

Memories of West Park

People hold memories of West Park that come readily to mind:

- Evan Pratt, Washtenaw County Water Resources Commissioner, who lived next to West Park for a number of years had this to say about his experiences with the park:

“I owned a house on Chapin Street in the early 90s, and somehow ended up with an old photo of West Park. Possibly came with the purchase (along with another historical document about the home) but may have come from a friend who worked at the Bentley Historical Library. I believe the photo was from 1895 but that date is from memory – I think the date was written on the photo. I may have sent a snap of that photo to Colin a few years ago. I may still have the photo or at least an image and will take a look. The photo had no sign of creeks or other reference points to get a better idea of the vantage point [from which the photo was taken]. But a few distant homes in the background that someone might be able to sleuth out [to determine the] vantage point.” – *Fortunately, Evan found the image, and that is the photo with horse and buggy in front of James Toms’ gardens, with what will become West Park in the background.*



“I used to walk along the section of the old trail (east of the stairs) often. It is my understanding that to the west of the stairs, the creek and trail used to be along the ‘toe of slope’, where the wooded slope abuts the park.

I’m sorry I don’t recall the document/map I have seen depicting this location of the trail, but it does make sense that the trail would have been to the south of the creek at Seventh if it was also to the south of the creek at Chapin.”

"It has been my understanding that the pergola that is there [in West Park] was a nod to an 'old one'; never thought about whether that meant 1920s or earlier."

"I have heard/read an old anecdote that a West Park skating pond went away after Eli Gallup fell through the ice but have never looked into whether that could be true or not. [It was in the] southwest part of the park."

- Harry Sheehan, Chief Deputy, Washtenaw County Water Resources Commissioners Office, who was on the scene daily for the construction work putting in place the 2009 stormwater management system. He recalls:

"There were some interesting surprises in the construction process [for building the wetlands and bioswales at West Park]. All sorts of 'antique' garbage surfaced—a large part of a model T automobile with plates, for example. But also arrowheads and obsidian—signs of earlier Native American activities. Once native artifacts were found, construction was halted and an archeologist was brought in to complete a Phase 1 Assessment of the site. Only when we were cleared did we continue. Their report indicates that native people would have settled on the higher surrounding ground, not in the park. We also continued to monitor construction to make sure his assessment was correct." [The archeological study concluded that the artifacts recovered from the archaeological survey were unremarkable in terms of their type and interpretive value. It was the opinion of the principal investigator that there were no significant cultural resources present within the present boundaries of West Park and no need for additional archaeological field investigations.]

- Amy Kuras, Park Planner and Landscape Architect for City of Ann Arbor (now retired), who was in the heat of the action both for park renovations and communications with the public. She recalls:

"There were old willow trees that were dropping huge branches on the sidewalk. We had to remove them, but first I had cuttings taken from them and then gave them to a friend who was a grower to raise to the sapling stage and then planted about 25 willow saplings close to where the old trees had stood. Now the saplings are about 30' tall!"

"The constructed pond (it's not a natural pond) is fed by a spring. We wanted to naturalize the pond, so we planted a lot of native plants that do well in such situations. Well, we went back a little while later and all the plants were gone... muskrats ate them all. Where did the muskrats come from? Seems you just need to create a pond and they will come.

At some point someone dumped their goldfish in the pond... and now there must be thousands of goldfish... and a blue heron now shows up for a meal. There is also a particular day when little frogs have hatched and are out and about everywhere, and particular times when the park is filled with the sound of frogs mating.

I would really like to see a bench added at the overlook on the deck of the boardwalk at the pond so a visitor could pause and allow all of this to just soak in.

I would also like to see a thematic renovation of the playground, a theme for the playground that reflects the nature, the character of the park."

"Reactions to the dog park proposal of putting in a dog park at the Chapin Street entrance to the park was puzzling. There had been requests for more dog parks, and that location would offer more community engagement and more eyes on the park. The public expressed a lot of support for the idea, but since it would be across from a church, it was best to also talk directly with the church's congregation. From the group discussion it seemed they were willing to have the dog park be there, but then one older gentleman spoke quietly but firmly, essentially saying there will be no dog park. So that was that."

- Christine Stier, Seventh Street neighbor of West Park whose backyard borders the park. She recalls:

"We moved into our house on West Park in the fall of 1992. In the thirty years since I have:

Pulled garlic mustard along the Indian trail and in the process discovered patches of trillium and bloodroot. Volunteered with Washtenaw County Water Resources to sow seeds of native plants around the swirl concentrators at the west end of the park.

Watched hundreds of baby toads leave their natal pond to hop up the north path to find their forever home (which for some of them was my backyard!), in that first year after the reworking of the park had been finished. Now every spring we hear peepers, wood frogs, and tree frogs calling for mates in that pond.

Enjoyed the many plays the Penny Seats Theater Company staged at the band shell during their summer residency over several seasons, Man of La Mancha being particularly memorable.

Fought against a nebulous attempt by some of the business community to privatize some part of the Chapin end of West Park for condo development, in support of which someone took photos of the park meant to make it look unused. It occasioned my first and only time speaking during the public comment section of a meeting of City Council. In those comments I mentioned the wedding which had taken place that summer under the oak just outside our back gate. That oak, I later learned from a city arborist, is somewhere between 350 and 400 years old!

Helped to organize the opposition in 2013 to a dog park proposed for the field south of the band shell, against which many of our neighbors spoke at City Council.

Seen lots of wildlife return to the park, including bluebirds, orioles, a great blue heron (and once a green heron), killdeer, and just in time for the pandemic a breeding pair of red-tailed hawks. Some neighbors have seen a fox or two this (2022) summer, but not me yet."

- In the Park Department file for West Park, an email to Robert Dascola and Amy Beth Kuras -- with subject 'RE: Mack School and West Park', dated April 7, 2011-- contained the following note:

"I apparently did remember accurately that my mother had reported she had taught in Mack School when it was located in 'what is now West Park.' She graduated from UM in 1917, and taught immediately after that for a couple of years. The current Mack School was dedicated in 1923, so it all fits together. Incidentally, my maternal German grandfather, Paul Wuerfel, came to Ann Arbor in 1906 as the preacher for the German West Side Methodist Church, where he preached in German, and raised a family of seven children. After he left the pulpit, he developed a small subdivision, inviting the older children to name the streets, after he used his own name, Paul, and Wesley, the founder of Methodism. My mother named Arbor View. I was raised in Ohio, but Ann Arbor was a second home because of my grandparents. When I came to Ann Arbor in 1948 to live and go to the UM for graduate work (after graduating from Northwestern), it was a homecoming of sorts. My wife and I thought we were here temporarily, but never left. Sorry to bore you with all of this. My major message is to thank you, Amy, for your research done so quickly – and again, for your excellent presentation this noon."

- At the foot of a large magnolia tree near West Park's Chapin Street entrance, a dedication plaque reads:

"1994
In memory of
Lorraine E. Lawrence
From the employees of the Parks and Recreation Department"