Where’s Elwood?

Elwood Wiles built miles of sidewalks in our neighborhoods. Have you seen the evidence? Who was that guy? Who else was busy building our sidewalks? How might you figure out who and when they did their work? Clues are right under our noses (and our feet).

**Background**

When our neighborhoods were built back in the years between 1910-1925, the first thing that went in were the streets, curbs and sidewalks. Men and horses with plows scraped away the brush and built the sidewalks. There were no bulldozers back then, everything was done by hand and by horse (can you imagine horses on our streets today?).

Sidewalks were a sign of progress, possibility and order as the grid of streets spread out across the fields and hills that used to be here. Elwood Wiles owned a company that built most of them. Property owners and the City of Portland hired him to do the work, and his crews were busy all across Portland’s eastside.

Other companies were busy too. They left their names stamped on our sidewalks—like artists signing their work—as well as the year of construction. Those names and dates are still visible today on just about every corner. They are clues from the past.

Once the streets, sidewalks and curbs were done, houses were built, families moved in and life in the neighborhood began. For the first few years, our streets were dirt or gravel, but those sidewalks were something to be proud of. They gave us places to play, to ride bikes or play hopscotch, and they connected our houses to each other.

**Activity Suggestions & Curiosities**

1. Find a name stamped into the sidewalk on your block and the date it was built. Walk all the way around your block and see if the same builder built the others at the same time.

2. Make an etching of the name and date (place a sheet of paper over the stamp and gently rub a pencil back and forth to create a “copy” of the stamp). Add some color.

3. Check out other blocks and see how many other builders’ names you can collect.

4. Make a map or a list of which blocks were built by which company, and which years.

5. Learn about Elwood Wiles and see his picture. What would you like to ask him?

6. Read about what else was going on in Portland the year your sidewalk was built.
7. Make a list of spelling errors you can find of street names stamped into curbs (there are lots).

8. Look for clues about why old sidewalks might be cracked (hint: be sure to look up).

9. Find a new sidewalk that was built differently than the old ones. Why do you think the new one is different?

10. Some sidewalks have paint with words, arrows and lines on them. What might be happening there?

11. Look for places where workers have cut through curbs and built new sidewalks that are flat and even where they meet the street. How come?

12. Make up a story your sidewalk could tell about your neighborhood.

**On-Line Resources**
Information about Elwood Wiles (with photo)
https://alamedahistory.org/the-builders/elwood-wiles-1874-1956/

Background on street and curb construction (with pictures):
https://alamedahistory.org/2009/04/03/a-legacy-written-in-stone-ok-concrete/

Fascinating blog and maps about Portland's sidewalk signatures:
https://sidewalkingpdx.blogspot.com/

Cool Instagram feed about misspellings on sidewalks:
@sidewalkingpdx

An article about the horse tethering rings built into curbs:
https://alamedahistory.org/2018/06/12/portlands-horse-tethering-rings/

City of Portland Historical Timeline (in three installments)
https://www.portlandoregon.gov/archives/article/284506

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*Home History School is a collection of activities for kids of all ages to experience and connect with neighborhood history in Northeast Portland, Oregon. This is one of a dozen “lesson plans” on a variety of local topics. The collection—which we’re adding to each Monday this spring—can be found at [www.alamedahistory.org](http://www.alamedahistory.org). For more information or other ideas, contact Doug Decker, doug@alamedahistory.org / 503-901-5510.*