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[ROUGH DRAFT]

The Rise of a Working-class Suburb: Settlement and Growth of White Center from  
Streetcar Town to Automobile Suburb 1912-1950

“The smart ones said they lived in West Seattle. White Center had the reputation of being just outside the boundary of the civilized world.”

-Richard Hugo writing about 1930's White Center<sup>1</sup>

Unlike the nearby tidelands of Alki Beach and the floodplains of the Duwamish River, the southern reaches of the West Seattle plateau were never home to a thriving Native American settlement. This territory was too steep, too densely forested, and too soggy to be inhabited. Even the early Euroamerican settlers in search of land for pasture and planting were soon frustrated and turned to logging. The first claim on the land that would later become White Center was in 1870, when the Soloman family purchased 319 acres from the U.S. Government (Young, 1976). As written in *White Center Remembers*, early settlers continued to log the land until enough land was opened up to subdivide into 5, 10, and 20 acre parcels (Young).

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Hugo, *The Real West Marginal Way : A Poet's Autobiography*, ed. Lois M. Welch Ripley S. Hugo, and James Welch, 1st ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1986) 22.

In the years from 1912 to 1950 White Center transformed from a logging camp of a few hundred to an urbanized area with a population of **[what was the population in 1950?]**. This paper tells the urban history of early White Center by tracking the process of suburbanization. In the context of other Seattle streetcar suburbs, White Center stands out as perhaps the last area to base its development on the streetcar. As opposed to thriving middle-class streetcar suburbs like Fauntleroy, Wallingford, and Fremont, White Center has always attracted working-class residents. Several factors limited the area's success in attracting middle-class residents, including its reputation, remote location, and lack of infrastructure. Furthermore, the streetcar failed to boost White Center into a thriving urban area. Larger-scale suburban growth came first at the onset of World War I, and especially during World War II, when the demand for working housing coincided with the automobile boom and improvements to road infrastructure.

This paper follows the example of Samuel Bender's *Streetcar Suburbs* and Kenneth Jackson's *Crabgrass Frontier* in attempting to expose the urban history of an area by tracking its evolution through development and population change. Like Bender, I have pieced together the patterns of growth using historic maps, subdivision records, and historic public documents. I have also consulted oral histories, historic newspaper articles, poetry, and other literary sources. Through this analysis I have considered four arguments presented by Bender and Jackson: 1) the process of suburbanization is driven by technology and private interest; 2) real estate investors hoped to attract middle class families in search of the rural ideal; 3) urban form is shaped by many individual decisions; 4) transportation improvements such as streetcars and automobiles facilitated new markets for commuters.

During the years of 1912 to 1950 White Center developed as a working-class suburb with a reputation for lawlessness, crime, and low-quality infrastructure. In light of this result, and based on the framework of the above arguments, I have drawn the following four conclusion: 1) initial investment in the Highland Park Lake Burien railway was made possible by the exaggerated projections of development potential by boosters; 2) the middle-class never came due to long travel distance from city and lack of infrastructure and services; 3) the absence of building regulations and lack of capital among residents led to a community of “shacks,” which perpetuated negative stereotypes; 4) robust population growth finally came with the war economy as demand for worker housing was high and roads were finally paved to support automobile travel

This body of this paper will focus on each of these four conclusions in more detail. Section one tells the story of the Highland Park Lake Burien Company, and how this group of White Center land owners convinced the Seattle City Council to manage a privately funded streetcar line that extended beyond the city limits. Section two focuses on the early population of White Center and what life was like for working-class residents. Poetry from Richard Hugo who was born and raised in White Center, helps illuminate day-to-day life during the 1930’s. The third section focuses on the built environment, and discusses the lack of regulations and quality oversight that accompanied construction in the early days of White Center, including both residential and commercial buildings. Finally, the fourth section will focus on the development of cultural institutions and recreation activities during the boom years of the first and second World Wars.

*The birth of a working-class suburb: the Highland Park Lake Burien Company*

Before the arrival of the streetcar, White Center was primarily a logging and small-scale agriculture community. Houses were scattered among large tracts of open land. This stood in contrast to nearby neighborhoods in West Seattle had seen significant urban growth since the arrival of the streetcar (**cite this**). The first horse-drawn streetcars began running in Seattle in 1884, followed by cable and electric cars in 1889 (Boone). During the early streetcar years in Seattle, the White Center area remained rural. The Highland Park Lake Burien Railroad Company was formed in [year-1911?] by a group of entrepreneurial businessmen from White Center and Burien. Jacob Ambaum, Hiram Green, George White—for whom White Center is named—and others launched their project of bringing the railroad, and with it commerce and real estate development to the Highland Park area.

**TO ADD:**

1. Process of White Center landowners working with the City of Seattle to establish the Highland Park Lake Burien Railroad:
  - Key players: The Carrs, Mr. Green, Mr. White, Mr. Ambaum
  - Process of negotiation and boosterism to sell White Center as an up-and-coming suburb; the naming of White Center
  - References: historic letters, meeting minutes
2. Description of railroad route
  - Weaknesses: tracks would get covered by caterpillars, causing the trolleys to slip on tracks
  - Service was sporadic and had low ridership

- Route connected White Center to downtown Seattle in about 1 hour
  - Resources: Kroll's atlases, "Burien Streetcar" Blog
3. Land development before and after streetcar
- Characteristics of the land before arrival of the streetcar in 1912
  - Subsequent subdividing and building along streetcar route
  - Commercial development in White Center
  - References: Kroll's and Metsker's atlases, **need: Krolls map showing building outlines for 1920's or 30's)**

*The edge of civilization: life in rough and tumble White Center*

By the time the first streetcar arrived in White Center in 1912, the City of Seattle had already annexed its well-established streetcar suburbs **[cite this]**. In 1910, the City of Seattle rejected the possibility of extending the city limits beyond Roxbury to annex a portion of the future White Center area **[cite—from 1910 map? Check city records/history]**. At that time White Center had just one business, the Oak Park Grocery, located a 16<sup>th</sup> Ave SW and SW 107<sup>th</sup> (Young, 1976). Though the possibility of annexation would come up again in the late 1940's **[other times, too? check Seattle Times article on 10/1/48]**, to this day, SW Roxbury remains the southern boundary of Seattle.

In the years following 1912 White Center did not experience a sudden influx of new middle-class residents. Though the railroad allowed access to and from Seattle, population growth was slow and very low-density. Travel distance from the city and lack of roads and service infrastructure were factors in keeping the middle class away.

**TO ADD:**

1. White Center's reputation for being a rough place
  - Boxing arenas and street fights (Richard Hugo)
  - Comparison of White Center people to West Seattle (Hugo)
  - **Find another resource to back this up besides Hugo**
2. Infrastructure problems
  - Dirt roads, muddy roads
  - Lack of sewers compared to Seattle: **find service maps for Seattle Sewers**
  - Lack of water: describe the private water company started in Mt. View
3. Distance to Seattle
  - White Center commuters (Richard Hugo)
  - Discussion of White Center's location, esp. topography
  - Lead times between trolleys vs. automobile travel (look at old streetcar schedules)

*"In the early days, we all came out to White Center and 'shacked it'"*<sup>2</sup>

Most of White Center was beyond the Seattle City limits. Not only did this mean a lower level of services, as mentioned above, but it also means there was less oversight by building inspectors and police. According to the longtime principal of White Center's Mt. View Elementary School, "Mt. View district had the lowest property evaluation in the country. Initially, there was very little business and virtually no industry. A lot in

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<sup>2</sup> Peg and Mike Knapp Young, White Center Remembers (Seattle: The Print Shop, 1976).

some areas of White Center could be purchased very cheaply with no building restrictions” (Young **page?**). Those coming to White Center were in search of land they could afford, and were willing to built their own home on that land to assure they had shelter. Since this area still had abundant timber supplies, most homes were made from wood. Over the years, most of these homes have been demolished and replaced. As a result, there are few remaining examples of early White Center architecture.

Interestingly, the first major housing development in White Center by King County Housing Authority was also built cheaply, as it was intended only to serve as temporary housing. Though one portion of this housing, built **at Lakeview Park** was removed shortly after the war, the larger section at Park Lake Homes remained in use through the year 2005.

**TO ADD:**

1. Describe examples of early homes

- Typical home is X sf with X rooms, made from what materials?
- Show photos of old demolished homes or existing examples
- Resources: King Co. Archive photos, MOHAI, self-collected photos

2. Go into more detail on the construction of wartime housing

- How did this change the land use patters?
- Show photos of existing 1940s homes and KCHA homes
- Resources: historic maps, historic photos, KCHA info/archives

3. Identify other major housing developments, look for existing examples

- What about multi-family housing? When did this begin to arrive? Mixed-use?
- Triangle Building, Skate Rink, Disco building, others?

- Photos of exemplary multi-fam or large-scale subdivision homes
- Resources: KC Assessor property cards, early land use maps?

### *The War Years and the rise of Rat City*

The World Wars brought a demand for home construction to house workers at Boeing and other nearby industrial plants along the Duwamish. This not only had an impact on the built environment, but it also changed the population of White Center. Many young men and women who had come to the area for work decided to stay after the war. They settled in White Center and had families. Soon cultural institutions such as clubs, churches, and festivals began to blossom, along with recreational activities such as baseball teams and competitive roller-skating.

#### **TO ADD**

##### 1. RAT City

- What was the Army Recruitment and Training Center?
- Who did this bring to the community?
- Resources: ?? Army archives? *White Center Remembers*, “White Center Times”

##### 2. The arrival of cultural institutions

- Churches: St. James Lutheran, Holy Family Catholic Church, others?
- Community Clubs
- Resources: KC Assessor, Polk Guides?, “White Center Times” Archives

##### 3. Recreational Institutions and Family Friendly Activities

- White Center Field House 1934
- Parks and play fields

- Skating Rink
- Resources: *White Center Remembers*, MOHAI photos of festivals and events

*Conclusion*

**TO ADD**

1. Restate conclusions mentioned in introduction
2. Discuss these conclusions in light of Bender and Jackson
3. Other lessons learned from White Center Case?
4. Other areas for future study: development of community since 1950's

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**ADD GRAPHICS**

Context map of White Center and surrounding areas

Photos of homes, streets

Charts showing population or housing prices

**Also Consult these Resources:**

Boomtown literature

Seattle streetcar literature

Housing prices back then?

The construction of church buildings: St. James Lutheran:

Holy Family Catholic:

The Log House:

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