

[https://gazette.com/premium/mill-street-neighborhood-a-historic-character-southwest-of-downtown-cronin-and-loevy/article\\_9a1826d2-83db-11ee-8e50-ffaefe401f3f.html](https://gazette.com/premium/mill-street-neighborhood-a-historic-character-southwest-of-downtown-cronin-and-loevy/article_9a1826d2-83db-11ee-8e50-ffaefe401f3f.html)

## Mill Street neighborhood: A historic character southwest of downtown | Cronin and Loevy

Tom Cronin and Bob Loevy  
Nov 19, 2023

1 of 2



The Mill Street neighborhood is filled with one-story bungalows such as this one. Built mainly in the early 1900s, they contain many of the decorative features of larger Victorian homes being built at the same time.

courtesy of Walt Loevy

Colorado Springs benefits from neighborhoods like Mill Street. Located southwest of downtown, Mill Street is historic and well preserved. It also is predominantly single-family. It is 50% owner-occupied and 50% rental houses.

According to city planning surveys, people like living there.

The Mill Street neighborhood is bounded on the north by a stretch of West Rio Grande Street and then a section of West Moreno Avenue. The eastern boundary is North Nevada Avenue. The southern boundary is Fountain Creek and the Fountain Creek biker-hiker trail.

The western boundary is Conejos Street, which runs along the edge of the former, now rapidly being removed, Martin Drake Power Plant.

The Mill Street neighborhood is one of the oldest communities in the city. Gen. William Jackson Palmer, the founder of Colorado Springs, platted the neighborhood in 1870, a full year before Colorado Springs was established.

The neighborhood got its name from a gristmill built in 1877. The mill was regionally famous for producing “the best wheat and graham flour west of the Mississippi.”

The mill was in operation for 25 years, serving the local community. It burned to the ground in 1902. The fire was blamed on transients moving through the area.

Beginning about 1900, modest one- and two-story homes were built in Mill Street. The neighborhood was ethnically diverse. Because of their smaller size, the homes were, by the standards of the time, affordable. They remain, comparatively speaking, affordable today.

From the earliest days, the neighborhood has sported an eclectic mix of small houses, retail and industrial uses. It was legally annexed into Colorado Springs in 1907.

One of the most historic features in Mill Creek are the mainline railroad tracks, which enter the neighborhood in the northwest corner, round a big curve going from a southerly to an easterly direction, cross South Sierra Madre Street at a grade crossing, and then head east eventually to go to Pueblo.

The railroad has been there longer than anything else. Palmer, the city’s founder, built the Denver & Rio Grande railroad south from Denver via Colorado Springs to Pueblo. He hoped to eventually connect Denver and Colorado with the large and growing population in the Rio Grande River Valley in New Mexico and Texas.

An interesting historical wrinkle is that Palmer famously built his railroad to a narrow (3-foot) gauge rather than the standard gauge of 4 feet, 8½ inches. The narrow gauge was to make it easier to climb mountain grades and go around sharp mountain curves.

Narrow-gauge railroads were considered picturesque and an exciting era in railroad development in Colorado. In the late 1800s, Mill Street saw tiny-looking steam locomotives pulling small, colorful railway cars down the tracks.

The tracks were eventually converted to standard gauge.

Today, the railroad is still a big part of life in the neighborhood. In the past 50 years, up to 40 trains a day have run back and forth over that main line.

Coal-train traffic is dropping as electric power plants switch from coal to natural gas and renewables, but there is still plenty of freight moving through Mill Street between Texas and Washington and Oregon in the other.

The major problem with the railroad today is the train horns blowing for the grade crossing at Sierra Madre Street. By national law, the train horns are loud and must be sounded at any hour of the day.

Mill Street has never been well fixed with internal parks and playgrounds. Dorchester Park at South Nevada Avenue and Fountain Creek is located at the far southwest corner of the neighborhood, but is a long walk from the family homes concentrated around Mill Street and West Fountain Boulevard.

In 1998, America the Beautiful Park, at the confluence of Monument and Fountain creeks, was built west of Conejos Street and north of the power plant site. Families must walk through industrial property and cross the railroad tracks to get to it from the Mill Creek neighborhood.

The area has received much study and effort from the city. In 2003, the Mill Street Neighborhood Preservation Plan focused on the residential core of the neighborhood and sought to preserve the homes from industrial uses and commercial enterprises around and within it.

The plan emphasized preserving the historic character of the neighborhood, adding to its existing residential stock by building additional affordable housing units, promoting homeownership as well as rentals, and cementing “the identity of the area as a working-class neighborhood.”

An additional and updated plan for the neighborhood was adopted by the City Council in 2019.

Things could be changing in Mill Street. As the power plant is finally removed, there are lively discussions about how this newly vacant ground should be redeveloped. The new uses ought to be compatible with the residential character of the Mill Street neighborhood.


Today’s residents of Mill Street worry that the character of their neighborhood is being “chipped away” by nearby new businesses and industries.

In recent years, the neighborhood has discussed the idea of a community benefit agreement (CBA). Under such an agreement, new businesses or industries would provide amenities for the neighborhood in return for residents supporting the new development plans.

This is a venerable neighborhood with an important history and charming small-house architecture. It merits preservation.

Tom Cronin and Bob Loevy are news columnists who write about Colorado and national politics.

You Might Also Like

Recommended by  Outbrain

×