

A HISTORY OF THE EAST SIDE OF BALBOA PARK

by
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Before the coming of landscape architect Samuel Parsons, Jr. to City Park in 1903, all the park had a similar appearance. The Ladies Annex in 1889 & Kate Sessions in 1892 had tried to develop the 6th (Park) Avenue side of the park. Property owners in Golden Hill, under the leadership of Matt J. Heller, and in Mulvey Canyon between Date & Juniper on the southwest side of the park in the early 1900's planted areas near their homes with semitropical trees & shrubbery & put in arbors, terraces, bridges & fountains. After the playground movement accelerated, the property owners in the Golden Hill area added recreational facilities for children & young adults.

The scene in the developed areas was rustic, sedate & picturesque. In those days, elite people dressed to the nines in clothes that inhibited movement. They behaved in their parks with the same impeccable manners as the people in the well-known painting by Georges Seurat: *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*.

In an area in the north middle-section of the park near today's War Memorial Building on Park Boulevard, sports lovers installed a country club pavilion & a golf course. These provided outlets for the San Diego's white-collar workers. Proprietors of an orphanage & an industrial school for boys & girls moved into the 100-acre Howard Tract in 1887 & planted the grounds with acacia, pepper, palm, cypress & eucalyptus trees. This was the land the U.S. Naval Hospital was to occupy from 1919 to 1988, before it moved into new headquarters further north in Florida Canyon. While male benefactors were occupying the Howard Tract, a Woman's Home Association acquired the right to put up a building closer to the southern border of the park on 16th Street. Though these areas had been allotted to charities, the City of San Diego still held title & required the custodians of the land to keep it open to the public.

A financial collapse in 1893 wiped out the fortunes of Bryant Howard & Ephraim W. Morse, the leaders of the all-male charitable foundation. A fire in 1897 finished off the home for indigent women. Thereafter, the Howard Tract holdings reverted to the City, except for a small section on 16th Street that continued to function as a Woman's & a Children's Home.

Russ School (later Russ High School and today San Diego High School) & the Woman's & the Children's Homes were the major encroachers on park land at the turn of the century. The Russ, as it was called, had been built in 1890, renamed in 1893, & expanded in 1893 & in 1898. On several occasions, merchants, lawyers, realtors & politicians attempted to whittle the park, but concerned citizens resisted these attacks. The California State Act of February 4, 1870 protected the park from a too hasty surrender to speculators as park land could not be put on the market without first securing the approval of the State Legislature.

Except for a dramatic change after the winter rains when flowers carpeted the mesas & canyons, the land was basically hardpan on which grew a thick and shallow chaparral. Two

canyons running north to south & a diagonal canyon on the east side running diagonally east to west divided the park into four recognizable districts.

Opinions differ as to whether the park in the early days was beautiful or ugly. George W. Marston was entranced by the flowers growing on the undeveloped land after the rains, but Leroy Wright and William E. Smythe were repelled by the park's desiccated & wild appearance.

Before their contact with Spanish and Mexican settlers, semi-nomadic Indians roamed the land, abandoning their camps when they became uninhabitable or when the need to obtain sustenance drove them away. Following the collapse of the Mission system, some Indians from Mission San Diego de Alcalá and Mission San Luis Rey de Francia moved closer to Old Town and later to New Town San Diego. Records exist indicating an Indian camp near the lower edge of City Park. Pioneer attorney Daniel Cleveland described the appearance of an Indian campsite made by Indians who through choice or necessity lived near towns rather than in their native villages:

“This rover class was represented by small groups of rude huts.... These huts were quickly built for temporary occupation... and were soon abandoned when the men wandered away to other localities. Heaps of debris—sticks, dried tules, dirty rags, bones of animals that had been eaten and the ashes of extinct fires remained to mark the spot...”
(*San Diego Union*, October 17, 1926, 9:1-8)

Unightly though they were, the Indian camps, had even less effect on the land than Spanish and Mexican incursions. Spanish & Mexican ranchers allowed their cattle to roam over the park's spaces but, as these spaces were not then divided among individuals, the park lands remained undeveloped & generally dissolute. By default rather than by intent, Mission fathers & the Spanish & Mexican ranchers changed the California landscape irrevocably when the flora they brought in multiplied & spread, driving out native species that had no defenses against the invaders. Chaparral was still in the park but it was a chaparral mixed with newer, more aggressive, & sometimes killer plants.

Following Alonzo Horton's purchase of what was to become downtown San Diego in 1868, newcomers from northern California and from the East moved closer to the park. They used its land as a quarry, dump, pound, shooting range, brick-making resource, pest house, site for artesian wells, and as a place to lay out paths for carriages and street car lines to connect with sections of the city to the east & north that developers were preparing for expansion. Spanish & Mexican settlers had changed the flora of Southern California, but American settlers upset nature's balance even more dramatically when they changed the topography.

While they had been no part of the newcomer's plans for the prosecution of business, transients—many of them unemployed & some unemployable—attached themselves to the streets, saloons & open lands of the City of San Diego. Inevitably, those parts of the City Park that were closest to downtown became sites for camps. Few people at the time thought about civic beautification. Things just happened. According to Indian & pioneer custom when the places on which one lived became inhospitable one moved away. But San Diego was next to the Pacific Ocean. And there was no place to move. Good, prosperous, & industrious working &

churchgoing people have not felt waves of sympathy for those who are not good, nor prosperous, nor industrious. They disapproved of the hobos in the City Park, threw them in jail, & ran the more obnoxious out of town. Other than many clickings of the tongue & shakings of the head, they allowed the majority of the bums to stay in the park. When they became too unruly, a judge sentenced them to pound rocks in the vicinity of Inspiration Point.

The grand scale & beauty of the buildings & the layout of the Chicago World Columbian Exposition of 1893 woke up many people, including many in San Diego who had been inclined to sit on rocking chairs on their front porches or to tend flowers in their backyard gardens. A shabby frontier town didn't have to happen. Something could be done if intelligent people joined together with the same zeal with which they had pursued their private businesses. Throughout the Midwest & even in the east the Imperial Roman style popularized by the Exposition took hold. Banks, churches, & residences began to look as though Caesar & Mark Antony might at any moment walk in. But California, the land of gold & oranges, so different from the rest of the United States in many respects, would also be different in its choice of architectural styles. In the State that boosters called "the Naples of America," newcomers preferred Mission, craftsman & Bungalow styles to Roman temples & coliseums.

In keeping with California's earthy trends, Kate Sessions, a woman far ahead of her times, said San Diego could be improved through landscaping. A. D. Robinson, creator of the Rosecroft Gardens in Point Loma, T. S. Brandegee, a distinguished botanist, & George W. Marston, a successful merchant & an amateur gardener, supported Kate Sessions' crusade.

In September 1889 Kate Sessions came out with the first overall plan for City Park improvement. She proposed planting the southern slopes of canyons with bougainvillea, the eastern slopes with California poppies, and the north and south slopes with morning glory vines from Chili. For level mesas between the canyons she advocated a mixture of palms, bamboo & eucalyptus. Kate knew that she could grow plants. She also knew she could not design parks. So she wrote to Frederick Law Olmsted, the premier landscape designer in the United States, for advice. Olmsted told her to avoid trying to make the park look like an eastern park & to confine her planting to plants that grew on the shores of the Pacific.

When the City of San Diego agreed to grant Kate Sessions the right to put a nursery on the northeast corner of City Park in 1892, the City required her to plant 100 trees each year in the park & 300 throughout the City. Kate was, therefore, obliged to use whatever stock she had on hand & not those plants that in 1889 she considered best for the park. She planted herself or directed the planting of Monterey Cypress, Torrey pines, eucalyptus, pepper, palm, rubber, cork & camphor trees primarily in the northwest section of the park, which, like her nursery, began to look more like a botanical garden than a park.

As a result of Kate Sessions' urging & George W. Marston's finances, Samuel Parsons, Jr., a former superintendent of Central Park in New York City & a prominent landscape architect, appeared in San Diego in the spring of 1903. The rains that year had been unusually heavy. Parsons saw a park blanketed with sparkling, diminutive flowers & with green shrubs that passed for trees in Southern California. He was delighted by the breathtaking views from the park's

level mesas into the small canyons & out toward vistas of sea, skies & mountains whichever way he turned. It was love at first sight.

Parsons left City Park with a road plan for carriage rides through the park, a plan for a wide-lane peripheral road that would demarcate the park's boundaries, & a planting scheme that was more respectful of local conditions than the schemes of members of the San Diego Floral Society who wanted the park to wear an eastern and an exotic dress. Agreeing with Frederick Law Olmsted's advice to Kate Sessions, Parsons did not think green lawns belonged in the park. As the guardian of New York City's Central Park, he had opposed putting buildings, statues, & other non-natural intrusions in the park. In line with these firmly held principles, he gently urged San Diegans to find other locations for such "improvements."

Parsons & George Cooke, his engineer assistant, did not have time to get their plans underway. The picturesque landscaping on the west side of Balboa Park show and the pedestrian bridges spanning canyons on the east side show what they would have been done elsewhere. Because of the intervention of the 1915-1916 Panama-California (International) Exposition, Parsons' plans died an unmourned death. John Charles Olmsted, a stepson of Frederick Law Olmsted, was asked to lay out the exposition grounds. Olmsted was bolder in his recommendations for planting than Parsons & he favored some modest architectural additions. Still, like Parsons, Olmsted had his principles. And he resigned when the City Fathers decided to put the Exposition on a mesa in the center of the park, thus rendering plans for an integrated park of winding roads and inviting sideways impossible.

John Morley, who had been appointed Superintendent of Parks in 1911, took over from Parsons and Olmsted. Like Kate Sessions, Morley was a landscape gardener, not a landscape architect. His major focus was on improving the grounds outside the exposition area which he did as well as he could on a meager budget and with the harassment of politicians who, with each change of elections, wanted to replace him with one of their friends.

In 1917 the San Diego Electric Railway Company, owned by John D. Spreckels, the wealthiest & most powerful man in the City of San Diego, completed its carline through Balboa Park across Powder House Canyon (so-named because of the dynamite magazines that used to be stored there) and two smaller canyons. The three steel bridges the line required changed the topography of the canyons. Two years later, at the urging of residents to the north, Powder House Canyon became a north/south extension of Florida Street. And so it is today.

People & institutions greedy over Balboa Park land tried to subdivide the park many times after 1915-1916. The San Diego High School, San Diego Zoo, & U.S. Naval Hospital were the most notable successes. Since this paper deals with the east side of the park, the U.S. Naval Hospital's expansion requires elaboration. The hospital went from 17.35 acres in 1919 to 92.66 acres in 1941. The Superior Court of San Diego, in 1982, allowed the U.S. Navy to acquire 35.98 acres in Florida (Powder House) Canyon in exchange for 34.5 acres of the site it occupied at Inspiration Point. When the U.S. Navy finally completed its present plant in 1988, it possessed 71.98 acres that had been part of Balboa Park. Since that time naval personnel have complained about a shortage of parking space. Many of these people now park along Park Boulevard or in

Balboa Park parking lots. Judging from past events, the U.S. Navy will soon be asking for more park land.

Mayor Louis J. Wilde, in 1919, pushed for the sale of 500 acres on the east side of Balboa Park to reduce taxes & to create additional lands to be taxed (Is there a contradiction here?), to obtain money for harbor & water developments, & to build a new city hall. Wilde was accustomed to doing things on his own; but this was one act he could not do as it required voter approval.

San Diego State College (now San Diego State University) attempted to occupy 125 acres on the northeast side of Balboa Park but the voters, in 1925, rebuffed the college after a divisive campaign in which park defenders were excoriated as enemies of progress. The same vilification was repeated in 1953 after city officials invited the San Diego Padres, a baseball team, to take over the greater part of the east side of the park.

City planner John Nolen, a favorite of George W. Marston who in 1908 paid for him to complete a master plan for San Diego & who in 1926 was paid by City to update his plan, was commissioned by the City to produce a Master Plan for Balboa Park. Nolen completed the Balboa Park segment of his plan between 1925 & 1927. The present utilitarian layout of Morley Field owes more to Nolen's contributions than to any other source. Of course, Nolen cannot be blamed for the parsimonious execution of his ideas as landscape architects start things going. Other people carry the plans to completion. The U.S. Government put the buildings, tennis courts & athletic field in Morley Field during the Depression era in a style that has sometimes been called "WPA Modern."

Nolen advocated widening Pershing Drive (laid out & named in honor of General John ("Blackjack") Pershing in 1919); putting picnic facilities on the mesa above Florida Canyon; establishing an athletic field on an axis with Texas Street; and erecting entrance gateways at 28th Street & Upas, on Pershing Drive, & near the San Diego High School.

Though unknown to San Diego city planners, some of Nolen's recommendations for the east side are still pertinent as the area has a large amount of undeveloped land. He urged that the park be enlarged from 28th Street to Redwood and 32nd Streets to parallel a projected roadway through Switzer Canyon. The Switzer Canyon road would connect to Pershing Drive to provide a north-south through road on the east side that park planners since Samuel Parsons, Jr. have consistently recommended.

Nolen accepted the Golden Hill Playground, but advised against duplicating it elsewhere in the park. He was partial to quoits, archery, checkers, Punch & Judy shows, & carts for vendors & wanted more of them. Maybe he had listened to George W. Marston since he wanted to set aside an area, 1000 ft. by 800 ft., for a parade ground south of the athletic field, an idea Marston had advocated in 1889.

Nolen preferred that active recreations areas should look down on as many of the canyons as possible. The canyons would be kept in a native condition which, to Nolen, meant they should be

planted with ceanothus, cactus & mesquite. Even though the golf course loomed large on the east side & infringed on the Golden Hill section, Nolen ignored its existence.

In April 1919, many years before Nolen proffered his advice on Balboa Park, San Diego golfers moved to the Golden Hill section of Balboa Park from Point Loma, where they had moved to accommodate the Panama-California Exposition, & laid out a nine-hole ungrassed course. In August of the same year, the golfers enlarged the course to 18 holes & put up a club house. They allowed members who paid dues of ten dollars annually to use the course, but kept others out. This restriction being too much for the City's Park Department, in September the Park Department took over the course.

Using U.S. Government money & labor, the City, in November 1931, put an all-grass course of nine holes in the southeast corner of Balboa Park & prepared plans for a 18-hole extension to Pershing Drive. This latter the City completed in April 1933. Architect William Templeton Johnson made a map in December 1933 that showed the 280-acre golf course as occupying almost the entire area of Balboa Park west of Pershing Drive from Redwood to Russ Street. And so it does today.

The Water and Street Departments of the City of San Diego relocated their stables from the 10th Avenue entrance to Pound Canyon to a City Operations Yard at the 20th and A Street section of City Park in August 1909. Sometime in the 1920's the City decided to motorize the department. The Department expanded its operations to include the Sewer Division in March 1953.

World Wars I & II put Balboa Park in a state of suspended operations. During both wars, the military preempted the west side of the park, but left the east side relatively undisturbed. The U.S. Navy took over the swimming pool at the foot of Texas Street in 1944 & 1945. The City did not reacquire the pool until June 1946. It being wartime, the City gave military personnel preferential treatment in the use of all Balboa Park recreational facilities.

Former U.S. Air Force Colonel & Councilman Frank. W. Seifert, in the early 1950's, kept up a campaign to build dams in Florida & Switzer Canyons. He spoke eloquently about the need for reclamation, but, after the flood of 1916 has wiped out two dams in Switzer & Florida Canyons & had caused an inundation of downtown streets, City officials were gingerly about endorsing Seifert's schemes. Also, during the impecunious depression years, City officials had taken to regarding City money as if it were their own.

In 1957, prominent women in the city, including Mary Marston & Helen Muehleisen, who had not been known as park despoilers, put on a vigorous campaign to build a seven-acre, 3,000-seat Civic Theater-Auditorium in Florida Canyon with split-level parking on the canyon's eastern slopes. As designed by architect Sam Hamill, the theater was every bit as grand as the present theater in the Community Concourse. Indeed, the designs for both were almost identical. Newspapers trumpeted this project, so when the voters rejected it, their rejection must have come as a surprise to San Diego's "movers & shakers." Were the voters turned off by the \$3.5 million cost of the theater or by the misuse of public park land, or by both?

The City of San Diego Sanitation Department opened the Arizona Landfill, in actuality a dump, on the east side of Balboa Park in 1952. The fill was to be completed in 1963 but the final capping was postponed until 1975. The landfill was called Arizona as it was on an axis with Arizona Street. Newspapers ignored the dump, which discouraged the growth of an opposition. By filling in finger canyons & by altering the jagged character of the topography, the landfill changed the appearance of the land between Pershing Drive & the southern border of Morley Field. While trucks were hauling trash to the site & flocks of seagulls were cawing & flying overhead, the view looking south from Morley Field or east from Park Boulevard was of an un-park-like eyesore.

Like the Toyon Dump in Griffith Park, Los Angeles, the Arizona landfill in Balboa Park was a boondoggle. The least that can be expected is that Park Departments in both cities will confer with one another on solutions.

Little of consequence has happened to the east side of Balboa Park since the landfill debacle with the exception of the transfer of the tennis courts from public to private management in 1983 and the construction of a velodrome for a private association of bicyclists in 1986. These two changes reflect a growing distrust on the part of many people of government authorities. They also are responses to a shortage of funds that are available to manage public parks. Willing or otherwise, Park Departments in the United States have relinquished many of their responsibilities to private groups & businesses. Inevitably those people who cannot afford to pay the new fees are left out & those who can pay are happy that they no longer have to mix with the poorly dressed & the poorly washed. While not as unsightly as the dump, the velodrome, by clearing a broad swath for concrete, has given the area where it is located a look of devastation.

A 1960 Master Plan for Balboa Park, prepared by Bartholomew & Associates, elaborated on solutions advanced by a 1957 Balboa Park Citizens Study Committee. A road was to be put through Switzer Canyon and the 18-hole golf course was to be moved to the site of the filled-in landfill to provide for a through north-south road on 28th Street, but not on an exact alignment. Except for the U.S. Naval Hospital & San Diego High School, the entire east side was to be used for recreation. Florida Canyon was to be landscaped and a new gymnasium was to be built in Morley Field.

Though some of their recommendations did not foresee future traffic & parking needs, the Bartholomew planners were good at admonitions. Robert Horn, who wrote most of the plans, loved public parks.

In a 1983 preliminary Master Plan for Balboa Park, landscape architect Ron Pekarek modified recommendations previously made by the Bartholomew planners. PRC Engineering in 1989 broadened further broadened the plans. These consultants abandoned the idea of a through 28th Street & left the golf course unscathed. The Golden Hill section, however, would have been subject to a drastic remodeling with the closure of the 26th Street entrance & the rerouting of traffic from 25th Street through one of the oldest landscaped sections of Balboa Park. The consultants refrained from delineating the future of the Arizona landfill, which future was partially decided when the San Diego Park Department put a nursery & maintenance yard on a sizable portion following the abandonment of the nursery near Park Boulevard in 1981 to make

way for the expansion of the U.S. Naval Hospital. The San Diego Zoo paved remaining portions of the landfill in 1988 to set up temporary parking for the automobiles of record numbers of people visiting the zoo that year to see a panda exhibit on loan from China. Since the landfill was a dump, the permanent use of the land must wait 30 to 40 years for the ground to settle & the methane gas to disintegrate. Proving that nature abhors a vacuum or that whenever there is an opportunity somebody will seize it, dog lovers have pressured the City into giving them special rights to the empty landfill. It is now a haven where dogs can run & poop free. Since the dogs have by default claimed the land, it is unlikely they will ever be dispossessed for more appropriate uses.

Because he had incurred the wrath of property owners on the east side of the park, the City dropped Ron Pekarek as a consultant for a Balboa Park Master Plan & hired his assistant Steve Estrada to bring the plan to fruition. This Estrada did in 1989. He dropped the proposal to create a main entrance at 26th Street & reaffirmed objections to extending 28th Street to Upas Street on the east side of the park. Estrada had little to say about the east side as his focus was on changes to the west side of the park. He, therefore, left the subject to be dealt with in a more precise plan that would be written later.

Fulfilling Estrada's expectations, the City Council, on April 13, 1993, adopted an East Mesa Precise Plan written by the consulting firm of Wallace, Roberts & Todd. Aside from tinkering with athletic facilities in Morley Field, the plan's major proposals involved turning the closed Arizona landfill into a gigantic open air court for the display of art works depicting the story of trash, in recognition of the landfill's prior history.

As is usual with plans for the east side, the only aspect of the plan that evoked emotion was a proposal to change traffic patterns at the northeast corner of the park. Wishing to avoid such a hullabaloo, the planners had decided to leave the 26th & 28th Street access or lack thereof as they were. The City Operations Yard at 20th & A Streets is fated to move to a more desirable location elsewhere in the City. Whenever it does so, the planners proposed that the vacated space become a recreational center with the relocated velodrome as the major attraction.

As hotel room tax money has been allocated exclusively to improvements in the central mesa, Wallace, Todd & Roberts could not identify funding sources for their East Mesa Precise Plan, which is tantamount to saying their plan is all smoke & no fire.

In 1988, the same year the San Diego Zoo had expanded onto the Arizona landfill, young people in Golden Hill began conducting an energetic "Plant the Park" campaign. These people have since become adults &, presumably, have settled down. A new wave of agitators has not emerged to take their place.

Plans for the east side produce arguments because people with different views seldom find points of agreement. Home owners on the east border of the park develop proprietary attitudes & resent public intrusions. They fear transients, gangs, drug dealers, homosexuals, people who are not well-dressed & well-washed, possible collisions with automobiles, & the inconvenience of automobile traffic circulating near their homes.

Public proposals for improvement are random as each proponent promotes his or her hobby & ignores or disparages those of other people. Consequently, the general picture & purpose of the park get lost.

In the best scenario for an East Side Master Plan, some proposed “improvements: will be eliminated. One such elimination was the 1960 Bartholomew planners’ recommendation for a Morley Field Gymnasium. Archery courts are not universally loved, but getting rid of an entrenched archery court is a virtual impossibility. Though some people want a Community Center in Morley Field similar to the existing center in the Golden Hill area, others disagree. Having organized themselves into a formidable lobby, the artists of the city have promoted turning undeveloped sections on the east side into an open-air gallery where earth-form sculptures & abstract designs can be imposed on the land.

Like the poor, controversies over the use of the east side will always be with us. Statements that the land should be left as it is because it is pristine are ridiculous. Before it embarks on costly & irreversible changes to the east side, the City should seek advice from specialists in recreation such as Galen Craz, author of *The Politics of Park Design*, & from people in the neighborhood whose children now play games in the street rather in the nearby park.

Unlike the west side which has become a preserve for “culture,” with a price tag attached, the east side should be devoted to the service of the old, the young, the disabled & the disadvantaged. No one should be excluded from the park. As Frederick Law Olmsted asserted, parks demonstrate democracy in action.

Topography & plant life should be modified to accommodate physical activities, but they should not be destroyed by such activities. Somewhere between nature as beauty and sport as energetic movement is a medium which park designers should try to discover. This medium has yet to be demonstrated on the east side of Balboa Park, though it exists on the west side & in parts of Golden Gate Park in San Francisco, Griffith Park in Los Angeles, & Prospect Park in Brooklyn.

The impetus for improvements on the east side should come from nearby residents, but these residents should begin looking upon their side of the park not as a gift for themselves, but as a gift for everybody.