Ten minutes from Vancouver, WA the small town of Camas sits at the juncture of the Columbia and Washougal rivers. Founded and developed as a mill town, today Camas is building on its small-town charm, historic downtown and proximity to both Portland and Vancouver to redefine its role in the metroscape.

Camas was incorporated in 1906 but its history as a paper town dates back to the late 1800s when prominent Portland resident and publisher of the Oregonian, Henry Pittock, recognized the site’s potential. In 1883, Pittock purchased 2,600 acres of land at the juncture of the rivers where he opened a paper mill. Although the mill’s ownership changed a number of times over the years, its importance as both an employer and a center of community life had played a seminal role in shaping the history of Camas.

By 1911, the mill, which has seen a number of owners over the years, had grown to include seven machines and 450 employees who earned a combined $25,000 in wages each month. A year later, electric power replaced steam power at the mill when NE Electric built a substation in Camas. In 1914, the second largest paper manufacturer in the country was formed when Crown Columbia and Willamette Paper merged, forming Crown Willamette. The next 20 years were a busy time for Camas. In 1914, the town’s first high school was built and a stage line connected the town to Vancouver. Six years later, Camas had grown to nearly 2,000 residents. By 1940, the number had more than doubled to 4,433. To accommodate the growth suburban style, settlements grew up on either side of the town center. The paper mill continued to act as the town’s main employment center. In 1941, the mill employed 2,300 and had an annual payroll of more than $4,000,000. That year a brochure published by the Camas Chamber of Commerce reported that 70% of city taxes were paid by employees of the mill and “seven of every ten married male employees who walk from the mill gates at the end of their shifts go to the security of homes they own or are buying” (A Brief History of Camas, Washington: Where Pioneers Hewed a Town from the Forest and Lived to See it Grow Up Around a Paper Mill by William D. Welsh, 1941). During WW II, the paper mill joined the war effort. Ship rudders were manufactured in the machine shop and used on ships built in Portland and Vancouver.

In recent years, the role of Camas in the metroscape has changed in response to the mill’s decreasing importance as an employment center. Camas is growing both demographically and geographically. Since 1900, the town’s population increased from 6,442 to 15,360 while two land annexations, including the addition of North Dwyer Creek in 2000, increased the town’s physical size. Many of the newcomers are finding homes in the new developments that cover the eastern hills overlooking the town. With views of Mt. Hood and easy access to both Vancouver and Portland, these neighborhoods are highly desirable.

One valuable asset Camas has embraced is its historic downtown. Extending several blocks from the Mill doors, Camas’s Main Street is lined with boutiques, antique shops, day spas, restaurants, and a historic movie theater housed in pristine storefronts. Mature trees tower over the benches; public art pieces and memorials line the wide and well manicured sidewalks. On the first Friday of each month visitors can join Camas residents as businesses along Main Street open their doors for an art walk. The challenge for Camas now is to maintain its small town charm while embracing growth.
The Twilight Pizza restaurant, downtown Camas urban renewal district, and Camas City staff offering hay rides to community members. Photographs courtesy of the City of Camas.