The value of businesses in stimulating residential sales prompted some developers of remote tracts to erect commercial buildings, just as the Central Pacific Improvement Corporation did on its more costly, close-in location. Frederick W. Braun undertook such a project, which included a theater and service garage as well as a range of stores, next to his forty-acre subdivision at Vermont and Slauson avenues. However, such coordinated development strategies were rare.[12] The norm was for the tract owner to promote the sale of lots to those wishing to build commercial facilities no less than to those wishing to build houses (figure 40).

DEVELOPMENT

Just as boulevard frontage was treated as neutral space, available for a potentially wide range of commercial functions, so most store buildings were designed as shells that could be easily adapted to suit the needs of individual tenants. Called taxpayer blocks in many parts of the country, these unassuming and, by the 1910s, ubiquitous components of outlying urban areas might contain only two or three units; many had around six; few had more than ten. Often there was a second level for offices or apartments, but one-story buildings became even more common after World War I when mounting automobile traffic made arterial routes less agreeable places to live and apartment dwellers increasingly expected some off-street space for their cars. The great majority of taxpayers were built as speculative enterprises by property owners wishing the most profitable use for their land. On average, the per-square-foot cost of a one-story taxpayer did not differ significantly from that of a two-story apartment building, but income could be substantially greater. Base construction cost was quite low; $10,000 for a block with four or five units was typical in the late 1920s. If many owners believed their land would soon rise in value to the point that they might sell it at a handsome profit, many others prob-

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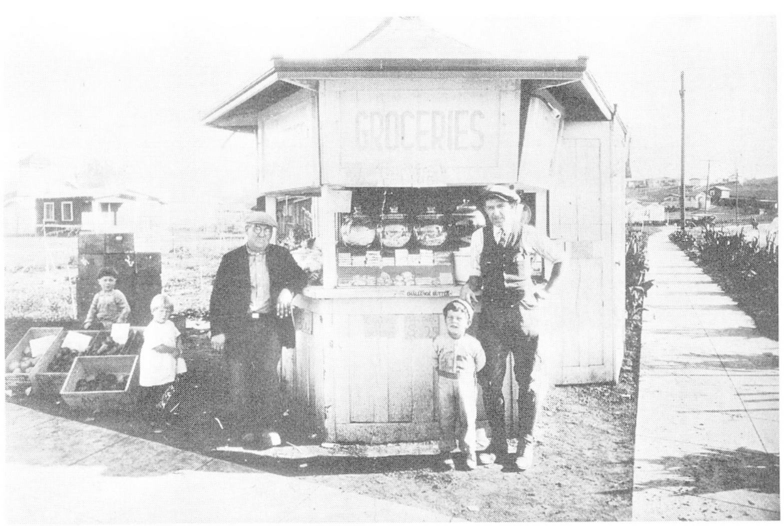
Washington Boulevard, looking east at Main Street intersection; apartment hotel for Washington Sullivan (1912, Neher & Skilling, architects) at left, apartment house for Central Pacific Improvement Corporation (1912–1913, E. H. Dorr, architect) at right, showing modification to buildings as part of street widening project. Photo 1930. (California Historical Society Collection, Department of Special Collections, University of Southern California.)



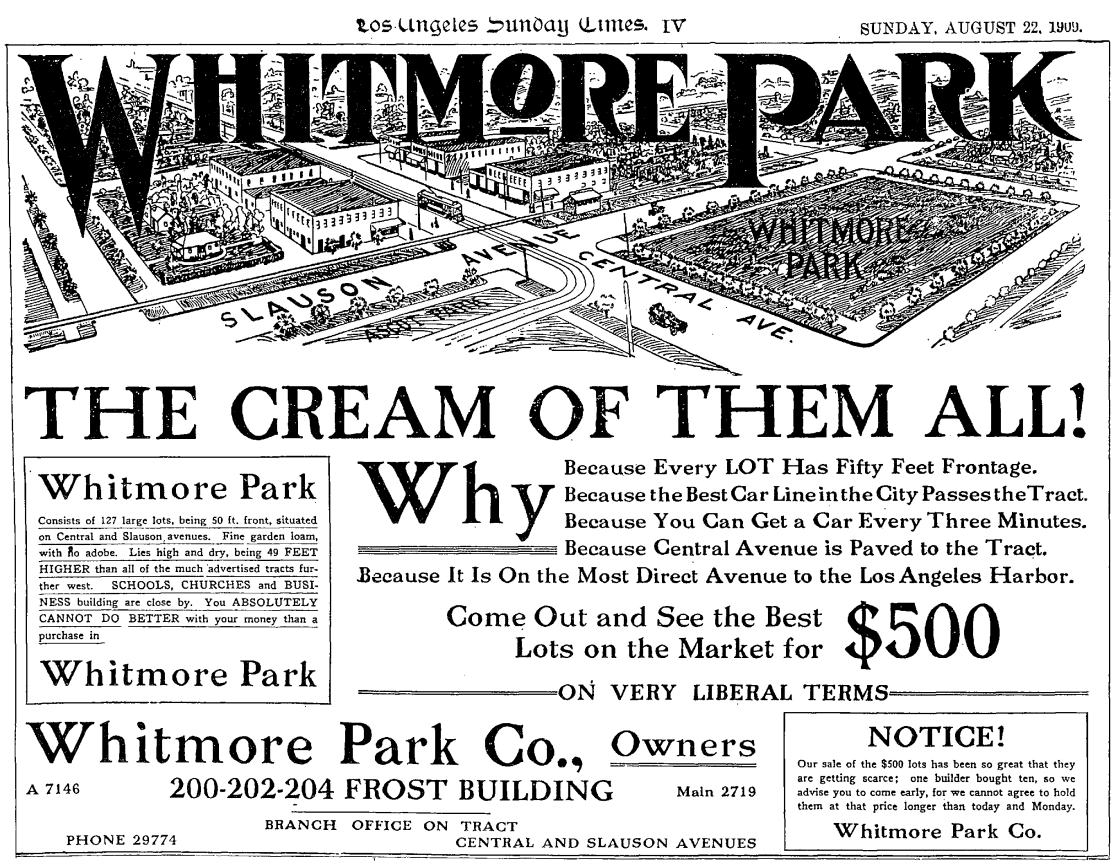
38

Grocery stand, probably in El Sereno district, Alhambra or Los Angeles. Photo ca. 1920s. (Alhambra Public Library.)

ably realized that change might not be so rapid and were content with the income from their investment. A taxpayer filled with successful stores generated more revenue than the carrying costs of the property; it could be a lucrative enterprise in itself, earning a 15–20 percent return, and for that reason the supply of such buildings more than kept up with the demand.[13]

Flexible space was important to the taxpayer's plan because the nature of the tenants was generally unknown at the design stage, and, once the building was erected, tenancy could change, perhaps at frequent intervals. A real estate broker worked to secure tenants on the owner's behalf. If circumstances were favorable, the units could be fully leased before construction, but often leasing progressed at a slower rate, and many taxpayers remained partially vacant well after completion. The broker's aim was to get tenants as quickly and on as good terms as possible. Securing a drug or grocery store might be the first priority because these businesses were likely to attract numerous customers on a frequent basis and thus provide an added incentive to other merchants to locate close by. Beyond such measures, little thought appears to have been given to the types of establishments in a taxpayer. These projects were almost never conceived as integrated business developments where tenants were selected as complementary parts, each reinforcing the presence of the others.

Taxpayers were not intended as long-term investments. One account of the type in New York put the maximum profitable life expec-



tancy at ten years.[14] Both the design and the construction of the buildings therefore tended to be of an elementary kind. Yet some embellishment often was considered helpful in attracting tenants and customers alike (figure 41). A somewhat comparable balance characterized construction. By the early 1920s, wood frame commercial buildings—which in southern California were then almost always sheathed in stucco and referred to by that material—were seen as distinctly inferior to those of masonry. Brick or hollow-tile terra cotta exterior walls became the norm after World War I, if not earlier, due to public preference as well as, perhaps, lower insurance premiums. The typical Los Angeles taxpayer block of the 1920s represented standards that were conspicuously higher than the norm twenty years previous or than what was still the standard in many small towns outside the metropolitan area (figure 42). These new buildings represented more than basic shelter. They were a benchmark of neighborhood progress. However, after being welcomed as an addition to the precinct, they were subsequently taken for granted. Architectural features, no matter how ornate, almost at once began to be overshadowed by a panoply of signs. Conceived as neither permanent nor transitory, taxpayers had a useful purpose but almost never contributed to a sense of singular identity for the places they served (figure 43).

Even when many parties were involved in the development of an outlying center, some order could be brought to the process by one or a small group of property owners who solicited the involvement of others

39

Whitmore Park advertisement, 1909. (*Los Angeles Times*, 22 August 1909, V-12.)

40

Commercial building, 2521–2535 S. Hill Street, Los Angeles, ca. late 1920s. Photo "Dick" Whittington, 1929. (Whittington Collection, Department of Special Collections, University of Southern California.)

and who sought to guide the general course of work. Such orchestration appears to have become especially pronounced after World War I, when the patterns of outlying center development established over the previous decade intensified throughout the metropolitan area. The underlying aim of this involvement was to increase the value of one's own holdings. Arterial frontage in outlying areas cost a small fraction of prime frontage downtown, but could yield substantially greater profits. Between 1917 and 1927, business property values rose as much as 850 percent in the Southwest district, 833 percent, on South Broadway in the South Central, 586 percent along the Pico and Washington Boulevard corridors. These figures were modest compared to those for property at key intersections. During almost the same time period, land at Western Avenue and Fifty-fourth Street rose over 2,100 percent at Western and Slauson over 3,600 percent. By contrast, increases at Seventh Street and Broadway were 171 percent, at Ninth and Broadway 18 percent. The rise in dollar value remained much higher downtown, but investment required huge sums of capital and opportunities were limited in comparison to the miles of potentially lucrative business property in outlying areas. The ideal situation was to select a site prior to substantial growth in the area when the purchase price was low. The assessed value of the land at the northeast corner of San Fernando Road and Los Feliz Boulevard, just beyond the Los Angeles city limits in Glendale, was only $680 in 1919, for example. A decade later the value had risen to $12,000.[15]

But choosing sites that would increase exponentially in value was a risky proposition. Miles of undeveloped boulevard frontage existed, the vast majority of it deemed suitable only for commercial use well before such thinking was codified by the city's 1921 zoning ordinance (figure 44).[16] One of the most dependable indicators of good business location in outlying areas of older cities such as Chicago was a transfer point between streetcar lines.[17] However, few such places existed in Los Angeles. Beyond the periphery of downtown, the municipal railway network had few intersecting paths in 1910, and almost none that did exist became host to a business center of consequence.[18] Crossings were more numerous a decade later and in some cases afforded stimulus to commercial growth, yet the automobile was now eclipsing public transportation as a barometer of human movement. By the mid-1920s, counting the number of cars that crossed an intersection daily seems to have become a conventional means of gauging the strength of adjacent property for business purposes.[19]

The mobility afforded by cars fueled the competition between established and nascent outlying business centers alike, for if one close at hand did not fully suit a customer's wishes, it was easy to drive somewhere else. Sustaining a critical mass of businesses that provided the products desired by a local market was thus crucial to a center's success. Property owners could not afford to remain passive under the circumstances; without an ongoing effort to secure good merchants, the outlying center could fall far short of realizing its potential. There was no better example of the dynamics of this process in Los Angeles during the early 1920s than along Western Avenue between Wilshire and Hollywood boulevards.

So named because it once formed a western boundary for the city, Western Avenue experienced little real estate activity of any sort before World War I. Residential development in the area was just beginning in 1913. But less than a decade later Western was heralded as the "Wonder Street"—a magnet for commerce that would become an unbroken

41

Commercial buildings, 742–772 S. Vermont Avenue, Los Angeles, ca. late 1920s; 742–758 altered, 760–772 no longer standing. Photo "Dick" Whittington, 1931. (Whittington Collection, Department of Special Collections, University of Southern California.)

42

Commercial buildings, 1501–1525 W. Seventh Street, Los Angeles, ca. 1920s; altered. Photo "Dick" Whittington, 1929. (Whittington Collection, Department of Special Collections, University of Southern California.)

shopping corridor second only to downtown.[20] The transformation began abruptly. Between 1918 and 1921 at least seven business centers emerged along the two-and-a-half-mile path. The size to which several of these nodes grew in a short period provided ample ammunition to boosters' claims that Western was destined to become another Broadway. One business center, located just north of Wilshire Boulevard around the Sixth Street intersection, boasted some eighty stores by the early months of 1922.[21] The blocks between First and Third streets were even more intensely developed, with close to one hundred businesses (figure 45).

The scope of enterprises found in such a node by the mid-1920s increased from that of the decade previous, in part because many small-scale, independent business owners were moving from downtown due to rising rents. Operational costs outside the city center, even in a prime location such as Western Avenue, were significantly lower. Furthermore, these sites lay closer to the prosperous clientele many merchants hoped to attract, a factor that rapidly became predominant. The same reasons induced

43

Angeles Mesa Land Company advertisement for commercial property fronting Slauson Avenue. (*Los Angeles Times,* 22 January 1922, V-10.)

44

Undeveloped boulevard frontage, La Brea and Willoughby avenues, Los Angeles. Photo "Dick" Whittington, 1931. (Whittington Collection, Department of Special Collections, University of Southern California.)

45

Western Avenue, looking north at W. Second Street intersection, Los Angeles. Photo C. C. Pierce, ca. 1924. (California Historical Society Collection Department of Special Collections, University of Southern California.)

many entrepreneurs to start businesses in outlying areas. At the decade's end, a veteran Los Angeles real estate broker summarized the mood: "Nearby customers are the best customers. The neighborhood store draws from about a mile. The store in a sub-center [such as Sixth and Western] of 50,000 people draws from about two to three miles, and the nearer its customers live the oftener they come and the more they buy."[22]

A principal force behind Sixth and Western's prosperity was the Lilly-Fletcher Company, a construction firm that started purchasing land along the thoroughfare in 1919. Within a year, Lilly moved its offices to Western and concentrated on developing the area. The firm expanded its scope to include departments in real estate brokerage, rental, insurance, and architecture so that it could design, construct, finance, and secure tenants for both apartment and business buildings. Many projects were done for others, but about a third were undertaken on land Lilly owned or controlled. The firm also helped launch the Western Avenue Improvement Association, comprised of merchants and property owners, which lobbied for public improvements. Lilly's professed aim was to have the area "constitute a complete community."[23]

Much the same objective was pursued through somewhat different means at Western and Santa Monica under the auspices of A. Z. Taft. While still in his early thirties, Taft rose to regional prominence as a real estate developer. He was first vice-president of two family enterprises—Taft Realty and Taft Land and Development companies—and involved in two others—Taft Building and Taft Mining and Exploration companies.

Much of his energy was directed toward Hollywood, where all these concerns were based. During the 1920s he became a central figure in the development of Hollywood Boulevard, but he also had an interest in smaller commercial centers as well.[24]

Taft's work at Western and Santa Monica began modestly enough in 1917, with the construction of a block containing five store units and offices above—the first commercial building in the vicinity and one of the first along Western. When the property was sold in 1925, it was part of a booming center that contained over 200 businesses (figure 46). Land Taft had purchased for $50 per front foot now fetched $2,240, an increase of nearly 4,500 percent.[25] The success of this venture stemmed not from large-scale holdings by Taft himself, but rather from a six-year campaign to make the area attractive for development. Taft first improved access by securing an extension of the municipal railway line in 1920—one of the few occasions when the creation of a transfer point proved successful in stimulating retail growth. The underlying aim was to attract other investors, whose projects the Taft Realty Company could finance and build. Many additional parties undertook projects on their own, convinced that the location was opportune. Some participants were in the real estate field as brokers or as developers, including Martin Kane, an associate of Taft's who built the Palomar Hotel in the precinct. Others were merchants, including P. A. BeHannessey, a supplier of movie props who expanded his business into the retail furniture trade; L. Felix, a Pasadena furrier who opened a branch store; or the Ries brothers, who left a motion picture studio to establish a photography business. Yet others were investors who employed third parties to realize the project.[26]

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Santa Monica Boulevard, looking east toward Western Avenue intersection, Los Angeles. Photo "Dick" Whittington, 1930. (Whittington Collection, Department of Special Collections, University of Southern California.)

Taft also seems to have sensed the advantages afforded by two new phenomena: the chain store and the branch bank. A lease for one of the first units of the Owl Drug Company to be situated away from the city center was secured for Taft's building in 1922. About three years earlier a store operated by Sam Seelig, then the largest chain grocer in the metropolitan area, opened across the street. Branches of the Los Angeles Trust & Savings Banks and the Security Trust & Savings Bank were completed in 1922 and 1923, respectively.[27] Together, these businesses were as important as any other factor in stimulating growth.

CHAIN STORES

The proliferation of chain stores during the early twentieth century was among the most significant developments in national retailing practices and one that ultimately had a profound effect on the nature of outlying business centers. Although the first chain store system in the United States—the Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company—originated during the Civil War era, the phenomenon as a whole remained in a nascent stage at the century's end. By 1929, however, chains accounted for 22 percent of gross sales in the retail trade, including about 40 percent of the