eased the housing problems of working class people. The landscape that BLM previously deemed useless and unappealing, Gepford transformed into a livable one, where a makeshift community could be improvised by residents. While problems were in store for residents as they struggled with a county government in search of ways to plan and regulate the development that took place there, Sun Valley nonetheless provided a place where working people could not only get by, but could own property. The remote lands north of Reno and Sparks were suddenly appealing. Yet, the challenge remained to find ways to plan for the growth that was by now gaining momentum, especially for a county government that had little to no policy regarding Sun Valley.
CHAPTER FOUR:

PLANNING AND NON-PLANNING IN SUN VALLEY, 1955-1973

The early development of Sun Valley saw the emergence of trailer housing, disputes between county and federal governments over land, the need for volunteers to provide services that were otherwise inadequate. As each of these problems came to characterize life in Sun Valley, residents most often responded to them by proposing to take the management of their community into their own hands. Underlying each specific problem, however, was a general need for better planning, because Sun Valley had grown mostly without it.

County engineer George Oshima claimed Sun Valley was developed before planners and other government officials knew the underground sewage capacities for the area. As a result of this non-planning, residents faced countless obstacles, including the presence of particulate waste in their tap water.¹ Sun Valley was a place that grew in a conscious spirit of non-planning. As I illustrate in this chapter, many residents preferred it that way. The disputes that arose between those residents and others who wanted better planning and regulation illustrate the continuing tension over how best to develop a place like Sun Valley.

The effects of non-planning are not always visible on the landscape. They can be found in the condition of roads, the cleanliness of properties, the organization of land uses, and in the condition of housing. In February 1951, those effects were apparent when

firefighters extinguished a burning chicken coop behind a residence in Sun Valley. They found burning mattresses in the structure in addition to other clues that people were living in it. The condition of homes alerted authorities to the physical danger of Sun Valley life. Yet the problem was not unique to the housing, the condition of which was the responsibility of residents. As county planners would argue, Sun Valley’s problem was its poor planning. Some went so far as to claim that the problems of Sun Valley were, in fact, the due to an absence of planning.

Soon after the chicken coop incident, as housing conditions worsened, Sun Valley children were reported by school officials to have attended “covered with filth.” The physical evidence included visible rat bites that authorities determined to have been the result of sleeping on rags under a lean-to outside of their parents’ Sun Valley home. Undersheriff Richard O’Boyle of the Washoe County Sheriff’s Office burned the dwelling after authorities learned it was the sleeping quarters of the young children. These living conditions were an indication of the unregulated nature of housing in Sun Valley and of the unplanned nature of its development.

By the 1950s, the problems that resulted from Sun Valley’s development included poor road conditions (most unpaved, few level), little if any regulation of housing conditions, and no guidelines on where and how to manage and dispose of junk and garbage. In this chapter, I argue that rather than solving the development problems it was designed to remedy, the county planning program for Sun Valley created tensions

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between residents who wanted the new ordinances and those who did not. The underlying symptoms of non-planning were the problems of waste and poor housing conditions, realities with which Sun Valley residents lived and that county planners struggled to manage.  

By the late 1950s, planners and commissioners wanted to develop a planning program in Sun Valley. Ongoing development there increased costs to manage infrastructure and expanded the need for water, sewer, and other infrastructure necessities, all of them requiring additional investment. With better planning would come more manageable and cost-effective infrastructure systems, especially those related to waste issues and housing conditions. Residents optimistically anticipated that planning could alleviate concerns about waste and housing conditions, but county intervention risked diminishing the sense of independence and relative isolation on which Sun Valley was founded.

Sun Valley required the attention of planners because it was developed by residents without traditional planning: there were no land-use maps to divide parcels according to best uses and no master plans or comprehensive plans to outline and define the specifics and the purposes of the differing land uses. The eventual zoning of Sun Valley, beginning in 1958, caused conflict between residents who welcomed and abided by it and those who did not. While the former wanted Sun Valley to recover from years of non-planning, the latter preferred the place continue to grow the way it always had.

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5 The problems of waste and housing are confronted in depth in the following two chapters.
6 The water supply in Sun Valley at the time was largely undrinkable (“Sun Valley Water Costs Reported,” *Nevada State Journal*, May 23, 1964).
7 See the development of the lands in Chapters Two and Three of this dissertation.
In 1958, county planners introduced a zoning code specific to Sun Valley, thereby attempting to regulate and bring a sense of order to a place that had grown without it. Sun Valley residents were responsible for their own fire protection and garbage clean up, problems that forced residents to confront the inattention they received from the county. Residents’ efforts to provide services for themselves illustrated both a lack of planning and the unsatisfying outcome of attempts to compensate for the lack of planning and code enforcement. Despite residents’ independent and isolated patterns of life (which suggested that they preferred the absence of regulation), many expressed interest in seeing Sun Valley receive planning and services from the county government. The disparity between these two groups of residents was made public from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s when many Sun Valley residents petitioned county and state governments for incorporation as an independent township. When attempts to incorporate failed, these residents sought annexation by the City of Reno, which also repeatedly failed. Residents would not be able to escape the isolation out of which Sun Valley grew.

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8 “Professor, ‘Annex Poverty Areas,’” Nevada State Journal, August 15, 1969. In 1973, Sun Valley residents applied for incorporation again, one resident arguing that “the incorporation of Sun Valley would solve all the problems we have out here” (“Annexation: Only After Night of Riotous Living,” Nevada State Journal, April 24, 1973). Regardless of the State Senate’s disapproval of the bill to allow Sun Valley residents to incorporate, supporters insisted that the community was “going to get it one way or another if the people of Sun Valley want it, and they have indicated they do” (“Annexation: Only After Night of Riotous Living.”). On April 25, 1973, the state senate’s Federal, State and Local Governments Committee declared that Sun Valley lacked an “adequate tax base” to become a “viable city” (“Sun Valley Incorporation Proposal Dead,” Nevada State Journal, April 25, 1973). Attempts to incorporate were “dead” (“Sun Valley Incorporation Proposal Dead.”). Had Sun Valley incorporated, the City of Reno would have lost approximately $145,000 per year in cigarette and alcohol taxes alone, a “substantial,” amount of revenue (“Tax Loss Seen in Sun Valley Incorporation,” Nevada State Journal, May 17, 1973. $145,000 in 1973 would be $779,335 in 2015 dollars, according to data.bls.gov’s Consumer Price Index calculations). Not only was Sun Valley supposedly unable to support itself on its own tax base, the amount it would take away from Reno and Sparks would in fact be harmful to those cities. Critics also pointed out that annexing Sun Valley into Reno or Sparks would burden that city with the extreme financial pressures of the struggling community, and that the threat was so severe that it would “break” that city financially (“Sun Valley Issue Sparks Debate at Regional Meeting,” Nevada State Journal, July 15, 1976.).
If the planning program was successful, Sun Valley residents would be left to deal with whatever regulatory decisions the county made, such as what kinds of development to permit in which areas of Sun Valley, and what conditions would be permitted on residents’ properties. Such decisions would affect residents’ use of trailer homes which were otherwise unregulated.\(^9\) A planning program for Sun Valley meant an end to the patterns of development and the ways of life that existed there up to the late 1950s. Trailer housing and constant struggles with waste and junk were symbolic of the pattern of non-planning (and the existence of unregulated living conditions) that became a part of the Sun Valley experience.

Many concerned residents welcomed the zoning code, believing the principles of city planning could remedy the early mistakes associated with Gepford’s laissez faire pattern of sales and development. Yet in a place that had been built without conventional planning, the process was foreign and mostly unwelcomed by the residents. Governmental imposition of planning and zoning was a logical solution to the various problems that had developed since development in Sun Valley began in the 1940s. Specific issues of waste and poor housing (discussed individually and in greater detail in the later chapters of this dissertation), were the visible signs of the negative effects of Sun Valley’s history of non-planning.

Sonia Hirt, historian of urban planning, observed the paradoxes inherent in planning in the United States. People want clean and safe neighborhoods, she claims, but they do not often want the intervention of government officials to make it happen.

\(^9\) Examined in depth in Chapter Five of this study.
Among the paradoxes, according to Hirt, is the tension between “freedom” and “authority,” as well as what she called the “change-and-stability paradox,” in which people struggle to improve their communities while simultaneously aiming to maintain traditions. The simplest paradox was that as much as people wanted to be left alone by the government to live as they pleased, zoning improved neighborhoods and improved neighborhoods equaled higher property values and quality of life. Hirt explained, “by regulating what gets built and where, [zoning] sets the basic spatial parameters of where and thus how [people] live, work, play, socialize, and exercise [their] rights to citizenship. By imposing spatial constraints on social behavior, zoning ‘affects the basic organization of [the] human environment.’”

Long before the Washoe County Commission and Sun Valley residents began to contemplate a planning program, “basic spatial parameters” of the place were determined

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11 Hirt, 185. Hirt’s third paradox is described as, “(the home-versus-property paradox),” which “stems from [the] theory that zoning’s popularity in the United States can be explained by homeowners’ concern with their property values. To protect these values, homeowners need a way to control their surroundings. Yet we are talking about America here—the land where people constantly leave one home for another to follow better jobs, schools or services, the land where people are more likely to see their homes as financial assets, as wealth generators, and as retirement plans…Isn’t it ironic that American residential space is so sacredly residential (so protected from intrusion through land-use law, that is) only because it is so commercial (because it is an object of trade rather than an object of our sentiments)?” Further, Hirt differentiates between “zoning” (an American practice where lines and political boundaries define much of the process) and “planning” (the term preferred by Europeans as well as urbanists in the US and elsewhere, a term that implicitly involves thought and foresight in development practices. While Hirt grapples with “zoning” specifically as an American problem, this work gravitates toward the latter to elicit the complexities of planning processes in development and development-related problems. This preferred term also alleviates the problem of line-drawing which, as Hirt points out, is problematic and provocative.

12 Hirt, 3.
by residents as they acquired their properties and decided as individuals how best to live on their land. The planning program would rearrange those spatial parameters by determining not only where, but also how people would go on living in Sun Valley. Just as Hirt predicted, such processes led to residents’ protests and petitions as they “exercised their rights to citizenship,” their rights to have a voice in the implementation of a regulatory program that would impinge on life in Sun Valley. As evidenced by repeated petitions and protests to the Washoe County Commission, many Sun Valley residents were open to the idea of planning. For them, a new system of planning would, ideally, remedy Sun Valley problems by regulating its physical organization.

Zoning empowered residents to preserve a preferred way of life while also providing local governments with the tools to regulate those practices. It was its peculiar tradition and culture that made zoning such a threat to the Sun Valley way of life. “The standard rules of US zoning,” Hirt argued, “are not mere technical tools but are culturally loaded.”\(^{13}\) Implementation of a new planning program meant interfering with established customs, which in Sun Valley revolved around non-planning independence from government involvement.\(^{14}\)

In a recent article entitled “Notes Toward a History of Non-Planning,” historian Anthony Fontenot argues that the problem of non-planning arises from debates over the 


\(^{14}\) Hirt posed the question: “how did increased government regulation of private land and property ever become acceptable to a [people] that ostensibly cherished the opposite?” (Hirt, 9). In Sun Valley, there was resistance to a system of planning that would effectively criminalize an unregulated way of life. Yet, consent to a new planning program suggested that many in Sun Valley welcomed a stronger government presence in order to remedy the effects their pattern of development under Gepford’s laissez faire benevolence.
role of government in people’s lives. Whether the focus is politics or the practice of zoning, Fontenot concludes that “a well-defined planning agenda can be a powerful instrument for bringing multiple, even opposing, constituents together to achieve common goals…” He celebrates “city-building processes characterized by the blurring of public and private sector responsibilities, processes that ultimately defy the reductive labeling of left and right, bottom-up and top-down, state and market.” In Sun Valley, non-planning created a tumultuous relationship between the County and Sun Valley residents, and subsequently created tensions between residents who desired better planning and those who did not, who instead were content to get by in a place where “anything goes.” With the problem of waste affecting the health and safety of residents, the lack of planning was apparent and the need for planning urgent.

Homeowners were often pro-zoning because the process protected neighborhoods. In Sun Valley, many properties were used to store junk and accumulate waste, causing other homeowners to support county efforts to improve property standards and code enforcement. Homeowners who did not participate in the culture of junk were relieved that the county might provide some solution, even if that solution was to intimidate offenders with stricter zoning and enforcement. It was the necessity of

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15 Anthony Fontenot, “Toward a History of Non-Planning: On design, the market, and the state,” placesjournal.org, January 2015, accessed September 2016. Fontenot traces the argument in political debates from the debates over states’ roles in development and infrastructure of theorists Friedrich Hayek and John Maynard Keynes, to discourses on city planning from Jane Jacobs’s study of urbanism in New York and Robert Venturi’s study of planning in Las Vegas.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Hirt, 9.

19 Explored in Chapter Four of this dissertation.
protecting property values that made zoning desirable.\textsuperscript{20} Better zoning and cleaner neighborhoods led to increased property values and the process was cyclical from that point: higher property values meant higher tax rates, which meant better services from the county. Sun Valley residents shared a growing awareness that there were community property issues that required attention, but debated among themselves whether county planners or Sun Valley residents were the right agents for the job. This tension between the established patterns of development (residents) and the proposed new program to remedy past problems and prevent future ones (planners) came to define much of Sun Valley’s history.

To live in Sun Valley was to live in the “county,” that is the non-urban landscape.\textsuperscript{21} Getting out of the city for many residents of Reno and Sparks meant moving to Sun Valley because, as sellers would point out, it was a place where residents lived “without restriction.”\textsuperscript{22} An early selling point for Sun Valley, which developer Harry Gepford was proficient in making, was that residents of Sun Valley could enjoy the benefits of living in a non-urban environment that was best exemplified by its lack of zoning and other constraints.

As seen in the ads, Sun Valley residents prized their open space, their big lots, their spacious (albeit mostly dirt) yards. Imposing zoning ordinances on people who not

\textsuperscript{20} Hirt, 10. “There is plenty of historic and contemporary evidence that protecting private property values was an important factor in making zoning acceptable to the American public…Constraining political individualism through zoning became acceptable…because the new legal tool was justified as a means of achieving greater economic individualism: i.e., as means of increasing private property values.”

\textsuperscript{21} Nevada State Journal, December 8, 1960.

\textsuperscript{22} Reno Evening Gazette, December 8, 1950: “SUN VALLEY LANDS: One acre and up without restrictions in county near Reno and Sparks.”
only grew accustomed to the way of life afforded by an abundance of space but who settled this particular area because of its space, meant violating the very expectations residents brought with them to life in Sun Valley. The place grew based on the tradition of independence born of isolation, a process that led many residents to build or import whatever form of housing they could afford and that they were willing to live in.

Over time, these portrayals of Sun Valley as less constrained by planning and zoning codes depicted a community threatened by the prospect of planning, a process they preferred to live without. The absence of restriction was more prominent than any other feature in the advertisements. The seller capitalized on buyers’ desires to flee Reno and Sparks by offering a location with roads, utilities, and a sense of connectedness to the cities without being too close to them. Other phrases such as “Out of Reno” left much to the seller’s imagination, assuring them most importantly that the home was not in the city. Ads consistently portrayed non-urban space, implying an unrestricted and unregulated independence from government control over the land.

Planning, as a theory of development as well as a professional practice of local governments, suggested that, hypothetically, the real developmental problems of Sun Valley could be remedied and that the place could reflect a vision the planners would create for it. Proponents believed that establishing a planning program for Sun Valley would render the place more organized and eventually more independent from the cities of Reno and Sparks. Sun Valley would, in theory and in physical organization, come to


reflect a more urbanized environment complete with zoning maps and a master plan of its own, unique to its geography, housing needs, infrastructure demands, and prior development patterns.

Sellers of Sun Valley property expressed an awareness that while sometimes sellers emphasized distance from cities, buyers sometimes wanted to remain connected to city life.\textsuperscript{25} This process motivated sellers to down-play isolation and distance. Sellers emphasized Sun Valley’s place as a non-rural but also non-urban place. Advertisements for isolated or connected aspects of Sun Valley life suggest that there were two groups of potential buyers: a group to whom the unplanned and unregulated landscape appealed, and a group to whom the connected and adequately serviced ways of development appealed. Pro-planning Sun Valley residents, however, may not have desired to duplicate the services of the cities. Planning could, instead, relieve Sun Valley of its dependence on Reno and Sparks. By relying less on the urban services of other cities, Sun Valley could instead devise its own vision for how to become an independent place, with its own services and its own system of planning and zoning.

Sun Valley needed more and better planning than Gepford had provided for it. Ad hoc settlement meant that neither residents nor developers determined Sun Valley’s

\textsuperscript{25} Many advertisements emphasized this connection, leaving behind the country and rural appeal of Sun Valley. One seller first emphasized the large size of the parcel (“10 acres”), the potential of such a large parcel (“for estate type homes”), and the benefits of the area’s proximity to Reno (“City water”) (\textit{Nevada State Journal}, January 11, 1967: “10 ACRES SUN Valley, for estate type homes. City Water, natural gas, septic, view”). Connection to city services implied a sense of connectedness with the city, an attempt to down-play isolation and distance, at least attempting to give a positive spin to the latter. Along with this connection to the city, the ad emphasized modern, albeit rural, amenities, which left it up to the buyer to define these features as rural or urban (“natural gas, septic”). That is, if they wanted to envision the property as urban, they could. Reference to city services provided this opportunity. Yet, “10 acres Sun Valley” made clear that indeed this sense of connectedness to the city was not mandatory.
character, whether the place would be connected to the cities or would remain isolated from them. The ambivalence of the ads mirrors the division among Sun Valley residents as advocates faced the challenge of implementing a planning program in a place where many residents did not want it.

Emphasizing city services in selling Sun Valley property allowed sellers to suggest that while Sun Valley was distant enough to allow more space than the standard residential city lot, it was also connected enough for residents to benefit from city services. The appeal highlighted closeness and distance at the same time, emphasizing the openness and space that were available at this intersection of city and not-city. This remoteness and disconnectedness, in addition to the freedom to live and build without restriction, drove much of the demand for Sun Valley property, as evinced in the language of Sun Valley sales ads.

Sun Valley development received special attention from county planners who recognized that it posed challenges. In 1954, the Washoe County planning commission approved Sun Valley resident Jud Packard’s permit to operate a trailer court in Sun Valley. The commission specified that Packard would need to provide sufficient electrical and water connections, lighting for the trailer court’s outdoor area, as well as

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26 As if to reassure wary buyers of the expected undeveloped nature of Sun Valley, many sellers were sure to mention “city water and gas” (Nevada State Journal, March 12, 1967). It was a small addition to any advertisement that reassured buyers that they were not moving too far away from Reno and Sparks and the services those localities were able to provide to homeowners. “Suburban” implied a sense of connectedness via infrastructure that the rural image could not provide. Suburban, in historian John Stilgoe’s language, was a middle ground between the urban and the rural, a borderland wherein residents could decide for themselves whether they wanted to embrace one landscape identity or the other. John Stilgoe, Borderland: Origins of the American Suburb, 1820-1939 (New Haven: Yale, 1990).
garbage service and fire protection.\textsuperscript{27} In similar cases in Reno, the commission did not emphasize the requirements for waste disposal and fire protection.\textsuperscript{28} Planning decisions in Sun Valley required explicit reasoning and step-by-step instructions on building and development, whereas in the developed city they did not. The extra attention Packard’s application received indicated a planning program might ease the complications involved in building and developing in an unplanned place where problems as basic as fire protection (especially given the presence of ultra-flammable trailer housing) and garbage collection still preoccupied residents.

In the late 1950s, as a result of the Packard case among others, residents attended commission meetings to inform commissioners that zoning specific to Sun Valley was increasingly urgent. The Packard case and others like it suggested that county planners agreed, that a planning program would make their jobs easier as well. One resident pointed out, “practically all Sun Valley residents were in favor of a zoning program.”\textsuperscript{29} Constant citations for zoning violations suggested that Sun Valley was a target of county code enforcement because most properties there did not satisfy county zoning codes in

\textsuperscript{27} Minutes of the Meeting of the Washoe County Board of Commissioners, Book S, page 234, “Planning—Trailer Court Permit, Jud Packard,” June 5, 1954.

\textsuperscript{28} The commission ruled that a west Reno trailer court operator was only required to provide community trash cans (Minutes, Book S, page 235, “Planning—Trailer Court Variance Number V-136, Ruth Bunker,” June 5, 1954.) In a case perhaps more similar to the Sun Valley case, commissioners ruled three months later that a trailer court operator in Black Springs (a very small community five miles west of Sun Valley) would have to provide outside lighting and sewage systems, not a requirement of city trailer court operators (Minutes, Book S, page 291, “Trailer Court Permit—C-R Trailer Court—Black Springs,” September 20, 1954.)

\textsuperscript{29} Minutes, Book T, page 165, “Planning—Sun Valley Zoning,” July 20, 1957. In a related case, county commissioners approved a master plan for zoning in nearby Lemmon Valley that required a one house per acre dwelling unit density because of the unknown quality of water and sewage in that area, a problem they also faced in Sun Valley (Minutes, Book X, page 48, “Planning—Master Plan—Lemmon Valley, District 11,” December 5, 1963).
one way or another. A new program specific to the existing developments in Sun Valley would simplify the process for both parties. Residents admitted that their community required a more regulated way of development to improve its physical condition. Planners admitted that holding Sun Valley residents and developers to the general county standards had only created a landscape where life was increasingly difficult for residents and burdensome for county officials including both those monitoring development and enforcing existing codes as well as those providing services to Sun Valley. In June 1957, Washoe County commissioners recommended the new planning program for Sun Valley, developed by county planners in cooperation with Sun Valley residents themselves.30

The following month, commissioners reviewed the proposed zoning code at public hearings and concluded that the new code would benefit the community. The proposed zoning program for Sun Valley emphasized the negative: the condition of its housing and the accumulation of junk and waste. After a decade of growth in Sun Valley, these problems were alarming enough to warrant county intervention. The commission voted to adopt standards that divided Sun Valley into modern development zones (residential, commercial, agricultural).31 Commercial lots were reserved for businesses, residential lots were reserved for conventional residential development, and agricultural lots were reserved for whatever uses did not fit either of the other two patterns; many Sun Valley “residences” would maintain an agricultural designation because existing


31 Reno Evening Gazette, July 22, 1957, page 15. Also, Minutes, Book T, Page 158. The “agricultural” was the closest term the county came to “rural” in order to designate that the residential uses of the land would not reflect urban-size residential lots. There was no agricultural work other than home gardening taking place in Sun Valley.
conditions did not meet conventional codes for residential development. The new code sought to implement a regulated pattern of development, impose a sense of order on the landscape, and remedy the effects of unplanned development.\(^{32}\) Adopting the code the following year, the Washoe County commission declared an end to Sun Valley’s unregulated and unsupervised period of development.

The county commission held various meetings in the years leading up to their July 1957 decision to adopt a planning program for Sun Valley.\(^{33}\) The commission’s most specific complaint about Sun Valley was that the unregulated development that took place allowed roads to fall into disrepair with increasing amounts of traffic. This in turn triggered rising costs for the state and county agencies responsible for the maintenance.\(^{34}\) Establishing a basic pattern of zoning to guide development was a first step in solving this essential infrastructure problem for the residents of Sun Valley.

Sun Valley resident Melvin Brown was present at the hearing to represent the landowners of Sun Valley, who, he claimed, were grateful for the proposed changes to what he insisted was a troubling pattern of development.\(^{35}\) According to Brown, the unmanaged pattern of growth had created a landscape that was difficult to live on and a way of life with which he and other concerned residents were growing increasingly uncomfortable. In Brown’s words, “practically all of the residents of Sun Valley were in

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\(^{32}\) Previously, residents and developers were free to build what they wanted in any Sun Valley area, which led to the un-planned appearances for which the community became known by outsiders.

\(^{33}\) *Reno Evening Gazette*, July 22, 1957.

\(^{34}\) Ibid.

\(^{35}\) Minutes, Book T, Page 165.
favor of the zoning program.” 36 In imposing a new body of land use laws for a place that grew without any, the county proceeded carefully. Zoning affected people like Brown because in determining development patterns, planners determined not just where but also how people lived. 37 The zoning program would begin to regulate the ways of life of a people who often had chosen to reside in Sun Valley because one did not exist there. Much to Brown’s irritation, the unregulated way of life they created was chaotic because residents of Sun Valley had previously been free to live in whatever conditions they created for themselves. 38

In May 1959, a year after receiving notice from the county that there would henceforward be a planning document or “master plan” to guide and regulate Sun Valley development, residents submitted a petition to the county commissioners asking that they use the new code as a tool to prevent the issuance of building permits to people aiming to engage in the businesses of trash and junk disposal, a business that inherently required the collection and accumulation of garbage. 39 Planning in this case gave concerned residents a remedy when developments in their community concerned them. 40

36 Ibid.
37 Hirt, 2-3.
38 Hirt, 7. Zoning poses a threat to what Hirt called spatial individualism (Hirt, 8).
39 Minutes, Book U, Page 106.
40 The planning program for unincorporated Washoe County led to the official acceptance of trailer housing, explored in Chapter Five of this study. The acceptance, however, came with the expectation that trailer housing could be beneficial if development followed a structured zoning code to ensure the proper mixes and separations of land uses. In December 1960, for example, the Regional Planning Commission proposed to designate eleven square miles of Sun Valley land for the use of trailers (“Eleven Square Miles: New Trailer Zoning Plans,” Reno Evening Gazette, December 16, 1960). While regulated, trailers were no longer a product of haphazard development processes. While they continued to represent the form of housing that enabled people to settle and continue to live in the community, they were now sanctioned by the County.
By early 1963, however, in the fifth year of the planning program, the planning commission disputed Mel Brown’s declaration that a majority of Sun Valley residents favored zoning. Based on their interactions with Sun Valley residents and developers, county commissioners concluded that an apparent majority of Sun Valley residents did not take kindly to the zoning code.\(^{41}\) Although Brown proclaimed that the planning program should remain in effect “for their own protection,” county commissioner Dick Streeter sided with the disapproving residents, saying, “I’d feel I was remiss in my duties if we shoved it down their throats.”\(^{42}\) His solution was to direct county staff to inform residents of the pros and cons of the planning program, and allow the residents to vote on whether they wanted to keep the new ordinances in effect.\(^{43}\) Residents of Lemmon Valley (to the northwest of Sun Valley) had voted that year to adopt a similar code, claiming they wanted their community to develop in a more manageable way. Commissioners believed Sun Valley residents might come to a similar conclusion if given the choice and the opportunity to see the benefits of the program over time.\(^{44}\)

The zoning problems that remained most apparent and for which residents anxiously awaited resolution were those associated with trailer housing. In 1966, residents who had previously obtained permits to install and live in trailers were threatened with citations for zoning violations because trailer living was only permitted on certain parcels.\(^{45}\) Under the new county zoning code, many Sun Valley residents lived


\(^{42}\) Ibid.

\(^{43}\) Ibid.

\(^{44}\) Ibid.

in a “Suburban Farm” zone, which meant that trailers were no longer allowed on their properties.46 Residents fought against the new designation because they had been permitted to live in trailers on their properties previously.47 Building inspector Ross Stoltz explained to the commission and the residents that back in 1960 the district attorney’s office had not yet begun to build its case that living in trailers would, in most county zoning, be construed as “illegal.”48 Sam Bull, attorney for Sun Valley residents, argued that using private land for trailer living could not be construed as illegal and therefore must be permitted on county parcels.49 Conflicts between Sun Valley residents and the county grew, as did residents’ discomfort with the planning program, as they witnessed increasing tensions over the use of trailer housing.

Residents were cited for activities that the county deemed inappropriate in a residential community, mainly home businesses. One resident was cited for storing trees and lumber on his property for his tree surgery business while another was cited for operating a sizable child care business out of her home.50 In the case of the child care business, enforcing zoning regulations was the county’s best remedy for solving a problem that may have presented a danger to the public. Commissioners pointed out that the violations in general ranged from fire safety to unhealthy water.51 Violations were

47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
51 Minutes, July 25, 1967. Commissioners by this point were using “well log reports” to ascertain the drinkability of Sun Valley. The reports indicated more often than not that the water was unsafe.
specific to observable infrastructure issues, and were not, according to the county, meant to target trailer housing or any other aspect of Sun Valley life. Rather than treating residents living in trailer homes as code violations, the more pressing concern for county officials was the misuse of their land, mainly the accumulation of junk and waste on their properties. This emphasis on planning solutions to waste problems became the main concern of county officials as the physical appearance and condition of Sun Valley neighborhoods was now under their supervision.

County commissioners believed that maintaining planning programs in poorly developed areas would assist with “proper” growth and development in the future.\textsuperscript{52} Imposing a code on current residents and property owners meant enforcing a body of ordinances that had not yet been in place when residents moved there and for which many residents expressed disdain. The only remedy the county planners could recommend for the problems of poor development was a system of conventional zoning standards that would, over time, eradicate the issues related to poor planning that continued to plague residents and became drains on county resources. Commissioners conceded that “the wise political course wasn’t necessarily the best planning course.”\textsuperscript{53} Planning for Sun Valley to continue to grow meant imposing a body of regulations with which residents were uncomfortable. The planning program addressed the overwhelming need for new and updated infrastructure, which Gepford had failed to supply and which residents sometimes sought on their own.\textsuperscript{54}

\textsuperscript{52} “Planners worry over authority,” \textit{Reno Evening Gazette}, March 6, 1963.

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{54} They were challenged by high costs in attempting to obtain an updated water system from the Sierra Pacific Power Company in 1964 (“Sun Valley Water Costs Reported,” \textit{Nevada State Journal} May 23,
In 1962, the County Commission’s Housing and Environmental Committee proposed an addendum to the zoning code in Sun Valley.\textsuperscript{55} They claimed that sustained enforcement procedures would improve the quality of life and that new codes could upgrade the condition of existing housing and structures, thereby improving the cleanliness of Sun Valley neighborhoods.\textsuperscript{56} The committee believed that while zoning in general would bring about financial hardship for some Sun Valley residents (by requiring some to upgrade their properties), in the long run the changes would be beneficial for all residents.\textsuperscript{57} For instance, the change would benefit residents by preventing sellers from selling parcels of land that buyers would later discover could not be used for conventional residential construction.\textsuperscript{58} Commissioners then focused their efforts on whether to restrict trailer homes to trailer parks or allow them in any residential area. The former would permit trailers only on specific parcels, rendering over half of Sun Valley property owners “in violation” of the code; while the latter suggested that haphazard housing in Sun Valley would continue as it had.


\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid. Zoning, the ad illustrated, brought the benefits of an organized environment in which infrastructure and public services were available, whereas in the un-zoned rural environment they were not. Zoning also allowed the use of trailers in designated areas.
Residents responded to the new planning program in protest. In April 1965, resident Leo Fox, in the midst of constructing a home in the heart of Sun Valley, noticed many of his neighbors were not as adamant about following new code as he was.\(^59\) Fox’s neighbors told him to ignore the zoning codes and any potential changes to the code that affected his use of his property.\(^60\) The neighbors did not believe a zoning code should restrict Sun Valley traditions such as trailer living and the freedom to use properties as they desired. There was a growing divide between residents who wanted the new code and those who did not. Fox’s dilemma illustrated the divisions between neighbors who created a general disregard for the needs of Sun Valley, a complaint expressed by many groups of residents over the course of nearly two decades. Those patterns had, according to Fox, Brown, and others, created neighborhoods that had grown increasingly unlivable. Further, the county’s efforts to regulate and plan for better living conditions were without reward. Many residents continued to disregard the implications of the ordinances and disobeyed county code enforcement efforts, as evidenced by the continuing presence of junk and waste matters in county agendas over the following years.

Before the original zoning code went into effect in 1958, many varying uses were allowed, but when the zoning regulations were adopted, uses that were once allowed became violations.\(^61\) Zoning in general prohibited Sun Valley from growing the way it had previously. A decade later, in 1969, policy analyst Elmer Rusco foresaw Sun Valley

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\(^60\) Ibid.

\(^61\) Ibid. Planners argued that permitting land uses that had been allowed before the new zoning code could be construed as spot zoning, wherein a planning agency allows arbitrary land uses based on demand rather than on the best interests of long-range development.
evolving into “group poverty,” the product, he argued, of “urban areas without urban
services.” Foremost among Rusco’s recommendations was the need for better planning.
Sun Valley needed “services provided by government or some other agency,” but
residents were not receiving them. With better planning and zoning, county officials
could better gauge the need for specific services and maintenance, Rusco believed. His
observations suggest that over the course of the first decade of planning in Sun Valley,
the landscape appeared as if no planning had actually taken place. Even with county
efforts to remedy the effects of poor planning on the part of developers and previous
county officials, Sun Valley properties appeared just as neglected as before planning was
implemented.

As Gepford worked to sell Sun Valley, residents worked to take care of the place,
to provide the services that otherwise would have been lacking. Sun Valley, according to
political scientist Elmer Rusco, “had an almost complete lack of community services.”
Twenty-three percent of Sun Valley residents believed there to be no services for fire and
waste disposal in Sun Valley. The remaining three-quarters of Sun Valley’s population,
according to Rusco’s findings, were aware of the reality that what fire and other services
did exist were provided by residents willing to provide them. Rusco pointed out that Sun
Valley materialized largely without basic community services as a result of a lack of

63 Ibid. By 1973, Sun Valley residents applied for incorporation again, one resident arguing that “the
incorporation of Sun Valley would solve all the problems we have out here” (“Annexation: Only After
64 Rusco, 42.
65 Rusco, 66.
planning: Sun Valley was “poor regardless of the incomes of the families living there.”  
Rusco described the state of development in Sun Valley as a “poverty of community facilities.”  
To illustrate Sun Valley’s lack of services, Rusco observed that “residents must get water from their own wells…No sewer system exists…individual cesspools must suffice.”  
While wells and septic tanks were not necessarily a sign that life in Sun Valley was particularly difficult, Rusco was concerned with the inability of residents to acquire infrastructure from Washoe County.

In addition to the issues of water and sewage, Rusco was concerned about residents’ abilities to protect themselves in cases of fire: “a Sun Valley Volunteer Fire Department exists; it has some equipment, plus a building in which to house the equipment.”  
Rusco went on to identify a school, three churches and various businesses such as bars, junkyards, a used car lot, two cafes and three gas stations.  
In keeping with the apparent improvisation out of which Sun Valley grew, its residents provided many necessary services for themselves. Sun Valley, Rusco observed, “had few resources with which to bring the community services into being; in addition to the fact that there are relatively few high-income families, the tax base must be small in relation to the needs of the community.”  
As a result, Sun Valley residents relied on volunteerism; on

66 Rusco, 41.
67 Rusco, 42.
68 Rusco, 44.
69 Ibid.
70 Rusco, 42-44.
71 Rusco, 54.
themselves and on each other in the areas of development where planning efforts were either lacking or non-existent.

Aside from issues of junk, substandard housing, and a general need for better planning, other tensions also signified the need to better manage Sun Valley’s growth. Prior to 1973, the boundary between Reno and Sun Valley was an arbitrary one that ran along political boundaries rather than representing the natural landscape of the area.72 Residents and the commissioners agreed that the “township line” should be changed from the existing straight line to a more accurate one that represented Sun Valley’s natural topography.73 The county proclaimed that in redrawing this distinction between Reno and Sun Valley, the “people living in the Sun Valley area will be politically located in the Sun Valley precinct rather than in the Reno township.”74 The redrawing of the line meant that the people of Sun Valley would be more independent from Reno, and as a result, continue to be isolated from it as well. Further, the City of Reno would not have to provide services to that small area when Sun Valley landowners filled it in with new development. It was a step toward regulating Sun Valley with physical boundaries as the county continued to struggle to define what would take place within those boundaries. A Sun Valley with newly drawn boundaries and an established and accepted planning program could more clearly be construed by residents as a place that was physically as well as politically separate and independent from both Reno and Sparks.

72 Minutes, Book 8, Page 125, October 5, 1973.
73 Ibid.
74 Ibid.
The new boundary reaffirmed that no part of Sun Valley belonged in Reno. County officers agreed that it was in the best interest of all parties involved. The county investigated whether there were other communities in the area that were politically grouped together with Reno or Sparks but realistically did not function as a connected part of one of those cities. Better zoning could potentially solve Sun Valley problems, but also keep those problems isolated to that community and prevent them from making their way into the nearby cities. The solution to this problem of lines and boundaries was to draw Sun Valley’s border according to geography, rather than the less-meaningful political ones.

Sun Valley resident Bob Woods wrote to the *Reno Evening Gazette* in 1974, wondering why the county was willing to collect taxes from Sun Valley residents and then neglect to provide the community with adequate services, creating Rusco’s “group poverty,” in which urban communities are refused urban services. Woods explained that county fire roads were in better condition than most of Sun Valley Drive, Sun Valley’s main street. Sun Valley residents were often ignored when it came to receiving public services from the county. County and state planners argued that Sun Valley as well as

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76 Ibid.
79 Ibid.
80 Ibid.
its “seas of mobile homes” and the junk and waste that tended to surround them, were the visible signs of poor planning.\textsuperscript{81}

In April 1973, the Nevada Assembly was petitioned to allow Sun Valley residents one last opportunity to vote for cityhood, something residents had tried repeatedly without success since the years when the county first introduced the new planning program in 1958.\textsuperscript{82} The original attempts, dating back to the 1950s, illustrated a sense of frustration on the part of residents who felt intimidated by regulation and zoning. The final attempt in 1974, however, was an effort on the part of residents to take control of the management and regulation of their own community on an official level. Incorporation of Sun Valley required approval by the Nevada State Senate; then residents of Sun Valley would vote on what type of government to establish. Later that month, a majority of Sun Valley’s 11,000 residents voted to incorporate and become independent.\textsuperscript{83} County officials warned that if Sun Valley became a town of its own it would be responsible for its own fire protection and other essential services.\textsuperscript{84} The Nevada Assembly sided with Sun Valley residents who wanted to form a township and officially become independent not only from the cities of Reno and Sparks, but also from Washoe County. State senators concluded that the tax revenues likely to be raised by the community made up mostly of minimally taxed trailer homes remained insufficient for Sun Valley to provide the full spectrum of public services for itself. The final failed


\textsuperscript{83} Ibid.

incorporation attempt in 1973 meant that Sun Valley would remain a part of unincorporated Washoe County, and Sun Valley residents would be forced to adhere to the planning program that county planners laid out for them. As “official” and independent as the planning program made Sun Valley seem, it would remain under the official management of the Washoe County government.

In order to prevent the physical decay of neighborhoods, according to Rusco, local governments would have needed to provide better services and better planning. He claimed that Washoe County government was the “logical agency to provide them.” Rather than culminating in resolution, the zoning question became one more source of tension in Sun Valley. In the end, non-planning continued to define development, and indeed life, in Sun Valley. Residents for decades to come would struggle to form legal protests to county actions concerning the regulation of Sun Valley development and infrastructures.

As Fontenot predicted, the problems of non-planning are as apparent in histories of urban planning as they are in the politics and ideologies that complicate those histories. To plan what people could build and where they could build it was to determine how people lived, to regulate ways of life. The scale of the place does not alleviate the tensions of planning, just as the scale does not diminish the restorative effects good

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85 “Professor, ‘Annex Poverty Areas.’” *Nevada State Journal*, August 15, 1969. From the perspectives of state, county, and city levels of government, Sun Valley’s problems remained detrimental to the community’s development. Each of these levels of government cited the impact of mobile homes on the community: the state claiming the taxes were insufficient on these homes, and the county and city claiming that there was no zoning solution that could accommodate the scattered presence of the homes on the Sun Valley landscape.
planning can have on places that need it. Yet, planning is merely a theoretical tool that is used to direct development, not to redress existing problems. In the Sun Valley case, these specific aspects were waste and trailer housing. While parcel maps and master plans may have helped to alleviate the haphazard physical development of the Sun Valley landscape, waste and housing in particular continued to be poorly planned and poorly managed. These basic physical realities, not theories of planning or non-planning, would come to define the Sun Valley experience and to characterize the Sun Valley landscape. They are considered in more detail in the following chapters.

Planning for waste management required a governmental policy that addressed the specific problems of Sun Valley’s growth pattern. The emphasis on planning is important because it introduces not only the larger problems of waste and housing in Sun Valley, but it introduces the methods of development and government interaction that led those problems to evolve. Issues of waste and housing were rooted in the interactions between settlers and the county government. This relationship shaped the issues of waste and housing, yet the relationship was a reflection of the difficulties associated with isolated settlement. They were a reflection of precisely the planning problems BLM foresaw in administering its Small Tract Act disposal program.
CHAPTER FIVE:
TRASHING SUN VALLEY, 1951-1976

Historian Suellen Hoy observed that in the twentieth century, “cleanliness became something more than a way to prevent epidemics and make cities livable—it became a route to citizenship, to becoming American.”¹ Historians of urban waste contend that the problem of municipal waste in the twentieth century was a problem of space.² Many eastern U.S. cities had nowhere to store waste. In the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, big cities increasingly relied on dumps and landfills, both of which required available land, which many cities did not have. The Sun Valley case complicates this logic about the relationship between waste and space. Abundant land in Sun Valley did not mean that waste was not a problem.

Located between the urban environments of Reno and Sparks and the vacant public lands that surrounded those cities, Sun Valley demonstrated that access to vacant land did not remedy the problems of waste. Rather, the area’s waste problem assumed a shape of its own. The non-planning of Sun Valley by developers and local governments led immediately to problems with waste. Sun Valley experienced three problems that I argue were symptoms of the lack of planning that continued to plague the place and its

¹ Suellen Hoy, Chasing Dirt: The American Pursuit of Cleanliness, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 87. Clean homes and clean neighborhoods were equated with twentieth century suburban middle-class ideals (Hoy, Chasing Dirt, 88).
residents. These included the ongoing dispute between Sun Valley residents and the City of Reno about locating a new landfill in Sun Valley; illegal dumping (where residents from around Reno, Sparks, and Washoe County traveled to Sun Valley to dump garbage on roadsides and on empty lots rather than paying fees to the fast-overflowing Reno dump); and the cleanup campaigns organized by concerned residents and the volunteer fire department to remedy the effects of the waste problems. The three processes together were not only products of poor planning practices, but over time they came to define much of how Sun Valley was portrayed in both government interactions and in the local press. Public health critic J. B. Thomas observed that trailer communities were regarded by the public as unsanitary. ³ He wrote that “public health authorities are concerned with the general sanitation of trailer [communities] and the health hazards which develop [in them].”⁴ To install a landfill at Sun Valley would have exacerbated the waste issues that were already apparent.

After Reno’s existing dump began to reach capacity in the late 1940s, the city began to search for a location to install a landfill to replace it. Sun Valley was a potential site. While illegal dumping and other waste problems were already a growing concern for Sun Valley residents, the City of Reno’s proposal only served to make matters worse. Struggles with waste and cleanliness were already daily concerns for residents, but Sun Valley’s proximity to the vacant public lands north of the cities only made things worse.

⁴ Ibid.
As a concerned Reno resident observed in a letter to the *Nevada State Journal*, the area’s waste problems were not unique:

Reno is only one of many cities having problems with a facility that is most necessary yet which every community wishes it did not have to bother about. It is that time-honored institution, old as civilization itself, the city dump. It is almost impossible to remember when Reno wasn’t troubled one way or another, over the city dump.⁵

Reno City Council made its first proposal to relocate its near-capacity dump out of the city limits to the border of Sun Valley. In February 1951, Sun Valley residents presented the Washoe County Board of Commissioners with a petition containing 124 signatures to prevent the city from doing so.⁶ Sun Valley residents would spend the remainder of the decade fighting to no avail to prevent the City of Reno from establishing a landfill in Sun Valley.

Nationally, by 1960, siting a landfill took an average of five to seven years.⁷ City and county governments nationwide often proposed landfills in neighborhoods where residents were less likely to mount formal legal opposition.⁸ Another benefit to siting landfills in poor communities was that governments and waste management firms often

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⁵ “Modern Processing Methods May Eliminate City Dumps,” *Nevada State Journal*, September 13, 1962. The letter continued, “Many years ago, when it was located just out of town in the northeast there were complaints about people losing their trash and garbage as they hauled it through the city streets. As the city grew it began to crowd the dump and complaints arose about the smoke and odor. There were several years of talking about moving it and finally the near-town site was abandoned and it was established eight miles north, a deal having been consummated with the Bureau of Land Management. The BLM stipulated there would be no burning, and the holders of the collection franchise agreed. But the trash now catches fire every so often, and the BLM threatens to shut it down. Still another site was acquired east of Sparks for the exclusive use of the franchise holder.”

⁶ “Sun Valley Doesn’t Want Dump Moved,” *Nevada State Journal*, February 27, 1951.


⁸ Jenkins, 516.
had to buy surrounding land within one thousand feet from a proposed landfill.\textsuperscript{9}

Historian Elizabeth Royte observed that “garbage follows a strict class topography. It concentrates on the margins, and it tumbles downhill to settle in places of least resistance….”\textsuperscript{10} While many Sun Valley residents were unhappy about the presence of garbage in their community (especially other people’s garbage), physical as well as the socioeconomic geography appeared to make Sun Valley the logical site.\textsuperscript{11} Illustrating the enduring impact of the Small Tract Act on the Sun Valley landscape, Royte continued, “most cities…located their dumps on poor quality land viewed as economically useless.”\textsuperscript{12}

Historian Susan Strasser pointed out that “American cities and towns…maintain landfills and incinerators in places that are out of the way of all but the poorest citizens.”\textsuperscript{13} While poor citizens and working class neighborhoods may not have been the target, the City of Reno faced far more than the expected opposition to the Sun Valley landfill project: “Projects which are likely to arouse the opposition of neighbors are likely to be sited where the neighbors are few.”\textsuperscript{14} Given Sun Valley’s relatively low population

\textsuperscript{9} Jenkins, 518.


\textsuperscript{11} Martin Melosi, \textit{The Sanitary City: Environmental Services in Urban America from Colonial Times to the Present} (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008), 1. Melosi writes, “Service delivery remains the ‘hidden function’ of local governments.”

\textsuperscript{12} Royte, 158.

\textsuperscript{13} Strasser, 7.

density and its socioeconomic position, city officials must have anticipated little objection over its plans to store waste on the boundary of Sun Valley.

Wrecking yard operator, Herman Jednick, reported to the *Reno Evening Gazette* that “Sun Valley is nothing but dumps and trash.” The sentiment was apparently shared by Reno officials when they decided the Sun Valley area was a good place for a new dump. The Reno Sanitation Company (contracted by the City of Reno to collect and manage garbage) was among the first in the United States to transition away from burning toward the landfill method. They needed a non-urban location to make the underground storage of waste more feasible. Waste and dumping were a constant cause for concern in Reno because of the smell and the health risks associated with burning garbage. The challenge was to find a more spacious site where underground storage was more feasible.

Reno Sanitation Company officials assured opponents who feared the health hazards that the Sun Valley site would employ the new sanitary landfill method (in which garbage was buried rather than burned) but Sun Valley residents were skeptical. Since nearly all Sun Valley homes used wells for drinking water, burying garbage beneath the soil posed an immediate health risk to them. A month after submitting the petition in February 1951, Sun Valley residents solicited the aid of county commissioners to prevent

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17 By then, embers of waste ignited at the Reno City Dump as early as 1929 still smoldered.

18 “Sun Valley Doesn’t Want Dump Moved,” *Nevada State Journal*, February 27, 1951.

the relocation.\textsuperscript{20} Operating a landfill in the Sun Valley area, the residents argued, would not only create a “general nuisance,” but would cause property values to drop.\textsuperscript{21}

The City of Reno’s existing dumpsite employed a process (called “cut and fill”) that required continuously digging deeper into the ground to continue filling it with garbage. This cost the City of Reno tens of thousands of dollars a year, expenses that motivated the search for a new site.\textsuperscript{22} The Sun Valley location would require a similar process of cutting and filling, but would allow the city to invest less in the digging process compared to the existing site because of the abundance of space at the new location. Addressing the scarcity of space around Reno, W. Wallace White, director of the Nevada Division of Public Health Engineering, observed, “the days of unlimited space around the edges of town are running out, and a farsighted community, large or small, should reserve ample tracts close in, for this and other sanitation uses.”\textsuperscript{23}

Sun Valley residents stalled the efforts of the City of Reno staff when they presented another petition to the Washoe County Commission in 1956. Once again, they urged county officials not to allow the City of Reno to open the landfill in Sun Valley.\textsuperscript{24} County commissioners, however, acknowledged that Reno, Sparks, and Washoe County

\textsuperscript{20} “Sun Valley Protests to County Board,” \textit{Nevada State Journal}, March 4, 1951.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{24} Minutes, Book S, page 579, “Dump Grounds,” June 5, 1956. At the same time, a 520 acre dump site was being established through a city and county effort to develop a dump sit near Verdi for residents of that community (Minutes, Book T, page 119, “Real Property—Dumpsite—Verdi,” April 5, 1957. W. Wallace White, director of the Nevada Division of Public Health Engineering, listed “the advantages of this simple method as including complete control of the rodent problem, prevention of odors, sightly disposal areas which gradually become parks, and reclamation of uneven tracts close to town” (“Garbage ‘Fill’ Method Used,” \textit{Reno Evening Gazette}, November 4, 1954).
residents were in need of a new dump and that Sun Valley was, in fact, a viable location.\textsuperscript{25} Reno’s proposed new site for “rubbish dump and disposal,” was, in the commissioners’ words, “8 miles north of UNR,” at the “northern extremity of the city,” the western boundary of Sun Valley.\textsuperscript{26} Commissioners who opposed the dump argued that the site was “too great a distance” from residents of Reno and Sparks; that the distance would promote illegal dumping elsewhere; and that it would create too much traffic in that area, which would then require road expansion and maintenance.\textsuperscript{27} The commissioners’ language suggested their concern with the impacts a landfill would have on the people living in Reno, as much as with the people of Sun Valley. Residents of Black Springs, west of Sun Valley and north of Reno, argued that the proposed site would cause inevitable blight in an area that was already facing problems with illegal dumping.\textsuperscript{28}

\textsuperscript{25} Minutes, Book T, page 133, “Planning Reno Dumpsite,” May 6, 1957.
\textsuperscript{26} Minutes, Book T, page 153, “Planning Reno Dumpsite,” June 11, 1957.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
Among the complaints listed by opponents from Sun Valley, as well as citizens from Reno and Sparks, on a 1957 anti-dump advertisement were increased garbage collection fees, pollution of the city’s university campus, reduction of land values, loss of a nearby shooting range, smoke from the burning of trash (though the new landfill was not intended to employ the burning method), and the inconvenience of locating the landfill outside the city rather than in it. In addition to proposing the Sun Valley site for the benefit of keeping the garbage dump outside of Reno city limits, the language of the ad once again privileged Reno residents over non-residents.

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29 The fine print of the advertisement read, “Don’t raise the garbage rates in Reno; Don’t litter the University Campus; Don’t reduce land values on N. Virginia St. and Purdy Highway; Don’t condemn the rifle range; Don’t smokeup Sun Valley and North Reno; Don’t tax local businessmen by making them drive 20 miles to the dump.”

30 Nevada State Journal, April 7, 1957.
City officials responded that there was not enough fresh earth to cover garbage at the existing dump location, therefore the lands in the Sun Valley area were a viable solution because there was open space which would solve the fresh earth problem. Commissioners declared that the landfill site would only be viable with a road equipped for the traffic it would produce. They required that these transportation and infrastructure issues be remedied before they could approve the use of the Sun Valley site. Infrastructure aside, the emphasis in the flyer that residents vote not to “smoke up” Sun Valley stressed the health-related concerns over the burning of garbage. The insistence was crucial: the health and safety of Sun Valley residents was a concern with which the county would have to deal.

Opponents of the landfill argued that it would contaminate underground water, that garbage would attract unwanted wildlife and rodents, and that the mostly hilly area would be difficult to access in winter because of snow. In addition, they claimed, it would pose problems for developers who were attempting to build in the area. County officials claimed that the landfill would clog the narrow and winding US-395 route used to access the landfill. That road, they pointed out, was dangerous and busy enough already.

The day after the flyer appeared in local newspapers, County Commissioners held a public meeting and asked if anyone in attendance was in support of the new dump. Residents from the neighborhood of the existing dump provided a petition that contained

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31 “Decision due on dump Site,” Reno Evening Gazette, April 22, 1957.
32 Ibid.
125 signatures in favor of the new site. No other supporters of the new site were present at the meeting. Mr. H. S. Chisolm, a resident of Sun Valley, spoke on behalf of Sun Valley and Black Springs residents who attended the meeting because the proposed dumpsite was situated directly between the two communities. Their petition contained 640 signatures. Reno mayor Len Harris, present at the commission’s meeting, responded to objections by promising that the city would build a new road to the proposed site. The mayor and other Reno lawmakers were determined to establish the new dump at the Sun Valley site.

In June 1957, the Reno City Council authorized the mayor to issue payment to the BLM for the land at the proposed Sun Valley landfill. No official plans would be pursued, however, because of county commissioners’ reluctance to permit the use. Nearby residents of Panther Valley (who also lived near the Sun Valley landfill site) filed a petition with the county after the Reno mayor’s announcement that the city would pay BLM for the land. Panther Valley residents cited the inevitable pollution of well water, on which the majority of that community relied. Residents of three communities were by then arguing to the county that the proposed dump would impact their health and safety.

35 Minutes, Book T, page 123. April 8, 1957.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
The ultimate decision, residents feared, rested in the hands of the Bureau of Land Management, the owner of the land in question, and their decision as to whether to sell the land to the City of Reno.\textsuperscript{43} BLM, however, could not approve or deny a specific use. The agency had to base its decision solely on whether there were competing claims to the land.\textsuperscript{44} Furthermore, to the disappointment of the City of Reno, Washoe County would still have to issue the permit required of any such facility developed in its jurisdiction, regardless of city boundaries or federal ownership.\textsuperscript{45}

In a show of support for the people of Sun Valley, and a rebuke of the city’s handling of the issue, county commissioners ultimately voted in June 1957 to deny the proposed development of the Sun Valley landfill.\textsuperscript{46} The City of Reno nevertheless purchased a square mile of land bordering Sun Valley from the Bureau of Land Management.\textsuperscript{47} Reno City Council members maintained that the County Commission had no legal right to prohibit the city from using land it now owned.\textsuperscript{48} Yet the decision to approve or deny the landfill use was the county’s alone because it fell under county authority to manage and permit waste disposal facilities even when those facilities were within a city’s limits.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[43]“Quimby Takes Position on Dump Issue,” \textit{Nevada State Journal}, July 6, 1957.
\item[45]Ibid.
\item[47]Ibid.
\item[48]“Dump Site Dispute Turned Over to Attorney General of Nevada,” \textit{Nevada State Journal}, June, 25, 1957.
\end{footnotes}
While the struggle over the new landfill site continued over the next half-decade, Sun Valley residents urged county commissioners to post a sign along its main road in the meantime urging people to stop dumping garbage illegally in Sun Valley. Not only did the City of Reno have the Sun Valley area in its sights for storing garbage, illegal dumpers did as well.

Less than a year after declaring that they would not permit the landfill in Sun Valley, county commissioners admitted that they were running out of legal arguments (and funding to pursue those arguments) to prohibit the development of the Sun Valley landfill. In April 1958, county commissioners agreed to allow the dumpsite on a provisional basis, requiring that the City manage the landfill and whatever costs it generated. The county required dump trucks to be covered so as not to litter the Sun Valley and surrounding landscapes. It was the first agreement between Reno and Washoe County to move forward with the Sun Valley landfill, a temporary concession to see if the landfill in Sun Valley was either efficient or sustainable. Residents had worked for years to establish Sun Valley as their home but these waste problems demonstrated that it was not perceived by outsiders from around the Reno and Sparks areas as such.

In April 1958, the landfill at Sun Valley was officially under construction and by 1960 was open for business.

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50 Ibid.

51 Nevada Department of Environmental Protection, Bureau of Waste Management, “Lockwood Regional Landfill,” http://ndep.nv.gov/bwm/landfill_lockwood.htm, accessed April 5, 2016. The cities of Reno and Sparks sought a temporary solution to their waste problems outside Washoe County lines, establishing a temporary landfill at Mustang in Storey County near Sparks. By the 1970s, the Mustang-Lockwood landfill became a permanent regional landfill.
In October 1960, Sun Valley resident James Francis was given special permission by the Washoe County commission to store a garbage truck on his property. The stipulation on this permission was that he could store only one such truck on the property, that the truck should be concealed from public view, and that surrounding neighbors should not be disturbed by the presence of garbage. Concealing the truck served to prevent Sun Valley from becoming further associated with waste. Still, the truck’s presence implied that there was garbage moving through the community, implications residents had spent the previous decade trying to avoid.

In 1960, with the landfill in Sun Valley fully operational, county commissioners revealed that the Reno Disposal Company had misused the previous Reno dump. Workers as well as residents living in the vicinity complained of rats and contaminated water. Commissioners took this testimony to mean that the City of Reno could not properly manage its waste processes. Washoe County commissioners observed the landfill at Sun Valley from 1960 to 1964, concluding (with the evidence of mismanagement of the previous Reno landfill coming to light and serving to raise suspicion of the city’s waste management practices) in September 1964 that they would permanently revoke the permit they had issued to the City of Reno to operate the landfill.

53 Ibid.
55 Minutes, Book W, page 68, “Special Use Permit 2-62w, Reno Dump Site Revocation,” September 5, 1962. The Reno Disposal Company was originally given sixty days to remedy the problems in order for the county not to revoke the special use permit they required for the operation of a dump.
at Sun Valley. Operations were to be halted and the public would receive notice of the landfill’s full and official closure.

![NOTICE! The Reno City Dump](image)

*Figure 18: The official notice of the closure in 1964. The landfill is referred to as the Lemmon Valley Dump.*

In 1964, Washoe County Manager C. B. Kinneson observed that “there is not a place within 50 miles of here where a dump would not be a problem to someone.” As the Sun Valley case demonstrated, waste management discourse did not prioritize a clean and healthy living environment for affected residents. Rather, it emphasized concealing

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58 Ibid. The fine print of the flyer read, “The Reno City Council, at the request of the Bureau of Land Management, has acted to close the Lemmon Valley [Sun Valley] Dump effective August 17 until further notice. This action was taken due to the extreme fire danger to existing areas. For your convenience all trash and rubbish may be dumped at Mustang Dump site for a very nominal fee (25 cents per can; 50 cents per cu. Yard). Auto bodies may be removed to the Happy Valley Dump site for a fee of $3.00 each. Regular customers of Reno Disposal Company are entitled to weekly pick up service of 1 cubic yard of trash (3’ x 3’ x 3’), along with garbage service. Should you wish additional service for trash and garbage, please let us know.”

59 “Manager Favors New Dumpsite,” *Nevada State Journal*, January 31, 1964. The problem, he warned, was bigger than one community’s: “Unfortunately, it is a penalty we must pay for civilization,” and that “a community must have dump facilities” (Ibid).
Polluting the Sun Valley landscape would serve, if nothing else, to preserve Reno and Sparks neighborhoods.

Sun Valley opposition to the landfill did not end with its official approval, as indicated by the many protests and editorials published in Reno newspapers. Residents were angered by the mismanagement of the Sun Valley landfill. Many also remained angry that Sun Valley was selected for the site to begin with. But the management of the site by city officials proved that they were not following all the appropriate procedures in the management of waste. During the time the dump was in operation, BLM repeatedly cited the managers of the facility for burning waste. This was a violation of the agreement between the city and county, which stipulated that the Sun Valley landfill would be a non-burning “sanitary” facility (though it could burn garbage at specified times by permit, an exception that many facilities exercised in the years of transition away from burning toward the total burial of garbage). After repeated citations, BLM acted to protect Sun Valley by ordering once and for all that the facility be shut down.

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61 Lemmon Valley was the name sometimes given to the landfill facility near Sun Valley. It was bordered to the east by Sun Valley, to the north and west by the less-populated Golden Valley-Lemmon Valley developments, which, like Sun Valley, grew from the housing needs of military personnel at the nearby Reno Army Air Base, which closed in 1966.

In 1969, the site of the Sun Valley dump was turned back over to the BLM and designated as the “future site” of a public park. The closure was a victory for the residents of Sun Valley who ultimately prevailed by asserting that they did not deserve to bear the burden of the area’s waste. The 280-acre site had been an active dump repeatedly but for limited terms because of the active resistance against it. It served as little more than a temporary solution to an ongoing problem faced by the greater Reno and Sparks region. Locating the (temporary) dumpsite in the Sun Valley area did little to remedy the cities’ waste problems. Rather, it took attention away from illegal dumping.

After the Reno city council announced it would return the land to BLM, County Commissioner Joe Coppa observed that illegal dumping around Sun Valley was still happening at an alarming rate. According to archaeologist William Rathje, illegal dumping disturbed communities because the act represented a misuse of space: “Garbage that is out of place has always attracted far more attention than garbage that winds up where it is supposed to.” Landfills, he argued, were not the problem. The real problem associated with waste in neighborhoods was garbage perceived as “out of place,” which represented disorder. The problem of waste “out of place” in Sun Valley developed

64 Ibid.
65 Ibid.
66 Rathje and Murphy, 197.
67 As Sun Valley residents worked to reshape the image of waste in their community, residents witnessed an abrupt change in the delivery of city services. In April 1965 appeared a legal notice in the *Reno Evening Gazette* informing the public of the formation of the Sun Valley Water and Sanitation District (“Legal Notices,” *Reno Evening Gazette*, April 20, 1965). As their first order of business, officials from the new district proposed the “construction, installation and other acquisition of a public sanitary sewer system” (Ibid.). At the time, the use of septic tanks in Sun Valley was problematic because sewage bled into the ground, and became saturated enough to impact well water. The notice proclaimed an immediate need for
from its early non-planning, which in turn led to the problem of illegal dumping.

Although illegal dumping was increasingly common in urban areas in the middle of the twentieth century, in Sun Valley the problem resulted from the bureaucratic struggle to properly plan and site landfills.\(^6^8\) The simplest way to dispose of waste when landfills were distant or inadequate was to dispose of it, even if illegally, where resistance was minimal.\(^6^9\)

In the decade after the short-lived Sun Valley dump, there remained 85 illegal dumping sites in Sun Valley.\(^7^0\) The county spent significant resources during this time to clean these sites, not including the cost of enforcing regulations aimed at preventing them from taking shape in the first place. People from around Reno and Sparks continued to use Sun Valley for these purposes because it was publicized in newspapers throughout new water, and an “apparent future need” for the upgraded waste system (Ibid.). The notice warned of the growing threat of waste in the community.

\(^6^8\) Rathje and Murphy, 85, 197. See also, Katie Kelly, *Garbage: The History and Future of Garbage in America* (New York: Saturday Review Press, 1973); Susan Strasser, *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash* (New York: Holt, 1999); Kevin Lynch and Michael Southworth, *Wasting Away: An Exploration of Waste—What it is, How it Happens, Why We Fear it, How to do it Well* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1990); Judith Walzer Leavitt, *The Healthiest City: Milwaukee and the Politics of Health Reform* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982); “The sanitary landfill, a repository whose operations are today regulated by an increasingly stringent but by no means perfect web of state and federal strictures…about half of all sanitary landfills in operation today are operating without permits” (Rathje and Murphy, 85).

\(^6^9\) Rathje and Murphy. Also, Strasser, Hoy, and Melosi. In June 1961, Louis Ferretto, waste control officer for the City of Reno and Washoe County, issued 42 citations for waste management violations, half of which were cited for “accumulation of trash” (“Property owners notice for waste,” *Nevada State Journal*, June 16, 1961, page 12). Properties that were unsightly were cited for posing fire hazards in addition to being unsightly and “menaces to the community in general” (*Nevada State Journal*, June 7, 1961, page 7). Ferretto acknowledged the problems of safety and the impact accumulations of trash had on the image of the community. Ferretto’s efforts represented the city and county commitments to assisting in community-organized cleanup campaigns in the Reno area (“Property owners notice for waste,” *Nevada State Journal*, June 16, 1961, page 12). Nine of Ferretto’s citations were issued for dumping trash along county roads, a common occurrence in the Sun Valley area (Ibid.).

the area that the dumpsites existed there, and that while illegal, they were free to those willing to use Sun Valley in this way.

Illegal dumping appeared frequently on the County Commission’s agenda. In 1959, the commissioners ordered the district attorney’s office to draft an ordinance imposing a $300 fine or six months in jail for disposing of garbage on county roadsides.\textsuperscript{71} “Litterbugging” or illegal dumping became one of the most frequent topics at commission meetings.\textsuperscript{72} Indeed, the presence of residents’ inoperable junk cars was as problematic as outsiders using Sun Valley for dumping illegally.

Sun Valley’s junk car problem magnified the garbage problems by adding a more noticeable visual blight to the Sun Valley landscape.\textsuperscript{73} In July 1964, the Washoe County District Attorney claimed to have little choice but to prosecute Sun Valley residents who possessed or attempted to illegally dump an inoperable car body. The office determined that Sun Valley residents were responsible for most junk car violations in the county and made consistent efforts to prosecute the offenders.\textsuperscript{74} By 1965, the issues reached the desk of U.S. Senator Alan Bible who received letters about trash accumulation and dirt pits in

\textsuperscript{71} Minutes, Book U, page 175, “Ordinances,” August 20, 1959.

\textsuperscript{72} Minutes, Book U, page 219, “Roads,” August 31, 1959. Meanwhile, as illegal dumping plagued Sun Valley, the image of waste and disorder involved more than inanimate garbage. Volunteer fire chief Bud Stocke appeared before the board to state that Sun Valley was being overrun by feral dogs. These feral dogs had killed several smaller domestic dogs as well as goats, chickens, rabbits and sheep. Stocke pointed out that the problem was a half-decade old by this point because “no one wants to take action.” The sheriff and the district attorney claimed there was little they could do to help. They conceded that they would send a patrol of available firefighters and deputies to round up the animals (Minutes, Book V, page 264, “Sun Valley—Stray Dogs,” August 21, 1961). Also, Sun Valley residents claimed a man was using his property to raise pigs which caused odors and other issues that were offensive to residential property owners (Minutes, Book W, page 298, “Sun Valley—Nuisance,” April 5, 1963).


Sun Valley being used as illegal garbage dumps. While Washoe County and the City of Reno were in constant debate over the location of the dump in Sun Valley, the Senator insisted they reach a compromise on the Sun Valley waste problem. On August 5, 1965, after the closure of the Sun Valley landfill site, county commissioners agreed that there should be at least a transfer dump station in Sun Valley (a location at which residents would be permitted to dump garbage that would then be transferred by dump trucks to a larger regional landfill). The establishment of a transfer station was to be a compromise, keeping Sun Valley waste under control but alleviating the burden on residents who were unable to take their garbage to other sites.

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76 Ibid. The county manager ordered his staff to research a “dump station” in Sun Valley.

77 Minutes, Book Y, page 311, “Illegal Dumping—Garbage—Trash,” and “Ordinance—Illegal Dumping—Garbage,” August 5, 1965. “Inefficient and improper methods of disposal of solid wastes result in scenic blights...have an adverse effect on land values, create public nuisances, otherwise interfere with community life and development” (The Solid Waste Disposal Act of 1965, p. 997). Waste piling up on road sides and illegal dumps worsened the problem in Sun Valley. While the Federal law implied that operating traditional dump sites caused the impacts listed above, communities with illegal and otherwise “inefficient and improper methods” were in vastly more trouble. Indeed, land values remained low in Sun Valley and there was an ongoing and seemingly permanent “public nuisance” of waste, which did “interfere with community life and development.”

78 San Francisco-based firm Kennedy Engineers prepared a report for the Washoe County Commission in 1966 which suggested that the Spanish Springs area, not Sun Valley, was the most suitable location for landfill needs (“Trash, Garbage Burial at Spanish Springs Proposed,” Nevada State Journal, July 1, 1966. Economist Kenneth Clayton suggested that many governments in the early 1970s used “location theory” to decide the siting of landfills (Kenneth C. Clayton and John M. Huie, Solid Wastes Management: The Regional Approach (Cambridge, MA: Ballinger Publishing Company, 1973) 4). Location theory focused only on costs, aiming to maximize profits, assuming most waste collection services were private entities. The only community-minded aspect of the location theory was the cost to customers, which was essential given that many low-income communities would be neglected if the residents were unable to pay waste disposal fees. Among the factors involved in early location theory were the costs to transport garbage and labor costs (which included garbage men and landfill crews) (Clayton, 5). Transportation costs result in the siting of urban and nearly-urban landfills, such as Reno’s Sutro Street landfill and the desire to relocate the landfill to Sun Valley. When people don’t receive waste collection services, they “must either burn or dispose of their solid wastes in open dumps, publically operated and otherwise, or in illegal roadside dumping areas.” (Clayton, 3). Sun Valley, they concluded, should never have been chosen to house the landfill. The firm recommended the Mustang site (in Storey County, east of Sparks, in a neighboring county jurisdiction) continue to be used by Reno and Sparks residents until an adequately sized new site could be established in Spanish Springs (where land was more abundant and less-densely populated, in
In 1969, Reno resident A. C. Lapham suggested that the city “permit free dumping,” at an established dump site “so the ‘renegade’ residents will go there to addition to being closer to most Reno and Sparks residents than Mustang) or elsewhere (“Trash, Garbage Burial at Spanish Springs Proposed,” *Nevada State Journal*, July 1, 1966). City managers of Reno and Sparks approved the firm’s proposals. Yet, it would be the county’s final decision, once again, to approve the new landfill site. The firm also concluded that in 1965 there were 210 tons of garbage collected in the metropolitan area per day and that the current landfill facilities (including Sun Valley and Storey County locations) were “too small for general use” (Ibid). While the cities needed a temporary landfill solution, Sun Valley was not the most “proper and economical” one (Ibid).

79 *Reno Evening Gazette*, July 22, 1968. The caption of the image read: “Yes, It’ll Be Removed—Today! A reader asked the Gazette Action Desk if the ‘no dumping’ sign on the road to Sun Valley indicated it is all right to dump beyond 1,000 feet from the road. That’s what the sign seemed to indicate. So, Action Desk talked to Roy Marke, state road maintenance superintendent. He said a Washoe County ordinance prohibits dumping anywhere in the county other than specifically designated places, such as the legal dumping grounds. The sign will be removed—today, Marke said. He isn’t sure how the sign got there. He thinks a county commissioner asked for it about 10 years ago.”
dispose of their junk instead of littering the countryside.”

Lapham went on to express distaste for the residents responsible for the illegal dumping: “the low characters who dump their unwanted junk in any open spot aren’t so much concerned about the dumping cost to individuals as they are the inconvenience of driving to Mustang,” referring to the Mustang landfill, nearly ten miles east of Sparks, twenty miles from Sun Valley. His assessment was that “they won’t take the time, or they are simply lazy. So they drive to the nearest fringe area and toss their refuse out—usually in the dark of the night.”

Lapham’s analysis suggested that Sun Valley was perceived by residents of Reno and Sparks as “countryside” with adequate open space as well as serving as a fringe place where normal rules of waste disposal did not apply.

Citations for illegal dumping strengthened the association between Sun Valley and waste, but residents fought against the effects, organizing to manage waste on their own. Most important of these efforts were repeated cleanup campaigns that brought like-minded residents together for a common cause. Melosi has described the urban cleanup campaign as a “major civic event akin to a festival.” The cleanup campaign was an effort to protect and beautify a shared space, a celebration of place in addition to a productive way to connect people who worked toward fire-safe living conditions, and to

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82 Ibid.

83 Illegal dumping had been a growing problem throughout the 1960s. Illegal dumping often accumulated to form collection pits which were sometimes set ablaze, sometime accidentally, sometimes not. In addition to the random collections of garbage amassed by the illegal dumpers, Sun Valley residents were responsible for an alarming presence of dangerous waste in their community.

84 Melosi, *Garbage in the Cities*, 131.
make neighborhoods look better. Cleanup campaigns brought Sun Valley neighbors closer together as they cared for the neighborhoods they shared. They enacted a sense of responsibility. The revitalized neighborhood reflected a community concern for safety as well as cleanliness. Cleanup efforts also showed residents’ sensitivity toward others’ views of Sun Valley.

Beginning with the first campaigns organized by volunteer fire chief Bud Stocke in the 1950s, cleanup campaigns in Sun Valley earned the attention of the county government. Sun Valley residents were doing work that was the official responsibility of the county government. That fact illustrated that county services to Sun Valley had fallen below tolerable levels for residents. Citizens eliminated fire threats through their cleanup campaigns but also made life more tolerable in places where waste and junk threatened to become overwhelming. The campaigns served to clear away health and safety hazards associated with junk and garbage and alleviated potential fire threats.

Saturday, May 23, 1959, was the first annual “Pick-Up Day” in Sun Valley. The event evolved into the “Month of May Cleanup Campaign.” Resident and Sun Valley realtor Robert Fink worked with Stocke and the volunteers to organize the first spring

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85 Melosi pointed out that in addition to the visible results in neighborhoods, cleanup campaigns also stimulated new ordinances to prevent the problems from recurring (Melosi, Garbage in the Cities, 130).

86 Richards, 2015. Richards’s memory of Sun Valley properties during these times was that they were often in severe disrepair. Fire issues exacerbated the poor condition of the community because the homes were more often completely destroyed than partially damaged by fire. Further, many residents were not even fortunate enough to have been living in one of these trailer homes. News reports of chicken-coop and lean-to “housing” abound in local presses in throughout the 1950s and 1960s in Sun Valley.

87 Melosi, Garbage in the Cities, 129.


89 Ibid.
cleanup events.90 Neighborhoods were divided into zones and residents competed for points. The zone with the most points was honored at a celebration event held at the fire station. At the end of the event, organizers crowned a “Cleanup King and Queen,” representing the districts with the most improvements.91 The event was popular among residents and attracted participants from all over Sun Valley who wanted to improve their neighborhoods.92 While the “king and queen” competition made the event more competitive and fun for residents, the entire community benefited.

The ongoing junk car problem, and the increasing difficulties that waste issues caused for the volunteer firefighters, spurred residents to request a better-organized system for keeping their community safe.93 In January 1964, Bud Stocke and fellow volunteer firefighter Bill Brooks, along with nine other residents, wrote a letter to county commissioners claiming that efforts to keep their community clean had failed. Residents identified three specific properties on which the residents accumulated junk cars. These had become “an attractive nuisance, a danger to life and limb of children, a fire hazard, an eye sore, and a devaluation of surrounding property.”94 The plea illustrated that the waste problem was growing and local cleanup campaigns were not enough. Stocke, Brooks, and the volunteers had been called the week before to extinguish a flaming car in

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92 Ibid.
93 Minute, Book One, page 324, July 5, 1967, in which residents ask for the establishment of a Fire Protection District.
94 Letter, supporting material on file for Washoe County Commission Agenda Item 64-85, February 5, 1964.
which children had recently been playing.95 The need to keep Sun Valley clean went beyond these concerned residents’ desires to prevent eye sores. They wanted to keep their community safe for their families.

Stocke initiated the first cleanups in an effort to resist becoming what he feared could be characterized as “slum valley.”96 Stocke and others assisted residents in putting boxes of junk and bags of garbage along the streets in front of their homes to await county garbage trucks that hauled away the waste soon after.97 Albert McKeel remarked that he and Stocke were merely “trying to make a decent place of the Valley.”98 Clearing away garbage and junk made Sun Valley safer while also making it more attractive.

Nonetheless Sun Valley residents continued to complain of an ongoing junk car problem. They petitioned the county commission to direct the district attorney’s official attention to prosecuting offenders for bringing junk cars into Sun Valley.99 Additionally, residents urged commissioners to pressure area dumps (the Sun Valley dump was open until just before the request was submitted) to begin accepting junk car bodies to help with the problem.100 Commissioners and the sheriff’s office responded that junk cars were already being removed from Sun Valley.101 County commissioners reported that there were properties in Sun Valley with as many as seven cars, most non-operational,

95 Ibid.
97 Ibid.
100 Ibid.
and that such instances were not uncommon. Planners insisted that conditions on these properties were grounds to impose code violations. While citations would officially redress the problem, residents still had few resources for disposing of junk cars.

Cleanup campaigns became an essential part of Sun Valley life for concerned residents. Of the many ways people dealt with waste problems, no practice, according to Melosi, “captured as much attention or enjoyed as much publicity as city cleanup campaigns.” Indeed, cleanup campaigns enjoyed ongoing and extensive coverage throughout Sun Valley’s history. The campaigns raised public awareness of the inability of Washoe County and the City of Reno to effectively manage waste. At the same time, however, the campaigns have origins in a process of yearly accumulation and clutter. Aside from the illegal dumping of non-residents, the problems of accumulation and clutter can only be attributed to residents themselves. Those residents who organized the events acted to encourage other residents to join in. The campaigns were especially pressing because if residents didn’t clean Sun Valley properties and neighborhoods themselves, no one would. The campaigns involved this strong outreach component which urged residents to take the condition and appearance of their properties more seriously.

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103 Ibid.
104 Ibid.
105 Ibid.
106 Good sanitation practice, especially residents cleaning their own garbage from their properties, promoted both home and neighborhood beautification, Melosi argued (Melosi, Garbage in the Cities, 129). The process of improving the individual home and lot led to the improvement of the neighborhood, but was not a reliable or consistent remedy when months or even years went by in between cleanup events. As Melosi pointed out, these events were no substitute for constant care for the community. Since there was
The campaigns were “cosmetic” and “short-term substitutes for effectively enforced ordinances and efficiently conducted collection and disposal practices.” A temporary solution was the only option for Sun Valley residents. Indeed, just as BLM acted to distribute lands to whoever was willing and able to live on them, Sun Valley was founded on the practice of finding temporary solutions to larger problems. Isolated cleanup campaigns created the attitude that accumulating trash and junk throughout the year was tolerable because it could be disposed of at the next year’s event. Citizen-run events did not always result in proper attention from the appropriate government agencies, much less effect policy changes. With the possibility that civic involvement would not result in policy changes, Sun Valley residents were left to make do with the short-term physical impacts their efforts had on their neighborhoods. That the cleanup efforts were periodic and ongoing was evidence. Over time, the need would arise again and residents would act anew to clean up whatever had become of their neighborhoods since the last such effort. Neighborhoods like Sun Valley where local governments were unable or unwilling to provide trash services, had to solve the problem themselves.

At the County Commission meeting of February 5, 1964, commissioners promised that Clinton Wooster, Deputy District Attorney for Washoe County, and C.W. Young, Washoe County Sheriff, would pursue the matter and that the junk cars would be not always full participation from people in the community, there arose an opportunity for the public sector to improve services to make up for the lack of community involvement.

107 Melosi, *Garbage in the Cities*, 132. The campaigns remedied “sanitary problems which could not be resolved in a burst of activity one week a year.”

removed from Sun Valley. In March, commissioners made their first public acknowledgment of the Sun Valley volunteers, the residents, and their cleanup campaigns. Commissioners claimed that they would give what little support they could to Sun Valley volunteers. Resident Albert McKeel informed commissioners that residents continued to keep piles of junk and garbage in their front yards, and that their efforts to clean their properties stalled because residents had no means of transporting the waste to the dump. McKeel requested that the county provide transportation and labor for a special one-day haul to move the garbage but was met with resistance.

Wooster observed that “the untidy condition of Sun Valley” was a violation of the county code, and stated that his office was prepared to prosecute violators. Upon observing the Sun Valley way of life, the District Attorney effectively criminalized it. There was, he argued, no excuse for Sun Valley’s condition. He was, however, willing to forego citing offenders since residents of Sun Valley were organizing their own cleanup efforts as well. In the name of benefitting public health, the County agreed to assist the Sun Valley cleanup efforts. They would provide three trucks and three drivers for one day’s work, requiring only that Sun Valley residents and volunteers load the trucks themselves. Without the independent cleanup campaigns, the county would apparently have been unwilling to step in and provide the extra help the residents needed. The

111 Minutes, Agenda Item 64-161, March 5, 1964, Book “X” 202.
112 Ibid.
113 Minutes, 64-161, March 5, 1964, 202.
county offered assistance rather than citations largely because Sun Valley residents were already doing the cleanup work on their own.

At its next meeting, two weeks later, the County Commission heard that in addition to the garbage hauled away, fifty-eight disabled automobiles were hauled out of Sun Valley. Commissioner Richard Streeter made a point to commend the residents of Sun Valley for “the promotion of community work.” While they may have had little other choice if they wanted Sun Valley to be cleaned, residents did succeed in making a dent in the trash accumulation. The meetings of March 1964 represented the first governmental acknowledgment of Sun Valley’s success at organizing and acting to remedy their problems with meager public support.

In July 1964, Sun Valley residents wrote another letter to the county commission, proclaiming that they were still struggling with “the dumping of everything from garbage to old car bodies.” This time, however, they were prepared to take their volunteerism a step further. Offering to police the community themselves, residents committed to patrol Sun Valley in pairs to obtain license plate numbers of offenders, which they would provide to the sheriff and the district attorney. Sheriff Young reported that while he would support and even organize drives to prevent garbage dumping in Sun Valley, the major problem was the dumping and abandonment of old car bodies. These junk cars, he stated, had nowhere to go since the dump at Mustang refused to accept them for

115 Ibid. Also, Minutes, Book X, page 285, in which residents informed commissioners that there were residents who continued to import junk cars into Sun Valley.
disposal.\textsuperscript{117} Further, the volunteers who were willing to record license plate numbers of violators, he informed the commission, would have to press charges themselves. The county had, it turned out, no legal grounds on which to prosecute offenders other than to issue zoning code violations, yet further evidence of an apparent lack of planning by the county in its efforts to regulate development and manage the growth associated with it. The goal of Young’s testimony was twofold: to get county officials to negotiate the dump’s policy on junk car disposal and to get the district attorney to prosecute the people dumping them illegally.\textsuperscript{118}

Commissioners came up with additional remedies to the junk and safety problem in Sun Valley over the following years. In 1967, commissioners announced that they would approve applications for junkyard car crushers to be permitted for business uses on Sun Valley properties.\textsuperscript{119} The crushers would enable residents to dispose of junk cars and mitigate the problem that continued to characterize the Sun Valley landscape despite the volunteers’ cleanup campaigns. One crusher operator, Marsh Auto Wreckers, was open for business soon after. The company set up collection points around Sun Valley for residents to drop off junk cars and car bodies to be disposed of.\textsuperscript{120} Just as Stocke and other volunteer firefighters feared, the continued accumulation of junk cars and the apparent ineffectiveness of cleanup campaigns left many Sun Valley properties “unsightly and hazardous.”\textsuperscript{121}

\textsuperscript{117} Minutes, Book X, page 320, July 15, 1964.
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{119} Minutes, Book One, page 104, February, 15, 1967.
\textsuperscript{120} Minutes, Book One, page 212, April 25, 1967.
\textsuperscript{121} Minutes, Book One, page 289, June 5, 1967.
As junk cars appeared to be an ongoing problem, county planners suggested three possible solutions: (1) impose a ten dollar tax on inoperable vehicles; (2) increase code enforcement staff to cite violators; (3) establish a county-run car crushing site.\textsuperscript{122} The Washoe County Assessor’s Office warned that the tax would be construed by critics as unconstitutional.\textsuperscript{123} The presence of junk cars already constituted a code violation for which fees could be assessed, and, if unpaid, levied against the property.\textsuperscript{124} The situation highlighted the new seriousness with which junk and waste would be approached by lawmakers (county commissioners) and law enforcement (the district attorney, etc.). The County’s approach in employing the DA to handle Sun Valley junk and waste was to suggest that residents in violation of the rules would have to “clean up or get out.”

The two waste problems (household garbage and junk cars) caused ongoing concern for Sun Valley residents. The firefighters were concerned because a common proposal by Sun Valley residents with excess garbage (and an inability or unwillingness to pay dump fees) was to burn the trash in their yards.\textsuperscript{125} When it was brought to their attention, however, the Commission proposed that an investigation be carried out by health and safety officers to determine whether this burning could be done safely by residents as an alternative to using the Reno dump.\textsuperscript{126} Burning would have been a means

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{122} Minutes, Book Three, page 436, September 15, 1969.
\bibitem{123} Minutes, Book Three, page 463, October 6, 1969.
\bibitem{124} Ibid.
\bibitem{125} Minutes, Book 3, page 71, February 24, 1969.
\bibitem{126} Minutes, Book Three, page 71, February 24, 1969. In March 1969, county planner Daniel Whitmore was ordered by the commissioners to devise a plan under which burning could be used as an alternative to dumping. Primarily, they argued, controlled burning was a means toward the “general clean-up of the area” (Minutes, Book Three, page 78, March 5, 1969). The process would enable residents to avoid paying high dump fees. It would also allow residents to maintain responsibility for the cleaning of their own properties without requiring that the County assist them.
\end{thebibliography}
for residents to dispose of garbage without the costs of transporting it to the dump, but would have added to the physical dangers of Sun Valley’s waste problems.

In 1976, more than a decade after the closure of the short-lived Sun Valley landfill, the Washoe County district attorney’s office initiated legal proceedings against the City of Reno for mishandling the Sun Valley dump site. Deputy district attorneys charged that the condition in which the city left the defunct dump site remained a nuisance which had become a financial burden on county (not City of Reno) resources.127 Further, when the City of Reno abandoned the site, it was the people of Sun Valley who were left to live with its aftermath and the presence of a now-abandoned former city landfill.128 And just as residents had to live with the presence of the unmanaged public park that Harry Gepford donated to them (that served mainly to accumulate garbage), residents continued working relieve their community of the problems of waste.

Aside from the three waste problems in Sun Valley, sellers had to grapple with the possibility that buyers were aware of the issues. Sun Valley property ads illustrate the effects of this ongoing struggle against waste. In many cases, sellers preempted the association simply by declaring in their advertisements that Sun Valley was clean. Sellers portrayed their properties as orderly and neat by emphasizing cleanliness.129 Other sellers

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128 Ibid.

129 One seller, for example, after explaining that the home was “nicely furnished” and “air conditioned” (that the home was modern), explained openly that the home was small (“for 2”) but went on to compensate for this by emphasizing space with the property’s “Lawn” and “trees.” (Nevada State Journal, April 23, 1966, classified advertisement). Emphasizing the space available in Sun Valley, as sellers had done for years, the ads reaffirmed cleanliness. The Sun Valley of these advertisements had ample space and was obviously not cluttered with waste.
implicitly admitted the poor condition of their Sun Valley homes. Sellers of properties in need of improvement and repair demanded in their advertisements that buyers “must improve.”

In a 1962 ad, other than a vague description of the size of the home and reference to its location in Sun Valley, the seller pointed out only that the property was “neat and clean.” In such advertisements, cleanliness was the only quality other than size worth mentioning. “Neat and clean” was a phrase critical to promoting a locality where nearby residents thought it best to store waste.

In another 1962 ad, “CLEAN” (in all-capital letters) overshadowed other features of the home, even ones that might have seemed more important, including that the property was “modern” (“with amenities”) and that a renter would not have to pay utilities. Financial concerns appeared less immediate than cleanliness. Such ads confirmed the growing tensions between cleanliness and waste in the Sun Valley experience. Buyers (or renters) needed reassurance that they would not be moving into a dirty home or neighborhood. Cleanliness was more important than space and spaciousness, which had previously been the most important attributes mentioned by sellers who aimed to market Sun Valley as open.

One seller pleaded that his or her

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130 *Nevada State Journal*, June 11, 1959, classified advertisement. One seller hoped to find a “handy man,” implying the property was in need of repair (*Nevada State Journal*, June 11, 1959, classified advertisement). In the midst of Sun Valley’s very public waste problems, the seller subtly pointed out that the homes, too, needed help.


133 The opening feature (aside from the header, “ONE ACRE”), as was common, was that the home was “clean” (*Nevada State Journal*, December 7, 1962, classified advertisement). Cleanliness was only one selling point of the property, in addition to once again being “modern.” In this case, the seller elaborated on space (“3 bedroom,” “Over an acre”) as well as pointing out that the property was fenced.
property, and indeed Sun Valley, were “worth looking at.” During the 1960s, cleanliness and spaciousness together came to define Sun Valley in sellers’ marketing efforts.

In a 1965 ad, the seller emphasized that the property was “CLEAN,” in all capital letters once again. Acknowledging that there was an issue in Sun Valley with accumulation of junk, the seller emphasized the “extra storage” available on this property. Thus, even the small size of the trailer would be no reason to allow the storage of personal belongings around the property to create the appearance of clutter. The wording suggested that new residents, despite prevailing perceptions of a community in disarray, would want to keep their properties clean and organized. Dealing with the problems of excessive junk by building and maintaining storage sheds on property accomplished two things. It enabled owners to eliminate clutter, and it restored openness to its former status as the primary attraction of Sun Valley.

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134 What the property suggested about this community “worth looking at” was that there was a sense of cleanliness, of space (though temporarily demoted by cleanliness), and that the homes that populated the community were, in fact, modern.


136 Though “neat and clean” appeared only in the middle of a short 1966 advertisement, the seller demonstrated that “neat and clean” remained ongoing concerns (Nevada State Journal, June 17, 1966, classified advertisement). Organization and neatness were crucial in maintaining an image of cleanliness. “Clean” implied no garbage or junk, while “neat” indicated that there was a sense of order. Historians of waste concluded that the major problem with waste in communities was often that it was not disposed of appropriately. It became a nuisance because it was not in its proper place (By 1966, “CLEAN” in capital letters was the standard (Nevada State Journal, July 23, 1966, classified advertisement). One seller had an additional selling point, “remodeled,” which added to the “CLEAN” emphasis by suggesting not only that the features of the home would appear updated and modern, but also that there was a sense of “new” which could distract buyers from any potential cleanliness issues they may have perceived about Sun Valley homes. It also suggested that there was a sense of order, and that the waste issues of which they may have been aware did not apply to this home. Additionally, where there may once have been issues with junk, clutter and garbage, the problems were no longer great concerns.). “Immaculate” spoke further to the buyer’s concerns in a 1966 ad (Nevada State Journal, May 20, 1966, classified advertisement). It took the idea of “clean” and exaggerated it, implying that the cleanliness of the property was irrefutable. In addition,
Language such as “newly decorated” suggested the cleanliness of the interior. The same seller claimed the home was located in the “nicest part of Sun Valley” suggesting that concerns may have arisen about issues related to the age or condition of Sun Valley neighborhoods. “Newly decorated” implied an older home had been upgraded, and was thus substantial enough to warrant additional investment. Emphasizing the renewed interior of the home may also have distracted buyers from the exterior.

Recurrent emphasis on space allowed sellers to disguise struggles with waste that left Sun Valley neighborhoods and properties cluttered and unclean. Sellers sought to portray individual properties as desirable amidst widespread public discussion of landfill and illegal dumping issues that had deadlocked the local government’s relationship with Sun Valley. As various sellers claimed, regardless of these struggles with waste and garbage, beneath the surface, the place was worth seeing.

In 1964, “CLEAN” was the most common header. By 1966, the word was still present but buried in the middle of the majority of Sun Valley ads. In 1968, it was a

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the seller advertised a “storage shed,” (extra space was necessary to explain given the standard 2-bedroom size of the home) so no clutter or waste would be visible.

137 Nevada State Journal, August 26, 1966, classified advertisement.

138 Ibid. Historian Andrew Hurley argued that the pursuit of cleanliness was exaggerated in trailer communities. The problem of waste in trailer communities extended into the homes themselves. He claimed that “the tendency to clutter in trailer homes conflicted with prevailing middle-class norms regarding cleanliness and tidiness” (Hurley, Diners, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks: Chasing the American Dream in Postwar Consumer Culture (New York: Basic Books, 2001) 231). Clutter, that is, was related to waste and the willingness to live among it. Trailer residents faced greater difficulty than residents of conventional houses: “More so than in a conventional house, meticulous housecleaning in a trailer was imperative because clutter was so noticeable. Even a few items strewn around inappropriately could make a trailer appear slovenly” (Hurley, 231). In the pursuit of a clean appearance, trailer residents faced a tremendous challenge.

139 Nevada State Journal, August, 24, 1968, classified advertisement.
staple in Sun Valley marketing.\footnote{Ibid.} Space, cleanliness, and waste were now interconnected in portrayals of Sun Valley, and were addressed in conjunction in marketing the place. With space, property was more useable. Emphasizing it was an effective way for sellers to encourage people to come to a Sun Valley that, due to the language used by sellers in the advertisements, they would believe to be clean and orderly. Space, while potentially introducing the possibility for new junk and waste to accumulate, suggested not just openness but cleanliness \textit{and} openness. Land and waste were intimately connected in Sun Valley.

Perceptions of waste and cleanliness in Sun Valley were rooted in newspaper coverage of life in Sun Valley that often focused on development issues, poor housing, and the area’s various waste problems. From debates over a contested landfill project, to residents’ attempts to organize repeated cleanup campaigns, to constant struggles with illegal dumping, perceptions of Sun Valley as the place for waste were rooted in the realities of the Sun Valley experience.

Government-level solutions to waste problems were inadequate without a foundation of residents who were willing to work toward having a clean community.\footnote{Melosi, \textit{Garbage in the Cities}, 200. Martin Melosi, “Out of Sight, Out of Mind: The Environment and the Disposal of Municipal Refuse, 1860-1920,” \textit{Historian} (August 1973), 621-40; Martin Melosi, “Urban Pollution: Historical Perspective Needed,” \textit{Environmental Review} (Spring 1979) 37-45. Melosi observed, “The Solid Waste Disposal Act, while representing the first significant recognition of refuse as a national issue, was incomplete in its assessment of the problem” (\textit{Garbage in the Cities}, 200).} Waste management was the responsibility of residents. It was the position of the federal government that to leave the responsibilities of waste management to citizens was ineffective, yet local governments demonstrated that they were often no better suited to
Regardless of any new federal positions on waste policy, Melosi observed, “operation of sanitation services largely remained a local obligation….” Cleanup campaigns remained temporary solutions to indefinite problems. They signified a failure of public services and an absence of effective planning. Through the struggle against the City of Reno and its landfill plans, illegal dumpers who worked from within and from outside Sun Valley to litter its streets and empty lots with garbage ranging from household garbage to junk cars, and the residents’ cleanup campaigns that served to alleviate an apparent shortage of public services, waste was a consistent part of the Sun Valley story. The problems of waste illustrated the problem of poor planning that stemmed from the tradition of getting by on a landscape where it was understood to be difficult to do so. And the association with waste would only make matters worse as residents continued to struggle with the realities of trailer living.

The residents who first settled Sun Valley were confronted by problems of waste since the very beginning. These issues were exacerbated by the presence of trailer housing because, as the following chapter suggests, perceptions of Sun Valley among non-residents and the county government were based on the strong presence of that housing. The place was assumed by many to be a good place for waste because it was a community made up of trailers. Troubling as the association may be, it defined much of Sun Valley’s past. This was a place, as historians of waste argue, where residents would, as a reflection of their limited resources, pose the least resistance. The implications grew not only to create tensions between residents and the county government, but to create an

143 Melosi, Garbage in the Cities, 203.
environment in which residents were reminded regularly that their form of housing was, in various ways, challenging to inhabit.
CHAPTER SIX:

LAND AND TRAILERS IN SUN VALLEY, 1970-1976

On Sunday, May 26, 1976, Lloyd Lockery and his family, three generations worth, were visiting in his Sun Valley trailer when a hole was ripped in the wall of the home, the roof lifted off, torn to rubble and scattered across the yard.\(^1\) A small tornado had formed abruptly and touched down with only enough force to destroy the Lockery home. Unlikely events like this one demonstrated the need for improved building standards in trailer homes, a national problem with a visible local presence. These homes, which President Nixon had celebrated in 1970 for “having ameliorated a housing crisis,” had created a new one.\(^2\) Later in that decade, Sun Valley sellers marketed them primarily as the pragmatic means through which buyers could have access to land. As trailers continued to dominate the Sun Valley landscape, ads suggested that they were a means to an end because they enabled the continued settlement of that land. Trailers in Sun Valley were a substitute for conventional houses because the land in Sun Valley was not suitable for site-building because of the quality of the soil and other features of the arid landscape.\(^3\)

Sun Valley residents in the 1970s found themselves dealing with the ramifications of having relied on trailer housing in order to settle where they did. As the federal government began to manage the language of trailer housing (stating that any “trailer”

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\(^1\) *Nevada State Journal*, May 24, 1976.


manufactured after the implementation of the HUD Code in 1976, for instance, would be classified not as a trailer and not as a mobile home but as a manufactured home), residents were left at the very least with the awareness that trailer living had warranted serious attention. As BLM and developer Harry Gepford both reluctantly demonstrated, successfully settling this particular place depended on the acceptance of trailer housing. As problematic as trailer homes were, they were crucial to Sun Valley.

In their advertising for Sun Valley properties, sellers struck a balance between embracing trailers as the area’s dominant form of housing and suggesting to buyers that the land beneath them mattered more, some sellers going so far as to conceal the identity of the trailer home for sale. Trailers were problematic, but were also beneficial as a means of settling this landscape. The latter point, I argue, is exemplified in the Sun Valley case.

As the Lockery incident was publicized in local newspapers, policy-makers and trailer residents alike grew increasingly concerned. Local government agencies agreed

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5 Historian Andrew Hurley wrote that “Contrary to popular belief, hurricanes and tornadoes contained no built-in homing devices guiding them to trailer park targets” (Andrew Hurley, Diners, Bowling Alleys and Trailer Parks: Chasing the American Dream in the Postwar Consumer Culture (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 245). “Trailer parks were exceptionally vulnerable to damage from extreme weather conditions. Many were located on flat and low-lying land that was susceptible to flooding and wind damage” (Hurley, 245). “Most importantly, the structures were not as sturdy as conventional homes built of bricks and mortar or wood frame” (Hurley, 245). The building standards in trailer housing were not up to a standard that could protect people from these extremes of nature. The outcome was an unfortunate reality with which mobile home residents had to live: “Trailer advocates might like to think that their homes could withstand nuclear attacks better than other types of housing, but the experience of hurricanes and tornadoes suggested otherwise” (Hurley, 245).

Legal scholar Chiori Santiago pointed out that “according to the National Weather Service, only about 10 percent of the country’s population lives in trailer parks, but half of those killed by tornadoes each year are trailer-park residents” (Chiori Santiago and Maggie Steber, “House Trailers,” Smithsonian, Vol. 29, No. 3 (June 1998)). “One reason…has to do with their lightweight and often flimsy construction” (Santiago and Steber, 1998).
that the [trailer] industry was by then “making a stronger product with wood framing like that in conventional homes, fire walls, stabilizing plates and steel tie-downs.”

Additionally, tie-downs, while optional in most states, could have prevented the majority of damage caused by wind and other extreme weather conditions. Yet trailers were still problematic for both residents (who lived in these relatively unsafe structures) and the government bodies responsible for regulating them.

In 1970, approximately 2.6 million housing starts (the indicator by which the health of the housing market is measured) would have been required each year to keep up with housing demand. The average actual number for 1969 and 1970, however, was 1.6 million, one million units annually less than needed. Only 20% of American families could afford to buy a new conventional home in 1969. Fortunately for those struggling in this housing market, the mobile home industry had been able “to expand production of inexpensive housing under the adverse economic and social conditions experienced in the late 1960s.”

Manufacturers of trailer homes recognized that they needed to build

“The good news was that the mobile-home industry was now making a stronger product with wood framing like that in conventional homes, fire walls, stabilizing plates and steel tie-downs” (Santiago and Steber, 1998). Additionally, tie-downs, while still optional in most states, could have prevented the majority of damages caused by wind and other extreme weather conditions (CBCG, 18). Sun Valley residents, for instance, were given the option to install tie-downs to their homes, which would earn them a distinction as “real estate” which had its benefits, such as higher taxes. On the other hand, if residents refused to install tie-downs, their mobile homes would remain “personal property” and would thus pay far lower taxes (Sun Valley resident Arline Laferry, author interview, April 2013).

6 Carson River Basin Council of Governments, 18.
7 Ibid. Also, Santiago and Steber, 1998.
9 Morris, 3. In the mid-1960s, according to Morris, the number was approximately 40%.
10 Ibid.
something cheaper and more efficient that the average working class American family could afford.\textsuperscript{11}

President Nixon contributed to a growing acceptance of trailer housing, stating, “the only way the nation could meet its housing needs in the next decade was to increase its supply of mobile homes.”\textsuperscript{12} By the 1970s, Nixon demonstrated, trailers were necessary, as a solution to housing shortages. The housing crisis had been ongoing even longer for the Reno and Sparks areas; but trailers were envisioned as merely temporary solutions to those immediate shortages.\textsuperscript{13} As geographer Michelle Rhodes observed:

House-trailers were never intended to be permanent housing. Despite being relegated to trailer parks on the edges of urban areas, homeowners still considered this option the first opportunity to own a home, albeit a temporary one until site-built housing became available or could be afforded. In other areas, this course of action was less a choice than a necessity. The house-trailer, and later the mobile home, was the only housing available, particularly in the small town. Trailer manufacturers did not hesitate to take advantage of this new found recognition. Manufacturers produced newer, streamlined models with more amenities. The homes became longer, wider, and harder to move. In rural areas and small towns, they popped up on individually-titled property rather than in parks. By the 1960s, the house-trailer evolved into the mobile home, and over the next thirty years, became one of the most important forms of housing in the western United States.\textsuperscript{14}

Facing the problems of mobility, economic necessity, and other constraints, trailer residents witnessed an explosion in the availability of trailers in the 1950s and 1960s.

\textsuperscript{11} Drury, 79-80. Drury observed that economists and social theorists like Erich Fromm and John Kenneth Galbraith argued that “goals have been changed drastically by the shift from a producer-oriented to a consumer-oriented economy….It has widened the gap between generations….The growth of the mobile home market has been affected by both of these generations.”

\textsuperscript{12} Margaret Drury, \textit{Mobile Homes: The Unrecognized Revolution in American Housing} (New York: Praeger, 1972), 12.

\textsuperscript{13} Harmon, 1998.

Rather than being confined to a trailer park, people could choose from a variety of trailer homes for purchase and move one to a piece of land where they would have been unable to construct a conventional house.

Historian Allan Wallis concluded that “the mobile home may well be the single most significant and unique housing innovation in twentieth century America.” The trailer was not just an affordable alternative to conventional housing but it also enabled people to settle in places where conventional building was problematic. Yet, writer J.B. Jackson observed, critics could not “bring themselves to recognize the trailer as a dwelling.” These critics were unwelcoming of trailers as permanent housing, permanent fixtures on the landscape as opposed to the temporary ones they assumed trailers to be. Few wanted trailers in their neighborhoods, Jackson argued, and cities nationwide relegated trailers “to the less visible parts of town.” Eventually, the federal government took action on the issue by implementing the Manufacture Home Construction and Safety Standards within the Department of Housing and Urban Development (referred to as the HUD Code, or “HUD”). HUD not only recognized that the trailer was a legitimate housing form, but that it was so prominent (and apparently permanent) as to warrant close regulation. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, policy analysts debated the language used in the industry to differentiate between trailers, mobile homes, and eventually

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16 Wardlaw, 60. Sun Valley was determined by geologists to contain mostly poor soil quality and low likelihood for conventional building.


18 J.B. Jackson, 51-69.
manufactured homes, each essentially signifying the same thing.\textsuperscript{19} Meanwhile, many residents continued to prefer they be hidden or less visible in order to conceal their unsightliness and apparent poor quality of construction.\textsuperscript{20}

As Wallis argued, “three factors contribute to the low quality [of mobile home construction]: poor design, cheap materials, and sloppy workmanship.”\textsuperscript{21} He went on to point out that “in areas where the code is lax or ambiguous, many manufacturers still use the cheapest and shoddiest materials available. Poor workmanship by unskilled, untrained workers slapping together homes at a frantic pace, is an equally important cause of low quality. These three factors all too often result in shockingly bad products.”\textsuperscript{22} The bad products were well suited for neighborhoods that were poorly planned and regulated and building codes were “lax.” They were also well suited for short-term or temporary use. In Sun Valley they became a symbol of a people’s willingness to endure harsh living conditions in order to get by.

Wallis observed the lower costs per square foot for trailer homes compared to conventionally built houses.\textsuperscript{23} The average lifespan for most trailer homes was twenty-

\textsuperscript{19} Wallis (1991); Hart (2002); Rust (2007); with the exception of the later, more contemporary “modular” home, which signified “pre-built” as opposed to “mobile.”

\textsuperscript{20} Margarethe Kusenbach, in “Salvaging Decency: Mobile Home Residents’ Strategies of Managing the Stigma of ‘Trailer’ Living,” \textit{(Qualitative Sociology, Volume 32, 1999, 399-428).}


\textsuperscript{23} Wallis, 136.
five to thirty years, whereas the lifespan of conventional site-built homes was approximately one hundred.\textsuperscript{24} The quick deterioration of trailer homes was often visible.\textsuperscript{25} As in the Lockery family’s case, structural problems were sometimes devastating to residents. That these inadequacies were visible caused much of the trailer problems that would ensue.\textsuperscript{26}

By 1970, nationally as in Sun Valley, most trailers were not in trailer parks but on individual parcels of land outside of cities.\textsuperscript{27} The issues that arose from the founding of Sun Valley on the Reno and Sparks periphery were not without precedent. Drury

\textsuperscript{24} John Fraser Hart, \textit{The Unknown World of the Mobile Home} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002) 1.

\textsuperscript{25} Hart, 1.

\textsuperscript{26} Carson River Basin Council of Governments, \textit{A Look at Mobile Homes in the Region}. January, 1975, page 17, 39. “another claim against the location of mobile homes…was the aesthetic impact…the mobile home more resembles a ‘long tin box’ on the landscape as opposed to a conventional home, constructed of wood, that has an apparent greater ability to blend into the environment somewhat” (CBCG, 39). “The length alone, which was often five times the width, creates a shape that can be an aesthetic problem in itself. To make things worse, sometimes occupants place tires and bricks on the roof as a means of reducing the rattle caused by wind” (CBCG, 39). The Carson River Basin Council of Governments was an agency made up of representatives from Carson City, Churchill County, Lyon County, Douglas County, and Storey County, Nevada.

\textsuperscript{27} Morris, 34. In describing communities similar to Sun Valley, economist Earl Morris pointed out that “although this type of siting was not common near large metropolitan centers, in 1969, about 50 percent of mobile homes were on individual sites, mostly in and around smaller cities and towns” (Morris, 34). “From the standpoint of communities,” Morris believed, “it was easier to regulate mobile homes, arrange for taxation, enforce sanitary codes and restrictions, and provide utilities if they are concentrated rather than placed on single private lots in scattered locations” (Morris, 34). Communities that grow in a “scattered” pattern, like Sun Valley, face obstacles from government agencies that will be unwilling and sometimes unable to provide adequate infrastructure: “If zoning was absent and marginal farmland can be used, the long-range effect of a few mobile homes on scattered sites would be minimal” (Morris, 34). The issues that arose from the founding of Sun Valley on the Reno and Sparks periphery were not without precedent: “Mobile home parks have been the focus of great opposition from local governments and interest groups when developers have tried to establish them in the suburbs. This opposition closely parallels that which we are experiencing today in obtaining sites for lower-income housing developments in suburbia” (Drury, 147). Additionally, “opposition to mobile home parks also stems from concern by the locality that the inhabitants of the future development might be ‘lower-income….’” (Drury, 147). Not only would local governments be unable to provide adequate services due to inadequate taxation, residents themselves were perceived, in Drury’s analysis, to be unable to provide for themselves, illustrating yet another difficulty in the development of such a trailer community.
observed that trailer housing has “been the focus of great opposition from local
governments and interest groups when developers have tried to establish them in the
suburbs. This opposition closely parallels that which we are experiencing today in
obtaining sites for lower-income housing developments in suburbia.”28 Trailers were a
form of low-income housing that not only disturbed the norms of suburban development,
but which housed people who lacked the resources to remedy the day-to-day issues of
new development regardless of suburban norms. Drury claimed that the opposition to
trailer housing “stem[med] from concern by the locality that the inhabitants of the future
development might be ‘lower-income….’”29 Not only would local governments be
unable to provide adequate services due to inadequate taxation, residents themselves were
perceived, in Drury’s analysis, to be unable to provide for themselves. While these
tensions were present in the Sun Valley case, residents there demonstrated over time that
these assumptions about their inability to remedy their own problems were untrue.

Over time, the Sun Valley land-trailer model was noticeable around Reno and
Sparks as well. In 1970, there were more than one hundred mobile home parks in the
Reno and Sparks.30 Of the 8,500 trailers in those cities, 3,000 were on individual lots, not
in trailer parks.31 Yet there also existed a nationwide trend among city and county
governments to be suspicious of trailers on spacious properties outside of trailer parks.32

28 Drury, 147.
29 Ibid.
30 Atri, 10.
31 Ibid.
32 “Sun Valley Issue Sparks Debate at Regional Meeting,” Nevada State Journal, July 15, 1976. Also, see
note 52 above.
In the urban context, trailers were at least contained to spaces that could be closely managed. On more spacious land, especially outside of city limits, trailer dwellers would (like any other landowners) live as they pleased.

As Rhodes explained, “substantial population growth in the West since World War II created housing pressures on the urban fringe and in small towns. The manufactured home moved in to fill the void and became an important and accepted element of the region’s housing.”

Trailer housing was more affordable, increasingly accessible, and enabled otherwise unappealing parts of the west like Sun Valley to be settled. By the time of its arrival on the Sun Valley landscape, the trailer was already a fixture in western American life. In her study of trailer housing in Nevada, economist Roberta Aiazzi observed that the “conditions in the Western States are conducive to mobile home living….” She argued that trailer homes enabled people to settle in areas where building conventional houses was too expensive or otherwise too difficult.

In 1927, Chism’s Trailer Court opened alongside the Truckee River near downtown Reno. It was the first of its kind in the city. By 1950, Chism was made up of 75% permanent residents, a figure that began the process of dissociating trailer housing

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Also, “The thesis of this project is that the increased presence of manufactured housing during this time has exhibited a cyclical growth pattern in response to such population pressures. A combination of infusion, replacement, and modification all ensure manufactured housing’s continued importance. Such a cycle creates a varied housing landscape in which the manufactured home often looks site-built. In the small resource or amenity town, manufactured housing has filled a vital role in providing homeownership opportunities to low-income residents” (7).


with transient people. Throughout the 1950s, trailers were becoming a permanent housing form and an accepted part of the Reno housing landscape. Yet, as Chism and others familiarized area residents with trailer housing, residents were living with the reality that much trailer housing, especially in Sun Valley, was becoming “substandard,” a term political scientist Elmer Rusco used to imply that the condition of a home was approaching unlivable.

Trailer housing in Sun Valley brought further attention to the need for analysis and improvement of housing in the region in general. Putting the Sun Valley trailer landscape into the context of regional housing, Rusco pointed out that in 1950, of 10,947 occupied dwelling units in greater Reno, 1,281 were substandard. Out of that number, more than ten percent of total housing, 495 homes were “dilapidated.” By 1960, out of more than 24,000 occupied housing units, 2,280 were substandard. Of those, 517 were “deteriorating,” and 708 were “dilapidated.” The poor condition of housing throughout the City of Reno was exacerbated by relative density. The city regulated a minimum distance between mobile homes of 15 feet, while other regions with high concentrations of mobile homes (specifically in the southern United States) required over 20 feet of

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36 Atri, 9.

37 Nearby, Old Orchard Trailer Park was opened on farmland that had previously been rented to campers and other transient people as well (Atri, 10).

38 Elmer Rusco, “Poverty in Washoe County,” Bureau of Governmental Research, University of Nevada, Reno (February, 1966), 16.


40 Rusco, 16.

41 Rusco, 17.
space between them. By contrast, Sun Valley provided residents with space that they would not have found in trailer communities in Reno or Sparks. With an average lot size of 1/3 acre, there was ample space between dwellings compared with urban residential lots.

The trailer homes that many Sun Valley residents inhabited often did not satisfy safety standards that conventional house builders had to follow. Spurred by the rise in numbers, Washoe County commissioners introduced an ordinance in 1971 to regulate the building and placement of trailer homes. Their “Modular and Mobile Home Standards” identified common dangers of trailer living and proposed restrictions to remedy the effects these issues would have on communities. While fire was the most common problem the county discussed at meetings related to Sun Valley, much of the debate over trailer homes was centered around physical appearances and the impact the homes had on the character of surrounding neighborhoods. The problem was of great concern to Washoe County commissioners who, along with Sun Valley residents, were dealing with the accumulated problems of trailer living all at once. As HUD took action to regulate

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42 Atri, 114.
43 Rust (2007).
45 Minutes, Book 5, page 528, “Modular Homes—New Washoe City,” September 27, 1971. Commissioners agreed with expert testimony that there must be adequate fire protection facilities within eight miles of any mobile home community. Also, Minutes, Book 5, page 563, “Modular Homes,” October 15, 1971, in which the regulation of trailer and mobile homes would include specifically any home marketed or otherwise designated as a “modular” home, since many residents believed they could avoid trailer and mobile home restrictions if their home was labeled “modular” instead. The decision: modular homes are mobile homes. Wallis, 212: “Safety and durability were becoming serious concerns. Fire-related deaths in mobile homes were reported frequently in local newspapers, and hurricanes and tornadoes seemed to single them out for destruction. Insurance companies and consumer groups lobbied for action to reduce the risks of mobile home living.” Problems of fire and the general safety of trailer living are explored in Chapter Two of this dissertation (with the formation of the Sun Valley volunteer fire department and the growing presence of trailers in the initial years of development).
trailer housing nationwide in the mid-1970s, language used by sellers in Sun Valley suggested that trailer homes had become so problematic that it was preferable to emphasize the land beneath them instead. Land was an extension of the home, but as the trailer home gained negative attention, land was emphasized by sellers to distract buyers from the homes.

Sun Valley residents capitalized on the growing availability of trailer homes in the 1950s, and just as developer Harry Gepford predicted, they proliferated there. While trailers enabled Sun Valley’s development, they also caused many of its problems, from regulatory struggles with the county to unsafe living conditions for residents due to “flimsy” construction. Chairman Bob Rusk of the Washoe County Commission

46 On the national level, HUD code solutions reflected much of the Washoe County approach. Wallis argued that “the act made mobile homes the first private-sector building type to be regulated by a mandatory federal code. It recognized the mobile home as a dwelling, but one that was separate and distinct, by virtue of being built on a permanent chassis” (Wallis, 214). But the question remained “whether HUD was the right agency to be developing a code” (Wallis, 214). HUD created the standard by which mobile homes across the US would be built and used thereafter, regardless of the local ordinances that attempted to do the same: “By establishing a single standard, a manufacturer was assured that the electrical system built for a mobile home in Indiana would also meet the requirements of any other state to which it was shipped” (Wallis, 214). While the local Washoe County approach was working toward more effectively dealing with the issues that arose from the use of mobile homes, HUD implied that local remedies were inadequate. Washoe County’s problem was, indeed, a national one.

47 Minutes, Book S, page 234, “Planning—Trailer Court Permit—Jud Packard,” June 5, 1954. Also, Minutes, Book T, page 115, “Trailer Coach Park—Sun Valley—J.A. and G.B. Evans,” March 20, 1957. Both were dramatic cases in which applicants attempted to establish significant trailer parks in Sun Valley because of the growing presence the homes had in the community. Trailer park applications such as these were sometimes denied because of the low availability of infrastructure and services to the Sun Valley area. In the national housing context, see John Jakle and David Wilson, Derelict Landscapes: The Wasting of America’s Build Environment (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1992).

reported that the lack of planning in Sun Valley on the parts of both the county and developers like Harry Gepford was most noticeable in its housing.49

As conditions worsened, both sellers and government agencies were forced to address the obvious problem of trailer housing. Residents were not often equipped to solve the problem of deteriorating trailers. In the mid-1960s, political scientist Elmer Rusco believed the problem to be related to the transiency of trailer residents, particularly in Sun Valley: “the population of Sun Valley was a fairly mobile one...only five persons said they had lived in Sun Valley more than fifteen years.”50 Residents were less likely to be aware of the effects of blight in Sun Valley’s changing landscape because of this rate of transiency.51 Rusco argued that “the highly mobile nature of Sun Valley’s population probably has had an influence; there are relatively few people who have lived in the Valley long enough to know its problems and possibilities thoroughly.”52 Eighty-four percent of respondents to Rusco’s 1966 surveys lived in Reno less than five years.53 Nearly half of those residents had lived in Reno less than one year.54 Sun Valley’s apparent transiency was symptomatic of Reno’s.

50 Rusco, 51.
51 Ibid. Rusco observed a pattern throughout the region, that “throughout [the Reno and Sparks areas] it was apparent that poor housing was interspersed with good housing; particularly, many small houses are located in the alleys, not easily visible from the street,” which in many cases hid the appearance of decay (Rusco, 19). The report went on to explain that these housing mixes gave the impression that “these Districts may seem to be in good condition to the casual observer,” when in fact they were not (Rusco, 19).
52 Rusco, 54. Rusco also reported that there were 13 college graduates living in Sun Valley in the mid-1960s.
53 Rusco, 66.
54 Ibid.
Gepford foresaw the need for trailer homes in Sun Valley. He predicted what geographers would later examine in greater detail, that Sun Valley land could not accommodate conventional building. The map below indicates that, in fact, the overwhelming majority of Sun Valley land had what Geographer John Wardlaw would characterize as a “low suitability for dwellings” because of its arid and loose soil.

Figure 20: Wardlaw’s mapping shows that approximately 80% of the Sun Valley landscape was not adequate for basic home-building.

Whether applying for a Small Tract from the BLM or purchasing one of Gepford’s many parcels, people moved to Sun Valley to own land, even if that land was

56 Ibid.
not perfect and could potentially be fraught with challenges. Trailers were well suited for Sun Valley land even though they too came with challenges. In keeping with its origins as a working class community, Sun Valley relied on this inexpensive housing.58

Throughout the 1960s, residents of Reno and Sparks expressed concern that the proliferation of trailer homes could affect their neighborhoods by creating visual blight and impacting surrounding property values.59 The county was reluctant to provide increasing levels of service to trailer residents whose tax dollars were inadequate to provide those services.60 Their solution to this service problem was, in 1966, to impose a new tax on trailer homes.61 This tax applied to the purchase and installation of new trailer homes. In response, residents made efforts to relocate or purchase used trailers rather than new ones in order to avoid paying the tax.62 Five months later the annual mobile


59 Minutes, Book S, page 181, “Planning—Trailer Court Ordinance,” February 5, 1954. Also, Minutes, Book S, page 197, “Ordinance—Trailer Coach Parks,” March 5, 1954. The latter was the city’s response to the justifiable fears among residents that trailer homes, at very least, needed to be better regulated. While later policies would regulate the construction of the homes themselves, this early effort was focused on regulating sanitation practices in communities of trailers.


home tax was applied to all trailer homes used as residences in order to provide them with better services.  

In 1972, Nevada State Assemblyman Artie Valentine (who represented Sun Valley residents) introduced legislation to regulate manufacturing of trailer homes to protect the people living in them. His Sun Valley constituents, he learned, were under the impression that trailer homes were safe to inhabit. They assumed there were regulations that governed the production of their homes. These residents were wrong, Valentine insisted. The seller of a trailer home built in 1950, according to the law, was only required to uphold what safety standards were on the books in 1950. Sellers and buyers were not required to make improvements to old trailer homes to meet new standards. As they struggled to develop and enforce new standards specific to trailer homes, local governments were reminded of the ongoing relationship between tax revenues and service costs specific to trailer communities (road maintenance, waste collection). In 1975, the Carson River Basin Council of Governments suggested that the deficiencies were normal in any kind of development. They pointed out that trailers and


conventional homes alike were rarely taxed sufficiently to pay for the infrastructural costs they generated.  

Further complicating the tax-service imbalance, sales tax on mobile homes was collected at the place (state or county) of sale rather than the destination or dwelling site. This left the communities where the homes ended up without sufficient revenues to provide services. Taxation became even more complicated on the used mobile home market, especially because newer trailer homes were built to the higher federal building standards (enforced nationally beginning in 1976) while older homes were not. Finally, tax assessments were performed annually on trailer homes in most states, including Nevada. Conventional houses at this time were assessed less frequently, usually every five or ten years. The annual assessment made depreciation of trailer homes appear more rapid (eight percent per year nationally) than conventional homes. Rapid decreases in value made purchasing, insuring and financing trailer homes more difficult, just as it made portraying trailer housing as appealing more of a challenge for sellers.

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67 CRBCG 17.
68 CRBCG, 25.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid.
Economist Earl Morris observed that, “To live in a trailer home meant not to have made the grade.” Yet he also recorded that some trailer residents claimed that economic necessity was secondary to personal decisions and the general willingness of residents to live in a trailer: “living in a mobile home results from deliberate choice, not necessity.” As average rents between Reno and Sun Valley converged, the choice to live in Sun Valley was, in fact, rooted in an interest in trailer living. Ads in Sun Valley suggest that the choice to inhabit a trailer there could be motivated by explaining the benefits (land) that could potentially outweigh the recognized costs. Among these costs was the compromise that entailed living in a type of housing and a type of community that was far from traditional.


72 Earl Morris, Housing Crisis and Response: The Place of Mobile Homes in American Life (Ithaca: Cornell, 1971) 25. Also, David Thornburg, Galloping Bungalows: The Rise and Demise of the American House Trailer (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1991) 157. This new generation of trailers was hinting at a new way of life, as if to suggest that the mobile was going to be taken out of the mobile home and that mobile home residents would escape the stigma associated with their homes. “The prewar trailers,” Thornburg continued, “were really too short for this division into separate rooms, though they sometimes had curtains provided for that purpose” (157). In postwar housing, a curtain would not suffice as a privacy barrier. Americans wanted space and privacy, a place of their own, a space they could call home. The new generation of mobile home offered this.

73 Morris, 25.
Trailers, historian Margaret Drury observed, created an alternative to traditional home ownership, yet, “little or no official recognition was given to the mobile home unit as a housing alternative until the late 1960s,” when on local and national levels the problems of trailer housing were growing increasingly apparent.\(^\text{74}\) Trailers, she observed, “overnight became the objects of much official interest and recognition.”\(^\text{75}\) While trailers provided alternatives to conventional housing, the interest and recognition was not positive. Most centered around issues of safety, deterioration, depreciation, taxation, and local regulation.\(^\text{76}\)

Sociologist Margarethe Kusenbach observed that since the 1940s, people living in trailer homes have “routinely encounter[ed] negative stereotypes regarding their ‘trailer’ home, community, and lifestyle in public discourse and personal interactions.”\(^\text{77}\) Aside from financing and regulatory problems associated with buying and living in a trailer,

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\(^\text{75}\) Drury, 3.

\(^\text{76}\) Ibid. Also, historian Andrew Hurley reported that “banks charged high interest rates on loans and demanded repayment within three to five years as opposed to much lower rates and much longer repayment terms for fixed-site homes” (Andrew Hurley, *Diners, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks: Chasing the American Dream in the Postwar Consumer Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 2002) 266). Additionally, because of the risk factors involved in underwriting mobile home loans, “the average trailer tenant was saddled with monthly payments that ranged between 15 and 50 percent higher than the buyer of a new suburban home” (Hurley, 266).

\(^\text{77}\) Margarethe Kusenbach, “Salvaging Decency: Mobile Home Residents' Strategies of Managing the Stigma of Trailer Living.”

Architecture critic Clare Cooper went on to explain that “A person who lives in a house that moves must somehow be as unstable as the structure he inhabits” (Clare Cooper, *The House as Symbol of Self* (Berkeley: Institute of Urban and Regional Development)), 134. “The house-on-wheels was somehow looked down upon by the average American homeowner as violating the true image of home and neighborhood” (Drury, 12). Cooper’s connection that stigmas toward trailer homes were therefore stigmas toward trailer residents implied that the complexities of trailer problems were personal for residents. Trailer homes were “not recognized as legitimate housing,” which left trailer owners to live in constant comparison with owners of conventional houses (Drury, 12. Housing was changing in the 1960s, and trailers were becoming more popular in areas of “rapid population increase” (Drury, 37)).
Kusenbach identifies stigmas which date back to the early twentieth century when trailer homes (then in their mobile “travel trailer” stage) first gained attention:

Contemporary popular culture is rife with negative images of people living in mobile homes and provides derogatory names that are utilized by many without quotation marks. Everyone knows that the designation “trailer trash” is not meant as a compliment. The low social prestige of “trailer” living presents a challenge that mobile home residents … routinely encounter in their daily lives. The negative image of trailers dates back to before World War II when small, makeshift accommodations on wheels originally meant for vacationing became popular permanent homes for low-income retirees and migrant workers.  

The association of the trailer with a transient way of life preceded perceptions of trailer residents as poor or working class, or the reasoning of the banks that trailer loans were greater risks than conventional loans. Kusenbach believed the relationship to be reciprocal, that social realities of trailers (found in policy, governance, and financing) fed into cultural perceptions and vice versa:  

Images of ‘trailer’ living as transient and deficient persist in contemporary mass media and popular culture. Mobile homes are shown to be crowded, ugly, dirty, and unsafe accommodations. Mobile home parks are portrayed as desolate places packed with junky homes and roaming dogs where lawns are strewn with litter, broken down cars, and indoor appliances. Mobile home residents, frequently referred to as ‘trailer trash,’ are depicted as alcoholics, crack heads, meth addicts, drug dealers, wife beaters, prostitutes, sex offenders, and as mentally insane. Women are promiscuous, men are violent, kids are out of control. In brief, the majority of media images propel the message that these people are indecent because they live in objectionable places and environments that coincide with a

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78 Kusenbach, 400.

range of personal and cultural deficiencies. Understandably, many mobile home residents take issue with such negative views.\textsuperscript{80}

The assumptions imply that there was a particular way of life that was specific to trailer residents. Assumptions such as these served as the public’s and the county government’s knowledge of trailer residents in lieu of facts or firsthand experience. Trailer parks masked some of these stereotypes by concealing the conditions of the trailer community behind fences and walls, but trailer homes that were “exposed to public streets tended to be among the shabbiest.”\textsuperscript{81} As Drury pointed out, “the slum-like environment in which the unit was often placed,” contributed to negative public opinion about both trailers and their residents.\textsuperscript{82} Sun Valley came to embody regional stereotypes of this slum-like environment.\textsuperscript{83}

\textsuperscript{80} Kusenbach, 400-401.

\textsuperscript{81} Hurley, 248.


Legal scholars in the 1950s pointed out that “the use of house trailers by more than one million Americans has created a growing problem for local government.” The report implied also that there was a significant proportion of the United States population living in trailers and that the problems associated with them were increasing: “An influx of house trailers may bring health and sanitation problems, traffic congestion, and ugly vistas to a community.” Service problems and infrastructure burdens, that is, were partially responsible for perceptions of trailers as “problems.”

In Sun Valley, the trailer problem and the housing situation in general were extreme. Raymond Smith, Washoe County planning director, reported in 1955 that “half of the buildings in the county are being erected by the owners themselves,” drawing

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85 Ibid. Each of these problems had impacts on perceptions of “trailer dwellers,” who, Hager’s analysis concluded, “make little financial, civic, or political contribution to community life.” The criticism went on to illustrate the degree to which stereotypes had become ingrained in perceptions of mobile home life: “Trailers are thought to be occupied by rootless wanderers and are commonly regarded as posing threats to community interest not presented by other types of housing” (Ibid.). “Regulation and Taxation of House Trailers,” 1955. (Policy analyst Adam Rust wrote that “manufactured housing was often an invisible housing issue to the community development sector, to policy makers, and to the public at large. Residents are left out of community development initiatives and housing policy reforms.” (Adam Rust, *This Is my Home: The Challenges and Opportunities of Manufactured Housing* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2007) viii). Also, Manufactured Housing Institute, “Dodd-Frank Act and Manufactured Housing” July, 2011. Also, Chiori Santiago and Maggie Steber, “House Trailers,” *Smithsonian*, Volume 29, Issue 3 (June 1998). Also, Dawn Wotapka, “Carlyle Jumps into Niche Space: Private-equity Firm adds Trailer Parks to its Diverse Portfolio.” *Wall Street Journal*, October 15, 2013. Drury argued that “the mobile home unit as a totally industrialized product made gains in the housing market since 1955 because it was not affected by the normal institutionalized forces operative in the housing market” (Drury, 144).
attention to deteriorating shacks and the growing presence of trailer homes.87 “It was not that these people don’t want to do a good job,” Smith added, “it’s just that in many instances, they don’t know how to go about it.”88 The existence of substandard homes in Sun Valley was cause for alarm on a county-wide level. In response to the perceived and very public problems with trailers, sellers tried to emphasize that Sun Valley land was the way to appeal to prospective buyers. Residents resisted negative imputations by reminding the buying public that the real appeal of Sun Valley was more affordable land than anywhere else in the Reno and Sparks area.

By 1976, trailer life was under the watchful regulatory eyes of both the Washoe County and federal governments. The former sought to provide better services to trailer residents and the latter to ensure a new level of safety for structures that had previously gone unregulated.89 While trailer homes enabled the development that became Sun Valley, those homes also led residents to decades of regulatory difficulty from the county as that government struggled to determine and fund the appropriate level of service. The homes were an economically viable route to homeownership for working-class people, but in the 1970s a new degree of planning and regulation would apply to all trailer housing, whether sited in trailer parks or independently on privately-owned land.

Real estate advertisements in this era reflected a sense of ambivalence about Sun Valley housing and responded to the growing stigmas about trailers and trailer living. Sales ads sometimes exhibited a sense of pride in the place based on its housing, while

88 Ibid.
others emphasized land and yards, indicating sellers’ desires not to mention the homes in any detail. In the dual emphases on homes and land in advertisements, residents created a narrative in which trailer housing complicated Sun Valley life by creating visual blight while encouraging residents to emphasize the importance of the land. When homes were unappealing, the land that surrounded them became more important. Treatment of housing and land in ads in the 1970s illustrated the complicated nature of selling Sun Valley properties and sellers’ determination to create an interest in the Sun Valley landscape. This was a challenge for residents just as it had been for early developers like Harry Gepford and the Bureau of Land Management, each of whom had discovered over time that trailers were a crucial means through which settlers could get by on this landscape.

In a Sun Valley ad from 1971, the seller was forthright: “TRAILER HOME” appeared in capital letters as the header of the advertisement in a significantly larger typeface than the rest of the text.90 Another 1971 ad referred to a trailer home as a “a real bachelor pad,” indicating the home had a specific audience. “Must see to appreciate,” in the same ad, implied that if the home did not sound appealing on paper, in person it would reveal unanticipated charm. The appeal of Sun Valley homes lay beyond the

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90 Nevada State Journal, March 6, 1971, page 8: “TRAILER HOME: Sun Valley area, 1/3 acre, fantastic view…A real bachelor pad…Must see to appreciate.” Also, Reno Evening Gazette, May 1, 1972: “MOBILE HOMES, Sun Valley, huge 3 bedroom 2 bath luxury modular concept….Also 3 bedroom, 12x60”
surface. Sellers emphasized land as a selling point for Sun Valley, suggesting that residents (sellers) did not want the community to be too closely associated with trailer housing alone.

In a 1971 ad, while Sun Valley sellers had begun to emphasize the name brands of mobile homes, they also began to create an emphasis on the land. The seller in a 1972 ad labeled the home “huge,” and explained that it had a “luxury modular concept.” Each of these features made the home seem less like a trailer, especially the adjective “luxury.” The ad suggested that a “luxury” lifestyle was attainable in this form of housing, an ambitious claim for a trailer in Sun Valley. The features mentioned in these advertisements suggested that there were attractions both inside and outside the home.

The yard (an extension of the home) became as important as the homes themselves.

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91 On one hand, the trailer was accepted as part of the landscape, while on the other hand it was concealed because of the public awareness of their problems and an always-growing discomfort with the mobile home aesthetic and the potential effects on surrounding neighborhoods.

Historian Allan Wallis argued that the features of mobile homes served to make them “comfortable, particularly by providing more space for activities and storage; others were to make [them] more attractive and socially acceptable” (Wallis, 151).

92 Reno Evening Gazette, February 25, 1971, page 22: “Sun Valley, 1 acre with a 4 bedroom house partially completed. A 2 bedroom house trailer. Property zoned for 3 dwellings. City water and gas available. Hurry on this one.” In another ad from 1971, the “house trailer” was included in the description of a property that could contain up to “3 dwellings.” While the description of the two homes on the property clearly distinguished between the “house” and “house trailer,” the trailer was nonetheless accepted as a part of the residential landscape. Additionally, the conventional house was not livable (only “partially completed”) and the trailer house provided the solution to this problem, continuing to fulfill this longtime role in the housing market as the affordable alternative to conventional housing (Reno Evening Gazette, April 9, 1971, page 10: “SUN VALLEY, One Acre zoned for three dwellings…two bedroom house trailer.”).

93 Reno Evening Gazette, April 21, 1971: “Privacy, Horses, 2 bedroom trailer 8x40 on 10 acres, by itself, Sun Valley.”

94 Nevada State Journal, June 10, 1972: “SUN VALLEY, 12x60, 2 bedroom, unfurnished, quiet, pleasant, room for garden.”
Sellers emphasized the former in efforts to deemphasize trailer housing, reminding buyers that the land in Sun Valley was the important selling point.95

Sellers who combined “SUN VALLEY” and “MOBILE HOME” in their headers, displayed confidence that there was a significant market of potential buyers willing to call Sun Valley home because of the common one-third acre lot size. Such ads reminded buyers that yards, too, were important. Sun Valley sellers sold not only the trailer homes—cheap, old, and without many modern features—but also the land beneath them. Land and yard represented the continuing appeal of the rural landscape Sun Valley once was.

Emphasizing the particular appeal of trailer homes in sales advertisements was a strategy to destigmatize them; but the majority of sellers in the 1970s focused exclusively on the land and ignored the homes. Yet their language, too, suggests that Sun Valley was trailers and land. While the two were seldom separated in advertisements, one was significantly more apparent in the language of the sellers. The author of a 1973 ad celebrated “COUNTRY LIVING At its best!” before emphasizing the “beautiful,” yet small (12x60) home with its “spacious” lot.96 Small trailer homes were not always perceived negatively.97 Due to concerns over interior space and the general limitations of

95 As historian Kenneth Jackson observed, “the space around us, the physical organization of neighborhoods, roads, yards, houses…sets up living patterns that condition our behavior” (Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier, 3).

96 Nevada State Journal, February 17, 1973: COUNTRY LIVING at its best! Beautiful 12x60 mobile home on a spacious Juniper Terrace lot in Sun Valley. Fully landscaped yard, family room, fireplace, you name it, it’s got it!” And, “HOW ABOUT THIS: Located on one acre, Sun Valley, this custom built mobile home offers 3 bedrooms, 2 baths, formal dining, complete kitchen…”

97 When the ten-foot wide (the “ten-wide”) trailer was introduced in the 1950s, it was considered by housing experts to be a “real competitor in the housing market” (Drury, 93. Historian Earl Morris argued that “despite their small size, mobile homes are not overcrowded” (Morris, 16)).
trailer homes, however, the land remained a vital part of the trailer experience in Sun Valley.98

Mobile homes were so ingrained in Sun Valley life that some ads referred to them by make and model, implying that buyers knew the trailer market. Sellers touted the “72 Broadmore, 1970 Fashion Manor, 1970 Double Wide Commander,” in ads, language about which potential buyers would need prior knowledge.99 The seller of the ’72 Broadmore in an ad from 1973 pointed out that the home was large (a double-wide measuring 24’ x 64”) and that the land was fenced. The order of these features (year, brand, size, land) suggested that the size of the home was not as important as the year and

98 Not only was the lot spacious, it was fully landscaped with a yard. Additionally, the home, small as it was, offered all the necessities, yet the seller sold the home as adaptable (“you name it, it’s got it!). The home may not have been big, but it had everything.

J.B. Jackson argued that the appeal of a home is “often less a matter of size and cost than of how space, interior as well as exterior, is organized and used” (Jackson, 64-5). “Because the house is attached to the land,” journalist Douglass Haskell wrote, “so are all the transactions that are connected with it. If you buy a house you also have to buy the land” (Douglas Haskell, “Bringing Shelter up to Date: Unchaining House from Land,” The Nation, May 23, 1934, 586). In this process, the land surrounding the home became part of it. Just as sellers attempted to portray the changing face of the modern home on the inside, there was something worth protecting on the outside. Many sellers expressed the need to protect the home and the land, with “fenced-in” acting in the advertisements as a signifier of safety. As Jackson pointed out, “the new ideal was no longer to be part of a close community, but to have a self-contained unit, a private wonderland walled off from the rest of the world” (Jackson, 58). Yards, with lawns and any other added feature, were not only extensions of the home, but were prized possessions.

More than serving as the barrier between neighbors, yards represented a division of spaces as viewed from the public streets: “It served as a means of transition from the public street to the very private house, as a kind of space that...mediated between the activities of the outside and the activities of the inside” (Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier, 58). This division between public and private enabled sellers to emphasize that their property was safe.

99 Nevada State Journal, June 17, 1973: “1970 Double Wide Commander located on a fully improved 1/3 acre Sun Valley. Completely fenced and landscaped. 20x20 Carport plus 10x7 storage building. Lots more extras. Come and See.” Also, Reno Evening Gazette, August 10, 1973, page 21: “’72 Broadmore 24x64. Fenced 1/3 acre. In Sun Valley...all the extras.” Geographer John Eyles wrote that home sales advertisements “illustrate directly how such housing may be treated as a commodity” (John Eyles, “Housing Advertisements as Signs: Locality Creation and Meaning Systems,” Geografiska Annaler, Vol. 69, No. 2 (1987) 93-105; 93). He went on to argue that “no need can be recognized without a commodity to satisfy it” (Eyles, 96).
brand name of the home. This use of such detailed trailer information suggests that the homes were an attractive selling point. Not just that there was a market of potential buyers who were informed about trailer manufacturers, but that the homes themselves could maintain appeal and attract those buyers.

In a 1974 ad, only the size of the trailer home came before emphasizing the brand (“12x64 Broadmore”). Any potential buyer would have to have known what “12x64 Broadmore” meant because it was not explicitly referred to as a “home” at all. While the trailer was not necessarily big (12’ by 64’ of livable space), it featured an “expando living room,” (a design in which an extra room was added to the trailer once it was affixed to a site) which increased the livable square-footage. Just as with the brand name, the buyer would have to have known what “expando” referred to. Buried in the text of the advertisement between descriptions of the land and the two homes on it, was the vague but informative “beautifully landscaped,” which reasserted the importance of the land outside the home.

The author of a 1975 ad was likely (given the language and the Sun Valley context) selling a trailer when he or she described the home simply as “2 bedroom unfurnished unit.” The seller was more descriptive about the land, noting that the home

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100 Reno Evening Gazette, November 21, 1974: “12x64 Broadmore with expando living room.”

was installed “on large fenced space…[with] Extra storage.” This seller reminded potential buyers of the land that gave Sun Valley its original appeal while also pointing out the added amenity of the extra space for storage. Homes themselves were explained only briefly, if at all.

Problems of housing in Sun Valley reflected the many processes of planning, land use, and waste which had been the other main factors in Sun Valley’s development. Sellers resisted the negative perceptions of these processes and celebrated the fact that trailer housing enabled the growth that took place in Sun Valley. They embraced trailers for this feat while acknowledging in their ads that the public may have remained skeptical of them. Trailers were necessary and, as the ads demonstrate, many sellers emphasized their features and used them as selling points. But at the same time, others used the rural charm of Sun Valley land to portray the community as appealing. Just as was the case in the early development of the Sun Valley area, the appeal was not always in the housing. Often it was in the land itself. In emphasizing the rural landscape, sellers capitalized on


The seller in a 1975 ad asserted that the home and land created an “ideal family situation.” The only description that may have supported their claims about the “ideal family situation” was that it was a fenced lot which would provide and enclosed and safe space (Nevada State Journal, February 19, 1975: “SUN VALLEY on lot fenced, ideal family situation...Lease option on Lot”). “Lease option on lot” suggested that the home was located in a trailer park, which suggested that “fenced” was even more of a concern given that neighbors lived in close proximity. This closeness made fencing a necessary process.

Other sellers made less effort to promote the land as “beautiful,” instead emphasizing security. The seller in a 1976 ad quickly described the size of the parcel and that it was fenced and landscaped (Nevada State Journal, December 8, 1976: 1/3 acre Fenced and landscaped, Juniper Terrace Sun Valley, 1973 expando 24/60 Broadmore”). The land was the centerpiece of the advertisement, and once again, the land inside the fence and the home were worth protecting. Only after revealing this selling point did the seller mention Sun Valley and then the 1973 24 x 60 Broadmore mobile home. While Sun Valley and the mobile home were important to mention, they were secondary to the importance of the land. And while the ad did portray the home as a commodity (year, make, model, size, etc.), it only mattered insofar as it was a feature of the fenced land. As the yard and land came to the forefront of these home sales, fences represented not just security, but boundaries.
the one enduring appeal that had attracted Sun Valley’s early settlers, and continued to attract buyers throughout the decades to follow. While trailer housing may have helped ameliorate a housing crisis in the mid-twentieth century, it also entailed complications. Sun Valley residents dealt with these complications by embracing the housing in advertisements while also reminding skeptics that, after all, the housing was merely a means to settle the land. As Michelle Rhodes argued, the growth of the west was made possible by trailers.\textsuperscript{103}

As Roberta Aiauzzi pointed out, the arid landscapes of the western United States were well-suited to trailer housing. Trailer residents were well suited for the region and for the land that made trailer living necessary. The region was difficult to settle, and the trailer home enabled people to inhabit the remote parts of it that otherwise would have remained unappealing for settlement. As sellers of trailers in Sun Valley demonstrated, the homes were embraced by some and rejected by others. The housing that enabled western settlers to stay permanently on a harsh western landscape would remain caught between being embraced as readily as it was rejected by Sun Valley sellers; as praised by Richard Nixon as it was scorned by local governments in their efforts to plan for and regulate it; as celebrated by historians of place and the built environment as it was mocked in popular culture. While Allan Wallis and many other historians have argued that there was no more meaningful housing form in the twentieth century, and as Michelle Rhodes and regional geographers have praised the trailer for its role in the development of the western United States, the trailer home remains a contested housing

\textsuperscript{103} Rhodes, 7.
form yet has enabled the settlement of places that were otherwise unappealing and would have remained unsettled.

Many sellers found it difficult to boast about a trailer for sale. The real appeal, as sellers demonstrated, was land. The timing of this shift stands out in the national trailer history because as sellers in Sun Valley were coming to recognize trailers as a problem, so, too, was the federal government when it enacted the HUD Code in 1976. HUD served to regulate the production of trailer homes so that they would not decay as rapidly and so that inhabiting them would be safer for residents. The two main problems Sun Valley sellers faced in selling trailer housing were being remedied on a national scale.

The case of Sun Valley is significant because it illustrates the ways trailers were symptomatic of a history of non-planning. Settlers used whatever form of housing they could afford in order to settle there. As planning efforts in Sun Valley faltered throughout the 1960s, it became more apparent that services to the community were not just complicated by the previous lack of planning, but by the trailer housing itself. Efforts by the county to plan for a place that grew without planning caused yet more problems for residents as well as for those county planners. Residents responded to the situation by suggesting that while trailers were problematic (and sellers seldom disagreed with this point), they were useful because without them they would have had to find other affordable housing options and would not have had the opportunity to own land in Sun Valley. While problematic in terms of salability, trailers were sensible, and would, in fact, enable buyers to connect with the rural landscapes that, in the case of Sun Valley specifically, could not sustain conventional building. Trailers were sensible, necessary,
and were a means to an end: they enabled Sun Valley to take shape on a landscape that could sustain no such growth by conventional standards.
CONCLUSION

Under the Small Tract Act of 1938, the Bureau of Land Management initiated a pattern of development that took a permanent shape in the lands north of Reno and Sparks, Nevada. Precisely the challenges about which BLM warned applicants—trailer housing, remoteness and isolation from surrounding communities, becoming a burden on the resources of those communities and their local governments—became a part of life in Sun Valley. Hasty development and a lack of planning at the edges of two growing cities left Sun Valley residents to live in a state of tension that arose from these problems.

In her 2012 novel, *Girlchild*, author Tupelo Hassman painted a tragic picture of Sun Valley. In the story, the main character, a young girl, was consistently abused while growing up there. Hassman describes a place where the homes were best characterized as “flimsy,” an adjective that symbolized more than just the construction of the trailers. The girl excelled in school and loved books, while her mother, a working-class woman with multiple jobs, provided the home in which the two of them merely got by. The Sun Valley of *Girlchild* was not a place people sought out but a place where people ended up.

First, the family left California to come to Reno, where the cost of living was cheaper. They found themselves in Sun Valley, where housing and costs of living were cheaper still. The mother struggled to raise her child in a low-income community where life was not easy. Finally, after her mother’s death, the young girl prepared to leave Sun Valley behind and begin her adult life elsewhere. Knowing how quickly trailers burned,

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she lit a match and burned her childhood home to the ground and left Sun Valley behind
to burn with it. The symbolism of the burning trailer implied that to live in Sun Valley
was to hate Sun Valley, and to leave it behind a common fantasy. Residents’ awareness
of the flammability of trailers and the inherent physical risks associated with trailer living
were juxtaposed in the story with an act of destruction, of the trailer and of Sun Valley.

Hassman’s Sun Valley was a desolate place where people came out of necessity
and were able to survive through tough times when they were not likely to do so
elsewhere. While working class families could survive there, they were subject to living
conditions that were not always appealing. The center of community life in Hassman’s
Sun Valley was the casino-bar where the girl’s mother worked so many hours that she
was mainly absent from the day-to-day life of her child. The mother interacted with
casino- and bar-dwellers who lived in the community for economic reasons, just like
herself.

When the mother learned of the sexual abuse of her daughter, she was outraged at
the man responsible, but also bitter about the circumstances that brought her to a place
where such things happened. The people in Hassman’s Sun Valley were so busy in their
own lives that they didn’t notice the dangerous elements of this working class and
impoverished way of life that were not only infuriating but sad and unthinkable.
Hassman’s plot suggested that Sun Valley was not a safe place to live, and that ending up
there was a misfortune for the poor and the working class people who had to live in such
places out of necessity. That the young girl burned the trailer to the ground suggested that
there was only one way to escape Sun Valley. One had to flee permanently and not look
back.
More than a story of people, housing, waste, planning (or non-planning), development and land policy, Sun Valley’s history is a story of trailer culture, of the way the trailer enabled development in regions and by people who otherwise might not have experienced homeownership. Trailer culture was disapproved of because of the landscape it created: trailers with old tires holding roofs down, broken down cars littering yards, unpaved roads difficult to travel. It was characterized by children growing up in visible poverty and residents struggling constantly to get by.

In 1997, Sun Valley residents, led by retiree and community leader Mary Hansen, planned a two-and-a-half-year campaign to revitalize the appearance of their community.² The campaign, with slogans that included “Looking Great in ’98” and “Looking Fine in ’99,” was guided by three questions: “What is it we need to do? What can we do for ourselves? [And] what do we absolutely need government to do for/with us?” The language of the final question suggested that residents not only expected local government to provide services, but that the residents would be involved alongside the government body, that cooperation and interaction would remain pivotal in improving Sun Valley. Once again, residents found themselves working to improve the physical appearance of Sun Valley in order to fight against the realities that earned the place such an poor reputation. Slogans suggested the ongoing experience of living in Sun Valley: that there would be constant struggles for concerned residents to provide public services for themselves, just as the BLM had warned.

In the short term, cleanup efforts like Hansen’s and those before her were successful at restoring cleanliness and livability. In the long term, their repetition signified unresolved neglect, both by residents and the county government. They were a symptom of the condition of the poorly planned Sun Valley neighborhoods, where poor waste management only inspired periodic cleanup efforts rather than consistent, sustained maintenance of homes and neighborhoods.

To residents of Sun Valley, the cleanups were essential, yet they were also a constant reminder that their community was in trouble. That the cleanups never stopped suggested that scattered waste was integral to the Sun Valley experience, not a problem likely to find permanent resolution. Like the need for better planning, or better housing, waste management was a common theme that became part of the Sun Valley experience. These problems didn’t go away, they weren’t solved by citizens or the county government; they became part of the Sun Valley reality. The condition of Sun Valley homes and neighborhoods are the subject of this dissertation precisely because they are the overarching themes of Sun Valley history, yet they also characterize much of the Sun Valley experience. The unplanned use of unappealing lands with trailer homes created a community that was plagued by struggles against waste. People moved to Sun Valley to get by, and in the face of ongoing problems, that was precisely what they did.

Gradually through the 1990s and into the twenty-first century, the trailer came to symbolize residents who made the best of a hard life on a harsh landscape. As Sun Valley development issues persisted, local resident and political activist Susan Severt brought
those issues to the local presses where she composed weekly articles. Severt informed readers that Sun Valley experienced many of the same development issues that other communities faced, from the struggle to build and maintain parks and schools, to attracting retail businesses to the area. She educated readers on ways life in Sun Valley was ordinary, save for its unique housing and its constant waste issues and cleanup drives. Offering an alternative to Hassman, Severt’s Sun Valley emerged not as a symbol of despair or poverty, but of the hard work and perseverance required to survive through hard times on a harsh landscape.

In 2005, Reno businessman Scott Dunseath founded Reno eNVy, a clothing and souvenir business aimed at celebrating Reno and the lifestyles of its people. The trailer home logo, Dunseath argued, served at once to celebrate the role of the trailer in local heritage and to poke fun at the region’s working-class roots. The Reno eNVy trailer logo has become a staple on t-shirts and bumper stickers around the Reno and Sparks areas. It is the subtle symbol of a local and regional heritage, one that is simultaneously mocked and embraced.

But Sun Valley continued to experience outsiders’ disapproval even as this growing acceptance of trailer culture began to take hold. In June 2016, a local Reno news station reported a fire that had destroyed a trailer and a shed in Sun Valley. The brief

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5 Reno eNVy also pokes fun while embracing the working-class heritage of local residents in a logo that reads: Neck (in red letters), Trash (in white letters) and Collar (in blue letters), celebrating the redneck, white trash, blue collar ways of life all at once.
report was followed by a solitary comment from a reader. The comment read, “Disgusting Property. Get rid of the hazard.” The images that accompanied the story showed the trailer ablaze, close enough to a neighbor’s home to threaten it with the flames. Meanwhile, the trailer home on the property with the burned fifth-wheel had a window boarded up with wood, a state of disrepair with which the commentator must have been familiar. The tone of the comment suggested continuing disapproval of the unkempt nature of Sun Valley, and implied that the fire (yet another of the ongoing and unresolved problems of the trailer culture) was the fault of an unclean and therefore unsafe way of living. The story resembles the news coverage of Sun Valley over seventy years. From unsightly properties to junk and clutter creating unhealthy and dangerous conditions, coverage of Sun Valley has seldom varied. Not only are poverty and poor living conditions constant issues in Sun Valley, but they also elicit disdain from those fortunate enough not to live there.

In Hassman’s fiction, relocating to Reno had temporary implications. Her heroine abandons the place definitively. Yet Sun Valley residents created a community that many are eager to protect. For the many reasons newcomers sought affordable housing and even homeownership, Sun Valley provided opportunity in a landscape where such opportunity was not abundant. Sun Valley is part of the larger story of western land policy because the farther back the Sun Valley story goes, the more it becomes part of the difficult migration to the west, in which the federal government aimed to provide

7 Ibid.
inexpensive land to people willing to settle a harsh landscape. Sun Valley was the result of this process.

Sun Valley remains a more affordable suburban alternative for those willing to inhabit its mostly unappealing homes and neighborhoods. It also begs the question, what would the Reno and Sparks housing and suburban landscape look like without Sun Valley? Where would these working class and underprivileged people reside? The Reno economy has thrived on an appealing downtown image for its gambling and tourism industries, so it was convenient that this unappealing residential landscape took shape behind the hills that have kept Sun Valley hidden from city view.

The landscape of trailer homes is fascinating. There is such a concentration of them, and with the addition of the businesses that have operated there over time, Sun Valley itself looks like a small town. That town-like community is home to people who otherwise would be searching for similar living conditions elsewhere in the city. Reno’s working class and poor did not find themselves confined to inner city slums. Rather, these conditions materialized outside the city limits, where those who endured them were hidden from tourists and other visitors, hidden from agents of the county government, and hidden from the people who may not have tolerated such a settlement. People who came to Sun Valley largely understood that it was a place devoted to getting by, appreciated by people who likely struggled to do so elsewhere.

Sun Valley resembles a small town, separate from those nearby cities of Reno and Sparks. Although conventional houses have sprung up along the outer boundaries of Sun Valley, the core remains mostly trailers. There are trees lining the streets, some of them paved, some not. There are fences to keep stray animals and unwanted guests out. Many
properties are meticulously maintained and well-groomed, yet these are not the homes that come to mind when thinking of Sun Valley, either today or a half-century ago.

In postwar housing, Sun Valley is suburban because it provided housing to people and cities that needed it. Its homes and properties were stepping stones for people who planned to work their way up the social ladder. Yet that dream often materialized as a beat up old trailer rather than a constantly improved suburban home. As such, Sun Valley became a haven for the hard-up. It is a working class community where people have the opportunity to own land and a home.

Today, Sun Valley is home to more than twenty thousand people. The working class population is largely Latino, and the condition of many homes suggests that, as usual, the working class is not living the good life in this suburb. They are willing to make homes in Sun Valley trailers because it is difficult to do so elsewhere around Reno and Sparks.

On the surface, Sun Valley exemplifies working class life. Its poor housing conditions appear unsanitary and disorderly, and with the recurring problems of waste and struggles for basic infrastructure, that appearance is not far from reality. Sun Valley was founded by, and remains made up of, working class people in search of a place where their housing dollars presumably go farther. The local county government continues to provide a bare-minimum level of services to the community. Still, the residents continue to step in where these services fall short. The community cleanup events are still periodic and just as effective as ever, just enough to maintain appearances until concerned residents organize the next one.
Sun Valley enabled a city to ease its housing shortage; enabled working class people to own homes; enabled trailers to emerge as reasonable alternatives to conventional housing; enabled people to settle into a region that appeared unaccommodating. In Sun Valley, those resilient settlers became trailer-dwellers, two identities that seem unconnected in the western past, but in the case of this community became one and the same. Sun Valley illustrates the processes through which land policy, housing issues, and waste problems combined to create a western trailer community.

In 2010, Washoe County adopted a new version of the planning document that was first introduced by planners in 1958. This “Master Plan” reads like a boilerplate document prepared by planners who appear to have taken few of the intricacies of the actual place into account. The document outlines design standards for commercial and residential development, vaguely defines much of Sun Valley as “suburban,” while never explaining in much detail existing development. It emphasizes the need to preserve both rural and suburban character of the community, acknowledging that Sun Valley fits into each of these important roles in the Reno and Sparks region, but fails to explain why, or even define what the terms mean in the Sun Valley context.8

The document observes the importance of the proximity to BLM lands that surround Sun Valley, the lands on which Sun Valley was developed.9 Yet the images of design standards do not reflect the real Sun Valley. Rather than capturing images of desirable Sun Valley developers’ work around the community, the document instead

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8 Washoe County, Nevada, Department of Community Services, “Master Plan: Sun Valley Area Plan,” (September, 2010), 6.
9 Ibid.
contains images from a World Market and Nordstrom’s shopping center in South Reno. The development that the master plan portrays is less likely in Sun Valley than most anywhere else in the Reno-Sparks area. The master plan suggests that Sun Valley residents will continue to manage their community’s issues as they always have, through their own efforts as the county government continues to produce regulatory documents that consider few, if any, of the actual conditions of the Sun Valley landscape.

As waste problems continue to plague Sun Valley, the master plan treats them as problems that can be remedied by better concealing garbage receptacles, just as businesses are encouraged to conceal dumpsters behind buildings away from public view. The document also goes to great lengths to illustrate design standards for personal storage facilities, implying that an increase in this kind of business could remedy problems related to junk. While the document addresses waste directly in these ways, it does not acknowledge how complex Sun Valley’s history with the problem of garbage has been, nor offer realistic solutions.

Perhaps most revealing of the ongoing problem of non-planning in Washoe County’s management of Sun Valley is the fact that there is absolutely no mention of trailer housing in the master plan. The planners demonstrate no understanding of the most basic characteristics of the Sun Valley landscape, as if they are not planning for Sun Valley at all. The American Society for Planning (now called the American Planning Association) proclaimed as early as 1960 that trailers had proliferated to such an extent across the continent that local governments “must include them in planning.” For this

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oversight to be so apparent the master plan suggests that Sun Valley’s history with planning and non-planning is ongoing, that a lack of awareness of this landscape is ingrained in the relationship between Sun Valley and the Washoe County government.

Washoe County planners still appear unaware of real Sun Valley issues. They offer minimal, if not indifferent solutions to real Sun Valley problems. The planning document that is supposed to guide development and regulate land uses in Sun Valley appears to have been written for any other community except Sun Valley. The legacy of the Sun Valley experience, in which residents are left to manage their own development and care for their own neighborhoods with minimal effort from the county government, continues.

In the 1970s, economists found that the overwhelming (five-to-one) majority of Sun Valley residents did not believe that their quality of life was worsened by the level of services (waste collection, fire protection) they received from the county. Further, a majority of residents expressed no interest in “leaving” Sun Valley, unlike the young girl of Hassman’s Sun Valley. Nevertheless, Sun Valley’s problems are yet unsolved and perhaps insoluble by conventional planning. There appears to have been no resolution to the historical problems of this place. Rather, poor planning, waste, and trailer housing seem to be written into the foundations of Sun Valley, just as they continue to define much of the Sun Valley experience in the twenty-first century. As a result, the Sun Valley of the current local news media is a place that appears as closely associated with the

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problems of junk, garbage, waste, and the many complex issues of trailer housing, as was the Sun Valley of the 1950s and 1960s.

The detailed and modern Master Plan that Washoe County developed for Sun Valley in 2010 reflects the same problems that plagued the first attempts to adopt a planning program in Sun Valley in 1958. The county’s efforts to plan for and zone Sun Valley take almost nothing unique to Sun Valley into account. Just as the first efforts led to divisions among residents and created further tensions between residents and the county government, the current planning document serves only to remind planners that the realities of Sun Valley development do not conform to the standards they adopted in attempts to regulate the place.

The processes of land disposal, marketing, volunteerism, planning, waste management, and trailer housing illustrate a place where residents are willing to overcome obstacles in order to manage the growth of their community, and where a county government is still searching for ways to better understand and regulate the place, its housing, and its people. But for a county government that is burdened with regulating this unusual and complex place, recent efforts (such as the Sun Valley Master Plan) indicate that there remains a strong disconnect between traditional processes of planning and development and the realities of the Sun Valley landscape, which remain ever disparate.

Sun Valley’s history places it into a complex but crucial part of the Reno, Sparks, and indeed western suburban landscape as an illustration of the simultaneously problematic and indispensable aspects of trailer housing with its strong associations with waste. The presence of both trailers and waste remain strong in Sun Valley, if only as a
reflection of poor planning on the part of the county government. As a part of the suburban west, Sun Valley was an experiment in unconventional forms of development that created precisely the problems the Bureau of Land Management foresaw as its agents reluctantly allowed trailer housing as a means for settlers to domesticate the rural west. The ultimate outcome was that Sun Valley became a place where people ended up, and struggled through the processes I emphasize in this dissertation, to get by.
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