

Hurricane History

The new city was laid out in a north-south grid into approximately 28 blocks of five acres each. North-south streets were set at ** rods or *** feet while east-west streets were made one rod narrower. An irrigation ditch ran on the west side of each north-south street as well as on usually the south side of east-west streets. Larger arterial ditches fed these. Watering turns came once a week for town lots and every other week for fields. Irrigation went on twenty-four hours a day, so good night vision was a real asset. An early civic project was to plant poplar trees along the street ditch banks. The streets with the exception of three blocks of Main Street remained dirt or gravel until well after WW II. SR 9 was paved of course along about 1936. Each block was divided into four lots so that for years a maximum of four homes stood on a block. The acre plus lot provided ample room for a large hay barn, corrals, storage sheds and buildings, pig and chicken facilities, fruit trees and a garden that by necessity met much of the family's food needs. Iron-tired wagons hauled loads of hay in summer, stove wood from the nearby mesas in the fall and manure from the corrals back out to the fields in the winter.

The block on which the Heritage Park sits was designated for public use both religious and civic. The west part of it was called "the square" and had a smooth dirt surface that served as a school and a community playground. It was the scene of baseball games nearly every Saturday afternoon between teams of adult players from the area and hosted summer holiday activities. The business district extended along Main Street from 50 North to 150 South mostly on the east side of the street. In the mid 1930's it began a slow growth west on State Street.

Keep in mind that Hurricane was planned on the assumption that the town lot plus the twenty acres of irrigated farmland was sufficient for the needs of one family. It was a huge improvement over what anyone had known in the feeder villages and based on what we would know call a subsistence level economy it was reasonable. An agricultural revolution throughout the nation and much of the world was just building steam however, that would radically change what a farm family needed for comfortable living and that would dislocate millions of people who ironically were doomed to failure, foreclosure and migration to the city because of the overall success in keeping prices low by their chosen

profession. Livestock raising was from the beginning an important source of income for many families. Cattle had been on the outlying ranges for fifty years and for a period sheep growing was a better source of income. Also, dry-land wheat growing in what is now Apple Valley and on out to the south as well as Smith's Mesa began about the time Hurricane was settled that provided considerable income. Unfortunately, there was little or no government control over livestock numbers until the Taylor grazing Act of 1934 and overgrazing was the norm. Even worse for the land however, was the dry-land grain growing. It involved plowing. Plowing and harrowing broke up the desert sod into easily dissolvable particles. Summer thundershowers took a dreadful toll and the gullies began forming that one sees out there today.

The inevitable demise of the "twenty acres – one family" equation was probably forestalled until the 1940's in Hurricane. Families were used to being nearly self-sufficient and living in a near-cashless society. Fruit and vegetables were canned during the growing season as well as meat when cool fall weather made backyard butchering feasible. Most families ate heartily of poultry and dairy products and there was a ready market for surpluses. Many housewives, including Annie Hirschi the banker's wife, purchased butter wrappers with their names imprinted. One could take, say, a half-dozen eggs and a pound of butter to the store and receive credit in form of store scrip in return. The scrip might be used to buy sugar and spices. Creameries to the north would buy cream that was sent via mail truck in three or five-gallon cans. The total yearly take from these items would hardly make weekly pocket change for today's teenagers but it was a crucial item to families during the first thirty-five years or so of Hurricane's life. It might be almost the only cash a housewife ever saw.

Hurricane is just one hundred years old, the newest city in the area. It sits on by far the largest piece of rich arable soil in Dixie, a fact well known to the earliest settlers who looked longingly on its fertile expanse while their own villages were stifled by small acreage. The Virgin River is tantalizingly close but forty years passed before its waters were utilized. In the 1860's, Erastus Snow who bequeathed the name, Hurricane, and ten years later President Brigham Young both had feasibility studies made only to learn that the steep treacherous cliffs made hanging a canal along them as

unfeasible. The same conclusion was reached by the privately dug LaVerkin Canal's surveyor in the late 1880's.

Unwilling to concede defeat just because of professional opinion, James Jepson of Virgin and John Steele of Toquerville did their own study using a spirit level as a sextant. They concluded that a canal was economically feasible if men pooled their resources, worked cooperatively, contracted the digging themselves, and worked winters after crops were in. They persuaded around a hundred men who formed the Hurricane Canal Company and began digging January 1894. Every skeptic's doubts proved true and by 1898 slow progress made it clear that additional capital was needed. Although aiding other such projects in the past, The Latter Day Saints Church was unable to purchase stock at this time. A stalwart few kept digging but by January 1902 the ten or so still at it desperately petitioned the church again. News of the \$5,000.00 stock purchase brought home by a persuasive James Jepson gave new life, energy and resolve to the local population and water flowed onto the land August 6, 1904. Now gullies could be filled in, fences put up, crops planted and homes began.

The new village began with no culinary water, no electricity and almost no roads leading to the outside world. They didn't need a sewer system; everybody had outhouses. By 1910, the little bridge by the hot springs enabled wagons loaded with dried peaches and sometimes sorghum molasses to head north on dirt highways to sell or trade. A wooden pipe soon brought pure water from Toquerville springs and a new hydroelectric plant below LaVerkin provided electricity. A bank is essential for a city's economic health and this was another priority. Some schooling was available from the very beginning but teenagers had to go to Cedar or St. George to attend high school. By 1920 however, diplomas could be earned in Hurricane High School in a well-lit building that had piped-in water. The one highway into town was still crude but negotiable by early automobiles and the bank was in place to make loans. Finally after 1937, you could drive directly to St. George or to Cedar City on paved roads.

Self-sufficiency was a family necessity in early Hurricane and children's labor was essential to it. Household and barnyard chores called morning, noon and night. Cooking and washing were more than a full-time job. Summers, the family worked together drying or canning fruit and vegetables. It wasn't all work. Evenings the deserted streets became young people's playgrounds. Dances were held every weekend and on holidays.

Baseball games between town teams happened every summer Saturday afternoon. Plays, usually produced by church auxiliaries were frequent highlights. Self-sufficiency enabled families to survive the great depression during the 1930's but the depression crushed those who had borrowed money to invest in sheep or other livestock. World War II brought economic relief but at a terrible price. Fifteen young men gave their lives.

The pioneers who dug the canal received twenty acres of farmland plus a large lot in town, as twenty acres was assumed to be all that one family could handle or would need. By war's end however, it became apparent that the efficiencies and economics of agriculture demanded a far higher acreage for family survival and comfort. Hurricane farms now supported only a static population and then only because families typically relied on additional sources of income. Other postwar innovations on a national scale were to spell the end of the farm economy entirely and at the same time make profound changes in the city that we are currently experiencing. Retirement programs in government and industry created a large population of retirees with comfortable incomes who can live wherever they choose. The new freeway system ended our isolation. Now even businesses with worldwide markets could be established here. When home as well as automobile air conditioning became the norm, our summer heat no longer barred all those who admired our scenery and enjoyed mild winters from living here. The trickle of new residents to Dixie soon became a torrent that continues to engulf us. Homes and businesses are the new farm crop.