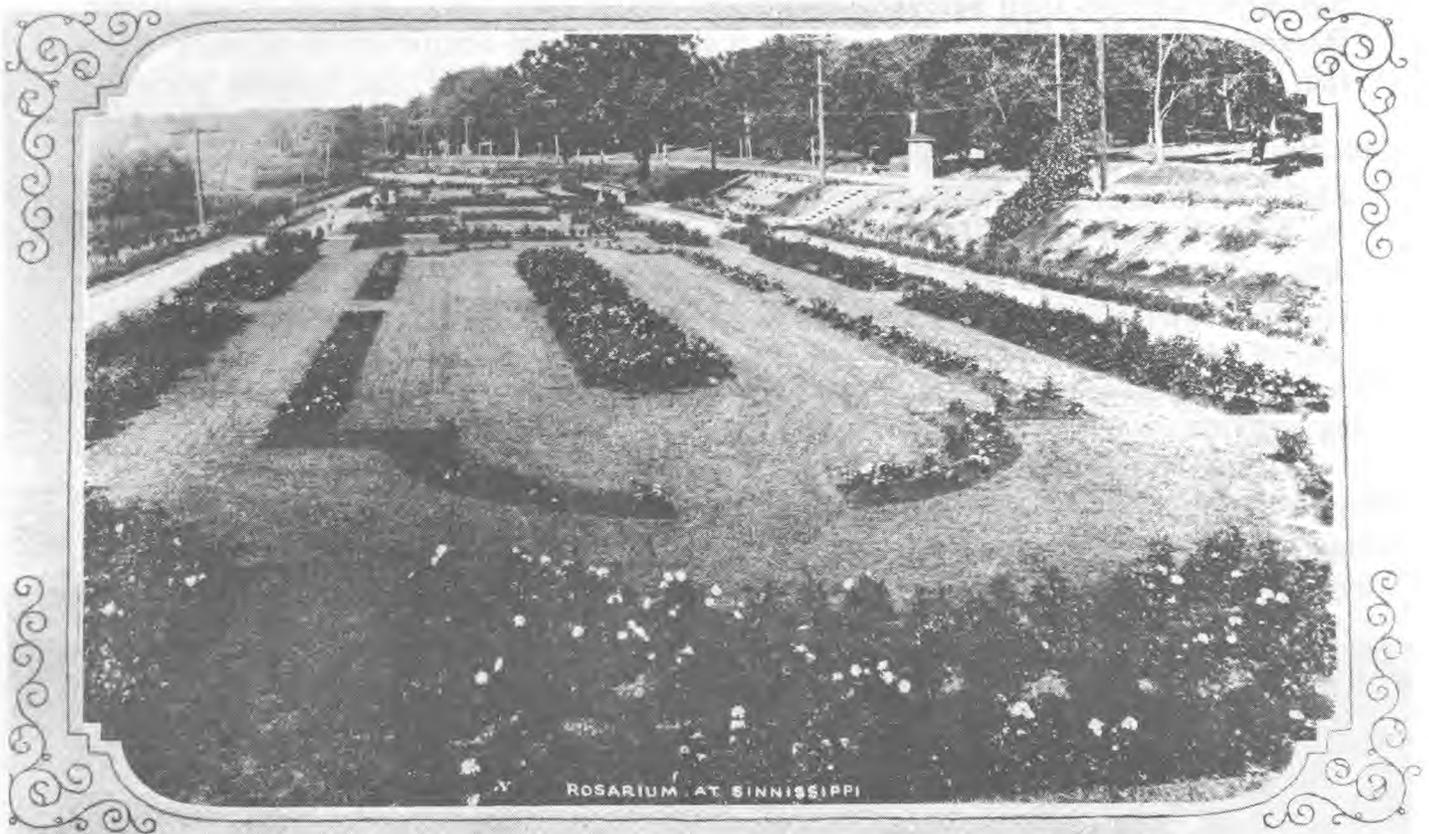

NUGGETS OF HISTORY

VOLUME 35 MARCH 1997 NUMBER 1

Rockford Park District, 1909-1997



Sinnissippi Park Rosarium, 1923

Courtesy Rockford Park District

FROM AN EDITOR'S DESK

This issue features the early history of the Rockford Park District as well as visions for the future. The years in between are filled with acquisitions, programs, partnerships with about 350 community entities, and the desire to provide recreational facilities and programs for persons of all ages. To relate a comprehensive history covering 88 years would fill a book. We're grateful to Vance Barrie, the district's Coordinator of Marketing, who provided facts and photos. Park photos in this issue are courtesy of the Rockford Park District.

Our request for information about singing groups not mentioned in our December 1996 issue, brought a response from retired Chief of Police Delbert Peterson. He supplied us with recollections of the Rockford Policemen's Chorus by Sgt. Eric Ekebom, then Secretary of Police. About 1938 then Chief of Police Augie Bargren had asked Ekebom to organize a singing group composed of officers. At that time, Bargren sang with Sveas Soner; Ekebom with the Lyran Singing Society.

Officers who responded to Ekebom's invitation to sing in a chorus included Lloyd Anderson, John McFadden, Robert Holmer, William Laird, Russell Forson, Ed Ring, Wilbur Balmer, H. C. Reinert, Stuart Mulford, Hal Campbell, and George Albee. Allen Elmquist and Linden Lundstrom served as directors during the chorus's brief history. The men sang at nursing homes, birthday parties, churches and at the Coronado Theater in connection with the Rockford Policemen's Relief Association show. They also paid a final tribute to Bargren by singing at his funeral in 1942.

Reportedly, the chorus disbanded soon thereafter due to a captain's complaints that too many members were on the same shift. Responding to that situation, Chief Charles Manson, who had succeeded Bargren in 1940, ended chorus activities.



Peggy Jensen
Peggy Jensen

VISIONARY CITIZENS CREATED, AND NOW SUSTAIN, THE ROCKFORD PARK DISTRICT

TWO PARKS AND THE FAIR GROUNDS

At the turn-of-the-century the city had only two parks--look-alikes Haskell on the west side and Haight on the east side--plus the spacious Fair Grounds. Current sites number 176 from mini-parks to golf courses, from Magic Waters to the Sportscore, and from recreational pathways to museums. Men and women with vision have created one of the nation's most esteemed park systems.

Rockford residents today owe a debt of gratitude to community leaders beginning with industrialist Levin Faust. In 1909, he envisioned open green spaces developed as parks for the young people of this community. Early in this century, families who lived in tenement or apartment housing lacked large yards in which to play. To avoid playing in streets, Faust realized, children needed neighborhood parks.

He enlisted the help of the Rockford Civic Club to pass a referendum. Successful, it established the Rockford Park District. Industrialist George D. Roper (of Roper Stove fame), Henry Williams, Fred Carpenter and Robert

Tinker (one-term mayor, influential citizen and builder of the Swiss-style chalet that bears his name) joined Faust as the first commissioners.

DILEMMA

Soon they faced a dilemma. An opportunity had arisen to acquire 80 acres known as Rood Woods at the northern boundary of the city along Rock River. Not having had time to levy a tax, the commissioners personally approached three local banks in order to secure a loan. That \$47,500 purchased not only the 80-acre tract, but also an adjacent 40 acres for development as Sinnissippi Park. The name came from a Native American word translated as "clear flowing river." Vision helped to establish the district's first park in spite of media concern that the location was "too far out in the country to ever be used."

ROPER BOULEVARD?

Early on, Commissioner Roper envisioned a riverfront boulevard along a mile-long stretch east of the Rock River. Not until 1976 did this materialize. A recreation path now extends north from Davis Park downtown to Machesney Park Mall, a distance of 10.25 miles. Further extension is planned.

FAIR GROUNDS

Fair Grounds Park had had a long history before coming under Park District control. Used as the county agricultural fair grounds, it also boasted an outstanding baseball diamond. Here in 1871 the professional league Forest City Nine played home games against teams such as the Cincinnati Reds, the country's first pro baseball team. Future Hall of Famer Al Spalding pitched for the Forest City Nine. Under the district, Fair Grounds park hosted festivals and May Day activities. They erected a commemorative plaque acknowledging an 1880s visit by Ulysses S. Grant. The 1920s saw the opening of a swimming pool.

BLACKHAWK PARK

In 1911 the district added Blackhawk Park. Formerly farm land owned by William Lathrop, the area was developed into a beautiful riverside park. Next the Rockford Zoological Society introduced a zoo in 1919. That August the Ringling Circus donated "Big Babe," an elephant. A year later the society sought financial help from the park district. "Big Babe's" (*photo below*) consumption of \$3000 worth of food annually proved too expensive. The district didn't have that kind of money either. The zoo closed.



LAND DONATIONS

By 1928, the park district owned 720 acres. The Ingersoll Golf Course had opened in 1922 followed by the 122-acre Levings Park and development of Sandy Hollow Golf Course. The latter would open in 1930. In addition to early donations of land for Ingersoll and Levings Park, other gifts have continued throughout the ensuing years. About 40 percent of current land holdings--4385 acres--have been donated to the District during its 88-year history. Many bear names of donors.

"Unpaid commissioners, with unprecedented vision for the future," says Vance Barrie, "have built today's district into a financially sound venue offering programs and facilities for all ages and for a multitude of activities."

CURRENT VISIONS

The vision dominates the late 1990s with development of a strategic plan. 1996 additions included the first three miles of the Perryville Path, playground renovations at seven sites, and an indoor facility--restrooms, food service and a conference room--at the Sportscore Soccer Center.

In 1997, look for the opening of Ice House II on Perryville Road in Loves Park. A multi-use complex, it will accommodate ice sports with seating for 600 spectators, plus an indoor mega-playground, meeting rooms, restaurant, game arcade and retail shops. "Magic Island"-- a five-story inter-active water

play structure--added to Magic Waters promises thrills and excitement.

FUTURE DREAMS

Recent acquisition of land in the city's eastern corridor will eventually lead to development of three regional parks in complexes tied to existing entities. Included will be soccer and ball fields, tennis and basketball courts, playgrounds, recreation paths and other amenities. User revenues will generate self-sufficiency.

The Rockford Park District Foundation continues to seek donations of land and money to develop new projects.

The future may hold a Family Fun center featuring an amusement-type park filled with rides at ten cents, or a Rec Path South from Blackhawk park to the Airport. Other proposals recommend a Family Aquatic Center at Alpine Pool, a second Atwood Lodge to replace one that burned in 1978 and the rebuilding of the 1922 Fair Grounds pool.

Some dreams, such as a second Sportscore and a Teen Center, may be on hold. A nearly 30 per cent cut in capital spending is anticipated due to reduced revenue attributed to last November's voter enactment of state tax caps.

Nevertheless, the vision continues.

Sources: Vance Barrie, the Rockford Park District's Coordinator of Marketing; *Rockford Register Star*, June 9, 1996; Jan. 28, 1997.



Rogue (a form of croquet) and tennis courts at Fair Grounds Park, 1910s. Note the "formal" attire in contrast to today's casual (and comfortable) choices.



Western edge of 1910s Sinnissippi Park along Rock River looking south. This site now includes a greenhouse, lagoon, rose garden, Rec Path, Sea Scout building and Symbol.



Scenic Sinnissippi Park, 1920s. Board member Robert Tinker contributed to landscaping designs not only at Sinnissippi, but also at Haskell, Waterworks, Fair Grounds and Blackhawk parks. He called such efforts "Tinkerizing."



Neighborhood children pose for a "Bring-Your-Doll-Day" event at the east side's Beattie Park located in the Longwood Avenue area, 1910s/20s. Today the park is on Rural Street.



Crowds gathered to cheer Greenlee Tool baseball players, 1910s/20s at Southeast Park--now re-named Keye-Mallquist Park-on 11th Street.



Andrews Park site when purchased in 1926 prior to development of the Central Avenue/Auburn Street area.

PARK NAMES OFTEN EVOLVED TO HONOR DONORS

Among the district's parks, many bear names in recognition of contributions by Rockford residents. Too numerous to mention each donor, we here highlight only a few. Seven bear names of former members of the Board of Commissioners.

During Reuben Aldeen's 16-year tenure on the board, he presented a \$47,500 check for the 1965 purchase of the 88-acre Memorial Forest Preserve on North Alpine Road. Without his knowledge, other board members voted to name this acquisition, "**Reuben Aldeen Park.**" Aldeen had arrived in Rockford as a 16-year-old immigrant from Sweden.

Seventeen years later he and his older brother Gedor, in partnership with eight other local investors, formed the American Cabinet Hardware Corporation (1929). It developed into one of Rockford's industrial giants, known now

as the Amerock Corporation.

Seth B. Atwood, a 32-year member of the board (16 as president) purchased 322 acres near New Milford on the Kishwaukee River for the district. Now a year-round environmental and adventure facility, it's identified as the **Seth B. Atwood Park.**

He traced his Rockford connection back to 1839 when his grandparents settled here after relocation from New Hampshire and Ontario, Canada. In 1909, after graduating from the University of Wisconsin, Atwood joined his older brother in co-founding the Atwood Vacuum Machine Company. A bothersome door rattle in a 1916 Buick changed their focus to auto hardware. This led to the invention and manufacture of other such products. After World War II, Seth G. Atwood (Seth B.'s son) entered the family business. He assumed the presidency in 1957 when his father retired. In 1985, Anderson Industries purchased the firm and renamed it Atwood Industries. Current park board president

Bruce Atwood reinforces his grandfather's tradition of service.

Edwin Carlson Jr. and Viola Nelles Carlson donated a 15.5-acre site on S. Pierpont in 1975. It's known as **Carlson-Nelles Park**. The senior Edwin Carlson also served on the board.

In June 1970, the district changed the name of Valley Park, 3200 Oak Grove Avenue. In memory of Commissioner Ray Dahlquist, who died May 12, 1970, the park now is called **Dahlquist Park**.

Landstrom Park, a 14.6-acre tract east of Forest Hills Country Club recognizes Gilmore J. Landstrom, an 11-year board member.

With the assistance of funds indirectly donated by Harley "Moon" Mullins, the park district purchased land in the Pebble Creek Subdivision from the Harlem School District. **Mullins-Pebble Creek Park** is located on Pebble Creek Trail.

Tinker Park, land adjacent to Tinker Cottage, was donated to the district by Robert Tinker's widow.

OTHER HONOREES

Thomas G. Levings, a former Rockford Township Highway Commissioner, donated 122 acres of farmland in 1943. Here the district created a 35-acre artificial lake within **Levings Park**.

The **Mel Anderson Memorial Pathway** winds for three miles through northwest Rockford along Kent Creek.

Anderson served this area as alderman, 1969-85.

Born in Ireland in 1821 of Scottish parents, John Beattie settled in Rockford in 1837 with his wife Mary. John amassed a considerable fortune as a carpenter. Among his contributions, he co-designed Rockford's 1844 courthouse, termed then "one of the (city's) finest examples of Greek Revival structure." He died in 1889; Mary, 1891.

Two single daughters, Mary and Anna, continued to occupy the family homestead. Upon their deaths in 1920 and 1921, the Rockford Park District inherited the property. The sisters' will stipulated that the park be named "**Beattie Park**" and that neither trees nor mounds could be removed or disturbed and that no roads or drives be constructed through the property.

The Beattie sisters also donated land in 1914 for a playground--between Longwood and Hall streets--in honor of their parents. Whitman Street Bridge approachways in 1961 needed that property necessitating **Beattie Playground** re-development along Adams Street south of Rural Street.

James Lockwood's life has been described as "the adventures of Indiana Jones." Indeed James E. Lockwood Jr. has led an exciting life. A native of Racine, Wisconsin, he paid expenses at Beloit College by selling thousands of eggs, from his own chicken farm operation, to commercial establishments. After graduation, he purchased a Rockford gas

station. He added nine others under the umbrella of Lockwood Oil Company, a business he sold in 1957.

He sought adventure in deep sea diving and archeological digs. Diving exploits in the West Indies, Florida and elsewhere led him to improve the design of diving lungs. Excavating in Egypt's Valley of the Kings and in Haiti prompted him to write articles on archeology, published internationally.

On the local scene, he envisioned a place for family-oriented, economical recreation. To that end, in 1985, he provided a \$300,000 Trust Fund toward the rebirth of the former 115-acre Children's Farm now renamed **Lockwood Park.**

GOLF COURSES

Clayton C. Ingersoll, while a student at Cornell University, enlisted during World War I. He received his commission as lieutenant: trained in Fort Worth, Texas; and then sailed for France, February 1918. Two months later, only 21 years old, he was killed while flying a mission with the 27th Aero Squadron in France.

His parents, Winthrop and Harriet Ingersoll, owners of Ingersoll Milling Machine Company donated \$55,000 to the park district. The amount equaled half the proposed cost for land and development of a west-side golf course and park. It would be the district's second course, an 18-hole layout supplementing the existing nine-hole Sinnissippi course. The Ingersolls stipulated that the new park be named **"The Lieutenant Clayton C.**

Ingersoll Memorial Park" in memory of their son.

The district's third superintendent and director, Earl Elliot in his 40 years with the park district had watched it grow from 710 to 2,615 acres. In 1961 the district acquired east-side land for an 18-hole golf course, practice area and lighted driving range. Originally designated as Tollway Park, the board secretly decided to name the park in Elliot's honor in recognition of "dedicated and unselfish service." **The Earl F. Elliot Golf Course,** Lyford and Mill roads opened May 25, 1968.

Norris Aldeen--son of Gedor and nephew of Reuben--worked at the Amerock Corporation(1938-79) including positions as president, chairman of the board, and CEO. He and his wife Margaret donated 143 acres of farmland valued at \$1.5 million to the park district in 1988. A \$5.6 million golf course and comprehensive practice center opened for nine holes in 1991, followed by a second nine in 1992. **The Norris Aldeen Golf Course** is located at 1900 Reid Farm Road.

More honorees: the Collins, Davis, Franz, Gambino, Haight, Hall, Haskell, Hunter, William Talcott and Alexander Forbes families; individuals such as C. E. Brown, Harry and Della Burpee, Glen Ekburg, William E. Harmon, Francis S. Keye, Allan Mallquist, Michael and Elsie Mandeville, Charles Woodward Martin, John Nelson, Anna Page, Emily Searls, William Taylor, Ray Wantz, Terry Lee Wells, John and Jennie Wester, and Walter D. and Juanita Williams.

Sources: Rockfordiana Files at the Rockford Public Library, Interviews with Seth G. Atwood and Norris Aldeen, Rockford Park District Archives.

AFTERWORD

Passage of a Recreation Referendum in 1956 has enabled the district to provide more than 750 recreation programs and activities supported by local taxes. Among its most popular programs, the district identifies the following:

Music in the Park concert series, Imagination Station, African Griots storytelling
Supervised summer playground programs, Tot Lots
Teen Activities--Friday Rec Nights, Summer in the City, The Getaway
Lessons for lifetime sports
Summer day and resident camps
Adventure and team-building programs
Environmental education at Atwood Park and Aldeen Nature Lodge
Formation of Special Recreation Services to include people with disabilities

In addition, the following facilities have been developed, some in cooperation with, and/or through donations made by, other venues:

1975: Washington Park Community Recreation Center. Midway Village
1977: Rock River Rec Path. Trailside Centre Stables
1979: Forest City Queen river boat.
1981: Lockwood Park Observatory
1982: BMX track in Searls Park
1983: Track Trolley Car 36. Sportscore
1972: Guilford Tennis Center. Rockford Museum Center. Camp Sunshine
1988: Magic Waters
1989: Marinelli Stadium. Aldeen Golf Club and Golf Practice Centre
1990: Riverfront Museum Park
1992: The Getaway at Blackhawk Park

Such development depends not only upon the availability of tax dollars, but also upon leadership and vision. Five superintendents/executive directors have led the district: Paul Riis (1910-27), Clarence Pedlow (1927-34), Earl Elliot (1922-62), Robert Milne (1968-71) and Webbs Norman (1972 - present). Recreation Director James Brademas (1956 -60) receives credit for innovative recreation programs. Unpaid commissioners, elected by local voters, have supported the staff and its priorities.

Fred E. Carpenter, 1909-36; Levin Faust, 1909-11; George D. Roper, 1909-24; Robert H. Tinker, 1909-17; Henry W. Williams, 1909-10; Napoleon Levasseur, 1910-15; Dr. Alfred Olson, 1911-16; Dr. O. Alfred Olson, 1915-20; Frank L. Cleveland, 1915-28; Frank S. Horner, 1916-27; Edward W. Brown, 1917-25; Fay Lewis, 1924-47; Adelbert R. Floberg, 1925-37; Harry B. Andrews, 1927-41; Seth B. Atwood, 1928-60; Harry O. Swanson, 1937-42; Howard C. Gregory, 1937-39; Dr. Robert F. Schleicher, 1939-62; Edwin W. Carlson, 1941-55; O. G. Nelson, 1942-52; Ray F. Dahlquist, 1947-70; Francis H. Colehour, 1952-64; Reuben A. Aldeen, 1955-71; Joseph Bean, 1960-73; Gilmore J. Landstrom, 1962-73; Harley W. Mullins, 1964-71; John B. Whitehead, 1970-83; Gerald Wenick, 1971-79; Edwin W. Carlson Jr., 1971-90; Alden E. Orput, 1973-78; JoAnne Baker, 1973-81; Rolf Theinemann, 1978-present; Michael J. Delany, 1979-89; William K. Sjostrom, 1981-92; Michael A. White, 1983-89; Fleur C. Wright, 1989-present; Bruce T. Atwood, 1989-present; Gloria E. Cardenas Cudia, 1990-91; Kristine O'Rourke Cohn, 1992-94; Roberta E. Ingrassia, 1993 -present; Nathaniel Martin, 1995-present.

Source: "Rockford Park District Celebrates 40 Years of Recreation," *Rockford Register Star*, June 9, 1996

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