

IN California it's the strip, in Portland it's Broadway. But here in Eugene . . .

## It's called cruisin' the gut

By STEVE DODGE  
Of the Emerald

In California it's "cruisin' the strip," in Portland "dragging Broadway" and in several towns including Salem and Eugene, Oregon's version of "American Graffiti" is known as "The Gut."

A microcosm of the national phenomenon best known as "cruisin'," Eugene's Willamette Street between 24th and 29th Streets sports what is probably Lane County's highest concentration of chrome wheels, exhaust fumes and police cars.

Centered around Bob's Hamburgers and a couple other fast food chains, "The Gut" is the traditional meeting place of young people from all over the area — a place where people come to join in a uniquely American mobile courtship — or just plain hang out.

"The Gut's the only place in town where something's happening for somebody my age," says Randy Nelson, an 18-year-old graduate of Thurston High in Springfield.

"If I was 21 I'd probably go bar hoppin', but I can't get in. I'm out of high school; I'm caught right in the middle."

Besides movies and parties he says, there's no other place to go, "so we cruise the gut."

Willamette Street historians recall nostalgically that the Gut ran all the way to Skinner's Butte before construction of the downtown mall cut it in half. Most anyone that cruises today can remember a parent, brother or sister who wheeled their Detroit gas guzzler in earlier times down Willamette in

search of something to do.

Pretty much a fair weather phenomenon, the Gut revives from winter rain in the spring and reaches its height in the summer. Not even the gas shortage has slackened the cruisers, but one thing has — police.

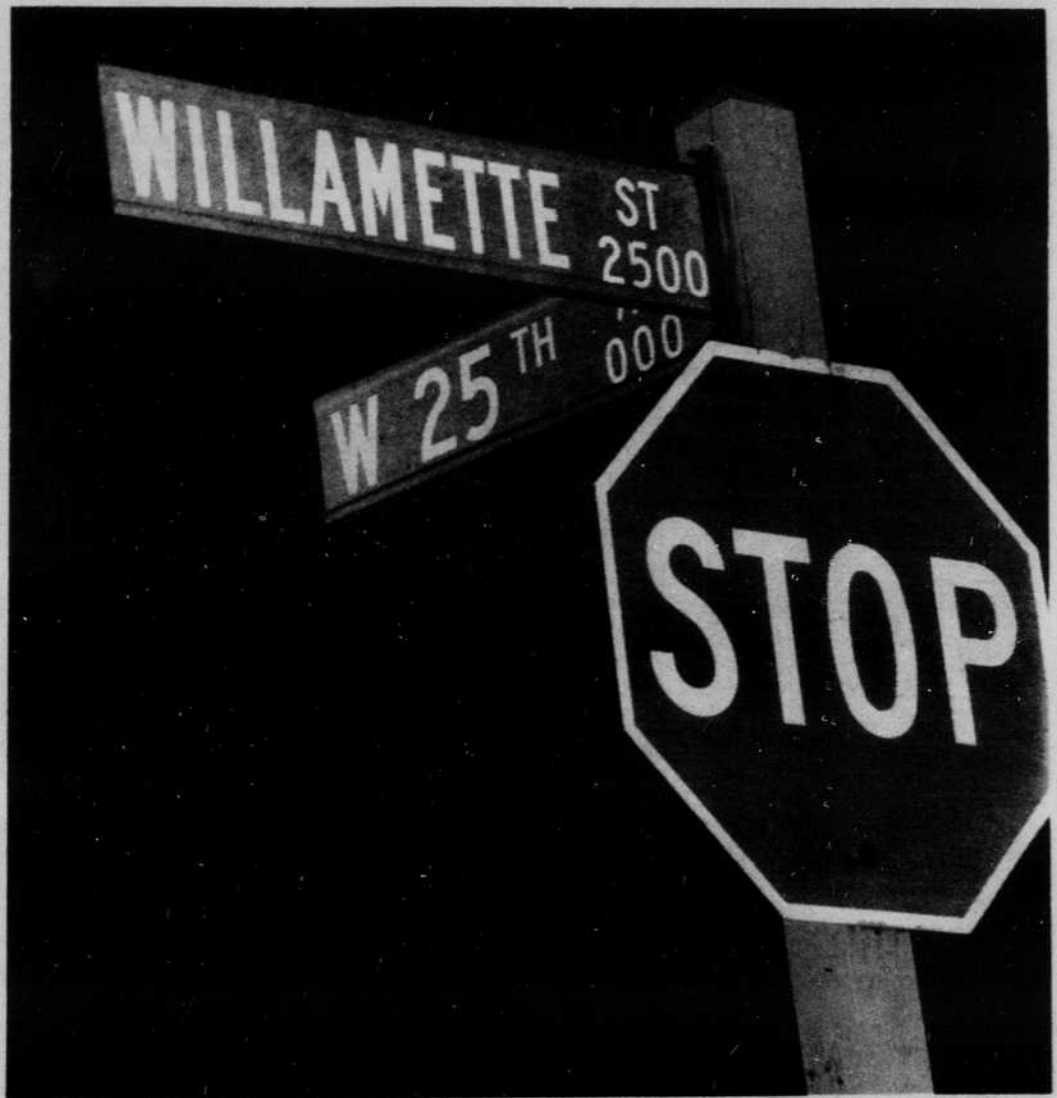
"Police work is just like fishin'," said Eugene Police Corporal Bill Childers, head of the four-man four-car Traffic Noise Team assigned Fridays and Saturdays on South Willamette. "Sometimes you can be quite busy and sometimes you're not busy at all," he noted as he directed his unmarked blue Plymouth up Willamette.

The fish weren't biting much the Friday just before the Memorial Day weekend, but flashing blue lights from the other two cars (one man was off duty) indicated they wouldn't be collecting rust from disuse even on this slow night.

Childers recalls a summer crackdown which at least doubled the South Willamette police coverage. Businesses complained of vandalism including large amounts of broken glass in their lots on Monday morning.

"Back in August of '74 you can pretty well say that the people who frequented this place had it to themselves. They ran it. The streets belonged to them," he says.

The two patrolmen assigned to the area began to get hurt in arrest situations, he says, so from five to seven cars worked South Willamette for the rest of that summer in an effort to "take it (the area) back and regain the smooth movement and safety for the peo-



Photos by Kerrie Steinhauer

ple that were walking and driving the area."

Nelson remembers that the police set up roadblocks and searched cars for alcohol and other drugs. He believes the crackdown has discouraged some from cruising, but agrees that "people down there pushed it too far."

Police regained control, and two additional patrol cars were added permanently for Friday and Saturday night coverage contributing to a slight thinning of the traffic, though on some nights it would be hard to notice. Says Childers: "We wanted them to know we were there."

The Traffic Noise Team, which began as a federal grant, works

the whole city during the week when Gut traffic slackens, according to Childers. Future funding may increase the force by three cars.

How do Gut residents view the whole thing?

"I leave," says Marty Froescher, a University student from West Linn whose apartment overlooks Willamette.

He says he tries to stay away completely on weekends, but usually has to drive home "through the smell of burnt tacos and the omnipresent broken glass with my paper thin tires." And slightly smiling he adds that he "loves the smell of burnt rubber, fried brake shoes and the heady intoxication of exhaust fumes."